Schoolmasters Abroad

The Working-Class Press, 1816–1858

Working-Class Literacy and the Working-Class Press

WORKING-CLASS LITERACY in the first half of the nineteenth century was high. Most scholars of nineteenth-century British working-class literacy, basing their assessments upon evidence found in court records, marriage registers, regional and occupational surveys, and a number of other sources, place the figure at somewhere between two-thirds to three-quarters of the laboring population of Great Britain during this period.1

These figures cannot tell us much at all about a working-class audience for working-class periodicals or much about specific individuals or groups within that audience, any more than a knowledge of middle-class literacy can tell us about the readership of the Westminster Review. Estimates about a national rate of working-class literacy cannot take into account the enormous and ever-changing regional, occupational, and gender-based variations in literacy among this class at this time or among socioeconomic substrata within the class, variations largely attributable to widely differing social pressures and widely differing educational institutions and opportunities. Such estimates tell us nothing, to take only one example, about the differences between Scottish and English
working-class literacy. Scotland, which unlike England had a national system of education at this time, apparently had an even higher rate of literacy than did England or Wales.²

Moreover, bare numbers give us no sense of the quality of working-class literacy; in many modern and nineteenth-century studies “literacy” is defined in its broadest sense—as the ability to read at any level at all. The most commonly cited evidence of literacy, for example—signatures in marriage registers—testifies at best to every form of literacy from the most rudimentary upward. Many readers considered literate in this sense cannot be considered “periodical literate,” as it were; many would find reading and comprehending Cobbett’s Political Register or Northern Star impossible.

Nor, of course, can conventional literacy rates offer any indication about working-class tastes. Certainly there were many readers capable of reading working-class periodicals who did not do so. Periodicals written by and for the working class competed, often unsuccessfully, with other periodicals, as well as with other media and other forms of entertainment, for the attention and generally limited free time of working-class readers.

What these sweeping literacy rates do show, and show impressively, is that the British working class was at this time what R. K. Webb calls a “potential reading public” (British Working-Class Reader 23).³ Simply put, most members of the working class who wanted to read working-class periodicals did so. While education was not yet systematized or universally available in England and Wales, most of the working class had the opportunity to attend dame and other day schools, Sunday schools, mechanics’ institutes, and other adult schools.⁴ Also, many could learn basic reading skills at home, from a parent, child, or sibling. Through such opportunities most men and women of this class could and, as the statistics show, most did garner the basics of reading. But the activity of reading involved physical and economic costs, costs that must have seemed prohibitive to many. In many cases working women, men, and children did not see the point in spending their few free hours in the self-improving industry of reading. Nor could many parents afford the luxury of allowing their children time to study instead of work. Moreover, the activity of reading was often prohibitively expensive, owing to the high cost of some reading materials and of light by which to read them (Altick 93). Acquir-
ing basic reading skills, as well as using them to read the Bible, *Robinson Crusoe*, or the *Poor Man’s Guardian*, was at least as much a matter of sheer willpower as one of opportunity.

Olivia Smith, in describing the impact of that early working-class best-seller, Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, raises a point that can be applied equally to working-class periodicals in general. Noting the huge sales of that work, Smith writes: “The intriguing question behind such figures is the unknown numbers of those who began to read or write specifically because of the *Rights of Man* or because of the continuing political debate. There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that such a phenomenon occurred” (58). In other words, insofar as Paine’s work is concerned, interest preceded literacy. Similarly, many of later generations were most likely compelled by commentary on events by William Cobbett, Richard Carlile, John Doherty, Henry Hetherington, Ernest Jones, and others—the Paines of their day—to read and write themselves.

Working-class publishers and others were well aware of a working-class mass market that was always potential and at times actual. In order to break into that market, publishers of any class had to produce a product the value of which in some way overrode the high costs of working-class reading. Many targeted this market with their publications during this period, and several reached it. That there was, on occasion, an actual working-class mass market for reading matter is demonstrated in the huge sales of such works as James Catnach’s often lurid chapbooks, ballads, and broadsides, some of which had sales of over half a million copies (Altick 287, 382). That there was, further, a working-class market clearly interested in self-improvement and factual knowledge is demonstrated by the large sales of two “useful knowledge” periodicals, *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal*, which in 1832 achieved circulations of at the very least 100,000 and 50,000, respectively (Altick 393). That there had been, and was still, a working-class market for literature devoted to working-class interests is demonstrated by the huge sales of the second part of Paine’s *Rights of Man* between 1792 and 1793, variously estimated at between 50,000 and 200,000 copies, and the first twopenny issue of Cobbett’s *Political Register*, “Address to the Journeymen and Labourers,” which sold around 200,000 copies in 1816 (Altick 70–71, 325, 381; E. P. Thompson, *Making* 117).
The above circulation figures are some of the largest of the period (and, in the case of Rights of Man, before this period). Such mass sales bear no discernible connection with the documented rise in the rate of literacy from 1820 on, a rise that continued throughout the century and culminated in something approaching national literacy. The periodic appearances and disappearances of a working-class mass market did not reflect this gradual rise at all but indicated instead issues and events—political, criminal, and otherwise—that caught the interest of the working class.

Similarly, overall readership of working-class periodicals did not rise gradually between 1816 and 1858. Rather, it rose or declined in close correspondence with fluctuations in working-class political activity. It is no coincidence that there were three peak periods for the circulation of working-class periodicals: 1816–29, the years of postwar depression, of Castlereagh and Sidmouth, Jeremiah Brandreth and the Cato Street Conspiracy, Henry “Orator” Hunt and the Peterloo massacre; 1830–36, the years of the First Reform Bill, factory agitation, the “War of the Unstamped,” and the new poor laws; and 1838–48, the years when Chartism attracted its greatest following. Certainly, working-class periodicals were published continually from 1816 on, but those published outside the peak years generally targeted a smaller audience. Events, not reading ability, were responsible for the varying size of the audience for working-class periodicals. It may be true that the sharp decline in circulation of the working-class press in the 1820s was due in large part to the Six Acts of 1819, which increased the prices of all the major working-class newspapers to amounts prohibitive to many readers, but it is equally true that a relatively calm political climate in the 1820s was the main reason why concerted working-class opposition to the newspaper tax did not flare up until the 1830s. And while the working-class newspaper with by far the largest circulation of the late 1830s and 1840s, the Northern Star, ran from 1837 until 1852, its circulation was much greater between 1838 and 1842 and again in 1848 than at any other time: annual stamp returns show that its circulation, on average, in 1838 was 11,000; 1839, 36,000; 1840, 18,700; 1841, 18,700; 1842, 12,500; and in 1848, 12,000 (Epstein 86 n). In no other year did the average weekly circulation top 8,700. James Epstein notes that during the few weeks of intense Chartist activity after the Bull Ring riots in Birmingham (July 1839), “sales perhaps
reached 50,000 copies a week" (68). These peak periods, of course, were the times of the greatest Chartist activity.

It is worth pointing out in a discussion of circulation that the circulation and readership of working-class periodicals are two very different things. Circulation figures offer at best a sense of the proportion of readers who read any one periodical in relation to others. Many issues had more than one reader. Working-class periodicals were generally available at coffeehouses, reading rooms, and even some pubs, where, for a small price or for the cost of a drink, one could read several. Doherty, William Lovett, John Cleave, and many other working-class figures owned such establishments. Webb notes that there were 888 coffeehouses in London alone by the end of the forties (Kirby and Musson 340; Aspinall 24–29; Webb 33). Many working-class readers clubbed together to buy their papers; many bought used papers; and many passed old papers on to others. Some of these periodicals are estimated to have had an average of twenty or thirty readers per issue (Aspinall 24–25; Hollis 119; Webb 33).

I do not mean, in arguing that there was a huge potential audience for working-class periodicals, to suggest that literacy preceded literary understanding. The illiterate one-fourth or one-third of the working class were not barred completely from political or literary discourse published in or engendered by working-class periodicals. They, too, were capable of taking in and acting on the views of literature in these periodicals. As Webb writes of the working class at this time:

There was also a hearing public. [Francis] Place pointed out that it was not uncommon for the men in a workshop engaged in quiet employment, such as tailoring, to commission one man to read aloud, while the others worked, doing his work as compensation. A letter in Chambers' Journal describes a similar procedure in hackling shops in Dundee and elsewhere. . . . Methodist, radical, Chartist, and self-improvement classes and meetings often included reading aloud as a feature; it was certainly done in homes where perhaps only one member of the family could read; and Tremenheere was alarmed by a Primitive Methodist preacher's reading the Northern Star weekly at a miners' meeting. And this too was a feature of public house life. (34)

Many of the illiterate were thus aware of working-class publications—and working-class journalists were aware of the illiterate in their publications. Writers such as Cobbett and Feargus O'Connor obviously adopted
a colloquial and conversational voice in their writings; they wanted to be heard as well as read. Cobbett's writings, then as now, take on a greater energy when read out loud: Epstein, writing of O'Connor, notes that "it is obvious from the highly rhetorical style of the [Northern] Star's lead articles that the paper was designed to be read aloud" (68). Reprinted speeches were a staple of the working-class press. And as with the strictly political, so with the literary. The various literary entertainments of the working-class press—poems, short literary varieties, and reviews with excerpts, such as the long review/summary of Dickens's The Chimes in Northern Star (1844)—for many must have been heard instead of read.

Such experiences of "reading" by the illiterate or the semiliterate are as important in their own way to this study as are the experiences and writings of the highly literate among the working class. Both types of readers made their own contributions to a developing sense of a working-class canon. Among those who considered Percy Bysshe Shelley to be a working-class hero—those, for example, who thought Shelley's Queen Mab to be the "Chartist's Bible"—there must have been many who only knew about the work and its political agenda by hearing it or hearing about it. There must have been many who held Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" to be one of their anthems without actually being able to read it. Such men and women had notions about Shelley and his significance in their lives; their beliefs contributed to a working-class consensus about Shelley; and that consensus in turn was reflected or questioned in the working-class press. A comparison can easily be drawn between this group and the illiterate and unlatined of the Middle Ages; while the latter by necessity had to learn about the Bible and other important texts secondhand, their ideas about those works contributed importantly to the religious ethos of the day.

All this emphasis on numbers—how many could read and what those who could, did read—assumes, of course, that the size of the audience for working-class periodicals is somehow crucial to this study. Such an assumption is only partly true. Insofar as these periodicals were disseminators of working-class ideas and ideals, numbers of readers are very important as a measure of dissemination. If Carlyle's distinctive views about literature reached an audience of ten instead of tens of thousands, his declarations would have, in a way, less value to the historian of literary criticism and, in particular, of literary influence. His at times immense
working-class readership suggests that Carlile's literary ideas had a wide-ranging influence upon that class; in this way, numbers give him authority.

But there were other working-class writers who expressed their literary ideas in less-popular periodicals, some of which lasted only a week or two, and yet others who only appeared in print once, in the form, for example, of a letter to the editor. Their expressions, too, are important, though they may not have reached many readers at all. The task of this study is not simply to note the most influential pronouncements about literature in working-class periodicals. If such were the case I could have contented myself with studying the handful of working-class periodicals published between 1816 and 1858 that attained a circulation over 5,000 or 10,000. Literary discourse in every working-class periodical is both an attempt to influence and the product of influence. Only by studying a great number of subjective statements by many working-class writers and a great number of literary decisions by many working-class editors can we come to any sense of a working-class feel for poetry or fiction at this time, or of a working-class canon. In this way, the opinions of an anonymous "Lancashire Weaver" about poetry, or those of writers in the most ephemeral of the working-class periodicals of the "War of the Un-stamped," are as worthy of consideration as the literary ideas of such influential critics as George Julian Harney and Gerald Massey.6

**Autodidacticism and Early Reading Experiences**

With few exceptions, those who would become working-class journalists and critics were autodidacts. Certainly their self-education shaped their values and critical beliefs. An investigation of working-class biographies of the last part of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth suggests that the reading material of working-class children was widely divergent.

That divergence is not surprising if one considers the variety of sources of reading material and the near randomness of most working-class children's reading experiences. They could come in contact with chapbooks or broadsides sold by peddlers, or with small home libraries, generally containing religious works but sometimes containing more (Vincent, *Bread* 110); they might find something to read at their school
libraries; they could borrow reading-matter from friends; or they could, if they were lucky, obtain free admission to a circulating library. Thomas Cooper, the Chartist intellectual did this (see below) as did Thomas Carter (Cooper 34; Vincent, Bread 117). Some may have had parents who read periodicals. James Watson’s mother had “the habit of reading Cobbett’s Register” (Vincent, Testaments 110). Some had less literary sources of reading: besides learning from “the contents of the local papers,” Joseph Gutteridge gained knowledge from reading “the sign board literature of public-houses and shops” (Gutteridge 85). Such randomness must certainly figure in the amazing eclecticism of the working-class periodicals these autodidacts contributed to as adults.

But within the great diversity of reading materials, there was clearly a tiny core of commonality. Most working-class readers were more or less acquainted with the Bible, of course. If their households contained any library at all—as many did—the Bible invariably was at the heart of the collection. As David Vincent notes, “The Bible was less the mediator between man and God than a vague symbol of religious commitment, useful as a primer for young children who were learning their letters, an occasional source of entertainment, even, indeed, a particularly suitable item for pawning in times of need” (Bread 110). Moreover, most of the schools in which the working class picked up the rudiments of literacy—Sunday schools, schools of the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, and those of the nonconformist British and Foreign School Society—used the Bible as the primary, and often the only, text for reading lessons (Burnett 141, 146–47). Some would not look back fondly upon these early and difficult forced-reading experiences. In his autobiography, the poet John Clare, who considered parts of the Bible among his “favourite readings,” nevertheless was harshly critical of the Bible as a reading primer:

I think the manner of learing [sic] children in village schools very erronious, that is soon as they learn their letters to task them with lessons from the bible and testament and keeping them dinging at them, without any change, till they leave it A dull boy, never turns with pleasures to his school days when he has often been beat 4 times for bad readings in 5 verses of Scripture. . . . Other books as they grow up be-
come a novelty and their task book at school, the Bible, looses its relish
the painful task of learning wearied the memory irksome inconvenience never prompts recollection. (5)

Clare found solace (and “learning”) by reading on his own “the Sixpenny Romances of ‘Cinderella,’ ‘Little Red Riding Hood,’ ‘Jack and the Bean Stalk,’ ‘Zig Zag,’ ‘Prince Cherry,’ etc. . . .” (5).

Another autobiographer, the Chartist James Bezer, complains about his Sunday school: “Now, that school did not even learn me to read; six hours a week, certainly not one hour of useful knowledge; plenty of cant, and what my teachers used to call explaining difficult texts in the Bible, but little, very little else” (quoted in Vincent, Testaments 157). The growing Bible literacy of this time was both the product and the promoter of the rise of Methodism and the Evangelical movement. It also could partially explain the persistent linking by working-class thinkers of working-class politics and free thought, since, for some, unpleasant experiences learning the Bible must have shifted to a distrust and dislike of the work itself—or a distrust and dislike of the way their teachers interpreted it. Whatever the case, biblical references are common in working-class periodicals, although attitudes toward the Bible are mixed.

There were other works that working-class children commonly read. The one that is mentioned again and again in working-class autobiography is John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, which was found in many working-class homes or school libraries (Vincent, Bread 110–11). For many it was one of the first works they chose to read—and, for many, it was the first to make a powerful impression. Both Samuel Bamford and Frederick Rogers state that that was the case (Bamford 1, 51; Rogers 6). And Bezer presents Bunyan as the antidote to his dreary Sunday-school education: “My own dear Bunyan! if it hadn’t been for you, I should have gone mad, I think, before I was ten years old!” (quoted in Vincent, Testaments 166). For Cooper, at nine or ten “the immortal ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ was my book of books. What hours of wonder and rapture I passed with Bunyan as a boy!” (Cooper 22). References to the Pilgrim’s Progress in working-class autobiography are overwhelmingly positive; Francis Place is exceptional—unique even—in seeing the work as an “absurd book” (Place 46). Indeed, E. P. Thompson writes that Pilgrim’s Progress, which posits the
value of inner belief against the wiles and falsity of the "other world" is, with Rights of Man, one of the two foundation texts of the English working-class movement (Making 34–35).

One might expect, therefore, to find Pilgrim's Progress promoted enthusiastically as essential reading in the working-class press. But that is not the case at all; even passing references to the work in those periodicals are extremely rare. I can point to only two. The Sunday Herald, a London periodical that ran for sixteen weeks in 1832 (Wiener, Finding List 56) began its first issue with an attempt to update Bunyan with "A New Pilgrim's Progress; or The Adventures of a Reformer, In Travelling from a State of Slavery and Corruption, to Liberty and Prosperity." In 1845 Northern Star published a lengthy excerpt by the editor of Wade's London Review that is harshly critical of Pilgrim's Progress. The editor of Wade's believes that "allegories, emblems, and fables in early education . . . are puzzling and misleading," and describes the malevolent effect Bunyan's work had upon his own childhood: "The result of such reading . . . was to people my young brain with a horrid phantasmagoria of bodiless and misshapen images, from whose midnight tortures and distractions I was happy to escape, after much suffering, with my faculties underanged." The Northern Star reviewer, in introducing this excerpt, also admits to being a survivor of childhood night terrors brought on by Bunyan and thanks Wade's editor for his "castigation of the mad tinker's printed trash" (15 Mar. 1845: 3).

I have found no other references to Pilgrim's Progress—not even a brief excerpt in the wide-ranging and copious collections of literary extracts to be found in several periodicals—collections that, as we shall see, strove to be comprehensive catalogues of valued works.

Why this divergence between autobiographical and journalistic writing, sometimes—as is the case with Cooper—on the part of the same writer? There are a few possibilities.

For one thing, while many autobiographers remembered reading Bunyan as children, none mentioned rereading him at a later age. For many, then, the work may have lost its immediacy, its details having become ghostly images. Or possibly working-class writers perceived the work as one for children and therefore, for whatever reasons, not important for their (largely) adult audiences. In other words, the difference might suggest a conscious or subconscious awareness on the part of these
writers of a canon of children’s literature—even a canon of working-class children’s literature—that is distinct from an adult canon. This may explain another surprising difference between working-class autobiography and journalism: Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* figures prominently in the childhoods of many working-class autobiographers but hardly at all in working-class periodicals (Vincent, *Bread* 118–19, 127 n, 179 n; Clare 13, 28). If working-class journalists categorized and marginalized *Pilgrim’s Progress* or *Robinson Crusoe* as juvenile literature, however, one is hard-pressed to explain the paucity of references in later (and especially Chartist) working-class periodicals, when what children read became more a concern for journalists.

Very likely for many journalists there was more to their silence about these works than the books’ inapplicability to adults. Some surely must have seen *Pilgrim’s Progress* as dangerous. As I shall argue in chapter 4, many working-class journalists of the teens, twenties, and thirties feared the imaginative in literature and especially in fiction. By these standards a work that was personally liberating for many could be seen as socially dangerous and hardly “useful.” This explanation, however, does not explain why Chartist journalists—who generally did not fear the imagination and the imaginative—avoided mentioning the work.

A third possible reason might be found in what, for lack of a better term, I call the “second literacy” one sees described repeatedly in working-class autobiography: a highly-motivated and wide-ranging program of reading, often undertaken years after the reader had first learned to read. The most famous of these, perhaps, is Cooper’s, a course of study and memorization so heavy that it resulted in a nervous breakdown (22–68). His directed self-study was only atypical of the working-class intellectual in its obsessiveness. This “second literacy” was always much more deliberate and methodical than the first, since the reader no longer read what happened to be around but sought out, and often sacrificed to obtain, those works that he or she, for whatever reason, believed worth reading. Often one work led to an epiphany that set the reader on a course of autodidacticism. For Clare that work was James Thomson’s *Seasons*, a fragment of which he came upon at the age of thirteen and thereafter obsessively sought to obtain. For Alexander Somerville, later (briefly) editor of the *Cosmopolite* and *Political Soldier*, the work was Robert Burns’s *Poems*: “I read them under sensations of pleasure entirely new”
(88). For James Watson, the prolific radical publisher of the 1830s, that moment may have come when he happened upon a meeting of radicals who were reading Thomas Jonathan Wooler's Black Dwarf, Carlile’s Republican, and Cobbett’s Political Register (Vincent, Testaments 110). Rationalist texts and poetic works both provided the impetus to self-education, and for many the reading of one sort of work led to the reading of the other. This “second literacy” depended upon choice and not upon accident, and choice depended upon a sense of value. In turn, in presenting in their periodicals a sense of what was and was not valuable, many would naturally refer to this time when they were able to decide what they read. In other words, they relied less upon what books their parents happened to own or what their schools provided for their edification, and more upon those they consciously fixed upon as worthy. But this reason, too, does not fully explain away the discrepancy between private and public values. Whether it was read by choice or not, working-class readers clearly saw Pilgrim's Progress as valuable in their own lives. Why would they deny that value in the lives of their audiences? To some extent, then, the relative disregard of Pilgrim's Progress and Robinson Crusoe in the working-class press remains a mystery; a thoroughly convincing solution must await a systematic comparison between working-class private writing (diaries, letters, memoirs) and public writing (speeches, periodicals, and books).

However working-class journalists obtained the rudiments of literacy, the “second literacy” of each depended upon their own wills and—helped perhaps by knowledgeable colleagues or working-class periodicals—upon their own choices. Their energetic self-pursuit of knowledge, usually against great odds, shaped the form and content of their periodicals in several ways.

For one thing, self-teaching, no matter how thorough—cutting a path as one goes, rather than following any established curriculum—cannot but leave gaps in learning in contrast to a more structured education. Doherty, for one, recognized the gaps in his own education but, in introducing his United Trades’ Co-operative Journal in 1830, he transformed this deficiency into a point of pride:

The slender stock of knowledge which we possess has been casually and, as it were, accidentally snatched from the common stock, during
the usual and necessary periods of cessation from labour. . . . We make no pretensions to classic lore. We cannot boast of an acquaintance with what is commonly called the learned languages; nor can we, at present, of course, aspire to a display of the beauties and elegances of composition. The only requisite qualifications which we believe we possess . . . [are] a moderate share of common sense and an accurate knowledge, from experience, of the wants, the wishes, the interests, and the capacities of the working classes. (Quoted in Kirby and Musson 2)

In other words, learning from books constitutes only a part of what one needs to become a good working-class journalist and critic; living and learning working-class values is important to promoting those values and to critical evaluation for a working-class audience. Lack of that class-based experience, on the other hand, reduces the value for a working-class audience of middle-class critics, no matter how complete their education.

Another way of dealing with gaps is to deny that they are gaps—to argue that what one has not read is not worth reading. Carlyle’s pronouncements on Sir Walter Scott’s novels illustrate this sort of reaction. Such condemnation is hardly a device invented by working-class journalists; many of the middle-class Evangelical attacks on the novel, for example, were clearly mounted by those who shunned novel reading completely. The tactic is not necessarily an illegitimate or shoddy one. The notion of gaps presupposes an established canon, one that every reader needed to read to have a full education. But working-class critics worked hard to destroy the idea of a universal or class-transcendent canon and to promote an alternate canon that overlapped the established one but served a completely different audience with its own unique values. In that sense, not having read Ovid was no gap at all to Doherty, and he need not have read Ovid to come to that conclusion. For a critic writing for and to a particular class, with a particular culture, at a particular time, Ovid was an anachronism. Moreover, the class interests of these autodidacts led them to read works that were foreign to formal education. William Benbow’s Grand National Holiday, for example, first published in 1831, certainly helped shape the political philosophy of many autodidacts but probably did not contribute to many university educations. But we could only consider that those university educations therefore had a “gap” if we assume
that any work has the exact same value for all people—that there was one
canon for all in Britain during the first part of the nineteenth century.
Few politically aware autodidacts made that assumption.

Incidentally, pursuing one's own curriculum can have one distinct
advantage: such a course of study tends to juxtapose works in a way that a
more formal education does not, leading to new angles from which to
view particular works. A reading of Shelley's *Queen Mab*, for example, in
the context of works by Paine or Comte de Volney—or William
Godwin—rather than among Shelley's collected works or those of his po-
etic contemporaries, would tend to emphasize Shelley's role as a philoso-
pher more strongly than his role as a poet. Works are read in context;
one text read in a number of contexts produces, in a sense, a number of
different works. A reader today, introduced to Shelley in a course on Ro-
mantic poetry simply would not read Shelley in the same way as one who
read Shelley after hearing about him in Carlyle's *Republican*.

A second by-product of working-class autodidacticism was the en-
ergy, and sometimes even obsessiveness, with which these writers pro-
vided their favorite authors and works. These readers did more than
learn: they discovered—and, as autobiographies of the time suggest,
working-class autodidacts did not forget the emotional and intellectual
power that their literary discoveries had upon them. Some, such as Coo-
per and those several editors who compiled copious literary selections,
paid homage to a number of their discoveries in their writings. Others fo-
cused upon one writer as their great literary hero: we shall see, for ex-
ample, Carlyle's relentless promotion of—and even possessiveness of—the works of Paine, or Harney's lifelong obsession with the works
and life of Byron.

A developing working-class press offered these writers a chance to
publicize their own autodidacticism and to promote their own path to
learning as an aid to the working-class readers who followed them. In a
sense they worked to promote a working-class curriculum, seeing in their
own experience a model for all working-class reading. The obvious ego-
tism of many of the working-class leaders and journalists of this time of-
ten proved a hindrance to their political movements: a study of early
nineteenth-century working-class journalism is of necessity a study of
constant bickering, temporary alliances, and long-standing rivalries,
based as much on personality as upon political philosophy. In the matter
of literary criticism and canon formation, however, this egotism could be greatly beneficial: faced with the task of building a working-class canon almost from scratch, these writers could only look within for a sense of what was valuable. Their power as critics depended upon their extreme confidence that what was valuable for them was valuable for their class. In other words, their effectiveness lay in transferring the energy and content of their self-study to the working class as a whole.

The Working-Class Periodical

Not every periodical read by members of the working class could, by even the broadest definition, be termed a “working-class” periodical. If that were the case, nearly every periodical published during this time would be “working-class.” Coffeehouses and reading rooms regularly carried journals and newspapers supporting a wide variety of political and class interests, and their patrons had access to periodicals such as the London Times as well as the Republican or Northern Star. Describing Doherty’s Manchester coffee- and newsroom, Arthur Aspinall writes: “Ninety-six newspapers were taken in every week; they included the principal Manchester and London papers, some from Dublin, Belfast, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Leeds, most of the unstamped (and therefore illegal) ones, and even the Edinburgh Review and Westminster Review (though not, it may be observed, the Tory Quarterly Review).” This variety was not unusual (26, 28). Working-class readers of the 1840s and 1850s also had access to stamped newspapers in mechanics’ institutes, although Richard Altick notes that these reading rooms “never attracted many workmen” (201).

Moreover, although buying individual copies of middle-class papers and journals was impossible for most laborers, they could club together to buy them or could rent them out from cooperating news vendors (Altick 323); servants were often obviously in a position to inherit the discarded periodicals of their employers and pass them on; and anyone of any class might find pages of a recent Advertiser or Chronicle wrapping a purchase from the greengrocer or fishmonger (Webb 23).

As a youth in the 1820s, Cooper, though poor, was a voracious reader of expensive periodicals; through the help of a sympathetic caretaker of a book society for the local Gainsborough gentry, he read “each number of the Quarterly and Edinburgh Reviews, and of the European, New Monthly,
and Blackwood's Magazines, as duly as they came out." But his "great favourite" was the London Magazine, "a periodical which first set before English readers the Essays of Elia, the Picture Galleries of Hazlitt, De Quincey's 'Confessions of an Opium-eater,' verses by Keats and sonnets by poor Clare, and tales by Allen Cunningham, and in the later numbers of which Carlyle's 'Life of Schiller' first appeared" (Cooper 65–66).

Working-class journalists were aware of such middle-class competition. Indeed, they often extracted from middle-class periodicals for their own publications. The many attacks in working-class journals on articles in the Times or other newspapers with views seen as hostile to working-class interests suggest that working-class journalists assumed that many readers in their audience knew of such articles and were therefore in need of some sort of political antidote.

To begin to focus the subject of this study, then, I define a working-class periodical not simply as one read by members of the working class but one that self-consciously directs itself toward the working class and its interests.

But how does one judge which periodical is directed toward which class? What may be the most obvious indicator—price—is perhaps the least helpful. It is a mistake to think that the more expensive (and therefore generally stamped and legal) periodicals were directed toward the middle class and that the less-expensive (and therefore generally unstamped and illegal) periodicals were directed toward the workers—or, to put it another way, that the middle class published "respectable" periodicals and the working class did not. If we assume that all expensive periodicals were intended for middle-class audiences, several stamped periodicals clearly directed toward the working class would fall outside the scope of this study. Cobbett's Political Register, Carlile's Republican, and Wooler's Black Dwarf were all stamped and all cost sixpence in the years after the passing of the Six Acts in 1819. In the 1830s Doherty's Voice of the People, "the exclusive property of the Working Classes" (1 Jan. 1831: 1) was stamped and cost seven pence an issue. After the stamp duties were lowered from four pence to one penny in 1836, many working-class periodicals, including Northern Star, were stamped and cost threepence, four pence, or more an issue.

Prices above a penny or two obviously limited the circulation of working-class periodicals. Cobbett, for example, estimated that raising the
cost of his Political Register from twopence to sixpence cut his circulation by more than 80 percent (Spater 390–91). But the publishers of such costly periodicals obviously hoped—successfully, in some cases—that an audience large enough to keep them solvent would be interested in their work and would seek out and read their periodicals in the same way they read other expensive publications: in their coffeehouses or reading rooms or by clubbing, borrowing, or buying used copies.

It should not be assumed, either, that all “cheap” periodicals were directed exclusively toward the working class. There were many middle-class periodicals among the unstamped. They were just as illegal as their working-class counterparts but generally were not prosecuted. The Ladies’ Penny Gazette was directed toward “females in the middling classes of life[;] tradesmen [sic] and farmers’ wives and daughters” (27 Oct. 1832: 1). Among the middle-class unstamped publications are the innumerable periodicals of the Figaro type: Figaro in London (and Figaros of several other places), Punchinello!, the Whig-Dresser, and many more. These sometimes excruciatingly arch precursors to Punch, which looked satirically at party politics (and which collectively went far toward proving that puns are not simply the lowest form of humor but also a refined form of torture), were, as Joel Wiener points out, “exclusively ‘middle class’ in orientation” (War 178).11

Other cheap periodicals were, or tried to be, classless. Editors of many of these periodicals took great pains in their first issues to disassociate themselves from any class interests. Their protestations were in part motivated by a desire to avoid the kind of persecution by the Stamp Office that fell upon their more class-conscious brethren (Wiener, War 173). Many of the hundreds of periodicals published during the “War of the Unstamped” proposed this sort of truce with the government in introductory essays. Two of the cheapest of the cheap offer good examples of this sort of distancing. The useful-knowledge London Halfpenny Magazine wrote of its audience: “We anticipate extensive patronage from classes very different in rank; just as the fruiterer in Covent-garden-market sells apples and pears to the Duke of Bedford as well as to the little boy at the crossing” (5 May 1832: 2). A northern counterpart, the Edinburgh Half-Penny Magazine, aimed itself toward a similarly broad audience, while at the same time drawing a correlation between wealth and intelligence: “We pledge ourselves to produce a melange, which, while it
may cheer and enlighten the hearth of the ignorant and poor, will not be unworthy of the acceptance of the intelligent and rich” (2 [n.d.] 9). Besides avoiding the wrath of the law, conductors of these periodicals obviously avoided class issues in order to appeal both to the class with more people to buy their magazine and to the class with more pennies and halfpennies to spend on it. This sort of periodical was legion during the explosion of periodical publishing in the early thirties. Other examples are the twopenny *Lincoln Cabinet* (1832), as well as the *Magazine of Interest* (31 Aug. 1833), the *Penny Lancet* (1832), and the *Lawyer* (1833), all of which cost one penny. An earlier example of a periodical that similarly distanced itself from any class is the threepenny Birmingham *Bazaar, or Literary and Scientific Repository*, “adapted to every class of readers” (26 June 1823: 1). A later example is the *Illustrated People’s Paper* (1854). Many periodicals of this kind, however, in trying to be everything to everyone, offered nothing of substance to anyone, and most quickly slipped into oblivion.

The *Penny Magazine* of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) was a model for both these *Halfpenny* magazines and for scores of other inexpensive publications. That periodical, too, noted in its first issue that “we hope our Penny Magazine will be to all classes—a universal convenience and enjoyment.” But in the same introduction *Penny Magazine*’s editor, Charles Knight, specifically directs the periodical to a more limited group: those “whose time and whose means are equally limited” (31 Mar. 1832: 1). Certainly *Penny Magazine* was read by members of the middle class (Altick 337–39). But its raison d’être was from the start an attempt by middle-class reformers to improve the minds of individual members of the working class, and from its first issue *Penny Magazine*’s ideas about individual improvement took on the biases of its publisher’s class. Its introductory essay exhibits both the condescension and limitations of the magazine, promising that it “may be taken up and laid down without requiring any considerable effort; and . . . may tend to fix the mind upon much calmer, and, it may be, purer subjects of thought than the violence of party discussion, or the stimulating details of crime and suffering” (31 Mar. 1832: 1). Attempting to divorce the political from the “useful” is, of course, a political act. The “violence” of party discussion and the “stimulation” of crime and suffering informed the working class of their own social and political situation; such “vio-
“ience” and “stimulation” were therefore among the first things that the working class looked for in their reading and among the first things most working-class journalists gave them. Brougham, Knight, and the SDUK were well aware of all this; by “fixing”—a significant choice of words—the attention of members of the working class, during the little free time they had, upon such “calm” and “pure” subjects as the history of Charing Cross, the antiquity of beer, and the zoo at Regents Park (all covered in the first issue), the SDUK hoped to check any interest their readers might have in political literature and, by extension, in political thought and political activity. The class interests in Penny Magazine might be less obnoxiously overt than those of the awkward antiradical periodicals of a generation before, such as White Dwarf and the Anti-Cobbett (of which more later), but its political intent was equally subversive. That intent was not lost on working-class journalists and readers. A correspondent to the Poor Man’s Guardian from Poplar, who calls himself “a Labourer,” reacted angrily to Penny Magazine’s first issue:

Are we to be amused by the piping of a penny trumpet, sounded weekly to divert our minds?—Pshaw! Useful knowledge, indeed, would that be to those who live idly on our skill and industry, which would ca-jole us into an apathetic resignation to their iron sway, or induce us to waste the energy and skill of man for them all day. . . . I caution the readers of the ‘Guardian’ against the base and insidious intentions of this Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. (Apr. 1832: 359)

Among the better-known middle-class propagators of “useful knowledge” besides Penny Magazine were Saturday Magazine, put out by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and the remarkably long-lived Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal (1832–1956). There were many others. Some overtly preached middle-class values. One example of such sermonizing, fascinating in its very transparency, can be found in the story of Goody Two-Shoes in the Boys’ and Girls’ Penny Magazine. Its author offers this argument against working-class political agitation: “The father of Goody Two-Shoes was born in England; and everybody knows, that in this happy country the poor are to the full as much protected by our excellent laws, as are the highest and richest nobles in our land, and the humble cottager enjoys equal share of the blessings of English liberty, with the sons of the king themselves” (5 Jan. 1833: 138). Other periodicals strove for a
safe "innocuousness"—a conscious avoidance of discussing or promoting working-class values. Chambers' was such a periodical. But, as Altick argues, by striving not to offend the ruling class, the Chambers brothers avoided publishing the very things that would attract a working-class audience: "In his zeal to avoid giving offense on any side, [William] Chambers kept from the Journal the qualities necessary to win working-class readers accustomed to the hard-hitting commentary of the political press and the melodrama of both the Sunday newspapers' surveys of crime and the penny numbers of Gothic fiction" (334–35). Altick notes that, after its initial popularity with the working class, Chambers' was bought more often by members of the middle class (338).14 Penny Magazine, Chambers', and other periodicals directed primarily toward the working class but not produced by them, fall outside the scope of this study. I do not deny that members of the working class read such periodicals and were influenced by them. I am, however, not interested here in the literary values that one class promoted for another, but rather in those that working-class journalists either saw existing within their own class or that they promoted for that class.

The best evidence for the class orientation of periodicals lies within the periodicals themselves. Most periodicals exclusively and self-consciously directed toward the working class made no effort hide that fact, and many proudly proclaimed their allegiance in their lead article. Thus, in the Poor Man's Guardian Hetherington targets his audience on the first page: "We will try, step by step, the power of RIGHT against MIGHT; and we will begin by protecting and upholding this grand bulwark and defence of all our rights—this key to all our liberties—THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS—the press, too, of the IGNORANT and the POOR! we have taken upon ourselves its protection, and we will never abandon our post; we will die rather" (9 Jul. 1831: 1). In much the same way in the first paragraph of the first issue of the Chartist London Democrat (1839) the conductors of that periodical spell out their class interests: "It is of the utmost importance that working men should be accurately informed of the true state of affairs, and likewise that they should thoroughly understand the principles upon which the present movement is founded; therefore the publication of the Democrat is ventured upon, solely to supply what is considered by many to be a great deficiency" (13 Apr. 1839: 1).15
Many "working-class" periodicals, of course, did not spell out their values and class orientation this clearly from the start. Moreover, the first issues of many working-class periodicals no longer exist (as is true of the *Northern Star*). In both these cases the contents of the periodicals—political leaders, letters from readers, reprinted speeches, literary reviews, "varieties," and even advertising—generally offer a clear sense of that periodical's target audience.

A number of periodicals published during the first half of the nineteenth century clearly promoted the interests of the working class while self-consciously working in the interests of the middle class as well. These periodicals differed greatly from those that divorced themselves from class interests; in these, class interests were paramount. Most of the radical periodicals published before 1830 in particular targeted radicals from both the working and middle class, and indeed held that the interests of both groups were the same. Cobbett may have opened the door to a new, working-class reading audience in 1816; he did not thereby slam the door on the many middle-class radicals who had supported the *Political Register* for years. Carlile, Wooler, and William Hone also had feet in both camps. The issues discussed by these editors—postwar debt, the right to form political unions, the vicissitudes of Queen Caroline, and the need for electoral reform, to name a few—were issues important to all classes, and especially to radicals of all classes.

Similarly, the Owenite periodicals of the 1820s, such as the Brighton *Co-operator* and the *Cooperative Magazine*, later known as the *London Cooperative Magazine*, addressed themselves to and had readers among all classes. But their advocacy of a classless society devoid of personal property appealed particularly to laborers, and in the 1820s and early 1830s, as G. D. H. Cole points out, "the driving force of the movement came from the working class" (*Robert Owen* 255). Laborers more often than not produced and wrote for these periodicals; laborers more often than not read them as well.

After the Reform Bill of 1832 severed working- and middle-class radicals into two distinct groups, with largely distinct cultures and sets of interests, fewer journalists found it possible to address working- and middle-class interests simultaneously. At times, for causes such as the struggle against the new poor laws or for factory reform, the interests of the two groups coincided, and some publications catered to both. The
Ten Hour's Advocate, and Journal of Literature and Art, for example, declared in its first issue that it addressed the interests of all (26 Sept. 1846: 1). But for the most part, working-class periodicals of the early 1830s were directed toward that class alone.

Whether they confined themselves exclusively to working-class interests or self-consciously promoted the interests of other classes as well, any periodical that exhibited a clear and uncondescending sympathy for working-class interests I consider a "working-class periodical" and one relevant to this study.

A working-class periodical, then, is "working-class" because of the makeup of its audience and because of the relationship between the producers of the periodical and their audience. But this definition raises two tricky questions: what exactly was the "working-class audience" for these periodicals, and what exactly is a "working-class journalist"?

Of course there was no such thing as one working-class audience; there was not one particular group that every publisher and editor of a working-class periodical tried to reach. Rather, most aimed at smaller interest groups within that class. Some publishers and editors appealed to laborers in a certain trade. Some focused on certain issues—trade unionism, say, or factory reform, or specific local issues—issues that limited their audience. Some, such as editors and publishers of Owenite or free-thought periodicals, sought out a working-class elite that was relatively conversant in the specialized ideas they discussed. One periodical targeted common soldiers: Carlyle's short-lived Political Soldier (1833–34).

Moreover, many working-class periodicals, consciously or unconsciously, at best appealed directly to only half of the working class, directing their periodicals specifically to "working men." That is how the London Democrat prefaced its opening number. Cobbett draws the same line, at least partially, by addressing his first discourse to the working class to "Journeymen and Labourers." Many periodicals aimed toward a male audience in their titles: among these are two of the best-known working-class periodicals of the 1830s, the Poor Man's Guardian and the Poor Man's Advocate (1832–34).

This blindness to the latent energy and power of ideas held by the women of the working class helps explain the almost complete exclusion of female working-class journalists in the first half of the nineteenth cen-
tury. Not counting working-class poets published in these periodicals, and acknowledging that some anonymous submissions most certainly were written by women, I have been able to discover only five women who were intimately connected with working-class journalism. Three of them were connected in some way with Carlile: his wife, Jane, and his sister Mary-Anne, both of whom at one time shared his imprisonment, helped with his business, and published his works while he was in prison; and the fascinating Elizabeth Sharples, who, impressed by Carlile’s free-thought ideas, began to give free-thought lectures of her own. She became Carlile’s mistress and assisted him with his later projects. She was also the only known female editor of a working-class periodical, the free-thought Isis (Wiener, Radicalism 81–85, 191, 196–97). The other two were Chartist: one Sophia, a Birmingham Chartist who corresponded with several periodicals, including the National Association Gazette (1842) and the English Chartist Circular, and Helen MacFarlane, the translator of the Communist Manifesto for Harney’s Red Republican, who was probably the “Howard Morton” who wrote regularly for that periodical and its successor, Friend of the People, and whose leaving prompted Engels to criticize Harney for breaking with “the most outstanding and capable contributor to The Friend of the People.”

But these five women were exceptions in a fraternity of male publishers, editors, and writers, who, in leaders, addresses, essays, and exhortations, often depicted their audience as a brotherhood or as “brethren.” Later, many Chartist periodicals explicitly or implicitly recognized that women did indeed have a place in a working-class audience. The Northern Star, certainly, tried to be a full-feature family newspaper. In another case, a writer for the Glasgow Chartist Circular advised Chartist mothers what to read to their children. But even in the few cases in which women had a legitimate place in a periodical’s audience, it was often a place apart from that of their fathers, sons, and brothers. Harney might appeal to both sexes in the literary page of Northern Star, but O’Connor, in that newspaper’s political leaders, constantly addressed himself to men: “Fustian jackets, unshorn chins, and blistered hands.” Such gender-based exclusion of both staff and audience, we shall see, strongly influenced views of literature in these periodicals.

In almost no case, then, did working-class journals—even those with
massive circulations—target the entire working-class as their audience. “Working-class audience” is a term of convenience denoting any audience composed of members of the working-class: everything from the smallest local interest group to the broadest mass audience. By describing each periodical individually as it comes up in this study, I hope to give some idea of the particular composition of its audience.

One important point remains in defining a working-class periodical. Some of the periodicals published during this period were produced by one person alone; most were produced by a very small group of people. In either case, most periodicals of the day strongly reflected individual preferences and values. Because of this, the class standings and values of the journalists behind these periodicals are crucial in determining whether a periodical is “working-class” or not. In many cases, writers (and, more rarely, publishers and editors) of these periodicals were anonymous; all our evidence about their values lies wholly within the texts themselves. In cases in which the journalist is known, I apply the same tests to them and their writings as I do to the periodicals: if their lives and works show a clear sense of sympathy with the aspirations of the working class—and especially if members of the working class realized that sympathy—I consider them and their writings relevant to this study, in spite of their class origins or even class standing. Therefore, the periodical writings of Cobbett and Robert Owen have a place here, even though calling Cobbett “working-class” would be problematic, and calling Owen “working-class” would be downright ridiculous. Or, to take a later example, Jones, one of the last great Chartist, was the son of Major Charles Jones, who was equerry to the duke of Cumberland. He was educated at the aristocratic St. Michael’s College at Lunenburg in Hannover and attended the Middle Temple and became a barrister before dedicating himself to Chartism in 1846 (Baylen and Gossman 2: 264). After that date, few seriously questioned his efforts on behalf of his adoptive class; as Engels wrote to Karl Marx, “he was the only educated Englishman among the politicians who was, at bottom, entirely on our side” (Marx and Engels 116)—a statement that reveals as much about Engels’s view of education as it does about Jones’s class values. Working-class readers of Northern Star, the Labourer, People’s Paper, and other periodicals that Jones wrote for saw him as a fellow traveler; these periodicals, and his writings in them, figure importantly here.
For the purposes of this study, then, I define a working-class periodical as a periodical that is self-consciously directed toward the working class and that clearly reflects working-class interests; I define a working-class journalist as one who self-consciously promotes those class interests. Hundreds of periodicals and writers fit within the limits of these definitions.