A Sense of Canon

A Literary History

The Influence of Paine

THE FIRST periodical directed intentionally toward the working class, an inexpensive edition of Cobbett’s Political Register, came out on 2 November 1816. Any history of the working-class press of this period, however, literary or otherwise, must begin not in the nineteenth century but in the eighteenth, and not with William Cobbett but with Thomas Paine.

The massive sales of both parts of Paine’s Rights of Man demonstrated the readiness of the “swinish multitude” (as Edmund Burke had dismissed them in his 1790 Reflections on the Revolution in France) to receive and discuss political ideas. Paine is, in Rights of Man, intensely aware of that audience, and indeed derives much of his rhetorical power from them. In particular, his constant use of a communal, popular “we” argues strongly, as Olivia Smith puts it, “that there exists a public understanding that is intellectually adroit and competent to deal with political questions” (52). Paine presented himself in Rights of Man not just as an educator of the people, but also as the articulator of their basic political aspirations; the publication of his ideas proclaimed the value of their own. That assumption of popular political ability was nothing short of revolutionary in Britain in 1791, and it was that revolutionary assumption
that underlay every working-class periodical published in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the period from 1816 to 1858, but especially at its beginning, working-class journalists acknowledged Paine as their model in matters of politics and rhetoric—and sometimes in matters of religion. They had other influences in these areas, of course. Volney's *Ruins... of Empires* (1791), Elihu Palmer's *Principles of Nature* (1801), and the works of d'Holbach, Voltaire, Rousseau, Godwin, and Bentham often appear in articles of working-class periodicals or in the lists of working-class publishers. But Paine was obviously the father figure to many journalists. As a contributor to Thomas Davison's *Medusa, or Penny Politician* wrote, concluding a memoir of Paine: "Thus have we humbly attempted to pay a tribute of gratitude to this great man whose pen has done more to benefit the human race than all the writers that have preceded or followed him" (27 Mar. 1819: 41). In July of the same year, William T. Sherwin, an early radical journalist, published a highly laudatory biography of Paine. Carlile, Sherwin’s sometime collaborator, followed with his own *Life of Thomas Paine* in 1820 (Wiener, *Radicalism* 28).¹

In all his many periodicals it was Carlile more than any other working-class writer who coveted the role of Paine’s political and theological son and heir. He lavishly praised Paine in every one of his periodicals. Indeed, Paine seems the only mortal that the extremely egotistical Carlile believed his superior—or at least his equal—as a politician or theologian. Carlile wrote in the *Republican*, "I hold him to be the most useful man that ever trod the soil of the United States, or of any other states" (1 Aug. 1823: 124). Carlile’s *Republican* energetically promoted and then diligently reported the many birthday dinners held annually on 29 January in honor of Paine, often with Carlile himself as the guest of honor. Indeed, Carlile held that Paine’s birthday was a “Festival of Reason” of far greater significance to humanity than another birthday, Christmas (*Republican* 1 Feb. 1822: 129). Such dinners were held throughout the country until well into Chartist years.²

Another journalist who assumed the mantle of Paine was Cobbett, a man who had hated Paine during Paine’s lifetime but who had reversed himself completely by 1816.³ Cobbett’s economic ideas in particular owe much to Paine’s *Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* (Williams
20; Political Register 18 Sept. 1819: 131–32). But while Carlile accepted all
of Paine as his gospel, Cobbett considered the free-thought ideas of
Paine’s Age of Reason to be “nonsense” (15 Jan. 1820: 635). This differ-
ence between the two men was partly responsible for two attacks on
Cobbett by Carlile in his Republican; attacks mounted with the virulent
flavor of a bitter sibling rivalry (10 Feb. 1826: 161–65; 11 Feb. 1854:
168–79).4

One of Cobbett’s more quixotic enterprises was to bring Paine’s
bones from their original resting place on Paine’s farm in New Rochelle,
New York, to England in 1819, when Cobbett returned from a two-year
exile. That action was ridiculed in drawing and verse—by Byron and oth-
er.5 The recurrent image of most of these drawings and verses—Cobbett
with Paine’s bones strapped to his back—is surely an emblematic cut at
Cobbett’s deep debt to Paine.

Paine offered Carlile, Cobbett, and their successors much more than
a class-based view of the political system. He offered them the possibility
of using their minds and pens to add their own ideas to the struggle
against the prevailing political state. Paine’s writing—in Rights of Man
and other works—is situational; he wrote political analysis motivated by
the interplay of class values and current events. What he did in 1791 oth-
ers could do in 1819, 1832, or 1848. Rights of Man was not a periodical,
but it showed working-class writers what a working-class political periodi-
cal could do and should be.

More than this, Paine’s style—loaded with verbs and nouns, shorn of
ornamental adjectives, elegant and thorough, but at the same time
simple, concise, and above all accessible—was the perfect rhetorical
model for working-class journalists.6 Few slavishly tried to copy Paine’s
style, and the best among the working-class journalists were fine and
original stylists in their own right. Cobbett, for example, has a lively and
personal style that is purely his own, as anyone who has read even a few
pages of his Rural Rides knows.7 But for an example of prose that sought
out a specific audience, one with widely differing literacy skills, and that
spoke uncondescendingly to that audience with clear, simple, and yet
comprehensive prose, and for an example of prose that articulated the
attitudes of the working class in the language of that class, many looked
to Paine.
In one other way *Rights of Man* is a seminal work for working-class journalists. It can in no way be construed as a work of literary criticism, but nonetheless it suggested a bold new way for members of the working class to view literary texts. Paine argued in *Rights of Man* that the best government was one that changed to represent the shifting will of the people, and that the worst government was one stagnated by traditional values upheld because of tradition alone—a tyranny by the dead over the living. He exhorted the people to judge and rejudge government by their own constantly evolving values and to reject and replace a government that did not respond to their present needs. Many working-class journalists heeded his call and became popular political critics; many applied the same judging and rejudging, the same willingness to reject and replace, to literary texts as well. Most working-class critics refused to accept without careful consideration the literary values either of the dead or of writers of other classes. Instead, they judged works of literature using their new, class-based values. Such a strongly antitraditional approach to texts made some working-class journalists iconoclasts, desiring nothing more than to condemn outright the (to them) irrelevant works by writers of other ages and classes. Others, however, approached literary works with a breadth of mind rare in any age. They were extremely receptive to new literature and willing both to reject any so-called classics that offered nothing to their own class and also to reapproach, reinterpret, and recanonize old literature for their new audience.

1816–29

It is no accident that a working-class press came to life in the second half of the 1810s. The long war with France had ended in 1815, leaving a staggering national debt. The Industrial Revolution had reshaped British society, destroying the industry and livelihood of many skilled artisans and creating a steadily growing force of unskilled and semiskilled labor, which generally worked under oppressive conditions. The year 1816 was one of hunger for many. In no other period of British history, perhaps, was the division between the interests of the ruling classes and the economic underclass so great. This division led to an increased sense among the working class that they were indeed one class with common aspira-
tions, and this sense in turn led to a greater need for outlets in print to voice those aspirations. For in a world of "us" and "them," it was clear that the press belonged to "them" completely.⁸

A number of periodicals sprang up between 1816 and 1820 in an attempt to remedy all these problems. Most were literary as well as political from the start.

At the end of 1816, aware that food riots were erupting throughout Britain and believing that the "hirelings" of the established press did nothing to promote the true interests of the people, William Cobbett decided to address the "Journeymen and Labourers" himself, by lowering the price of his Political Register from 1s. ½d. to 2d.—a difference of 10 ½d. Cobbett put out his first reduced-price issue on 2 November; he described the results in his Register some months later:

The effects of No. 18, were prodigious. It occupied the conversations of three fourths of all the active men in the kingdom. The whole town was in a buzz [sic]. The labouring classes of the people seemed as if they had never heard a word on politics before. The effect on their minds was like what might be expected to be produced on the eyes of one bred up in the dark, and brought out, all of a sudden, into broad daylight. Every body was permitted by me, expressly to re-publish this Number, and, in town and country, there were, in two months, more than two hundred thousand of this one Number printed and sold; and this, too, in spite of all the means which the Government, the Church, the Military and Naval Half Pay, and all the innumerable swarms of Tax-gatherers and Tax Eaters, were able to do to check the circulation, not forgetting their fast allies, the great Manufacturers, Loan-Jobbers, and some of the Yeomanry. (2 Aug. 1817: 551)

In issue after issue of the inexpensive Register, Cobbett presented himself as an extremely self-confident articulator and shaper of the political, moral, and economic values of the working class. He also presented himself as an articulator and shaper of their literary values.

Cobbett, proud of his origins as a plowboy, was largely self-taught and was extremely well read. George Spater, in his biography of Cobbett, notes the breadth of Cobbett's reading:

We know that he had read A Tale of a Tub as a small boy, and by the time he became a journalist he had read a great deal more of Swift. He
seemed as familiar with Shakespeare as with the Bible, and quoted him more often than any other author. By the peak of his career he had read the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and Goldsmith, who were his favorites, and he also read Milton, Marvell, Butler, Cowley, Churchill, Thomson, and Cowper. He knew all 400-odd lines of Goldsmith's poem "The Traveller." He had read some Byron, and mentions Wordsworth and Southey, but not Keats or Coleridge. The novels Cobbett read included those by Fielding, Sterne, Le Sage, and Cervantes. In addition to the plays of Shakespeare, he was familiar with those of Wycherley, Congreve, Beaumont and Fletcher, Otway, and Foote, as well as those of his contemporary Sheridan. He read some of Molière, Voltaire, La Fontaine, and Rousseau. He occasionally mentioned Virgil and Horace. He had carefully studied Blackstone's *Commentaries*, Watts's *Logic*, and Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric*. He had read some of Fortescue, Bacon, Evelyn, Gibbon, Addison, Paley, Samuel Johnson, and William Temple. (1: 18)

Much of Spater's evidence for Cobbett's reading comes from the pages of the *Register*. Cobbett usually revealed his literary learning in that periodical in two ways. First, his style—vigorously, flashing with irony, presenting the enemies of the people as stupid or evil caricatures—owes much to Dryden, Pope, and Swift, to "the great political satirical tradition of the eighteenth century" (Birell 215). Second, he showed his literary influences in the *Register* through direct quotations. Usually when Cobbett used established writers he distilled their ideas into short snatches, presenting a brief quotation here, a headnote there, almost every one yoked to the service of a nonliterary point, most often attacking the present political or economic state of affairs. After quoting three couplets from Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," for example, Cobbett argues that Goldsmith depicts accurately the state of the working class in 1821, not 1770: "Dr. GOLDSMITH, if he used a little of poetical licence, only anticipated the literal and melancholy truth" (5 May 1821: 319–20).

Cobbett rarely published any literature at length, or any discussions of literature. The few times he did overtly take on the role of literary critic in the *Register*, he did so to serve distinctly nonliterary purposes. His harshest criticisms of Scott, for example, appear in a missive instructing "Tree Planters and Gardeners"; his lively assault upon Shakespeare and Milton appears in an essay attacking potatoes. His reluctance to enter
often into literary discussion in a periodical that ranged freely over a host of subjects, says much about Cobbett’s conception both of himself as a journalist and of his audience. Cobbett saw himself as the working-class autodidact whose self-education had brought him in contact with the great works of writers of other classes. In the Register he took on the role of an intermediary between those writers and the working class. Long before the SDUK existed, he saw himself as the great diffuser, the one to bring the class in which he was born out of the dark and into social and literary daylight.

Obviously, many works and writers canonical to other social classes were of very limited use, in Cobbett’s eyes, to the working class. Though he might use Shakespeare at times to back up his own points, he dismissed him out of hand on several other occasions as a writer unworthy in his own right of the attention of Cobbett’s audience. He similarly dismissed Milton and Scott. He ridiculed Johnson more than once, presenting him at one point as a rhetorical and political failure when compared to Paine (18 Sep. 1819: 132). Cobbett’s Political Register was the filter through which a tiny amount of Cobbett’s huge store of literary knowledge passed on to the working class. His reticence in promoting the “classics” implies that while the literature he read might have entertained him, he felt that only a small amount had any place in a working-class canon.

While Cobbett “occasionally mentioned Virgil and Horace,” as Spater notes, Cobbett’s Political Register, like most other working-class periodicals, is virtually free of classical quotations, translations, and allusions. Such quotations and allusions were common in the middle-class periodicals of this time. Certainly, Cobbett and most other working-class journalists never received a substantial classical education; but that does not fully explain this particular difference between working- and middle-class periodicals. Cobbett was among the first in a long line of extremely well-read journalists for the working class who consciously rejected the supposed value of a classical education. As Cobbett wrote in 1807, “learning, truly so called, consists in the possession of knowledge and in the capacity of communicating that knowledge to others; and, as far as my observation will enable me to speak, what are called the learned languages, operate as a bar to the acquirement of real learning” (Political Register 10 Jan. 1807: 36, quoted in Williams 45). This statement does not
reflect any bitterness on Cobbett’s part about an education denied him. His linguistic abilities were unquestionably strong; he was the author not only of the very popular *A Grammar of the English Language*, but also of a grammar for students of French (1824). He simply believed that Latin and Greek were useless for himself and for his audience. So did others: a writer in John Wade’s *Gorgon* (1818–19) argues that those languages are “despised and useless” (30 May 1818: 12).\(^{11}\) Both this writer and Cobbett, and those who succeeded them, failed for the most part to publish or discuss Latin or Greek works, not because they lacked education or culture, but because they believed in and promoted very different educational and cultural values.\(^{12}\) In this way, too, Cobbett worked to create a new, distinctly working-class sensibility about literature.

Richard Carlile spent his young manhood as a tinplate worker. He was twenty-seven years old before changing careers to radical journalism. In 1817, influenced by Cobbett, Wooler, and other radical thinkers, he began collaborating with Sherwin, another pioneering working-class journalist, on *Sherwin’s Political Register*. Sherwin abandoned his *Register* after the 1819 Peterloo massacre, apparently because of the frightening level of political tension and the repressive governmental reaction to that event. Carlile took over, renamed the periodical the *Republican*, and “by the end of the year he was recognized as the standard-bearer of free expression” (Wiener, *Radicalism* 18–21, 33, 42–43). Carlile was a leading working-class journalist until well into the 1830s, and more than any other he suffered for his ideals. He spent much of his adult life in prison, was constantly harassed by the authorities, and his stocks (and therefore his livelihood) were seized several times. Despite the relentlessness of these attacks, he wrote and published a huge body of periodical literature. Besides the *Republican*, which ran until 1826, he published the *Lion*, the *Prompter*, the *Gauntlet*, and several other shorter lived periodicals. Some of these works were more free thinking than political, others more political than free thinking. Most combined politics and free thought in large doses and ranged into many other subjects as well. One of these subjects was literature.

Carlile was far less grounded in the established canon than was Cobbett, as the relative lack of literary quotations and allusions in his writings suggests. His suspicions of the Bible carried over to texts in general.
What texts he did publish and promote were those the truths of which he believed to be absolutely self-evident. This, of course, explains why he published many editions of Paine’s writings. He judged texts exclusively for their didactic effectiveness and was always wary of the imaginative in fiction or poetry. He may have published both Byron and Shelley, but he published them, as we shall see, for their truths and in spite of—indeed, in denial of—their imaginative qualities. For the most part Carlyle shunned the imaginative literature of other classes and was even wary of their didactic literature. He is the great literary iconoclast among early working-class journalists.

Thomas Jonathan Wooler was apprenticed to a printer as a youth and became the first of several journalists to apply a background in printing to producing a working-class journal. He was the editor and printer of two periodicals before 1816, the Reasoner and Statistical Journal (1808) and the Stage (1815–16), but these, though radical, were not directed toward the working class. From 29 January 1817 on, however, he “appealed to a larger public” with his immensely popular Black Dwarf (Stephen and Lee 21: 899). That four penny periodical was particularly targeted toward the working class, and no less a witness than Viscount Castlereagh noted that the Dwarf indeed found that target: the Dwarf, according to Castlereagh, could be found in the northern colliery districts “in the hatcrown of almost every pitman you meet” (Hendrix 108).

Forced by the Six Acts to raise his price to six pence, Wooler maintained the Dwarf with a limited circulation until 1824, when he ceased publication, bitterly recriminating his audience: “In ceasing his political labors, the Black Dwarf has to regret one mistake, and that a serious one. He commenced writing under the idea that there was a PUBLIC in Britain, and that public devotedly attached to the cause of parliamentary reform. This, it is but candid to admit, was an error. Either there is no public, or that public is indifferent upon the subject” (“Final Address,” 1824 n.p.). After publishing a short-lived periodical, the Mechanics’ Chronicle in 1825 (Prothero 187), Wooler retired from journalism until well after the “War of the Unstamped”—indeed, until well into the Chartist period. At the end of 1848, Benjamin Steill, a veteran of the periodical struggles of the 1830s, asked Cooper, a Chartist, to collaborate with the “aged” Wooler in a weekly penny periodical, the Plain Speaker. In
describing their collaboration in his autobiography, Cooper shows no love for Wooler: "'He was, at one time, the finest epistolary writer in England,' said Mr. Steill in his commendation. But the stilted style of the *Black Dwarf*, however it had been relished by the men of a former generation, was not in favour with the men of my generation. . . . Nor was Wooler's conversation more animated than his style: it was 'flat, stale, and unprofitable'" (Cooper 317). Certainly, Wooler's *Black Dwarf*, the product largely of one man, epistolary in style, directed toward issues that had lost much of their significance by 1849, was in some ways very different from the working-class periodicals that Cooper was familiar with. But in other ways, it was far closer than Cooper acknowledged; in a literary sense especially, *Black Dwarf* is the most forward-looking of the earliest working-class periodicals. Despite the disgust with his audience Wooler displayed when quitting them, he shows in that periodical a fuller conception of the essential humanity and humanism of a working-class audience than do either Cobbett or Carlile.

Wooler believed that his periodical should offer as much entertainment as education. *Black Dwarf* promoted itself in its first year as "a survey of the DRAMA, and the literary world in general" ("Prospectus," 1817 n.p.). Interspersed with stinging condemnations of the Six Acts and reports of the events at Peterloo are reviews of Edmund Kean's *Othello* (26 Feb. 1817: 78), of an 1817 revival of Philip Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (12 Mar. 1817: 110), and a very early stage version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (6 Aug. 1823: 207–8), among other plays. Those reviews and others are concerned primarily with the ability of plays to entertain, not to teach. The idea that a working-class audience should watch, say, Shakespeare purely for pleasure is one that Carlile and Cobbett never seemed to recognize. With such reviews, Wooler departed boldly from his contemporaries.

Wooler strove to entertain with his own writings as well. Like Cobbett, Wooler shows the influence of the great British satirists—especially Pope—in his lively personal style. Moreover, his work strongly shows the influence of the satirists of his own day, such as George Cruikshank and his friend Hone, both of whom he flattered by publishing a "Reformer's House That Jack Built" obviously derived from their "Political House That Jack Built" (1819). He shows their influence as well in his satirical advertisements and in features such as his "State
Theatricals," which reviewed the doings of Parliament as a drama, or his "A New Political Herbal," which compared certain public figures to plants, connecting the then poet-laureate, Robert Southey, for example, with the "Spurge, or Common Laurel."16

No one has yet compiled a list of the literature that Wooler read, but that list is obviously an extensive one. Wooler, like Cobbett, was fond of quoting established literature to make his own points—as, for example, when he compares the concoction of the Six Acts to the strange brewing of the Weird Sisters in Macbeth. But unlike Cobbett, Wooler published extracts of English, American, and European literature independently of his own points, as writing worth reading by his audience solely for its own sake. Many of these extracts appeared in an extraordinary series Wooler began publishing in 1820 called "The Blackneb."17 The introduction to that series argues that the working class of the present should find value in many of the works of the past:

In beating up the quarters of our old friends, we shall occasionally ascend the high latitudes of time, and traverse the various districts of life. Now and then we may relieve the severe gravity of the argumentative, by excursions into the fields of Anecdote and Poetry . . . and we hope to produce some proof, that a sense of Liberty is not a thing begotten on the poverty of yesterday, by yesterday's oppression; that Liberty is not the trimming shifting ignis-fatuus, which the servile would have us believe, but a real entity, unchangeable, eternal, and one of the chief blessings of social existence. (26 Jan. 1820: 89)

During the two years that the series lasted Wooler published fully 698 quotations by "old friends," quotations from (among many others) Locke, Benjamin Franklin, Bacon, Hazlitt, Thomas More, Swift, Cowley, Francis Quarles, Milton, Marvell, Aristotle, Holinshed, Sterne, Hume, Thomas Browne, James I, the Paston Letters, Machiavelli, Chesterfield, Erasmus, Erasmus Darwin, Blackstone, Bentham, and Johnson, and ending with, as number 698, an early publication of the "Star-Spangled Banner" (Black Dwarf, 9 Oct. 1822: 524).18 Despite the abundance of sources here, the selections were obviously chosen carefully, as expressions of liberty. Wooler may have published far more literature than Cobbett did in his Political Register, but Black Dwarf, too, acted as a very selective filter between established writers and the working class.
Wooler shows in *Black Dwarf* a broad-minded approach to literature that anticipated the views of many later working-class journalists. Wooler was the first to reexamine established writers systematically, to separate what was applicable to his audience from what was useless, and to give old writers a new greatness by letting them speak directly to a new class. While Carlile distrusts these literary voices and promotes himself as a replacement for them, and while Cobbett respects those voices insofar as they back up his own dominant voice, only Wooler lets them speak for themselves. His *Black Dwarf* celebrates the multiplicity of these voices, not their unanimity.

While Cobbett's, Carlile's, and Wooler's periodicals were the most popular of this period, there were others. Some of these did not last long enough to establish more than the barest literary identity. Cumulatively, however, they show a belief in the power of Paineite rhetoric, a healthy sense of themselves as a new literary power, and a general willingness to apply established works to their own ideas. They also show a strong belief in the literary ability of members of their class, publishing many of their poems. In this they are similar to their better-known contemporaries: Carlile, Wooler, and, to a lesser extent, Cobbett also published working-class poetry. Most of the poems stridently or satirically comment on the events and issues the poets saw as important to their class. Many of the poems in periodicals such as Davison's *Medusa* and the *Cap of Liberty*, as well as *Black Dwarf*, demonstrate convincingly that Shelley was far from the only writer to commemorate the Peterloo massacre in verse (see chap. 5).

These periodicals occasionally looked to established writers to make or emphasize their own points. *Hone's Reformists' Register*, Davison's *Medusa*, and a Glasgow periodical, the *Spirit of the Union*, all published, without commentary, passages from Hazlitt; they reflect the obvious fondness that early working-class journalists held for that essayist. Hone also presented his audience with long passages of verse from Cowper and Defoe, “one of the closest observers of mankind” (5 July: 733–36; 4 Oct. 1817: 337–41). A writer in the twopenny *People*, a periodical that only lasted from April to July of 1817, noted a strong parallel between the ways Macbeth and Richard III used hired assassins and the ways Liverpool, Castlereagh, and Sidmouth employed “spies, informers, and hatchers of
plots and treasons and conspiracies” to do their dirty work (28 June 1817: 319–20).

Reviews are rare in these short-lived works. One in particular stands out. Hone’s Reformists’ Register is perhaps the only working-class periodical of the first half of the nineteenth century that today is known primarily for its literary commentary. Hone was the first to notice what he saw as the brilliance of Southey’s recently published (though long-before-written) Wat Tyler, and the first to compare unfavorably the reactionary poet-laureate of 1817 with the revolutionary young poet who wrote the poem in 1794.21

Perhaps no stronger compliment—albeit a backhanded one—was paid to the political power of all of these periodicals than that of their imitators: periodicals published by members of the government or parties loyal to the government in an attempt to “combat the seditious and infidel publications of the day,” as one of them, the Green Man, or Periodical Expositor, states. Other such periodicals include the Anti-Cobbett, written by George Canning, William Gifford, and Southey; Gibbons Merle’s White Dwarf, subsidized by the Home Secretary, Sidmouth; and Shadgett’s Weekly Review of Cobbett, Wooler, Sherwin, and Other Democratical and Infidel Writers.22 These imitations also paid tribute to the rhetorical and literary power of working-class periodicals. Their writers often tried to use Paineite rhetoric to serve their own reactionary ends. Some bravely tried to imitate Wooler’s or Cobbett’s satirical style. They also carried reams of imitation working-class poetry. But while these periodicals contain the same forms as their originals, they are infused with a patently false energy. Trying to speak to the people, not with them or for them, they are mannequins of early working-class periodicals.

In the 1820s a new kind of periodical began to appeal to members of the working class. Although Owen’s Co-operative ideas found few working-class adherents in the days of Peterloo, when he was denounced by Cobbett, Wooler, and others, by late in the decade a number of laborers had embraced Owenism—or, to be more precise, had adopted some of his ideas and adapted them to suit their class. According to E. P. Thompson, the Owenite movement owed as much to ideas of the working-class as it did to Owen himself:
Owenism from the late Twenties onwards, was a very different thing from the writings and proclamations of Robert Owen. It was the very imprecision of his theories, which offered, none the less, an image of an alternative system of society, and which made them adaptable to different groups of working people. From the writings of the Owenites, artisans, weavers and skilled workers selected those parts which most closely related to their own predicament and modified them through discussion and practice. If Cobbett’s writings can be seen as a relationship with his readers, Owen’s writings can be seen as ideological raw material diffused among working people, and worked up by them into different products. (Making 868)  

In the late 1820s and into the 1830s a number of Co-operative periodicals began to appear, conducted largely by members of the working class and appealing especially to an audience of that class. Two of the best known of these early Co-operative magazines are the Brighton Co-operator and the Co-operative Magazine. In general these periodicals had a serious, millennial tone, a far cry from the ironic style of some of the earlier working-class journals. This tone was reflected in the literature they chose to discuss or publish. These periodicals, like Carlile’s, were relatively free of imaginative literature. Their own literature consisted largely of fables, simple moral tales, and didactic poetry. When established writers do appear, their ideas are firmly linked to the Co-operative movement. In the Co-operative Magazine, for example, Burns, Shelley, and Southey all earn honorable mentions, because a few carefully chosen lines from the poetry of each show a leaning toward Co-operative principles.

The Co-operative magazines had small circulations and appealed to a very limited segment of the working class. They survived largely upon the energy of the movement and the events within it, such as the development of Co-operative societies and labor exchanges, and not because they supplied the working class with news about revolutionary events, as had the press of 1817–20. That more popular press lingered on, but without the energy of its first years. The Six Acts of 1819, which so rigidly defined a newspaper as to make every production of the working-class press liable to the four-penny stamp, dampened that press. A gradual lessening of the political tension within that class during the years before 1830 had much to do with shrinking circulations as well. The events of the early
1830s threw the working class as a whole into a new ferment, and a renewed working-class press exploded into action.

1830–36

William Carpenter, one of the first working-class journalists to enter the fray in the “War of the Unstamped” of 1830–36, gave his first periodical the ponderous title of Political Letters and Pamphlets, Published for the Avowed Purpose of Trying with the Government, the Question of Law—Whether All Publications Containing News or Intelligence, However Limited in Quantity or Irregularly Issued, Are Liable to the Imposition of the Stamp Duty of Fourpence. Hetherington, one of the most famous working-class journalists active during this period, stated on the masthead of every issue of his Poor Man’s Guardian that that periodical had been “ESTABLISHED, CONTRARY TO ‘LAW,’ TO TRY THE POWER OF ‘MIGHT’ AGAINST ‘RIGHT.’” Both journalists thus loudly asserted one of the primary purposes of their periodicals, and indeed a major purpose of most of the working-class periodicals of the time: to combat the provisions of the Six Acts of 1819, provisions that made any periodical that appeared more than once every twenty-six days, sold for less than six pence, and contained “any Public News, Intelligence, or Occurrences, or any Remarks or Observations thereon, or upon any Matter in Church or State” a crime, one punishable by imprisonment and high fines (Wiener, War 4–5).24

Combating laws that had been on the books for more than ten years does not completely explain why an enormous wave of working-class periodical publication began in 1830 and continued for six years. The idea that all the working-class journalists of this period were obsessed with the one issue of “taxes on knowledge” is, quite simply, wrong. Such thinking only dulls any sense of the energy of what was one of the most spirited and colorful periods of British working-class journalism—indeed, of British working-class history. Fighting the Six Acts and the class oppression that they codified was, during this time, one struggle among many. As E. P. Thompson argues convincingly in The Making of the English Working Class, the early 1830s were the very years in which this class came of age. A revived working-class press reflected that new-found awareness; it reported and discussed the events and issues that were of interest to the
working class, those moreover that reinforced the working class's awareness of itself as a class, with common needs and aspirations.

Many working-class concerns in the early 1830s were not new, of course. The Co-operative movement continued into the decade, and new Co-operative periodicals appeared, most important among them the Lancashire Co-operator, which became the Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator (1831–32), and the Crisis (1832–34), which was edited by Owen himself, as well as by his son, Robert Dale Owen, and James E. "Shepherd" Smith. That periodical, at one time subtitled National Co-operative Trades' Union and Equitable Labour Exchange Gazette, dealt also with another concern vital to the working-class: trade unionism. This concern was far from new. Wooler had written on union issues; in 1825 John Gast had produced the Trades Newspaper and Mechanics' Weekly Journal, a periodical representing several trades and "governed by a committee of the trades" (E. P. Thompson 853 n.). In the 1830s, however, more working-class periodicals than ever before focused on trade-union issues, among them the Herald to the Trades Advocate, and Co-operative Journal, the Scottish Trades' Union Gazette, and the Tradesman, all published in Glasgow; James Morrison's Pioneer; and a series of periodicals edited by Doherty, the most popular of which were the stamped Voice of the People and the unstamped Poor Man's Advocate.

Some periodicals, such as the twopenny Radical, later the Radical Reformer, Carpenter's short-lived Political Unionist, and Carlile's Union, championed the cause of political unions. Others, such as the British Labourer's Protector, and Factory Child's Friend, a periodical out of Leeds, focused on factory reform. Periodicals such as Cleave's and Cruikshank's A Slap at the Church (1832) attacked organized religion. Other periodicals, including two papers published by Charles Penny, the London Policeman and the People's Police Gazette, censured legal and police abuse of the working class. One periodical, the Advocate, saw as its purpose opposing the use of machinery in any form.

There were other concerns as well: the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, the hated "bread tax" (or the Corn Laws), and the celebrated cause of the Tolpuddle Martyrs (1834). Most working-class periodicals aimed at comprehensiveness, addressing in turn each issue they felt was important to their audience and using those issues to promote the idea of a separate class with a distinct and valuable consciousness. Some of the
more successful periodicals of this kind were James H. B. Lorymer's Republican, the Poor Man's Guardian, the Cosmopolite, the Destructive and Poor Man's Conservative, Joshua Hobson's Voice of the West Riding, and Richard Lee's Man, as well as later, full-size newspapers such as Cleave's Weekly Police Gazette and Hetherington's Twopenny Dispatch.

One issue of importance to most working-class periodicals of this period was the Reform Bill of 1832. Although there was much debate among working-class journalists as to the value of the bill before it passed, most of them agreed in hindsight that the bill signaled a betrayal of the working class by the middle class, and that it left their class alone without direct representation in government. From 1832 on, these journalists knew that working- and middle-class interests were forever severed and that the working class had to take control of its own destiny. More than ever, their political values were class-based. So, more than ever, were their literary values.

It is often difficult—indeed, even impossible—to connect specific ideas or statements about literature in these periodicals with specific writers in the way I have done with Cobbett, Wooler, and Carlyle. This is not because the 1830s lacked colorful and industrious champions of the working class: Cleave, Watson, Hetherington, and Carpenter in London, Doherty in Manchester, Hobson in Leeds, and many others were just as active and productive as their predecessors and, if anything, even more strident and class conscious. The 1830s was a decade unsurpassed in the history of the British working class and its journalism in the variety of its movements, writers, and ideas.

Therein lies a problem. This period was one of committees and combinations, of short- and long-term alliances and collaborations, of the National Union of the Working Classes, the National Association for the Protection of Labour, the Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union, the London Working Men's Association, and many other political, trade, and Co-operative unions. In much the same way, working-class periodicals of the time were generally the products of a combination of journalists. Periodicals published, edited, printed, and largely written by one man—those, in other words, like Cobbett's Political Register or Wooler's Black Dwarf—did exist during this period, and they can tell us, for example, that Carpenter, in his Political Letters and Pamphlets, was somewhat familiar with the works of Shakespeare. But such one-person efforts were
rare. Most periodicals had a publisher, a separate editor, and a number of contributors. The *Poor Man's Guardian*, for example, was published by Hetherington and edited, for the most part, by James “Bronterre” O’Brien. Both men influenced the ideas in that periodical. So did others: Thomas Mayhew, Cleave, Watson, and possibly Julian Hibbert (Wiener, *Finding List* 46).27

Moreover, in many cases a periodical’s publisher, editor, or contributors, or even its name, could change in mid-run. Describing one of the more popular periodicals of the day, for example, Patricia Hollis notes that “the *Cosmopolite* was launched in March 1832 by eight vendors, including [Edward] Hancock, [George] Pilgrim, [James] Knight, and [Joseph] Walker.” But by the end of 1833 Carlile and his son Richard were “the anonymous publishers, writers, and proprietors” of that periodical (134, 151).28 Eventually, *Cosmopolite* merged with Lee’s *Man* (Wiener, *Finding List* 12). Such confusing transitions are not unusual. Trying to trace the family history of these periodicals can be at times incredibly difficult. And this already complicated situation becomes even more complex when we consider the latter part of this period, when the smaller, pamphlet-size papers such as *Cosmopolite* and *Poor Man’s Guardian* gave way to full-size, full-feature newspapers such as *Cleave’s Weekly Police Gazette* and *Hetherington’s Twopenny Dispatch*. Since most writings in working-class periodicals were not given bylines, trying to assign individual pieces to identifiable writers is in many cases an exercise in futility.

So while we are often stopped from saying with certainty what John Cleave thought about John Milton, for example, or what Lorymer thought about Scott, we can draw some general inferences about how these journalists approached literature.

Most working-class journalists of this time obviously believed that literature had some value to them and to their class. Almost every one of their periodicals carried literature in one form or another. Whether or not these journalists made references to the literary lights of the past or the established writers of their own day, almost all published a huge amount of working-class poetry. Like the poetry in earlier working-class periodicals, this poetry—satirical, occasional, or didactic—was almost always directed toward overtly political ends. Just as working-class poets of 1819 strove to immortalize the eleven martyrs of Peterloo, for example, so the poets of 1834 strove to immortalize the six martyrs of Tolpuddle.29
Besides publishing working-class poems, the editors of this period were far more likely than their predecessors to publish long excerpts from other works and even, on occasion, to republish entire works. The works that these publishers and editors chose to print or reprint—those, in other words, that they considered to have literary value and therefore to deserve a place in a working-class canon—include, as would be expected, a number written by the working class or directed particularly toward that class. One of the most commonly reprinted (and reviewed) works during this period, for example, was Rowland Detrosier’s An Address Delivered to the Members of the New Mechanics’ Institution . . . on the Necessity of Extension of Moral and Political Instruction among the Working Classes. Parts of this work—indepedently, or in reviews—appear in, among other places, Berthold’s Political Handkerchief (1831; “Literature,” 19 Sept. 1831 n.p.), Cleave’s Weekly Police Gazette (2 Apr. 1836 n.p.), and from an unknown issue of True Sun, from which the passage in Cleave’s is excerpted.30 To take another example—one that must have scared the life out of the overseers of the unstamped in the Home Office—a supplementary number of the Poor Man’s Guardian consists entirely of eight closely printed pages of excerpts from Francis Macerone’s Defensive Instructions for the People, a manual on street fighting that describes, among other things, the proper way to construct pikes and barricades and the most effectively damaging use of burning acids (11 April 1831).

But for every such example of exclusively class-based literature, an instance can be found taken from works already canonical to the middle class. The journalists of this period, too, culled from that canon to create their own. Continuing in the tradition of Wooler’s “Blackneb” series, at least two editors during this time created whole periodicals—Materials for Thinking, and Every Man’s Library of Republican and Philosophical Knowledge—solely to bring the best and most relevant ideas of established authors to the working class. Materials for Thinking, compiled by John Taylor, went through at least three printings, the last in 1852. In that periodical Taylor brought Addison, Sterne, Pope, Johnson, and many others to a working-class audience. No copy of Every Man’s Library is now known to exist, but according to the Poor Man’s Guardian and Lorymer’s Republican, that periodical carried the writings of Paine, Locke, and Voltaire (Wiener, Finding List 16–17).

Generally, working-class journalists during this period chose to pub-
lish an established work if it had obvious political and social value for a working-class audience. As long as a work had such relevance, the actual class standing of its writer hardly mattered. In the second issue of the Political Soldier, for example, two poems appear, one beside the other: a working-class poem, “The Soldier Flogged,” and Thomas Hood’s “A Waterloo Ballad” (14 Dec. 1833: 11). No distinction is made between the two poems or between their writers; the implication is that no distinction should be made, as long as each work speaks to the working class.

These journalists did more with literature than just excerpt it. They were far more likely to review individual works than their predecessors. Generally, critics in these periodicals felt that, to serve their audience, they had to operate within a completely new set of standards. In other words, most working-class reviewers rejected outright the many critical models offered by middle-class commentary of the past and present. A writer in the Poor Man’s Guardian, noticing a new periodical called The Truth!, recognized the absence of a good middle-class model for the working-class literary critic: “All that we have heard of [The Truth!] is, that it is to contain political as well as literary criticisms; what room there may be for the former, we know not, but we do know that the latter is absolutely wanting” (18 Aug. 1832: 501).31

Working-class journalists generally believed that middle-class commentary and critics were hopelessly corrupt. A writer in a working-class critical journal, the Literary Beacon (1831), saw as the purpose of that periodical less reviewing individual works (although it did contain many reviews) than “breaking down the system of corruption which has been for so long a period permitted to exist under the name of criticism” (“Introduction,” [Sep. 1831?] n.p.). Another periodical, the popular Destructive, clearly attacks middle-class reviewers in a blanket diatribe upon “men of letters,” showing their literary corruption to be at least partially class based:

People are but too apt to attach vague notions of excellence to what are called “men of letters.” It is a grievous error. They are among the most worthless of society. Their trade is “phrase-making”—their habits loose and idle—their knowledge confined to books, and their characters in general a compound of envy, sycophancy, and fretful vanity. . . . Ever ready to lick the dust from under the feet of rank, when it notices them, their spite is equally vigilant to revenge every little neglect, real
or fancied, to which their exorbitant vanity subjects them at its hands. Thus, while they are the most querulous of mortals respecting their own wrongs, they treat the “lower orders” with ten-fold more superciliousness than they can themselves endure from their patrons. (16 Mar. 1833: 53)

Generally, working-class reviewers believed that their articles, which promoted the truth, stood in opposition to the lies of such middle-class reviewers. That belief entailed a rejection of middle-class attitudes toward literature in general. That rejection in turn necessitated a complete renunciation of those values that made a work canonical for the middle class. By promoting their truthful views over the lies of the middle class, the working-class journalists of this period deliberately sought a new canon, one composed of works that had direct value for their own class.

While working-class critics’ standards may have been class based, they reviewed—and sometimes approved—the works of writers from all classes. Of course, they were especially eager to recognize the efforts of fellow working men and women. Perhaps the most frequently reviewed writer during this period was Ebenezer Elliott, especially his Corn Law Rhymes (1830). Reviews of Elliott’s work appeared, among other places, in the Literary Beacon (16 July 1831: 33–36) and the Weekly True Sun (17 Jan. 1836: 997). These reviews make it clear that despite the problems the literary historian might have in seeing Elliott as “working class”—after all, he was the owner of a Sheffield foundry—working-class reviewers of the time clearly felt he was a proletarian. Charles Cole, the “London Mechanic,” is also a frequent subject for review. The poems of these two were also published frequently in working-class periodicals during this time. But few periodicals restricted the works they published or reviewed to working-class productions. Generally, when reviewers saw writers of any class attacking, neglecting, insulting, or otherwise offending the working class they were merciless in their assaults. But when writers of any class promoted truths valuable to the working class, described conditions in a way that accorded with that class’s view of things, or otherwise reached out to that class, reviewers would heap praise upon their work. Many examples can be found of reviews hostile or complimentary to established writers; many can be found that both compliment and attack. Thus, a reviewer of Eugene Aram in the Literary Test. . . . (1832), for ex-
ample, angrily enumerates the many ways that Edward Bulwer insults the working class (7–14 Jan. 1832: 17–22, 37–39);33 a reviewer of Benjamin Disraeli's *Alroy* and his *Rise of Iskander* in the *British Liberator* prefers the second over the first because of its simple, more generally comprehensible style, which makes it more accessible to the working class (17 Mar. 1833: 80); and two periodicals, the *Schoolmaster, and Edinburgh Weekly Magazine* (1832–33) and *Cobbett's Magazine* in 1832, greeted enthusiastically the long-delayed publication of Shelley's class-sympathetic *Mask of Anarchy* (*Schoolmaster* 8 Dec. 1832: 291–93; *Cobbett's* Jan. 1833: 17).34

These reviewers were willing to look to other eras and classes for works relevant to their own class, works that they felt were worth placing side by side with the best of those written by members of the working class. Their literary integrity matched their political integrity. Staunchly sticking to their working-class literary ideals, they refused to meet established writers halfway; for a writer to enter the working-class canon, he or she had to come all the way to them. If a work did not serve the interests of the working class in some obvious way, these journalists ridiculed, condemned, or ignored it as useless.

The working-class journalists of this period, then, promoted a canon for their class that at first glance appears to be half old and half new, made up both of works valuable to their class exclusively and those taken from the middle-class canon. In reality, however, the working-class canon the journalists of this period promoted had very little in common with that of the middle class. The journalists looked at every work they quoted or reviewed from a completely new, class-based point of view and wanted their audience to look at literature in the same way. To examine a work with an entirely different set of values and beliefs about what "literature" actually is, is, in a very real sense, to look at a different work. Everyone read Burns, for example, but, as we shall see, the poems by him the working-class respected and the ways they read them differed from those the middle class read and the way they read them. This was the period when the working class first fully recognized itself as a class, and just as working-class politicians saw for the first time that their class had its own interests, apart from and in opposition to those of any other, so working-class writers first fully recognized that their class had its own literature and literary principles, apart from and at times in opposition to those of other classes.
In the spring of 1836 Parliament passed the Newspaper Bill that lowered the tax on newspapers from four pence to one penny and increased the penalties imposed on publishing or selling the unstamped. The act was met with bitterness and anger on the part of working-class journalists and the politically aware working class in general, who saw it as serving to make “the rich man’s paper cheaper, and the poor man’s paper dearer” (D. Thompson 40)—but by 1837 the bill all but killed the issue of “taxes on knowledge.” It did not kill the working-class press, however: the “War of the Unstamped” ended just as Chartism was beginning.

The People’s Charter, with its six points—universal male suffrage, the ballot, equal electoral districts, payment for members of Parliament, abolition of property qualifications for candidates, and annual elections—was drafted and published by the London Working Men’s Association in the spring of 1838. Its ideas were not new; they had been discussed for years. What was new was the yoking of these points together into a specific program for mass agitation: the Charter popularized working-class philosophy. Chartist literary ideas as well were not born in a vacuum; they were continuous with and developed from earlier working-class literary ideas.

Such a continuity of ideas is only to be expected. The leading working-class journalists of the early 1830s—Hetherington, Cleave, Watson, Carpenter, Lorymer, Lee, Hobson, and others—welcomed Chartism and were active in the early Chartist press. Several leading Chartist journalists began their careers working with the unstamped. Bronterre O’Brien, we have noted, was the editor of the *Poor Man’s Guardian* and the *Destructive*; he was also an early contributor to the *Northern Star*, the editor of several Chartist periodicals, and one of the leading political thinkers of Chartism. Harney, one of the most active of all Chartist journalists, began his career as a shop boy for Hetherington (Schoyen 6).

Holding that Chartism centered exclusively upon the six points obscures any sense of the variety of concerns during this time. Working-class thought was no more fixed upon these six points than were the ideas of earlier working-class thinkers limited to the Six Acts or “taxes on knowledge.” There were a variety of submovements within Chartism; there were moral-force Chartists, physical-force Chartists, “land-plan”
Chartists, teetotal Chartists, Christian Chartists, knowledge Chartists, O'Connorites, O'Brienites, Lovettites, and complete suffragists. Most of these submovements were represented in one or more periodicals. Moreover, there were many issues important to the working class not at all connected to the Charter. Those issues—trade unionism, free thought, Co-operation, and others—were discussed in Chartist periodicals and in a number of non-Chartist periodicals directed toward the working class, chief among them Richard Oastler's factory-reform periodicals, *Fleet Papers* and *Champion of What Is True and Right and for the Good of All*, and George Jacob Holyoake's free-thinking periodicals, *Oracle of Reason*, the *Movement*, and the *Reasoner, and Herald of Progress*. Most of the periodicals of this time, Chartist or otherwise, like their predecessors, were the work of more than one person.

The most popular working-class periodical of the Chartist era was, without question, *Northern Star*, a full-size, full-feature weekly. Some historians of Chartist, such as Mark Hewitt, have argued that the *Star* "was an expanded O'Connor"—that the *Star*, in other words, existed solely as the outlet for O'Connor's demagogy and as the means by which he could control the raw and stupid power of the mob (96). That view is, quite simply, ridiculous, and can only distort our view of O'Connor, Chartism, and the mass of the *Star*'s working-class readers. The *Star* represented the voices of many apart from O'Connor. According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, O'Connor was "thoroughly latitudinarian in his editorial policies" (258). Dorothy Thompson writes:

Anyone who has read the *Star* knows that it is very far from being the kind of one-man paper that was traditional among radical journals. The paper had an editor who was a determined and opinionated radical, the Rev. William Hill, a Swedenborgian pastor from Hull who had formerly been a linen handloom weaver in Barnsley. Editorial control rested with Hill, and later with the other editors, Joshua Hobson from 1843 to 1845, and G. J. Harney from 1845 to 1850. O'Connor's role was as a major contributor—most weeks he wrote a front-page *Letter*, he occasionally wrote other columns, and he always ensured that his speeches were reported in full. But for the rest—the greater part of the paper—he allowed his editors and other staff considerable freedom. The *Northern Star* was run in accordance with O'Connor's idea of what a radical newspaper should be—and this was much more like a radical
Almost every issue of the *Northern Star*, every week for fourteen years, carried a literary page. The many different writers for that page (including Harney and Ernest Jones, but *not*, apparently, O'Connor) obviously believed their audience had both strong political abilities and strong literary comprehension. They were not talking to a mob.

*Northern Star* is crucial to this study for a number of reasons, chief among them its obvious value to thousands of working-class readers of the time and its sheer volume of literary information. No other periodical in the 1840s offers such a sense of what members of the working class took literature to be.

*Northern Star* folded in 1852, leaving no national newspaper for Chartism. Jones quickly tried to fill that void, putting out the first issue of *People's Paper* on 8 May 1852. *People's Paper* never had the success the *Northern Star* did. It struggled to survive from issue to issue, pleading again and again to its readers for donations to keep it going. Keep going it did, however, from 1852 to 1858, and it served in those years as the national outlet for the political and literary ideas of many among the working class. It, too, had a literary page, much like the *Star*'s; it, too, offers the scholar a wealth of literary information. While I do not mean to downplay the importance of the many local working-class papers of this period, or of the shorter-lived and smaller-circulation national periodicals, I think it is hard to overstress the importance of these two papers. From the *Northern Star* and *People's Paper*, more than any other periodicals, we can get some sense of the working-class canon between 1837 and 1858.

The literature and literary values found in the working-class periodicals of this time reflect both the literary ideas of earlier working-class intellectuals and the vitality and evolution of working-class critical thought in the 1840s and 1850s. These periodicals, like their predecessors, were crammed with working-class poetry; most of it, as before, was directed specifically toward working-class political ends. Working-class journalists show that they inherited the literary sensibilities of their predecessors in
their reviews and extracts as well: many also judged or published works by established writers based on overtly political, working-class standards. But a new way of viewing literature began to develop during this period. A number of reviews and extracts in Chartist periodicals were not obviously political—or rather, not overtly, immediately, and primarily political.

The extracts in these periodicals continued in the tradition of Wooler's "Blackneb" series. Some periodicals contained selections in departments such as the "Flower Gatherer" ("we cull the choicest") of the Northern Star or the "Gleaner" of the People's Paper. Other periodicals were wholly composed of extracts: William James Linton's National: A Library for the People is perhaps the best example of these. Like the editor in Northern Star who in 1840 extensively quoted Shakespeare as a political poet to support the tenets of Chartistism, many of these editors used established writers to support specific working-class points. But interspersed among the usual political thinkers are such apparently nonpolitical writers as Captain Frederick Marryat, James Fenimore Cooper, and Charlotte Brontë (all of whom were extracted in Northern Star). Linton, in his National, excerpts 125 writers; his three favorites—Milton, Shelley, and Godwin—are overtly political, but he also published Keats, Spenser, Confucius, Robert Herrick, Izaak Walton, Socrates, and Chaucer.

Reviewers, too, tended to take a broader view of literature than their predecessors did, and were concerned as much with the pleasure of the text as with its value—or, to put it more accurately, they saw more value than their predecessors did in the simple pleasure a text offered. Individual reviews praised both the politically correct and the aesthetically pleasing. For example, in the April 1850 issue of the People's Review of Literature and Progress, a non-Chartist periodical put out by self-professed "Members of the Working-Classes" ("Preface," [1850] vi), a reviewer of Henry David Thoreau's works cites two passages worthy of special attention. The first is Thoreau's politically appropriate statement about refusing to pay taxes to support an unjust cause from his lecture on "Resistance to Civil Government." The second is a distinctly nonpolitical description of a Concord sunset from A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849). The reviewer offers no suggestion that the first excerpt's political power is any more valuable than the second's aesthetic impact.
Such a broadening to include literature that is not strictly political
does not at all imply a turning away from the political—or a softening of
working-class sensibilities. Far from it. Rather, it shows a growing matura-
ity of literary thought on the part of working-class thinkers and a more
sophisticated sense of the political in literature. These later working-class
thinkers did not see literature as simply a collection of political facts that,
properly disseminated, would result in political action on the part of
their audience. They did not see their audience as “little vessels . . . ready
to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to
the brim,” as Thomas Gradgrind sees his audience of schoolchildren in
*Hard Times* (2). In a number of ways, but particularly in literary ones,
these journalists served their class not simply by exhorting members of
that class to collective action, but also by working toward their holistic in-
dividual improvement. Whether moral-force or physical-force Chartist,
or not Chartist at all, these journalists generally believed that human and
imaginative improvement was linked to political improvement.

Perhaps the best evidence that these journalists placed great value
on the imaginative in literature is that many of them, unlike their prede-
cessors, were poets and novelists in their own right. Linton, Gerald
Massey, Jones, and Cooper were major Chartist poets, as well as impor-
tant journalists. Jones, Cooper, and even, apparently, O’Connor, were
writers of fiction.\(^39\) A number of periodicals—*Cooper’s Journal* for ex-
ample, or Jones’s *Notes to the People*—existed largely to carry the imagina-
tive writings of their producers. These writers were not any less political
than others in either their journalism or their creative writing, of course;
rather, they showed with their own fiction and poetry that the imagina-
tion could effectively serve the political and the social.

The prefaces to many working-class periodicals of this time exhibit
not just a greater belief in the imagination, but an increased certainty of
the power of beauty and the inseparable interconnection of the beauti-
ful, the imaginative, and the truthful in literature and in the minds of
readers. Linton states in the preface to his *National* that his role is not
simply to enlighten his audience, but to “respond to their feelings” (5
Jan. 1839: 2). A writer in the *People’s Paper*, probably its editor, Jones,
writes in the first number, “Features of romance will not be wanting to
temper and harmonise the more stern and serious portions of the
People’s Paper, and to commend it as a household companion of the lei-
sure hour" (8 May 1852). This statement says as much about the writer's idea of the psychological makeup of the paper's individual readers as it does about the editorial components of the paper itself.

The literary values of working-class journalists widened in one other way during the Chartist period. The 1840s and 1850s were decades of growing internationalism on the part of working-class thinkers, engendered in part by the growing number of political exiles from Europe after 1848, among them Mazzini, Marx, and Engels. Many Chartists, including Cooper and Linton, were supporters of Mazzini; many, including Jones and Harney, were friends of Marx and Engels. In fact, and without really stretching our definition, Mazzini, Marx, and Engels could all be considered "British working-class journalists" during this time: Mazzini contributed to Linton's *English Republic* and Harney's *Red Republican*; Engels was, for a time, the foreign correspondent for *Northern Star*, and Marx was actually a temporary co-editor of *People's Paper*. Further, Marx's and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* was first published in English in *Red Republican* on 9 November 1850 (F. B. Smith 52, 106; Saville 40, 50; Schoyen 129, 142–43; Cole, *Chartist Portraits* 294).

The growing political internationalism parallels a growing literary internationalism on the part of working-class journalists. That internationalism was a part of some earlier Chartist periodicals. The last two numbers of the *English Chartist Circular*, for example, carry articles on "The Living Political Poets of Germany," writing about Johann Ludwig Uhland and Anton Alexander von Auerspurg (n.d. [Jan. 1843?] 397, 403–4). But the internationalist flavor is strongest in the later periodicals, which carried or discussed work by George Sand, Eugène Sue, and Victor Hugo—all three of whom were well known to British working-class journalists as political radicals—as well as John Greenleaf Whittier, Pushkin, and many others. These late Chartist thinkers believed that international political class interests transcended national ones and obviously felt the same way about literary interests and values.

The sense of canon that working-class journalists promoted in this period, therefore, was in several ways broader than any promoted before. Almost any writer, from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to Massey, to Ferdinand Freiligrath, was eligible for entry into that canon. The criteria for canonization were various and sometimes complex and reflected the sense these journalists had of their audience, and of what they saw as
valuable and "literary" for that audience. Earlier working-class journalists had held that the ability of a work to promote working-class political progress was the simple standard for allowing a work entry into a working-class canon. The view many Chartist journalists held of their audience was more complex, subtle, and human; every member of that class needed the "Charter and something more," as Harney put it in each issue of Red Republican. That "something more" included a sensitivity to beauty as well as a sense of humanity, self-esteem, and self-reliance. And that "something more" could be found in a number of "great" and not explicitly political works. In that sense, Jane Eyre is a political work.

Perhaps the most rewarding discovery to be made from an investigation into the working-class periodicals of the first half of the nineteenth century is what they tell about the amazing and ever-increasing depth of the working-class canon, a depth that forces us to rethink working-class literary, psychological, and political history. I notice that as I have discussed this study with a number of people, the exact same questions come up again and again, all concerned with middle-class works about the working class: "What did they think about Alton Locke?" "What did they think about Mary Barton?" "What did they think about Hard Times?" These questions are important ones. Working-class critics rarely accepted depictions of their own class by middle-class authors without some criticism; their criticism of such outside views gives us a new perspective from which to view these middle-class writers and also says much about working-class journalists and the class as a whole.

But I think it significant that the works of literature I have been asked about are almost completely limited to contemporary middle-class depictions of the working class. The uniformity of this line of questioning implies a distorted and limited view today of working-class critics and readers of the first half of the nineteenth century, and especially of the Chartist period. The fact is that in all the working-class periodicals I have looked at, I have found not one reference to either Hard Times or Mary Barton. I have, however, found references to Nicholas Nickleby, Paradise Lost, Faust, Don Juan, and Hamlet. Working-class critics of the 1840s and 1850s were not so narcissistic and narrow-minded as to recognize only works of literature strictly depicting their own condition. Many working-class critics had as strong a sense of analogy as their middle-class counterparts; they also saw how Shakespeare, say, or Goethe or Byron, could speak to them and help them understand and better their own lives.
Instead of wondering, then, what they thought of *Mary Barton* or *Hard Times*, I find it more rewarding to ask “What did they think of Thoreau?” or “What did they think of Rabelais?”—or Sand, or Herrick, or Chaucer? Only by investigating the extent of the working-class canon, by investigating their views of writers we might consider (wrongly, in many cases) to be at the periphery of an early-nineteenth-century working-class canon, can we begin to realize the growth, breadth, and literary and political sophistication of the working-class canon of this time. The more I read, the more I am convinced that that canon is at least as broad and sophisticated as any other in Britain at the time.