Conclusion

IN 1987 E. D. Hirsch Jr. published his solution to what he saw as a decline in literacy in the United States. That work, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know, became a huge best-seller and, in a way, became in itself a part of American "cultural literacy," so that many who have not read the work are familiar with its basic premise: that the knowledge of a number of facts and concepts generally known to other Americans is essential to becoming literate, to educational growth, to communicating clearly with others across class, regional, and occupational lines, and therefore essential to success in life. As an aid to teaching or learning this cultural literacy, Hirsch, along with Joseph Kett and James Trefil, supplies an enormous appendix listing facts and concepts, a "preliminary" attempt at a guide to cultural literacy, with entries from "Hank Aaron" to "Zurich," including "Thomas Malthus," "kleptomania," and "April showers bring May flowers."

The readers of Poor Man's Guardian or Northern Star were familiar with such benevolent attempts to lift the apparently illiterate out of their sad ignorance and bring them into the light of reason. To them, however, cultural literacy went by the name useful knowledge, Hirsch's nineteenth-century British counterparts were Henry Brougham and Charles Knight, and the nineteenth-century guide to cultural literacy was Penny Magazine.

Brougham and Knight had similar political objectives in their work
as Hirsch does in his. Hirsch, like his predecessors, takes great pains to deny any political slant to his sense of cultural literacy, but he does believe that an individual with a greater knowledge of cultural concepts is better able to think politically. He maintains that "the civic importance of cultural literacy lies in the fact that true enfranchisement depends upon knowledge, knowledge upon literacy, and literacy upon cultural literacy" (12). Exchange the twentieth-century American jargon for that of nineteenth-century Britain, and the words could easily have been those of Brougham, or Knight, or any other middle-class liberal who held that working-class "enlightenment" must precede working-class suffrage.

Working-class journalists were well aware of the value of "useful knowledge" (or "cultural literacy"), and saw themselves as the purveyors of such information. They knew that their readers needed knowledge that transcended class or region in order to read, say, Byron's *The Vision of Judgment*—and they attempted to provide their readers with that knowledge. They also were well aware that distinguishing useful from nonuseful knowledge is necessarily an exercise in ideology. And, in the end, they did something with their periodicals that Brougham or Knight, George Canning or Southey, or even Dickens could not do with theirs: cumulatively, working-class journalists provided their readership with a sense of the works that could serve their class and those that could not. They established, largely from scratch, a working-class canon. And in evaluating works, they considered the importance of their readers, seeing them not as aspirants to middle-class knowledge and values but as part of a group with its own power, sensibilities, and sense of the uses and values of literature. These journalists worked toward, and in some measure achieved, the literary and intellectual elevation of their class. In other words, they offered a workable solution to the kind of problem that Hirsch grapples with.

For that reason, I believe that the largely ignored literary writings of these mostly forgotten periodicals should be neither ignored nor forgotten; their subjects may be dated but their implications about literacy and canon are not. It might be worthwhile for the resurrectors of the belief in useful knowledge, and for anyone concerned with the way that literacy grows, to consider a few of their implications.

It is clear from this model of canon formation, first of all, that need precedes literacy, or, to be more specific, need precedes the "second
literacy" I discuss in chapter 2—the pursuit of literate knowledge that follows simply learning to read a text. In early nineteenth-century Britain there was a huge potential readership among the working class, which showed itself periodically, by turning Paine's *Rights of Man* into a best-seller, and by ballooning the circulations of periodicals such as Cobbett's *Political Register* and *Northern Star* in times of political crisis. The same potential readership surely existed for fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, waiting only for a good reason to read a particular work. Working-class journalists attempted to provide a rationale for reading some works and shunning others. In essay after essay, for example, Carlyle promoted the pantheon of himself, Paine, and Shelley—with the demigod Byron knocking at the door—while disqualifying just about every other writer, living or dead, from serious consideration. Clearly, he perceived literature as consisting of a very few pearls in a sea of mud. At the other extreme, Jones offered a hugely inclusive sense of the valuable in his criticism, challenging his readers to read a large number of writers, particularly foreign, politically aware ones such as Pierre-Jean de Beranger and Ferdinand Freiligrath. Despite Carlyle's and Jones's greatly different senses of the valuable, both were insiders, with one eye upon the interests of the class for which they were writing and the other upon those works that best served those interests. Canon cannot be imposed from outside; what is valuable cannot be understood without some conception of the values and beliefs of the readership. It is difficult to conceive that any working-class reader would be inspired to literary creation by studying issue after issue of *Penny Magazine*; on the other hand, the many submissions of poetry by members of the working class to *Northern Star* and *People's Paper* suggest strongly that working-class periodicals provided, at least partially, the inspiration for many to create. Moreover, some of the earliest reactionary responses to the working-class press, pseudo-working-class periodicals such as *Shadett's Weekly Review* or the *White Dwarf*, are laughable and must have been laughable to working-class readers of the time, because they are so patently at odds with working-class values, literary and otherwise.

The success of Carlyle and Jones and many others as literary journalists, and their obvious influence over the thinking of their readers, suggests that canon is manipulable: that they were able to impose their sense of values, and of valuable writers, upon their readership. This is true, but
only in a limited way. Carlile, both as publisher and promoter, most cer-
tainly introduced Shelley to many working-class readers, and therefore
did much from the beginning to establish the poet’s place in the work-
ing-class pantheon. But Carlile, in both publishing and promoting
Shelley, was working to serve a need of his audience—even if they were
unaware that the poet could serve that need. Had Carlile enthusiastically
promoted Tom Moore instead of Shelley, or Dr. Johnson instead of Tom
Paine, his exhortations would likely have fallen upon deaf ears—as did
those of his reactionary contemporaries in the pseudo-working-class peri-
odicals of Carlile’s day. Jones, too, was working to satisfy specific needs by
promoting class-conscious foreigners in the late forties and early fifties: He
was well aware that his audience was deeply concerned with the inter-
national events of and around 1848, and that it was beginning to per-
ceive that class-interests transcended national ones. He was also aware, in
promoting writers like Tennyson and Browning, that his audience was
more sophisticated than Carlyle’s, combining overtly political and aes-
thetic values in their views of literature.

The persistent attempts by working-class journalists to establish a
working-class canon in opposition—or at least in contrast—to that of the
middle class, suggests that there is no such a thing as a “national” canon.
“National” canon could be defined in two ways, both of them problem-
atic. A national canon might be considered a combined canon—consist-
ing of all the works contained in each subcanon (or, rather, alternative
canon) of each subculture within a nation. The result would be insub-
stantial indeed, a canon which involves little to no consensus about works
or how to evaluate them. Or, national canon might be defined as one
containing the tiny core of works within the overlap of individual alter-
nate canons. Even this small body of works could hardly be said to derive
from any consensus about value: we have seen, for example, that the
working-class evaluations of Byron differed completely from those of the
middle class, although Byron was a fixture of both canons. E. D. Hirsch
notes that “literate culture is the most democratic culture in our land: it
excludes nobody; it cuts across generations and social groups and classes;
it is not usually one’s first culture, but it should be everyone’s second, ex-
isting as it does beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and
region” (21). The writings in these periodicals emphasize the dangers of
ignoring the importance of that first culture and the significance of
literature within it. If a sense of canon is to serve the individual reader, then it must take into account what is important to that reader; in other words, canon must serve primarily one's first culture. The purpose of any canon should be to enlighten, not to homogenize.

One way to create the illusion of a dominant, established national canon, of course, is to confuse the dominant class with the literate one and to marginalize all others either as having no literature and literary values to speak of, or as aspirants to the same literature and literary values as the dominant class. In the specific case of Great Britain in the nineteenth century, one could easily create such an illusion by seeing in the middle class and their quarterlies the alpha and omega of literary criticism. But such partial blindness is, for the literary historian, equivalent to the blindness of the historian who views history as exclusively the study of those in power. Because of the relative fame of the great nineteenth-century middle-class literary critics, and the relative obscurity of the great working-class critics, such blindness is not surprising—but we have the resources to correct that blindness, and should do so.

Any attempt to isolate a particular canon is more complicated than listing the works valuable to a particular group. Every canon is, by necessity, ever changing—so fluid as to suggest that there is never really any such thing as a canon. Canon must depend upon the values and beliefs of the readers of a group, who are themselves affected by and dependent upon cultural and moral shifts. For example, the violent agitation of the months leading up to the passing of the First Reform Bill in 1832 led to the periodical publication and promotion of Francis Macerone's *Defensive Instructions for the People*, a primer on urban guerrilla warfare. That work must be considered an important part of the working-class canon of the time, however short-lived its placement there. The condition and needs of any readership are never static and neither is its canon. Working-class critics were aware of this, and were generally more concerned with what should be in their canon rather than what already was. Therefore, the early history of the development of a British working-class canon is characterized at least as much by debate as it is by consensus. Debates were conducted either directly—that between Carlile and his correspondents over fiction being perhaps the most striking example—or indirectly, as critics offered differing arguments for the value of one writer over another. The many different assessments of Shelley's and
Byron's place in the working-class literary pantheon is a good example of this. Canon, by definition, is consensus, but since absolute consensus is impossible, so is any sense of a fully developed, fully definable canon. Canon never is, but always is coming into being. In the perpetual formation of any canon, debate about value and the sense that many values must change, is the sign of health, not weakness.

A refreshing aspect of working-class criticism (and something that modern critics would be wise to consider) is the clear recognition of the connection between what is read and what is happening, and, in consequence, an openness to testing all works for value and wariness of relying without question upon established notions of value. We might smile at the propensity of these critics at first to regard some apparent literary drivel on the same level as "Tintern Abbey" or Coriolanus, but such openness doesn't cheapen any work; rather, it is the best way to establish the immediate, living—although, by necessity, temporary—greatness of a work. We should smile, rather, at modern attempts to codify great works and at modern whinings that the American mind is closing because students today don't have the same values their fathers and mothers did. Values change; the need to evaluate does not.

I believe that the working-class critics and their audience can remind us what reading should be. In particular, they remind us that reading is a dialogue between writer and reader, and if a reader engages in that dialogue without some sense of his or her own value, what might be useful knowledge loses its utility. No Carlile or Jones, Hirsch or English professor can give a reader that sense of personal value; the best they can do is recognize it and promote particular works that serve it. The greatness of the working-class critics lies in their recognition of the greatness of their audience.