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A Preface to a History of Audiences

This book addresses a question which, until recently, was considered unanswerable. It proposes to enter the minds of ordinary readers in history, to discover what they read and how they read it. It is relatively easy to recover the reading experiences of professional intellectuals: authors, literary critics, professors, and clergymen extensively documented their responses to books. But what record do we have of "common readers," such as freedmen after the American Civil War, or immigrants in Australia, or the British working classes?

Not long ago David Perkins concluded that "for most times and places, we lack the sources, such as accounts of reading experiences, from which a history of reception could be written."[1] According to Jeffrey Richards, "It is pointless to ask for the first-hand accounts of ordinary people about how their reading or leisure has affected them. For such evidence cannot exist. The nature of popular culture and of its consumers provides no means of articulating such a conscious verbal response."[2] Historians, as Robert Darnton observed in 1980, "want to penetrate the mental world of ordinary persons as well as philosophers, but they keep running into the vast silence that has swallowed up most of mankind's thinking."[3]

Just six years later, however, Darnton had become more optimistic. "It should be possible to develop a history as well as a theory of reader response," he now suggested. "Possible, but not easy ...."[4] In fact, in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars in the emerging discipline of "book history" invented the research methods and tapped the archival resources that allowed them to penetrate this mystery.[5] Common readers disclosed their experiences in memoirs and diaries,[6] school records,[7] social surveys,[8] oral interviews,[9] library registers,[10] letters to newspaper editors (published or, more revealingly, unpublished),[11] fan mail,[12] and even in the proceedings of the Inquisition.[13]

Of these sources, the most useful are the autobiographies of ordinary people. Richard Altick well appreciated their value when he wrote the pioneering work in the field, *The English Common Reader*, back in 1957. He was handicapped by the fact few such memoirs were known to scholars at the time ("If only we had the autobiography of [a] pork butcher...!").[14] By 1981, however, David Vincent had assembled 142 memoirs by early nineteenth-century British workers, and in *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* he showed how they could be used to reconstruct

a detailed history of reading response.[15] In 1989 Vincent, together with John Burnett and David Mayall, completed *The Autobiography of the Working Class*, a bibliography listing nearly two thousand documents, published and unpublished, from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain.[16] My book, based as it is on a reading of most of those memoirs, would have been impossible without their groundwork.

Like any other historical source, autobiography contains certain inherent distortions and biases. Memoirists are not entirely representative of their class, whatever that class may be, if only because they are unusually articulate. Autobiographies were produced in every stratum of the British working classes, ranging down to tramps and petty criminals, but a disproportionate number were written by skilled workers. Women account for only about 5 percent of the memoirists born before 1870, rising to about 15 percent for the 1870–89 cohort and about 30 percent for the 1890–1929 cohort. Of course, some autobiographical manuscripts were bowdlerized or rejected by bourgeois publishers, but that is not so great a problem as one might suppose. The majority of these surviving memoirs are unpublished, or were self-published, or were published by local or radical presses. Agitators usually managed to record their lives in some form, with the result that our whole sample is actually skewed to the political left: the Burnett–Vincent–Mayall bibliography lists many more Communists than Conservatives.

As one washerwoman's son warned us, the autobiographer "may helplessly, perhaps even thoughtlessly, but more probably designedly, select, omit, minimize, exaggerate, in fact lie as wholeheartedly" as the novelist.[17] None of this disqualifies the memoir as a historical document: after all, similar uncertainties are built into everything we find in archives and published records. We can minimize those uncertainties if we use these sources with some awareness of their limitations, and if we check them against other kinds of documents. Historians have descended into archives to verify two classic proletarian memoirs (William Lovett's *Life and Struggles* [1876] and Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise* [1939]) and both proved reasonably (if not perfectly) accurate.[18] This book uses oral history, educational records, library records, sociological surveys, and opinion polls to confirm what memoirists tell us, and they usually (though not always) point to similar conclusions. They also make possible the double focus of this book: while autobiographies tell us a great deal about the vital minority of self-improving workers, other sources offer a more representative portrait of the working class as a whole.

The great strength of these memoirs is that they represent an effort by working people to write their own history. All historians must use data selectively, but here, in the first instance, within some limits, the working classes decided what to include. Tellingly, they wrote at length about their reading, as if they were pointing the way for future historians. An entire chapter on the subject is not unusual, and some autobiographies, such as Thomas Carter's *Memoirs of a Working Man* (1845), are predominantly accounts of a lifetime of reading.[19] Robert Collyer (b. 1823), who rose to become a celebrated Unitarian minister, deliberately chose to dwell upon the moment when, as a child laborer in a Fewston linen factory, he bought his first book, *The History of Whittington and His Cat*:

> Does some reader say, Why should you touch this incident? And I answer, I have a library now of about three thousand volumes ...; but in that first purchase lay the spark of a fire which has not yet gone down to white ashes, the passion which grew with my growth to read all the books in the early years I could lay my hands on, and in this wise prepare me in some fashion for the work I must do in the ministry. ... I see myself in the far-away time and cottage reading, as I may truly say in my case, for dear life.[20]

Significantly, these memoirists devoted far more space to reading than later generations of labor historians. Though the "new social historians" of the past few decades have produced important and innovative work, they have harbored a prejudice against literary history, perhaps because it seems "elitist" and lacking in social scientific rigor. They have focused instead on the grittier or material aspects of working-class life—diet, housing, workplace culture, trade unionism, radical politics, crime, and family structure. All this has filled in large gaps in our knowledge, but it has left unwritten a critical chapter in the history of what were once called "the inarticulate masses"—who, it turns out, had a great deal to say.

Their reminiscences make possible a broader kind of reading history, which could be called a history of audiences. Put simply, a history of audiences reverses the traditional perspective of intellectual history, focusing on readers and students rather than authors and teachers. It first defines a mass audience, then determines its cultural diet, and describes the response of that audience not only to literature, but also to education, religion, art, and any other cultural activity. For reading is not limited to books. We also "read"—that is, we absorb, interpret, and respond to—classroom lessons, concerts, radio broadcasts, films, in fact all varieties of human experience. Broadly, an audience history asks how people read their culture, how they experienced education in the widest sense. This book tracks working-class responses to classic literature (Chapter One), informal education (Chapter Two), fiction and nonfiction (Chapter Three), dead authors (Chapter Four), primary education (Chapter Five), adult education (Chapter Eight), Marxism and Marxists (Chapter Nine), school stories (Chapter Ten), popular culture (Chapter Eleven), and the avant-garde (Chapter Thirteen). It uses social surveys to measure cultural literacy, the stock of knowledge acquired through reading, which in turn determines reading comprehension (Chapter Six); and it uses library records to quantify reading habits (Chapter Seven). It chronicles the first generation of common readers who became professional writers, ascending to careers in clerkdom and popular journalism, where they often encountered striking hostility and jealousy on the part of more affluent intellectuals, as illustrated in Chapter Twelve.

A history of audiences can of course address the impact of literature on political consciousness. The question of whether Dickens, Conrad, or penny dreadfuls reinforced or subverted patriarchy, imperialism, or class hierarchies has become an obsession in academic literature departments and cultural studies programs. Although literary criticism has been narrowed and impoverished by this fixation, the question is a legitimate one, and it is addressed (alongside other issues) in this book. The failure of political criticism, as it is actually practiced, is methodological: with some exceptions, it ignores actual readers.[21] In this terrain, critics repeatedly commit what might be called the receptive fallacy: they try to discern the messages a text transmits to an audience by examining the text rather than the audience. This blind spot is not easy to excuse or even explain, given that over the past two decades we have become used to the notion that readers make meaning: they may enjoy wide latitude in interpreting what they read. We can discover how an Edwardian housemaid read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, but only if we do some serious scholarly retooling.

That kind of history could cast a sharper light on provocative issues such as canon formation. Do the "great books" embody universal moral values, psychological insights, and aesthetic standards? Or, as Janice Radway (and a large cadre of contemporary cultural critics) would put it, is it "the dominant class who define and maintain the value of high culture"?[22] The second theory suggests that if the job of literary criticism were handed to readers farther down the social scale—say, colliers and millgirls—they would produce a different canon. But without a history of audiences, how do we know? What if the same books recommended by intellectual elites brought aesthetic joy, political emancipation, and philosophical excitement to these ordinary readers? If the dominant class defines high culture, then how do we explain the passionate pursuit of knowledge by proletarian autodidacts, not to mention the pervasive philistinism of the British aristocracy? A past president of the Modern Language Association, Barbara Herrnstein Smith (to take a representative of our own dominant cultural class) authoritatively states, as something too obvious to require any evidence, that classic literature is always irrelevant to people who have not received an orthodox Western education. It is an undeniable "fact that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare do not figure significantly in the personal economies of these people, do not perform individual or social functions that gratify their interests, *do not have value for them.*" It is an equally self-evident "fact that other verbal artifacts (not necessarily 'works of literature' or even 'texts') and other objects and events (not necessarily 'works of art' or even artifacts) have performed and do perform for them the various functions that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare perform for us."[23]

This theory has no visible means of support. If classic authors have no "transcultural or universal value," as Smith alleges, they would never be translated into other languages. And how can Smith explain Will Crooks, Labour MP? Growing up in extreme poverty in East London, Crooks spent 2d. on a secondhand *Iliad*, and was dazzled: "What a revelation it was to me! Pictures of

romance and beauty I had never dreamed of suddenly opened up before my eyes. I was transported from the East End to an enchanted land. It was a rare luxury for a working lad like me just home from work to find myself suddenly among the heroes and nymphs of ancient Greece."[24]

Smith claims that we respond to a great book only because it tends to "*shape and create* the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and, for that reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing."[25] But how did the *Iliad* create the culture of the East End? Again and again we find classic literature embraced by working people who thoroughly lacked literary education. Though Smith dismisses the notion of "cultural deprivation" as mere condescension, it was painfully real to those who were denied her educational privileges. Bryan Forbes (b. 1926) grew up in a nearly bookless home: "I never saw my mother read a book until she was in her eighties when, like somebody coming off a starvation diet, she consumed three or four novels a week."[26] Nancy Sharman (b. 1925) recalled that her mother, a Southampton charwoman, had no time to read until during her last illness, at age fifty-four. Then she devoured the complete works of Shakespeare, and "mentioned pointedly to me that if anything should happen to her, she wished to donate the cornea of her eyes to enable some other unfortunate to read."[27] Margaret Perry (b. 1922) wrote of her mother, a Nottingham dressmaker: "The public library was her salvation. She read four or five books a week all her life but had no one to discuss them with. She had read all the classics several times over in her youth and again in later years, and the library had a job to keep her supplied with current publications. Married to a different man, she could have been an intelligent and interesting woman."[28]

One finds similar blind spots in the scholarly handling of popular culture. T. J. Jackson Lears takes a fairly typical approach to the subject when he analyzes a 1930 radio scenario: after a tired housewife tells her fatherly doctor her troubles, the program segues into a commercial, which assures women that a good night's sleep on a Beautyrest mattress will preserve their good looks and their husbands' affections. Lears then poses a leading question—"Consider the constructions of gender and power at work in this passage"—and answers it himself. A history of audiences, however, would first consider the questions that Lears (and most other practitioners of cultural studies) fail to ask. Even if this advertisement seems to endorse "female dependency" on male authority figures, how do we know that any listener consciously or subliminally absorbed that message? Assuming that women were paying attention when it was broadcast (a risky presumption), they might well have treated it as just another sales pitch. Possibly some listeners put a feminist construction on it: an overworked housewife may have concluded that, after years of sacrificing for her family, it was high time to purchase something for her own comfort. Or perhaps an immigrant learned that in America a doctor was not an unapproachable shaman, but a neighbor who could help him negotiate a strange culture. My point is that there is as much hard evidence for any of these readings as there is for Lears's, which is to say, none at all; and we will get no closer

to answering these questions unless we shift our attention from the text to the audience. After all, why focus selectively on this particular advertisement, when others may have projected a very different image: for example, patriotic women performing men's jobs in the Second World War? In fact, why devote so much analysis to something that flashed by the audience in a few minutes? Of all the radio programs, books, magazines, newspaper articles, and school lessons that a Depression era housewife absorbed over a lifetime, how do we know which ones significantly shaped her attitudes and opinions?

Perhaps we should ask her. She may not be able to tell us the whole story, but we must begin with her. She might have left behind a document telling us which books and radio programs were important to her, and why. Lears claims that neither he nor other practitioners of cultural studies "would deny consumers a place alongside producers in the process of constructing cultural meanings," but most of them have failed to redirect their research toward those consumers.[29] Even historical studies that promise to tell us something about the "impact" and "influence" of the press usually do not focus directly on audience response.[30] When we do address those issues, we will discover what Roger Chartier calls "appropriation": the power of an audience to transform received messages and render them "less than totally efficacious and radically acculturating."[31]

This book describes how people at the bottom of the economic pyramid appropriated the Bible, *Jude the Obscure*, the *Girl's Own Paper*, Beethoven, the BBC, *Marines of Guadalcanal*, adult education courses, elementary school lessons, even the disciplinary thrashings administered by schoolmasters. All of these experiences required interpretation. In every case, the "reader" had to ask what sociologist Erving Goffman treated as the most basic question of human existence, the question we ask when we first become aware of an external universe, and continue to ask up to the moment of death: "What is it that's going on here?" How do we interpret not only books, but all the raw sensory data that is constantly showering on us? Goffman developed the useful concept of the "frame," meaning "the organization of experience," our ground rules for processing information, "the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events."[32] The frame does for the human mind what a program does for a computer. It determines how we read a given text or situation: whether we treat *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a bedtime story or a Freudian fable, *Finnegans Wake* as densely meaningful or gobbledygook, the morning newspaper as biased to the left or the right, Bible stories as truth, lies, or parables. Every political ideology, psychological theory, religious doctrine, scientific method, literary genre, and school of literary criticism is a distinct frame. Thus the frame is an essential tool for historians of reading: it explains why Robert Darnton was right to treat print, rather than economics, as the prime cause of the French Revolution.[33] To say that revolutions are caused by economic crises begs the question: in the mind of the politically active public, who or what causes such crises? The king? Aristocrats? Economic overregulation? Bankers? Capitalism?

The inevitable vissicitudes of the free market? An act of God? Foreign investors? Greedy workers? The Jews? Different frames will lead individuals to different "readings" of the situation, with radically different political results.

Goffman's approach can help resolve that long and increasingly sterile literary debate over whether meaning is inherent in the text or created by the reader. One might as well ask whether a computer printout is produced by the program or the data: obviously, it is a matter of one working on the other. Readers do play an active role in making meaning, but they cannot capriciously or randomly assign meanings to texts without destroying the usefulness of language as a communication tool. They generally follow certain rules of interpretation (frames), though these rules vary from reader to reader and from situation to situation. Readers can adopt any frame they choose, provided it produces some kind of meaningful reading, and provided the readers have learned the rules laid down by the frame. One cannot read *Pilgrim's Progress* as an allegory unless one knows what an allegory is.

Of course, an excellent way to learn the nature of allegory is to read Bunyan. Since every literary work frames reality in a particular way, we can build up a repertoire of interpretive strategies simply by reading widely. The authentic value of a liberal education lies not so much in acquiring facts or absorbing "eternal truths," but in discovering new ways to interpret the world. We read Homer and Shakespeare and Milton primarily to learn how they saw things, and thus to enhance our own powers of sight. That, fundamentally, is why autodidacts like Will Crooks pursued knowledge under difficulties. The British class system had always drawn a sharp distinction between workers and thinkers: it was the prerogative of the latter to interpret religion, economics, society, and literature for the former. The founders of the Labour Party and other self-educated radicals realized that no disenfranchised people could be emancipated unless they created an autonomous intellectual life. Working people would have to develop their own ways of framing the world, their own political goals, their own strategies for achieving those goals. Locked out of Christminster, Jude Fawley would chalk that political program on the college walls: "I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you ..." (Job 12:3).[34]

The whole canon of world literature—not just literature with an explicit political message—could help them develop those powers of understanding. In fact, when autodidacts were asked which books made all the difference to them, they usually pointed to the same canon of "great books" derided by contemporary critics such as Barbara Herrnstein Smith. They knew that Homer would liberate the workers. If the classics offered artistic excellence, psychological insights, and penetrating philosophy to the governing classes—if, in fact, this kind of education equipped them to rule—then the politics of equality must begin by redistributing this knowledge to the governed classes. Anyone growing up in an industrial or rural slum would be predisposed to take the existing social order for granted: the vision of a long-dead author could come as a salutary shock, creating new

discontents and suggesting radical possibilities. The epiphany that struck Will Crooks is one of the most persistent themes of working-class autobiography.

As for noncanonical literature, by and large it did not perform the same function for proletarian readers. Joseph McAleer has documented working people who freely testified that they resorted to popular fiction as an escapist narcotic. "As the Cockney said: 'Getting drunk is the nearest way out of London,' so reading is the quickest way out of Glasgow," quipped a Scottish postman in 1944.[35] This is not to say that all romance novels, school stories, and tough-guy detective fiction were pernicious: some of them, as we will see, had a certain educational value for common readers. But they usually did not do what the *Iliad* did. To explain why, one would have to explain why some books enter the canon and some do not, an intimidatingly complicated question. Certainly, the tendency of popular fiction genres to follow stereotyped formulas limits their value: they cease to offer much after one has read a few volumes. Authors are far more likely to inspire generations of readers, disciples, critics, and commentators if they produce novel, distinctive, provocative, even subversive ways of interpreting reality. That is exactly what autodidacts, struggling to make sense of it all, found in Shakespeare, Bunyan, Defoe, Carlyle, Dickens, and Ruskin. They embraced Sir John Lubbock's "Hundred Best Books" list, that much ridiculed quick guide to the classics, because it offered a hundred ways of understanding the world, and a hundred plans for changing it. Probably more than a hundred: classics appeal to diverse populations of readers because they are usually capable of diverse readings. *Pilgrim's Progress*, as we will see, was not always read through the frame of religious allegory.

One alternative to this versatility is to view the world through a single tunnel: what in common usage is called "ideology." Putting it in Goffman's terms—terms consonant with Edward Shils's definition of the word[36]—an ideology is a particularly rigid frame. Of course, we cannot think without using some kind of frame, no more than a computer can work without a program. But we can be more or less flexible in our choice of strategies for determining truth, more or less willing to revise the frame in the light of new knowledge. We can (and most of us do) use a variety of frames in different situations: one in church, another in the laboratory, a third in an art gallery, a fourth in the polling booth, a fifth in courts of law, a sixth when we sit down with a novel. But we can also become stuck in a frame and judge everything by it, as in the old joke about the psychoanalyst who wonders what his doorman really meant when he said "Good morning." If we cleave to Marxism, feminism, Christianity, Islam, liberalism, the traditional British class structure, or any other intellectual system to the point where we can no longer step outside it and assume another frame, then we are in the cage of ideology.

Generations of liberal critics, from Matthew Arnold to Lionel Trilling, recognized that literature, by suggesting a wealth of alternative perspectives on the world, would inevitably subvert ideology. As Arnold phrased it, culture can liberate us from "system-makers and systems" by "turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits."[37] Today Arnold's vision is less

than popular among academic literary critics, who (as a glance at the *MLA International Bibliography* will reveal) tend to see literature as freighted with ideological baggage that may insidiously indoctrinate the unsuspecting reader. This school of criticism tells us more about the preoccupations of critics than the experiences of common readers in history, which, frankly, Arnold understood much better. Far from reinscribing traditional ideologies, canonical literature tended to ignite insurrections in the minds of the workers, exactly as *Culture and Anarchy* predicted.

This book is a history of that revolution in thought, a revolution represented in the intellectual lives of Elizabeth Ashby and her descendants. She was a Warwickshire cottager's daughter, who lived her entire life within a sixteen-mile radius of the village of Tysoe. In 1859 she bore a son out of wedlock. Recovering from childbirth, she read the book that most people in her station started with—a vast family Bible. But no consistent ideology was communicated by Scripture: it was capable of multiple readings, even by the same reader. For Elizabeth Ashby, it could be a powerful tract for equality as well as a font of spiritual truth. When the vicar once made her take communion after a prosperous farmer's wife, she defiantly quoted at him "Thou shalt not even secretly favour persons" and "No respect of persons with God, no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all that call upon Him." "It was the first time that in all the centuries of Tysoe's church's existence a woman's voice had been clearly raised in it to utter words of her own choosing, audible to many," wrote her granddaughter, a professional historian. On other occasions Elizabeth treated the Bible simply as a collection of wonderful yarns, reading Chronicles to her children as bedtime stories.

She later married and had two more children. When her husband died after five years, she relied on the charity of the parish for 6s. to 7s. a week. Even at that level of poverty, the family began to expand its range of reading. Her son Joseph learned some Shakespeare at a National School. Though he left school before his eleventh birthday to become a farm laborer, his mother still gave him a few shillings to buy books. In any town it was possible to find a bookstall in the market square, where old volumes could be had for pennies. In Banbury Joseph bought something by John Wesley for his mother, a geometry text, and a 1759 edition of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. One could hardly avoid treating the Bible as absolute truth if one had read nothing else, but exposure to other books might set off a debate in the mind, each volume offering another perspective, opening up a limitless cycle of readings and questionings. Joseph and mother perhaps alluded to that open-endedness with a passage from *Rasselas* which they liked to quote: "There are many conclusions in which nothing is concluded."

By age nineteen Joseph had become a preacher for the Wesleyan Methodists: he was too eager for a broad range of secular knowledge to join the more anti-intellectual Primitive Methodists. Rigid dogmas were more attractive to those with deeper scars. One of Joseph's intellectual companions, an orphan raised in

hard poverty, concentrated his reading more narrowly on increasingly radical schemes for political salvation. He began with Mill's *On Liberty*, turned to the progressive income tax Tom Paine proposed in *The Rights of Man*, then embraced the single tax of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. By the late 1940s he was a lockstep Stalinist, the sole village Marxist. Joseph remained the kind of liberal whose ideology amounted to a rejection of ideology. *On Liberty* "suited him down to the ground," his daughter recalled, "but there was nothing doctrinaire or monopolistic about that." The other villagers found their political vision not in Marx, but in the humane radicalism of Charles Dickens, who was probably the most popular author in the community.

The village children had to struggle with ponderous Victorian textbooks, and their reading was constantly interrupted by chores. Nevertheless, they managed to extract from these volumes something relevant to their individual lives. Joseph's daughter described it as a process of appropriation: "What they heard and read was brought so immediately into contact with events and with work" that they developed a remarkable knack "for discerning unsuspected aspects of a topic and expounding them in terms of their own."

In 1872 farm workers at the nearby village of Wellbourne went on strike, backed by Joseph Arch's union. Local laborers were sympathetic but never expected the stoppage to succeed: the *Banbury Guardian* was given over mainly to hostile letters from farmers and clergymen. But when the *Daily News* took up the issue, Tysoe laborers chipped in to buy it—this was their first exposure to a London paper. Working-class readers throughout the country were gradually shifting from the local to the national press, which could offer a dramatically different perspective on events. The *Daily News* coverage of the strike was not only far more balanced, it was placed in the context of national issues. Now the men of Tysoe saw themselves as part of a larger struggle to win the right to vote and organize trade unions. The range of discussion in village shops grew to embrace the entire range of politics, even *Progress and Poverty*.

For workingmen, the expanding culture of print opened up opportunities to write and act in the public sphere. Joseph Ashby contributed notes on village affairs and politics to newspapers in Leamington and Warwick. He became a Liberal Party agent and a travelling agitator for the Land Restoration League. The quest for education carried his son Arthur to Ruskin College, an educational center for workingmen, and ultimately to the directorship of the Agricultural Economics Research Institute at Oxford University. Women of Joseph's generation could not take advantage of the new ferment to the same extent. His daughter recalled that her mother

> would never greatly develop her literary taste or any other intellectual quality, for it seemed her duty to be perpetually poised for swift service—to husband, child, animal, neighbour and the chapel. Her delicate senses and vivid emotions were under the severest control—no job too hard or dirty, once its necessity was seen; the most innocent tastes were permitted no indulgence; no strong feeling was allowed to break through her resignation to heaven, husband, and fate. And so, naturally, she passes into the background of her husband's and children's lives, not often to emerge.

Yet Joseph taught his wife to enjoy Walter Scott and George Eliot, and would not permit her to waste time with the *Girl's Own Paper*. He sincerely believed in the importance of education for the next generation of girls, according to his daughter, who became principal of the Hillcroft Residential College for Working Women.[38]

The roots of that autodidact culture go back as far as the late middle ages. It surged in the nineteenth century, particularly in Joseph Ashby's late Victorian generation, and crested with the Labour Party landslide of 1945, the climax of this history. Thereafter, the working-class movement for self-education swiftly declined, for a number of converging reasons. This is, then, a success story with a downbeat ending.

Chapter One **A Desire for Singularity**

> Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses. The ordinary popular literature is an example of this way of working on the masses. Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own profession or party. Our religious and political organisations give an example of this way of working on the masses. I condemn neither way; but culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been known and thought in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely,—nourished, and not bound by them.
>
> This is the *social idea*; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the *best* knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.[1]
>
> —Matthew Arnold,
> *Culture and Anarchy*

The masses, as they call them: Arnold sensed that the word erased personality. And he was right to suspect that individuals within that class were pursuing, in the face of intimidating obstacles, a liberal self-education much as Arnold would have understood the term. Their motives were various, but their primary objective was intellectual independence. For centuries autodidacts had struggled to assume direction of their own intellectual lives, to become individual agents in framing an understanding of the world. They resisted ideologies imposed from above in order to discover for themselves the word of God, standards of beauty, philosophical

truth, the definition of a just society. There is nothing distinctively "bourgeois" in this desire for intellectual freedom. If anything, it may have been strongest in people who had spent their lives following orders and wanted to change that. More than a few members of the educated classes supported this movement, but many others treated it as a serious threat to their own social position—which, in an important sense, it was.

This may have been the most crucial arena of the class struggle, and it can be traced all the way back to the Lollards. The reaction against Lollardry was so intense because a vernacular Bible threatened to break a clerical monopoly on knowledge, and throw scriptural interpretation open to artisans. Men of this class dominated underground Lollard reading parties in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and they openly demanded a share of the "hidden buried treasure" hoarded in monastic libraries. Priests warned that they would be made redundant if, as one of them put it, "every lewde man is becomen a clerke and talkys in his termys." Then, complained Bishop Reginald Pecock, common readers "would fetch and learn their faith at the Bible of holy scripture, in a manner as it shall hap them to understand it." There was a clear and fearful recognition that a vernacular Bible would allow room for any number of individual interpretations of Scripture. Centuries before Jacques Derrida, Thomas à Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*: "The voice of books informs not all alike."[2]

Henry VIII would try to suppress Scripture reading before the Reformation, and even after the Bible had been legally published in English. A 1539 proclamation limited discussion and reading of Scripture to graduates of Oxford and Cambridge universities, and the 1543 Act for the Advancement of True Religion dictated that "No women nor artificers, 'prentices, journeymen, servingmen of the degrees of yeomen or under, husbandmen nor labourers" were permitted to read the English Bible. Thomas Cranmer proposed to confiscate heretical texts and prosecute Bible readers, and at least twenty people were burned for discussing heresy between 1539 and 1546.[3]

But artisans were soon entering spiritual debates from all points on the theological compass. Polemics were published by the orthodox Protestant weaver John Careless of Coventry, by the separatist Henry Hart, and on the Catholic side by the London hosier Miles Hogarde. The emergence of individualism in this period, writes J. W. Martin, has been found "in such varied manifestations of a slowly changing upper class sensibility as the rising interest in portrait painting, in mirrors, in sequences of love sonnets, in a greater provision for privacy in country house architecture." But the emergence of these artisan controversialists indicates that "There may be plebeian parallels also. It may be little more than a coincidence that this insistence on airing their personal religious views, differing as those views were, should appear at almost the same time in three Englishmen of the artisan class. But the coincidence still suggests that the century's growing interest in individual identity may be found on levels lower than where we have been accustomed to look."[4]

Henry Hart led a group of about sixty dissidents who believed that the educated class had misinterpreted Scripture, and were determined to read it for themselves. In East Anglia the carpenter Christopher Vitel was promoting a similar movement among itinerant weavers, basketmakers, musicians, and bottlemakers—the gospel of Familism as preached in the works of Hendrik Niclaes. Niclaes's *Terra Pacis* emphasized literacy as the road to salvation. His significantly-titled *A Publishing of the Peace Upon Earth* outlined a utopia based on intellectual liberty and free will. Niclaes, who felt the learned classes were arrogantly enforcing a literal reading of the Bible, looked instead to the untutored common reader (he was perhaps the only writer of the period who addressed them directly) and welcomed the new fashion for silent individual reading. That individualism particularly irked one of Vitel's opponents: he "could never lyke of any publicke doctrine which was taught but had always a desire for singularitye."

T. Wilson Hayes makes the point that elites feared the Familists not simply because they were heretical. More threatening than the content of their theology was the fact that they were discussing it outside of official channels, bypassing the clergy entirely. "The priests and lawyers who ran the royal bureaucracy ... were willing to tolerate dissent within the framework of established institutions where traditional rules of debate were observed," Hayes notes, "but they were not willing to give up the power those institutions wielded or to seriously alter their modes of operation." Monitored by the Privy Council, the Familists were singled out for suppression in a royal proclamation of 1580, which pointed out their real crime: the fact that "privy assemblies of divers simple unlearned people" were engaging in a "monstrous new kind of speech."[5] The Familists were, of course, a small sect, but when Margaret Spufford studied popular reading in post-Reformation England, she was "startled" to find that this style of plebeian disputation was becoming increasingly common: "the laity ... were far from being the docile material which their ministers no doubt desired." A Jesuit reported on a Puritan meeting in the late 1580s: "Each of them had his own Bible, and sedulously turned the pages and looked up the texts cited by the preachers, discussing the passages among themselves to see whether they had quoted them to the point, and accurately, and in harmony with their tenets. Also they would start arguing among themselves about the meaning of passages from the Scriptures—men, women, boys, girls, rustics, labourers and idiots .... "[6]

Did this provide the ideological kindling for the Puritan Revolution of the 1640s? There is no question that English Bibles and Testaments were reaching a mass audience: we estimate that more than a million of them were printed between 1534 and 1640. But in his study of the role of Scripture in the English Revolution, Christopher Hill ran up against the fact that "the Bible produced no agreed new political philosophy: it came to be used as a rag-bag of quotations which could justify whatever a given individual or group wanted to do." It could be a weapon against tyranny and economic inequality, and no revolutionary message was too extreme to be read into Scripture. If it was sinful to worship

graven images, some radicals leapt from that premise to condemn equally the "idolatry" of wealth, the nobility, the king, Parliament, and even the Bible itself. Yet it was just as easily cited in defense of colonialism, war, the subjection of women, and religious intolerance. Sixteenth-century conservatives had correctly predicted that the publication of a vernacular Bible would be a subversive and equalitarian act, but not because Scripture was an unambiguously revolutionary text. The danger was that ordinary people would enter into theological debates once reserved for an elite. As Hill explains, the end of press censorship after 1640 released an explosion of pamphleteering, much of it produced by

> authors who were "illiterate" in the eyes of academics. They knew as little Latin or Greek as Shakespeare. So in the interregnum discussions there was no longer a shared background of classical scholarship; the rules of logic which structured academic controversy were ignored. University scholars treated the newcomers with contempt, and this in turn fuelled opposition to the universities as such. The whole classical curriculum and the conventions of academic argument were called into question. Indeed, were universities of any use at all?

Armed with the Bible, radical autodidacts like Gerrard Winstanley "could beat academics at their own games .... So in the forties uneducated men and women read back into the Bible themselves and their problems, and the problems of their communities, and found Biblical answers there, which they could discuss with others who shared the same problems." What they would not find therein was an authoritative consensus ideology. Thus, Hill concludes, after 1660 "the Bible ultimately contributed to pragmatism, lack of theory, the rise of empiricism." Most importantly, it left a legacy of intellectual freedom that extended to all literate people:

> The seeds of all heresies are to be found in the Bible, and most of them were cultivated and flowered during the Revolution. The glory of that Revolution, as Milton grasped, was the discussion, the ferment: truth may have more shapes than one—the principle of dissent, the contempt for established authority shown by those ordinary people who could not, in Bunyan's immortal phrase, with Pontius Pilate speak Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Failure to prevent continuing discussion by the middling and lower classes, to which the survival of dissent testified, was perhaps as important in preparing the intellectual climate for the Industrial Revolution as the political changes and liberation of the revolutionary decades.[7]

It is meaningless, then, to speak of the "ideological work" performed by Scripture or any other text. Texts do nothing by themselves. The work is performed by the reader, using the text as a tool. What is significant here is that the Bible alone offered plebeian readers enormous latitude for individual interpretation and social

criticism, even when they had access to very few other texts. As the range of books and periodicals available to the laboring classes expanded over the next three centuries, the scope for interpretive freedom would increase apace.

Scottish Overture I

In the eighteenth century, autodidact culture flourished especially in Scotland, particularly among weavers. By then one of the highest literacy levels in the world had been attained in a belt across Lowlands Scotland and the far north of England. (Literacy was far lower in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands, in part because few books in Gaelic had been published.) And weavers as a class had long been legendary readers. Between 1580 and 1700 about half of the weavers in rural England had been literate; in London and Middlesex the proportion may have been two-thirds.[8] Scottish weavers accounted for 38.1 percent of the identifiable subscribers to Isaac Ambrose's *Prima Media* (1757), and 43.7 percent for a 1759 edition of Thomas Watson's *A Book of Practical Divinity*.[9]

In 1742 there was a well-documented explosion of religious revivalism at Cambuslang, with a revealing sociological profile. More than two out of three converts interviewed by William McCulloch, the Cambuslang pastor, were of the artisan class. Of them, half belonged to weaving families, and the majority of weaving-community converts were unmarried women. Although McCulloch's preaching began the revival, the clergy soon lost control to lay leaders, nearly all of them weavers, who urged converts to rely on their own individual interpretations of the Bible rather than the guidance of ministers. These converts often felt a sense of sin not because they were deviating from clerical orthodoxy, but because they had not done enough to read and speak for themselves: they expressed shame at their illiteracy, their lack of serious reading, their inability to voice their theological feelings in public. The Presbyterian clergy had closely monitored the theological views of their parishioners, enforcing orthodoxy through relentless preaching and catechizing. But, observes Ned Landsman, "even in such an environment ministers and hearers could come to hold ... sharply diverging views of the religious experience, and ... converts could create ... lay-centered understandings of conversion. The laity possessed a rather remarkable capacity to integrate seemingly disparate beliefs and actively forge their own understandings of the delivered message and create their own religious symbols."[10]

"There seems to have been a subtle association between weaving and Radicalism in Scotland," noted Clydeside militant David Kirkwood (b. 1872), citing his own great-grandfather as an example. "It may be that these men and women, weaving patterns of cloth, wove at the same time patterns of life. Or it may be that the work, although intricate, became automatic and allowed the mind to browse in the meadows of thought. Did not David Livingstone learn Latin from a text-book propped up in front of him as he wove the cloth?"[11] In all parts

of the kingdom, weavers were legendary for their habit of reading at the loom. "For hours together I have done this, without making bad work," boasted Joseph Livesey (b. 1794). "The book was laid on the breast-beam, with a cord slipped on to keep the leaves from rising. Head, hands, and feet, all busy at the same time!" Livesey would be involved in no less than eight unsuccessful attempts to set up mechanics' institutes and reading rooms in Preston.[12] In the large factories of Aberdeen, weavers would discuss literature after work:

> The Wizard of Waverley had roused the world to wonders, and we wondered too. Byron was flinging around the terrible and beautiful [words?] of a distracted greatness. Moore was doing all he could for love-sick boys and girls,–yet they had never enough! Nearer and dearer to hearts like ours was the Ettrick Shepherd, then in his full tide of song and story; but nearer and dearer still than he, or any living songster—to us dearer—was our ill-fated fellow-craftsman, Tannahill, who had just then taken himself from a neglecting world. ... Oh! how they did ring above the rattling of a hundred shuttles! Let me again proclaim the debt we owe those Song Spirits, as they walked in melody from loom to loom.[13]

The Statistical Account of Scotland, a sociological survey of the 1790s, found that communities of engaged plebeian readers were no longer limited to weavers:

> *Auchterderran, Fife*: In common with the rest of Scotland, the vulgar are, for their station, literate, perhaps, beyond all other nations. Puritanic and abstruse divinity come in for a sufficient share in their little stock of books; and it is perhaps peculiar to them, as a people, that they endeavour to form opinions, by reading, as well as by frequent conversation, on some very metaphysical points connected with religion, and on the deeper doctrines of Christianity. They likewise read, occasionally, a variety of other books unconnected with such subjects. ... Although the parish consists wholly of the poorer ranks of society, newspapers are very generally read and attended to.[14]

> *Kirkpatrick-Juxta, Dumfries*: Several of the farmers read history, magazines and newspapers. The vulgar read almost nothing but books on religious subjects. Many of them are too fond of controversial divinity; a taste which the Dissenters are very diligent in promoting, and which the few books they are acquainted with, are rather calculated to confirm.[15]

> *Wigtown*: Servility of mind, the natural consequence of poverty and oppression, has lost much of its hold here. ... An attention to publick affairs, a thing formerly unknown among the lower ranks, pretty generally prevails now. Not only the farmers, but many of the tradesmen, read the newspapers, and take an interest in the measures of government.[16]

In Dunscore, Dumfries a squire had set up a parish library for his tenants and neighboring farmers, with Robert Burns serving as librarian.[17] It was also observed that shepherds, in their isolation, were often great readers.[18] John Christie (b. 1712), the "literary shepherd" of Clackmannan, built up a library of about 370 volumes, including complete sets of the *Spectator*, *Tatler*, and *Rambler*.[19]

The Milkmaid's Iliad

Until the late nineteenth century, autodidact culture was an overwhelmingly male territory. Few working women would participate in adult education or commit their life stories to paper. The owner of a mid-Victorian London bookstall told Henry Mayhew that women only occasionally bought from him: "Sometimes an odd novel, in one volume, when it's cheap, such as *The Pilot*, or *The Spy*, or *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest*, or *The Monk*."[20]

Some feminist academics have argued that these women were practically silenced because nearly all the literature available to them was written by men and loaded with misogynist ideology. One critic has insisted that reading a traditional male literary canon may cause "grave psychic damage" and even "schizophrenia" among unsuspecting females, though she produced no evidence of anyone actually diagnosed with that disorder.[21] In fact, that canon seems to have had precisely the opposite effect. John Milton and Alexander Pope may well have been male supremacists, but Joseph Wittreich and Claudia Thomas have respectively shown that they nevertheless provided profoundly emancipating reading experiences for eighteenth-century women. In his translations of Homer, Pope directly addressed the female reader, inviting her into what had hitherto been an exclusively masculine cultural realm. Women made up 8 percent of the subscribers to his *Iliad* and 13 percent for his *Odyssey*, impressive proportions for the period, certainly large enough to disturb some male authors. In their *Homerides* (1715) Thomas Burnet and George Duckett warned that, thanks to Pope, "every Country Milkmaid may understand the *Iliad* as well as you or I." Claudia Thomas confirms that female poets of all classes—including milkmaid Ann Yearsley and nurseryman's daughter Mary Leapor—found Pope inspirational. He was no feminist, but his work was a useful foil to these women, who could appropriate it to their own purposes.[22]

Donna Landry likewise notes that the literary models for plebeian women poets of the eighteenth century were the standard male authors—Pope, Dryden, Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Milton, Swift, Thomson, Young, and Johnson. Yet they used these sources to produce "a far from servile discourse, ... potentially more culturally critical in its implications than many later, more 'authentic,' working-class self-representations. ... To take these plebeian poets at their word, acquaintance with the pleasures of high literary texts enables them to take pleasure in their own intellectual powers, representing a form of critical

empowerment rather than cultural acquiescence." That kind of literature strengthened Ann Yearsley's resolve to resist the control of the woman who patronized her in every sense of the term, Hannah More. An evangelical author, More favored teaching the poor to read, but only to indoctrinate them in Christian morality and obedience: they were not to be taught to write. She tried to present Yearsley to the world as a simple untutored folk poet, but was repeatedly startled when the milkmaid drew on classical sources for her work. "How I stared!" More exclaimed, "besides the choice was so *professional*."[23] The emphasis is telling. As an amateur poet, Yearsley could be treated with condescension, but More saw that she was breaking into a literary sphere reserved for the educated class. The two women fell out over control of a trust fund, though for Yearsley it was an issue of intellectual as well as financial independence. "She tells everybody my envy of her makes me miserable, and that I cannot bear her superiority," More complained, while Yearsley protested that her patroness ruined her poetry with corrections and insulted her by consigning her to the role of a poor milkwoman: "You tax me with ingratitude, for why? You found me poor yet proud. ... You helped to place me in the public Eye; my success you think beyond my abilities, and purely arising from your protection. ... I cannot think it ingratitude to disown as obligation a proceeding which must render me and my children your poor dependents for ever."[24]

Yearsley was asserting the kind of artistic individualism that we have come to associate with the Romantic poets. She knew that Hannah More would treat that as a threat: "A fear of being singular, which claims/A fortitude of mind you ne'er could boast."[25] Plebeian poets of both sexes were confined by their betters to the ghetto of folk poetry.[26] (Lord Byron would direct withering ridicule toward the pretensions of shoemaker-poet Joseph Blacket.) Ann Yearsley would have encountered no difficulty if she had been content to remain a representative of the faceless masses, but she could only find her independent voice by mastering classical literature, which she appropriated as the collective property of all classes. With extraordinary nerve, she staked that claim in "Addressed to Ignorance, Occasioned by a Gentleman's desiring the Author never to assume a Knowledge of the Ancients." This poem, a high-wire burlesque, transforms the great Greeks and Romans into Hogarthian lowlife. Zeno and Socrates are starving Grub Street hacks, Lycurgus a thief to be hanged at Tyburn, Horace a streetsweeper, Penelope a sluttish tramp, Ajax a butcher, Clytemnestra a Billingsgate fishwife, while Helen sells laces and pins at Charing Cross. Yearsley's levelling message is uncompromising: this is my culture as well.

Here's Trojan, Athenian, Greek, Frenchman and I,
  Heav'n knows what I was long ago;
No matter, thus shielded, this age I defy,
  And the next cannot wound me, I know.[27]

Female autodidacts were held back not by the standard male authors, but by the scarcity of other female autodidacts as models. There were hardly any women in G. L. Craik's popular tract, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties* (1830–31), though in 1847 he issued a companion volume trumpeting the achievements of self-educated women.[28] In 1842 Mary Ann Ashford, a London domestic servant, saw an advertisement for *Susan Hopley, or the Life of a Maid Servant.* She was intrigued, since she so rarely saw such women in print, except for the occasional newspaper crime story. "And," she added, "in penny tracts, now and then, a 'Mary Smith,' or 'Susan Jones,' is introduced, in the last stage of consumption, or some other lingering disease, of which they die, in a heavenly frame of mind, and are duly interred." Disappointingly, *Susan Hopley* turned out to be fiction, but at least it spurred Mary Ashford to publish her own life.[29]

As Ann Yearsley discovered, women as well as men looked askance at the female plebeian intellectual. For Janet Hamilton (b. 1795)—the Langloan weaver, poet, and essayist—self-education was an imperative for workingmen, but not quite so important for their wives:

> Education of the mind, when adapted to sex and circumstances, is both useful and becoming in a working-woman; and a well-informed and intelligent woman is a most interesting and pleasing object, but the seat of her strength is not in her head—it is in the heart. What would man be, what would the world be, were it not for the full fountains of true and tender love, sweet and holy affections, gushing sympathies, kindly feeling, and the warm and active charities which are ever overflowing from the cultured heart and affections of true womanhood?[30]

Ellen Johnston (b. 1830s), who achieved some fame around Glasgow as the "Factory Girl" poet, found that she was "courted for my conversation and company by the most intelligent of the factory workers, who talked to me about poets and poetry." That aroused suspicion from another quarter: "The girls around me did not understand, consequently they wondered, became jealous, and told falsehoods of me. ... I was a living martyr, and suffered all their insults."[31]

Knowledge and Power

The contest of wills between Ann Yearsley and Hannah More illustrates an enduring aspect of the class struggle in Britain. Educated people commonly (though by no means universally) found something profoundly menacing in the efforts of working people to educate themselves and write for themselves. As Arnold predicted, culture was a force for equality and was destructive of ideology, including the ideology supporting the British class structure. That hierarchy rested on the presumption that the lower orders lacked the moral and mental

equipment necessary to play a governing role in society. By discrediting that assumption, autodidacts demolished justifications of privilege. That they presumed to write about their own lives provoked a Tory growl from John Gibson Lockhart of the *Quarterly Review* in 1826:

> The classics of the *papier mâché* age of our drama have taken up the salutary belief that England expects every driveller to do his Memorabilia. Modern primer-makers must needs leave *confessions* behind them, as if they were so many Rousseaus. Our weakest mob-orators think it a hard case if they cannot spout to posterity. Cabin boys and drummers are busy with their commentaries *de bello Gallico*; the John Gilpins of "the nineteenth century" are the historians of their own *anabases*, and, thanks to the "march of intellect", we are already rich in the autobiography of pickpockets.[32]

During the Napoleonic Wars, Scottish cotton-spinner Charles Campbell (b. 1793) earned 8s. to 10s. a week, but set aside a few pennies for a subscription library, where he read history, travels, and the English classics. He joined a club of twelve men, mainly artisans and mechanics, who met weekly to discuss literary topics. He admitted that, without much education or guidance, they had to grope their way towards knowledge, "like way-fairers storm-steaded," yet one of their number went on to become a philosophy lecturer and editor of a medical journal. Their aim, however, was not to get on in the world, but the disinterested pursuit of knowledge:

> The lover of learning, however straitened his circumstances, or rugged his condition, has yet a source of enjoyment within himself that the world never dreams of. ... Perhaps he is solving a problem of Euclid, or soaring with Newton amidst the planetary world, and endeavouring to discover the nature and properties of that invisible attraction by which the Almighty mind has subjected inanimate matter to laws that resemble the operations of intelligence; or descending from the harmony of the spheres, he contemplates the principle of animal life, and explores the intricate labyrinths of physiological phenomena. ... Pursuing the footsteps of Locke and of Reid, he traces the origin of his own ideas, feelings, and passions: or ... he unbends the wing of his imagination, and solaces his weary mind in the delightful gardens of the classic muse [of] poetry and music.

These sentiments, it would seem, were the uncontroversial commonplaces of the late Scottish Enlightenment. The club barred any discussion of political and religious topics, and yet, "being the only thing of the kind that was ever instituted in the village, it experienced a good deal of opposition at its first outset." The fact that laboring men were engaged in cultural pursuits that involved no monetary reward provoked intense suspicion: "These honest people branded us with the

designation of atheists, poets, and play-actors; and their officious gossiping was to me the sources of many a domestic lecture. No poor devil was ever more tortured, or persecuted, for his attachment to books than I was. Every cross accident—every misfortune, that chequered my early life, was ascribed to my love of books, and the influence of our club." Campbell grasped the nature of these fears when, as a sailor, he visited Jamaica and noted that the slaves were denied education by their masters: "A West Indian slave is every whit as rational a creature as a Scots peasant or mechanic, and tinged with less vulgarity. I have conversed with slaves who could reason on right and wrong with as much, and sometimes more good sense than some philosophers—slaves who were conscious of the birth-right of human nature, and eyed their own degradation with just but silent indignation."[33]

The stonemason-geologist Hugh Miller (b. 1802) encountered a more genteel expression of that hostility when he sought to publish his poems, and approached a clergyman who had some influence with the *Inverness Courier*. After waiting in an anteroom with the charity cases (the minister only received supplicants from the poorer classes between eleven and noon) he presented his verses. "Pretty well, I dare say," the clergyman granted. "You, however, use a word that is not English—'Thy winding *marge* along.' Marge!—What is marge?" Miller pointed out that the word was in Johnson's dictionary, and had been used by poets from Edmund Spenser to Henry Kirke White. Rattled, the minister professed no acquaintance with the editor of the *Courier* and ushered Miller out.[34] In 1812 radical tailor Francis Place learned the same lesson more painfully, when one of his oldest customers discovered that he had built up a personal library of 1,000 volumes:

> He expressed much surprize at the number of books, the fitting up, and the library table though there was nothing in the least expensive but it was all neat and in keeping. His remarks were sarcastic and he was evidently displeased. I waited upon him in a few days when some trifling omission being discovered, he told me, he supposed I was thinking more about my books, than about his orders.

The realization that his tailor had intellectual interests was intolerable to the gentleman, and his reaction was vindictive:

> He could not bear to think of me, my presence was excessively obnoxious to him, he took away his custom, and thus ridded himself of much of the annoyance, but he could not forget me his pride was hurt, and his meanness could only be satiated by doing me injury, and he took away some of the best customers I had. Other somewhat similar instances occurred as some of my customers learned from time to time, that I was a "bookish man", and had made acquaintance with other "bookish men". Had these persons been told that I had never read a book, that I was ignorant of every thing but my business, that I sotted in a public house, they would not have made the least objection to me. I should have been a "fellow" beneath them, and they would have patronized me; but,–to accumulate books and to be supposed to know something of their contents, to seek for friends, too, among literary and scientific men, was putting myself on an equality with themselves, if not indeed assuming a superiority; was an abominable offence in a tailor, if not a crime, which deserved punishment, had it been known to all my customers in the few years from 1810 to 1817—that I had accumulated a considerable library in which I spent all the leisure time I could spare, … half of them at the least would have left me, and these too by far the most valuable customers individually.

Years later, the scars from that incident produced an almost Freudian nightmare. Place dreamt

> that I went along the passage to my library and into it, every thing was disarranged and there was no carpet on the floor, stooping down to pick up a book, I could not rise again, something pressed me down and kept my face near the floor. I soon ascertained that it was an immense hand which covered the back of my head and shoulders, the fingers spread over me and I endeavoured to grasp the thumb but could not move. The oppression was dreadful and I have no doubt that if it could continue for a few minutes I must die.[35]

It is sometimes argued that the working-class pursuit of education was an accommodation to middle-class values, a capitulation to bourgeois cultural hegemony. Actually, it represented the return of the repressed. "Knowledge is Power" may strike us as a naive Victorian slogan, but it was embraced passionately by generations of working-class radicals who were denied both. Artisan Christopher Thomson (b. 1799) wrote,

> Let the horny-handed labourer, by inadvertence, drop the two short words "I think," and every "Jack in office," by virtue of his one step upward, is in a fever. Yes! he fears the contagion engendered by the march of intellect will kill his occupation. The tyrant whipper reminds the luckless wight who prates of thinking, "He has no right to think; let those think who are paid for thinking". …
>
> [So] he was forbidden to think! Why? Oh, the free exercise of thought would have taught him to scan the war-debt … would have taught him to calculate taxes on food, and the blessings flowing from the rights of commerce, property taxes, pensions, high-priced legislation, the debasing system of place-making—to assert his right of citizenship—his duty to control the law-makers who contrive the statutes that are to feed or starve, reward or punish him—would have taught him self-dependence and moral elevation, instead of serfish cringing crumb-picking.

Economic inequality rested on inequality of education: hence, monopolies on knowledge had to be broken by any means necessary. Toward that end Thomson organized an artisans' library in Edwinstowe, set up an adult school for both sexes, and (he claimed) subscribed to every issue of the *Penny Magazine* from first to last.[36] If George Howell (b. 1833), the bricklayers' MP, was forever compiling long and difficult reading lists for workingmen, it was because he remembered that farmers and squires had tried to cut short his own early schooling: "What do the working classes want with education? They have only to work." Howell remembered that "The wealthier and employing classes thought that education would foment discontent," and took them at their word.[37]

Such attitudes survived well into the twentieth century. Jean Rennie (b. 1906), a Scottish kitchenmaid, recalled that her employer bristled when she confided that she had once aspired to attend a university and become a French teacher. When the lady was assured that these plans had come to nothing for lack of money, her smile returned. (Her son was equally stunned when Rennie, who had attended high school, spoke to him in fluent French and Latin.) "Not a word about my dreams of academic brilliance," Rennie recalled bitterly, "not a word about the sorrow of my mother, who struggled and saved to give me a chance—not a word about whether I'd wanted to do anything else. ... No, she'd got a cheap scullerymaid, and if my dreams were thrown in the dustbin, then it was the 'station in life to which–'." Once she protested to the cook, "I want a private life—I have a soul," only to meet the acidic response, "You are not allowed a private life, or soul, in service, and once you're in, you'll never get out." Ultimately she found some release in classical concerts and writing. Once she astonished herself when she entered a love story competition in a Scottish weekly and earned four guineas, but the pursuit of a literary career entailed risks for a servant: one employer gave her an uncomplimentary reference because she spent too much time "scribbling."[38]

Dorothy Burnham (b. 1915), who grew up in an overcrowded home ("circumstances that would have affronted the dignity of a guinea pig") and, after her family disintegrated, a Catholic hostel, found her private life in Keats, Tennyson, and Arnold:

> Communication between these poets and myself was instantaneous. I saw with delighted amazement that all poetry had been written specially for me. Although I spoke—in my back street urchin accents—of La Belly Dame Sans Murky, yet in Keats's chill little poem I seemed to sense some essence of the eternal ritual of romantic love. And Tennyson's "Morte D'Arthur" bowled me over. I read it again and again until I fairly lived in a world of "armies that clash by night" and stately weeping Queens. So the poets helped me escape the demands of communal living which now, at thirteen, were beginning to be intolerable to me.

As a servant girl she took an evening class in English and stood breathless before a Fragonard at Kenwood House, though employers hardly approved of her intellectual pursuits. When an older sister considered taking an evening class, her mistress immediately crushed the idea: "What! And what do the likes of you want with learning? As well teach a monkey to type as try to educate the lower orders!" Remarkably, Dorothy recalled, her sister related this incident with "an odd mixture of pride and a sort of defiant admiration as if she dared me to contradict Ma Arnold. *She* at least, her attitude seemed to say, had an employer who would not stand for any nonsense."[39]

As late as 1935 a Liverpool journalist reported that, according to letters from his readers, some employers were still trying to control their servants' reading—for example, banning newspapers with the wrong political slant.[40] This was never a universal practice: one could produce many counterexamples of employers who gave servants theater tickets and allowed them the run of their libraries.[41] But even the most liberal-minded could be nonplussed by a literary housemaid. Margaret Powell (b. 1907) once worked for an aristocratic couple in Chelsea, who were considerate and gracious in every other respect, until she asked the lady of the house

> if I could borrow a book from her library to read, and I can now see the surprised look on her face. She said, "Yes, of course, certainly you can, Margaret," adding "but I didn't know you read." They knew that you breathed and you slept and you worked, but they didn't know that you *read*. Such a thing was beyond comprehension. They thought that in your spare time you sat and gazed into space, or looked at *Peg's Paper* or the *Crimson Circle*. You could almost see them reporting you to their friends. "Margaret's a good cook, but unfortunately she reads. Books, you know."[42]

Having read *Remembrance of Things Past* three times through, she could be touchy on that point, especially when her allusions to Dickens and Conrad scared away boys.[43]

All this tends to support Marshall McLuhan's conclusion: "Print carries the individuating power of the phonetic alphabet much further than manuscript culture could ever do. Print is the technology of individualism."[44] Walter Ong contended that print accelerated the disintegration of feudalism when it "created the isolated thinker, the man with the book, and downgraded the network of personal loyalties which oral cultures favor as matrices of communication and as principles of social unity."[45] The benefits of print have been questioned by those who uphold the value of "rich oral traditions" (no one ever seems to have a poor oral tradition) but plebeian observers who witnessed that change had no doubt that it represented progress. Popular almanacs of the Stuart period commonly cited the invention of printing as one of the blessings of technology.[46] From Thomas Hardy of the London Corresponding Society (b. 1752)[47] to the first

Labour MPs, working-class agitators were acutely conscious of the power of print, because they saw it work. The political awakening of J. R. Clynes (b. 1869) came when three old blind men paid him 3d. a week to read the newspapers to them:

> Reading aloud was a new joy to me. Some of the articles I read from the local Oldham papers of the time must have been pretty poor stuff I suppose, but they went to my head like wine. ... Then I began to feel the power of words; that strange magic which can excite multitudes to glory, sacrifice or shame. As blindly as my blind hearers, I began to conceive that these words that I loved were more than pretty playthings: they were mighty levers whereby the power of the whole world could be more evenly and fairly distributed for the benefit of my kind.

If Clynes needed a second lesson in the subversive power of print, it came when his foreman nearly sacked him for sneaking a look at *Paradise Lost* during a work break at the mill.[48]

William Johnson (b. 1849) left school at age twelve, and then spent a lifetime pursuing further education via night classes and essay competitions sponsored by workingmen's clubs. The breadth of his studies was astonishing: geology, agriculture, chemistry, physiology, English history, political economy, the cooperative movement, literature, and a reading knowledge of French and German. When Johnson said "Knowledge is Power," he meant specifically the power to turn a fresh stream of ideas on our stock notions and habits: "This wide range of study and reading broadened my mind and gave me that capacity for looking at both sides of a question, which is invaluable to a man in public life."[49] His fellow MP Charles Duncan invested his spare cash in books, promoted the creation of public libraries, and urged workers to read the ancient classics, because otherwise they would be at the mercy of the educated classes: "The unread man has a narrow outlook, and easily goes astray; he is the sport of political tricksters and the tool for all knaves." Granted, some of their parliamentary colleagues, like collier Thomas Glover, asserted (somewhat defensively) that they had been educated by experience rather than books. But he too recognized the political imperative of an enlightened working class, if only because the capitalists' "main object has always been to keep the working man as much in the dark as they can."[50]

When Richard Hoggart extolled the unlettered "oral tradition," Robert Roberts pointed out that Edwardian autodidacts "showed impatience with the many stale saws and clichés that peppered working-class talk. ... These expressions, in fact, brilliant at birth, had been worn to vacuity through over-use and met condign ridicule from the more intelligent." After the First World War, Salford workers would become markedly less deferential, more articulate, readier to debate politics and question the existing order—and that ferment was directly linked to print:

> Many more books, periodicals, newspapers were to be seen in ordinary homes. My mother recalled the plaint of our burial club collector. "Some of 'em are reading mad!" he grumbled. "They buy paper after paper, but won't pay the weekly penny these days, to bury their dead!" The *Daily Herald*, a powerful left-wing voice now, had reached a circulation of nearly 300,000. Certainly our two newsagents' shops, poor strugglers before the war, flourished now, dealing with printed words in a quantity and variety unprecedented; though let it be admitted that the racing novels of Nat Gould and the exploits of Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee stood easily first in popular taste.[51]

George Bourne, the Edwardian chronicler of country life, reminds us not to romanticize the oral culture that Sexton Blake superseded. Rural people were not idiots,

> But the concentration of their faculties on their rural doings left them childish and inefficient in the use of their brains for other purposes. ... Fatalism is too respectable a name for that mere absence of speculative thought which was characteristic of the peasant kind of people I have known. The interest of their daily pursuits kept their minds busy upon matters obvious to the senses, while attention to opinions and ideas was discouraged.

For men and boys, there was not much to do in the evenings except stand around outside the pub "and try to be witty at one another's expense, or at the expense of any passers-by—especially of women—who might be considered safe game." Around 1900 Bourne helped organize a village "Entertainment Club," which offered fortnightly shows run entirely by working people. It carried on with great enthusiasm for a few years, but the performers quickly exhausted their folk repertoire. Then the club had to fall back on those members with some drawing room culture, and their piano recitals had an air of social superiority that drove away the audience.

> I entertained a shadowy hope of finding amongst the illiterate villagers some fragment or other of primitive art. It is almost superfluous to say that nothing of the sort was found. My neighbours had no arts of their own. For any refreshment of that kind they were dependent on the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, or on such cheap refuse as had come into the village from London music-halls or from the canteens at Aldershot. Street pianos in the neighbouring town supplied them with popular airs, which they reproduced—it may be judged with what amazing effect—on flute and accordion; but the repertory of songs was filled chiefly from the sources just mentioned. The young men—the shyest creatures in the country, and the most sensitive to ridicule—found safety in comic songs which ... dealt with somebody's misfortunes or discomforts, in a humorous, practical-joking spirit, and so came nearer,

probably, to the expression of a genuine village sentiment than anything else that was done. But for all that they were an imported product. Instead of an indigenous folk-art, with its roots in the traditional village life, I found nothing but worthless forms of modern art which left the people's taste quite unfed.

"The breaking up of the traditional life of the village [has] failed to supply the [villager] either with the language or with the mental habits necessary for living successfully under the new conditions," Bourne argued. A literate laborer might read newspapers aloud to his fellows, but only with painful difficulty:

> He goes too slowly to get the sense; the end of a paragraph is too far off from the beginning of it; the thread of the argument is lost sight of. An allusion, a metaphor, a parenthesis, may easily make nonsense of the whole thing to a reader who has never heard of the subject alluded to, or of the images called up by the metaphor, and whose mind is unaccustomed to those actions of pausing circumspection which a parenthesis demands.

It was pointless to talk about preserving a traditional rural culture, because the rural laborer was no longer part of a self-sufficient economic or cultural community: "He is entangled in a network of economic forces as wide as the nation; and yet, to hold his own in this new environment, he has no new guidance. ... For making our modern arrangements a standard English language is so necessary that those who are unfamiliar with it can neither manage their own affairs efficiently nor take their proper share in the national life." For precisely that reason, some men were having their children teach them what they learned in school. "Certainly the old contempt for 'book-learning' is dying out," Bourne noted, and there was a growing realization of the need to understand political affairs. "Thanks to the cheap press"—even if it was the gutter press—"ideas and information about the whole world are finding their way into the cottages of the valley; and at the present stage it is not greatly important that the information is less trustworthy than it might be. The main thing is that the village mind should stretch itself, and look beyond the village; and this is certainly happening. The mere material of thought, the quantity of subjects in which curiosity may take an interest, is immeasurably greater than it was even twenty years ago." Coal-heavers could now be surprisingly knowledgeable about working conditions, wages, royalties, transport, and trade unionism in the mining industry.

> Shackleton and the South Pole are probably household words in most of the cottages; it may be taken for granted that the wonders of flying machines are eagerly watched; it must not be taken for granted at all that the villagers are ignorant about disease germs, and the causes of consumption, and the spreading of plague by rats. Long after the King's visit to India, ideas of Indian scenes will linger in the valley. ... The newspapers, besides giving information, encourage an acceptance of non-parochial views. The reader of them is taken into the public confidence. Instead of a narrow village tradition, national opinions are at his disposal, and he is helped to see, as it were from the outside, the general aspect of questions which, but for the papers, he would only know by his individual experience from the inside. To give one illustration: the labourer out of work understands now more than his own particular misfortunes from that cause. He is discovering that unemployment is a world-wide evil, which spreads like an infectious disease, and may be treated accordingly. It is no small change to note, for in such ways, all unawares, the people fall into the momentous habit of thinking about abstract ideas which would have been beyond the range of their forefathers' intellectual power.

These issues had shaken the rural poor out of their fatalism, and mobilized them in the 1906 election. "Men who had never before in their lives tried to follow a logical argument began at last to store up in their memory reasons and figures in support of the fascinating doctrine [of tariff reform], and if they were puzzle-headed over it, they were not more so than their leaders."[52]

Literature and Dogma

Though autodidact culture was nurtured by the evangelical revival, it also presented a challenge to evangelical ideology. Many of the earliest working-class memoirs were published by evangelicals as conversion narratives, and as such were strictly orthodox, formulaic, and deferential: otherwise they would have hardly passed the editors. But autobiographies that were not written for publication, or were published by the author, reveal a real individual effort to grapple with political and religious controversies. The outcome of these mental struggles was, quite commonly, a critical attitude toward not only evangelicalism, but all received ideologies, including those of the militant left.

Joseph Mayett (b. 1783), a Buckinghamshire laborer, usually respected his betters, yet was not inclined to put up with obvious injustice, and he resented that he "was deprived of a liberal education." The son of a Methodist farm worker, he studied Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Two Covenants*, but did not limit himself to religion. As a soldier in the Napoleonic Wars he had access to his captain's library, where he studied politics. He was a critical reader who recognized and struggled with the internal inconsistencies in Scripture. Proselytized by a follower of the mystic Joanna Southcott, he read some of his propaganda but "found Some things that did not Correspond with the bible and also that it was a trick to get money so I declined his religion and bid him adue." He was no less discerning about the tracts printed in the millions by evangelicals:

> Their Contents were Chiefly to perswade poor people to be satisfied in their situation and not to murmur at the dispensations of providence for we had not so much punishment as our sins deserved and in fact there was but little else to be heard from the pulpit or the press and those kinds of books were often put into my hands in a dictatorial way in order to Convince me of my errors for instance there was [Hannah More's] the Shepherd of Salisbury Plain ... the Farmers fireside and the discontented Pendulum and many others which drove me almost into despair for I could see their design.

In that frame of mind, he was receptive to the radical anticlericalism of William Cobbett, T. J. Wooler, and Richard Carlile, given

> the perplexities and trials I met with under oppression[,] the Sophistry and deceit of those who gloried in appearance and not in heart and the general Conduct of many who professed to be Christians. ... These books seemed to be founded upon Scripture and Condemned all the sins of oppression in all those that had supremacy over the lower order of people and when I Compared this with the preceptive part of the word of God I began to Conclude that most if not all professors of religion did it only for a Cloake to draw money out of the pockets of the Credulous in order to Spare their own and no wonder for I had experienced Something of this myself.

Mayett was on the brink of becoming an atheist or deist, but when one of his radical friends denounced Jesus as a fraud, he recoiled in shock and returned to his Bible. He hoped, like Bunyan, to find a conclusion to his spiritual pilgrimage, but he never completely worked out the contradictions of Christianity. What did remain was an unsectarian faith in education. When his fellow Methodists set up a Sunday school, he warned that their children would be better educated at the existing Anglican National School, but nevertheless supported the Methodist school by teaching there himself.[53]

Uriah Plant (b. 1786), a wheelwright's son, affirmed that "My uncertainty about the truth of religion not only increased my sense of its importance ... but gave me a habit of thinking, a love of reading, and a desire after knowledge." As an office boy and bookkeeper in Leicester he organized a discussion group devoted to religion and, over six years, spent "only" £21 10s. 9d. on books, mostly second-hand. He fearlessly read across the spectrum of theological opinion, including *The Age of Reason*, and opposed the suppression of antireligious literature. Later he joined the Wesleyan Methodists without completely accepting their dogma, noting that Wesley in "The Witness of the Spirit" was rather more liberal than some of his followers.[54]

At age thirteen John Clare was shown *The Seasons* by a Methodist weaver, and though he had no real experience of poetry, he was immediately enthralled by Thomson's evocation of spring. The weaver laughed and assured him that Wesley's hymns were far superior. "I said nothing but thought (whatever his religion might be) the taste of him and his friends was worth little notice. I have seen plenty of these fanatics to strengthen my first opinion, as some of them will not read a book that has not the words Lord and God in it." Clare came to loathe all ideological extremes: a pamphlet on the execution of Louis XVI destroyed any sympathy he might have had for the French Revolution.[55] For him the target of John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was not just Catholic persecutions, but every kind of religious fanaticism: "Tyranny & Cruelty appear to be the inseparable companions of Religious Power & the aphorism is not far from truth that says: 'All priests are the same.'"[56] Growing up in a village where he was sneered at for his bookish interests, literature became for Clare a means of affirming his individuality. "Self-identity is one of the finest principles in everybody's life & fills up the outline of honest truth in the decision of character," he proclaimed, "a person who denies himself must either be a madman or a coward."[57]

Opposition to secular literature ran wide and deep among Nonconformists and Anglican evangelicals in the first half of the nineteenth century, though the virulence varied among denominations. Those with predominantly working-class congregations, such as the Baptists and Primitive Methodists, tended to be the most hostile.[58] The mother of Joseph Wright, the millworker-philologist, did not learn to read until age forty-eight, and then apparently never ventured beyond the New Testament, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and a translation of Klopstock's *Messiah*. As a Primitive Methodist she considered the theater sinful: when her son brought home a volume of Shakespeare she literally threw it out of the house.[59]

On this much Mrs. Wright was entirely correct: literature posed a real threat to the more dogmatic varieties of Wesleyanism. Christopher Thomson was a "zealous" Methodist until he discovered Shakespeare, Milton, Sterne, and Dr. Johnson at a circulating library. When his absence from Sunday chapel was noticed

> I was called to account for it; by way of defence, I pleaded my desire for, and indulgence in, reading. This appeared rather to aggravate than serve my cause. It was evidently their opinion, that all books, except such as they deemed religious ones, ought not to be read by young men. I ventured somewhat timidly to hint, that it was possible for a young man to read novels, and other works of fiction, and still keep his mind free from irreligion and vice. ... The senior [class leader], with a sternness that reminded me of some of the bigots in those famous councils written in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, declared, that "if I did not at once, and unconditionally, renounce all books, except such as they should approve of, I was for ever lost!" At that sentence I paused, and wept; the iron mandate was driven into my soul, and after a long self-struggle, I renounced my connection with all bodies who would prescribe the free range of thought in matters of such vital importance. Although I lingered with them some time after, from the very moment of that unchristian sentence I belonged to myself and God.[60]

Circuit preacher Joseph Barker (b. 1806) found that theology simply could not compete with Shakespeare:

> What pleased me most was the simplicity and beauty of his style. He had always a meaning in what he said, and you could easily see his meaning. He never talked at random, or lost himself in a mist. I had at this time been so accustomed to meet with dull, mysterious, and unmeaning stuff in many religious books as they are called, that I felt quite delighted to read something that was rational, plain, stirring, and straightforward.

Shakespeare incited his appetite for poetry: Cowper, Pope, Dryden, Goldsmith, Thomson, Byron. Not only were they more interesting than the fifty volumes of Wesley's Christian Library: eventually Barker realized "that the reason why I could not understand them was, that there was nothing to be understood,—that the books were made up of words, and commonplace errors, and mystical and nonsensical expressions, and that there was no light or truth in them." When his superintendent searched his lodgings and found Shakespeare and Byron there, Barker was hauled before a disciplinary committee. "They talked to me about the danger of such books, and told me that *my* business was to be a Methodist preacher, and that I had nothing to do with any other books than those that would qualify me for teaching, inculcating, and defending Methodistical doctrines, and for exercising Methodistical discipline in the societies." Barker refused to back down, and in retrospect he admitted that he was already veering away from New Connexion Methodism. Byron had intoxicated him "with the freedom of his style of writing, with the fervour or passionateness of his feelings, and with the dark and terrible pictures which he seemed to take pleasure in painting." The general effect of reading Milton, Hobbes, Locke, and Newton had been

> to make me resolve to be free. I saw that it was impossible for the soul of man to answer the end for which it was created, while trammelled by human authority, or fettered with human creeds. I saw clearly that if I was to do justice to truth, to God, or to my own soul, I must break loose from all the creeds and laws of men's devising, and live in full and unrestricted liberty. And this I resolved to do. That measure of bondage in which I saw myself placed in the New Connexion began to be exceedingly irksome to me, and I felt strongly inclined to throw off the yoke and to assert my liberty.[61]

The special bugbear of early Victorian evangelicals, within and outside the established church, was the theater, if only because it threatened to draw away audiences. With alarming frankness, J. H. Pratt explained that "The sermon is the essence of dulness after a play: this shews the evil of the play-house."[62] Though one former ploughboy extolled Shakespeare for possessing "a deep sense of the pure morality of the Gospel," and quoted him on most of the 440 pages of his

autobiography, he was anxious to insist that "Shakespeare can be far more appreciated and better understood in the closet, than in a public theatre." Surely, he added, the Bard would have agreed: his lines "The instruments of darkness ... win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence" clearly alluded to the seductions of the playhouse.[63] As a Lancashire weaver's son recalled, in the last decades of the nineteenth century some Methodist Sunday school teachers still asked their pupils to consider the condition of their souls if they died while attending a theater. It took some persuading to bring him to his first play, *Julius Caesar*. "Actors were considered no better than they ought to be," he explained. "A girl who left home to go on the stage was a girl who had gone to the bad. I dare say the poor quality of the stuff produced in the wretched local theatres and the types of performers who came to act there in those days were, in part, responsible for this poor opinion."[64]

These attitudes changed dramatically toward the end of the century, thanks to several influences. Undenominational Board schools proliferated after the Education Act of 1870. English literature became their most widely taught subject, especially after 1882, when readings from Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe, and other "standard authors" were mandated for the higher grades. In response, publishers churned out numerous school editions of Scott, Goldsmith, Cowper, Bacon, Pope, Byron, Lamb, and Gray.[65] Thomas Jones, born in the year of the Education Act, was brought up in a Welsh Nonconformist home where there were few books beyond a Bible, a hymnal, *The Christian Instructor*, and *Pilgrim's Progress* (all in Welsh), as well as the usual penny dreadfuls. Farell Lee Bevan's *Peep of Day* (759,000 copies in print by 1888) supplied him with the frame of a totalistic religious ideology:

> It was from these pages that I got my first ideas of the moral foundations of the universe, was handed the first key with which to unlock the mysteries of the world in which I found myself. These little books served the purpose of an index or filing system; a framework of iron dogma, if you like, providing an orderly arrangement of the world and its history for the young mind, under two main categories, Good and Evil.

But Jones also attended a Board school, where he found "salvation" in an old cupboard of books presented by the local MP. They were mainly volumes of voyages and natural history, "which took a Rhymney boy away into the realms of wonder over the seas to the Malay Archipelago, to Abyssinia, to the sources of the Nile and the Albert Nyanza, to the curiosities of natural history, piloted by James Bruce, Samuel Baker, and Frank Buckland." His father blamed the Board schools for undermining children's respect for their elders, and of course he was right. While he read little but the Bible and religious periodicals, his son was soon working his way through the Rhymney Workmen's Institute Library and Cassell's National Library of 3d. paperbacks. Macaulay's essays, Goldsmith's *History of*

England, Far From the Madding Crowd, Self-Help, Josephus, Plutarch, Shakespeare, Pepys, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* were among the books Jones read, often on his employer's time. (He hid them under the ledger at the Rhymney Iron Works, where he worked a thirteen-hour day as a timekeeper for 9s. a week.)[66]

Whatever their attitudes toward Goethe, all Nonconformist sects encouraged the habits of close reading, interpretive analysis, and intellectual self-improvement. Those talents, exercised on Scripture and sermons, could be carried over to any kind of secular literature. The Primitive Methodists may have been the most anti-intellectual of the Wesleyans, yet miners' MP John Johnson (b. 1850) "found their teaching the strongest possible incentive to trying to improve myself, not only morally, but mentally, and towards the latter end I took to serious and systematic study." He read deeply in history and philosophy, as well as such this-worldly tracts as *The Wealth of Nations*, John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, and Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics*.[67]

The Labour Party was founded by such half-lapsed Methodists. As Beatrice Webb wrote, a major impetus behind the late Victorian socialist revival was "the flight of emotion away from the service of God to the service of man." In the same generation there was a parallel shift among Nonconformist readers, a transference of reverence from the Good Book to the Great Books. From 1886 William Robertson Nicoll, a Free Church minister, recommended classic and contemporary authors in the columns of the *British Weekly*, reassuring his vast audience (circulation 100,000+) that there was no necessary conflict between proper piety and belles-lettres. "I thought that much more might be done in the way of uniting religion with literature," he wrote, "believing that Nonconformists had too long behaved as exiles from the world of culture."[68] Another popular paper, *Great Thoughts* (founded 1884), made the same impression on Edwin Muir while he was working as a Glasgow clerk:

> It was filled with a high but vague nonconformity, and tried to combine the ideals of revivalist Christianity and great literature. There were articles on "aspects" of Ruskin, Carlyle, Browning, and other uplifting Victorians, and a great number of quotations, mainly "thoughts," from their works and the writings of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. For some time this paper coloured my attitude to literature; I acquired a passion for "thoughts" and "thinkers," and demanded from literature a moral inspiration which would improve my character: there were many "thoughts" bearing on character, particularly in its aspect of "self-culture," in which the reader was encouraged to strike a balance between the precepts of Christ and Samuel Smiles.[69]

Emblematic of the change was the President of the Methodist Conference, Richard Pyke (b. 1879). He remembered only a handful of books in his parents' home in rural Devon: the family Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, *Jessica's First Prayer*, *A Peep Behind the Scenes*, and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. His theological training at Shebbear College was "slender and inadequate," but there he studied with an inspiring and progressive headmaster, Thomas Ruddle: "While the custodians of the true faith spoke of evolution as 'the gospel of dirt', he would exalt Darwin almost to the level of a Hebrew prophet." As a circuit preacher Pyke introduced farm people to Milton, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Tolstoy. His own reading ranged from Shakespeare and Boswell to Shelley's poems and George Henry Lewes's *History of Philosophy*. He was even prepared to acknowledge the "genius" of *Jude the Obscure*, though he would have preferred a happy ending.[70]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, a similar transformation had worked itself out at the other end of the ideological spectrum. In his investigation of early radical periodicals, Paul Thomas Murphy found that they scarcely mentioned *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Robinson Crusoe*, which probably had more working-class readers than any book except the Bible. Regarding literature, radical editors like William Cobbett and Richard Carlile were as blinkered as the most philistine Methodist. They too "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'." Carlile might publish Byron and Shelley, but for their politics, not their poetry. He dismissed Walter Scott as Tory propaganda, while Cobbett discounted Shakespeare, Milton, and Johnson. The Co-operative journals of the 1820s and 1830s likewise avoided imaginative literature in favor of fables and didactic verse, though they would publish excerpts from great authors if they had some political relevance.[71]

Evangelicals, utilitarians, and radical journalists of the early nineteenth century equally distrusted literature, and for much the same reason. Each of these sects was trying to convert the masses to their own ideology, and struggling to control the flow of information to the working classes. Their audience, however, was increasingly distracted by the growing availability of imaginative literature, which could not be contained in any ideological system. In Carlile's case the ideology was atheism (he did more than anyone to popularize Paine through the publication of cheap editions) and his approach to education was dismally utilitarian. He insisted that schools teach only science—not dead languages, history, or anything "metaphysical." He denounced poetry and drama (*Macbeth*, for example) as unrealistic and amoral, favored the suppression of carnivals, and generally loathed the hard-drinking "nonrespectable" poor. Because most literate working people had broader tastes in books and beer, he dismissed them as "human cattle," save only a few enlightened souls who shared his opinions. Ultimately, Carlile descended into what a sympathetic biographer called "messianic gibberish."[72] He would not be the last crusader on the left to end in that particular cul-de-sac.

Thomas Wooler was different, however. His *Black Dwarf*, a popular radical periodical, reviewed Edmund Kean's *Othello* and Philip Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, though they contained no apparent political message. Wooler's

own writings drew heavily on Pope for inspiration, and he published extracts from great authors following no consistent ideological pattern—Aristotle, Erasmus, Machiavelli, Thomas More, Holinshed, Shakespeare, Bacon, Marvell, Milton, Locke, Pope, Cowper, Goldsmith, Swift, Lord Chesterfield, Johnson, Sterne, Franklin, Burns, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Byron. Wooler was able to recognize the autonomous worth of literature because he was less interested in lecturing his readers and more willing to allow them to find their own salvation. He appreciated that literature was a means of expanding human freedom, and that freedom was intrinsically valuable: "By excursions into the fields of Anecdote and Poetry ... 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 world would have us believe, but a real entity, unchangeable, eternal, and one of the chief blessings of social existence."[73]

Some of the Chartist papers that flourished in the late 1830s and 1840s explicitly subordinated literature to politics. The *Labourer* proclaimed that it "had one great goal before our eyes—the redemption of the Working classes from their thraldom—and to this object we have made the purpose of each article subservient. ... We have placed poetry and romance side by side with politics and history."[74] But this resistance to imaginative literature was beginning to weaken. By now established critics, who had once disdained the novel, were coming around to recognizing it as a legitimate art form, and radical journalists followed suit. Dickens was difficult to ignore: not only was he a genius and spectacularly popular, but he also called attention to the same social issues that the Chartists had raised. Moreover, though radical journals were now more free to publish, they were also in danger of losing their audience if they remained dryly political. Cobbett's 2d. *Political Register* could sell as many as 200,000 copies in 1816, in part because he had few competitors for working-class readers. In contrast, the average annual circulation of the Chartist *Northern Star* peaked at 36,000 in 1839; it usually sold half that number or less.[75] The proliferation of cheap mass circulation general interest periodicals, starting with *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* and the *Penny Magazine* in 1832, forced the Chartist papers to leaven their editorial mix with imaginative literature. The *Northern Star* published Captain Marryat, Fenimore Cooper, and Charlotte Brontë. W. J. Linton's *National* excerpted Chaucer, Shelley, Keats, Spenser, Confucius, Robert Herrick, Izaak Walton, Socrates, and Milton. Some Chartist reviewers tried to introduce their readers to an international selection of writers—George Sand, Eugène Sue, Victor Hugo, Whittier, and Pushkin. And one could argue (as the *Chartist Circular* did in 1840) that Homer, Aesop, Socrates, Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe, and Dr. Johnson were all sons of the proletariat.

Meanwhile, "Knowledge Chartists" such as William Lovett made intellectual freedom their first political priority, calling for adult education programs and public libraries governed by the workers themselves.[76] Though Lovett had once been attracted to Robert Owen's materialist socialism, he came to question

> what human beings may become when the *individualism* in their nature is checked by education, and endeavoured to be crushed out of them by the mandate of a majority—and, it may be, that majority not always a reasonable and enlightened one. ... What even may become of the best portion of man's nature (of his industrial, skilful, persevering, saving energies), when some aspiring, hopeful individual, resolving to labour and to save while youth and vigour favour him, in hopes of realizing leisure and independence, or to procure some cherished object of his heart, is constrained to abandon his resolution, to conform to the routine of the majority, and to make their aspirations the standard of his own? Of what advantage the splendour and enjoyment of all art and nature *if man has no choice of enjoyment?* And what to him would be spacious halls, and luxurious apartments, and all the promised blessings of a community, if he must rise, work, dress, occupy, and enjoy, not as he himself desires, *but as the fiat of the majority wills it?* Surely the poorest labourer, bowed down with toil and poverty, would have reason to bless the *individualism* that gave him some freedom of choice, and a chance of improving his lot, compared with a fellowship that so bound him in bondage.[77]

All that contributed to a growing sense within the Chartist movement that literature was compatible with and necessary to political liberation. As Julian Harney put it in the *Red Republican*, the workers needed the "Charter and something more."[78] The propaganda of Robert Owen alone did not convert printer Thomas Frost (b. c. 1821) to socialism: "The poetry of Coleridge and Shelley was stirring within me, and making me 'a Chartist, and something more.'"[79] Frost had been an omnivorous reader since childhood, when he read his grandmother's volumes of the *Spectator* and *The Persian Letters*. Most subversive of all were the letters of the second Lord Lyttelton: "The attraction which this book had for me consisted, I believe, in the tinge of scepticism to be found in several of the letters, and in the metaphysical questions argued, lightly and cleverly, in others. I was beginning to assert for myself freedom of thought, and to rebel against custom and convention; and there was naturally much in common between the writer and the reader."[80]

Similarly indiscriminate reading brought the same kind of liberation to Chartist Robert Lowery (b. 1809). A prolonged illness gave him the opportunity to work through a bookseller's entire circulating library, and much else besides. Most autodidacts shared his habit of devouring any book that came to hand, and this indiscipline made it the best method of liberal education. Where a prescribed reading list might have reflected the biases of the compiler, improvisational reading offered him a broad "general knowledge of history, ... poetry and imaginative literature." The very fact that "I read without any order or method" forced his mind to exercise "a ready power of arranging the information this desultory reading presented." It inspired him to write poetry and fiction. After seeing his first play, *As You Like It*, he even attempted a drama, "a very long one

about some romantic adventure of some Highlanders in Spain during the middle ages." Though he went nowhere as a creative writer, he did learn to frame the world in his own terms: "I would take a passage or an idea suggested from some author and endeavour to enlarge upon it. I found this enabled me to trace ideas in their connections, gave me a wider view of subjects, and a facility of expression in writing."

That exercised imagination left Lowery skeptical of all ideological systems. Though not unsympathetic to Owenite socialism, he was alienated by Owen's environmental determinism and his grandiose promises of human perfectibility. Lowery could also see the limits of another ideology—temperance. He agitated against pubs, yet was willing to tell the readers of a Quaker temperance weekly that the vital autodidact culture of early nineteenth-century Newcastle had been based largely in taverns, a symposium in the original sense of the term:

> A fondness for company, and a passion for speculative inquiry and discussion, prevailed along with much intemperance. Thus, while the intelligence of the people was strong and they had their literary and philosophical institutions and a number of public libraries, and every week public lectures on various subjects, the old tavern system still prevailed. All classes met there to compare notes and to hear individual remarks and criticisms on what occupied public attention. ... Every branch of knowledge had its public-house where its disciples met. ... There was a house where the singers and musicians met—a house where the speculative and free thinking met—a house where the literate met—a house where the artists and painters met—also one where those who were men of science met.[81]

One finds a strikingly modern taste for many-sidedness in the shoemaker-poet Thomas Cooper (b. 1805). He veered away from the Primitive Methodists when they condemned his love of secular literature.[82] As a Chartist he worshipped Homer, Shakespeare, Swift, and Dickens for reasons that transcended any particular dogma. "The power of fiction to instruct, the sources of the charm it exercises over the human mind," he wrote, cannot be explained by any one-dimensional political, utilitarian, or scientific calculus. "Perhaps, the secret of the charm of fictitious writing lies in the fact that it appeals to *all* the powers of the mind"—imagination, memory, reason, morality. A great book is defined as a book that astonishes the reader on many levels:

> What matchless beauty, what deep truth, what life-like pictures of humanity, what opulence of moral, in that transcendent *Iliad*—and yet it enthrones the bad passion for war; and if one anecdote be credible, that Alexander read it every day, and slept with it under his pillow by night—we owe the record of his ambitions, his ravages, and slaughterous conquests, to his reading of Homer! I do not mention this to induce any one to commit so great a folly as to throw Homer away: if he will do so, be it remembered that he must throw the older part of another old book after it, as even more pernicious—because it teaches war and slaughter under still higher sanctions.[83]

As a Manchester warehouse porter, Samuel Bamford (b. 1788) found the same richness in Milton: "His 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' were but the expressions of thoughts and feelings which my romantic imagination had not unfrequently led me to indulge, but which, until now, I had deemed beyond all human utterance." In "Il Penseroso" the provocative ambiguities in the line "Call him up that left half told"

> set my imaginative curiosity to work—What him? who was "him"? when did he live? where did he reside? and how happened it that he "left half told/The story of Cambuscan bold"? What a strangely interesting subject for thoughtful conjecture was his "story half told," with its Cambuscan, and Algarsife, and Canace, who, whether or not she was ever wived at all, was a mystery impenetrable to me.

There was a direct connection between that reading experience and Bamford's subsequent turn to radical agitation, and not because he had read any overtly political message into "Il Penseroso." Milton established a habit of serious reading, which brought Bamford to Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, the great poets, classic histories and voyages, and, ultimately, William Cobbett's *Political Register*. More importantly, "Il Penseroso" taught Bamford to ask questions and voice his thoughts—a revolutionary transformation. Of all poets, "none has so fully spoken out the whole feelings of my heart—the whole scope of my imaginings," and that, Bamford concluded, is what made Milton so "fascinating and dangerous."[84]

Conservative Authors and Radical Readers

Even literature that appeared to be safely conservative was potentially explosive in the minds of readers. This may seem counterintuitive: in the recent "canon wars," the Left and Right agreed that a traditional canon of books would reinforce conservative values (the Right arguing that this was a good thing). But both sides in this debate made the mistake of believing each other's propaganda. Contrary to all the intentions of the authors, classic conservative texts could make plebeian readers militant and articulate. Rooted in the New York Jewish autodidact culture, Irving Howe gratefully acknowledged his debts to Edmund Burke, whose oratory was equally inspirational to Edward Milne (b. 1915), an ILP[85] organizer and an unsuccessful applicant for conscientious objector status during the Second World War. In his later parliamentary career Milne particularly liked to quote *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*: "A strenuous resistance to every appearance of lawless

power; a spirit of independence carried to some degree of enthusiasm; an inquisitive character to discover, and a bold one to display, every corruption and every error of government; these are the qualities which recommend a man to a seat in the House of Commons."[86]

The most famous example of a menial laborer emancipated by an arrogantly elitist author was Catherine McMullen (b. 1906), the daughter of a washerwoman who had served time in a workhouse. In 1926 she was herself a workhouse laundress, struggling to improve her mind by reading *T. P. and Cassell's Weekly.* The magazine was full of literary gossip that made her aspire to be a writer, but she had no idea which books to read until she came across Elinor Glyn's *The Career of Catherine Bush.* In this story of a romance between a duke and a secretary, the secretary is advised to read the *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son.* Catherine McMullen then visited a public library for the first time in her life and borrowed the book: "And here began my education. With Lord Chesterfield I read my first mythology. I learned my first real history and geography. With Lord Chesterfield I went travelling the world. I would fall asleep reading the letters and awake around three o'clock in the morning my mind deep in the fascination of this new world, where people conversed, not just talked. Where the brilliance of words made your heart beat faster. ... Lord Chesterfield became very real to me": after all, his letters were addressed to a boy who, like Catherine, had been born illegitimate. He launched her into a lifetime course of reading, beginning with Chaucer in Middle English, moving on to Erasmus, Donne, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* and even *Finnegans Wake.* Ultimately, as Catherine Cookson, she became one of the best-selling authors of all time, producing more than ninety novels with total sales of more than 100 million copies, at one point responsible for one-third of all the books loaned by Britain's public libraries. "Dear, dear, Lord Chesterfield," she sighed. "Snob or not I owe him so much."[87]

Radical papers of the early nineteenth century had often assailed Walter Scott's conservatism, but their readers did not necessarily concur. In 1832 a writer in the Edinburgh *Schoolmaster* ventured that Scott could be read as an anti-Tory, whose lower-class characters were more attractive than his aristocrats. One scholar of Chartist journals finds this reading "incredibly far-fetched,"[88] yet Ramsay MacDonald claimed that the Waverley novels "opened out the great world of national life for me and led me on to politics."[89] For one grocer's boy (b. 1860), Scott's works (in the 3d. Dicks editions) were studies in social history, and he came away feeling that Rebecca, not Rowena, was the right girl for Ivanhoe.[90] Socialist agitator Walter Hampson (b. c. 1866) agreed: he suggested that Scott used Rebecca to voice a satire on chivalry, no less devastating than Sancho Panza's.[91] T. A. Jackson (b. 1879), the most brilliant proletarian intellectual to come out of the British Communist Party, did not dispute that Scott "was a shocking old Tory, and a reactionary," but saw the same subversive streak in the Waverley novels: "He thought kings, lords, and gentlemen, had 'rights' which it was folly and worse to question; but he thought also, they had 'duties' which it was scandalous and worse

in them to evade. No radical could be more unsparing than he of the mere 'aristocrat.'"[92] By 1945 another Communist was calling Scott a great friend of the Russian people, indeed one of their favorite authors, and pointing out that Marx considered *Old Mortality* a "masterpiece."[93]

Jackson's response to Scott offers a fine illustration of intertextuality: the fact that our understanding of a text is shaped by everything else we have read. (To put it another way, while the frame controls how we interpret information, that new information is constantly modifying the frame.) Jackson first encountered *Ivanhoe* before he became a socialist, and at that point he absorbed completely its conservative romanticism. Later he came back to it after having read Robert Blatchford's socialist fable *Merrie England,* and in that context *Ivanhoe* became something quite different: a denunciation of economic rapacity. John Ruskin, William Morris, and Blatchford had all embraced an anti-industrial socialism that owed a great deal to Scott's medievalism, so it was not a great stretch to read *Ivanhoe* in those terms. Jackson recognized that Scott was no socialist, but at least in his feudal England the people belonged to the land and the land belonged to the people:

> For me capitalism had been revealed as equivalent to the castle of Torquilstone, manned by the brutal Front de Boeuf, the unscrupulous and faithless Bois Guilbert, the mercenary adventurer de Bracy and their brutal, hireling followers. Against them all the forces of the true English spirit were united in revolt—the gallantry and efficiency of Robin Hood, and his outlaws, the sturdy courage of the Saxons, and jolly Friar Tuck, the intrepid valour, strength and chivalry of Coeur de Lion, all that was English and opposite to sordid money-greedy meanness, treachery and brutality were in perennial revolt against this common enemy and destroyer of all that makes life noble, dignified and worth living.
>
> *Ivanhoe* had headed me off from Socialism once—now it led me right straight to its heart.[94]

When the first large cohort of Labour MPs was elected in 1906, the *Review of Reviews* asked them to name the books and authors that had most deeply influenced them. Of the forty-five who responded, eleven cited Walter Scott (Table 1.1, p. 42).[95]

Note that thirteen respondents mentioned Thomas Carlyle, a writer whose ideological legacy is even more ambiguous. Autobiographical evidence confirms that he had a huge following among autodidacts. There was nothing extraordinary about the Newlyn fisherman who owned his complete works and could discuss them knowledgeably.[96] Carlyle's ability to attract disciples from all points on the political spectrum, from Communists to Nazis, marks him as an author who might be turned to many purposes. *Sartor Resartus* could support one workingman struggling to break with religious orthodoxy,[97] while another might read it as a guide to romantic love.[98] It provided a gospel to self-improvers like Sir

Table 1.1: Favorite Authors of Early Labour MPs, 1906

John Ruskin	17	Robert Burns	8	Adam Smith	4
Charles Dickens	16	John Bunyan	8	William Cobbett	4
The Bible	14	Lord Tennyson	6	W. M. Thackeray	4
Thomas Carlyle	13	Giuseppe Mazzini	6	J. R. Green	4
Henry George	12	Charles Kingsley	5	Charles Darwin	4
Walter Scott	11	T. B. Macaulay	5	Henry Drummond	4
John Stuart Mill	10	James Russell Lowell	5		
William Shakespeare	9	Sidney/Beatrice Webb	4		

Henry Jones (b. 1852), who began his rise from a shoemaker's bench to a professorship of philosophy when a well-to-do lady warned him away from Carlyle, of whom he had never heard. When he read *Sartor Resartus*, "It was a case of love at first sight."[99] The same book was an effective aid to self-expression for Fred Gresswell (b. early 1890s), a farm laborer's son and 25s.-a-week insurance agent. When he first encountered it he was baffled, his literary education having been limited to penny novelettes. But later, in the midst of a speech for a YMCA debating society, "I found myself quoting from *Sartor Resartus*. This surprised everybody, including myself. Although I had read the book without much understanding, I could remember whole passages, word for word. On the strength of this supposed knowledge of the classics I was made editor of the YMCA magazine."[100] An obscure railway stationmaster could justify publishing his autobiography simply by quoting "On History": "In a certain sense all men are historians. Is not every memory written quite full with Annals, wherein joy and mourning, conquest and loss manifoldly alternate; and, with or without philosophy, the whole fortunes of one little inward Kingdom, and all its politics, foreign and domestic, stand ineffaceably recorded? ... The rudest peasant has his complete set of Annual Registers legibly printed in his brain."[101]

For those who were struggling to rise out of "the masses" and establish an identity, Carlyle was irresistible. An Edwardian slumdweller spoke for many readers when he wrote "I fancied myself a Teufelsdrockh."[102] Despising his job in a Birmingham factory, V. W. Garratt (b. 1892) surrounded his workbench with a barricade of boxes, set up a small mirror to provide early warning of the foreman's approach, and studied the Everyman's Library *Sartor Resartus* when he was being paid to solder gas-meter fittings. In retrospect he admitted that he probably "deserved the sack," but Carlyle made him feel justified in taking advantage of his employer: "I was virtuously trying to overcome circumstance and to live up to the individualist's doctrine of forcing a way in life without too much moral scruple." He felt much the same contempt for his workmates:

> I found little evidence to convince me that individuality flourished in the close contact of factory life or that generally speaking anything better emerged than a stubborn domination of the group mind over the individual worker. To be oneself courageously and unashamed in matters of dress, talk, and action, meant running the gauntlet of ridicule and tribal opposition. Much easier was it to fall into the rut and become moulded to mediocrity. The preparation for this attitude was in the elementary schools. After mass education in which the absorption of historical absurdities was more important than mental development, boys passed into the factories with minds ill-equipped to withstand a new environment. ... Growing up in an atmosphere of constraint in which individual thought and action stubbornly follow the groove of class prejudice, there eventually emerges the "sound, solid British working-man."

Garratt escaped to an evening course in English literature, where he felt "like a child that becomes ecstatic with a fireworks display." Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson "swamped the trivialities of life and gave my ego a fulness and strength in the lustre of which noble conceptions were born and flourished." He spent his free evenings in Birmingham's Central Free Library reading Homer, Epictetus, Longinus, and Plato's *Dialogues*, a classical education which further undermined his confidence in the status quo: "I began to wonder in what way we had advanced from the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome." In the First World War, he took Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* with him to France and wrote his own verses in the trenches. Later he became a journalist: his reading of the great books made it intolerable to continue as a cog in the industrial machine. Carlyle helped him break out from the factory, which he loathed not only for the dirt and poisonous fumes and low wages. What he resented most was the managing director parading "through the shops as if the workers never existed." In *Sartor Resartus* and other Everyman's Library volumes he found what he called "helps toward self-realization."[103]

For everyone who read Carlyle as an early Victorian Nietzsche, there were others, such as Labour MP G. J. Wardle (b. 1865), who admired him for a more conventional kind of moralizing: "Do the duty nearest to you."[104] For the pre-1914 generation of labor activists, however, he was preeminently a political prophet. Bookbinder Frederick Rogers (b. 1846) called him a "stern ... preacher of social righteousness" in the tradition of William Langland.[105] As a seaman in the mid-1870s, Ben Tillett had not yet been exposed to revolutionary literature, "But I discovered Thomas Carlyle and was held spellbound by the dark fury of his spirit, and the strange contortions of his style."[106] As a young South Wales miner, Edmund Stonelake (b. 1873), who had never heard of the French Revolution, asked a bookseller for something on the subject and was sold Carlyle. At first it was hard reading, but eventually he extracted an entire political education from its pages:

> I learned the causes which fomented the minds of the people and gave rise to the Revolution, how ferociously it was conducted, and how the proclaimed hero of today was carted away tomorrow in the tumbrils to a place where his

noble head fell under the merciless guillotine. I could visualise the Foreign Legion swooping down upon a vast unsuspecting concourse of quiet people slashing all around them with swords and sabres, leaving the dead and the dying whilst they dispersed and pursued the remainder who were fleeing in terror. I learned also of the great and lasting influence the Revolution had on peoples and countries struggling to establish democratic principles in Government in various parts of the world.[107]

Keir Hardie remembered that a "real turning point" of his life was his discovery of *Sartor Resartus* at age sixteen or seventeen. He had to read it through three times before he understood it: "I felt I was in the presence of some great power, the meaning of which I could only dimly guess at." Fifty years later he was more aware of Carlyle's flaws, but there was still plenty to admire. One could draw a pacifist lesson from his fable of the sixty French and English soldiers who massacred each other over a trivial territorial dispute. Carlyle's hero-worship made him appear a proto-fascist in the eyes of many readers (including Joseph Goebbels) but it inspired Hardie to embrace the role of the Hero as Proletarian.[108]

From Carlyle, as one agitator proclaimed, the working classes "learnt to hate shams." He exposed the ideological facades of the class system, preached independence of mind, and offered a vision of economic justice.[109] Having taken "Good strong doses of individualistic teaching" from Carlyle and Emerson, George Lansbury (unlike some other Labour MPs) refused to wear evening dress or court dress.[110] And Carlyle was a powerful influence in yet more radical circles. Helen Crawfurd (b. 1877), a baker's daughter from the slums of Glasgow, married a clergyman and trained for missionary work, until her evangelism took a sharp left turn. Joining the militant suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), she smashed the minister of education's windows and spent time in Holloway Gaol, where she staged a hunger strike. Later she would serve on the executive committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain. She attributed her political awakening to *Sartor Resartus, Heroes and Hero-Worship, Past and Present,* and *The French Revolution,* as well as Froude's biographical studies of both Carlyles. Everything she later read in Marx she discovered first in Thomas Carlyle:

> He stripped naked the Law, the Church and many of the fraudulent shams of his day. I was deeply impressed by his denunciation of quackery masquerading as Truth, his honour of honest work, his exposure of war, his gift of stripping people of all the vestures designed to overawe the simple—the bombazine gown, the horsehair wig of the judge, the Crown and Sceptre of the Kings and Queens; the cheap snobbery of "Gigmanism" [*sic*]—his "everlasting nay" and his "everlasting yea." He revealed the sham world, where honest men could not breathe, the mockery of the Church, and told of the starving Irish widow, having to sink down in an Edinburgh slum and die of typhoid after appealing to every charitable organisation for help, and infecting the whole people with typhoid, in order to prove to them "that she was bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh." Then there was his picture of the men of the village of Drundrudge in France and Britain, slaughtering each other at the behest of their masters; his admiration for the worker, whose hands performed such wonders, his love for his family. With Carlyle I had fellowship, and was greatly helped in feeling that I was not alone in my experiences or in my awakening scepticism of existing traditions and customs. ... I could weep for the African and American slaves. ... Like Carlyle's Irish widow, I saw them "bone of each other's bone, flesh of each other's flesh."[111]

If there could be a socialist Walter Scott, some working-class women found a feminist in Carlyle. Mary Smith (b. 1822) was a shoemaker's daughter whose love of books was discouraged at every turn. At a Methodist school she was taught ladylike manners, embroidery, and little else. "For long years Englishwomen's souls were almost as sorely crippled and cramped by the devices of the school room, as the Chinese women's feet by their shoes," she later protested. She found emancipation in Shakespeare, Dryden, Goldsmith, and other standard male authors, whom she extolled for their universality:

> These authors wrote from their hearts for humanity, and I could follow them fully and with delight, though but a child. They awakened my young nature, and I found for the first time that my pondering heart was akin to that of the whole human race. And when I read the famous essays of Steele and Addison, I could realize much of their truth and beauty of expression. ... Pope's stanzas, which I read at school as an eight year old child, showed me how far I felt and shared the sentiment that he wrote, when he says,
>
> Thus let me live unseen, unknown,
> Thus unlamented let me die;
> Steal from the world, and not a stone
> Tell where I lie.

By age twenty she had read and understood George Payne's *Elements of Mental and Moral Science,* Thomas Brown's *Moral Philosophy,* and Richard Whateley's *Logic.* But two authors in particular offered magnificent revelations. First, there was Emerson on Nature; and later, as a governess for a Scotby leatherworks owner, she discovered Thomas Carlyle:

> Emerson and he thenceforth became my two great masters of thought for the rest of my life. Carlyle's gospel of Work and exposure of Shams, and his universal onslaught on the nothings and appearances of society, gave strength and life to my vague but true enthusiasm. They proved a new Bible of blessedness to my eager soul, as they did thousands beside, who had become weary of much of the vapid literature of the time.

Carlylean hero-worship may strike us as rampantly masculine, but as Mary Smith wrote, "A woman without friends in the world, as I was, must harden herself to dare and endure much." Carlyle bolstered her mental independence, gave her the confidence to think and speak and write. When her employer warned her that Carlyle might be a dangerous skeptic, she brushed him aside and boldly discussed her literary interests with his wife, proclaiming "Intellect knows no rank." She wrote poems, publishing them in the *People's Journal* and *Cassell's*. Like the great man himself, she studied Fichte, Schiller, and Goethe. And when Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* anticipated Darwinian evolution, she struggled through the same crisis of faith: "Like Thomas Carlyle, my own early life owed its best and brightest influences to the devout Calvinism under which it was reared." For a time she corresponded with both Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle: "The young woman has something in her," he conceded. Later she campaigned for women's suffrage and the Married Woman's Property Bill, agitated against the Contagious Diseases Acts, and wrote on politics for local newspapers.[112]

At age fourteen Elizabeth Bryson (b. 1880) read *Sartor Resartus*, a favorite book of her father, an impoverished Dundee bookkeeper. There she encountered "the exciting experience of being kindled to the point of explosion by the fire of words," words that expressed what she had always been trying to say:

> It seems that from our earliest days we are striving to become articulate, struggling to clothe in words our vague perceptions and questionings. Suddenly, blazing from the printed page, there *are* the words, the true resounding words that we couldn't find. It is an exciting moment. ... "Who am I? The thing that can say I. Who am I, what is this ME?" I had been groping to know that since I was three.

She consumed *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, *The French Revolution*, and *Sartor Resartus* with the same intoxication. All of them resonated powerfully with that Victorian working-class ethic of self-education, which her father embraced thoroughly. Seven of his nine children won university degrees, including Elizabeth, who became a distinguished New Zealand physician and president of the Wellington chapter of the International Federation of University Women. She was not a feminist as such, and disliked androgyny: what drove her career was a Carlylean imperative to do the work that must be done. "I didn't care for short hair, and I was never worried about the vote," she wrote, "but I *did* want my hospital position."[113]

Not all working people viewed Carlyle as a man of the left. Sam Shaw (b. 1884), a Welsh farm laborer and coal miner, was driven into the ranks of the Conservative Party by *The French Revolution*, which made him suspect that socialist street orators were really "out for their own financial and political aggrandisement."[114] Chartist W. J. Linton (b. 1812) condemned Carlyle's hostility to the 1789 Revolution and his support of Governor Eyre, while applauding him for offering

a humane alternative to laissez-faire liberalism and materialist socialism.[115] Secularist G. J. Holyoake (b. 1817) denounced him as a racist and "the greatest ruffian in literature since the days of Dr. Johnson," but admitted that "he had, like the doctor, the redeeming virtues of honesty and heroic love of truth." He admired the Carlyle who defended Mazzini, the Carlyle whose gospel of work gave dignity to the worker.[116] Labour Party pioneer F. W. Jowett (b. 1864), reading *Heroes and Hero-Worship* as a young millworker, was attracted by its vision of a new society but repelled by its authoritarianism:

> There must have been something in me that could not respond to his powerful and eloquent glorification of the supermen—including the captains of industry who would organise production not for profit but for use—for in all things else he made a deep impression on my young mind. What could it be? What other experience had woven itself into me? The more I read of Carlyle's heroes, the less attraction they had. I did not like his Luther, his Frederick the Great, nor his Cromwell. In some way, at some time, I must have imbibed a repugnance to personal domination which rests on force. I had in me the feeling that the common people should not be driven, and the more Carlyle crowned and canonised a ruling class, the more I felt I was on the side of the common people.[117]

Robert Blatchford (b. 1851) felt the same shudder. He found *Sartor Resartus* intimidating: "After reading the famous meditation on the sleeping city, I threw the book across the room. I felt I should never be able to write like that."[118] It was just as well: Blatchford's true voice, far more friendly than Carlyle's jeremiads, won an enormous audience for the *Clarion*, his popular socialist weekly. It was Blatchford's populism that turned him against *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, which had profoundly affected him as a young man:

> Heroes accomplish much brilliant butchery; they are great dust-raisers and provokers of tumult; they find employment for the players on brazen instruments, and the perpetrators of heroic verse; but there are precious few of them in history who do not fill places that would have been better filled if they had left them vacant. ... Music, and the arts, and the richest treasures of tradition, romance and fairy lore, as well as most of the handicrafts, and much of the useful kind of learning, are less due to the labours of the heroes than to the slow accumulation of the added mites of long generations of Nobodies. ... Who does all the loading and firing, the charging and cheering, on the battle-field? The Nobodies! Who defended the pass at Thermopylae, and the biscuit-box breastwork at Rorke's Drift? The Nobodies! Who invented needles, and files, and umbrellas, and meerschaum pipes, and soap, and blotting pads, and beefsteak puddings, and the Greek mythology, and warming pans, and double stout, and lucifer matches, and the Norse Edda, and kippered herrings, and

kissing, and divided skirts, and the Union Jack of Old England, and *The Clarion*? The Nobodies!

Who wrote Shakespeare's plays–! ... Of what stuff do our novelists, poets, orators, and painters weave their spells? Of the loves and trials, the smiles and tears, the follies and the heroisms of the Nobodies.[119]

The Craftsman's Tools

With that easygoing style, Blatchford was able to reach a larger readership than any other socialist journalist of his day. The *Clarion* built up a circulation of 60,000. He claimed that his tract *Merrie England* (1893) sold a million copies in Britain alone, and a census at one north country Labour Club found that it had converted forty-nine of its fifty members to socialism. The *Clarion* succeeded because it was not all socialist propaganda: there were also large helpings of literary criticism, and many readers were more interested in that part of the magazine.[120] The son of an impoverished dressmaker, Blatchford had grown up with *Robinson Crusoe*, the Brontës, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, while he dreamt of writing novels that sold better than *David Copperfield*. As a soldier he had engaged in sharp barrack-room debates over the relative virtues of Dickens and Thackeray; and discussed music, painters, and poetry with a sergeant who could recite *Alastor*.[121] That background convinced Blatchford that the working classes could be politically awakened by the great authors. According to one of his converts, millworker-suffragette Annie Kenney, he was entirely right: "His writings on Nature, Poetry, Philosophy, Life, were my great weekly treat. Thousands of men and women in the Lancashire factories owe their education to Robert Blatchford. He was our literary father and mother. He it was who introduced us to Walt Whitman, William Morris, Edward Carpenter, Ruskin, *Omar Khayyam*, the Early English Poets, Emerson, Lamb. Robert Blatchford has always kept Labour clean, fresh, upright, virile."[122]

Blatchford realized that the emerging Labour Party had no single statement of ideology. Its doctrinal texts were nothing less than the whole canon of classic literature. When, in 1906, the *Review of Reviews* asked Labour MPs to define their program, they gestured broadly to a kind of Everyman's Library compendium of great books. (In fact the Everyman series, launched in the same year, would eventually publish all the authors in Table 1.1 except the Webbs and Henry Drummond.) ILP leader J. Bruce Glasier proclaimed that Bunyan, Burns, Shelley, Byron, Aeschylus, Dante, Schiller, and *Les Misérables* "all helped to rouse and nourish in me a passionate hatred of oppression and an exalting hope of the coming of a new era."[123] There Blatchford found the stuff that made socialists. When critics hailed Arthur Morrison's novel *A Child of the Jago* (1896) as a brutally realistic slice of slum life, Blatchford pointed out that it contained nothing one could not find in the standard English classics:

> Let any admirer of Mr. Morrison's ... read the gambling scene in *Catherine*, the chapter in *Vanity Fair* wherein Rawdon Crawley finds the Marquis of Steyne with his wife; the drawing of lots in the Lantern Yard Chapel in *Silas Marner*; the account of Jane Eyre's childhood, or the school scenes in *Villette*; the military scenes in *Barry Lyndon*; the rape, the murder, or the basket-making in *Tess*; and the tavern scenes in *Janet's Repentance*, and I think he will admit that *A Child of the Jago* has no more right to pose as the greatest piece of realistic fiction since Defoe than Rudyard Kipling's *Seven Seas* has to be called the noblest poems since Milton. ... Has Mr. Morrison discovered the London slums? What about Douglas Jerrold, Charles Dickens, Henry Kingsley, Walter Besant, Rudyard Kipling, and George Gissing? Have you never read *Oliver Twist*, *The Nether World*, *Ravenshoe*, or *The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot*?[124]

Burns, *Sartor Resartus*, and *Unto This Last* were the formative influences on Keir Hardie. In his early years he read almost nothing specifically on economics or politics, and nothing by Marx or other socialists.[125] Most of his fellow Labour MPs shared his faith in the emancipatory power of literature. "I have a library of over 700 volumes," boasted John Ward (b. 1866),

> the majority of which represents ten hours' work a day at 5d. an hour; sometimes even less—4½d. was the rate when I helped to make the Manchester Ship Canal.
>
> Reading, then, changed the whole course of my life, for, let me tell you, twenty years ago British navvies were intellectually the lowest, as they were physically the finest, class in the country. They took absolutely no interest in public affairs; in the mess hut or the canteen you never heard a word of discussion on political or social matters, and so it was books and books alone that directed my thoughts towards progress and reform. ... There has since been a remarkable change in this respect. To-day navvies are amongst the keenest and most intelligent critics of political and social questions, and I am proud to think that my work amongst them has helped to awaken them from the mental torpor in which they were plunged.[126]

Philip Inman (b. 1892) conveyed a more specific sense of the uses of literacy for an early Labour MP. The son of a widowed charwoman, he bought up all the cheap reprints he could afford and kept notes on fifty-eight of them, all purchased for less than £5. There were Emerson's essays, Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, Holmes's *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, Lamb's *Essays of Elia*, classic biographies (Boswell on Johnson, Lockhart on Scott, Carlyle on Sterling), several Waverley novels, *Wuthering Heights*, *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Imitation of Christ*, Shakespeare's sonnets, Tennyson, Browning, William Morris, and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. He loved everything by Charlotte Brontë, partly for what she had to say about the class system: "Characters like Jane Eyre and Lucy

Snowe were humble individuals in the eyes of the world, with only their dogged determination and lack of 'frills' as weapons against the dash and arrogance of those haughty and wealthy rivals among whom their lot was cast." Yet he admired Jane Austen for an equal but opposite reason: "The world of which she wrote, in which elegant gentlemen of fortune courted gentle, punctilliously correct ladies in refined drawing-rooms, was a remote fairy-tale country to me. Some day, I thought, perhaps I would get to know a world in which voices were always soft and modulated and in which lively and witty conversation was more important than 'brass'." Perhaps Brontë and Austen together taught him how to straddle the working and ruling classes, an indispensable skill for a nascent Labour politician: he eventually became chairman of the BBC and Lord Privy Seal under Attlee.[127]

One might also argue, of course, that Austen's roseate country-house sketches were subtle Tory propaganda indoctrinating the most literate workers—especially those few who would ultimately be coopted into the highest governing circles. Workingmen of this period, however, observed a direct correlation between literary taste and political radicalism. "The intellectual awakening of the workshop came with the spread of Socialism," wrote London bookbinder Frederick Rogers. Before then, "The average workman, as I knew him, was not capable of sustained reading."[128] Robert Roberts likewise noted that the most literate workers—"readers of Ruskin, Dickens, Kingsley, Carlyle and Scott"—were likely to be socialists: those who read only the racing papers tended to vote Tory.[129] James Murray found the same link between culture and socialism in his Glasgow woodcarving shop: "Art, Philosophy, Politics, and Religion were all tossed around indiscriminately. Most [workmates] had Socialistic leanings and I was not long in observing those with the keenest minds were rabid Socialists."[130] As J. R. Clynes argued, it was the mass circulation press that was doping the workers with trivia and distractions. Shakespeare, Balzac, William Morris, and Bernard Shaw "would be no cure for labour unrest. Labour unrest would be increased, though better expressed and more scientifically directed if workmen used to a greater extent the intellectual levers of Ruskin, Dickens, Meredith, and Masefield—to throw in only a few uneven names."[131]

The mainstream of the labor movement agreed that great art and literature had eternal value, and ought to be disseminated among the workers out of a disinterested concern for truth, beauty, and a higher morality. Whether or not these works had any explicit political message, they would produce a deeper political consciousness and a more fervent desire to transform society. Of course *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* might have a corrosive effect on religious belief, and *Les Misérables* was not likely to increase public confidence in the police.[132] The encouragement Dickens gave to the labor movement cannot be exaggerated: agitators were particularly fond of quoting Oliver Twist on the subject of asking for more.[133] It was also generally recognized that a knowledge of Shakespeare and Milton could make workers more aware and articulate in the political arena. But except on the more dogmatic Marxist fringes, literature was

not judged solely or even primarily for its propaganda value. When asked how books had shaped him, Labour MP F. W. Jowett ranged widely: *Ivanhoe* made him want to read, *Unto This Last* made him a socialist, *Past and Present* made him think, *Vanity Fair* and *Les Misérables* taught him human sympathy, and *Wuthering Heights* taught him respect for man and nature.[134]

There were Marxists, like housepainter James Clunie (b. 1889), who claimed to value literature solely "in support of the cause of Labour and Peace," but in practice almost any book could be used for that purpose, "the same way as a craftsman uses his tools." It was "the stimulating anarchism of Walt Whitman and the prophetic works of Robert Burns" that made him rebel against the factory system. Clunie even saw his childhood games of Robinson Crusoe, when he constructed and sailed his own raft, as "a suitable prelude to ... my search for the Voice of Labour," a preparation and inspiration for a life of political adventure. As Labour MP for Dunfermline in the 1950s, he still felt a thrill gazing at the bookshelves in the House of Commons library.[135] "Books to me became symbols of social revolution," not just because they preached the right kind of left politics, but because they allowed working people to control their own minds. "In my rediscovered social philosophy the miner was no longer the 'hewer of wood and the drawer of water' but became the worker-student, public administrator, a leader in his own right, advocate, writer, the equal of men."[136]

Percy Wall (b. 1893), jailed for defying draft notices in the First World War, was inspired in part by a copy of *Queen Mab* owned by his father, a Marxist railway worker. But neither father nor son applied ideological tests to literature. In the prison library—with some guidance from a fellow conscientious objector who happened to be an important publishing executive—Percy discovered Emerson, Macaulay, Bacon, Shakespeare, and Lamb. It was their style rather than their politics that he found liberating: from them "I learned self-expression and acquired or strengthened standards of literature."[137] Emrys Daniel Hughes (b. 1894), another imprisoned CO and son of a Tonypandy miner, learned that the authorities were not unaware of the subversive potential of great literature. Following a Home Office directive to examine prisoners' books, the chaplain confiscated a volume of Shelley, though not before Hughes had a chance to read and discuss it. The padre also apparently removed *Tristram Shandy* from the prison library: Hughes found it while cleaning the chaplain's room and had read it on the sly. "That's what does all the mischief. Books!" a warder shouted at another working-class CO. "If I had my way I'd burn them all."[138] He had a point: prison libraries could not be cleansed of politically questionable books without pulping the entire corpus of English literature. When Hughes found the grave of a hanged woman in the prison cemetery, he could not help but think of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In More's *Utopia* he discovered a radical rethinking of crime and punishment. *The World Set Free*, in which H. G. Wells predicted the devastation of nuclear warfare, naturally spoke to his antiwar activism, and he was greatly impressed by the Quaker idealism in George Fox's journal, a biography of William

Penn, and Walt Whitman's poems. He read the social history of Macaulay, Froude, and J. R. Green; Thorold Rogers's *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* particularly appealed to him because it offered "not the history of kings and queens, but of the way ordinary people had struggled to live throughout the centuries. It gave me confidence that the war was a passing episode in history and that when it ended great changes in society would come." Hughes was one of those agitators who found a virtual Marxism in Thomas Carlyle. *The French Revolution* inspired the hope that a popular revolt somewhere would end the war. (He never expected it to happen in Russia, where he assumed all the revolutionaries were in jail or Siberia.) Hughes was convinced that Carlyle, the apostle of German philosophy, would have been antiwar: "He would have certainly seen through all the sham patriotism and the hypocrisy of the Governments and the war propaganda." He particularly admired the Carlyle who wrote, "We must all either work or steal, whatsoever we call our stealing." After all, Hughes noted, "most of the prisoners had really stolen far less than some of the people who were sending them to prison."[139]

By age fourteen, Durham collier Jack Lawson (b. 1881) would find the same kind of emanicipation at the Boldon Miners' Institute,

> which was then nothing more than two pit-houses knocked into one. And didn't I follow the literary trail, once I found it! Like a Fenimore Cooper Indian, I was tireless and silent once I started. Scott; Charles Reade; George Eliot; the Brontës; later on, Hardy; Hugo; Dumas, and scores of others. Then came Shakespeare; the Bible; Milton and the line of poets generally. I was hardly sixteen when I picked up James Thomson's *Seasons*, in Stead's "Penny Poets". ... I wept for the shepherd who died in the snow.

The historical classics "came as a revelation"—Macaulay, J. R. Green, Gibbon, Motley's *Dutch Republic*, Prescott on Peru and Mexico, and *The French Revolution*. Academic critics today might discern ideologies in all of the above, but that was not Lawson's reading of them. "Of politics I knew nothing and cared less," he recalled, yet his purely literary readings had helped him form

> some very definite opinions on the right and wrong of things social. ... My strange ideas are the accepted general ideas of millions of Labour supporters today [1932], though I had no idea at the time [1900] that many others were thinking as I did and that a great movement embodying these opinions was on the horizon. ... But there was growing up in me at that time something which springs from the very roots of my being and waxes stronger as the years come and go, something which is not in political or economic programmes, for it goes so deep down to the soul of a man that it seems a dream, a thing of the imagination, hard to apprehend, difficult to hold, and impossible to interpret. ... I had actually arrived at the conclusion that if there was any good life, and freedom from insecurity, and beauty, and knowledge, or leisure, then the men who did the world's dirty, sweaty, toilsome, risky work, and the women who shared the life with them, ought to be the first entitled to these things. ... I held that no man needs knowledge more than he who is subject to those who have knowledge—and because they have knowledge. That if there is one man in the world who needs knowledge, it is he who does the world's most needful work and gets least return because he lacks knowledge.

Though Lawson began reading politics and economics when he joined the ILP in 1904, his political ideas still came largely from literary sources: otherworldly Thomas à Kempis offered as much inspiration as this-worldly Thomas Carlyle. At Ruskin College he was exposed to Marx, but he found a more compelling utopian prophet when he read Lewis Carroll to his daughters: "Then one could look at life and affairs from the proper angle, for was not all our work to this end—that little children should live in their Wonderland, and mothers and fathers be heartful of the good of life because they were."[140]

Liberal education proved more effective than straight indoctrination in making radicals because, frankly, it was more thrilling, more likely to generate the enthusiasm that mobilized students to change the world. For Alice Foley (b. 1891) the pursuit of culture was an act of rebellion against both her strict Catholic upbringing and the working conditions at her Bolton cotton mill. It was not only the monotonous labor, the wretched factory lavatories, the constant threat of automation and reduced wages: "Most resented of all was the lack of human dignity accorded to our status as 'hands' with appropriate check numbers," a system that reduced workers to "a cowed and passive community. ... But these subservient days were occasionally shot through with moments of magic when the spirit of freedom and joy broke through." For 8d. there was Gilbert and Sullivan at the Theatre Royal, as well as grand opera staged by the Moody Manners and Carl Rosa companies. Nearby Manchester offered inexpensive seats at the Hallé Orchestra, as well as Annie Horniman's experimental repertory company at the Gaiety Theatre:

> As a member of a group of young socialists I hoarded my scanty pocket-money, amounting at that time to one penny in the shilling of factory earnings, so that I could afford with them the luxury of a monthly matinée. With a cheap seat in pit or gallery we saw most of the early Shaw and Galsworthy plays, followed by tea in the Clarion café in Market Street, where I remember there was a fine William Morris fireplace. If the café was crowded, we hived off to the Art Gallery and over tea, brown bread, peaches and cream we animatedly argued and discussed the philosophy, art or satire of the productions. The whole outing cost about five shillings each, but we returned home like exultant young gods, tingling and athirst with the naive faith that if only sufficient human beings could witness good drama and comedy it might change the world. ...

> Two world wars had not yet shattered or devastated man's moral and spiritual heritage. Life was ever meaningful, even if something of a battlefield, and we had an abiding faith in the ultimate achievement of the human race.

Alice Foley's achievements were considerable: she became a trade union leader, a justice of the peace, and an activist for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). She read some Morris and less Marx, but for her, a liberal education for the proletariat was not merely a means of achieving socialism: it was socialism in fact, the ultimate goal of politics. At night school she staged a personal revolution by writing a paper on *Romeo and Juliet* and thrilling to the "new romantic world" of *Jane Eyre*. She joined a Socialist Sunday School, where "Hiawatha" was recited for its "prophetic idealism," and a foundry hammerman intoned Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Handel's songs were taught by an operatic carpenter, "a wholly self-taught musician who passionately believed that 'the people' endowed and stimulated by 'sounds that delight and hurt not' could, and should, sing their way into a new millennium." There was also a former croft worker who saw the brave new world through a telescope:

> He hated the industrial system and had found liberation by operating a market-garden on the edge of the moors where he had the use of a powerful telescope erected on his land. Indoors he gave us magic-lantern shows of the heavens and their constellations, and on clear evenings at the dark of year we were invited to view the rings round Saturn, the beauty of the Milky Way or the craters and valleys of the Moon. After carefully sighting the objects he turned to us saying solemnly, "Sithee, lasses, isn't that a marvellous seet; a stupendous universe, yet we fritter our lives away i' wars and petty spites!" As youngsters we gazed, inclined to giggle; then came a moment of silent awe as the awareness of "night clad in the beauty of a thousand inauspicious stars—the vast of night and its void"—seeped into consciousness. To recapture these moments of rare experience is to realise the debt owed to these humble, self-taught men who, uninvited, prodded a corner of my being in those far off impressionable years.

Her first WEA summer school, at the end of the First World War, was "a new and undreamt-of experience. ... We argued over Wilson's Fourteen Points and in literary sessions read and explored Browning's poems. It was a strange joy to browse over the niceties of *Bishop Blougram's Apology* or to delve into the intricacies of *The Ring and the Book*. ... It was a month of almost complete happiness; a pinnacle of joy never to be quite reached again." It was specifically the joy of breaking the chains of ideology: "In its complete rejection of what then seemed to be religious shackles the new-born idealism was healthy and intoxicating. It released youthful, buoyant energy and hope." That was what Alice learned from Emily Brontë:

> Vain are the thousand creeds
> That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,
> Worthless as withered weeds
> Or idlest froth amid the boundless main.[141]

In London's Jewish East End, the liberating power of literature was most effectively mobilized by the anarchists and their intellectual leader, Rudolf Rocker. Though he was not Jewish, Rocker taught himself enough of the language to edit the Yiddish anarchist paper *Arbeter Fraint* (peak circulation 5,000), as well as a more literary journal, *Germinal* (peak circulation 2,500). Jewish laborers were in awe of this German gentile who introduced them to the writings of I. L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and Sholem Asch. "He was one of those who stood at the cradle of modern Yiddish literature," gushed one garment worker. Rocker also published Yiddish translations of Molière, Herbert Spencer, Strindberg, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Chekhov, Gorky, Andreiev, Hauptmann, Anatole France, Maeterlinck, Knut Hamsun, Wilde, Zangwill, and Kropotkin. In 1906 an Arbeter Fraint Club and Institute opened in Jubilee Street, with an 800-seat hall, a free library, adult courses, lectures, concerts, and theatricals, including a Yiddish *Ghosts*. Rocker himself taught history, sociology, *Hamlet*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. On Sundays he took his classes round to the British Museum. For Rocker all ideologies, even anarchism itself,

> were subordinate to the great idea of educating people to be free and to think and work freely, ... [making] it possible for the individual to develop his natural capacities unrestrained by hard and fast rules and dogmas. My innermost conviction was that Anarchism was not to be conceived as a definite closed system, nor as a future millennium, but only as a particular trend in the historic development towards freedom in all fields of human thought and action, and that no strict and unalterable lines could therefore be laid down for it.
>
> Freedom is never attained; it must always be striven for. Consequently its claims have no limit, and can neither be enclosed in a programme nor prescribed as a definite rule for the future. Each generation must face its own problems, which cannot be forestalled or provided for in advance. The worst tyranny is that of ideas which have been handed down to us, allowing no development in ourselves, and trying to steamroller everything to one flat universal level.

Rocker reversed the Marxian theory that culture is economically determined, arguing that all economic systems are culturally determined. Modern industrial society, for example, had been created by modern scientific culture, not vice versa. Culture was not, then, constructed by a particular class, but was "the creation of countless generations of people of all social classes," and "cannot be judged from the point of view of class or of economic conditions." Therefore, the injustices of

capitalism would be abolished not by scrapping the Western cultural heritage, but by redistributing it to the workers: "What the human spirit has created in science, art and literature, in every branch of philosophic thought and aesthetic feeling is and must remain the common cultural possession of our own and of all the coming generations. This is the starting-point, this is the bridge to all further social development."[142]

Immersion in Western literary culture could be tremendously emancipating for the children of immigrants. Though Chaim Lewis (b. 1911) attended a Jewish school in Soho, it was his English teacher "who jolted me out of my intellectual torpor. ... He traded with words: he blew the wind of rhythm into them, he caressed them to mean more than they said and made them sing as I had never heard them sing before." It did not matter that Lewis "had read precious little till then and could only obscurely guess at the meaning of much of what he read to us. ... Such knowledge was to come later." That stands as a caveat to educationalists who tailor school readers to fit the cultural backgrounds of their pupils: the books that do most to stretch children's minds are those they do not fully understand. Lewis enthusiastically embraced the literature of an alien culture—"the daffodils of Herrick and Wordsworth ... the whimsey of Lamb and the stirring rhythmic tales of the Ballads" and, yes, "the wry eloquence of Shylock." Even before he discovered the English novelists, he was introduced to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Pushkin by a Russian revolutionary rag merchant, who studied Dickens in the Whitechapel Public Library and read aloud from *Man and Superman*. Another friend—the son of a widowed mother, who left school at fourteen—exposed him to Egyptology, Greek architecture, Scott, Smollett, the British Museum, and Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru*.

How did the assimilation of English culture and European literatures affect Lewis? They certainly did nothing to dampen his socialism: the *Daily Herald* was gospel in his home. Nor did he become an imperialist: the roster of kings and conquests that made up his history classes did not interest him, for as a Jew he was inclined to sympathize with history's losers. His reading of classic writers clearly ignited his authorial ambitions, but did not make him devalue his Yiddish literary heritage: the same rag merchant who acquainted him with Pushkin and took him to free Beethoven concerts at Queen's Hall also introduced him to Sholem Aleichem. This synergy may appear paradoxical today, when partisans of ethnic and mainstream literature seem locked in trench warfare. But for those who are not narrow academic specialists, reading in one literature can stimulate reading in another. Lewis's training in English and Russian authors provided models of taste, cultural standards, and intellectual challenges which then led him back to find similar virtues in Yiddish writers. Before his literary education, Lewis recalled, "we were inclined to write off the past of our parents as something inexcusably alien and not worth remembering." He discovered later that "Yiddish had a grammar, a dictionary and writers of genius to rank with the great names of European literature"—something he could only appreciate after he had mastered those great Europeans.

This pattern would be common enough among the post-1945 generation of New York Jewish intellectuals. Yet for them, as for Lewis, absorbing a cacophony of literary cultures could be disorienting. Rapid assimilation inevitably left him wondering which side he was on. "At one moment I saw myself as no different from others—a like among likes," Lewis recalled, "at another, I struck out for my own singularity." Yet the same promiscuous reading that brought on this crisis of identity also gave him a means of dealing with it. Reading made him a writer, and in writing he found that most basic of intellectual moorings, the power of naming: "I must be the identifier, never the identified: it was I who established order, each separateness in the world but a living fragment of my own being." He was deeply affected by the Jewish legend that the elect who know the name of God possess great power, and had sustained the Jewish nation through centuries of exile. He was equally struck by Adam's power to name all the birds and beasts, a power that made him in one respect a creator above the angels and on a level with God: "Life only becomes conscious of itself when it is translated into word, for only in the word is reality discovered."[143]

That was the autodidacts' mission statement: to be more than passive consumers of literature, to be active thinkers and writers. Those who proclaimed that "knowledge is power" meant that the only true education is self-education, and they often regarded the expansion of formal educational opportunities with suspicion. That was a point made by Thomas Thompson (b. 1880), who rose out of the Lancashire mills via Co-operative society classes. In a Sunday school library set up by a cotton mill fire-beater, he read Dickens, Thackeray, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Marcus Aurelius. He joined a workingmen's naturalist society, frequented also by a housepainter who had built his own observatory. By 1940 he had acquired some contempt for a generation that took educational opportunity for granted: "Learning is so cheap that people do not even stop to pick it up. We had to fight for what bit we got." He conceded that

> It was pathetic to see the faith in education as a cure for all ills. But then it is as pathetic now. So-called education can be used to produce slaves, soldiers, and snobs, as well as gentlemen. ... You can Bolshevize people by education, or you can make them into the perfect Nazi. Unless the intended victim has trained himself to think for himself.[144]

To preserve that independence, working people had to create their own network of informal self-schooling programs. This they accomplished by improvising a vast grass-roots movement, which had no central organization, but was a presence in hundreds of chapels and millions of kitchens. It touched more students than all organized adult educational institutions combined. It never had a formal title, but was generally known as "mutual improvement."