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‘Their names will be greater than their writings’, Matthew Arnold predicted of Byron and Shelley; ‘stat magni nouznis unbra’. [1] They have indeed enjoyed, besides the attention of the literary, that second and rarer kind of immortality, fame and at least a simplified public image among many people who have never read them. Byron is celebrated, not only on academic occasions such as this, but also in films and colour-supplements; one does not find, say, Pope or George Eliot enjoying this kind of currency. I shall be concerned today with a relatively unexplored aspect of his influence and mythic status in the decades following his death.

Of Thomas Cooper, the nominal though not the only subject of my lecture, one could use Matthew Arnold’s phrase, and more emphatically: his name is indeed greater than his writings, though of course an altogether smaller and more local one than Byron or Shelley’s.

In 1845 he published an epic which, said a reviewer, was ‘beyond all question the most singular poem in the language’, a poem which ‘comes nearer than any other poem in our language to the grand works of Milton’ [2], but Cooper’s Purgatory of Suicides soon augmented the long list of unread epics, not the very short list of read ones. What are his claims to be remembered? asked Professor Peers, of this University, forty years ago — ‘His printed works will live, if at all, as literary curiosities. He himself is now almost forgotten.’ [3] Well, where Cooper was aspiring to write ‘literature’, in his epic and other poems, and in his novels and stories, he is now indeed unread, and of his most ambitious and erstwhile famous work, the Purgatory, one must echo what the Quarterly said about another Chartist epic, Cappell–Loft’s Ernest, or Political Regeneration: ‘a man must be an ardent admirer of poetry or of Chartism to pursue his unflagging course through the twelve books’. [4] I shall not be arguing that posterity has been mistaken about Cooper’s poetic merits, though (as I hope to show) his career and writings remain interesting in other ways. He is of course remembered by anyone who reads about Chartism, for he was (briefly) one of the national leaders, one of the martyrs, and one of the outstanding personalities of the movement. Our sense of this comes partly from his autobiography, The Life of Thomas Cooper, written by Himself and published in 1872. It remains a minor classic, not only because it records a fascinating and varied life-story (‘as interesting as a romance’, said a reviewer, truly), and a life which briefly impinges on national events, nor only because it contains one of the most striking accounts of a formative process of self-education, but also because it is written with an unpretentious force and directness that reminded reviewers of Defoe.

The austere Saturday-Review suggested, indeed, that scores of popular writers would much improve their style if, every morning before they set to work, they learned off by heart a page of Cooper’s Life. The autobiography far surpasses Cooper’s other writings (which also include many sermons and polemical religious works, written in his later years) — and, one might add, he had long been in practice for writing his masterpiece, which he had even thought of writing thirty years earlier. He had always happily seized any occasion to tell the story of his life — in his address to a jury when on trial for arson, in the preface to his Purgatory of Suicides, even in his lectures. ‘He lectured for six nights, telling us much of the story of his life’, recalled a member of one of his audiences, in the 1860s. By then he was a Christian again, after several changes of conviction, ‘and was trying to undo all the harm he said he had done’. On the sixth night, ‘all the people rose and gave him a regular ovation, almost cheering him in their excitement’. [5] I shall not be arguing that Cooper was the main model for Alton’s situation and adventure, and in conversation had provided Kingsley with much of his background information about Chartism. Much of my lecture may be taken as an extended footnote to his autobiography.

Cooper has a further little niche in English literature, as a footnote to Charles Kingsley’s novel about a Chartist poet, Alton Locke (1856). For he was the main model for Alton’s situation and adventures, and in conversation had provided Kingsley with much of his background information about Chartism. Much of my lecture may be taken as an extended footnote to Alton Locke (not, I hope, such an unpromising nor superfluous enterprise as it may sound). Alton Locke was subtitled Art Autobiography, and did not originally bear Kingsley’s name: but, as the Times reviewer perceived, it was clearly ‘not the labour of a working man with a smattering of learning, but of a poet with an inking of Chartism’. [5] To assess Kingsley’s presentation of Cooper is not my task today. It is of Alton Locke as ‘a poet of the people’ that I wish to speak; and here Kingsley was knowledgeable and shrewd. And if I quote the moment of Albion’s awakening into poetry, you will discern a large part of my lecture.

If we turn to Cooper’s autobiography, not published until twenty odd years later, we read:

Save that childish enthusiasm I had felt while reciting ‘Chevy Chase’, I do not remember that poetry really touched any chord of my nature, until, in my thirteenth year, by some accident there fell into my hands one of the cantos of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and the drama of Allan Wa — [They] seemed to create almost a new sense within me. I wanted more poetry to read from that time; but...
The young shoemaker to whom Cooper was apprenticed, two years later, had read Byron, and ‘spoke passionately’ of it; a grocer’s apprentice, who belonged to the same Mutual Improvement Society as Cooper (in Gainsborough), owned several precious volumes of Byron; and Cooper’s enthusiasm was confirmed. In mature life, he regarded Childe Harold and Wandering in the West as ‘the noblest poetry since Paradise Lost’; for what he said was ‘argued, fully and convincingly’. He was reticent: his garret is a haill Paradise Lost or Paradise Regained . . .\[1]\[2\] Kingsley, here and elsewhere in the novel, is touching upon an anxious debate of the ‘40s and ‘50s — should poets leave the exotic and other settings sanctified by Romantic precedent, and write about the urban and modern, including the evils and oppressions that many poets were putting at the centre of their works? The question posed itself in particularly sharp terms for working-class poets. Many of them — like Cooper and Prince — had first-hand knowledge of extreme poverty, un- (or under-) employment, and political protest. But many were held back from writing about their experience, partly because too little in the existing poetical tradition helped them to treat such subjects ‘so unpoetical’, as Alton had said, partly because they were already disadvantaged, partly because they, without money or connections to secure publication, without loading their manuscript with what might seem both artistically and politically objectionable — but partly also because, for many of them, writing poetry was an attempt to escape, economically or at least in status or self-esteem, from the limitations, and, correspondingly, the subject matter they least wanted to dwell upon was the working-class life they hated and resented. Inevitably, working-class poets of this period, like poets of more comfortable origins, were influenced by Romantic conceptions of poetry and techniques; and one element of Romanticism that had this attraction and its imaginative release into the strange and the wonderful. Dr. Louis James, one of the few English scholars to have discussed this working-class poetry and its cultural context, has shown, how, in its way, it was non-political, it was ‘generally a form of intellectual escapism’ [13]; but, in our society and our critical condemnation of most of the poetry that resulted, we might remember what ‘Mark Rutherford’ says of the working-class-intellectual hero of his Revolution in Tanner’s Lane:

... the revolutionary literature of the time, and the more popularly, Byronically, increasingly interested. It is all very well for the happy and well-to-do to talk academically of poetic sentimentality. Those to whom a novel is an outlet for their affection are denied know better. They instinctively turn to books which are the farthest removed from commonplace and are in a sense unreal. Not to the prosperous man, a dweller in beautiful scenery, well married to an intelligent Fife, is Byron precious, but partly also because, for many of...
caught the public eye); the author received not only the profits on a successful book, but also substantial donations from well-wishers. Thom left his trade, and drank himself to death. It was not unusual in which such poets were prone. 'That scribbling of rhymed verse which ruined me,' wrote Tannahill, another Scottish poet—'... It has led me into a wide circle of acquaintance, of course into an involuntary habit of being oftener in a Public House than can be good for any body.... Charles Kingsley was not being patronising when, in an interesting essay on this very subject written about the same time as Alton Locke he questioned whether this new fashion of verse writing among working men has always been conducive to their own happiness.'

'This new fashion': certainly the sheer number and (I think) the average quality of such volumes were now. The Westminster Review said of J. C. Prince's first collection in 1841 that 'had such a volume been introduced twenty years ago by a poor cotton weaver, its author would have been accounted a prodigy'; a friend of a shoemaker poet named James Blackaby, who never became famous, remarked that he would have done so a century earlier. 'But poems and essays which sufficed to make their authors' fame in the last century are now so numerous that they are read only to be forgotten.' In a study of such poets published in 1851, The Literature of Labour: illustrious instances of the Education of Poetry in Poverty, E. P. Hood remarked (as did many others at that time) that 'no young man's library is complete without G. L. Craik's popular and inspiring book The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties (1830-1). But, as Hood's book, reaching back to Cadmon and to Taylor the Water-poet, and as Robert Southey's Lives of Uneducated Poets (1831) too, remind us, the pursuit of knowledge — and of versifying — under difficulties was not a uniquely Victorian phenomenon, though circumstances of education, publishing and public opinion favoured such efforts much more in the 1830s and after, than ever before. C. B. Tinker's delightful study of humble-born poets in the eighteenth century, Nature's Simple Plans, explores the reasons why the sophisticated reading-public of that period was predisposed to expect that out of the social and economic mess would come forth poetic sweetness and strength. Traces of this Romantic primitivism survive in mid-nineteenth-century comments. William Howitt, for instance, in 1841, who did much to encourage Cooper and other such poets: 'It must be borne in mind, my conviction that our literature ... must owe its restoration to health and strength and a infusion of new blood from the working classes, which ... I have always found to rest a sounder foundation and more solid moral sense.' Or the theologian F. W. Robertson, in 1852: 'The Poetry of the coming age must come from the Working Classes. In the upper ranks, Poetry ... has long been worn out, sickly, and sentimental. Its manhood is effete ... But tenderness, and heroism, and endurance still want their voice, and it must come from the classes whose observation is at first hand, and who speak fresh from nature's heart. But this approach is much less common in the nineteenth than in the eighteenth century.

Some of the working-class poetry, particularly the political kind, was addressed rather to fellow-workers and radicals than to the genteel reading public. The poets who attracted a genteel readership appealed less as the voice of Nature, or as 'usus Naturae', than as 'voices from the crowd', cries from the dispossessed. Middle and upper class patronage was popular, though sometimes tickle and ruinous (Mackaye warns Alton Locke that, if he publishes a volume, he'll briefly become 'a lion, and a flunkie, and a ticker o' trenchers — ... and then they'll teach you your level, and ... leave ye to die in a ditch as they did wi' puir Thom'). Patronising (in a bad sense), playing Lord or Lady Bountiful, enjoying on undemanding form of intellectual slumming — these motives were indeed apparent in some of the condescensions extended to working-class poets, and Alton Locke's career exemplifies some of the perils, and some of the advantages, of being taken up by one's 'betters'. But a more high-minded motive is also evident, one which hardly appears in the analogous eighteenth-century cases surveyed by Tinker — that development of social conscience which Kingsley complacently, but with some justice, described in 1857: 'A general interest of the upper classes in the lower, a general desire to do good classes in the lower, a general desire to learn how good can be done, has been awakened throughout England, such as, I boldly say, never before existed in any country upon earth; and England, her eyes opened to her neglect of classes ... has put herself into a permanent state of confession of sin, repentance, and sin, repentance, and amendment ...' I would not claim that the humble poets had a decisive effect in opening the eyes of the upper classes: but their reception owed something to this guilty curiosity about the poor, and their existence too, in such number, is a sign of that flexibility and reversion to the pursuit of knowledge — of the English society that account for our having avoided, in the nineteenth century, the revolutions that punctuated most other national histories. A French observer, in 1856, noted that nowhere else than in Britain was there so much working-class poetry; if here constituted a recognisable branch of the national literature, and he attributed this to the political developments, notably Radicalism and Chartism, which differed in direction from the Continental experience.

Thomas Cooper was one of these poets who, in the words of one of his heroes, Shelley, were crafted into poetry by wrong:

They learn in suffering what they teach in song.

He wrote a few conventional nature-poems and songs in his teens, and some of the national literature, and he is much less common in the nineteenth than in the eighteenth century. Some of the working-class poetry, particularly the political kind, was addressed rather to fellow-workers and radicals than to the genteel reading public. The poets who attracted a genteel readership appealed less as the voice of Nature, or as 'usus Naturae', than as 'voices from the crowd', cries from the dispossessed. Middle and upper class patronage was popular, though sometimes tickle and ruinous (Mackaye warns Alton Locke that, if he publishes a volume, he'll briefly become 'a lion, and a flunkie, and a ticker o' trenchers — ... and then they'll teach you your level, and ... leave ye to die in a ditch as they did wi' puir Thom'). Patronising (in a bad sense), playing Lord or Lady Bountiful, enjoying on undemanding form of intellectual slumming — these motives were indeed apparent in some of the condescensions extended to working-class poets, and Alton Locke's career exemplifies some of the perils, and some of the advantages, of being taken up by one's 'betters'. But a more high-minded motive is also evident, one which hardly appears in the analogous eighteenth-century cases surveyed by Tinker — that development of social conscience which Kingsley complacently, but with some justice, described in 1857: 'A general interest of the upper classes in the lower, a general desire to do good classes in the lower, a general desire to learn how good can be done, has been awakened throughout England, such as, I boldly say, never before existed in any country upon earth; and England, her eyes opened to her neglect of classes ... has put herself into a permanent state of confession of sin, repentance, and sin, repentance, and amendment ...' I would not claim that the humble poets had a decisive effect in opening the eyes of the upper classes: but their reception owed something to this guilty curiosity about the poor, and their existence too, in such number, is a sign of that flexibility and reversion to the pursuit of knowledge — of the English society that account for our having avoided, in the nineteenth century, the revolutions that punctuated most other national histories. A French observer, in 1856, noted that nowhere else than in Britain was there so much working-class poetry; if here constituted a recognisable branch of the national literature, and he attributed this to the political developments, notably Radicalism and Chartism, which differed in direction from the Continental experience.

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They learn in suffering what they teach in song.
Characteristic of the man that he could and would, from memory and with no previous stage experience, attempt the role: and a sign of those times that this could seem a promising enterprise to attract a large working class audience. Hamlet was one of the texts Cooper had learned off by heart around the age of twenty when he was involved in that amazing self-education; and he was motivated when his health failed, just as he was embarking on King Lear and had only committed to memory the first four books of Paradise Lost. Apart from general reading, in philosophy and theology, he was also at that time learning Latin, Greek, Hebrew and French, rising at three in the morning so that he had four hours’ study before sitting down at his stall to work at his cobbling until eight or nine at night. ‘I was’, he recalled, ‘repeating something, audibly, as I sat at work the greater part of the day — either declensions and conjugations, or rules of syntax, or propositions of Euclid, or the Paradise Lost, or Hamlet, or poetry of some modern or living author.’ And this stupendous effort was exerted with a stary-eyed zest that makes one’s heart bleed, as he displays a passion for learning not always demonstrated by students with more advantages: ‘He discovered by students with more advantages the town-library: ‘I was in ecstasies to find the dusty, cobwebbed shelves loaded with Hooker, and Bacon, and Cudworth, and Stillington, and Locke’ and a score of other old authors, whom he recommends for ‘the temporary literature too excited him: ‘I went home all in a glow of delight’... for I was taking two numbers of the London Magazine with me, and the first volume of Scott’s Kenworth[27]

All this reading helped him in composing his ‘Prison-Rhyme’, enthusiastically described by a fellow-poet as:

More full of classic learning and allusion
Than any other poem in the language. [28]

It is indeed an extraordinary feat, for a man without a reference library at hand. The poem consists of a series of dreams, in which the poet encounters in the underworld the shades of famous suicide, from ancient and modern history; this vision-device stems from Shakespeare (whom Cooper had not read). He tries to obtain variety and some sort of order (poets in Book IV, French revolutionaries in V, women in IX, and so on), but inevitably the poem both lacks a narrative structure, and suffers from monotony, all the characters having had troubles that led them to kill themselves. Many of course were political victims, and much of the poem in fact consists of the enunciation of political morals congenial to Chartist. Cooper’s learning provides him with an amazing number of suicides (one had not thought dead had undone so many that way); he was unable to include one suicide, because he could not remember his name and had no means of looking it up — Uriel Acosta, a Portuguese Jew who three times apostatised from Judaism, a figure few of us will have had the opportunity to forget. [53] C’est magnifique, mais ce nest pas la poésie qui importe. Cooper writes in a Babylonish dialect, much influenced by Milton, and is too continuously declamatory, as if always making or getting his characters to make public speeches. He had intended to write the poem in blank verse, but found that the opening lines fell into a rhymed quatrains, and thus he came to write in Spenserian stanzae, a measure he had never used in Spenser[30] and, as always in poets of this period and class, Spenserian stanzae signal the influence of Byron. The most tolerable parts of the poems are the exordia to every book, about the poet himself or expressing his convictions or miseries: the opening of Book II where he asks how a poor man like himself (‘a thrall, from humble labour sprung’, himself or rather) might ‘Succeed, strike the lyre in scornful age’; and he takes courage by invoking the great English poets.

O thou, immortal Childe, with him that saw
Islam’s Revolt, in rap prophetic trance. —
Did fear of harsh reception overawe
Your fervid soul from fervid utterance
Of freedom’s fearless Soul? — did your soothing glance
On proudly rotteness, did ye turn down
To censure soft that might find sufferance?
Knowing your cold award would be the towne
Of custom, priestcraft, power, — ye made your stern thoughts known.
[8–v]

The poem is provided with extensive Notes, an occasion for further displaying knowledge which Cooper enjoyed: his Christmas volume The Baron’s Yule-Feast (1846) must have been the first of many such seasonal offerings to have annotation in Hebrew (for readers curious about the etymology of ‘carr’). The volume’s failure cannot have been wholly due to its having been published in January for the Christmas market. Not that publishing then was as inelegant as it is in our technological age; Cooper left prison in May 1845, and after what he regarded as a difficult search for a publisher (though he enjoyed the encouragement or help of Diraeal, Dickens, Jerrold, and others), his poem — 346 pages — was published in August.

I mentioned that, in his newspapers and periodicals, Cooper encouraged other ‘poets of the poor’, and there were many of them. During 1850, for instance, he ran a penny periodical, Cooper’s Journal; it only lasted seven months, but in that time reviewed nine volumes of such poems — William Jones, a Leicester framework-knitter, Henry Lott, a working carpenter, Alexander Macintosh, a deformed working man from Dunfermline, and so on: also four penny-journals written by and for working-men: — The Frame-Work Knitters Advocate published in Nottingham, The Leeds Shob, and The Spirit of Freedom published from Utbridge by a frequent contributor to Cooper’s Journal, and the only poet to acquire a wider reputation, Jerwood Massey — Massey, whom F. D. Maurice commended to Kingsley, at this time, as ‘our Chartist poet... not quite a Locke, but he has I think some good stuff in him. I hope he will not be spoiled.’ [91] Massey certainly resembled Alton Locke in becoming a Christian Socialist, but was thus ‘spoiled’ as Chartist saw it — like several other such working-class rebels, including Cooper, tamed into religious and political orthodoxy.

Over twenty poets (of sorts) had contributed to Cooper’s Journal and his was a very minor working-class periodical, and by this time he had quarrelled with many of the leading Chartist leaders and authors, and others of them were in jail. Chartist had been remarkable literary; among its most prominent leaders, not only Cooper but also Ernest Jones, George Julian Harney, Sedgwick and W. J. London were prolific and quite capable poets, and were at times also editing Chartist periodicals, where they printed poetry, old and new, and often critical discussion (particularly of socially-concerned literature — the series in The Chartist Circular, for instance, the Politics of Poets’). ‘The new fashion of verse writing among working men... for I discovered Kingsley discussed in 1851, was certainly widespread. In Scotland, of course, both the vernacular tradition and, even more, the illustrious example of Burns stimulated a large and continuous production of popular verse, much of it by humble men; and their work had deeper roots in popular culture, as is evidenced by that Scottish handloom weaver Willie Thom. He apostrophises his fellow weaver-poet, Tamannah:

Poor weaver chiel! What we owe to thee! Your‘Braes o Balgaddy’, and ‘Yon Burnside’,... (and other poems)! Oh how they did ring above the rolling of a hundred shuttles! Let me again proclaim the debt we owe to these Song Spirits. [32] When the breast was filled with everything but hope and happiness, ... let only break forth the healthy and vigorous chorus: ‘A man’s a man for a’ that’, the flagged weaverbrightens up!... Who dare measure in doubt the restraining influence of these Songs? To us they were all instead of sermons... Church bells rang not for us. Poets were indeed our Princes. [53]

The list of such poets is endless, and my Chairman [Professor Kinsey] would be better able than I am to descant upon, and to extend, it: the Bethune brothers (mentioned in Alton Locke), Robert Nicoll (the kinneunter, known as ‘Scotland’s second Burns’), William Nicholson the Galloway poet (peadar, piper, and cattle-driver), James Hyslop, the shepherd, David Wingate, the collier, Hugh Miller, whose first volume was Poems... by a Journeymen Mason (1829), before he turned to the geological studies for which he remains famous.
English poets of this class lacked such an enriching culture to inspire and to receive their work, but a relative plenty of verse printed in Chartist journals (and in earlier Radical, 1820s) was clearly more than a reflection of the tastes of their editors. One helpful tradition was singing: as 'Shakesporean Chartist Hymns' reminded us, the term 'hymn' was widely used in secular contexts, and the lines used as often came from church and chapel as from popular songs. Samuel Bamford, the Lancashire weaver of pre-Chartist radical days, used to organise his fellow political-prisoners to sing 'The Union Hymn':

... Not distant is the welcome day,
When war, and want, and tyranny,
Shall from our isle by swept away.
The grand epoch of liberty
Awakens a faithful union...

Arrested again after Petrolas, he bilythe presented copies of his collected verse to the officers in his escorting party, and in Lancaster Castle he and his fellows made it a nightly rule at locking-up time to sing, 'In the true spirit of devotion', his 'Lancashire Hymn', invoking Hampden and Sydney and ending:

If England wills the glorious deed,
We'll have another Rummels.

This communal singing tradition still has an emphasised vestigial existence in the 'Red Flag' ritual at Labour Party gatherings, and William Morris of course made an attempt to give it a second wind, but it has been of little political, or poetical, significance. The Chartists, however, seem to have enjoyed, and promoted, it more fully; and Ernest Jones would recite his Chartist Songs (1846) at political meetings, too, to great applause, 'I am', he wrote, 'going the tide of my songs over England, forming the tone of the mighty mind of the people — a claim which, Mr. John Saville tells us, was no exaggeration. (35) Jones, I might here interject, followed Cooper by writing, 'with the aid of memory and blood' (he said), a long epic poem of The Nineteen Worfs and he has the distinctness of being the only Chartist poet to achieve Oxford Book status. His lively ironical Song of the Lord is an admirable anthology piece —

But why should we wonder,' protested Ebenazer Elliott, the Corn Law Rhymro, in 1833, 'if mechanics write well in these days?' adding modestly that there were many Shefield mechanics who could write better than he did, and proving (by somewhat dubious arguments — 'showing is enrolled as a mechanic-poet of earlier years') that this was entirely likely and that, moreover, 'All genuine poets are fervid politicians'. (36) I have suggested that the political agitations of the first half of the nineteenth century gave an impetus to this form of self-expression, the gable impulse of course lay behind this verse-writing: notably, self-improvement, spiritual or economical. Alexander Bethune, for instance, a Scottish labourer so poverty-stricken that he could remember only two whole days in the past twenty years which he had devoted wholly to pleasure, concluded that he could scarcely be wondered at, that I should turn my thoughts to writing. This appeared the only open door'. Writing was, in this sense, the one unskilled middle-class trade for which no special education or qualifications, and no capital, were needed. Both Alexander Bethune and his brother John attracted some notice as poets, but as Alexander reflected: 'This is not as good as a mechanic'; poets particularly poor ones, to live in. (37) A complaint made at most times: but there was point in the remark of another humble poet, J. W. King of Sheffield and Leicester, 'if this is not an age of poets, when will it appear?' King pointed to the huge amounts of verse that were getting printed — the huge amounts of verse of commercial, and the thousands of cheap reprints of the classics (penny-number issues of William Cowper, Scott, Shelley, Byron and others), all of which, he said, proves beyond a doubt that this is an age for poetry. (38) King had been a contributor to Thomas Cooper's Journal; most of his volumes were published in London, by John Chapman (a radical publisher, important in this poetry market), paperbound booklets of 56 pages for a shilling. Cooper, we saw, had been published commercially in London, and he also used the cheap part-issue form of reprinting so important in Victorian publishing: The Purgatory of Suicides was available in The People's Edition at 3/6d., or in six parts at sixpence, or eighteen numbers at twopenny.

I wish I knew more about the economics of the publishing of working-class poetry. Printing was relatively cheap, but some of the poets I have mentioned were penniless and most of the others had few pennies to spare for printers' bills. Hugh Miller tells us that most such verse produced in Scotland, being 'ill fitted for the literary market', was published by subscription — that leasing a subscription scheme which so often robes men of good money, and gives them bad books in exchange. (39) Subscription was certainly a widely-used method, though again I wish I knew more about how it was organised: for instance, did the rustic bard of Barnsley, Thomas Lister, manage to amass in 1834 a list of subscribers that occupies twenty double-column pages of small print, with large contingents from towns all over the North of England — some fifteen-hundred names? or was it largely large printing. His list is headed by a Duke, an Archbishop, a Earl, and a countess, and so on down to the membership of Parliament, but these only amount to two dozen names. (40) Needless to say, Lister is no political firebrand; more socially-activist poets would not look to the Duke of Devonshire to take four copies of their work, but subscription methods were common (though unfortunately few volumes contain lists of subscribers). Much remains to be discovered about how these volumes were published, and about the role both of provincial and of metropolitan publishers. That many volumes of verse by these humble authors at least paid their way is suggested by the fact that second, third and fourth collections were common.

Lectures provide another indication of working-class interest in poetry. In 1838, Mrs. Gaskell's husband gave a series of lectures 'in the very poordest district of Manchester, on "The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life"'. You cannot think [wrote his wife] how well they have been attended . . .

... And on the very day yesterday two deputations of respectable-looking men waited on him to repeat those lectures in two different parts of the town. (41) Thomas Cooper, in the years following his imprisonment, made his living, partly from authorship and journalism, but more as a lecturer, until another conversion made him non persona grata to the radical working-class audiences on whom he had relied. (Due to lecture at the Hall of Science on 'Sweden and the Swedes', he announced to an appalled audience that he was suddenly convinced of the existence of a Divine Moral Governor.) His repertoire had been staggering, and he had toured all over the British Isles; another desideratum in our knowledge of Victoria culture, indeed, is a study of lectures, recitals and readings, for which Cooper's contemporaries had an almost American zest. Large audiences were attracted, and not only in Manchester; Crabb Robinson heard Cooper lecture on Byron 'an hour of desultory rambling which had not one Redeemer who did not comment and commented on the poor attendance — not above two hundred or two hundred and fifty people there!' (42) Cooper's topics ranged over history (ancient and modern), biography, ranged geography, science, philosophy, theology, music, the visual arts, and poetry. Of particular interest to us are his literary subjects: Shakespeare, of course, beyond which his four standard lectures were on the Lives and Geniuses of Milton, Burns, Byron and Shelley — the inevitable four poets for anyone appealing to working-class audiences, especially to the politically activist. Charles Reades Chartist has been the subject of one scholarly paper; (43) and much more could be said about the attraction — literary, religious, and political — that Milton had for Chartists and other reformist groups, and about the polemical nature of the mid-seventeenth century in the nineteenth. Cooper's Journal had an epigraph from Milton; so had the Chartist epic Ernest, and many other Chartist publications; and Milton's prose works, as well as his poetry, were often reprinted cheaply, for he expressed congenial views on freedom of publication, monarchy,
removing hirings from the church, and other such topics dear to the radical heart. nHis having been on the right side in the Civil War, and having remained staunch in defeat, moved the Chartists: and Cooper, appropriately, when lecturing, 'recited Satan's speech . . . with magnificent effect.' [44]

The appeal of Burns for working-class readers and audiences is too obvious to need stating, and the importance of Shelley in nineteenth-century radicalism has been much discussed (particularly, of course through Queen Mab, 'the Chartist's Bible'). Byron's popularity has been less often noted, but he was being toasted, along with Burns and Shelley, at secret Taine Paines around 1820, and his works, like Shelley's, were much reprinted in cheap (mostly pirated) editions. Louis James lists twenty-five such editions for working-class readers before 1844, and notes that in 1837 The Vision of Judgment was reprinted by Cleave as a political tract. In the same year, Milner's Commercial Library was published: Byron and Burns were among the opening titles, and circulation figures show that, in the sixty years that followed, they far outstripped the other poets in popularity; Milton, Pope, Bloomfield and Longfellow came next in the list, and Shelley had sold less than William Cooper and Wordsworth and barely one-sixth of the Byron total. Engels, discussing the urban poor in 1844, maintained that

... it is the workers who are most familiar with the poetry of Shelley and Byron. Shelley's prophetic genius has caught their imagination, while Byron attracts their sympathy by his sensuous fire and by the virulence of his satire against the existing order. The middle classes, on the other hand, have on their shelves only cutely expurgated editions of these writers . . . prepared to suit the hypocritical moral standards of the bourgeois.

These subversive poets circulated among the agricultural poor too: a country parson noted, in 1850, that cheap editions of Don Juan and Queen Mab sold by every hawkers of books throughout the country, were lying in the cottages of his flock. Don Juan said the Northern Star, was 'a record of free thought and an eloquent vindication of democracy, which every republican, every lover of his species, should have in his library.' [45]

 Few 'bourgeois' critics, indeed, were praising Don Juan so highly in 1847: but I should add that I have found, in Chartist verse, as little influence of the satirical Byron as is apparent in other areas of early Victorian poetry. It was the Byron of Childe Harold and 'The Prisoner of Chillon' that influenced Thomas Cooper and his fellows. But one extraordinary sign of the curreny of Don Juan, and of the adulation of Byron, appeared in one of the first and largest of Chartist demonstrations, the procession at Newcastle on 27 June 1838. A contemporary records:

> There were not less than fourteen bands of music in the vast procession, and . . . along the whole line banners of the most tasteful appearance waved in the breeze. A considerable number of those contained patriotic inscriptions from the works of Byron, of which the following are a few . . .

> — and he quotes six as a sample, of which four come from Don Juan and two from 'Ode from the French' — such inscriptions as:

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REVOLUTION
I have seen some nations, like o'er-loaded asses,
Kick off their burdens, — meaning the high classes.
[Don Juan, IX, 100x]
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Other banners bore quotations from Burns, Cowper, Goldsmith and others, but the larger numbers were original — further impressive evidence of the literary inclinations of Chartism. Byron was prominent in the iconography of Radicals and Chartists: on the walls of the Chartist rooms at Sheffield hung home-made banners inscribed with the names of working-class heroes, ranging from War and Tyler to Byron and Shelley; and in the houses of such men as Harney the Chartist leader, and of the hero of Revolution in Tanner's Lane (based upon 'Mark Rutherford' and his father), the portrait of Byron would hang beside those of Burns and Shelley, Tom Paine, Major Cartwright, Rousseau, Mazzini and Kossuth. [46] Harney was one of the Chartist leaders who, like Cooper, had 'a passionate attachment' to Byron; he filled the Northern Star with quotations from him, and in his staid old age became an expert on minutiae of his biography, in Notes and Queries. 'His poetry is still an inspiration,' wrote Harney in 1892:

> He is the poet emphatically of Freedom — freedom of thought, freedom of political and social. He is not of that order of verse-mongers who with the name of Liberty on the tip of their pen, as Byron did, and as Shelley did, and as the poets of the French Revolution did, wrote words which, he commented, 'embody the pith of many a volume in the breeze. A considerable number of those contained patriotic inscriptions from the works of Byron, of which the following are a few . . .

> And, to prove his point, Harney quoted the lines which so many Victorian liberals cherished —

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I wish men to be free,
As much from mob as kings, from you as me.
[Don Juan, X, xxxv]
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> — lines which, he commented, 'embody the pith of many a volume in vindication of Liberty from Algernon Sydney to John Stuart Mill.' [47]

When Byron's body reached Nottingham, an unsympathetic local observer wrote in a letter: 'He was a lover of Liberty, which the Radical Corporation here thought made him their brother; therefore all the rabble rout from every lane and alley, and garret and cellar, came forth to curse and swear, and shout and push, in his honour.' At the same time, Byron's old antagonist Robert Southey was writing, somewhat ungenerously:

> 'I am sorry Lord Byron is dead, because some harm will arise from his death . . . We shall now hear his praises from all quarters. I dare say he shall be held up as a martyr to the cause of Liberty, as having sacrificed his life by his exertions in behalf of the Greeks. Upon this score the liberals will be very proud of him.' [48]

This inevitably happened: no eminent poet had died in such heroic circumstances since Sir Philip Sidney. The poet's death was to evoke such emotions again in 1850, when Ruperti Brocklehurst ten years later, in his plain, sworn, downright detestation 'Of every despotism in every nation', Byron had promised that 'I will war, at least in words (and — should! My chance so happen — deeds, with all who war With Thought' [Don Juan, X, xxvi]. Whatever the mixture of his motives in involving himself in Italian and Greek insurrectionary politics, and whatever the sincerity and coherence of his political convictions (matters disputed then, and since), he had, uniquely among literary trumpeters of Freedom, warred with deeds, and had died in the effort. Doubtless that 'rabble rout' in Nottingham reflected a wider movement. The son of a contributor to PMLA or the Philological Quarterly, or of a Bertrand Russell paying Byron the compliment of examining, if demolishing, his political position in his History of Western Philosophy. Equally, one doubts whether the enthusiasts today who paint on our buildings the slogan 'Viva Che!', and who wear the buttons above their hearts, have pondered fully the bearings of Guevararamism on, say, the economic planning of the East Midlands. But in both cases the myth is not the less powerful for being incomparably determined. I was born for opposition,' wrote Byron in Don Juan [XV, –xxii] — a rough-and-ready declaration which would appeal to radicals for whom opposition was the only likely political stance for a long time ahead. Similarly, they might have found congenial his much-quoted journal entry: incomplete though it may be as a philosophy. 'I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments . . . The fact is, riches are power, and poverty is slavery all over the earth' — though they would have demurred about his conclusion, at that period, that 'one sort of establishment is no better or worse for a people than another' [16 January 1814]. Later, he pronounced that 'The king-times are finished. There will be blood shed like water, and tears like mist; but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it' [13 Januarys 1821].
The Nottingham ‘rabble’ are likely to have remembered more positive political activity by Byron than such heart-satisfying curses against the Establishment and prophecies of its doom; not only his death in a war against oppression, but his splendid speech in the Lords defending the Luddites, and his vigorously scathing ‘Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill’. Perhaps too they had heard the rumbles (which had created alarm in Governmental circles) that Byron was preparing, around the time of Peterloo, to return from exile and lead a popular insurrection. The only serious political activist among the English Romantics, and the only one (except Scott) with an international reputation, he had of course been an inspiration to revolutionaries in several Continental countries. In the year after his death, he was one of the ideological heroes of the Decembrist rising in Russia; the poet Ryleyev, one of its leaders, carried a volume of Byron as he went to his execution.

‘The day will come,’ wrote Mazzini in 1839. When Democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron, and he criticised the English for failing to recognise what Byron had done for Europe or to learn from him as his Continental readers had done. Commenting on this in 1870, John Morley acknowledged that ‘it is only in his own country that Byron’s influence has been a comparatively superficial one’, because revolution had ‘never had that hold on the national imagination’ here that it had possessed overseas. Britain came nearest to revolution in the post-Napoleonic years and in the decade of Chartism: and, as we have seen, Byron was one of the main literary inspirations, both for the ‘rabble rout’, and the working-class poets of the period. More has been written about Shelley’s appeal to this public, and doubtless Shelley was more profoundly radical than Byron; as Marx commented, lovers of Byron and Shelley will rejoice that Byron died at the age of thirty-six, ‘because if he had lived he would have become a reactionary bourgeois; they grieve that Shelley died at twenty-nine, because he was essentially a revolutionary and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism’ — prophecies with which it is entertaining to contrast Charles Kingsley’s, that ‘the sturdy peer . . . might, if he had reformed, have made a gallant English gentleman; while Shelley . . . would probably have ended in Rome, as an Oratorian or a Passionist’. But Shelley, though proclaiming his ‘passion for reforming the world’, stated that he was writing (in Prometheus Unbound, but it applies elsewhere) for the ‘highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers’. These were no more numerous among the Chartists than elsewhere: but those qualities, and limitations, of Byron’s poetry which made him a best-seller among the less select classes of poetical readers, in the boudoir as well as at the workbench, gave his work a wider currency if a shallower impact. And Byron’s poetry proved more imitable, for a popular readership, both technically (partly because Byron’s was a plain man’s poetry, much of it amateurish in technique), and in recurrent subjects which appealed to these poets: the lonely rebel, the prisoner or exile, the moods of Nature as reflections of the poet’s mind, the apothecaries to freedom or denunciations of oppressors, the potted character-sketch of historical or contemporary figures. A curious local example of one version of this is Sherwood Forest, a poem in Spenserian stanzas by the Nottingham stocking-weaver, Robert Milhouse; Robin Hood emerges as a Byronic hero, Remembrance often would his brow o’ercast/Of early joys which led new hopes along . . . and of suitably humanitarian impulses he would ‘sigh a sigh o’er want and pain/While from his eyes the drops of pity fell’. [51]

Ironically, however, Byron’s only references to the working-class poets who were to admire and imitate him were snobbishly dismissive:

When some brisk youth, the tenant of a stall,
Employes a pen less pointed than his awl,
Leaves his snug shop, tomato’s his store of shoe,
St. Crispin quits, and cobbles for the Muse.
Heavens! how the vulgar stare! how crowds applaud!
How ladies read, and Littlel laugh! . . .
Hear, then, ye happy sons of needless trade!
Swear! quit the plough, mag ye useless spade!
Let Byron and BLOOMFIELD, nay, a greater far,
SONNETS why not on brother Nahin too?
Let PEEY go forth, pervade the whole.
Alike the rustic, and mechanic soul
Ye labourers, coddles o’er ye notes prolou.
Compose at once a slipper and a song.
So shall the far your handynpoetry, your pen;
Your verses sure shold please — perhaps your shoes.
May Blombard weavers boast! Find’st skill.
And tailors’ lays be longer than their bill.
While pincushion-beaux reward the grateful notes.
And pay for poems — when they pay for coats.

Or, cross-legg’d, crouch’d, the ninth part of an ape,
Doom’d ne’er to rise by merit to a scribe,
Or cobbled shoes, the lowest of his tribe,
No tuneful curse had tortured from thy tongue.
Who die unwept, or weep, in silence bow’d . . .

[English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers, 11. 795-98]

One of the ‘poets of the poor’, Ebenezer Elliott, riposted with vigour:

Go, and at Bloomfield, nature’s Artist, sneer,
Since chance, that makes a cobbler, makes a peer.
Had I thou been one of that degraded crew
Who die unwept, or weep, in silence bow’d . . .
No tuneful curse had tortured from thy tongue.
No blind’r thy rhyme wreathet upon
But lo! thy verse, the rift would have cried
Matches and thread, from Hobson to Cheapside.
Or cobbled shoes, the lowest of his hire.
Darst ear to ear by meny to a scribe:
Or, cross-leg’d, crouch’d, the north part of an ape.
Stitching the clothes he could not learn to shape . . .

But, within a few years, Elliott’s admiration for Byron ‘amounted almost to idolatry; and [a contemporary writer] he was impatient of all dissent from his judgment in this particular . . . Nor was it easy to convince him that there was a single flaw in the rhetoric or sentiments of his noble idol’. [52] He would quote endless passages from Byron, he imitated him, and wrote several adulatory poems about him. And even the Northern Star went out of its way to praise English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers, which contains those offensive lines. As Macaulay had remarked in 1831, referring to other classes of readers whose susceptibilities, political or religious, Byron had outraged, people continued to ‘love him and admire him . . . Everything, it seemed, was to be forgiven to youth, rank, and genius’. [54]

The readers and poets I have been discussing were not predisposed to admire him, though maybe even they were not immune to the national tendency to love a lord, particularly if he was at odds with other lords. In drawing attention to Byron’s popularity among early-Victorian workingmen, I have been making a sortie into one area of his reputation and an area of popular culture that could support a larger scholarly expedition, more fully equipped to explore these little-known territories. Political, social and economic historians have become increasingly aware of the importance of local studies, to supplement and correct national — which often means metropolitan — studies. Local studies have something to contribute to literary and cultural history, too, especially if we extend ‘local’ to the metaphorical senses of ‘province’ — that is, to the place where one finds its way on to the high-roads of literature, the reading public which took its instruction, not from the quarterly or the Athenæum or the Saturday Review, but from the unstamped press of the 1820s and ’30s, the Chartist journals of the ’40s, and the popular journals of the Howell’s and
Or, to be pointedly local: what was Thomas Cooper thinking of when he wrote that if any locality in England can tend to elevate the sentiments of its young inhabitants, one would think it to be Nottingham? — and he was not then giving an ingratiating lecture or addressing the audience here, but writing a short-story. "There are souls to be saved in Manchester," ran a favourite tag in this period, and about Manchester in literature, and as a social entity, we have lately learned much, to our profit. What was the life-expectancy (in more than biological terms), what nourishment for soul and spirit existed in early-Victorian Nottingham, or Leicester? What were its sources, literary and other, and how was it diffused? Preparing this lecture has made me realize how little I know about these matters, and I hope that hearing it may have interested you in questions which I have raised, unable though I am fully to answer them.

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10. Alton Locke, p. 65 (John Colton's Private Hours with the Maases (3rd ed., 1840), pp. ix, xci). [Ed. - this online edition as stated]
15. Alton Locke, p. 222.
23. Miscellanies, i, 321.
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42. See note 11.
47. Mary Howitt, an Autobiography, ed. Margaret Howitt (1889), i, 189; C. C. Southey, op. cit., p. 178. For another local reaction, see William Powars, Lines on the Funeral of Byron (Nottingham, 1824).
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56. Wise Saws and Modern Instances (1845), i, 61.

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