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CHARTIST LITERATURE

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A movement for universal adult male suffrage, Chartism flourished in the United Kingdom between the late 1830s and mid-1850s, and was arguably the world's first and most dramatic working-class movement. The literature that came out of that doomed movement may not have moved as many people as its speeches, or its inspired actions, but it retains its power to thrill. Readers, few but ardent, have pondered Ernest Jones's "Chartist songs," Gerald Massey's stirring lyrics, and William James Linton's late Chartist utopics, alongside the fractured fiction of writers such as Thomas Martin Wheeler.

Canonical novels like Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850)—and arguably even Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849)—have long provided authoritative outsider's accounts of Chartism as a foe to the British state: conspiratorial, disrespectful of tradition, and violence-prone. But the Chartist's own words tell quite a different story. Many scholars nowadays turn to Chartist literature in order to understand not merely the bodily suffering of working Britons, but also their all-too-brief moment of Victorian mental emancipation.

While it lasted, Chartism promised great things to working men (it sometimes made promises to working women, too, but these remained largely unredeemed). The industrial North of England and then the rest of the nation were rocked by midnight marches, simultaneous assemblies, and petition presentations. The movement was divided between a growingly belligerent "physical force" wing, which thought that armed struggle might topple tyrants, and a pacific "moral force" side, which counted on spectacular public unrest to rouse the conscience of the nation. Birmingham's Bull Ring Riots took place in 1839, as did the first national Chartist petition drive. The government proved far more worried by petitions than it had been by violence. Ernest Jones, Thomas Cooper, Feargus O'Connor, and a host of other Chartist writers were among the many leaders imprisoned for substantial lengths of time.

A revolutionary year all over Continental Europe, 1848 saw the Chartist's famous Kennington Common demonstration and march on Parliament—which ended with a third Chartist petition being ignored and its marchers, mocked and spurned, melting away into London's wet side streets. The 1850s were even harder years, and by 1860 the movement had dissipated into moral reform and Evangelical revival movements, its writers mostly silenced.

WORKING-CLASS OR FOR ALL MANKIND?

The movement was politically universalist in aspirations, but inescapably partial and partisan in actual composition. Because of the Reform Bill of 1832, which gave the vote to much of the (male) middle class, it was nearly inevitable that Chartism be working-class to its core. Even its few aristocratic members and leaders had somehow to demonstrate that they did not merely sympathize with, but actually shared "the cause of the working man" (the phrase speaks volumes about the movement's usual, though not uniform, neglect of women's rights). Ernest Jones sought factory credibility by asserting that his prison poems were written in blood; Feargus O'Connor earned his on 27 September 1841, when he famously appeared before the York Castle prison clad in workingman's fustian.

Chartism has deep roots in the democratic radicalism of the 1810s. However, scholars generally agree that Chartism from the late 1840s onward produced work that move away from radical universalism toward an often combative enunciation of working-class consciousness: Ernest Jones's "Song of the Lower Classes" and Gerald Massey's "Red Republican" lyrics are oft-cited examples.

To call the movement working-class, however, is only to tell part of the story. Chartism was certainly a movement oriented both toward political representation and social reform. But it was also a movement made possible and defined by the widespread popular press, especially

by the midcentury rising circulation of “stamped” periodicals, which the government regulated but sanctioned. Chartism was acutely aware of its national audience, in every medium that its artists employed.

If even the banners that hung at Chartist demonstrations could cost £50 and take months of work to produce, is it any wonder that yet more avowedly national productions like the widely reprinted speeches of Chartist leaders took on such significance? Or that the poetry and fiction published in such briefly efflorescent journals as *The Northern Liberator*, the *Black Dwarf*, and most famously the *Northern Star*, were lodestones of intense political agitation? Oratory and essays mattered in the Chartist’s England—the proof of which is that they could get you transported, or possibly even killed.

The best way to understand the difference between Chartism’s political universalism and its working-class slant is to consider the difference between Chartist works of the late 1830s and those of the 1850s. In Thomas Doubleday’s *The Political Pilgrim’s Progress* (1839), for instance, it remains unclear whether the central figures are meant to be universal, or merely universally working-class. On the one hand, there is an obvious debt to the allegorical tradition of John Bunyan’s Christian (from the *Pilgrim’s Progress*) or the medieval Everyman: the hero’s name is Radical, and his enemies, as they were in William Cobbett’s writings two decades earlier, are money changers and Jews. On the other hand, there is Radical’s obvious identity as a member of the working class, set in his ways and locked in place, desirous of living out his life, even in Utopia, wearing “useful and becoming garments suitable to a working man’s station in life.” How do we classify such writing: is it about political-religious emancipation of a universal sort? Or is it the beginnings of an aesthetics that defines Radical as a working man, first, foremost, and forever? This is impossible to decide.

By contrast, in later poems like “A Red Republican Lyric” (1850) of Gerald Massey, the divide is stark, the battle lines clear: “Our sons are the rich man’s serfs by day, / And our daughters his slaves by night!” The label “Red Republican” helps make Massey’s socialist or protosocialist orientation clear: no matter how republican we may be, since we live perforce in a divided social realm, defining our enemies is paramount.

The Chartists begin with the dream of a common English struggle against a universally acknowledged old-guard enemy: before the 1840s Chartist poetry relies on an established radical distinction between Court and People. But that dream gradually dies in the 1840s, as it be-

comes clear that the middle class are sated with their own success and will not come to the aid of working-class would-be voters in their hour of need. In such transitional poems as “Oppression” (an 1842 poem by “DC”), a collective subject emerges that is no longer “the People,” but that cannot yet be named as “the Workers.” The poem is left with a speaker defined only by a hauntingly unresolved “we.”

Shall we for ever lick the dust
Or fear the tyrant’s boding frown,
And cringing, pander to the lust
Of pamper’d minions of a crown?
.....
Forbid it, God! The dignity
Of manhood must awaken’d be;
Justice demands, and Liberty
Proclaims we must and shall be free!

By the 1850s poems like Ernest Jones’s “Song of the Low” (1852; originally titled “Song of the Lower Classes,” and repeatedly set to music through the latter nineteenth century) have made working-class bodies, and the chores they perform, paramount in defining the true struggle. In this deservedly famous lyric, a variety of menial occupations are cataloged and then drawn together so as to form a class—if nowhere else than within the body of the poem itself:

We plough and sow—we’re so very very low,
That we delve in the dirty clay,
Till we bless the plain with the golden grain,
And the vale with the fragrant hay.
Our place we know—we’re so very low,
’Tis down at the landlord’s feet:
We’re not too low—the bread to grow
But too low the bread to eat.
.....
Down, down we go—we’re so very, very low
To the hell of the deep sunk mines.
.....

And so on through various lowly professions.

READING WORDS, READING ACTIONS

The significance of the emergence of a conscious and powerful class discourse just as Chartist literature itself was vanishing in the 1850s is intensely debatable. Gareth Stedman Jones influentially argued that Chartist thought was by and large not class-conscious at all, and that the proof of their nationalist-radical orientation lies in attending more carefully to their words. If we make a “lin-

guistic turn" and consider what people wrote rather than what we conjecture about what they did, then the nationalist, non-class-based character of most Chartist ideology becomes clear.

The consequences of the "linguistic turn" broadside for social and cultural history would be hard to overestimate. Now that the dust has settled, such claims have sparked two sorts of constructive response. Some critics have demonstrated that nonwritten actions of the day—like O'Connor's famous walk in fustian, the wearing of white liberty caps, or the waving of elaborately worked, richly significant banners—can, if carefully construed, be as useful a source to chart the emergence of class consciousness as any written text may be.

Other critics have made the case that a real "linguistic turn" cannot simply take at face value whatever Chartist words have made it into print in such works as happen to survive. You cannot encompass the linguistic by disregarding all considerations of generic requirement, inherited literary form, and simple economics of publication, all of which have tremendous sway not only on what gets remembered by scholars, but what finds its way into print at all.

It turns out that audience expectations and formal inheritance play a huge role in shaping Chartist composition. In the 1850s even such well-known Chartist writers as Ernest Jones turned in their fiction toward a kind of deeply emotive melodramatic form that was at odds with basic parameters of Chartist ideology. In order to satisfy the demands of the genre he had chosen, and at the same time to convey the Chartist message in which he believed, Jones had to cobble together ungainly fictions that were contradictory and confused in nature, and perhaps doomed to fail.

CHARTISM'S MELODRAMA

Nor does that finding apply to Jones alone. A careful study of Chartist fiction, ranging from Alexander Somerville's 1839 military primer *Dissuasive Warnings to the People on Street Warfare* (which may remind some readers of the science fiction of Robert Heinlein) to later work by Doubleday and Thomas Martin Wheeler, suggests that the poetry and prose of Chartism was moving from universalist hopes to a battle-hardened class consciousness in the last years of Chartist writing. But it also confirms that Chartist fiction was shaped—perhaps too powerfully for its own good—by the influence of George William MacArthur Reynolds's sensational melodramas, and the

generic expectations of melodrama's hackneyed love, money, and poorhouse plots. Such fiction required certain kinds of stereotypical isolated sufferers to make its plot mechanisms operate, and the kinds of heart-strings that it tugged on were largely incompatible with Chartist ideology's emphasis on solidarity and collective class action.

Consider, for example, the jarring oscillation between particularistic melodrama and general claims about working-class identity that characterizes one of the most effective and best remembered Chartist novels, Wheeler's *Sunshine and Shadow*. This novel's 1849–1850 publication—in *The Northern Star*, in thirty-seven weekly installments tellingly labeled "communions"—has led many to call it the first working-class novel in the world.

Wheeler's novel almost painfully displays the implacable collision between Chartist politicking and the generic requirements that made the weekly *Mysteries of London* a sensation. Here, for example, is how Julia North, the novel's beautiful ingénue, is introduced. It is as if a sermon were followed without a pause by a steamy personal ad:

When will the middle classes learn their true interest, and combine their worldly influence and business habits with the strong sense, the sturdy independence, and the generous enthusiasm of the vast democracy beneath them? when will they abandon the False and Factitious for the True and the Real?

Julia North was a beauteous and well-trained flower . . . a form rather short than tall but most exquisitely proportioned, flaxen hair falling in ringlets on her delicate shoulders, eyes of the purest blue and a complexion in which the rose and the lily were so completely blended, that art would try in vain to imitate it.

It is possible to imagine an earnest Chartist audience for the former sentence, and easy to imagine one for the latter. But it seems astonishing that there could have been much audience for a book that blended both styles of writing, at least in such close quarters.

The most striking thing about Wheeler's novel is his own open acknowledgment of the perhaps insurmountable obstacles a writer in his position faced. As he draws to a close, he apologizes for his indecision in how to end the book—even while holding out the dim prospect that his writing may have somehow conjured up a politically energized audience. Dropping the pretence that the protagonist and his struggles are the true topic of the book, Wheeler addresses an imagined audience of like-minded

readers, becalmed as he is in the post-1848 letdown, and looking anywhere, even into fiction, for some relief: "Men walk wistfully abroad and hold their breath in the deep ponderings of suspense. These are not the hours to waste in idle dalliance; we must be up and doing, or when the time comes, we shall again be found unprepared." Wheeler thinks of his own protagonist as no more than the small part of a whole class whose shared story is far more interesting, than that of any particular member—including this protagonist. Here is the essence of why Chartist fiction was not only doomed but perhaps in a certain sense even engineered to fail. To disavow a protagonist's importance makes for good Chartist class-conscious doctrine—but it also makes for inferior "romance."

DASHED HOPES AND LINGERING EFFECTS

Chartist fiction did nevertheless flourish until the movement's political setbacks became impossible to avoid. We can assume that Chartist readers, belying modern-day expectations, really did read *Sunshine and Shadows* with the belief or the hope that at some time in the future a novel with these aspirations—a novel of true class solidarity—might succeed. That hope was not realized at the time, but that is not grounds for dismissing it altogether. Wheeler helps us to think about the Chartists as struggling to craft a new kind of identity within narrative: that is, using stories to conjure up in the present a shared usable past that will lead to a brighter future.

Were late Chartist authors simply unlucky to have ended their literary days writing fiction of a genre that was so shallowly emotive and relentlessly particularistic in its logic? Could they not have just picked some other genre? Perhaps, but it is hard to imagine another genre or aesthetic mode of the day with any widespread popularity (a consideration that excludes all Chartist poetic experiments, with the exceptions of its remarkably durable "songs") that would have expressed or conveyed late Chartist narratives of innovative solidarity much better. Would the forms of realism adopted by the canonical successes of the day—William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, or George Eliot—have any more imaginative space than melodrama for the sort of class-wide indictments that Wheeler or Jones wished to hand down? It was another three long decades before William Morris tried to dismantle the Victorian novel with his truly strange and deeply unpopular socialist romances; three decades as

well before Émile Zola succeeded in inaugurating the naturalism that so radically reshaped the Victorian novel's overpowering commitment to individual character and local specificity.

We might therefore think of Jones and Wheeler—and dozens of lesser Chartist writers whose works have vanished or come down to us only in dismissible or incomprehensible fragments—as laboring under the aesthetic limitations of an era with scant space for either class consciousness or a radical idea of allegiance that went beyond personhood. Unlike Zola and Morris, they were not yet able to fracture old generic requirements, nor to forge new ones. So they did not flourish—yet neither did they vanish.

[See also *Sensation Novel and Serialization*.]

FURTHER READING

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