Introduction

The Northern Star’s poetry column for 18 May 1839, carries a factory reform poem written by a woman known to history only as E. H., ‘a Factory Girl of Stalybridge’. In this poem entitled, ‘On Joseph Rayner Stephens’, E. H. compares her position with that of the millowners’ children and wives. The contrast she draws between their advantages purchased, she believes, at the cost of her own class’s impoverishment is a common rhetorical device in early Victorian social discourse. Less familiar, perhaps, is the content of this trope, for E. H. protests her cultural deprivation as bitterly as any material deprivation:

Their children, too, to school must be sent,
Till all kinds of learning and music have learnt;
Their wives must have veils, silks dresses, and cloaks,
And some who support them can’t get linsey coats.

Two stanzas later E. H. returns to the question of cultural entitlement – ‘If they had sent us to school, better rhyme we could make, / And I think it is time we had some of their cake’. In this simple rhyming couplet E. H. attests to poetry’s importance in the working-class movement. Here poetry is figured as a luxury rather than a fundamental necessity – cake rather than bread – but nonetheless it is something to which E. H. believes she is entitled. In her imagination, poetry equates with plenty; it signifies the desire for ‘something more’, the ‘something better’ which impelled Chartism.

Precisely because the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of scarcity, we have grown accustomed to hearing the cries for bread. In comparison the call for cake sounds anomalous. The inability to appreciate the difference between the two has entered popular consciousness as one of the causes of the French Revolution. If the call for cake seems outlandish as a popular demand, then the call for poetry seems equally improbable. To imagine a nineteenth-century workers’
movement demanding the right to versify alongside the demand for the vote and better working and living conditions seems incredible. Yet for E. H. these demands were inseparable, and she ends her poem by returning to the subject:

We factory lasses have but little time,
So I hope you will pardon my bad written rhyme.
God bless him for striving to get us our rights,
And I wish the world over were true Stephenites.

A Stephenite I am from the ground of my heart,
And I hope from the same I shall never depart.
May God spare your life till the tyrants are ended,
So I bid you good bye, till my verses I’ve mended.

E. H. knows she is writing ‘bad’ poetry and wants to write better verse; aesthetic standards mattered to her as they did to the rest of the Chartist movement. A dozen years later, at the end of the period covered by this study, a similar note is struck by the better-known Chartist poet, Gerald Massey. Addressing a poetic comrade in the preface to his first collection of Chartist verse, *Voices of Freedom and Lyrics of Love* (1851), Massey simultaneously acknowledges and excuses his poetic shortcomings. He identifies a lack of education and limited exposure to poetry’s ‘great masters’ as the causes of the intellectual and aesthetic weakness of his poetry which, he asserts, is nonetheless justified by its truthfulness and sincerity:

No one knows better than myself how unworthy [these poems] are of our common cause; no one knows so well as myself how far I have fallen short of what I had thought to perform; but the builder can only erect his edifice according to his material, and I have not much book lore . . . until of late, I have been quite shut out from the great masters of the lyre, and the mighty in the realms of thought. In my ‘Voices of Freedom’ I have endeavoured to utter what is stirring in poor men’s hearts. The thoughts may be unripe, and the utterance crude, but what is written, is written in my own life’s-blood; and you, at least, will not despise my earnest sincerity.¹

E. H. and Massey assume that the political struggle to which they were committed, required not just poetry – but the best poetry. This study originates in a desire to understand the terms of this conjunction of aesthetics and politics effected by the Chartist movement. In addition, it

¹ Gerald Massey, *Voices of Freedom and Lyrics of Love* (J. Watson, 1851), i.
seeks to abandon the defensive formulations of E. H. and Massey by celebrating the aesthetic and political achievements of Chartist poetry – to join with *The Chartist Circular* in denying ‘that the union of poetry with politics is always hurtful to the politics, and fatal to the poetry’, and with *The Friend of the People* in affirming the value of those ‘eloquent outpourings of the complaints of the people, passionate appeals for justice, [and] lofty dreamings of the great future, when SLAVERY and MISERY shall be no more’.  

Before beginning this study, I regarded Chartist proclamations of the importance of poetry with a large measure of scepticism and privileged the political over the aesthetic as the site of significant Chartist activity. This assumption fell away in the face of a prolonged encounter with the Chartist press in general, and its leading newspaper the *Northern Star* (NS) in particular, which convinced me that poetry played an active, primary role within the movement. Chapter 1, The Chartist imaginary: ‘talking by turns of politics and poetry’, is the result of the realisation that for the Chartist movement, the political and the aesthetic are not just closely related concepts but are thoroughly imbricated practices. The chapter provides the theoretical underpinning for this study’s claim that Chartist poetry constitutes both a distinctive form of agency and a unique form of historical knowledge. The unity of these twin facets of Chartist poetry constitutes the realm of the Chartist imaginary.

Chapter 2 examines the reception and critical history of Chartist poetry over the past century and a half. It charts the fluctuating visibility of Chartist poetry over this period and discusses the work of the most significant critics working in this field. It notes that the existing critical tradition has tended to concentrate on the work of a handful of ‘labour laureates’ (most notably Ernest Jones, Thomas Cooper, Gerald Massey and W. J. Linton) who are atypical Chartist poets insofar as the overwhelming majority of Chartist poets enjoyed at best a limited, local rather than national reputation, and published their work in the periodical press rather than in single volumes. Therefore, this study takes the poetry column of a given journal rather than the individual poet as its object of analysis. Chapter 3 represents the methodological outgrowth of this argument. It provides an empirical analysis of the poetry column of the leading Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, quantifying the number of poems and poets published on an annual basis as well as the ratio of

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Chartist to non-Chartist poetry in its columns. In addition, Chapter 3 seeks to reconstruct the poetry column’s editorial policy, paying particular attention to its attempts to raise the quality of Chartist poetic production from 1844 onwards.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the Northern Star’s poetry column during the periods of political crisis which accompanied the presentation of each of the three national petitions in 1839, 1842 and 1848. Chapter 4 deals with the aftermath of the ‘Newport uprising’ in November 1839 and focuses in particular on the insurrection’s ideological afterlife in the Northern Star. It examines the role of the poetry column in explaining and interpreting Newport and its treatment of the themes of exile and return following the transportation of the uprising’s leader, John Frost. Chapter 5 deals with Chartism’s resurgence in 1842 when a massive strike-wave in the aftermath of the rejection of the second petition constituted one of the most serious challenges to the British state in the entire nineteenth century. It demonstrates the crucial role played by the Northern Star’s poetry column both in the reconstruction of Chartist identity in the post-Newport period, and in the emergence of a more sophisticated economic and political critique. It examines the reworking of established Chartist poetic tropes in relation to the unresolved contradictions in Chartist strategy, before ending with an analysis of the role of ‘nostalgia’ in the Chartist imaginary in 1842. Chapter 6 examines the poetry column during the year of European revolutions, 1848. It traces Chartism’s response to the revolutionary nationalism which swept both Ireland and continental Europe, and to the defeat of those same forces in the latter half of that turbulent year. It examines the consolidation of a new structure of feeling – ‘red republicanism’ – and analyses its accompanying new poetic, which consolidates the emergent political and economic critique identified in the previous chapter.

Chapter 7 differs from the preceding three chapters by concentrating on the work of an individual Chartist poet, Gerald Massey, rather than the Northern Star’s poetry column. It does so in order to capture the idiosyncratic qualities of late (post-1848) Chartist poetry, with its distinctive figuring of the relationship between forms of temporal understanding and political activity. In particular, this chapter seeks to differentiate between the ‘messianic’ (used in its Benjaminian sense) and the ‘millenarian’ in Massey’s poetry, as exemplifying the ideological trajectory of the wider Chartist movement in this period. Massey’s
attempt to preserve hope at a moment of profound historical defeat provides a fitting coda for the Chartist imaginary:

‘All’s well!’ saith the sentry on tyranny’s tower,  
‘Even Hope by their watch-fire is grey and tear-blind.’  
Aye, all’s well! Freedom’s altar burns hour by hour –  
Live brands for the fire-damps with which ye are mined.³

³ Gerald Massey, ‘Our Symbol’, Voices of Freedom, 10. This poem also appeared in the first number of The Red Republican under the title ‘The Red Banner’.
CHAPTER 1

The Chartist imaginary: ‘talking by turns of politics and poetry’

We became acquainted that evening, and, in the course of many subsequent years, I passed an agreeable half-hour in the shoemaker’s garret, talking by turns of politics and poetry.

Thomas Frost, Forty Years’ Recollections: Literary and Political

This chapter will follow Thomas Frost’s conversational footsteps in ‘talking by turns of politics and poetry’. However, it also posits the unity of politics and poetry in the form of the ‘Chartist imaginary’ which both underpins the agency enjoyed by, and constitutes the unique form of historical knowledge embodied in, Chartist poetry. This chapter, therefore, offers both a theorisation and a definition of the Chartist imaginary.

How can Chartist poetry be said to possess agency? What does a Chartist poem make happen? It is certainly the case, as Timothy Randall has shown, that Chartist poetry was performed in a variety of settings including, but not confined to, ‘the mass open-air gatherings, the anniversary celebrations, the reading groups, the feasts, the evening teas, the workplace lunches, the public house meetings, the extempore singing in prison’. However, in these contexts Chartist poetry serves either as a mood enhancer, confirming or consolidating the ethos of the gathering, or it is entrusted with a cathartic role, with discharging anger which cannot be vented in any other form. In the first case it would appear to be the specific context (the mass meeting, etc.) which is the real locus of any agency, whilst in the second, the function of Chartist poetry appears to be the prevention of concrete action.

However, poetry also featured prominently in the Chartist press where, in addition to the poetry, reviews and literary miscellanies columns, it was

1 T. Frost, Forty Years’ Recollections: Literary and Political (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1880), 34.
3 Ibid., 175.
quoted frequently in reports of speeches as well as editorial and readers’ letters. Moreover, poetry permeated the entire movement, with both leadership and rank and file sharing a common belief in its value. This commitment is manifested by the numbers of rank and file Chartists who not only read but also composed poetry in their hundreds, and underscored by the close connection between poetic production and Chartist leadership at the local, regional and national levels. This relationship is exemplified by the careers of Thomas Cooper and Ernest Jones. At the national level they are joined by O’Connor, O’Brien, Harney, McDouall and Kydd – all of whom wrote poetry occasionally and all of whom (with the exception of O’Brien) published at least one poem in the *Northern Star*. In addition, Ulrike Schwab’s *The Poetry of the Chartist Movement* identifies a further thirty-eight local and regional Chartist leaders who were also published poets. This evidence suggests that the particular skills fostered by the writing of poetry may have played a vital role in the development of the Chartist movement.

This chapter opened with Thomas Frost’s recollection of his friendship with the Croydon Chartist shoemaker and poet, Jem Blackaby. Frost and Blackaby were leaders of local rather than national importance within Chartist society and as writers neither enjoyed a significant reputation. Indeed, Frost credits Blackaby with publishing only two poems in his lifetime – one on the death of Lord Abinger in the manner of Byron’s ‘Vision of Judgement’, printed privately in an edition of fifty copies, and another on the subject of the night-flowering cereus which appeared in *Reynolds’ Miscellany*. However, it is precisely the relative historical obscurity of Frost and Blackaby which underwrites their typicality and increases the value of their testimony.

4 U. Schwab, *The Poetry of the Chartist Movement: a Literary and Historical Study* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), 183–222. Given the extent of anonymous, pseudonymous and initialised publication in the *Northern Star*’s poetry column and the existence of figures such as Jem Blackaby (a local Chartist leader and poet unpublished by the *Northern Star*) there is a strong probability that there exists a meaningful correlation between Chartist poetry and Chartist leadership. However, in the absence of a systematic study of the Chartist localities, such a correlation remains a tantalising hypothesis.

5 David Vincent argues that the skills developed by the autodidact, particularly literacy and a broader perspective, were indispensable to almost any working class organization and notes that the overwhelming majority of his autobiographers made a ‘practical contribution . . . to the cause of freedom, either as official or unofficial leaders, or as political writers and poets’. D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom. A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (Methuen, 1982), 176–7.

6 Frost, *Forty Years’ Recollections*, 122–3. Jem Blackaby’s *A Vision of Judgement* (new version) was reviewed by the *Northern Star* (7 September 1844). A further poem entitled ‘Moral Musings’ authored by J. Blackaby was also published in the *Northern Star* (24 April 1847).
Of particular interest for this study is Frost’s account of the continuous interchange and interplay between the aesthetic and the democratic in their conversation, ‘talking by turns of politics and poetry’. Another of Frost’s reminiscences of Blackaby highlights the way in which the ‘political’ could quickly become the ‘poetical’. During ‘a conversation on the land question’, Blackaby comments on Frost’s pronunciation of ‘contrary’ and ‘quoted passages from Henry IV and Samson Agonistes’ in support of his argument that Shakespeare and Milton placed the emphasis on the second syllable. Indeed, throughout Frost’s autobiography, Forty Years’ Recollections: Literary and Political, the poetical and the political blend seamlessly. Frost recounts how as a sixteen year old he attended an Owenite entertainment at the Tivoli Gardens and found that his reading of Coleridge had already prepared him for socialism:

I had just been reading Coleridge’s ‘Religious Musings,’ and the brief address in which the philosopher of New Lanark had set forth the principles of his new constitution of society sent me to the poem again. The scheme of the philosopher seemed to be the due response to the aspirations of the poet.

Frost records that his subsequent reading of Shelley confirmed his Socialist convictions and that later the combined influence of Coleridge and Shelley made him ‘a Chartist, and something more’. Frost and Blackaby’s interest in poetry was not an unusual feature of early nineteenth-century working-class culture. David Vincent’s Bread, Knowledge and Freedom demonstrates that such readers ‘inherited both a background of book ownership and a tradition, albeit a narrow one, of serious reading’. Moreover, as Vincent shows, the reading of Milton’s poetry was central to this tradition of serious reading. Beyond these three, working-class reading lists became more eclectic and dependent on local circumstances. However, with determination and a degree of good fortune, the autodidact could complete a course of reading which would stand comparison with many a contemporary undergraduate syllabus. By his early twenties, Thomas Cooper had read (and memorised lines from) Milton, Shakespeare, Burns, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, Moore, Campbell, Southey and Keats.

7 Frost, Forty Years’ Recollections, 34.  
8 Ibid., 14.  
9 Ibid., 15 and 38. In similar fashion, W. J. Linton records the reading of Shelley’s Queen Mab as one of his formative political experiences. W. J. Linton, Memories (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970 [1894]), 16.  
10 Vincent, Bread, Knowledge and Freedom, 111–19.  
11 Ibid., 186.  
12 T. Cooper, The Life of Thomas Cooper (Leicester University Press, 1971 [1872]), 64.
Although Cooper’s reading was, probably, more extensive and more intensive than that of many autodidacts, nonetheless it exists as part of a continuum of working-class reading practices rather than an atypical aberration. Vincent notes that every one of the one hundred and forty-two autobiographers studied in his work ‘read poetry, and a surprising number tried their hand at composition’. In a number of cases the subject’s first encounter with poetry is figured as a life-changing moment. Alexander Somerville, for example, records asking a harvester (as an eleven or twelve year old) what a poem was and being treated to a recitation from Burns’ work. The harvester, seeing Somerville’s ‘delight’, promises to lend him a book of Burns’ poems on the following day. However, writes Somerville:

I was now so eager to see that famous book, from which he had kindled in me intellectual sensations so new, so delightful, and irrepressibly strong, that I could not go home to supper and to bed until I had accompanied him to his home, three quarters of a mile distant to get the book; I could not wait until he brought it in the morning.

For Somerville, Burns’ poetry produced ‘sensations of pleasure entirely new’ and ‘so exquisitely delightful’ that he ‘continued to read everything of verse kind which fell in [his] way’.

At a similar age to Somerville, Thomas Cooper had his first encounter with Byron’s poetry:

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 *Manfred*. I had them in my hands for only a few hours, and I knew nothing of their noble author’s life or reputation; but they seemed to create a new sense within me. I wanted more poetry to read from that time; but could get hold of none that thrilled through my nature like Byron’s.

A couple of years later as an apprentice shoemaker, Cooper was introduced to the poetry of Burns by his master. As with Somerville the effect was exhilarating – “The pathos of Burns took possession of my whole nature almost as completely as the fire and force of Byron.”

In both cases the encounter with poetry transforms the consciousness of the reader; Somerville refers to new ‘intellectual sensations’, Cooper to the creation of ‘a new sense within me’. This transformation is qualitative and total. It does not alter any specific opinions held by its readers but is

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16 Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper*, 35.
experienced by them as the acquisition of new powers in general. In both cases poetry increases the affective capabilities of its readers, producing ‘new sensations so exquisitely delightful’ for Somerville and ‘thrill[ing] through’ Cooper’s being. The account of poetry’s impact here clearly resembles the account of the ‘emancipatory impact’ of art offered by what Pauline Johnson describes as the ‘felt, radical needs’ school of Marxist aesthetics.¹⁸ The principal proponents of this school, most notably the later Lukács and Marcuse, argue that the richness of the aesthetic moment produces a cathartic experience in which the receptant recognises the creative potentialities and possibilities inherent in social-historical being, namely that life can be different. The cognitive rupture produced by the aesthetic moment is a necessary (but not a sufficient) condition for political action.¹⁹ A sense of the potential political ramifications of the aesthetic is suggested by its appetitive function; the unleashing of an almost insatiable desire for more poetry is recorded by both Somerville and Cooper. It is certainly the case that the psychic structure of Cooper’s desire for poetry (the need to find out more) is instrumental in securing his conversion to Chartism. Sent by his editor to report on a Chartist meeting in Leicester, Cooper begins to talk with some of the stocking weavers and is shocked when he discovers the level of their wages, ‘I felt, therefore, that I must know something more about the real meaning of what they had told me’.²⁰ That desire for ‘more’ simultaneously generated by and initiating a combination of intellectual and emotional needs first unleashed by poetry would, in Cooper’s case, also underpin his conversion to Chartism.

It would, however, be inaccurate to suggest that there existed an unproblematic identity between the aspiring writer and his (less frequently her) community of origin. The pursuit of literary knowledge sometimes required a degree of separation and self-alienation from the community. W. E. Adams, for example, records one such moment of choice:

One Sunday afternoon the usual call was made for a ramble in the fields. Word was sent to the callers that their old companion was not going to join them. I heard from an upper room, not without a certain amount of tremor, their exclamations of surprise. They wandered off into the fields in one direction; I, with a new companion, wandered off into the field in another. My new companion was Young’s Night Thoughts. The old companions were never joined again. A new life had begun.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 43–4 and 99–111. ²⁰ Cooper, The Life of Thomas Cooper, 139.