Introduction: Can a Social Problem Speak?

Tens of thousands of readers encountered Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* and Benjamin Disraeli's *Coningsby* in a context that might surprise contemporary critics. The Chartist weekly the *Northern Star* reviewed and republished portions of the novels in the spring of 1838 and the winter of 1844–45, excerpting the first nine numbers of Dickens's work and adapting the first volume of *Coningsby* to an abridged serial format. As the *Star* boasted a circulation around 10,000 and a readership several times that, a significant portion of the books' audiences read them in this fragmentary form, inflected by the preoccupations of the preeminent working-class radical periodical of the late 1830s and 1840s and surrounded by the *Star*'s running commentary on contemporary literature and politics.[1]

Yet this context for the novels remains largely unknown, in part because literary historians have too readily accepted middle-class writers' description of the gulf separating "the two nations" of rich and poor, assuming that the cultural world of the Victorian middle class remained isolated from working-class print culture until the rise of a new mass culture in the 1860s and later. Disraeli's own account of a fractured social universe appears early in his 1845 novel *Sybil*, when the Owenite journalist Stephen Morley describes the division of the country into classes "between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets" (65–66). Though Disraeli ultimately ironizes Morley's description (Gallagher, *Industrial* 203), similar pronouncements appear in writing across a wide spectrum, including by Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Douglas Jerrold, Charlotte Tonna, and Henry Mayhew. But although these and other authors adopted the guise of brave anthropologists entering a subterranean world when they wrote about the working classes, the cultural reality of social division was different, characterized on both sides by argument,

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contest, parody, and appropriation as much as separation and ignorance. Radical writers closely followed the development of reform-minded fiction; they used popular literary forms for their own ends and recontextualized familiar genres in an oppositional print culture. Middle-class authors learned in turn from experimental writing that appeared in the radical press. Indeed, much of what was most innovative in social problem fiction of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s had its origin in the intersection and collision of these two literary nations.

Realist fiction that raised the debate about the "Condition of England" in the age of industrialization contained within itself a host of stylistic innovations. It expanded the domain of fiction to encompass new aspects of everyday life and a host of topical problems; it pursued an ever more difficult dynamic of formal and social inclusiveness; and it interrogated different forms of allegiance – to class, to community, to nation – even as it moved to view society from a distant, outside perspective (Buzard 171). Each of these aspects can best be understood by examining the complex interplay between middle-class reforming novelists and the print culture successive protest movements fostered. The transaction between the working-class radical press and reforming novelists was complex and contradictory, characterized by violent denunciations and significant borrowings. Popular protest was more than a theme to be analyzed as part of the Condition of England. Radical writers, rather, were treated as social commentators in their own right, sophisticated interlocutors who demanded substantive engagement on both formal and thematic axes.

This introduction explores the cultural resonance of political protest in the early Victorian period from a variety of angles. I begin by outlining some of the most important conflicts of the 1830s and 1840s, particularly the Chartist movement and the struggle against the New Poor Law. Next, I turn to the literary sides of these movements by offering an overview of the experiments in fiction found in the radical press, focusing on revisions to the crucial Victorian genres of melodrama and the *Bildungsroman*. Third, I examine the publishing conventions, consumption patterns, and political context of radical periodical culture. Next, I consider how Chartist periodicals responded to middle-class novelists' efforts to describe social protest movements. Finally, I explore the impact of popular protest on middle-class writing and publishing, examining the way radical writers influenced the development of Condition of England fiction. Throughout, my focus is on the mutual engagement of middle-class and radical writers, the generative exchange that shaped the work of each group.

"*Our* French Revolution"

Chartism, a movement that extended from the late 1830s to the 1850s, sought the expansion of democratic rights as a way to redress social, economic, and political wrongs. It emerged from a variety of other struggles, including the movement for union rights and factory reform; the effort to rescind taxes on the press, which constrained working-class publishing and reading; and the anti-New Poor Law movement. The latter agitation challenged the program of social retrenchment instituted by the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and contested the world view of an increasingly hegemonic political economy. Besides critics of the New Poor Law, Chartism enrolled under its banner republican internationalists, Owenites, unionists, and many other stripes of radicals. It convulsed British society for more than a decade and became a touchstone for describing political upheaval for the rest of the century.

By the 1850s, a Whig version of the recent past had become conventional wisdom. This narrative distinguished Britain from its European neighbors by emphasizing how constitutional freedoms ensured peaceable movement toward reform, avoiding revolution. But only retrospectively did this interpretation take hold. Following the defeat in 1848 of revolution on the continent and Chartism at home, concerted efforts were made to erase the radical past (Haywood, *Revolution* 218–42). These efforts took two main forms: the ironic dismissal of the upheavals of the 1830s and 1840s and broader melioristic accounts of social and political change, both of which can be found in an array of writing from Macaulay's historical opus to *The Times* and *Household Words*. This context rendered it unlikely that the literary culture of (partially) defeated political movements would be transmitted to posterity, especially given the noncanonical nature of their writing, much of which appeared in short-lived journals or in cheap book editions that went quickly out of print.[2] As Margaret Oliphant remarked in 1858 of working-class periodicals, their "flimsy pages [seemed] made to kindle fires withal to-morrow" (202).

Nevertheless, the omission of the radical canon from much modern criticism has had the effect of projecting backward the highly contingent stability of the 1850s onto the whole early Victorian period (and sometimes onto the nineteenth century writ large). Building on groundbreaking work by Louis James and Martha Vicinus, recent scholarship on nineteenth-century radicalism has enlarged our sense of the range of Victorian literature. Ian Haywood, Rob Breton, Margaret Loose, Mike Sanders, and others have investigated the experimental and formally capacious nature

of writing affiliated with working-class social movements. This volume contributes to this growing body of scholarship by taking up the still largely unexplored question of the relationship between the radical canon and more familiar writing by authors such as Gaskell, Dickens, Carlyle, and Martineau.[3]

If commentators in the 1850s congratulated themselves on the stability of British political institutions, the recent past looked different to contemporary observers, who were confronted with successive protest movements forcibly inserting themselves into the public sphere. Abolitionism, the campaign to end the Stamp Acts, the struggle for the Reform Bill, the anti-New Poor Law movement, the agitation to repeal the Corn laws, campaigns against militarism and war, the factory movement, and Chartism, each reshaped British society as they mobilized thousands of participants for sustained periods and won widespread popular support. The mass mobilization of working-class people in the anti-New Poor Law, factory, and Chartist movements appeared particularly troubling to many middle-class observers. Although no Chartist convention declared an alternative Parliament and British sans-culottes only presented petitions when they marched on Westminster, Thomas Carlyle could remark in 1839 that "these Chartisms, Radicalisms, Reform Bill, Tithe Bill . . . are *our* French Revolution" (*English* 192). In the same year as Carlyle's essay, James Kay, the secretary of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education, struck an equally apocalyptic note: "The consequences of permitting another generation to rise, without bending the powers of the executive government and of society to the great work of civilisation and religion, for which the political and social events of every hour make a continual demand, must be a social disquiet little short of revolution" (Kay-Shuttleworth, "Recent" 85) The actions of the state during these tumultuous years further belie *ex post facto* celebrations of consensus and gradualism. The 800 newsvendors and journalists imprisoned in the war of the unstamped; the 1500 people jailed in the Chartist strike wave of 1842; and the nearly 100,000 police, troops, and special constables mobilized to ensure public order in London in April 1848 eloquently testify to how threatening working-class radicalism appeared. Kay, who saw education as the only means to return to rule by moral suasion rather than repressive power, put it grimly: "At this hour military force alone retains in subjection great masses of the operative population, beneath whose outrages, if not thus restrained, the wealth and institutions of society would fall" (Kay-Shuttleworth, "Recent" 88).

Advancing and receding in successive waves, Chartism had three high-water marks. In 1839, 1842, and 1848, the movement presented massive petitions to Parliament that demanded suffrage rights. These documents, each registering more than a million signatures – and more than three million in 1842, gathered by 50,000 people – enunciated the Six Points of the Charter: universal male suffrage, equal electoral districts, annual parliaments, a secret ballot, no property qualification for members of Parliament, and the payment of members. These demands remained central, rendering cohesive a movement that put forward diverse critiques of the British economy and social structure. Although petitioning Parliament was an eminently constitutional strategy, this tactic was supplemented by "auxiliary measures," which sometimes verged on insurrection, most notably the Newport rising of November 1839 in which several thousand armed miners marched on Newport, Wales, and suffered more than twenty casualties at the hands of infantry troops; the 1842 strike wave that involved a half million workers, engulfed the Potteries and Black Country, stilled Lacashire mills, and inspired the riot scenes in *Sybil*; and an alliance with revolutionary Irish Republicans in 1848.

While the planks of the Charter outlined a platform of reform recognizable from the 1770s, the movement was fed by diverse ideological currents. The Chartists asserted the right to the vote was customary, a legacy of free-born Britons usurped by Norman conquerors. To stake the claim of suffrage rights, however, they also turned to Paineite first principles, braiding universalist and constitutionalist discourse in complex patterns (Epstein, *Radical* 17–20). Always eclectic, the movement accommodated patriotic rhetoric side-by-side with strident internationalism. A single issue of a Chartist periodical might recount histories of the lost Saxon democracy and offer a biographical sketch of a Jacobin orator. This ideological diversity led to conflicts, which were heightened by the group's geographic and social breadth. Polemical debates over political violence, the place of culture in a protest campaign, and the role of women in the economy played out in the movement's press and its literature.

Yet Chartism's strength lay in its ability to subsume a variety of grievances – over the New Poor Law, economic inequality, the repression of unions, the persecution of the press, Irish coercion, and expanding police powers – into a unified vision of democratic rule, which adherents believed would enable a fundamental restructuring of society. The scope and ambition of this program separated Chartism from earlier movements, which advocated specific reforms within the context of the established political structure. As Malcolm Chase has pointed out, the term "Charter" quickly

became "shorthand for a whole new political order" (*Chartism* 19). An economic agenda remained entwined with Chartism's explicit demands. The anti-New Poor Law movement lent the Chartists their millenarian rhetoric and commitment to militant direct action (Epstein, *Radical* 12). From the anti-austerity politics of the 1830s through the strike wave of 1842 to the immensely popular Land Plan, which resettled urban operatives in model agricultural communities, economic issues remained constituent.

Chartism, however, was never simply a political or economic movement. On the contrary, its cultural front nourished artistic, educational, and literary activity that sustained the struggle in times of defeat and propelled it forward in periods of resurgence. These endeavors demonstrated the depth of the Chartist critique, how it grappled with questions of alienation and self-realization as well as those of inequality and oppression. Radical reformers organized hundreds of democratic chapels, temperance societies, schools, reading groups, lending libraries, and theatrical clubs as provisional embodiments of the more open and participatory culture they hoped to create (Epstein, "Some" 221–22). In these institutions, the movement drew attention to an array of issues beyond wages and suffrage rights, including the flawed assumptions in current educational provision and the way hierarchy marred art, culture, and worship.

Finally, Chartism was a movement which spawned an extensive literature. Its leaders called openly for the creation of a canon that would reflect the interests of and belong to the working classes. Writers such as Thomas Cooper proclaimed their ambition to "create a literature of [our] own."[4] The Chartists published more than 120 newspapers and journals, ranging from the local *Midland Counties Illuminator* to the regional *Chartist Circular*, which reached most of Scotland, to the *Northern Star* itself, a national organ, which at its height outsold all periodicals in England save *The Times* (Kemnitz 3). The press was critical to Chartism's success, part and parcel of its culture. The organizational network of the unstamped – publishers, booksellers, and agents who risked arrest to produce and distribute illegal papers – helped facilitate the rapid expansion of the new movement (Royle 13). As the struggle matured, the press ensured that local efforts would be identified as part of a common whole by encouraging the diverse groups within the movement – metropolitan artisans, northern mill workers, Welsh miners, Scottish operatives, textile outworkers, and dislocated agricultural laborers – to understand their experience in the light of one another's conditions and efforts (Chase, *Chartism* 17; Janowitz, *Lyric* 134).

Radical Fiction, or, Stories in Search of Their Protagonists

Some of the most dramatic experiments in early Victorian fiction can be found not in *Bentley's Miscellany, Household Words*, and the *Cornhill Magazine* but in such relatively neglected journals as the *Northern Liberator, Cleave's Gazette of Variety*, and *Notes to the People*. Chartist journals teemed with satire, historical fiction, adventure stories, didactic tales, *Bildungsroman*, allegory, romance, and poetry, as well as copious literary criticism. Straddling the demotic world of popular fiction and the respectable milieu of middle-class reforming novelists, radical authors invented syncretic forms that scrutinized the transformations of their industrializing society: picaresques interrupted with montage-like effects, Swiftian satires dense with scientific jargon, travel writing which detailed politicized and allegorical landscapes. As much as any manifesto, this literature reveals the breadth of Chartism, its attempt to imagine a social order on a more humane and egalitarian basis. Fiction and journalism addressed a series of topics beyond the movement's explicit program, including the role of women in politics and the economy; the significance of the colonial system for working-class Britons; and the relationship between education, individual ambition, and mutual improvement.

Although radical writing spurred a huge variety of literary forms, I pay special attention to innovations authors produced in two essential Victorian genres, melodrama and the *Bildungsroman*. In these modes, we see a startling shift from Victorian fiction's characteristic focus on individual personality as writers attempted to create stories capable of narrating the suprapersonal causes of social change. Rob Breton aptly describes Chartist writing as "anti-fiction" for its critique and inversion of many of the conventions of the middle-class novel (1). The fact that social structures constrict and diminish the self in the radical canon, however, affiliates that canon with broad trends in Romantic and Victorian literature. From Scott's indecisive and passive heroes; through Dickens's nondescript protagonists overwhelmed by a gallery of eccentrics; to Hardy's cast of victims pitched about by the forces of biology, economy, and religion, the tension between self-making and determination, subjectivity and circumstance, defines the nineteenth-century novel.

A critical tradition running from Lukács to Raymond Williams, George Levine, and Harry Shaw considers Victorian fiction in terms of such dichotomies. Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many* offers an innovative perspective on this same problematic. Woloch analyzes the relationship between minor characters and protagonists in Austen, Balzac, and Dickens. For Woloch,

minor characters' restricted narrative function makes them, paradoxically, interpretively rich: minorness highlights the contradictory roles all fictional characters inhabit. Simultaneously made to represent a human personality and to function in a narratological scheme (i.e., as a helper or blocking mechanism), secondary characters wear a costume rife with contradiction. As Woloch explicates, the tension between their function as mimetic figures and as supernumeraries subordinated to the plot becomes explosively charged in mid-nineteenth-century fiction. The constrained roles and formulaic descriptions that define minor characters allow Dickens and Balzac to explore social stratification and the "asymmetrical contingency of social connections" (221).

Woloch's frame is useful for approaching the radical canon, which similarly uses the poetics of minorness to meditate on inequality and political exclusion. In Woloch's telling, Dickens's minor characters inscribe the hero's potential insignificance, reminding the reader that only capricious circumstance has saved him from obscure drudgery. Radical writing goes further, sketching a world in which all characters are minor, heroes and villains included. Seeking ways to narrate complex social processes and imagine forms of agency beyond individual actors, Chartist and anti-New Poor Law fiction shows persons thrown up against large abstract forces – hemmed in by the class structure, adrift on the tides of empire, defined by a nation that excludes the majority of its population from citizenship. This canon rejects traditional forms of closure centered on marriage and the discovery of a vocation, refusing to describe futurity in terms of the family and middle-class work. As Breton remarks, the repeated failure of individual protagonists in Chartist fiction underlines how political combination alone "can bring about the social changes needed to precipitate new narratives" (3).

This study explores how dissident authors adapted a variety of narrative forms, often in ways that readjust the attention given to primary characters. Chapter 1 considers William Cobbet's ironic use of gothic iconography in his *History of the Protestant Reformation*, which describes the dissolution of Catholic monasteries in the sixteenth century as the violent founding of modern property relations, in which elites seized vast resources held by the Church on behalf of the poor. Chapter 2 examines anti-New Poor Law short fiction and journalism to ask what happens to melodramatic convention when villainy is situated in the anonymous world of the market rather than with specific malefactors. Chapters 3 and 6 analyze the ways Chartist *Bildungsroman* question the premises of the middle-class novel of development by rendering their protagonists passive objects of social forces rather than self-authoring individuals. In Chapters 4 and 7, the focus shifts

from the radical canon to its impact on middle-class social problem nove-
lists, exploring the engagement of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens
with the writings and world view of Chartist and post-Chartist authors.
Chapter 5 looks at domestic melodrama, investigating how Ernest
Jones's manipulation of seduction plots isolates the structure of the
paternalistic family, not aristocratic debauchees, as the greatest risk to
women's well-being. In each of these cases, authors describe injustice
rooted in fundamental patterns of social organization. In this way,
radical fiction departs from the narrative of Old Corruption, a promi-
nent current in radical thought, which blamed social ills on the depreda-
tions of a grasping elite.[5]

Fiction in the radical press exhibits a complex relationship to literary
convention. At times it copies the plot formulas, moralizing didacticism,
and character archetypes of the newly ascendant mass-market periodicals.
But more frequently it turns expected practice on its head.[6] Reworking
popular and respectable genres, Chartist writers tease out the tensions and
contradictions inherent within them. Ernest Jones's adventure stories, for
example, share with theatrical melodrama a Manicheanistic moral outlook,
a preponderance of *coups de théâtre*, and a penchant for scenes of physical
suffering. At the same time, Jones's stories drastically reduce the role of the
villain, a startling innovation given that character's typical centrality.
Instead of presenting diabolic outsiders, Jones places his villains in quoti-
dian contexts, revealing the kinds of institutional power upon which they
depend. The fluency with which Jones keeps intact other melodramatic
conventions while transforming Byronic supermen into the mere benefi-
ciaries of the class system suggests that melodrama as a whole was more
capable of analyzing systemic forces than conventional critical wisdom
indicates. Similarly, anti-New Poor Law satire moves between promoting a
"melodramatic" vision of social harm, in which malevolent individuals
wreak widespread destruction, and a view which grapples with the circui-
tous causality of a laissez-faire market, in which the authorship of injury
can only with difficulty be ascribed to particular agents.

Radical authors were more conflicted about the conventions of the
Bildungsroman and sought to unravel the uneasy synthesis of self-making
and social integration that middle-class versions of the genre stitch
together. "Merrie England – No More!" – a short story in Thomas
Cooper's *Wise Saws and Modern Instances* (1845) – recounts the attempted
departure of a young man from his impoverished village, but it does so
from the surprising vantage point of his father and neighbors. Inverting the
significance of this stock episode of the novel of development, Cooper

criticizes a narrative structure that equates self-realization with the slough-
ing off of childhood bonds. *Sunshine and Shadow* (1849–50) by Thomas
Martin Wheeler similarly rewrites narratives of individual self-making. It
utilizes the passive protagonist of picaresque in a story that is itinerant,
episodic, and fractured. The novel's unusual textual geography decenters
its genre's national commitments. Instead of tracing a youth's journey
from the provinces to the capital and dwelling on his experiences there,
Wheeler has his hero sojourn in the Caribbean and Europe. By demoting
London from destination to station along the way, *Sunshine and Shadow*
asks what it means to come of age in a nation that is an imperial power,
especially for a working-class hero who cannot identify with the empire's
prestige and receives little benefit from its promise of wealth.[7]

   As the previous thumbnail sketches suggest, the radical canon was
syncretic. It existed on a borderline between respectable forms of middle-
class fiction and the sensational and prurient genres of melodrama and
penny bloods. Agnus Reach's description of Abel Heywood's Manchester
bookstore evocatively captures the "literary chaos" that formed the wider
context of radical writing: "Masses of penny novels and comic song and
recitation books are jumbled with sectarian pamphlets and democratic
essays . . . Double-columned translations from Sue, Dumas, Sand, Paul
Feval and Frederic Soutie jostle with dream-books, scriptural commen-
taries . . . and quantities of cheap music, Sacred Melodists and Little
Warblers" (38). Chartist authors such as Wheeler and Jones learned from
the formally capacious novels of Disraeli, Dickens, and Jerrold a journal-
istic sensibility, a highly rhetorical style of address, detailed focus on
domestic settings, and a belief that fiction could intervene in the broader
social and political world. At the same time, they adapted formulas from
the popular stage and cheap serial novels, the media with which the
movement press competed most directly for its audience. These genres in
turn had absorbed impetuses from the Gothic, and one can trace how
Gothic paranoia, disorientation, and unstable characterization reemerge in
the radical canon, especially the writing of Ernest Jones and G. W. M.
Reynolds. It is fitting that a literature born of the revolutionary decades at
the end of the eighteenth century bequeathed its sensibilities to fiction
arising from the political crises of the 1830s to 1850s. Yet when the Gothic
returned it did so with a difference: in early Victorian literature the world
of vice and violence is contemporary, not a phantasmagoric image of the
feudal past. By combining the obsessions, claustrophobia, and bewilder-
ment of the Gothic with quotidian renditions of work and home, Chartist
and anti-New Poor Law fiction anticipated the sensation subgenre of the