



Article

From Politics to Pope: An Account of the Group Aesthetic

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Abstract: This paper discusses the study of Chartist and working-class literatures, noting that the pronounced development of aesthetic criticism in these areas uncomfortably corresponds with the rejection of “aesthetics” in other fields. Chartist, working-class, and laboring-class scholars have broken free from monolithically sociological or political readings that only a generation ago too often dismissed artistic endeavors as, at best, merely a re-accenting of the mainstream. Current studies focus on the aesthetic innovations that emerged out of working-class entanglements with mainstream counterparts. The paper argues that the rejection of “aesthetics” generally fails to recognize marginalized and group aesthetics (including the critical work done on marginalized and group aesthetics) and specifically what it meant for a political cohort—the Chartists are my example—to think aesthetically.

Keywords: Chartism; nineteenth-century working-class studies; literary aesthetics; political art; Thomas Cooper

1. Introduction

Chartism was undoubtedly one of the largest, longest-lasting, and significant working-class movements in nineteenth-century Britain. Its principal objective was to expand the franchise while reforming the electoral and parliamentary systems, but as historians have almost universally noted ever since Robert Gammage’s first *History of the Chartist Movement, 1837–1854* (1854), it was also very much a cultural movement, with Chartist lending libraries, theatrical clubs, an enormous radical press, and so on. With such emphasis placed on establishing or confirming an independent working-class culture, Chartists were acutely aware of the need to develop their own literary aesthetic as well, or as Thomas Cooper put it in *Cooper’s Journal*, 2 March 1850, “a literature of your own. Your own prose, your own poetry: you ought to be resolved to create these”. But when Cooper declared that “it now becomes a matter of the highest necessity, that you all join hands and heads to create a literature of your own”, he was primarily encouraging workingmen to write according to their trades and to send their contributions to local periodicals (Cooper 1850, p. 130). Foremost on his mind was the need for alternative content: framework-knitters would “serve the great purpose of exposing the wrongs of toilers in those important districts, and of binding the injured more firmly together for the redress of their grievances” (ibid., p. 130). But Cooper goes beyond calling for more politics, stating that “the continued use of brain and pen, by writers in these local papers, is sure, eventually, to call forth their essays in a higher range of thought” (ibid., p. 130). He proceeds to speak of the subsequent development of “real taste and intelligence”, of “thoughts which are truly refined and elevating” (ibid., p. 130). When Cooper turns to the subject of “true poetry”, and to the development of “style”, accenting syllables and so forth, he ignores questions of content altogether, clearly having aesthetic development in mind.

At the end of the essay, in fact, he suggests that his working-class readers aspire to and model their work on Alexander Pope, adding that he only makes these suggestions “for the muse herself and a natural wish to see her becomingly wooed, while her lovers are being multiplied” (ibid., p. 132). Cooper’s claim that from class-based, occupation-specific, political-focused, locally minded writing—a “working-class consciousness”—can emerge a universalist, disinterested, properly Kantian aesthetics, or at least a sophisticated aesthetics that seems as if designed to eschew the political, deserves some attention. The essay, the third in a series of “Letters” in Cooper’s own *Cooper’s Journal* called “To the Young Men of the Working Classes”, ends up echoing the tension to be found while reading together the sophisticated versification of his most famous poem, “The Purgatory of Suicides” (1845) and the everyday discourses in his short-story collection, *Wise Saws and Modern Instances* (1845), both of which were written while Cooper was imprisoned in Stafford Gaol. The strangeness of his approach to the development of a working-class aesthetics did not seem to worry Cooper, whose journal was subtitled “or, Unfettered Speaker, and Plain Speaker for Truth, Freedom, and Progress” but is chock-full of poetry and erudite “Thinkings” from Milton, Shelley, Carlyle, Locke, as well as “A Power-Loom Weaver” and many other working-class poets. Yet it might be considered as symptomatic of a definitional problem in the study of aesthetics that haunts some literary critics to this day: is “aesthetics” the study of “the beautiful” (for Cooper, poetry) or is it the study of form, “a literature of your own”? Can aesthetics tolerate a double meaning? Can it tolerate its pluralization? When we speak about aesthetics or an aesthetic experience, are we compelled to have a single designation in mind? What are the implications if we speak of a feminist aesthetic, a working-class aesthetic, or a framework-knitter’s aesthetic? If we do so, do we, like Cooper, end up defining the group’s product by its formal or political properties while the transcendent, individualist aesthetic—Pope—is defined by beauty and the satisfaction of the muse? Or perhaps the literatures produced by a politically defined cohort are simply a “tradition”, part of a “movement” or a “practice” and aesthetic judgements can be made of them from within that description, appealing to modified, specialized but nonetheless qualitative criteria? With the enormous recovery work taking place today on various kinds of working-class writing, the questions take on some urgency. How do we approach the literary activities of a specific political group—the Chartists will be my example—who by definition reject disinterestedness, singularity, specialness, and the conventional markers of aesthetic achievement, except when they don’t?

The goal of the paper is to start to bring two conversations together, one that is taking place on aesthetic criticism and one that is taking place among those who study working-class and especially Chartist literatures. What I hope to show is that there has been a response to the questioning of whether an “aesthetics of literature is possible and worthwhile” in the renewed and reinvigorated fields of working-class literature (Lamarque 2008, p. 6). Peter Lamarque’s query emerges from an observation that “literary critics on the whole show a marked reluctance to acknowledge the relevance of aesthetics to literature” (ibid., p. 1). But the exact opposite is true with the study of working-class literatures today, where aesthetic study, though defined somewhat differently from the definition of it that Lamarque provides, is experiencing unprecedented attention. Jennie Batchelor, for example, speaks of the “privileging of aesthetics over politics . . . to redress an imbalance in scholarship” which for years approached working-class writing politically, sociologically, or biographically, just never artistically (Batchelor 2017, p. 13). Critics of working-class writing see the dichotomizing of political and artistic aspiration as creating a false opposite. The idea of a group or shared aesthetic—not an aesthetic that forms a group, but a political grouping that forms an aesthetic—is not necessarily the aesthetics that Steve Connor and others would abandon or is responsible for the “flight from the aesthetic” that Lamarque describes (Lamarque 2008, p. 3). But the rejection of aesthetics at the precise moment that marginalized literatures are finally being read for their aesthetic qualities—though rarely if ever in isolation from their politics—is simply too reminiscent of “the death of the author” just as women writers, gay writers, and working-class writers were coming into some prominence 50 years ago.

2. Critical Histories

The case has been made numerous times that, when “aesthetics” is understood not in the narrow sense of Kantian beauty but as a shared imaginative or creative act, it is inherently political, potentially “emancipatory” (Armstrong 2000), a word Isobel Armstrong uses in *The Radical Aesthetic* to address the “anti-aesthetic” turn in criticism. Jacques Rancière, for example, argues that “aesthetic acts . . . create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity”, as both art and politics imagine and can re-imagine “what is done and what can be done” (Rancière 2004, pp. 9, 39). Following this conceptualization, aesthetics in a number of ways might be understood as more important to groups than to the individual. It is notable that Rancière’s argument has been taken up by a number of critics who study working-class and Chartist literature, especially Mike Sanders, who looks at the Chartist imaginary as shaping Chartist politics, meaning “the political and the aesthetic are not just closely related concepts but are thoroughly imbricated practices” (Sanders 2009, p. 3). Over 30 years ago, Brain Maidment in *The Poorhouse Fugitives* insisted that Chartist critics go beyond the “narrowly political” as that “denies the importance of literary allusion and tradition, and in addition oversimplifies the complexity of literary discourse as an aspect of class formation” (Maidment 1992, p. 24). Equally as important to the understanding of a Chartist poetics that is inseparable from the political is Anne Janowitz’s *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*. Janowitz begins by reconfiguring the Romantic lyric as a dialectic between communitarianism and individualism. The Romantic lyric is then shown as enabling Chartist poets to think through the idea of a working-class identity by simultaneously defining working-class aesthetics and political ambitions. She details how “Chartism as a social and political movement made itself culturally intelligible to its constituencies through its use of poetry” (Janowitz 1998, pp. 137–38). Janowitz, Sanders, and Maidment, however, were focused on poetry, where aesthetics has always had a more hospitable welcoming than in the study of fiction. Chartist poetry was seen for years as more important to Chartism than its fiction, though with the recent surge in studies of Chartist fiction, thanks to Ian Haywood’s groundbreaking work on it, this assumption also might be in the process of being reassessed. Chartist fiction, however, before Haywood, suffered a more censorious critical history than Chartist poetry, and it is only very recently that its aesthetic value, like the aesthetic value of working-class literature more broadly, has been considered.

Early criticism of Chartist fiction was generally divided into two. First, it was historical, focusing on the Thompsonian task of recovering and contextualizing a lost tradition. The study of radical fiction might have been divorced from aesthetic discourse at this point because of its early affiliation with the development of cultural studies coming out of England in the 1960s, and the assumption that cultural studies is uninterested in aesthetics. Though the cultural studies emerging out of Williams and Thompson might be understood rather as an attempt to extend aesthetic considerations to politically driven expressions and experiences beyond that which had been practiced in traditional aesthetics, undoubtedly the aesthetics of the fiction was often ignored, somewhat understandably, because of the political epistemology of the material. But the second approach to Chartist fiction, by the few who did offer an aesthetic critique of it, judged it only in relation to “great works”. Y.V. Kovalev, for example, one of the first to write on Chartist fiction, says,

many of them [authors of the fiction] did not manage to put their ideas into artistic form, and then their works turned into a mechanical union of political tract and some sentimental story. The absence of any organic unity between the form, subject, and ideas contained in a work naturally destroyed its literary value. There were quite a large number of such “works”, and only a comparatively small number of the novels and stories written by the Chartists are of literary value. (Kovalev 1958, p. 138)

Jack Mitchell, a Marxist literary scholar, also pursued aesthetic commentary, saying that Chartist authors attached “themselves to the fashionable love, mystery and adventure plot of the third-rate literature of the day rather than to those elements in the great realist tradition which could have provided them with a fruitful foundation” (Mitchell 1975, p. 258). Mitchell treats the political

material of the fiction, the “unrelieved hell-on-earth misery, oppression, unemployment, starvation and death”, as an aesthetic fault (ibid., p. 259). Other critics continued to judge the fiction as second rate because of what they saw as an attempt to mimic popular writing, essentially insisting that Chartist fiction was just badly derivative. Steve Devereux argues that, “In order to write popular fiction (and no other form of fiction could reach the intended audience), [Chartist writers] had little choice but to rehearse an established set of codes, to fulfill a contract to meet their readers’ expectations (and with serialized fiction, this contract had to be renewed with each installment)” (Devereux 1996, p. 146). Peter Hitchcock argues that the literary expression of the working classes more generally is “bound by a dependence on received, or traditional, literary forms. The literature of labour can in neither case be considered autonomous or specific in purely formal terms” (Hitchcock 1989, p. 8). He goes on to say that, “in a society where working-class expression was looked upon with suspicion, any challenge on the terrain of the Victorian bourgeois cultural form, the novel, would have taken an artistic acumen and determination far in excess of the attempts that have so far been recorded” (ibid., p. 16). Bernard Sharratt maintains that working-class literature is constituted from “devices [that] have been developed within the classical bourgeois novel” (Sharratt 1988, p. 103). And even Martha Vicinus says that Chartists “hoped to fulfill the aesthetic precepts they had learned from the mainstream of English literature”, noting also that “Chartist novelists readily borrowed the conventions of popular fiction” (Vicinus 1974, pp. 10, 95).

Behind much of this criticism is Raymond Williams’s idea of hegemony and, with nineteenth-century working-class culture on his mind, his dampening notion that

The making of new social values and institutions far outpaced the making of strictly cultural institutions, while specific cultural contributions, though significant, were less vigorous and autonomous than either general or institutional innovation. A new class is always a source of emergent cultural practice, but while it is still, as a class, relatively subordinate, this is always likely to be uneven and is certain to be incomplete. (Williams 1977, p. 124)

Today this line of criticism is at least implicitly challenged by critics who are finding more and more ways in which aesthetic innovations of the emergent fiction spoke to, with, and against the dominant literature of the day. Gregory Vargo, for example, argues that

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. (Vargo 2018, p. 2)

This shift to understanding more complex outcomes from Chartist and middle-class artistic entanglements—borrowings, reworkings, and rejections—necessarily invites aesthetic criticism. In her book on the Chartist imaginary, Margaret Loose bases her readings of Chartist aesthetics on the idea that Chartist “art was a site of political debate” (Loose 2014, p. 3). She sets out to read “Chartist literature more for its literary techniques and engagements than for its historical accounts or overtly political themes” (ibid., p. 9). John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan’s 2017 collection of essays, *A History of British Working Class Literature*, looks at the way laboring-class writers, mostly poets, have been making formal or aesthetic innovations for over 300 years, and how these writers were engaged with broader literary communities and traditions. Aesthetics, in other words, for critics engaged with the cultural works of a political movement and the individual artists who explicitly link themselves to that movement, has been decoupled from Kantian or universalist associations of evaluation, quality, and taste, but those critics nonetheless insist upon approaching the material aesthetically, even asking “were they any good?” on occasion (Landry 2017, p. xix). Assuming the position that working-class writers were entwined with other literary communities

while insisting upon an inevitable dissention from the mainstream requires the study of a plurality and not a hierarchy of aesthetics. An aestheticism that acclaims singularity—including the “modern aesthetics” of Jean-François Lyotard and Giorgio Agamben—sends the most politically explicit art, the art to further a specific social cause, into a political corner, denying or further minimizing the artistic and counter-cultural aspirations of the Chartist, working-class, or group aesthetic, but it would also deny that the dominant aesthetic is a group aesthetic. Criticism that engages with the most expressly political material has taken to separating out the political and sociological (or biographical) from the artistic but only so as to understand how the artistic shapes the political, sociological (and biographical). As Donna Landry argues in the “Foreword” to *A History of British Working Class Literature*, “Aesthetics and politics need to be understood as distinct categories of analysis and experience. Yet, that they can never be entirely severed from one another remains a lesson and a revelation delivered by working class writing” (ibid., p. xxii). Breakthroughs in historical discovery work have produced or provided access to an abundance of new materials to study. Emerging out of much of this archival work is an interest in the unique and divergent aesthetic features and qualities of working-class expression, creating opportunities for more and more aesthetical comparative analysis.

3. Distinctions

Perhaps what has altered the most in the study of working-class aesthetics is a new openness to valuing working-class literature so that Vargo, for example, can now speak of a “radical canon” or Kerri Andrews can rightly claim that scholars are “now increasingly willing to consider laboring class poets as, first and foremost, *poets*, with aesthetic, intellectual, and professional ambitions which we ought to, indeed *need to*, take into account” (Andrews 2017, p. 85). Pierre Bourdieu’s work on working-class aesthetics is generally dismissive of working-class production, as his focus is more on consumption habits, situating the working-class culture of the necessary—preferences that arise in adapting to scarcity—against middle-class disinterestedness and the cover for class interests that it provides. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that working-class culture is “constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 41). This is not, strictly speaking, entirely relevant to the recent developments in the aesthetic study of working-class writing as Bourdieu’s assumption is that the products working-classes consume are simply not worthy of aesthetic study. Bourdieu only sees in the working-class habitus—“Being the product of the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence, it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others” (ibid., p. 56)—a rejection or negation of the middle-class aesthetic and its ethos of disinterestedness. Working-class art is reduced to “a foil, a negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves, by successive negations” (ibid., p. 57). Later in this paper, I will discuss the importance of accepting the cultural confrontation of the “vulgar” as an aesthetic act, but Bourdieu’s treatment of working-class taste as essentially an anti-aesthetic or merely an aesthetic of *ressentiment* is not easily imported into working-class literary studies where the emphasis is more and more on the complexity of the entanglements between and among differing aesthetic groups and the growing appreciation not only of difference but of artistry in its own right as well.

In some ways this diversification in the study of aesthetics has itself become standard. Sam Rose notes that

Aesthetics is no longer necessarily seen as either Kantian or universalist. Many scholars have long made the case for pluralism, constructivism, and even out-and-out relativism about interpretation. The feminist critique of universalist assumptions about taste and judgement, for example, is now a widely acknowledged part of the standard story of the development of aesthetics (being within rather than against aesthetics as it now exists as a practice). (Rose 2017, p. 233)

Lamarque might agree, saying that “Aesthetic characterisations are not always or only ways of evaluating works; they also have implications for how the work appears, what impact it has, what is salient in it, what merits aesthetic attention. Aesthetic descriptions bring such matters to light” (Lamarque 2008, p. 6). This definitional turn in aesthetic criticism has only recently made its way to working-class writing, allowing it to be opened up to what was once reserved for “elite” individual artists. But it is not only because of this definitional shift that aesthetics is now available to working-class studies. As Donna Landry and William J. Christmas say in the introduction to their special issues of *Criticism* on the aesthetic achievements of working-class writers, “It is now surely time to attempt the properly aesthetic critical work that these new poems and new poets require in order to recapture something of their dynamic history as distinctive and often innovative artistic voices” (Landry and Christmas 2005, p. 415). It is becoming acceptable, that is, to say or at least to imply that “this is good” (or bad) and not good only insofar as it furthers a political agenda or is interesting and so demands study, but good because it might be argued to be artistically better (or more innovative) than something else. The paradigmatic shift towards a liberalization or multiplication of the concept of aesthetics that accepts flexibility in the usage of the term resembles Cooper’s assumptions in his essay as he moves from politics to Pope. Landry and Christmas observe that “the poets about whom they write are at least as compelled by aesthetic motivations and ambitions as by political or social imperatives” (ibid., p. 419); aesthetic criticism among critics of working-class literatures is increasingly the examination of those “motivations and ambitions” in relation to but not always subordinate to those “imperatives”.

Still, part of the shift towards aesthetic approaches to working-class writing theoretically acts to degroup the authors and depoliticize the material. But it should be possible to think aesthetically about fiction that groups itself around a political cause, and that a group can be just as motivated by aesthetic ambitions as an individual. The aesthetic might always be tied to the political cause, but that does not mean that it cannot develop and change. Though generally studied separately, critics have demonstrated that both Chartist poetry and fiction varied and developed over time, that they were contested fields responding to internal and external historical forces and, equally, internal and external aesthetic or cultural developments. Anne Janowitz, for example, details how at a certain moment Chartist poetics shifted from commemorating the work of mostly amateur and often anonymous poets to lionizing the “laureates of labour”, Cooper and Ernest Jones. Similarly, Loose (2014) and Vanden Bossche (2014) both demonstrate that Chartism’s literary efforts adapted to a broad range of historical developments, affecting those developments in their own turn. Vargo looks specifically at the way Chartist writers interacted with mainstream Victorian writers, affecting them as they were themselves affected by literary developments. When Chartists rejected what they understood as the function of the middle-class aesthetic, its underlying universalistic politics (which were not universal at all), they were also signalling an attempt to imagine new and different aesthetics to channel a new and different politics. On the one hand, as Sanders says,

Chartism possessed a deep-seated, almost instinctual (and certainly non-theorized) apprehension that the aesthetic was a necessary part of any resistance to utilitarianism and laissez-faire economics: both of which were blighting working-class lives in the 1840s and both of which were notoriously hostile to notions of aesthetic value . . . it is not difficult to see how ideas of craft and skill in the labour process might intersect with ideas of aesthetic value. (Sanders 2009, p. 19)

On the other hand, Chartists also rejected the mainstream, humanitarian response to the utility-mindedness of Victorian economics, the rejection of utilitarianism that privileged art for its own sake or the literature that advertised the effectiveness of middle-class caritas; again, it is not difficult to see how those most directly involved in labour processes would support the making of useful things. William Thomson, the editor of the *Chartist Circular*, declared in the 30 January 1841 issue that “I do not know anything more essential for the improvement of mankind—the just appreciation of character and the elevation of the masses to their natural status in society, than a Radical Literary Reform”.

The aesthetic of much mainstream fiction was thought to be in opposition to Chartism's political interests, while political interests were understood as inseparable from aesthetic form. For Chartists, the aesthetic was situational, contingent, relational, oppositional, and political, the opposite of what defined "the aesthetic"; the demonstration of a divergent but responsive and malleable group aesthetic was an opportunity to demonstrate a divergent or oppositional politics.

Chartist literary reform, that is, understood the importance of considering the aesthetic with the political. Critics of working-class literature almost universally do so as well, except perhaps when it comes to the most melodramatic Chartist fiction by G.W.M. Reynolds or Ernest Jones, fiction that makes artistic appreciation difficult by frequently employing predictable generic imperatives. As Sally Ledger confirms, "Chartism's turn to the popular was inspired by the need to compete with the new commercial popular press that developed in the 1840s and whose political clout among the masses was to become nothing less than awesome" (Ledger 2002, p. 32). But again it would be devastating for the contemporary critic to ignore the aesthetic at this juncture, for doing so would essentially amount to splitting off cultural confrontations from political ones, or ignoring cultural confrontations altogether. The developing popular aesthetic of the 1840s is often seen as a site of engagement against the culture of the dominant. Rosalind Crone sees cultural confrontations as "flying in the face of an increasingly prominent or even hegemonic culture supported by the new middle class and characterized by restraint and respectability" (Crone 2010, p. 78). Melodrama and the penny bloods of the 1840s have provided critics with glimpses into the relationship between class preferences and class differentiation. For Crone and others, the extent of the class-based subversiveness is not expressly political, but limited to what David Vincent calls "the new aesthetic", which is as far away from the "beautiful" as imaginable (Vincent 1993, p. 205). But they argue that it is primarily the aesthetic of the penny bloods, for example, that is socially disruptive: the excess or carnivalesque of plebeian culture as an aesthetic assertion against polite society. As Williams says, "the dulling, the lulling, the chiming, the overbearing . . . are also in real terms aesthetic experiences" (Williams 1977, p. 156). Ignoring this non-aesthetic aesthetic as an aesthetic, much like ignoring the aestheticism of the Chartists that seeks to demonstrate an autonomous culture, would amount to separating politics and culture, denying or marginalizing an enormously significant field on which both social and personal battles emerged. For Chartists and working people after the failure of the 1832 Reform Bill to increase the franchise to the vast majority of the nation, indicating differing aesthetic taste was a symbolic pronouncement that working people and the newly enfranchised did not have "mutual interests" and that working people were thus not in any genuine way represented in parliament.

The wholesale rejection of aesthetics is mostly commonly based on the idea that it represents the elevation of elite tastes, connoisseurs: that only trained experts know how to appreciate quality or use aesthetic terms correctly. The aesthetics of working-class writing—and especially popular fiction—are not necessarily what Steve Connor has in mind when he says he would gleefully rid the world of "'art' or Art—that is to say the idea or ideology of art, the set of more-or-less delirious beliefs that we hold or allow about the sorts of things that art is able to do simply by dint of being art, or any version of the thing we may severally or synchronously imagine 'art' to be" (Connor 2009). Rose complains that Connor operates under "the narrowest conception of aesthetics" (Rose 2017, p. 225), but in a way, Connor, who would allow people to attend the opera or break dance, casts his nets quite widely. Ironically, in order to reject the concept of "the aesthetic", it first has to be universalized, degrouped, and made singular. Rose also notes that the rejection of aesthetics in Connor's work and elsewhere follows the reduction of aesthetics "to one or other arguably contingent associations, then dismissed wholesale on that basis" (ibid., p. 224). Connor is mostly concerned with definitions, but the rejection of "aesthetics" most typically begins by presuming the study of art to be monopolized or dominated by socially conservative elites which would legitimize the assumed refinement and cultural power of the well-bred, acknowledging the crucial argument that claims to cultural power are at one and the same time claims to political power but only applying that maxim to those in or with power. It would not do to simply change the nomenclature, which would preserve a Kantian mist of beauty around some

works of art while alternative aesthetics would not be examined for their aesthetics, for their ability to initiate cultural challenges, to create a “voice”, or to give pleasure to a particular cohort. Engaging in aesthetic criticism is especially relevant at the margins of literary and political acceptance, in part because marginal groups, like the Chartist, so frequently respond to political conflicts by willing an alternative aesthetic, deliberately attempting to engage audiences politically through aesthetic innovation. The rejection of aesthetics as a field of study, especially if it has been ushered in to enable the politicization of criticism or because aesthetic criticism is supposed to be reactionary, is not just throwing the baby out with the bathwater, it is refusing to acknowledge one of the main ways by which subordinated groups *act* politically.

What then of the working-class artists wishing to achieve aesthetic success not among framework-knitters, but among Popes? Must they be ghettoized, asterisked to subcategory? As Rose says, “a redeemed aesthetics buys its newfound recovery and rejuvenation at the expense of a stable identity or subject matter” (ibid., p. 224). The lesson gleaned from cultural studies might be that true activist art, art with specific concerns, cannot be evaluated only artistically because it does not exist only artistically and without reference to context, but isolating a Pope from history should be just as problematic. Charles Altieri’s view of aesthetics as a form of action or interaction, “not pictures that have to stand apart”, is useful. He sees a revised aesthetics as “less a claim to recover or adjudicate the specialness of things as things than it is a claim to map out means of appreciating how artists compose modes of attention and develop possibilities for intensely engaging in particular situations” (Altieri 2011, p. 84). This is precisely what is taking place in working-class and especially Chartist studies. The “uncoupling of ‘Kant’ from the old idea of ‘the aesthetic’ as a unique and singular form of experience” (Rose 2017, p. 229) is something that is widely accepted today in the study of working-class writing which treats the aesthetic and aesthetic experiences as part of the historical moment, as an act shaping the historical moment, engaging in a very particular situation. Again, Mike Sanders’s remarkable study of Chartist poetry looks at the ways in which it helped structure Chartist politics and was not simply a means of remembrance on the heels of the properly historical moment. Instead of seeing the aesthetic as cultural dressing, that is, Sanders documents its agentic force. The “concept of action” that Altieri would bring to aesthetics is already accepted in today’s working-class studies.

Altieri confirms the way of thinking that allows for a contingent aesthetics by agreeing with Steve Conner’s argument on “the impossibility and absurdity of trying to use ‘the aesthetic’ to say anything interesting that can be relevant to all art objects as objects” (Altieri 2011, p. 81). One of the implications of treating aesthetics as the historicized, localized how and why of meaning is that interesting things might be said about the aesthetic quality or function of a specific group’s art, for literature that is inherently and narrowly political, even that which is sheer propaganda. The “apoliticizing” of aesthetic criticism no longer troubles working-class literary studies, the study of the kinds of literature that would be almost immediately excluded from a positive aesthetic review (in the way that Chartist fiction was first approached), because its practitioners have accepted the pluralization of aesthetics. Yet the responses to Connor’s work from Sam Rose or Charles Altieri suggest that the view of aesthetics as involving the kind of authoritative aesthetic judgements that might perpetuate authoritarian, evaluative criticism (or authoritarian social relations) is still driving the conversation around “aesthetics”. The example from literary criticism as provided by those studying working-class writing might demonstrate that we can return to aesthetics precisely in order to overturn authoritarian criticism (and social relations).

4. Cooper’s Aesthetics

The simultaneous rejection of “aesthetics”—a rejection, simply put, only of its pretentiousness and the arrogance in dehistoricizing or decontextualizing artistic works—and reacceptance of it brings us back to Thomas Cooper who seems to reject “aesthetics” by calling for “a literature of your own” and welcome it by suggesting that developing a localized print culture will lead to working-class Popes.

Cooper began his career as a Chartist following Feargus O'Connor and proponents of "physical-force" Chartism. Charged for sedition and conspiracy after making speeches favoring a general strike during the "Plug Plot" riots of 1842, he spent two years in Stafford Gaol where he wrote "The Purgatory of Suicides", a studious, epic poem of 963 Spenserean stanzas (8667 lines of poetry). He would also become a "moral-force" Chartist during his internment, perhaps part of the reason he leans towards classicism at this juncture and less to the Romanticism that inspired so many other Chartist poets. Sanders points out that the poem has often been seen as high-brow, "self-promoting, possibly even a self-aggrandizing display of classical knowledge" (Sanders 2017, p. 228). The poem shifts between visions of Greek, Roman, and Christian figures debating democracy to Cooper's own philosophical thoughts while in his cell. Loose argues that "the choice of poetic form . . . was itself not only an assertion of working-class pride but also a daring political statement of Chartism's rightful place in the annals of Britain" (Loose 2014, p. 45). She further argues that the aesthetic is central to the poem's meaning, saying, "Cooper's formal choices, over and above the explicit content of the poem, serve to confer on the Chartist cause authority, confidence, and respect for historical knowledge—essential equipment for a national movement" (ibid., p. 46). Sanders also demonstrates the political value of Cooper's aesthetics, arguing that the aesthetic display in the poem "might be read as an attempt to democratize 'elite' knowledge, as Cooper takes and demystifies forms of knowledge which had previously been the preserve of the privileged" (Sanders 2017, pp. 228–29). Still, Cooper has been accused of writing verse that aspired to a middle-class audience. Martha Vicinus argues that Cooper was trying to impress his "betters" and that he was "trapped by his painfully acquired learning and his middle-class aesthetics" (Vicinus 1974, p. 45). Vargo points out that the poem "made Cooper a minor celebrity in the world of middle-class literary reformers, who praised his artistic and educational accomplishments" (Vargo 2011, p. 167). Cooper was proudly an autodidact and the poem was proof of his accomplishments. It demonstrates Cooper's learning but also his comfort with "high", undeniably ornate aesthetics:

Poet of Paradise,—whose glory illumed
 My path of youthful penury, till grew
 The desert to a garden, and Life bloomed
 With hope and joy, 'midst suffering,—honour due
 I cannot render thee; but reverence true
 This heart shall give thee, till it reach the verge
 Where human splendours lose their lustrous hue;
 And, when, in death, mortal joys all merge
 Thy grand and gorgeous music, Milton, be my dirge!

In stark contrast, Cooper's 23 short stories in *Wide Saws and Modern Instances*, all but three of which written when he was in the same Stafford cell, adopt "plain words" to avoid any "Inflation of expression", part of the advice he would later give to the "Young Men of the Working Classes" in *Cooper's Journal* before outlining how this can develop into a Pope (Cooper 1850, p. 131). As Vargo says, "Cooper's prose work is the formal and thematic negation of his epic" (Vargo 2018, p. 101). In one of the stories, "The Lad who Felt like a Fish out of Water", simplicity is offered as an alternative to the aesthetic and cultural pretensions of the middle classes. The story nevertheless explicitly promotes working-class cultural elevation and education. Diggory Lawson, the "lad", educates himself by observing artisanal activities and celebrating nature. But he spends his leisure hours learning to appreciate literature. When his parents decide to make him a gentleman, and push him to learn the respectable pretenses of the bourgeoisie, he becomes the "fish out of water", unable to comprehend and accept the aesthetic snobbery of a Mrs. Strutabout and her daughters. Being an autodidact like Cooper himself, Dig knows of Socrates and Napoleon but he is tongue-tied by the air of sophistication in his new surroundings. At the end of the story, Diggory returns to his family and simple living, "happier every day" and content to be a "plain speaker" (Cooper 1845, p. 83), but still benefitting from his knowledge of "great works". Most of the stories in the collection describe various threats

to “self-culture”—the term Cooper also uses for trade- and location-specific identity in his essay in *Cooper’s Journal* (Cooper 1850, p. 129).

It is not impossible to see some points of connection between the story and the poem, especially if following Vargo’s reading of the poem that sees in it an “attempt to lay claim to a classical cultural heritage [which] is also consistent with the faith it articulates in the emancipatory power of learning. The final book forecasts that an enlightened people will one day emerge as their own liberators” (Vargo 2018, p. 101). Aesthetically, however, the poem and story are night and day, seemingly as paradoxical as Cooper’s desire for direct, political language that shows the way to Pope. The story is written simply, with many rural expressions, matching the message of the dignity of humble, simple living. As Loose points out, the poem is not only about the importance of knowledge and education, but it also argues the need for “aesthetic knowledge” (Loose 2014, p. 58). The story does as well, and though it promotes the study of the Greeks and Romans (interestingly, Dig especially studies military leaders), it insists that the expression of that learning needs to be kept simple. Cooper may be privileging poetry over prose, reserving “properly aesthetic” expression for the former. In the “Advertisement” for the collection, he says that the stories were written “merely as a relief from the intenser thought exercised in the composition of the poem” (Cooper 1845, p. vii). But there is a different way of thinking about the contrast between the poem and short stories in light of his words to working men in *Cooper’s Journal*, especially his insistence on “self-culture”. Cooper first promotes an aesthetics in Altieri’s sense of art “engaging in particular situations”, literature defined by action or in Cooper’s case, activism. For Cooper this is not in contrast to “the beautiful”, it develops into “the beautiful”; political consciousness is the educational means towards the freedom to sound like a Pope but not to be him, a freedom that he would have been keen to imagine while in prison. The “literature of your own” that he calls for underwrites equal access to the aesthetic, decentralizing it socially, pluralizing it politically, defining it culturally. To insist that “working men” should have the ability to think in terms of aesthetic quality but not lose their political identity doing so is essentially to insist that they get to decide questions of aesthetics themselves.

What might be gleaned from Cooper’s advice to working men, then, as with his own diverse literary output, is his insistence that the group can lend the individual artist a powerful sense of identity. Cooper rejects the idea that an aesthetic education is a hegemonic education because he sees classical knowledge (or Pope) as truly universalist. He does not recognize any contradiction in moving from politics to Pope, or from plain speaking to Spenserean verse, because his object is always the promotion of autonomous self-culture: he is equating the act of taking ownership over “the aesthetic” to taking ownership of the nation through the franchise. This was at its core Cooper’s way into moral-force Chartism. It is unlikely that the critic of working-class literary studies today would fault Cooper for telling working men to aspire to Pope or for displaying his self-learning through consciously elevated writing. It is unlikely, as well, that those critics today would gawk at the aesthetic differences between the poetry and prose as they themselves find meaning in the diversification of aesthetics. Deprived of his freedom, Cooper freely crosses aesthetic boundaries, enacting a symbolic liberation and demonstrating the power to make choices. As is so often the case with working-class writing, meaning emerges in the freedom and power that aesthetic decisions imply, even or especially within a group. We can’t abandon aesthetics without abandoning those meanings.

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