For all the corrective texturing of our apprehension of Romanticism and later nineteenth-century poetry that it performs, Janowitz’s influential *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* has also had the effect of reinforcing the longstanding, prevalent belief that the chief poetic ancestor of Victorian working-class writers was Romanticism.¹ The belief has substance and utility, not least because it places self-taught writers within the same literary heritage and sphere of influence as their canonical contemporaries, encouraging readers now to regard working-class poetry not as a thing apart from but as a fellow participant in the same broader cultural life as Tennyson and the Brownings in the early years of Victoria’s reign.² Nevertheless, the aesthetic genealogy of such writers as the Chartists is more varied—ideologically, formally, and chronologically—than such critical commonplaces would suggest. This chapter will demonstrate that claim in order to show how Chartist poetry’s wide-ranging intellectual and artistic eclecticism played a role in the movement’s democratic and increasingly multifarious range of economic, social, and political demands.³

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¹ For an example of such belief, see Vicinus’s *Industrial Muse*, which especially emphasizes Byron and Shelley in its discussion of Chartist literature.


³ In a characteristically vivid metaphor, Herbert Tucker describes how “the meal that epic made of pastoral, georgic, ode, ballad, soliloquy, oratory, epistle, *et cetera* was a standing
More specifically, three Chartist epics—Linton’s *Bob Thin*, Cooper’s *Purgatory of Suicides*, and Jones’s *New World*—engaged with Renaissance and eighteenth-century precedents, contemporary religious and architectural strains, medieval grotesque, and satiric and pastoral conventions, as well as the epic tradition itself, and in their effort to articulate political critiques and demands, they simultaneously exhibited their potential to effect qualitative changes in the Chartist movement itself. Like the rest of the book, this chapter argues for the political agency of aesthetic choices, in this case through Chartist epic’s handling of the diverse topics of Poor Law reform, insidious religious practices, and the necessity for internationalism. Yet my analysis is not limited to the *what* of these directly political topics; it also includes the *how* of their handling and the possible cognitive and organizational impacts of using the condensed, historically hypertextual medium of epic poetry.

As distinct from the sort of utilitarian language leveled at them in workplaces, shops, and courts of law, aesthetic language made beauty or pleasure or emotional engagement part of lived experience for its readers. In this way it stood opposed to the “Gradgrind school” of bare, unadorned, strictly functional interaction with the world enjoined on laborers through laissez-faire philosophy and political economy. Using poetic language, then, constituted a form of resistance to merely skeletal existence on a survivalist plane. More than that, literature coaxed people out of or beyond the world as they knew it (by becoming the “I” who tours Purgatory in Cooper’s poem, for example, or by ranging over the globe—and especially India—to witness political events there, in Jones’s). Cultivating such imaginative reach potentially enabled a similar operation at home, for if (in these poems) it is possible to conceive of such radically foreign locales and practices and systems of thought, it might also be possible to imagine one’s own city or country (retrospectively or prospectively) as other than what it currently is. The disjunction potentiates the cognitive dissonance that drives action to resolve the mismatch. The aesthetic encounter generates a cognitive flexibility that—while its tendency or outcomes are not predictable—makes possible the political. This is the Chartist imaginary at work.

All three of these writers garner discussion elsewhere in this book, but it is arguably here in these poems that they are writing at the top of their abilities, revising the epic tradition in complex ways that have (Linton excepted)

4. With some differences, Christopher Caudwell (“plasticity” of consciousness), Isobel Armstrong (“mediation” as an activity of thought and feeling), and Mike Sanders (“psychic structuring” and “the Chartist imaginary”), among others, have described this effect of the aesthetic for qualitative transformation. I also discuss this quality in the Introduction.
invited a range of sophisticated and theoretically informed interpretations, noted below. What the following argument adds to the conversation—beyond its constellating the standard choices of the Purgatory and New World with the underanalyzed Bob Thin—is a detailed consideration of how their formal properties perform a sweeping cultural literacy in a politically enabling manner.

**Grotesque Epic: Linton’s Bob Thin (1845)**

Few have been the references to, much less discussions of, William James Linton’s epic poem Bob Thin, or the Poorhouse Fugitive (1845). The poem’s bouncy tone, together with its composition in what Linton himself calls “dog-grel rhyme” (2), would seem to mark its ambitions as decidedly modest rather than epic. However, the long historical view of its narrative and the coupling of one man’s fate to the whole previous trajectory of British economic and social development reveal its larger aims. Additionally, if “genre-absorption” was a key means by which to attain “epic aggrandizement” (Tucker, Epic, 17), Linton here at least nominally attempted it, denominating Bob Thin in his parodically descriptive subtitle “A Political—Philosophical—Historical—Biographical—Anecdotal—Allegorical—Parenthetical—Pathetical—Prophetical—Poetical—Logical—Metrical—And Moral New Poor-Law Tale” (3). The poem bears resemblance to Byronic mock-epic (Tucker, Epic, 223), since it not only flouts epic’s generic norms but also unfavorably compares modern practices with some of the norms and values the epic tradition itself valorized.

As its title suggests, Linton’s grand historic survey carries a sustained attack on the Poor Laws, particularly as amended in 1834 when “outdoor” relief was abolished and new strictures and humiliations imposed in an effort to render workhouses as repellent as possible. The opening sections of this 40-page work survey the treatment of the economically distressed from feudal times through Elizabethan Poor Laws and up to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Then the jocular narrator introduces to us Bob Thin, a very un-Malthusian weaver whose tireless industry nevertheless enables him to support his many children. When the demand for weaving slumps, though, Bob and his family must resort to the workhouse. In accordance with the new regulations, they are obliged to travel to his birth-parish to do so—despite its being far from London, where he might actually be able to get work when demand resumes—and there the family is split up, badly fed, and hastened toward death through depression and neglect. After some years, Bob “escapes”
the workhouse (probably through death) and enters an idyllic future world where he is treated as an equal and attends a festival commemorating humanity’s “deliverance” from trade, selfishness, economic insecurity, and useless work (Linton, *Bob Thin*, 36).

Though this latter section of *Bob Thin* has its place as being the site of an imaginative effort to create a postrevolutionary world towards which Chartist activists might strive, its celebration of vague utopian concepts and its extended descriptions of pastoral delights pale considerably in comparison with the earlier section of the poem. However, its allusion to the long tradition of pastoral in English poetry serves to highlight the degraded conditions in which the modern poor subsist. The contrast serves an obvious purpose by reminding readers that current conditions are historically contingent and therefore susceptible to change, if people change them. More subtly, the utopian scene's invitation to readers to imagine a world that is other than the one they currently inhabit can effect a change in consciousness, an apprehension of the world as becoming or in process. Such an invitation represents an appeal to the creative, generative inclinations that Marx and others have identified as integral to humanity's "species being." To that extent the aesthetic object—in this case the poem—accesses something fundamentally human and humanizing, both recognizing and conferring the imaginative and agential qualities essential to those wanting to make social change. The poem does not itself make the social change but could be said to make the person who makes the change. The most immediately striking feature of the pamphlet edition of *Bob Thin* is its copious illustration with woodblock engravings executed by Linton, T. Sibson, W. B. Scott, and E. Duncan. A number of the illustrated capital letters beginning each stanza of *Bob Thin* also appeared in Linton’s later books of

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5. Pamela K. Gilbert provides a more comprehensive discussion of the juxtaposition of different historical times and spaces in the utopian, epic, and religious discourses at work in Jones's and Cooper’s poems discussed in this chapter, but her analysis would apply as well to Linton's *Bob Thin*. See “History and Its Ends in Chartist Epic,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37 (2009): 27–42.


7. For better or worse. As Ranciere and Sanders have pointed out, the change made by a changed consciousness can be either reactionary or progressive.
illustrated alphabets for children (sometimes accompanied by strongly acerbic political verse), books to whose making Linton often turned for a fairly reliable source of income. These sinuous capitals—reaching backwards to Blake and forwards to Aubrey Beardsley and Walter Crane—provide a running commentary on the text and are integral to its total vision and meaning. In addition they highlight Linton's desire to appeal to a popular audience comprising the full spectrum of literacy, from those who would recognize the eighteenth-century precedent for his mostly iambic tetrameter couplets to those whose literacy did not surpass a visual one derived from political and union banners, broadsides, the theater, and illustrated copies of the Bible or Bunyan. This broad democratic appeal signals the inclusive scope of its imagined readers, who cohere into a single political movement; in that respect the poem—its form and its illustrated presentation—serves to unite people around a shared complaint that suffrage would give them the collective power to change.

The image in Figure 1, for example, physically unites the “extra-reverend thicker- / Bodied and crowned bench of pastors, / Who, cheek by jowl with our lay-masters, / Make Poor-laws for us working folk” (Linton, *Bob Thin*, 7), thus literalizing the poet's phrasing and powerfully conveying the mutually constitutive symbiosis of clerical and legislative power. This representation of the creepy relationship between a mitered ecclesiastic and a crowned lawmaker so blends the two figures that the robed, legless priest seems to rely on the government figure for his lower limbs (i.e., agency), while the black-faced, skeletal legislator sports hooves and possesses a sinister length of devilish tail. The incestuous feel of this wedding, figured in the almost congenital conjunction of powers twinned in social effect as well as body, conveys visually what Linton does verbally in his attack on the new Poor Laws. The poem doubles its representational power by appealing not only to textual literacy but also to
that visual and cultural literacy that properly reads the images of crown, miter, hooves, and pointed tail and the meaning of their ugly union.

Many of the poem’s illustrations deploy the grotesque to disturbing, and politically suggestive, effect, as does the letter O in Figure 2, showing “the Solons of the nation” who “Out of their bag of legislation / (The bag o’ the spider, not o’ the bee) / Have spun a web, a twist of three, / Of such a monstrous complication— / [. . .] It threatens the poor with worse starvation / Than when bluff Harry kick’d the monks out” (ibid.). Here the hybrid human/insect form united to winding vines produces a weird, flylike humanoid with three pairs of legs, multiple (four or five) sets of arms, antennae, and a webbed connection to the spider above that makes the figure seem to be of the arachnid’s spinning. The figure also seems to be wearing glasses, though how that adds
to its freakishness might be lost on (or unappreciated by) modern bespeckled readers.

Linton’s choice of grotesque figuration in this section of the poem seems important, in part because of the illicit potential of the grotesque famously described by Bakhtin. More recent critics have usefully revised and extended his formulations beyond the rituals of carnival to their deep structures of violation of rigid conceptual oppositions such as between rulers and ruled. For instance, the binary structure of transgression described by Stallybrass and White is useful with respect to Linton, inasmuch as it concentrates on the political power generated by the grotesque’s incorporation of the oppositional term whose exclusion is so necessary to bourgeois identity formation. The merger of high and low (whether art or class, etc.) at work in transgressive cultural and aesthetic practices undermines the exclusionary “Othering” by which a dominant ideology constructs itself, revealing the degree to which bourgeois selfhood, for example, depends on the working class psychically and symbolically as well as in literal economic terms (laborers confer status as servants and as beneficiaries of middle-class charity, in addition to creating wealth). Implicitly acknowledging the frequent dismissal of workers as subhuman or animal, Linton’s grotesque turns the tables on the upper classes by collapsing the distance between them and animals and insects. In this manner he problematizes one of the binary distinctions used to justify the power and privilege of one class over against another. Linton’s self-conscious inclusion of grotesque figures amplifies the verbal satire of which it is, in a literal orthographic sense, an essential part. The engravings elicit a visceral repugnance that exceeds as well as comments on the poetic indictment of ruling-class machinations for maintaining the clear division between themselves and the poor.

Before any twentieth-century critics, though, Ruskin too recognized the satiric potential of the grotesque and particularly associated such uses with class conflict when he wrote that “nothing is so refreshing to the vulgar mind as some exercise of this [satiric] faculty, more especially on the failings of their superiors; and that, wherever the lower orders are allowed to express themselves freely, we shall find humour, more or less caustic, becoming a principal feature in their work” (Rosenberg, The Genius of John Ruskin, 212). This

8. The Politics and Poetics of Transgression usefully revises the oversimplified celebration of Bakhtinian carnival. For example, “If we treat the carnivalesque as an instance of a wider phenomenon of transgression we move beyond Bakhtin’s troublesome folkloric approach to a political anthropology of binary extremism in class society” (Stallybrass and White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 26).

9. In this respect there is a species hierarchy inscribed in the grotesque, which potentially undermines its liberatory capacity and complicates its use by an otherwise progressive movement. I am grateful to Jennifer McDonell for pointing this out to me.
strikes me as important for two reasons: in the first place, it points to how the satirical humor of Linton’s grotesque illustrations and doggerel verse in some measure trivializes or deflates those large political topics of whose competent handling working people were supposed incapable. Linton models a colloquial, familiar handling of civic concerns that would habituate his readers to their own fitness for addressing broad public questions. In the second place, Ruskin’s remark shows that at least some of Linton’s contemporaries recognized and even theorized the transgressive gesture latent in grotesque representations, however much the trends of their thinking might have tended toward different ends than Linton’s (as the discussion of Ruskin later in this chapter shows). Of course Ruskin’s treatment of the grotesque formed part of his famous analyses of painting and Gothic architecture, analyses which took as their model and ideal many medieval artistic principles and practices. That he had so much to say about the grotesque, then, resulted from his broader celebration of the medieval period, a characteristic feature of the mid-Victorian period to which I will return in a moment.

In Linton’s grotesque image in Figure 2, whether the humanoid figure is one of the legislating “Solons” or one of the threatened “poor” is somewhat ambiguous, but rather than detracting from a transgressive reading, that uncertainty feeds it. I am inclined to see the figure as a Solon. The bizarre form invites irreverent laughter and provokes revulsion; it reduces high and mighty persons to bespectacled cousins of spiders; it shows the dealers in lofty abstractions to be intensely, even absurdly, corporeal. In this straightforward sense the grotesque image is parodic and subversive, but in conjunction with the verse with which the image necessarily interacts to produce meaning, the attack goes further. The narrator points out that these Solons operate from the “bag o’ the spider, not o’ the bee” (Linton, *Bob Thin*, 7), a distinction that highlights the predatory, rather than industrious, activity they undertake, clearly subordinating them to the productive workers so often represented by the bee (and represented here by the skill bestowed on this poem by four working craftsmen) and overturning neat distinctions between higher and lower orders of being. Moreover, the laws they create are “monstrous,” a verbal echo of the hybrid figure that attracts and repels our gaze. Furthermore, one ironic couplet effectively consigns them to that lowest place of the low: hell (“Good meanings it is said pave hell: / There’s not a doubt but they meant well—” [ibid.]). Linton’s verse performs a series of inversions not unlike those per-

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formed in the suggestively grotesque illustrations with which it powerfully collaborates. The urbane, light tone of this section of the poem itself withers bourgeois pretensions and, by treating them as mere trifles to be dallied with in “doggrel rhyme” (ibid., 3), asserts the self-confidence, centrality, and power of the abject and marginalized. Such verbal and visual deconstruction does not of itself shake economic and political structures of power, but it can do important cultural work in deflating the mystique of power and privilege and in constructing the consciousness which grasps both the basis of protest and the entitlement to do so. That is, it foments the Chartist imaginary with which this book is centrally concerned.

Linton’s simultaneous selection of epic form and doggerel idiom packs a formidable ideological punch. To appreciate why this is so, compare his adoption of an unassuming, popular voice (through doggerel) to a similar adoption by bourgeois poets (through balladry). The mid-Victorian rehabilitation of the ballad represented a formal, rather than thematic, instance of 1840s medievalism. Associated as the ballad was with a romanticized medieval period for which some Victorians famously yearned, it should come as no surprise that this decade saw a revival of interest in the form. Such nostalgia served particular discursive ends, idealizing the period insofar as its values of duty, Christian belief, chivalric manliness, desexualized love, and fixed social relations validated the prevailing (but contested) cultural ideologies of nineteenth-century Britain.

However, as Herbert Tucker has shown, there were also immediate political exigencies motivating the renewed middle-class zeal for balladry: “it was to the freshly threatened stability of an unresolved national constitution that the 1840s ballad revival spoke its vernacular word of reassurance—in the people’s voice and therefore, so the implicit logic ran, in the people’s name” (Epic, 314). Forced to acknowledge the emerging democratic ideal, but loath to extend it so far as working-class activists demanded, the middle class sought to protect static class relations partly by reconfiguring themselves as “the people” and their own rise to power as the triumph and end of democracy. In the 1840s writers articulating bourgeois values resuscitated a poetic form long associated with folkloric traditions and the voice of “the people,” appropriating it to their causes and infusing it with their voices in a poetic sleight

11 Tucker compiles a convincing compendium of evidence of the decade’s interest in both balladry and the medieval ideals it elicited, including the Eglinton Tournament (1839), Pugin’s Contrasts (1836, 1841) and Parliamentary architecture, Barham’s 1840 Ingoldsby Legends, W. E. Aytoun’s Book of Ballads (1845) and Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers (1849), and the sudden enthusiasm for Bishop Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, which was republished almost every year between 1839 and 1850 (Epic, 311–12).
of hand akin to the political one whereby they represented the 1832 Reform Act as having given “the people” a voice in Parliament. Their valorizing and appropriation of the ballad form itself was as much an ideological gesture as that performed by writers with working-class commitments who commanded high cultural genres such as epic for their own ends.

Linton’s *Bob Thin* counters the bourgeoisie’s aesthetic/political move to wrest popular authority away from the working class by speaking with its own, quite different proletarian voice: doggerel. Announcing by its very first, very approximate rhyme that this poem harbors no pretensions to high seriousness, *Bob Thin* also playfully declares in its opening couplet that “Men like not prosy tales: we’ll try / How doggrel rhyme fits history” (3). The lines almost shrug, so casual and experimental is their tone; nevertheless they assert both their popular aim (to be what “Men like”) and how natural and unsurprising it is that an ordinary person should survey national history, even if the voice in which one speaks of it is a disparaged one such as doggerel (or, alternatively, a Lancashire dialect). Linton ostentatiously utilizes a vernacular “voice of the people” to denounce the laws made by the very middle class then seeking to paint its own speech and acts as “the people’s.” These examples provide compelling evidence for the claim that, on issues of paramount importance to midcentury Victorians, poetry represented not only a battlefield but also a weapon, for combatants on both sides.

**Spenserian Epic: Cooper’s *Purgatory of Suicides* (1845)**

Also epic, also published in 1845, Thomas Cooper’s *Purgatory of Suicides* could hardly differ more radically from *Bob Thin* in its form and ambitions. Cooper (1805–1892) represents not only one of the most extraordinary autodidacts to emerge from the British working class in the 19th century but also one of the most literary of Chartists. Today his *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (1872) probably commands more readers than any of his fiction or poetry, but his imaginative writing (notably the two-volume collection of short stories *Wise Saws and Modern Instances* and *The Purgatory of Suicides*, both published in 1845) is also making its way into modern anthologies and scholarly articles. *The Purgatory of Suicides*, written in the unusual Spenserian stanza format, is a blistering critique of religion that has still garnered too little sustained critical attention. It should be acknowledged that Cooper’s stridently anti-

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12. Cooper later wrote a second epic in Spenserian stanzas—a sort of retraction or companion to *The Purgatory*—called *The Paradise of Martyrs* (1873), which expressed his faith in Christianity rather than his skepticism of it. The 1850s saw him publish several novels, one
religious secularism, acquired largely during his imprisonment in 1843–45 for sedition, was sandwiched between his stints as a Wesleyan minister (when young) and as a Baptist preacher (when old). But in the prison years, during which he wrote *The Purgatory of Suicides*, Cooper was a skeptic and penned scathing attacks on Christianity. His changes of faith point to not only a pattern of alternations in Cooper's personal life but also to some of the paradoxes and ambiguities within the Chartist movement itself. Though primarily a secular movement, the Chartist ranks included religious believers (mainly Methodists, for whom that sect's rejection of rank in both church and society resonated) as well as free thinkers. Especially during the years of downturn from 1842 to 1848, some members of the latter category moved toward dissenting belief, so that mobility among the shades of belief and nonbelief was not peculiar to Cooper.

The most recent and comprehensive endeavor to untangle a “Chartist theology” occurs in Mike Sanders's essay about what might be the only extant copy of any Chartist hymnal: the *National Chartist Hymn Book*, the image patterns in which differ markedly from contemporary, traditional Victorian hymnody. Taking the *National Chartist Hymn Book* as his evidence, Sanders outlines Chartist beliefs that, since God created free people in a world of abundance, deprivation and political oppression are not only the result of economic and social mismanagement but are actually anti-Christian. Sanders shows that while Chartists affirmed their belief in God’s activity on their behalf, they also insisted on their own knowledge and agency in achieving the social transformation (“resurrection”) they sought. Most importantly, Sanders highlights the differences between “Chartism's religious attitudes and its attitudes to religious institutions” in ways that are useful here (“‘God is our guide! Our cause is just!’ The *National Chartist Hymn Book* and Victorian

of which (*Captain Cobbler, or the Lincolnshire Insurrection: a Story of the Reign of Henry VIII*) appeared serially in connection with his own periodical *Cooper's Journal*. In addition, he published the novels *Alderman Ralph* in 1853 and *The Family Feud* in 1855.

Hymnody,” 686). While Sanders demonstrates, as I do, Chartism’s hostility to organized religion, he also details how the movement’s secular images simultaneously carried religious meanings (ibid., 695–96). This seeming paradox can help elucidate how a poem as fiercely antireligious as the *Purgatory* can also rely on Christian figures of bondage, transformation, and God’s favor. Sanders concludes that “Chartist theology therefore acts as a deep generative structure informing Chartist consciousness—and, hence, wider symbolic praxis—not just at the level of specific ideas, but more fundamentally in terms of ethos and attitude” (ibid., 696). While attacking the clergy and their allies, Cooper predicates his whole poem on a Christian notion of an afterlife, regards such figures as Luther as forbears in related struggle, and anticipates a day when “Knowledge” and “Truth” will regenerate the world, language distinctly reminiscent of the Christian New Testament. The double consciousness of theological inspiration and ecclesiastical condemnation produces intriguing tensions in the *Purgatory*, but to allow for a careful reading of the poem’s aesthetics as well as its themes, the argument below concentrates mainly on the half of that binary aimed at clerical debunking.

The spiritual fluctuations in Cooper’s own life serve to reveal how vital to his politics was a critique of religion. During his most intimate, active engagement with Chartism and labor, he questioned his earlier beliefs and boldly exposed the harmful secular utility of cynical divine mysticism. His most complete statement of religious skepticism is *The Purgatory of Suicides*, which despite its relative critical neglect is a major work giving extended expression to a significant strand of Chartist politics. In it he leveled a sustained and earnest, though sometimes witty, denunciation of the baneful uses to which religion has been put, with particular reference to its effects on the class to which Cooper belonged. As a counter to the personal and political damage done by churches and creeds, the spread of knowledge and reason stands out as the key to a utopian future towards which the poem yearns. The basic pattern of the work is its division into ten books, each beginning with Cooper himself meditating on various topics from his jail cell. These opening exordia give way to the poet’s dreams of a Purgatory in which many historical and mythic figures (each a suicide) genuinely debate themes of importance to Chartist thinkers.

It is worth noting the very particular poetic form he adopted for the *Purgatory’s* contribution to Chartist politics: an epic in Spenserian stanzas. Spenserian stanzas were rare in the nineteenth century, but they had a his-

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14. Byron used them in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Keats in “The Eve of St. Agnus,” and Tennyson wrote a handful of Spenserian stanzas at the beginning of “The Lotos-Eaters.” Only a
tory of being the vehicle for poetic narrative. The more common epic form was Milton’s, a less challenging blank verse which, because it lacked a regular rhyme scheme, would in some ways have been more difficult for Cooper under his circumstances: a prison environment without access to pen and paper (at least when he began composing), so that he had to memorize the first stanzas before later committing them to paper. The rigid rhyme scheme of Spenser’s nine-line stanza would be an aid to recalling his verses. It also afforded Cooper the chance to make a cultural assertion of political ability: since members of the working class can negotiate the most stringently challenging literary forms, they are by implication equally qualified to acquit themselves in the less arduous task of voting.

A more important dimension of Cooper’s (and Linton’s and Jones’s) choice of epic form was the political gesture it implied. By definition, epic poems treat some historic quest, event, or achievement of heroic proportions and central to the beliefs or identity of a nation. Yet rather than recounting some war-time conquest (the Iliad), the founding of a nation (The Aeneid), or the superiority of a country’s church and monarchy (as Spenser’s own The Faerie Queene), Cooper’s epic makes the claims and cause of Chartism the great heroic center of Britain’s modern history. As Stephanie Kuduk puts it, the “epic form enables Cooper to assert that Chartism is the contemporary instantiation of a centuries-old struggle for British liberty” (“Sedition, Criticism, and Epic Poetry in Thomas Cooper’s The Purgatory of Suicides,” 166). For all three of these poets the choice of poetic form, then, 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. Through poetic form as well as by its inherent claims to justice, Chartism assumed the mantle of modern myth, a central element in the forging of a nation.

Cooper’s principal spokesperson in parts of the poem is a figure named Lycurgus. This character appears early in book one as the voice which challenges social inequality and the rule of kings, and he is the champion of the dignity of human understanding. He appears again in book ten, where his earlier arguments are vindicated and others congratulate him on the correctness of his views. It is interesting to ask why Cooper chose Lycurgus as the prophet of the spread of knowledge and the demise of monarchy, and why the Spartan enjoys such prominence early and late in the book.

The answer lies in the ancient history of the Spartan leader Lycurgus (circa 800 BCE), who first gained the admiration of his people by setting aside his
chance at supreme power. Later when he did return to lead Sparta, Lycurgus instituted sweeping reforms of its constitution and society, the appeal of which to a Chartist one can immediately perceive. His reforms included eliminating inequalities of wealth (and hence robbery and bribery), creating a senate to check the absolute power of royalty, undertaking a radically new education system for boys and girls, and de-emphasizing luxury by legislating simple houses for all and common tables in public eating halls.

Though Plutarch’s account (in Lives) of Lycurgus includes policies Cooper surely would have considered harsh and wrong (the merciless oppression of slaves, the prohibition against foreigners and foreign travel, the severity and authoritarianism of military training, for example), the most celebrated and memorable portions of Lycurgus’s history make it fairly easy to see why Cooper might have elected him as a speaker. In that role, he eloquently and calmly resists belief based on the denigration of clear thought and sane evaluation, favoring instead the spirit of “Truth” and “Freedom” which will inspire humanity to shake off civil and religious servility and acquire its rightful dignity through learning and mental clarity. Unquestionably the Lycurgus of the Purgatory gives voice to Cooper’s own fervent desire for social change, which cannot be realized without uprooting religion’s valorizing of blind faith.15

The eclecticism evident in Cooper’s selection of Spenserian epic form and an ancient Greek spokesperson could not fail to garner his readers’ notice, and his recourse to ancient history could not do other than signal the value of historical knowledge to a movement for political reform and set forth to other Chartists some of the qualities possessed by effective leaders. Activists who needed any emboldening for their intellectual independence (whether challenging established religion or received doctrines of proper government) would find it in the figure of a democratic spokesman with all the authority of Greek antiquity. In these respects Cooper’s formal choices, over and above the explicit content of his poem, serve to confer on the Chartist cause authority, confidence, and respect for historical knowledge—essential equipment for a national movement.

15 That Cooper had in mind the Spartan Lycurgus is unmistakable both because of his frequent designation as “the Spartan” and because that figure committed suicide by not eating (hence his presence in the Purgatory of Suicides). An intriguing coincidence, however, is the existence of a second Lycurgus, king of Thrace, who would also make an outstanding spokesperson for a rational, antireligious viewpoint. Mythic accounts detail this Lycurgus’s opposition to the worship of Dionysus, whose cult was one of ecstatic, wild, and savage belief and practice. His sole fame seems to derive from his driving Dionysus into the sea with an ox-goad, so vehemently did he oppose the new god’s inspiration of disorder, irrationality, and religious madness. Whether mythic or historical, the name Lycurgus is a powerful shorthand expression of many values articulated in Cooper’s latter-day epic.
Cooper’s critique of religion falls roughly under four headings which I will examine in turn: that it mystifies the world and clouds people’s reason, provides a cloak for war, suppresses knowledge, and colludes with the state to justify its existence and subdue civic rebellion. The Chartist poet begins his epic by showing how institutional religion, through its teachings and even its very architecture, steeps people’s minds in darkness and mystery. Book one casts a glance toward the contemporary discussions of Gothic architecture by A. W. N. Pugin and John Ruskin that I mentioned earlier. Cooper’s audacity in intervening in debates among the foremost aesthetic theorists of his time is admirable and an important instance of working-class self-assertion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Cooper’s view departs from those of both the Catholic Pugin, for whom Gothic is the organic expression of the medieval Catholic values he advocated, and the Anglican Ruskin, for whom the Gothic represents the freedom granted to individual workers in its construction. In contrast, Cooper indicts Gothic architecture as itself one of the tools traditionally used by institutional religion to bewilder people’s minds and ready them for deception and bondage.

Though the height of British enthusiasm for Gothic architecture was not until the decades following the 1850s, it was already coming into high regard in the 1840s when Cooper penned his *Purgatory*. In his 1841 work *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, the architect Pugin had said “An old English [i.e., Catholic] parish church, as originally used for the ancient worship, was one of the most beautiful and appropriate buildings that the mind of man could conceive; every portion of it answered both a useful and a mystical purpose” (42).

Just four years after Cooper’s poem was published, John Ruskin’s *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* appeared (1849), followed two years later by the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1851). In these works Ruskin famously developed his theories of architecture in general and Gothic architecture in particular. What is most interesting and innovative about his advocacy of the Gothic is his claim that its irregularities and incongruities express the freedom and humanity—with all its flaws—of workers not reduced to the mechanical reproduction of prescribed, premeasured, monotonous perfection. Yet his interpretation of its “savage” and “grotesque” ornaments could not differ more starkly from Cooper’s, the latter of whom thinks less about its creators and more about its uses and effects on its beholders (Cooper also clearly differs from Linton, whose subversive use of the grotesque matches neither his nor Ruskin’s formula). For Ruskin, “Gothic is not only the best,
but the only rational architecture” (Rosenberg, Genius, 189, emphasis his), and its “ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues . . . are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone” (ibid., 179). Cooper contends to the contrary that those wild forms are signs of religion’s irrationality and its fettering of people’s minds.

In the Purgatory Cooper opines that Gothic architecture’s blending of fantastic and wildly contrary shapes prepared simple worshippers to accept notions that would otherwise confuse and offend their reason. Through cathedrals, the spirit of “Phantasy” aimed “all contraries to blend and wed / Until with hybrids she had filled the mind, / And with wild wonderment its powers misled, / So that, its grasp grown loose and undefined, / The shaven and shorn enchanters might its freedom bind” (book 1: stanza XXX: lines 5–9). On his argument, one’s continual confrontation with “imp, saint, angel, knight with battle-blade, / Griffin, bat, [and] owlet” lit by “dim religious’ shade” and bathed in overpowering incense habituated him or her to the acceptance of the vaguely perceived and half understood. If things physical are a token of things spiritual, the architectural imposition figures the imperative to grow similarly accustomed to a suspension of logic in belief (1: XXX: lines 4, 8–10). This “gloomy” and “grotesque” setting served as a stage on which the “conjuror[s]” performed, exercising a species of paralyzing magic over human minds. The beneficiaries of the diffused light, altered colors, gloomy heights, and incongruous—and vaguely threatening—figures were the monks and priests who practiced their mystical craft there.

Cooper was responding not only to buildings but also to their apologists’ tone of rarefied adoration for their impact on religious feeling and their ability to deflate any human sense of innate self-worth. The briefest of quotations from Pugin will illustrate the gulf that separates his views from Cooper’s. Conceiving that churches are erected for God and not for humanity (True Principles, 38), Pugin celebrates precisely those features of “pointed” architecture that render it remote and intimidating to the human mind. His enumeration of the features of an idealized medieval church is so breathless that ordinary sentence structure breaks down in favor of an accumulation of phrases with no ultimate predicate:

the oaken canopy carved with images of the heavenly host, and painted with quaint and appropriate devices,—the impressive doom or judgment pictured over the great chancel arch,—the fretted screen and rood loft,—the mystical separation between the sacrifice and the people, with the emblem of redemption carried on high and surrounded with glory,—the great altar, rich in hangings, placed far from irreverent gaze . . . . (ibid., 42)
Notice the pervasiveness of diction implying distance, severity, and subdued awe. There is nothing approachable in religious architecture so “impressive,” “great,” “mystical,” and “rich,” nor anything reassuring in an atmosphere of “doom” and “judgment.” Its very virtue lies in its emblems’ being “on high” and so “heavenly” that they enforce a “mystical separation” between the people and God, whose altar must be distanced and protected from the “irrelevant gaze” of mortals. The absoluteness of division between worshipper and worshipped might also model an immutable social hierarchy, tampering with which would amount to sacrilege.

Nothing could be further from Cooper’s ideas, and it is significant that the Chartist squarely rebukes a religious, artistic practice for its enshrinement of concrete political and social injustices. The debate over Gothic architecture illustrates why it is vital to consider not only the literature of the Chartists but also the politics of their literature. Cooper’s explicit intervention, like Linton’s implicit one in *Bob Thin*, in a discussion which appears to be purely aesthetic demonstrates how thoroughly convinced many Chartists were that art, and more especially epic, is an arena for social and political debate.

Cooper also addressed the standard religious claim that “humanity is too finite to understand the Infinite.” To Cooper, one of religion’s most offensive practices is its resort to a claim of the incomprehensibility of the Infinite to the merely finite minds of humanity. In essence, when reason scrutinizes the claims and doctrines of the church, raises their improbabilities and contradictions, and confronts their absurdities, religious teachers and devotees evade the difficulties by dismissing the human mind as too limited to comprehend the “mysterious ways” of God, and anyway arrogant for attempting to. Tennyson provides a sharp contrast in the anti-intellectual mystification of his *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850). Though not published until some five years after Cooper’s poem, Tennyson’s elegy to Hallam was seventeen years in the making (1833–1850) and represents a strong strain of cultural response to religious skepticism.

Since both Tennyson’s and Cooper’s poems were simultaneously composed, recalling some of *In Memoriam* shows just how radically Cooper’s poem differed from prevailing ideologies. The speaker in Tennyson’s poem urges us to follow the example of Lazarus’s sister Mary, who found comfort and hope in her ignorance of the details of her brother’s resurrection by Jesus. Her devotion to Jesus supersedes any natural curiosity and probing she might direct at the miraculous event: “All subtle thought, all curious fears, / Borne down by gladness so complete, / She bows . . . . / Thrice blessed” (lyric 32: lines 9–13). Curiously, it is when she bows down, not only physically but also intellectually, when curiosity and thought are “borne down,” that she is
“thrice blessed.” If she inquires into the details of Lazarus’s four-day absence, she receives “no reply” and is simply forbidden either to know more (“The rest remaineth unrevealed” [31: line 14]) or think more (“Nor other thought her mind admits / But, he was dead, and there he sits” [32: lines 2–3]). She is better off just gratefully accepting what Jesus and his disciples present to her, experiencing the paucity of detail and dim understanding as consolatory and a purer form of faith.

Repeatedly Tennyson’s speaker seeks to emulate a type of blind trust akin to Mary’s, though in places he struggles to find any comfort in mystification. In frustration at trying to sort out why individuals one loves perish, the speaker’s faith falters as he labors “through the darkness up to God, / I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope, / And gather dust and chaff, and call / To what I feel is Lord of all, / And faintly trust the larger hope” (55: 16–20). He seems to sag here in the middle of the poem, as groping through darkness on the strength of nothing more than faint trust is not especially reassuring. Neither does confidence suffuse his declaration that “Behold, we know not anything; / I can but trust that good shall fall / At last—far off—at last, to all, // So runs my dream; but what am I? / An infant crying in the night; / An infant crying for the light” (54: lines 13–19). The syntax of line 15 (“At last—far off—at last, to all”), with its triple caesuras, repetition of “at last,” and distancing of fulfilment “far off,” strongly intimates the uncertainty of his unknowing trust. Furthermore, as if to underscore the shakiness of belief without knowledge, he follows up and undermines the declaration by likening himself to the ultimate incarnation of blank, unreasoning humanity: a benighted infant (ibid., lines 17–19). It is not enough to be simply an infant, without experience, instruction, and the simple biological development of the brain that allows for complex thought; this infant exists “in the night” and without benefit of light (ibid., lines 18–19). It is hard to think of a more complete metaphor for helpless ignorance.

This profound lack of understanding drives the speaker not to reject teachings that contradict reason and require such vague and unfounded hope, but to ask forgiveness for even questioning God and to glorify God’s supremacy over finite humanity. The very impossibility of making sense of religious teachings leads the speaker to rely on them even more, believing the fault to lie in himself rather than the teachings. This is just the sort of capitulation of the human power to examine and evaluate that Cooper cannot tolerate, and which he sees as religion’s final defense against a thinking person’s inconvenient probing of illogical doctrines. The entire poem ends by being itself a mystification, an effort to find consolation precisely by being low on the ladder of understanding. That is what makes it the ultimate Victorian expres-
sion of the sort of mind-numbing belief enjoined by traditional religion and damned by Cooper's *Purgatory of Suicides*.

Of course, Tennyson merely gave contemporary expression to a long-entrenched religious dogma. One has only to think of the Hebrew Bible's Holy of Holies, where any overweening curiosity resulted in death, or the New Testament Paul's assurances that, though "now we see through a glass, darkly" and only "know in part, and we prophesy in part," in some unspecified future people will see "face to face" and then "shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). Though one must be content with thinking and understanding "as a child" in this world (1 Cor. 13:11), what is now clouded in mystery will be revealed at some distant time in eternity. It appears that any impatience to reconcile religious claims with experience and logic amounts to an impertinent lack of faith, a failure to wait on God's timing for the clarification of implausibilities. Insistence on understanding is an intellectually arrogant denial of human "childishness" and a defiant attempt to leapfrog the divine plan. Old Testament priest, New Testament evangelist, or Victorian poet laureate: Cooper takes on a religious tenet that has stood citadel for millennia against the natural human demands for reason and knowledge. No wonder he took up the largest cudgel poetry had to offer: the epic.

**Religion as a Divine Cover for War**

Though he does not develop it extensively, another arrow in Cooper's quiver of antireligious critique is his claim that religion provides a cloak for war. In book seven he aims his barbs at the old alliances between the priesthood and military against independent thinkers. The narrator mourns not only the thousands whom war has killed but also the real heroes of Britain in the arts and sciences—those whom Church and military sweep aside as cowards and traitors because they have the temerity to value Thought and Philanthropy, not slaughter. Cooper intimates that, to the extent that heroes of the mind foster critical thinking and "mental freedom" (8: IX: 6) in society, they threaten the security of priests and generals who rely on people's automatic support. The church has a strong self-interest in preserving unchallenged the institutions of society such as the military:

Perchance the Priest forbodes his end is near,—  
Unless he come less lazily with aid  
To stem the torrent in whose strong career  
Thrones, altars, may be whirled! Shall they be stayed—
Thought's whelming waves?—Can Priestcraft's joint crusade
With Carnage, against Mind,—arrest its course?—
(7: XXIII: lines 1–6)

The same tide which threatens to upset the public's knee-jerk rallying behind martial exploits and exploiters could overwhelm "altars" too. For that reason "Fraud must to Force, its twin, be true:—/Mind must be bann'd" (7: XII: lines 8–9). It seems that priests and armies are the two arms of anti-intellectualism.

That the Church has long fulfilled its obligatory loyalty to the military is evident, Cooper says, in its affording honored places of burial to and continual supplications on behalf of dead state and military leaders, relegating the bodies of painters, writers, and scientists to small numbers and less honored places (though he does not name it, his case in point is Westminster Abbey). "Old comates in rule," priests and warriors seek to tear out from places of honor any but those whose work has been in the "Butcher line" of war-mongering and legalized murder (7: XXIV: lines 1, 5). In a voice loaded with irony, he demands that the bodies of "Heroes of the Mind"—those "mean" "churls"—be cast out of the cathedral so as not to distract from the pomp and glory "rightly" belonging to "the great / And grand in murder" (7: XIX: lines 6–7).

Those who have waged war in the name of religion Cooper places in a region of Purgatory roughly akin to the lowest region of Dante's mountain of Purgatory, where climbers are purged of the sin of pride.16 Cooper's climbers, too, exhibit pride, but it is a very particular species of this most base of the seven deadly sins: religious arrogance and an accompanying martial zeal to extirpate other faiths. The introduction of specifically religious pride and its issue in war is the Chartist poet's innovation. His speaker sees wild crowds uttering such words as "cross," "crescent," "heaven," "hell," "Tartarus," and "Elysium," religious symbols that "Have filled [the earth] with strife until the feverous throb / Issued in darkest, deadliest deeds of crime—/Each deed still hallowed by the things of slime—/The vermin priests" (2: XLVI: lines 3–6). This region includes Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews—representatives of the world's major religions, who in the names of their respective gods "coined / A cursing tempest from their cursing tongues combined" (2: XLIX: lines 8–9). More than simply cursing each other, they have warred on each other, as references to "deadliest deeds of crime" and "earth's strife" and the armor of war make clear.

16. See cantos X–XII of Dante's Purgatory, which is of course Cooper's inspiration. The sins of which climbers of the mountain of Purgatory are purged are Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust.
Cooper includes multiple references to the Crusades, including the Knights Templar, a religious and military order formed by the Crusaders in Jerusalem between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Virulently anti-Muslim, this was a band which, even here in Purgatory, “signs of antique war / Displayed,—their zeal and guise alike bizarre,— / Shirted in steel and visored” (2: XLVIII: lines 4–6). The speaker expresses surprise both at their religious zeal and their military armor, “bizarre” outward markers of the very arrogance of which they are supposed to be purging themselves. However, instead of that intended purification, all of these zealots retain their thirst for war as well as their religious motives and justifications for armed conflict. Ironically, the spiritual leaders who should promote purification instead sanctify this continued combativeness, “each deed still hallowed by the things of slime— / The vermin priests.” Our parting view of these bellicose religionists is almost humorous in its depiction of people so blindly intent on destroying others for God that they fail to notice their shared malady and doom:

Anathemas and hells eternal waged
They next against each other,—losing sense
Of their strange afterstate,—so madly raged
Each bigot at his fellow’s difference
Of madness.

(2: LI: lines 1–5)

This glimpse of the persistence of religion’s instigation and sanctification of war plays a key role in Cooper’s condemnation of supernatural faith.

Religion as an Antagonist to Learning

Arguably the major theme of Cooper’s epic is the importance of knowledge in regenerating the world, and in this he represents the beliefs of vast numbers of the working class in general and of Chartists in particular.17 Educational initiatives such as reading rooms, Sunday schools, and discussion groups formed part of Chartist culture from the beginning, but gradations of opinion on the

17. See Gregory Vargo’s “A Life in Fragments: Thomas Cooper’s Chartist Bildungsroman,” Victorian Literature and Culture 39 (2011): 167–81. Vargo compellingly reads Cooper’s short story collection Wise Saws and Modern Instances—written simultaneously with the Purgatory—as “the formal and thematic negation of his epic” (168). Rather than aping bourgeois self-help axioms that promise personal and social transformation through individual effort, education, and self-fulfillment, Cooper’s stories, Vargo argues, revise the Bildungsroman tradition to show the frustrations and alienation of the poor in the absence of more than personal enlightenment.
priority of education naturally existed within the movement. Most notably, the cabinetmaker William Lovett, who as secretary of the London Working Men's Association wrote *The People's Charter* in 1838, published a further treatise in 1840 entitled *Chartism; A New Organization of the People*. Here Lovett surveyed various educational methods and proposed his own detailed system for all levels of instruction from “infant” to adult. Though the book also urged passage of the Charter, its talk of working people’s “regenerating” themselves socially and politically invited attack from Feargus O'Connor. O'Connor successfully if somewhat unfairly portrayed Lovett’s book as placing education ahead of enfranchisement, dubbing it “Knowledge Chartism” and lumping it together with the “Teetotal,” “Church,” and “Household” Chartisms he rejected as distractions and delays to the passage of the clear, unifying Charter. Defenders of both positions took to the pages of the *Northern Star*, providing perhaps the most prominent debate about education to occur within the Chartist movement.

Cooper’s vision in the *Purgatory* is far less specific than those earlier debates over education within Chartism. In book 3 the Indian philosopher Calanus speaks of “Knowledge,—the new-born world’s great heroine” (3: LXX: line 4) and prophesies about the brightness of a future under its influence. He also describes the unfurling of a banner whose message strikes mortal fear into the hearts of kings and priests. That banner, which might as well serve as the epigraph to Cooper’s book, reads “‘Knowledge is Power!’” (3: LXXIII: line 9) Knowledge serves as the harbinger of truth, brotherhood, freedom, and other democratic ideals espoused by proletarian activists of the time.

Such exaltations of knowledge occur throughout the *Purgatory*, and very often they are coupled with condemnations of the religious suppression of knowledge. The theme of these condemnations represents a third primary strand of Cooper’s overall critique of religion. In book 6 his favorite spokesman Lycurgus eloquently contends that priests have long endeavored to combat popular acquisition of knowledge:

> Say ye, Right’s triumph, like a dream, shall fade,
> ‘Neath swift rewaking vigour of throned Power?—

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18. See Chase’s *Chartism: A New History*, 168–78 for an explanation of and challenge to O’Connor’s characterization of Lovett’s aims.

19. Calanus (fourth century BCE) was an Indian sage who accompanied Alexander the Great. He fell ill and, considering that it would be better to relinquish life voluntarily than to undergo treatment and die slowly, he killed himself by mounting a funeral pyre. He was admired for his bravery.
Monarchs, be not deceived! Right, now, hath aid
From Knowledge—hid by priests in secret bower,
And when thence 'scaped, caught, and to dungeon-tower
By them condemned—yea, to the fiery flame!—
They knew not of her high immortal dower,
The veritable Phœnix—whom to tame,
Or to destroy, will ever mock old priestly aim!

(6: CXXV)

It is the priests, he says, who have fruitlessly endeavored to stamp out the spread of knowledge, who have tried to hoard it and protect it by means as drastic as imprisonment and destruction. The “fiery flame” to which religious officials have consigned knowledge applies both to the burning of radical books and pamphlets, and even sacred texts in vernacular languages, and to the grisly execution of people themselves who held “heretical” or anti-establishment views. For rhetorical and illustrative purposes, Cooper here chose the most extreme examples of priestly anti-intellectualism. Yet even such apparently effective methods—the physical annihilation of books and people—clearly failed in their purpose. Cooper perfected his metaphor of knowledge as Phoenix by saying that knowledge too arises out of the fire intended to destroy it. In book 8 Cooper extols great “Saxon” thinkers from the Reformation martyrs “who dared the flame” (8: IX: line 8) to Paine, Godwin, Owen, and many others in between. It might be surprising in a critique of religion that some religious figures (Huss, Wickliffe, Luther, e.g.) make it into this catalogue of honor, but he esteems them as “stalwart pioneer[s] / Of mental freedom” (8: IX: lines 5–6) who, even if they did not possess all of the truth, still fought for it against “the bondage of the Priest of Rome” (8: VIII: line 2). Likewise did “philanthropists” battle “Old Superstition” of other varieties and creeds, superstition which the poem depicts as snakelike in its opposition to the progress of “Young Knowledge.” Cooper writes that “forth from his snaky coil / Old Superstition springs,” but the wily opponent is conquered and counted a spoil of war by triumphant Knowledge (2: LXXII: lines 4–5). In a minor coup, Cooper inverts the usual religious metaphor of sin, temptation, or Satan as a snake. Instead, it is irrational belief itself that equates with the serpent and becomes the foe of all that is just, ennobling, and freeing.

Often the form of knowledge at which dogmatic religionists took aim was secular literature, and they attempted to restrict the scope of their adherents’ reading to the Bible and other religious texts. Shakespeare, Pope, Byron, and many others appealed to working-class readers, but such reading brought parishioners into direct conflict with leaders of the congregations to which
they belonged. According to Jonathan Rose, denominations “with predominantly working-class congregations, such as the Baptists and Primitive Methodists, tended to be the most hostile” to secular literature, though opposition “ran wide and deep” among Nonconformist and Anglican evangelicals generally up through the 1850s (31). His surmise is borne out by the evidence provided in working-class autobiographies of the period,²⁰ many of which “highlight[] the threat to religious belief and practice which was inherent in the readers’ commitment to pursuing knowledge to whatever destination it led them” (Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography*, 181). Catholics, Anglicans, and Nonconformists all had a stake in suppressing such knowledge and therefore all fell under the sweep of Cooper’s condemnation.

Some of these religious attitudes changed later in the nineteenth century, particularly after the 1870 Education Act and the wide teaching of British literature in nondenominational Board schools. But during the Chartist period, religious antagonism to working-class education in particular made spiritual institutions a frequent target of criticism. Many Chartists viewed religious anti-intellectualism as colluding with institutions of state power to bar working people from their rights as human beings and Englishmen.²¹

For working-class autodidacts and political activists such as Cooper, educational gains could only be hopeful and empowering. It is true that he, like factory poet Ellen Johnston, encountered some suspicion from neighbors and co-workers for his educational ambitions,²² but given that intellect had traditionally been the domain of their oppressors, proletarians could be forgiven for fearing that seeking mental improvement signaled a class betrayal or an aping of middle-class manners. Such apprehensions could be over-

²⁰. See Vincent’s *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography*. The life narratives of Cooper himself (who was criticized for not attending church so that he could read), Christopher Thomson (told to choose between books and his soul’s salvation), and Thomas Oliver (censured by his congregation for expressing doubts raised by his secular reading), for example, demonstrate the clash between Methodist orthodoxy and workers’ intellectual freedom. The Methodists were not alone in fearing the free-ranging and critical mental habits reading cultivated, and neither were those apprehensions unfounded. Joseph Gutteridge, whose secular reading coupled with material hardship led to unbelief, and Joseph Sketchley, whose personal study resulted in a split from Catholicism, provide more evidence of the threat to various religious sects.

²¹. As explained earlier, unanimity about education did not exist among Chartists, however. Some arguably saw it as an end in itself, a goal that replaced the attainment of the Charter’s demands, while others saw it as a means to an end, an important aid in the analytical and organizational tasks faced by women and men engaged in the struggle for the Charter.

come, but more implacable and better-founded were the fears of their socio-
-economic superiors, some of whom regarded overeducation of workers as a
Pandora’s box. Increasing self-confidence and ability to analyze and articu-
late social injustices, erasure of some previous bars to enfranchisement, and
general insubordination all lurked. Those fears were evidently correct, if one
judges by such examples as Cooper’s and artisan Christopher Thomson’s. In
railing against the employer class’s prohibition of thought among laborers,
Thomson explained in his Autobiography of an Artisan that a worker was
“forbidden to think” because such thinking “would have taught him to scan
the war-debt . . . to assert his right of citizenship—his duty to control the
law-makers—. . . would have taught him self-dependence and moral eleva-
tion, instead of serfish cringing crumb-picking” (qtd in Rose, 23). Certainly
the concurrent emergence of working-class education, trades unionism,
and Chartism could be placed in the evidence column for anti-intellectual
polemicists.

One formidable obstacle to the popular acquisition of wide learning was
dogmatic belief, and about this Cooper was nothing if not specific. What
became Cooper’s especial antipathy was the religious entombment of peo-
ple’s natural mental abilities. In a crescendo of excitement over the spread of
knowledge to Europe, Africa, and Asia, Lycurgus concludes book one of the
Purgatory by exclaiming that Africans and Asians will soon “disenthral / Their
new-born spirits from Faith’s mystical / Degrading chains, and shake their
ancient slough / Of sottish ignorance off: no more to crawl / In abjectness
‘fore hideous gods, nor throw / Their slavish frames ‘fore kings” (1: CXXX-
VII: lines 4–9). The Spartan spokesperson firmly couples faith and mysticism
with ignorance and the degradation of bondage to gods and kings. Political
liberation accompanies spiritual liberation, and both are predicated on escap-
ing the straitjacket of ignorance in which religion would constrain people. It
is important to note that the chains that enslave people politically originate
specifically in nonrational belief. Hence Cooper’s critique of religion and his
confidence that knowledge dispels both of the “twin theurgies” of political and
spiritual power (2: LXXIV: line 2).

In The Purgatory of Suicides, Knowledge represents more than the abstract
concept proclaimed in Calanus’s banner “Knowledge is Power!” More than
a vague, intangible moral possession, for Cooper knowledge represents the

23. Though there is some British chauvinism here, Cooper does include Europe, too, as
only just beginning to hear the voice of Truth (see, e.g., 1: CXXXVI: lines 5–6). Elsewhere in the
poem he admires ancient Asian thinkers murdered by “Falsehood” (9: XXXIII), sympathizes
with Mexican and Irish condemnations of colonialism (10: LII–LX), and empowers a Jewish
woman to indict the violent history of Christian anti-Semitism (9: XLII–XLVI).
seizure of one’s democratic rights in the most immediate, concrete way. Calan-
us goes on to proclaim that “Knowledge, the great Enfranchiser, is near!”
(2: LXXIV: line 3) The grammar of this short sentence is suggestive, since the
appositional conjunction of learning and the vote permits not even a verb
to separate them. They are so firmly, so tightly linked that they brook not so
much as a grammatical division. The omitted verb, of course, is the verb of
being (is), but its insertion would subtly detract from the absolutely concur-
rent acquisition of learning and the demands of the Charter. Undoubtedly, in
Cooper’s mind William Lovett’s formula of “self-improvement before politi-
cal rights” abandoned the majority of Britain to prolonged poverty and denial
of civil rights. The abridgement effected by the poet’s choice of apposition
here revises that formula to lend greater energy and force to the poetic line
and greater urgency to the working-class demands for education and political
power. Therefore, to the extent that religion seeks to block people’s endeavors
to learn, it denies access to basic democratic rights. In Cooper’s cosmos, it is
doubly damned.

More central to my consideration of the Chartist imaginary than broad
notions of education is the question of what happens when one confronts
not only knowledge but aesthetic knowledge. Marxists such as Herbert Mar-
cuse and Georg Lukacs have described how the aesthetic impresses people
with an awareness that the world can be other than it is, and this ability to
imagine beyond the already received is a precondition of political activism.
As Mike Sanders has persuasively argued, Cooper’s (and other Chartists’)
own first encounter with poetry unleashed “an almost insatiable desire for
more poetry,” a “psychic structure [. . .] (the need to find out more)” that was
“instrumental in securing his conversion to Chartism” later in life (Poetry, 10).
Aware of the critical role poetry had played in his own intellectual and politi-
cal development, perhaps Cooper went on to write the Purgatory in the belief
that poetry possesses a unique cognitive power, not just in its paraphrasable
content but in its aesthetic form, to induce the mental thirst and imaginative
distance from the given so essential to a worker’s adopting and advocating for
the Chartist vision. This is why I contend for the unique political agency of
poetry (and other literature) within the Chartist movement.

Religion as an Ally of State Repression

To conclude my consideration of the Purgatory, I will analyze a key scene that
opens book six, in which the speaker witnesses the procession of a convicted
man towards the scaffold. Leading the way to the “legal butchery” (Cooper’s
footnote 1, 225) is a member of the priesthood, and this opens the door for a strong denunciation of religion’s complicity in upholding the power of unjust laws and kings. The second stanza reads thus:

It is the death-toll: there! they bear him on!
I climb to read the lesson through my bars.—
Hah! curse upon thee, priest!—is it well done,
That thou, a peace-robed herald pattering prayers,
Dost head the dead-march? Trow’st thou not it jars
With that sky-message which proclaimed, thou say’st,
‘Peace and Goodwill to Man’?—aye, that it mars
The face of mercy to behold thee placed
There, in grim state, ’tween spears with crape, in mockery, graced?

(6: II)

For this fourth of his critiques of religion, Cooper skillfully exploits the full expressive potential of his poetic form, manipulating rhythms and sounds to underline the content of his argument about religion and the state. For example, he deviates from the poem’s prevailing iambic feet by substituting both spondees and trochaic inversions which deftly draw attention to such contrasts as that between the “dead-march” (II: line 5) sanctioned by the priest’s leadership and the “sky-message” of “Peace” (II: lines 6, 7) which he proclaims on God’s behalf. The disordering of the rhythmic norm faintly trips up attentive readers and invites a moment’s pause over the irony of the ministers of mercy presiding at its obliteration.

To insist on the reader’s further pausing, Cooper breaks up his stanza’s concluding alexandrines with four caesuras. This deviates from the single caesura that more usually bisects the Spenserian stanza’s final line. The result is that one halts and stumbles through a line whose theme as well should startle readers with incongruity and hesitation: a priest appears “There, in grim state, ’tween spears with crape, in mockery, graced?” (II: line 9) The absence of any smooth progression in the line imitates the Chartist’s own disbelief in the Church’s open participation in the most barbaric expression of state power. Also, Cooper here capitalizes on the power of emphasis inherent in the alexandrine. In a stanza of eight pentameter lines, a final hexameter line cannot but stand out, calling attention to its content even more than the rest of the lines do. In this case, the exceptional line rings with repeated vowel sounds that firmly interlock secular and spiritual power. The assonance of the long a in “state,” “crape,” and “graced” forms a thread through three decreasingly-distinct concepts: coercive government power, death, and religion. Admit-
tedly “state” in this instance denotes condition rather than ruling body, but in the context of Cooper’s critique, the double meaning is inescapable. So if “state” conjures up notions of legal oppression and “graced” suggests that religious institution which proclaims, if it does not practice, grace, then the medium of their imbrication—their literal fulcrum in this line—is execution, symbolized by the “crape” on either side of the priest in the death-march. Cooper masterfully links the three through the sounds of the stanza’s concluding, longest, most pronounced line.

Religion’s consistent association with the ability of the ruling class to subdue social rebellion earns its further censure in stanza eight. Again, the form as well as the content of the verse bears the burden of its message. Addressing priests, the speaker says

... ye preach
To slaves: Christ’s precepts are for them! ...
[and ye are]
Dark ambidexters in the guilty game
Of human subjugation!—how to tame
Man’s spirit ye, and only ye, have skill:
Kings need your help to hold their thrones,—while claim
Of sanctity enables ye, at will,
To wield o’er prostrate Reason subtler empire still!
(VIII: lines 1–9)

Skillful poets establish metric patterns partly in order to deviate from them expressively, and Cooper here departs from the prevailing iambic feet of his lines precisely in those places where the key phrases occur. As I hear the lines, spondaic substitutions occur in (and only in) each of the four phrases “Christ’s precepts,” “Dark ambidexters,” “Man’s spirit,” and “Kings need” (VIII: lines 2, 4, 6, 7), phrases which can be strung together almost without addition to form the damning sentence “Kings need dark ambidexters [in] Christ’s precepts [“to tame”] man’s spirit.” While one of the priest’s hands claims sanctity and preaches Christ’s precepts of peace and forgiveness, the other hand subdues humanity’s “Reason,” and so subtly muddles people’s minds with superstitious fear that they abdicate their power to question and challenge clerical and monarchical authority.

The final line’s contention that priests wield over humanity’s mind a more insidious “empire” than kings do over its body nevertheless couples a political relationship of dominance and exploitation (imperialism) with religion. Unlike both Spenser’s bisected alexandrine and Cooper’s own choppy alexandrine referred to above, this stanza’s final line contains no internal pauses at
all, as if to imitate the smooth veneer religion provides to the sway of kings. To give occasion for pause or reflection on the church’s “subtle empire” might defeat its very subtlety, opening it to questions such as those posed by this poem. The line even hastens through one of its words by eliding a letter and syllable; perhaps significantly, the truncated word is the preposition that describes the spatial position of the fearsome ecclesiastical conquerors vis-à-vis humanity’s “prostrate Reason”: over. Again, calling attention to this mental dominion could have a dangerously destabilizing effect on hierarchical social relations—dangerous at least in the eyes of those priests and kings who would prefer to have the whole line swallowed up in a cough or a throat-clearing anyway. The absence of the caesura is a small departure from the Spenserian norm, but the deviation—along with the elision—nevertheless draws attention to itself.

One of the unique features of the Spenserian stanza form Cooper uses is its rhyme scheme (ababbcbbcc), which unifies the logic and sense of the stanza and pulls together the thematic content of its two quatrains. As well as carrying over the b rhyme well into the second quatrain, the stanza tightens its coherence by means of the central couplet, which in The Purgatory is almost always open\(^{24}\) so as not to suggest, by drawing a false enclosure around itself, that its idea is complete and independent of the lines before and after. The couplet, in other words, has a foot in each quatrain and grows organically out of the merger of the two. The central couplet therefore has about it something slightly special, a prominence deriving from its functionality as the stanza’s fulcrum and its status as the semantic synthesis of the two quatrains. To look at two examples from stanzas II and VIII, which I have been discussing, one should consider how the words are rhymed, which words Cooper places at the line termini for rhyming, and what themes the paired lines seem to select and lift forth from the quatrains.

In the second stanza describing a priest’s presence at a state-sponsored execution, the speaker apostrophizes him thus:

\[
\text{. . . is it well done,}\\
\text{That thou, a peace-robed herald pattering prayers,}\\
\text{Dost head the dead-march? Trow’st thou not it jars}\\
\text{With that sky-message . . . [of peace]?
}\]

(6: II: lines 3–6)

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\(^{24}\) Paul Fussell explains that “couplets in which the second line is stopped or retarded by strong punctuation at the end, and in which the first line exhibits a high degree of syntactical integrity, are called closed couplets. . . . When enjambed, on the other hand, couplets are called open” (Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, 129).
The most interesting fact about this couplet is that its rhyme, unlike the vast majority of the others in the poem, is slant. The *b* words in this stanza include “bars,” “jars,” “mars,” . . . and “prayers,” which is as noticeably discordant with its mates as the priest’s pronouncing peace and good will from the pulpit while sanctioning death and damnation from the scaffold. The sound literally “jars,” as the themes of the stanza’s two quatrains—execution in the first and mercy in the second—jar when united in this couplet and in practice. There is a necessary relationship between the form and the sense of the stanza, a structural and semantic inseparability that marks the successful poem.

In contrast to stanza II, the rhyme of the central couplet in stanza VIII is a perfect rhyme, accusing priests of being

Dark ambidexters in the guilty game  
Of human subjugation!—how to tame  
Man’s spirit ye, and only ye, have skill:  

(6: VIII: lines 4–6).

In this case, the semantic concerns of each quatrain that the couplet joins and foregrounds are preaching meekness and peace (VIII: line 1), and subduing civic rebellion (VIII: line 7). In these twinned tasks the church is equally skilled with both hands—“ambidextr[ous]” at enforcing, on the one hand, precisely those personal virtues which breed a timid recoiling from the combative tendency of Chartists to inquire into matters considered above their comprehension and, on the other hand, exploiting people’s belief in priestly integrity to provide divine cover for corrupt and merely human power.

Also of interest in this couplet are the two words Cooper opts to place in that all-important slot at the ends of the lines: “game” and “tame.” That the church would take part at all in “human subjugation” is damning enough, but that such a grave participation should take on the air of a mere dalliance or “game” consigns it to even lower levels of human guilt. Moreover “game” implies a distance between the players and the consequences of their play: if the majority of society remains disenfranchised, overworked, and hungry, that reality has an aura of trifling unreality as long as political and social relations remain diversionary abstractions and pursuits. One favorite diversion of the nineteenth century’s leisured classes, though priests less frequently participated, was the hunting of small animals, an amusement perhaps lurking in Cooper’s choice of “game” and reinforced by its rhyming word “tame,” something one typically does with animals. Yet in this case, what priests tame is “Man’s spirit” (VIII: line 6), which would otherwise naturally rebel at oppression and deprivation. There is more than a whiff of brutalizing condescension
in the priest’s imputed assumption that laboring humanity is some sub-species that requires the firm hand of moral and penal authority to become domesticated. Both the tightness and the prominence of the couplet enhance the poem’s ability to conjure up the specters of these unflattering truths.

Ultimately, Cooper’s censure of religion for its role as defender and supporter of an unjust state folds into itself the other criticisms discussed in this chapter. One might even consider the opening of book six a *mise en abyme* for the whole poem’s anti-religious peroration. For to what end does it tend if people’s power of critical analysis is blunted? Or if the organizational skills and self-assurance education afforded are limited or withheld? Does it not preserve the *status quo*, Cooper would ask? Does it not maintain the subservience of the majority under a state whose power to punish them and send them to war is fundamental to the rule of the minority? It was Cooper’s conviction that the answer was “yes,” and in putting forward that answer through the well-wrought execution scene opening book six he reached his highest poetic achievement.

Poetry was the vehicle of choice not only for Cooper’s critique of religion but also for his proffered alternative too. Of course he versified the arguments for Chartist reform, as hundreds of other working-class men and women did, but even more than that he extolled its benefits in a poetic form explicitly counterposed to traditional religion: a Chartist hymnal. Such a collection of Chartist verse, to be sung to traditional church tunes, in a public meeting hall and on Sundays, effectively filled the old skins with new wine: it adopted the old sacred forms but infused them with new secular content which expressed the best and most immediate aspirations of their working-class singers.

While this gesture openly offered itself as an alternative to established religion, at the same time it acknowledged the values of community and inclusion implied by the religious practice of hymn-singing. Chanting familiar words and tunes on a weekly basis meant illiterate parishioners could participate equally with literate ones in worshipping God, or in this case, in claiming the right to equal participation in politics. Moreover, each individual could feel the satisfaction of contributing to something larger and more beautiful than any one person alone could produce. There was a democratic strain in the practice, however thoroughly other church rules and teachings militated against that underlying impulse. This partly accounts for why Owenites, Chartists, and socialists later in the nineteenth century all used songs as part of their propaganda work, and why Cooper’s hymnal stands as part of a tradition of music by and for the producing class.25

25. For a treatment of late nineteenth-century socialist songs, see Christopher Waters’s
Recognizing the democratic potential and value of regular group singing, in 1842 Cooper initiated the composition and publication of a Chartist hymnal for the Leicester Chartists who gathered in the Shaksperean Room several times a week to hear Cooper and others lecture on politics and a host of educational themes. With varying degrees of reference to God, the hymns express common democratic themes of equality, class injustice, and the righteousness and eventual triumph of the Chartist cause. What is distinctive is their collection as *hymns* to be sung in public gatherings on the ordinary church day of Sunday—a self-conscious substitution of secular, Chartist ritual for religious ritual. Though Cooper delivered an incisive critique of religion in *The Purgatory* and elsewhere, he distinguished himself from merely negative critics by additionally offering a positive alternative. He was not alone in appreciating the value of hymn singing, though, since there seem to have been at least three Chartist hymnals in existence. Just one of those books is known to exist, and its contents, as discussed by Mike Sanders, resonate with what is known of Cooper’s hymnal.

**Heroic Epic: Jones’s *New World* (1851)**

In drawing some conclusions to her study of the creation of a British national identity in the years leading up to Victoria’s accession, Linda Colley generalizes that the three forces most responsible for defining what it meant to be British were religion, war, and economics (especially imperialism). It seems logical, then, that an internationalist such as Ernest Jones (as demonstrated in chapter 1) would take on all of these topics in their relation to nationalism

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26. This was Cooper’s consistent spelling of the name. Historians such as Martha Vicinus (*The Industrial Muse*, 109) and G. D. H. Cole (*Chartist Portraits*, 198) utilize the more usual spelling of Shakespeare.

27. By his own account, he contributed only two songs, while local working-class poets John Bramwich and William Jones wrote the other thirty. Though the sixpence volume “achieved a wide popularity” (Cole, *Chartist Portraits*, 198), unfortunately *The Shaksperean Chartist Hymn Book* itself seems to be lost. But Cooper printed the hymns in his weekly paper *Extinguisher*, and in his autobiography he reprinted one hymn by each contributor, also mentioning the tunes to which each was sung.


and class exploitation in his epic poem *The New World, A Democratic Poem* (1851). With its lengthy preface and dedication, this work took pride of place on the very first page of the very first issue of Jones's new journal *Notes to the People*, which continued publication throughout 1851 and 1852. As Jones describes it, the epic traces the “successive phases through which the nations of the earth have passed, to shew how the working classes have been made the leverage by which one privileged order has subverted another” (*The New World: A Democratic Poem*, 3). Royalty cedes power to the feudal nobility, which eventually succumbs to the wealthy middle class, and now “we stand” at a point of decision between the forces of “democracy” and “reaction” (ibid., 4). As a contribution to the forces he sees as contending for democracy, with this poem Jones hurls a violent attack at colonialism and its base financial aims, as well as indicting the role religion plays in papering over economic aggression with pretenses to civilization and salvation. Furthermore, he seeks to persuade working people that they have nothing whatever to gain from warring with each other on behalf of their rulers. In an effort to foster internationalism, he devotes considerable attention to all three of the major factors Colley identifies as primary contributors to British nationalism.

The poem's length means that modern readers have convenient access to short excerpts at most, and therefore it might be useful to provide some summary and a sense of the texture of the work. *The New World* lays out the vision of a war between British forces in India and various regional militaries, with colonial Britain in retreat before a victorious Hindu army. Against this background, the narrative launches into an ambitious political and historical survey of civilization and the ways in which its governance has varied over the centuries, but with a wry satire of the slogans and pretenses of contemporary Britain. For example, perceiving its own precarious position, the nobility seeks to take power from the tottering monarchy by recruiting working-class sympathies thus: “‘If burdens crush ye, and if bread is high, / It is the King—the King’s to blame!’ they cry, / If famine threats, work lacks, and wages fall, / The King, the King alone, is cause of all!’” (ibid., 8, all italics are in the original). These were precisely the arguments used in Jones's time by middle-class Corn Law repealers who hoped to shake the power of the aristocracy.

In the poem, once the nobility has transferred power to its own hands, they bid the masses to disarm, go home, and for “the future wait, / And hope the best, for—they’ll deliberate” (ibid.). But nothing of general use happens, the people continue in misery, and eventually the nobility face their own challenge for power from the middle class. Now the traders rally the masses by saying “‘If burdens crush ye, and if bread is high, / The landlords—landlords are to blame!’ they cry” (ibid., 10). Though it is becoming a familiar refrain, it
works because ordinary people are so desperate, and the middle class acquires legislative ascendency over the nobles. That done, they quiet the unrest they had fomented by commanding the populace to “Disarm!—go home!—and wait—while we reform!” (ibid.) Jones captures the formulaic nature of the rhetoric used to urge on and then pacify the majority, the promises sworn and forgotten.

When time passes and the plight of the people fails to improve, “they wake to find, once more betrayed, / 'Tis but a change of tyrant they have made” (ibid.). The lack of any real change and the absence of middle-class urgency about making change have serious consequences, as evidenced by one of the best and most powerful lines in the entire epic: “And 'give us time!'—and 'give us time!' [the traders] cried: / Another generation starved and died” (ibid.). The latter line’s brisk pace and unadorned statement of fact are reminiscent of the business world in which traders have made their fortunes, while the rhyme juxtaposes their whining pleas for procrastination with the stark and massive consequences of their delay. Inescapably memorable, it is a supremely effective couplet. Here the poem pauses to note the role of state and religious institutions as tools of the ruling class. The narrator shows that they are not neutral arbiters of unbiased laws and customs, above and independent of social conflicts, but they exist to protect the interests of those in power.

Yet at last the people themselves have had enough of merely “changing tyrants” and “the nations” thoughtfully and peacefully rise, overthrowing with ease those old, oppressive institutions. The uprising is not limited to Europe alone, but sees the “swarthy” peoples of Africa smashing slavery, South Americans throwing off colonialism, Jews gaining a homeland, and women sharing equal rights with men (ibid., 12–13). Throughout the poem, Jones maintains a sweeping global vision that reaches beyond not only Britain but also Europe, always reminding readers that internationalism is essential.

30. If indeed he had any particular region—not just some place of rest and refuge—in mind, Jones must have been unaware of the millions of people inhabiting Palestine. He envisions the Jewish people’s entry to “Jerusalem” as a peaceful, uncontested march into a place with “no prior owners” and where it would not be necessary to commit the “crimes revolting” of conquerors (The New World, 13). Quite possibly he had no specific locale in mind, since later Zionists themselves discussed a handful of possible places to settle, scattered all around the world. Regardless, Jones’s admirable championing of a persecuted people is consistent with his political vision in this poem.

31. Gilbert makes an interesting point about how Jones here (and to a lesser extent Cooper, in book 9 of the Purgatory) couples Jews and women as somehow set apart: “The irreducible particularity represented at this historical moment by women and by Jews troubles the possibility of a homogenous and universal public and the elimination of all geographical boundaries” (“History and Its Ends in Chartist Epic,” 36).
to freedom. Concluding the epic is a celebratory, futuristic vision of scientific achievement (“aeronauts,” public health, weather control, “cars of steam,” “rays of light” which can transmit messages—perhaps even images—over vast distances, etc.), of international peace, and of the abolition of property ownership and class distinctions (ibid., 14).

The preface to _The New World_ scathingly exposes the cynicism of the great empire in which Britons are supposed to take pride, revealing the justice of resistance to it and enlisting Britons to oppose it as well. Instead of portraying imperialism as the extension of the British customs of alleged fairness and the code of law, as the spiritual rescuer of perishing souls, and as the bringer of enlightened education and technological progress, Jones condemns it as a marauding bid to extend the economic power of Britain’s ruling class. While admitting the customary boast that on Britain’s colonies “the sun never sets,” he caustically adds “but the blood never dries” (ibid., 1). His poet’s ear serves him well in this terse formulation, which exactly follows the rhythm of the boast and thus twines itself like a clinging vine around an unwilling host, making it difficult any longer to say the one clause without hearing the other. He acknowledges that Britain’s “commerce touches every shore, but their ports have been opened by artillery, and are held by murder” (ibid.). Jones makes explicit the necessity of military conflict to capitalist economic expansion, simultaneously exploding the notion that “private enterprise” is private; in his observation, the state’s military might serves as a crowbar for entrepreneurial encroachment. It is significant that this preface appeals not only to Britons to withdraw support for “their” nation’s conquest of others but also addresses itself to the working people of the United States in a gesture of international fraternity.

The poem itself includes numerous metaphors that similarly point to the imbrication of economic and military means in imperial expansion. Describing how “Nations, like men, too oft are given to roam, / And seek abroad what they could find at home,” one extended metaphor uses the terms of commerce to characterize military campaigns (ibid., 7). Speaking of nations who deploy “their armies” abroad, Jones calls them

_Destruction’s traders! who, to start their trade,  
Steal, for the bayonet, metal from the spade.  
The interest’s—blood; the capital is—life;  
The debt—is vengeance; the instalment—strife;  
The payment’s—death; and wounds are the receipt;  
The market’s—battle; and the whole—a cheat.  
(The New World: A Democratic Poem, 7)_
In these lines warfare is a thoroughly financial concern overseen by “traders,” the identical appellation given to middle-class rulers elsewhere in the poem. While their trade might appear to be in wine, tea, sugar, or textiles, it is at bottom a trade in “destruction” of human lives for the plunder of foreign markets, materials, and labor. The metaphor is slightly strained but succeeds in impressing on readers the point that, for capitalists, war is a matter of business. It also suggests that “cheat[ing]” is every bit as routine a characteristic of business as are receipts, payments, interest, markets, etc. War is stripped of its ideological justification by being equated with what most Victorians regarded as filthy and corrupting (hence the necessity for women to be the moral guardians of and restoratives for those men who engaged in “the public sphere”). And it is condemned by the concluding declaration that both war and business amount to nothing more distinguished than “a cheat.”

The predication in these six lines is also of interest, since the couplets are overwhelmingly dominated by forms of “to be” (eight times) and include only two transitive verbs (“start” and “steal”). The implied or stated “to be” verbs signify the equation of war and commerce, casting military exploits entirely in terms of financial transaction and calculation and giving the lie to claims that invasions serve to “civilise, reform, redeem!” (ibid., 5). In light of this poem’s republication during the Sepoy Rebellion, it is worth noting that Jones includes the vengeance of the conquered against their conquerors as a natural and predictable part of imperialist expansion, not some unaccountable craze brought on in the “natives” by the heat or their inherited disregard for human life. In fact, their violent resistance to conquest is a “debt” which is by definition owed to the “traders” in destruction (ibid., 7).

By implication, it is a debt the workers of England should help the conquered pay, for the metal in the conqueror’s bayonets is filched from much-needed spades at home. Here is where the two transitive verbs in these lines occur, showing the ruling class at its most energetic: the traders “start” warfare internationally by “steal[ing]” spades domestically. The agricultural implement stands in not only for the potential jobs and incomes earned by those who would ply it but also for the all-important yield of a life-sustaining harvest. This fact, along with the reality that working people are the ones who must wield the bayonets and suffer the “wounds” and “death” of battle, illustrates in part how imperialism abroad costs poor people at home. This is a portion of the economic transaction which rulers would prefer to conceal or sanitize, but which Jones’s use of metaphor reveals (an instance of the epistemological power of metaphor). So too do his careful choice and arrangement of verbs which, while indicting by equating finance and war, also draw our attention to the two moments of active bourgeois initiative: domestic theft to sustain the prosecution of international theft.
As mentioned, Jones cast his broad historical survey against an Indian background, a choice he would later regard as prophetic. For although originally published in 1851, The New World appeared again in 1857 under the new title The Revolt of Hindostan or The New World. Its republication came in direct response to the domestic British reaction to the Indian Uprising of 1857. Periodicals of the time overwhelmingly reflect a sentiment for revenge on the sepoy army and other rebels, with calls for retribution growing increasingly vitriolic as news of Hindu excesses was revealed. After the British began to regain control of India, they carried out a ruthless suppression which included the killing in one city of over six thousand people regardless of age or sex, as well as the gloating vigilantism of volunteer execution parties and hangmen (Morton, A People’s History of England, 467–68; Bates, Subalterns and Raj: South Asia since 1600, 65–92). In his writings about these events, Jones did not deny the atrocities committed by some mutineers but counterposed to them the slaughters perpetrated there by Britain and contextualized them within the disastrous impact of British rule over several decades. He also did not let pass the opportunity to draw some parallels with English rule in Ireland, describing what he called English “sepoyism” (atrocities) and calling for the independence of both colonies from England. His arguments on behalf of decency and Indian independence sharply distinguished him from his contemporaries then and still earn him respect now. Perhaps too his views on this matter partly explain the prominence of The New World in modern critical discussions of Jones.

Jones wrote The New World during his inhumane imprisonment from 1848–50, a time when he would have been keenly aware of whose class interests were served by state institutions such as the army and police. In the poem he imagines the defeat of British forces in Hindostan, and though he respects the strength of ordinary soldiers and can appreciate their “misused courage,” he recognizes the “centuries of wrong” which prompt rebellion on the Indian subcontinent and cries, “God, hope, and history take the Hindu side!” (The New World, 6) His analysis of the dilemma of British soldiers sent to “murder[] millions to enrich the few” (ibid., 5) reveals his view that the soldiers themselves fight in a cause not their own and from which they gain nothing.

32. Modern historical accounts make clear the range of motives (reinstatement of kingdoms and chiefdoms, military grievances, anger at taxation and moneylenders, etc.) and participants in the insurrection—from rural elites to peasants to nomadic communities to soldiers. Crispin Bates provides a thorough account of the multifarious nature of the rebellion in chapter 4 of Subalterns and Raj: South Asia since 1600.

33. See, for example, Jones’s articles in the People’s Paper for September 5 and October 31, 1857.

not even a living wage. At home they “leave starving families to beg bread,” indicating the insufficiency of their pay. And he makes the point still more forcefully when the poet asks British rulers, “Think ye that men will still the patriot play, / Bleed, starve, and murder for four pence per day[?]” (ibid., 6) Whether in uniform or out, working men face severe exploitation for which the language of patriotism cannot compensate; since the men and their “starving families” cannot eat glory or medals and they are no better off as soldiers than they were as weavers, they are right to question where the profits of war, like the profits of cotton, go. Such questioning is part of Jones’s project, for if soldiers will no longer “the patriot play,” they evaporate the capacities of their nations to wage war.

This section of the poem depicts British soldiers as victims of their own rulers, not of their Indian counterparts. They are “Marched against men, God never made their foes,” and thinking of this and of their starving families back home, they “strike unwilling blows” (6). They glimpse the fact that they actually have no quarrel with people in other countries who seek independence, and though for the time they go through the motions of war, their sense of righteousness and resolution erodes and they fight half-heartedly. Their awareness that those who stand to gain from the mutual murder of poor Indian and poor Englishman are corrupt feudal princes and avaricious British merchants will, Jones believes, lead to a cessation of armed conflict:

What gain they, save they, by the deathful strife?
What meed have they to balance risk of life?
They conquer empires: not a single rood
Is their’s—not even the ground whereon they stood,
When victory drenched it with their gallant blood!
Think ye, that men will . . .
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
Go forth for others vile designs to fight[?

(The New World, 6)

In the poem’s vision of the future, these warring workers will have recognized their own interests, put down their arms, and united the world in friendship (ibid., 14). It is significant that this realization of international peace follows from a distinct consciousness of shared class interest. Jones posits that membership in a community defined by class has the power to negate national identities and boundaries, “for nigh the day has come, / When country signifies a larger home” (ibid., 13). Apparently, class consciousness also contributes to the eradication of artificial barriers for women, as Jones tantalizingly
suggests in the lines “And when the strong the weak no more o’erbears, / But equal rights with Man sweet Woman shares” (ibid.). It is a sweeping conception of a future transformation, but what emerges unmistakably from this and Jones’s other writings is that it cannot be achieved without the solidarity of the international working class.

That Jones wrote this epic after the defeats and setbacks of 1848 and during his own imprisonment might go some way to explaining some formal features of the poem that distinguish it from his earlier writing. Of course its length is striking—fifteen pages of tiny, double-columned print with few breaks—meaning that its reading requires a degree of sustained effort and the sort of literary patience one gains by some practice and leisure. Its many hundreds of iambic pentameter couplets also might make it less accessible than much of his own previous writing and of Chartist song, for example. So too would its grand scope—a survey of civilization and systems of government, along with a good deal of historical and literary allusiveness. Though it includes some cautions directed to the “democrats” of the United States, the poem is noticeably less immediate and agitational in its tone than his earlier poems. All of this suggests a more aesthetic and educational orientation to the poem, an orientation that might have resulted partly from his isolation in prison and partly from the symptoms of decline in Chartism in the last two years of the 1840s. Nevertheless, Jones’s epic poem—like his fiction, speeches, and journalism discussed in chapter 1—showed his unwavering commitment to internationalism and expressed his continued hope for a better future.

It might seem peculiar that Jones incarnates this hortatory vision of a future world in the anachronistic medium of heroic couplets. The use of neo-classical poetic modes in the first half of the nineteenth century was not uncommon among working-class writers (Linton also used couplets—though not heroic—in *Bob Thin*), even though poetic norms among educated writers had dramatically shifted toward a more expressive, personal idiom under the influence of the Romantic poets. This might well be attributable to the fact that poor readers had much cheaper access to older rather than modern poetry, so that their models had about them a rather musty air in more than physical ways. But like Cooper’s Spenserian stanzas, Augustan couplets must also have represented a level of cultural attainment that worker-writers sought as a kind of surety to their poetic bonds, a formal backing that lent authority and gravity to their efforts and voices. In Jones’s case, though, these explanations seem inadequate because, though rendered economically unstable (he was disinherited) and socially marginal by his commitment to Chartism, he hailed from a well-to-do family and enjoyed a sound education in Germany prior to his move to England. He undoubtedly knew that the legacy
of Romanticism had changed the field for contemporary poets; did he choose heroic couplets as a formal identification with or appeal to other working-class poets? If so, it is a striking instance of political solidarity by specifically poetic means, irreducible to theme or even ordinary language.

Probably Jones also knew how eighteenth-century poetic conventions lent themselves to satire, denunciation, and moral judgment as well as the expansive and detailed knowledge or analysis so characteristic of the age of essays, dictionaries, and biological classification schemes. Closed iambic pentameter couplets (with their hierarchy of pauses, balanced rhetoric, and tidy correspondence of syntax and line) represented detached empirical observation, logical demonstration, balance, and command—in other words they were the perfect choice for the expansive global epic Jones had in mind, one which offered and interpreted the stages of human history viewed synchronically. Personal awareness or individual self-expression is not the goal here, so open couplets or other lyric forms will not do. Instead Jones requires a form simultaneously empirical and morally denunciatory, as he desires to tip the balance of opinion and action towards finally liberating the working classes from their historical role of enabling others to grasp power. As for all the epic poets discussed in this chapter, the nature and history of his medium, as well as the burden of his expressed message, form part of the power of his work.

A node that my discussions of these three epics all touch is Victorian medievalism. As for other cultural barometric readings in this chapter, the preeminent exemplar of a traditionalist engagement with medievalism is none other than the poet laureate Tennyson, who composed Arthurian poems throughout his long career and, through them, represented contemporary conventional values and practices as natural and nonideological.\(^{35}\) The transmission of those values is the ultimate end toward which his “Morte d’Arthur” (1842), for example, marshals its readers.\(^{36}\) Framed by the poem Tennyson called “The Epic,” “Morte d’Arthur” concludes with the paradox that the dying king and his famed sword Excalibur must physically part and depart in order that the legend and values they represent may be communicated down the ages in the form and power of myth. Tucker’s important reading of the poem concludes that “the subject of ‘Morte d’Arthur’ is cultural transmission, the handing on or handing over of a communal ideal whose

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\(^{35}\) For a convincing analysis of Tennyson in these terms, see Antony Harrison’s *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture: Discourse and Ideology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 17–43.

[. . .] essence is communication” (Tennyson, 318). If the epic ideal previously had consisted in transmitting a culture (epic serves as a conduit for the passing of a set of beliefs, values, practices across generations and places), here it consists in the notion that transmission is culture (the act of communication, without alteration, itself becomes the belief, value, or practice to be preserved). In other words, an epic attains to the status of culture only insofar as it performs a conservative, preservationist role—such a definition is inherently defensive and reactionary. If culture equals transmission, then it is precisely the maintenance of existing power relations—sexually, economically, domestically—that is culture.

Chartist epic’s aesthetic and social challenge to dominant values represented the very antithesis or negation of culture so defined. 37 This is why Chartist appropriations of aesthetic cultural forms were potentially so powerful: the very practice of writing in high cultural forms such as epic while also challenging the conservative values embodied in Victorian medievalism created an ideological disruption, a cognitive dissonance, a destabilizing fissure in the lockstep association of epic with the transmission of culture which finally mutated into the notion that transmission is culture. To the extent that Chartist epic did not transmit or instantiate the values neo-medievalists represented as inevitable and absolute, it could not be “culture.” Yet it was “culture,” a pedigreed aesthetic practice and form with a lineage stretching further back than those favored middle ages. For these reasons the Chartist project of self-representation in epic forms—whether through heroic couplets or Spenserian stanzas or grotesquely illustrated doggerel verse—marked one of the most powerful and richly engaged cultural practices ever undertaken by the Chartist movement.

37. Arguably such poets as Arnold, the Rossettis, Morris, and Swinburne also demonstrate a counterhegemonic use of medievalism (Harrison, 17–43).