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## The Reading Experience of Worker-Autobiographers in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Europe

Historians of popular reading practices are often forced to study them indirectly, through the work of those intent on disciplining or moralising the poor. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, too, a mass of advice literature appeared, as Churches, educators, librarians and philanthropists attempted to direct expanding working-class literacy into safe channels. The competing discourses about reading during the 19<sup>th</sup> century reveal plenty, incidentally, about the fears and neuroses of élites, but in the end they only tell one side of the story: they say little about what workers actually read. As Jonathan Rose urged in a provocative article, we must ‘interrogate the audience’ itself.<sup>1</sup> My paper tries to do that, at least for a small group of autodidacts, and to offer some clues about readers’ responses. The clues come from the accounts given by individual workers about their own reading experience. These sources enable us to envisage workers not just as a passive body of readers ready to be shaped and disciplined, but as active readers who attempted to construct a distinctive reading culture of their own.

The core of this discussion lies in the autobiographies of workers themselves. I have consulted 22 French autobiographies, and 68 for Britain, which was a far more prolific source of worker-autobiographies. The bibliography compiled by David Vincent and his colleagues lists no fewer than 801 working-class autobiographies

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Rose, “Rereading the English Common Reader: a Preface to the History of Audiences”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol.53, no.1, 1992, p.70.

written in Britain between 1790-1900.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the 1866 edition of the Larousse Dictionary described autobiography as an English invention, still rare in France.<sup>3</sup> The autobiographies consulted span the period from the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1914. 79 works consulted were written by men, only eleven by women. They were published either in book form, or in newspapers, or as a brief life history to introduce a collection of poems. Working-class autobiographers rarely failed to give a description of their reading, and some of them outlined the detailed reading programs which had guided them. In relating their reading, they traced their triumphant struggles to acquire a literary culture. They established authentic foundations for their own literary aspirations. The eager search for book knowledge was vital to the intellectual emancipation on which political action was based; it also provided the knowledge and discipline required for moral, rational self-improvement.

The emphasis on reading was echoed by many members of this working-class intelligentsia, and it raises important questions for a historian of reading practices : what did the working-class autobiographers read? Given the expense of buying books, how did they acquire their reading matter? *When* did they read, if their days were filled by long hours of exhausting manual labour? And above all, *how* did they read - collectively or alone, silently or orally, eagerly, obsessively, or casually, like the "nonchalant" readers encountered by Richard Hoggart?<sup>4</sup> They exploited a variety of resources to acquire reading matter, and struggled to read in the face of grinding poverty and other material difficulties. And yet what they regarded as 'useful knowledge' did not always match the definitions of utility promoted by

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<sup>2</sup> John Burnett, David Vincent & David Mayall, eds., *The Autobiography of the Working Class: an annotated, critical bibliography*, 2 vols., Brighton (Harvester), 1984-7, vol.1.

<sup>3</sup> Grand Dictionnaire Larousse, 1866 ed., I, p.979.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy : aspects of working-class life*, Harmondsworth UK (Penguin), 1958.

philanthropists, educators and politicians. Workers made their own choices, dictated by their own interpretations of their needs.

Working-class autobiographers had quite distinctive and intensive methods of literary appropriation. Their literary culture was improvised, developed haphazardly outside the structure of educational institutions. In its respect for the literary canon, the reading of the autodidacts seems extremely deferential to the literary monuments of bourgeois culture. This ambiguous reverence for official culture lies at the heart of working-class *autodidaxie*. Yet it never prevented working-class readers from proclaiming their class identity or making clear where their fundamental class loyalties lay. They lay, in the vast majority of cases considered here, with the working-class roots from which they had sprung. From this angle, we can justifiably call their reading culture a culture of resistance.

### *1. The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties*

The process of cultural appropriation, according to Pierre Bourdieu, depends on the balance between an individual's economic capital, and his or her educational capital.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the cultural goods we consume and cherish are determined by our income level and the level of schooling we have attained. It follows from this that the autodidacts were doubly disinherited. They were both poor and lacking in educational qualifications. The autodidact, deficient in both inherited and acquired cultural capital, was forced to accumulate it through his or her own efforts, and by unorthodox means. Excluded from the kinds of cultural consumption enjoyed by the well-off, the autodidact inevitably became a usurper of cultural property. He or she was an interloper, who had been denied access to an envied cultural world. This

situation provoked alternating feelings of dutiful submissiveness and belligerent resentment.

The 'Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties' was the title of Edward Craik's successful work of advice literature for self-improving British workers, first published in 1830 under the auspices of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.<sup>6</sup> The title suggests the material handicaps which working-class readers had to overcome. The education of the autodidact was, by definition, intermittent and incomplete, constantly sacrificed to the family's economic needs. Erratic attendance made it difficult for teachers to impart learning as a cumulative process. Formal schooling was far less important for the apprentice reader than the informal networks of relatives, neighbours, priests and benevolent employers who took time to assist the debutant reader. The home and the local community remained important sources of the educational process. Hannah Mitchell, a rare working-class suffragette, grew up on a farm in the Peak district in the 1870s and early 1880s. As we learn from her autobiography *The Hard Way Up*, she was taught to read by her father and uncle.<sup>7</sup> Then she herself taught her younger sisters to read. Hannah only had two weeks' schooling. The story of her reading apprenticeship is a good example of the importance of family transmission in the acquisition of literacy.

Self-taught workers had a love-hate relationship with formal education. They resented the fact that it remained the preserve of the rich and privileged. At the same time, they retained a strong belief in its value, and several autobiographers devoted considerable space to a discussion of their own education. Many were deprived even

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Paris (Eds.de Minuit), 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Lillie Craik, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties*, revised ed., London (George Bell), 1876.

of the opportunity to learn to read. Perhaps the most harrowing tale of thwarted educational possibilities comes from the long-time illiterate, Norbert Truquin, the son of a northern metal-worker. Born in the Somme in 1833, the young Truquin was put to work for a woolcarder in Amiens at the age of seven. For three years, Truquin led a brutalised existence, forced to sleep in a coal-hole under the stairs.<sup>8</sup> Truquin's release came in 1843 when his employer died, but this left Truquin unemployed, living by begging and then resorting to a series of itinerant jobs. At the age of 13, he could neither read nor write, but he had heard of the socialist writer Cabet, and he came to think of himself as a freethinker.<sup>9</sup> In one factory, he heard a fellow-worker reading aloud from Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie*, but this worker was dismissed.<sup>10</sup> This incident testifies both to the importance of oral transmission in working-class reading, and to the fragility of any attempt to develop an independent reading culture in this period. Truquin had acquired strongly anticlerical opinions, but he still had had no opportunity to learn to read.

In 1855, Truquin was eking out a miserable existence in the silk sweatshops of Lyon. He discussed history and politics with fellow-workers, and he heard the *Courrier de Lyon* read aloud, although he regarded it as a paper which continually

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up, the autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, suffragette and rebel*, ed. Geoffrey Mitchell, London (Virago), 1977, pp.43-54.

<sup>8</sup> Norbert Truquin, *Mémoires et Aventures d'un Prolétaire à travers la Révolution, l'Algérie, la République argentine et le Paraguay*, Paris (Librairie des Deux Mondes), 1888, p.14. For more about Truquin, see Michel Ragon, *Histoire de la littérature prolétarienne en France*, Paris (Albin Michel), 1974, pp.100-3; Michelle Perrot, 'A Nineteenth-Century Work Experience as Related in a Worker's Autobiography: Norbert Truquin', in Steven J.Kaplan & Cynthia J.Koepp, eds., *Work in France: representations, meaning, organization and practice*, Ithaca & London (Cornell University Press), 1986, chapter 10; Paule Lejeune, introduction to the 1977 edition of Truquin's *Mémoires et Aventures*, published by Maspéro in Paris; Mark Traugott, ed., *The French Worker: autobiographies from the early industrial era*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> Truquin, *Mémoires et Aventures*, pp.144 & 231.

<sup>10</sup> Truquin, *Mémoires et Aventures*, pp.72-3.

slandered the working class.<sup>11</sup> Without any formal education or reading competence, Truquin had learned from direct experience about the exploitative nature of capitalism. In 1870, he was arrested for participation in the Lyon Commune. Once again, oral reading amongst his fellow-workers continued Truquin's education. He persuaded other prisoners to read to him from Fernand Cortez's history of the conquest of Mexico.<sup>12</sup> Truquin had clearly developed a great interest in history, although historians, in his opinion, only wrote to praise the upper classes. The great philosophers were no better, Truquin decided after visiting the ancient sites of North Africa, for the great minds of antiquity cared nothing about the emancipation of the slaves who maintained their illustrious civilisations.<sup>13</sup>

Latin America now captured his attention. He was attracted by the promise of new, agrarian-based, social experiments. Still illiterate at the age of 37, he left in 1872 to help establish a socialist colony in Argentina. He returned briefly to France before his definitive emigration with his wife to Paraguay. His experience of Paraguay confirmed his anti-Jesuit opinions, but in all probability it was here that he eventually became literate. He finished his autobiography, *Mémoires et aventures d'un prolétaire*, in 1887, and it was published in the following year by Bouriand, a socialist publisher in Paris.

Norbert Truquin had spent much of his life trying to fight hunger and homelessness. No wonder that his autobiography, like many other workers' autobiographies, recorded such basic information as the price of bread and how much he earned. Such materialist concerns are a distinctive feature of working-class writing in the 19th century. In spite of his hardships and peregrinations, he had acquired a

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<sup>11</sup> Truquin, *Mémoires et Aventures*, pp.225-7 & 235-6.

<sup>12</sup> Truquin, *Mémoires et Aventures*, pp.294-5.

class-based culture, which was inspired by socialism and anticlericalism, and was well-versed in history. He asked questions, discussed issues with fellow-workers, and responded critically to the literature that he listened to. His 'knowledge' developed out of his life experiences – physical hardships, two revolutions and prison. Truquin had no roots and no craft-based training, and he suffered from his own illiteracy. He was deprived of an education, and his employers continued to prevent workers' access to culture. Nevertheless, he had by his mid-fifties acquired enough expertise to write his own autobiography, which concluded with a ringing call to social revolution.<sup>14</sup> Even in the most hostile of environments, a workers' literary culture could be formed.

However brief the experience of formal schooling, it nevertheless authorised some emphatically negative judgements from workers. They had, after all, obtained an education through their own efforts, and they were proud to have fashioned their own culture. It was natural that they should value the lessons of life and experience over classroom learning. For several of them, schools were purveyors of useless erudition and false knowledge. James Bezer, born in Spitalfields (East London) in 1816, complained about the ineffectiveness of the schools he attended. He claimed he was still unable to write, after 15 years in Sunday School, where he had

"Six hours a week, certainly not ONE hour of useful knowledge; plenty of cant, and what my teachers used to call EXPLAINING difficult texts in the Bible, but little, very little else".

"My education was very meagre;", he wrote, "I learnt more in Newgate [prison] than at my Sunday School" - a typical autodidactic rejection of institutionalised instruction,

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<sup>13</sup> Truquin, *Mémoires et Aventures*, pp.447-8. Truquin spent 7 years in Algeria, 1848-55.

<sup>14</sup> Truquin, *Mémoires et Aventures*, p.451.

in favour of the 'hard knocks' school of life.<sup>15</sup> Yet later in life, after working as a shop assistant, a porter and a beggar, he himself became a Sunday school teacher, before his emigration to Australia. The fact that a large number of working-class autodidacts did become teachers betrays their deep-rooted concern for the cultural life of their own class.

The autodidacts pursued their desire for study and self-improvement with a determination that was sometimes obsessive. Indeed, it had to be, if they were to overcome the immense material handicaps that stood in their way. Sacrifice and ingenuity made up for the lack of money, light, space and time to read. Gabriel Gauny, as a poor Parisian *gamin* in the *faubourg* St.Marceau during the second decade of the century, even collected discarded wrapping-paper used to pack seeds, sugar or coffee. It was usually made of old books and newspaper, and provided him with an unlikely source of reading-matter.<sup>16</sup> Gauny's difficult life as a child of the *faubourgs* did not prevent him from starting an apprenticeship as a carpenter, joining the Saint-Simonians, and developing a philosophical theory based on the palingenesis of souls. But this lay in the future. The publishing initiatives of the 1830s had reduced the price of novels without yet making them affordable to working-class readers. Another problem was the lack of light for reading. Windows were rare, and candles were expensive. In the 1830s and 1840s, oil-lamps were available, and after the 1850s, paraffin lamps were introduced. In many working-class households, however, the lamp might only be lit when all the family as present for the evening meal.

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<sup>15</sup> John James Bezer, 'Autobiography of One of the Chartist Rebels of 1848' in David Vincent, ed., *Testaments of Radicalism: memoirs of working-class politicians*, London (Europa), p.157.

<sup>16</sup> Gabriel Gauny, *Le Philosophe plébéien*, ed.Jacques Rancière, Paris (La Découverte/Maspéro), 1983, p.27.



Parental opposition to reading was a deterrent, too. Martin Nadaud's memoirs are a reminder of this, for Martin's father had to overcome vigorous opposition from the boy's mother and grandfather in order to send him to school.<sup>17</sup> Parental censorship failed to crush Margaret Penn, who grew up in a non-conformist family in Lancashire in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Margaret, who called herself 'Hilda' in her extremely evocative autobiography, had great difficulty in expanding her reading beyond what was authorised, that is to say the Bible and the books she won as Sunday School prizes. Hilda began to borrow fiction from her local Co-operative library, but her parents would only tolerate this if the local vicar approved the titles she read. Hilda proceeded to devour a range of romantic and fictional literature, including *Robinson Crusoe*, the best-selling Victorian melodrama *East Lynne*, and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a book which became an emblem of independent womanhood at the end of the 19th century. Because Hilda's parents were illiterate, they demanded that she should read her books aloud. Only in this way could they check that the contents of her reading were acceptable. Hilda could not oblige: she borrowed novels on a week's loan, which left little time for reading aloud before they had to be returned. Family tension mounted when Hilda became determined to leave home to go into service. Her parents blamed her reading for her wilful departure to Manchester, and an independent life as an apprentice dressmaker.

Working-class autodidacts embarked on the pursuit of knowledge with vast enthusiasm and little discrimination. They confessed to a ravenous appetite for literature of all sorts, which they admitted in retrospect was poorly directed. Only later did some of them organise their study into a pattern with fixed objectives. This

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Nadaud, *Les Mémoires de Léonard, ancien garçon maçon*, ed. Maurice Agulhon, Paris (Hachette), 1976, pp.67-80.

indiscriminate and eclectic reading seems to have been a necessary initiation stage. The autodidact began by accumulating knowledge quite arbitrarily. He or she lacked the experience or education to classify his or her cultural acquisitions, or place them in a hierarchy of importance. Without the literary landmarks offered by formal schooling, the autodidacts were cultural usurpers, adopting independent and 'heretical' modes of cultural acquisition.<sup>18</sup> They looked back with mixed feelings on this stage of exploration and rapid, unsystematic consumption. The goal of self-improvement dictated a different kind of reading. Reading should have a clear purpose, and there was little room for casual browsing.

Autobiographers thus described an early stage of ignorance. At a certain point, however, the reader would be struck by the revelation that his or her reading had been desultory, indiscriminate and poorly directed. He or she determined to pursue a more purposeful reading plan in future. This turning-point has been effectively described by Nöé Richter as 'the conversion of the bad reader', when the autodidact resolved to renounce his 'bad' reading habits.<sup>19</sup> At this point, the self-improving artisan or worker made his or her own reading time, and set his or her own programme. A stern self-discipline and a careful economy of time were required. Moral, spiritual and material improvement demanded neatness, sobriety and moderation in all things. Self-denial was part of the *habitus* of the self-taught working-class reader. Nevertheless, self-imposed reading courses were sometimes so ambitious that they exacted a heavy price in terms of the reader's mental and physical energy. Teenage reading crises were not

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<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, p.378.

<sup>19</sup> Nöé Richter, *La Conversion du Mauvais Lecteur et la Naissance de la Lecture publique*, Marigné (Editions de la Queue du Chat), 1992, pp.9-22.

unusual, and I have already recounted elsewhere the reading breakdown of the shoemaker Thomas Cooper.<sup>20</sup>

Working-class readers improvised and borrowed from friends, neighbours, priests or schoolteachers. A collective effort could compensate for the lack of individual resources. As a soldier in Metz in 1846, Sebastien Commissaire joined with other members of his barracks to 'sub-let' two-day-old copies of progressive newspapers from a local bookseller.<sup>21</sup> Family ties, professional or religious connections were sources of intellectual aid rooted in the working-class milieu itself. Working-class networks protected the autodidact's autonomy as a reader, and may have filtered his or her responses to the texts read. They ensured that he or she did not always respond predictably to the literary culture diffused by middle-class mediators.

Informal borrowing systems developed in the workplace and workers gave up their time to tutor one another. As a result, literacy could be developed and used in the context of a militant working-class tradition. Consider the oral testimony of an anonymous worker from the north of France, born the son of a nail-worker in 1892. His official schooling was interrupted at the age of seven, but a group of militants continued to take his education in hand. He recalled:

“When you reached the age of seven, school was over, totally! Young people don't realise what the situation was like, 50, 60, 80 years ago. They ask you ‘So how did you learn to read? How could it be done...?’ ...Well, there were the old guesdist militants... They were good teachers who put on an evening school to teach us to read and write. They gave lessons. They taught us problems, maths. They did half an hour of theory on what had happened, on

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<sup>20</sup> Martyn Lyons, ‘Les Nouveaux lecteurs au 19e siècle: femmes, enfants, ouvriers’, in G.Cavallo & R.Chartier, eds., *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental*, Paris (Seuil), 1997, p.392.

the revolutions, action and after all, at that particular time, it was very rich from the point of view of social issues. My father was born in 1852, and he brought us up in the memory...he told us about the Commune. He was a member of the socialist party and naturally, he told us about Louise Michel. You see, we were brought up with the attitudes of people who had rebelled against injustice".<sup>22</sup>

This militant, known here simply as A., later became secretary of the St.Nazaire branch of the French Communist Party. His story shows how even learning to read could become part of the informal process by which working-class culture was transmitted from one generation to another, and by which historical memories and myths were perpetuated.

Autodidacts, then, were condemned to improvise. They stole time to read, and they carved out moments of privacy from the continuous stream of demands from families or employment. By exploiting working-class networks or the generosity of relatives and assorted patrons, they manufactured their own culture. In spite of the need for middle-class patronage, 'self-culture' was still seen as a means to the independence and emancipation of labour. It is a paradox of *autodidaxie* that out of this very dependence on bourgeois help was to come self-reliance and the desire for emancipation. Only the successful autodidacts present us with these contradictions.

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<sup>21</sup> Sebastien Commissaire, *Mémoires et Souvenirs*, 2 vols., Lyon (Méton), 1888, vol.1, p.121.

<sup>22</sup> Autobiography of A., in Jean Peneff, ed., *Autobiographies de Militants CGTU-CGT*, Nantes (Université de Nantes, cahiers du L.E.R.S.C.O.), 1979, p.18. I am grateful to Jacques Girault for bringing this work to my attention. "A sept ans, on a supprimé l'école totalement! Les jeunes ne se rendent pas compte quelle était la situation, il y a 50, 60, 80 ans. Ils vous disent : 'Comment vous avez appris à lire? comment vous avez pu...?' ...Il y avait alors les vieux militants guesdistes...C'étaient de bons instituteurs qui faisaient l'école le soir pour nous apprendre à lire et à écrire. Ils nous faisaient des cours. Ils nous apprenaient les problèmes, le calcul. Ils nous faisaient une demi-heure de théorie sur ce qui s'était passé, sur les révolutions, l'action, et puis alors évidemment, à ce moment-là, c'était très riche au point de vue social. Mon père était né en 1852 et il nous a élevés dans le souvenir...il nous parlait de la Commune.

The fate of those who tried the road to self-improvement, but failed, defeated by poverty or other pressures, can only be imagined.

## 2. *The Uses and Abuses of Fiction*

Working-class intellectuals had little patience with popular novels. They joined company with middle-class library reformers in urging workers to rise above the tide of pulp fiction which, by the end of the century, was engulfing lending libraries. The worker-intellectual Henri Tolain takes us further into the *habitus* of this emerging working-class intelligentsia.

Tolain was a Parisian bronze-worker with Proudhonist sympathies who played a major role in founding the International in France.<sup>23</sup> At first sight, his literary views showed a great respect for 'high' literary culture. In 1865, Tolain, writing in the short-lived weekly *Tribune Ouvrière*, regretted the banality and sensationalism of the popular novel. Pulp fiction, in his view, was a corrosive influence and an insidious poison, infiltrating the working household and sapping its sense of morality.

Newspaper fiction, he wrote, was sprouting

“like a poisonous mushroom. Secretly or in broad daylight, it proudly struts its wares or furtively slides under the poor man’s roof. Even if papa by chance bans it as unhealthy fare, Lise will hide it in her bodice. The tyrant can do nothing, and his ban adds the bitter taste of the forbidden fruit to the palpitating attraction of the drama”.<sup>24</sup>

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Il était adhérent au parti socialiste et naturellement, il nous parlait de Louise Michel. On a été élevé, vous savez, avec cet état d’esprit de gens qui s’étaient révoltés contre l’injustice”.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Duveau, *La Pensée Ouvrière sur l’éducation pendant la Seconde République et le Second Empire*, Paris (Domat Montchrestien), 1948, pp.302-7.

<sup>24</sup> Henri Tolain, ‘Le Roman Populaire’, *La Tribune Ouvrière*, vol.1, no.3, 18 juin 1865, pp.9-10. “Comme un champignon vénéneux, le journal-roman foisonne. Au grand jour ou clandestinement, il s’étale orgueilleux ou se glisse furtif sous le toit du pauvre. Si papa le

Tolain significantly blamed the female reader for promoting the harmful effects of serialised fiction, and his reference to the fall of Eve reinforces his gender prejudices.

Tolain condemned novelists with no morality, and no conception of justice. He criticised the rotten distortions inherent in the sensational novel. He did not shrink from condemning Goethe's *Werther* as a selfish, weepy lover, and Balzac's Madame Marneffe as a female monster. He severely criticised the novels of Eugène Sue. If we examine his ideas more closely, however, it is clear that he does not reject fiction outright. Tolain simply had his own agenda for the ideal novel. What he demanded from the genre was a clearer personal conviction on the author's part, and an awareness of social and political issues. What he valued in novels, and found wanting amongst popular contemporary writers, was precisely that sense of social justice and social realities which would make fiction meaningful and uplifting to working-class readers. Tolain cites Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* as a novel with such ideals, and in spite of Madame Marneffe he grudgingly praised Balzac as a master of social observation. Everything else, however, was dross, nothing but overwrought sentiment and banality. The novel itself was not condemned, but Tolain expected novelists to be philosophers with principles and a message to impart.

Tolain, therefore, was a critical reader who had a clear agenda for his ideal working-class reader. But what did other autodidacts read in their dedicated pursuit of self-culture?<sup>25</sup> To some extent, they accepted advice to concentrate on utilitarian reading, together with a knowledge of uplifting canonical works. Many of them felt that purely recreational fiction was a waste of their time. Their responses to self-

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proscrit, par hasard, comme une nourriture malsaine, Lise le cache dans son corsage. Le tyran n'y peut rien, et sa défense ajoute à l'intérêt palpitant du drame l'âcre sauveur du fruit défendu”.

improving literature, however, were not uniform. Although they often read the same books, it is not always possible to predict what they thought of them. Workers conducted their own dialogue with the texts they acquired, and searched for answers to problems arising from their own experience of life and work.

Autodidacts shared similar preferences and similar evaluations of different literary genres. In the codes of practice they adopted, they unconsciously formed what Stanley Fish termed an “interpretive community” of readers.<sup>26</sup> They developed common reading strategies, based on convergent assumptions about what constituted good literature. For the British autodidacts, their library reflected the heritage of radical Dissent. Bunyan, Milton and Tom Paine formed a staple diet, to be supplemented perhaps by Cobbett, Ruskin, Carlyle or by Chartist literature and the radical *Black Dwarf*. The classical literature of the 17th century was one common meeting-point for French working-class readers, while Rousseau was the dominant radical presence in the autodidact's library. The writing of Châteaubriand was another strong influence. Volney had an international influence on working-class anticlericalism, and so did Voltaire. The autodidacts read and responded individually but in spite of obvious divergences, they shared common interests and devoured the same imaginary library.

A few certainly used their reading in politics and economics to develop socialist ideas. Voltaire reinforced the anticlericalism of many militants, fuelled at the same time by a reading of Volney, Holbach, Meslier or indeed of religious history itself, which could demonstrate the follies of the Crusades, the wars of religion and

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<sup>25</sup> Martyn Lyons, “The Autodidacts and their Literary Culture: working-class autobiographers in nineteenth-century France”, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol. XXVIII, no.3, 1991, pp.264-73 gave a short preliminary answer to this question.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, Mass. (Harvard University Press), 1980.

the Inquisition. They devoured history, scientific works and tried to master foreign languages. Louis-Arsène Meunier, the starving muslin-weaver from the Perche, became an itinerant schoolteacher in the 1820s, but felt ridiculed by his social superiors for his ignorance of Latin. So he taught himself Latin, with some assistance from a local lawyer. The phenomenal Meunier claimed that he read eight hours per day for six years, committing large sections of Rollin's *Ancient History* to memory. He had borrowed the work from a friend, and read it through twice within three weeks before returning the loan.<sup>27</sup>

Serious autodidacts, however, were not usually enthusiastic about fiction and recreational reading. Victorine Brocher, the militant *communarde* who was sentenced to death as a *pétroleuse*, recalled rather grimly that in her family “we read progressive newspapers”.<sup>28</sup> Those who experienced a ‘conversion’ to more serious and purposeful reading looked back on fiction-reading as a frivolous waste of time. When James Burn the itinerant pedlar drew up a list of recommended books, he began with the categories of religion, history, the arts and the sciences. Only then did he turn to the humanities, and to the types of fiction to be avoided. Sentimental romances were better left on their shelves for all the useful knowledge they provided. They were “full of language without meaning, and pretty flowers without fragrance!” They outraged common notions of probability, and above all, they lacked gravity.<sup>29</sup> Only two novels were excluded from this class of useless fiction: Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* and

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<sup>27</sup> Louis-Arsène Meunier, “Mémoires d’un ancêtre ou tribulations d’un instituteur percheron”, *Cahiers perchérons*, 65-66, 1981, pp.38-44. Meunier’s memoirs were first published as supplements to the teachers’ journal *L’Ecole Nouvelle* in 1904.

<sup>28</sup> Victorine B. (Brocher), *Souvenirs d’une morte vivante*, preface by Lucien Descaves, Paris (Maspéro), 1976, p.34.

<sup>29</sup> James Dawson Burn, *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy*, ed. David Vincent, London (Europa), p.198.



Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* had a moral content and were sufficiently "true to nature" to qualify amongst Burn's recommended literature.

On the other hand, many working-class autobiographers, like Tolain, took a personal and selective approach to fiction. Hugo was especially remembered by the autobiographers, because he could be read as a social radical. Victorine Brocher clearly took time off from her progressive papers because she reported that she was inspired by *Les Misérables*, which she read in a *cabinet de lecture* in the mid-1860s, and re-read annually thereafter.<sup>30</sup> She described it as a great work of social philosophy, well worth the one franc per day she paid to borrow it.

Working-class readers knew what they wanted from imaginative literature. They compared their fictional worlds to their own, and judged them according to their own standards of realism. They usually also demanded that novelists should be aware of social problems and social inequalities. It was on these terms that they appropriated the work of writers like Hugo and Dickens. What mattered most was the novelist's social conscience. Thus what Dickens imparted to the Labour Member of Parliament George Roberts was "a deep and abiding sympathy with the poor and suffering".<sup>31</sup>

Emile Zola was interpreted in similar terms. Unskilled worker Tom Barclay admired him, in spite of (and possibly because of) the accusations of obscenity levied at Zola in the press. He predictably preferred *Germinal*, Zola's novel of working-class life because "I suppose I am a rebel and a Socialist".<sup>32</sup> The socialism of British working-class autobiographers was clearly broadly-based enough to embrace anyone who expressed concern about the condition of the poor. But Zola could have the

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<sup>30</sup> Victorine B., *Souvenirs*, p.62.

<sup>31</sup> George Henry Roberts, 'How I Got On', *Pearson's Weekly*, 17 May 1906, p.806c. This was one in a series of life histories by the new contingent of Labour Members of

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Patrick Barclay, *Memoirs and Medleys. The Autobiography of a Bottle-Washer*, ed. James K. Kelly, Leicester UK (Backus), 1934, pp.61-2.

opposite effect. W.E.Adams, the compositor who became a newspaper editor, looked back on his life in a final chapter which compared present-day depravity with the great struggles of the past. The chapter was entitled 'Degeneracy', and he identified many contemporary ills with Zola, whose novels depicting drunkenness and immorality seemed typical of the dangerous vogue for realism. As far as Adams was concerned, Zola's subject-matter was hostile to the self-improving values of thrift, industry and sobriety which had sustained his long life.<sup>33</sup> Novelists, therefore, had their uses, and they were judged by their attitude towards working-class problems. In the writings of self-improving artisans, however, the notion of the degeneracy of the novel was not easily overcome.

Working-class readers respected the classics of bourgeois literary culture, but they judged them according to their own values of realism and understanding of their struggles. In France, they read 17<sup>th</sup>-century masterpieces. They studied dead and foreign languages. None of this was of any practical use to their professions, but they by no means restricted their reading to socialist economics or works on explicitly proletarian themes. Self-education had opened up a world of literary classics, and the autodidacts turned enthusiastically to the official monuments of French and European literature. The self-improving artisan was acquiring a bourgeois or learned culture which was potentially alien to him. Xavier-Edouard Lejeune, inspired by Châteaubriand, devoted his reading to “the works of the great men of every epoch and of every country: historians, philosophers, poets, founders of nations and religions”.<sup>34</sup> This was not the whole story. Working-class readers drew on works of ‘high culture’,

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<sup>33</sup> William Edwin Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, 2 vols., London (Hutchinson), 1903, vol.2, p.650. First published 1901-02, in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, which Adams edited, 1864-1900.

<sup>34</sup> Xavier-Edouard Lejeune, *Calicot, enquête de Michel et Philippe Lejeune*, Paris (Montalba), 1984, pp.13-14.

but measured them according to their own needs and standards. Many read works of liberal political economy simply in order to reject their principles in favour of socialism. They read novels, too, but made use of them to reinforce their notions of contemporary social injustices.

### 3. *Workers as writers*

Workers were not just readers. They also wrote. If we are fully to measure their achievement in constructing an independent literary culture, we must also consider the phenomenon of workers as poets and above all, as autobiographers. Working-class authors searched for the means to legitimise their writing efforts and, almost inevitably, they imitated literary figures from the world of high culture. Yet the derivative nature of their literary projects encountered sneers rather than applause. The unschooled worker who doffed his cap to the prestigious authors of the past had pretensions which the cultivated élite might regard as a mockery of the literary canon. Bourdieu accurately characterised the paradoxical situation of the autodidact in search of acceptance:

“The traditional kind of autodidact was fundamentally defined by a reverence towards high culture which was the result of his brutal and premature exclusion from it, and which led to an exalted and poorly directed devotion to it, inevitably perceived by the agents of official culture as a sort of caricatural homage”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, pp.91-2. “L’autodidacte d’ancien style se définissait fondamentalement par une révérence à l’égard de la culture qui était l’effet d’une exclusion à la fois brutale et précoce et qui conduisait à une dévotion exaltée et mal orientée, donc vouée à être perçue par les tenants de la culture légitime comme une sorte d’hommage caricatural.”

The autodidact did not easily cross the cultural chasm which separated him from those who claimed natural membership of the literary world.

Several workers became published poets. Poetry was not the preserve of a distant, learned culture; it could be re-worked by working-class readers and it was produced and published by working-class writers. Their poetry, however, was often an extension of the oral culture which they inherited, and which survived in popular song. Chartist poets like Willie Thom drew on a local (Scottish) ballad tradition, and were not afraid to write in dialect, sometimes providing a glossary for the uninitiated. French worker-poets might prefer local languages which were closer to popular usage. The *coiffeur* Jasmin, for example, wrote in occitan, looking ahead to the renaissance of regional languages which occurred in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Poetry was closer than prose to popular oral tradition, and it found ready outlets in 19th-century newspapers.

Working-class autobiographies are another clear indication of a growing self-awareness, and mastery of the printed word. Without formal tuition, without ghost-writers and without literary credentials, a group of remarkable individuals set out to write their own stories. They wrote autobiographies for different purposes, to warn, to instruct, to record, to preach. Some were inspired by nostalgia, some by vanity, others by anger. They wrote at different times of their life, some taking advantage of a prison sentence, others reflecting on their past in old age, others taking new stock of themselves as a result of a personal trauma, a few writing to re-assess themselves, and resolve what we might now call a mid-life crisis. They adopted traditional literary conventions, but sometimes escaped those set formulas to express the more authentic

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<sup>36</sup> Alphonse Viollat, *Les Poètes du Peuple au XIXe siècle*, ed. M.Ragon, Paris (Librairie française et étrangère), 1846; François Gimet, *Les Muses Prolétaires*, Paris (Fareu), 1856.

voice of the 'unlettered' author. We must consider the literary strategies that dominated their autobiographies.

The commonest autobiographical idiom in the first half of the century, in Britain at least, was the spiritual autobiography. The ancestor of the genre is usually recognised as St. Augustine, but for the writers who concern me, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was the strongest influence. The spiritual autobiography traditionally told a story of youthful depravity and moral degeneration. This usually induced a phase of suffering, loss of direction, and mental prostration and alienation, the 19th century equivalent of the Augustinian fall and *peregrinatio*.<sup>37</sup> Then the autobiographer experienced a spiritual crisis, resolved by a sudden, dramatic conversion. Self-regeneration and moral self-improvement could now begin. Autobiographers in this tradition were principally concerned with the salvation of their soul, and their main subject was their private relationship with God. From 17th century English Protestantism, and from the Bible itself, they inherited Biblical language and metaphors in which to describe their own spiritual odysseys. They relied heavily on models of the exodus, a paradise lost, aimless wanderings in the wilderness, redemption, and finally the sight of the promised land to interpret their own misfortunes and revivals.<sup>38</sup> Their autobiographies are therefore full of references to Bunyan and the Bible, which operated as a kind of code, demonstrating their entry into an élite spiritual community.

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<sup>37</sup> Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: the language of self-writing in Victorian and modern England*, Berkeley (Univ. of California Press), 1983, pp.58-69 & 104. My summary seems to differ from the view of Regenia Gagnier, who states inexplicably "Most working-class autobiographies do not have crises and recoveries just as they do not have climaxes", in R. Gagnier, "Social Atoms : working-class autobiography, subjectivity and gender", *Victorian Studies*, vol.30:3, 1987, p.344.

<sup>38</sup> Linda H. Petersen, *Victorian Autobiography: the tradition of self-interpretation*, New Haven, Conn. (Yale UP), 1986, pp.1-10.

The autobiography of James Hopkinson, the Nottingham cabinet-maker, relied on the idea of a spiritual conversion. James Hopkinson took up his pen in 1888, induced to reflect on his past by the shock of his wife's death,

"who I trust and believe is now before the throne and with the redeemed, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb".<sup>39</sup>

Hopkinson considered himself "as a frail Barque launched on the ocean of time". His account of childhood and the years of apprenticeship is a repentant confession of drinking and lying, and his own involvement in fights with other apprentices. Then, however, at the age of 18, Hopkinson experienced his conversion:

"I cannot tell, like some can, the exact time I found liberty. It appeared to me to be like the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. However this I know that a very great change had come over me. And instead of desecrating the sabbath I began to enquire like Saul of Tarsus Lord what wilt thou have me to do. I soon found my work in the Sunday school, and as I loved it I soon began to make myself useful".<sup>40</sup>

The New Testament provided the classic metaphor of a sudden illumination, which changed the direction of Hopkinson's life-journey, on his personal road to Damascus.

Later in the 19th century, this mode of writing expired. Autobiographies became more positivist and scientific. They referred neither to God nor the salvation of the soul, but saw personal development rather in terms of the growth of the power of reason. Scientists, engineers, and even Darwin himself, wrote autobiographies which claimed to be detached and factual. Nevertheless, the power of Bunyan's

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<sup>39</sup> Jocelyn Bety Goodman, ed., *Victorian Cabinet-Maker: the memoirs of James Hopkinson, 1819-1894*, London (Routledge Kegan Paul), 1968, pp.3-5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

pilgrim to shape the images and language of early 19th century English radicals cannot be underestimated.

A second popular style adopted by autobiographers, after that of the spiritual traveller, was that of the historian. Autobiographers like William Lovett consciously assumed a responsibility for recording their own history. No-one else, they knew, would provide the kind of working-class history they wanted to leave behind them, and a few were well aware that no adequate history of the Chartist movement had appeared by the end of the century.

"It is extremely unlikely", wrote William Adams, "that any competent and satisfactory narrative of a stupendous national crisis will ever now be given to the world".<sup>41</sup>

The "stupendous national crisis" was, of course, Chartism, and Adams set about to give its history, sketching its leading figures, and citing previous autobiographies of Chartists as he did so. Radicals like him set out to balance the public record, giving their version of their own role in British radicalism. At their worst, they offered little more than anecdotes about the public celebrities they had known, as Linton the engraver did, recounting his casual acquaintance with a string of European revolutionaries, like Mazzini and Herzen.<sup>42</sup> At their best, they offered a kind of alternative political history of the century, from the Reform Bill agitation to Bradlaugh.

A third autobiographical stance was to demonstrate a success story, when success was to be measured in material terms. This, of course, was quite compatible with the autobiography-as-spiritual odyssey and with the autobiography-as alternative

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<sup>41</sup> Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, vol.1, p.154.

<sup>42</sup> William James Linton, *Memories*, London (Lawrence & Bullen), 1895.

history. Radical historians of their own movements often finished their careers as successful journalists or teachers; they had escaped the necessity of grinding manual work. One function of the autobiography was to demonstrate how this was done. Like the autobiography as spiritual odyssey, the autobiography as material success story had a pedagogical purpose: it stood as an *exemplum* for the next generation, teaching the path which led forward and upward, and the virtues required to tread it successfully.

Thomas Burt, the Northumberland miner, advertised his success in his subtitle : "Pitman and Privy Councillor", and his autobiography actually concluded with Burt's election as Member of Parliament for Morpeth in 1876. John Hodge was a puddler in a Glasgow blast furnace who became Lloyd George's Minister of Labour in 1917. His autobiography was entitled "Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle", since he considered as the pinnacle of his career an invitation to spend the night as a house guest of the royal family. Titles and subtitles proclaimed the autobiographer's achievement, as in William Cobbett's proud proclamation "The Progress of a Ploughboy to a seat in Parliament".<sup>43</sup> In France, the best example in this category is the autobiography of Jacques Laffitte, which boasts of his successful *montée* to Paris, and his 'arrival' in his 'gilded mansion' on the fashionable Chaussée d'Antin. Laffitte was concerned to impress the reader with the author's overpowering sense of self-importance.<sup>44</sup> His vanity was characteristically male, expressing the pride of men whose sense of self-worth was intricately bound up with a public career and the

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Burt, *Thomas Burt, MP, Pitman and Privy Councillor. An Autobiography*, London (T. Fisher Unwin), 1924; John Hodge, *Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle*, London (Sampson, Low & Marston), no date ?1927; William Cobbett, *The Autobiography of William Cobbett*, ed. William Reitzel, London (Faber), 1967.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Laffitte, *Mémoires de Laffitte, 1767-1844*, ed. Jacques Duchon, Paris (Firmin-Didot), 1932.



exercise of political power. The autobiography of the self-made author was in this sense a highly gendered text.

Working-class women writers came into their own, however, as authors in a second popular genre, that of the militant's memoirs. Their interest lay not in material success, but in self-emancipation. The author's gradual radicalisation and perceptions of the sources of oppression were the true subject of these autobiographies. In addition, their writing had a historical purpose – to tell the story of the century's revolutionary struggles from a true perspective, in other words from the point of view of the protagonists and victims. A good example is the autobiography of Victorine Brocher, published in this century like so many militants' memoirs by François Maspéro. Her story centres almost exclusively on her experiences of 1848, and of the Paris Commune. It is a passionate account of the February Revolution and of the massacres of the Commune, during which she was an ambulance worker. The author gives day-by-day accounts of these revolutions, culminating in the discovery that she had been sentenced to death as a *pétroleuse*'. Her narrative reflects the problems of material life with which 19th-century workers commonly struggled: the price of bread, the problem of finding shelter, and the levels of wages are often detailed. Victorine B. wrote exactly what she paid for butter and potatoes, and she described the illnesses and diet of her children, which was a vital concern in the siege of Paris, when she unwittingly found herself eating mouse paté.<sup>45</sup> Even if the style of working-class autobiographies was frequently derivative, they expressed specifically proletarian concerns. Frequently, and Brocher was no exception to the rule, this kind of autobiography took on a profoundly anticlerical or atheist animus, which spared neither Catholic nor Protestant.

Working-class writers were usually conscious of writing history for public consumption, but at the same time, writing an autobiography fulfilled an inner need. Autobiography was a step in the process of defining one's identity, both as an individual and as a member of a group or class. The act of writing itself brought greater self-knowledge and self-assertion. Philippe Lejeune described autobiography as principally the 'history of a personality', and envisaged the autobiography as a pact which the writer makes with himself or herself.<sup>46</sup> The purpose of the pact, Lejeune argues, is to redeem a flawed destiny, and to rescue a personality which has doubted its own value.

The problem for these 'new writers' was to find a suitable language and style in which to 'make themselves'. Jacques-Etienne Bédé's editor, for example, lists the author's many grammatical mistakes, wrong use of tenses, incorrect agreements and bad spelling.<sup>47</sup> They were untutored and unsophisticated writers, but however uneducated they were in a formal sense, working-class authors brought a great deal of cultural baggage to the task of writing. They had inherited or acquired a sense of correct literary tone, and they adopted linguistic or stylistic modes encountered in their own reading. They plundered their existing capital of images, metaphors, and narrative techniques for the style best suited to the expression of their own individual identity.

Self-taught writers were naturally self-conscious, and aware of the existence of a long literary tradition, which they had to adapt for their own ends. Bédé, who led a strike of Paris chairmakers in 1820, wrote his life as a late 18th-century melodrama. In

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<sup>45</sup> Victorine B., *Souvenirs*, pp.113-6.

<sup>46</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris (Seuil), 1975; and his *On Autobiography*, ed.P.J.Eakin, Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press), 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Rémi Gossez, ed., *Un Ouvrier en 1820: manuscrit inédit de Jacques-Etienne Bédé*, Paris (Presses Universitaires de France), 1984, pp.45-9.

his autobiography, Bédé continually addresses God or destiny in a romantic style reminiscent of Ducray-Duminil (“O sort épouvantable!”, etc.). A carefully crafted *mis en scène* frames his father’s death which opens the story. In a terrible thunderstorm, with thunder crashing, a heavy beam tragically fell on him in his mill. At the sight of this accident, his uncle swooned and “faillit perdre la vie”.<sup>48</sup> His narrative reads like a novel throughout. Bédé entitled it, in the style of Ducray, ‘Etienne et Maria ou le Triomphe de l’Amitié’. He provided the triumphant ending which the genre demanded: in 1820, with the devoted support of his friend Maria, he was released from a prison sentence with a royal pardon. The *dénouement*, however, has a final novelistic twist. Until the end, Bédé concealed the real identity of the beloved Maria who worked loyally for his release from jail. The reader learns that Maria is not in fact Bédé’s wife, but the wife of a comrade Bicheux, to whom the work is dedicated, and whose real relationship with Bédé can only be surmised. Historians of labour have appreciated and exploited Bédé’s work as a valuable source for early 19th-century labour struggles, but they have not always appreciated the narrative strategies and novelistic style which order the text.<sup>49</sup>

Autodidact writers struggled to find a narrative mode appropriate to their message and their abilities. English romantic poets and novelists had several conscious or unconscious imitators. Ellen Johnston, factory hand and daughter of a Glasgow stonemason, read many Walter Scott novels at the age of about 13, and gave herself the role of a Scott heroine. “I fancied I was a heroine of the modern style”, she wrote, because “by reading so many love adventures my brain was fired with wild

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.73. See the review by Michael Sonenscher in *History Workshop Journal*, 21, summer 1986, pp.173-9.

<sup>49</sup> Among them Traugott, *The French Worker*, pp.47-8.

imaginations".<sup>50</sup> Without clear models to emulate, working-class women writers often followed the literary conventions of the romantic fiction which had been identified as their special sphere. Ellen Johnston identified herself with Scott's fictional heroines, and sustained herself with idealised images of courtship and married bliss. It was as if Walter Scott provided the only means available to articulate female desire. She

"waited and watched the sun-set hour to meet my lover, and then with him wander by the banks of the sweet winding Clutha, where my muse has often been inspired when viewing the proud waving thistle bending to the breeze, or when the calm twilight hour was casting a halo of glory around the enchanting scene".<sup>51</sup>

The realities of factory and family life were far removed from these romantic images. Johnston's haunt was not the sweet-winding Clutha, but the rather less salubrious Paisley Canal. Instead of the lover who made her happy at the sunset hour, she met one partner who left her in 1852 not with a halo of glory, but with the burden of an illegitimate daughter. The harsh realities of the factory, the canal and her tormenting stepfather are in stark contrast to the romance genre in which Johnston elaborated her own female identity.

Working-class writers, therefore, were an articulate but inexperienced minority. A few wrote to demonstrate that they had achieved bourgeois respectability. Others wrote to educate others in a spirit of militant defiance. Their work was inevitably derivative, as they improvised a literary style and a narrative structure to announce their presence alongside the paragons of 'legitimate' culture.

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<sup>50</sup> Ellen Johnston, *Autobiography, Poems and Songs, by E.J., the Factory Girl*, Glasgow (Love), 1867, p.7.

#### 4. Working-class intellectuals as cultural intermediaries

For the 19th-century autodidact, reading served an emancipatory purpose. At the same time, it was the crucial instrument in the development of a broadly humanistic version of ‘self-culture’. Working-class readers and writers adopted similar reading and writing practices, in the teeth of poverty, material hardship and a lack of privacy endured by the working classes as a whole. There were some common patterns in their reading preferences and critical judgements. For these reasons, they can be said to belong to a distinctive interpretive community of readers.

Their reading practices emerged from a common aesthetic of self-denial and earnestness. The social psychology or *habitus* of the self-taught worker, however, exhibited some characteristics (thrift, sobriety, respectability) of 19th-century bourgeois culture. Working-class readers distanced themselves from the crowd of fellow-workers. Reading was a solitary activity, and individual working-class readers were often shunned by their fellow-workers, or treated as peculiar anti-social recluses. The worker who read, Agricol Perdiguier recalled, was an object of ridicule (*un objet de raillerie*).<sup>52</sup> A few might have welcomed this ostracism, as it gave them more time and solitude to devote to reading. But individual readers had an uneasy relationship with fellow-workers. Jean-Baptiste Arnaud described French *compagnons* as “blind, credulous, worshippers of prejudice” (*crédules ouvriers, aveugles et idolâtres de leurs préjugés*).<sup>53</sup> Their reading opened up for them a world of middle-class culture and middle-class values, which accentuated the ambiguity of their position.

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<sup>51</sup> Johnston, *Autobiography*, pp.5-6.

<sup>52</sup> Agricol Perdiguier, *Mémoires d'un compagnon*, Moulins (Cahiers du Centre), 1914, p.87.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Baptiste Arnaud, *Mémoires d'un compagnon du Tour de France*, Rochefort (Giraud), 1859, p.50.

A distance opened up between the working reader and the ordinary worker, often filled with a poorly-disguised antipathy. Even language barriers appeared between ambitious working-class intellectuals and their fellow-workers. Laffitte, in order to facilitate his Parisian *embourgeoisement*, had got rid of his Bayonnais accent. For Perdiguier, as for Nadaud, learning French and discarding their local language (it was Provençal in Perdiguier's case) and pronunciation were part of their intellectual progress. Nadaud was for a long time a worker with his feet in two different worlds. As a regular seasonal migrant from the Creuse to the French capital, he was part-Limousin, part-Parisian, speaking with a natural Limousin accent which he gradually lost as his life centred more permanently on Paris. As an autodidact, he despised the apathy of his fellow-masons, and yet was eager to do something for their education. He characterised the duality of his position as that of a revolutionary vanguard. "In each occupation", he wrote, "groups formed amongst the proudest and most intelligent workers, who spurred on the masses and made them ashamed of their indolence and apathy."<sup>54</sup> Nadaud identified himself with 'the proudest and most intelligent', leading the rest out of ignorance and indifference. As a reader and an autodidact, he was detached from other workers, but at the same time he appointed himself their guide and leader.

Working-class intellectuals had a very keen sense that they were different. They knew they belonged to a small group more determined and more far-sighted than most other workers. They tended to adopt reading practices which reinforced their sense of distinction. My purpose, however, is not to argue that the 19th-century autodidact was on the road towards *embourgeoisement*. His or her predicament was

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<sup>54</sup> Nadaud, *Mémoires de Léonard*, 1976 ed., p.282. "Il s'était formé dans chaque corps de métier, des groupes parmi les ouvriers les plus fiers et les plus intelligents, qui aiguillonnaient les masses

far more complex than that rather simplistic term implies. The improvisation of a culture often followed middle-class models, but between what the autodidacts read and how they responded as readers there was scope for many possible outcomes. Some autodidacts certainly emerged from the working-class through determined to distinguish themselves irrevocably from it, but few denied their class origins entirely. The situation was ambiguous. The working-class intellectual did not share what he or she perceived as the laziness and prejudices of the majority of workers. At the same time, he or she did not necessarily share middle-class versions of respectability either. Autodidacts in general were cultural intermediaries, working-class activists with a broad knowledge and their own interpretation of a hallowed literary tradition.

Political radicalisation was filtered through the values of an informal but distinct community of readers, with its own evaluation of the uses of fiction, poetry, history or science. Print culture was vital to this politicisation, although it also depended on oral transmission. The autodidacts are best seen as cultural intermediaries, standing between the learned culture which became accessible to them, and their working-class roots, from which their education had partially detached them. In spite of the cultural shifts they made, these exceptional working-class readers rarely lost contact with their origins. Gilland, the adamant locksmith of the *faubourg* St. Antoine, declared “I love my position (*mon état*), I love my tools and even though I could have made a living from my pen, I would not have wanted to stop being a working locksmith”.<sup>55</sup>

Theirs was a reading culture with which we are no longer in touch. The cultural practices of the 19th-century autodidacts have been buried by a century of

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et leur faisaient honte de leur indolence et de leur apathie”.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Ragon, *Histoire de la littérature prolétarienne*, p.82.

social change. Universal schooling made their improvised reading culture superfluous. The rise of new forms of leisure has made their intensive reading practices seem obsolete. A general process of acculturation has transformed all of us into consumers of culture and of commercialised entertainment rather than independent seekers after self-emancipation. The compulsive reading of 19th-century self-taught workers is a distant reminder of individual potential, when driven by a passionate desire for intellectual liberation.

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