

# Witness Narratives and Working-Class Suffering: “The Cry of the Children,” *Corn Law Rhymes*, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Unpublished Hunger Ballad

MARJORIE STONE

In 1841, the poet Richard Hengist Horne was in Wolverhampton working for the Children’s Employment Commission (CEC), whose 1842–43 reports on child laborers in mines and manufacturing would galvanize legislative reform. After gathering “statements of 123 witnesses from all classes and grades of life, of both sexes and all ages,” including “96 . . . children and young persons,” Horne wrote “To Her Majesty’s Commissioners” on 25 May, submitting his “evidence” on “Iron Trades and Other Manufactures” in Wolverhampton and South Staffordshire (Horne Q1).<sup>1</sup> The letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (then Elizabeth Barrett Barrett) at the time reveal no awareness of the conditions Horne was investigating. On 27 March, she mentions him writing with “millions of pots & pans for a background” and sending “his

---

**ABSTRACT:** The primary historical context for interpretations of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” (1843) has long been the 1842–43 Children’s Employment Commission reports. Examining the poem in light of Barrett Browning’s prior attempt to address working-class suffering in “O pardon dear lady” (1842) offers new evidence for her engagement with the reports. It also, however, underscores the effects of the anti-Corn Law movement and of what Barrett Browning termed “agricultural-evil” on her “factory-evil” poem. An unfinished ballad in the voice of a starving rural child, “O pardon” exhibits multiple features connecting it to Ebenezer Elliott’s *Corn Law Rhymes* (1830–31), some of which appear also in “The Cry of the Children.” The first part of this essay considers literary engagement with the anti-Corn Law movement initiated by Elliott, his connections with Barrett Browning, and her intensifying interest in anti-Corn Law politics and in Chartism in 1842. The second part analyzes images, echoes, and rhetorical strategies connecting “O pardon” to “The Cry of the Children” and both to *Corn Law Rhymes*. It also explores similarities between the poems and witness narratives as these are conceptualized in contemporary life-writing and human rights studies.

**MARJORIE STONE** (mistone@dal.ca), McCulloch Professor Emeritus of English at Dalhousie University, Canada, is co-editor for three of five volumes in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Pickering & Chatto, 2010). She has published on the Brownings (especially Barrett Browning), Dickens, Gaskell, Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, transatlantic abolitionism, and the corporate university, among other authors and subjects.

picture ‘showing’ how he looks when fresh-black from the pits,” then deplors the “national dishonor” of “high spirits” doing “such work!” (Kelley et al. 5: 31). On 30 May, after describing to Mary Russell Mitford her collaboration with Horne on a “Lyrical Drama,” she laments, “not a line” is written and “he has gone down to Wolverhampton on government business about pots & pans & pits, NOT poetry but pottery” (5: 50–51). On 24 July, she expresses hope to Horne that his “suffering is concentrated in the Parliamentary reports” and that his long “silence” is not due to illness, and again critiques the “atrocious system” in England where “poets” are “promoted into accurate counters of pots & pans” (5: 86–87). She does not mention the workers making the “pots” or blackened daily in the “pits.” Rather, her chief concern is the economic precarity of poets, a cause Horne was addressing in “the Professional Authors crusade” (Blainey 89).

Two years later, “The Cry of the Children” appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in August 1843, depicting child laborers envying little Alice’s “grave-rest” (line 32) in the “pit prepared to take her” (line 41) and dragging their “burdens tiring / Through the coal-dark, underground” (lines 73–74) to “drive the wheels of iron” (line 75) in “the factories” above (line 76). Reaching a much larger transatlantic audience in *Poems* (1844), the poem rapidly became “one of the most influential texts of the industrial reform movement” (Stone and Taylor, “Cry” 431). It was credited with increasing pressure on Parliament to pass Britain’s Factory Acts, and was known throughout America in the 1840s; later translated into French, Italian, and Russian; reprinted in a New York Child Labor Committee pamphlet in 1908; and adapted in Edwin Thanhouser’s 1912 silent film about a strike. How did such a politically transformative poem come to be written by a writer who, two years earlier, seemed oblivious to child workers in focusing on the “suffering” of poets? From her girlhood, Barrett Browning was stirred by liberal causes such as Greek liberation, but working-class oppression does not figure prominently in her poetry or letters prior to “The Cry of the Children.”<sup>2</sup> What contexts contributed to the poem’s composition, and how do these inform—or limit—Barrett Browning’s role as poet-advocate bearing witness for subjects whose suffering she could only experience indirectly, through mediations and empathetic imagining?

I address these questions in seeking fuller understanding of the shifting political consciousness, social formations, and literary influences shaping a work whose very familiarity can impede analysis. The principal interpretive context for “The Cry of the Children” has long been the CEC reports, especially the section Horne produced, given Barrett Browning’s invitation to him on 7 August 1843 to “look into Blackwood . . . because my ‘Cry of the Children’

owes its utterance to your exciting causations” (Kelley et al. 7: 274). This essay adds to evidence scholars have already adduced for the reports’ impact on the poem, including footnotes referencing commissioners in the *Blackwood’s* text,<sup>3</sup> echoes of the reports’ child-witnesses, the poem’s manufacturing metaphors, its “industrial meter,” and its critique of industry-harnessed social systems (Tucker 86).<sup>4</sup> However, I emphasize the role of contexts aside from industrial reform in shaping the poem’s political engagement, rhetoric, and formal features. The draft of “The Cry of the Children” (in a crowded 1842–43 notebook written in from both ends) bears out Barrett Browning’s comment that the poem, with its idiosyncratic stanza form and “rhythm,” came into her “head in a hurricane” (Kelley et al. 7: 331)—evidently, as a direct response to reading the reports.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the poem also shares motifs, metaphors, and phrasing with a prior attempt to depict working-class suffering in an unfinished and hitherto little-discussed ballad of thirty-seven stanzas, drafted in an 1842 notebook and written in the voice of a starving child.<sup>6</sup> Beginning “O pardon dear lady,” the ballad suggests a more layered creative process for “The Cry of the Children” than Barrett Browning’s comment on Horne’s “causations” implies, and catalysts additional to the CEC reports and factory reform literature by earlier writers.

Most notably, “O pardon” embodies Barrett Browning’s deepening engagement with the anti-Corn Law movement discernible in her letters in the early 1840s, intertwined with her growing awareness of Chartist activism. Multiple aspects of “O pardon”—especially the ballad’s bread and corn motifs and its surprisingly radical exploration of the class and familial dynamics of rural working-class hunger—register the influence of Ebenezer Elliott’s *Corn Law Rhymes* (1830–31) on Barrett Browning’s poetics and politics. Less visibly, Elliott’s anti-Corn Law critiques, with their moving vignettes of suffering, dialogical rhetoric, and politicized religious discourse, also inform “The Cry of the Children,” despite differences in its focus and form arising from changing historical circumstances, Barrett Browning’s class background, and the poem’s industrial contexts. Published following extensive parliamentary and newspaper attention to the CEC reports, “The Cry of the Children” strikingly embodies emergent “structures of feeling,” to use Raymond Williams’s term. Thus, the poem articulates “social experience . . . still *in process*” and thought suffused by “affective elements of consciousness,” manifested in new “rhythms” and “semantic figures” resonating with “more widely experienced” generational or period developments (Williams, “Structures” 132–34). As Williams emphasizes, however, “the effective formations of most actual art relate to already manifest social formations, dominant or residual” (134). Examining “The Cry of the Children” in light of Barrett Browning’s letters and “O pardon” suggests that

the power and pathos that its reviewers noted resulted not only from structures of feeling catalyzed by the CEC reports, but also from “residual” formations and “semantic figures” popularized by Elliott’s radical *Corn Law Rhymes*, then appropriated by a predominantly middle-class anti-Corn Law movement.

Part I of this essay considers Elliott’s role in shaping “the complex relation of differentiated structures of feeling to differentiated classes” in the 1830s and early 1840s (Williams, “Structures” 134), and reasons why the poet “famous in Britain throughout the 1830s and 40s as the Corn Law Rhymer” is now often overlooked (Hildebrand 102). I then present evidence for Barrett Browning’s knowledge of Elliott’s poetry and parallels between her growing interest in Corn Law debates and the response of other middle-class writers including Horne, Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, and Robert Browning. While this interest reflects the propaganda of the Anti-Corn Law League, founded in 1838 by Richard Cobden and others, Barrett Browning was more immediately engaged, as Dickens was, by the 1841 elections that swept Robert Peel into power, reinforcing protectionist agricultural interests. I give particular attention to the anti-Tory animus of her comments in August 1842 on the strike wave that convulsed British industrial districts. Generated by economic depression, food scarcity, anti-Corn Law mobilizations, trade union activism, and Parliament’s rejection of the second Chartist petition, the 1842 strike wave constituted “one of the most serious challenges to the British state in the entire nineteenth century” (Sanders 4). Reading Barrett Browning’s comments on this upheaval in light of the *Times* reports they cite, one can better appreciate why “O pardon” is suffused with echoes of Elliott’s *Corn Law Rhymes*, published a decade earlier, yet also reflective of intensifying Chartist critiques of class inequities. Both movements contributed to what Barrett Browning characterized as a radicalism increasingly in conflict with the dominant formations of her Whig family background, though this shift in consciousness is more fully manifested in her unpublished hunger ballad than in her remarks on the 1842 strike wave.

Part II turns from historical contexts reflected in Barrett Browning’s letters to close analysis of “O pardon” and the images, themes, and verbal echoes connecting it to “The Cry of the Children,” and connecting both poems to Elliott’s *Corn Law Rhymes*. To explore deeper parallels among these works, I adapt witness narrative theory, more widely used in contemporary literary and cultural studies than in Victorian studies. The term “witness narrative” is most often applied to non-fictional life-writing such as Holocaust memoirs and stories of other persecuted or oppressed groups or trauma survivors. Structures of feeling are central to witness narratives, as Lisa Peschel’s use of Williams to analyze

Holocaust “survivor testimony” suggests, but so too are evidence and authenticity. Witness literature often incorporates testimony “from outsiders and experts” in seeking “justice” or at least “legal/public recognition” for wrongs (Jensen 141–42)—much as the *Blackwood’s* text of “The Cry of the Children” references the CEC reports, in themselves a massive bureaucratic assemblage of witness testimonies. Part II draws on the five “metrics of authenticity” that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson identify in witness narratives: a “first-person witness,” survivor, and/or “editorial commentator or advocate” creating a “‘you-are-there’ sense of immediacy”; “an experiential history” of trauma and “memorializing the dead”; establishing a “normative shape of victim experience” (e.g., child soldier); incorporating “cultural practices” of oppressed groups like “oral storytelling”; and invoking “the moral grammar of rights discourse” in “naming . . . adversaries” as “perpetrators” (“Witness” 593–94). As Smith and Watson elsewhere indicate, slave narratives constitute key historical precedents for contemporary witness narratives.<sup>7</sup> However, similar “metrics” also inform working-class autobiographies like *A Narrative of the Experience and Suffering of William Dodd: A Factory Cripple* (1840)—and the Victorian social protest poems considered here.

While “The Cry of the Children” bears witness to the exploitation of child laborers in mines and manufacturing, “O pardon,” like Elliott’s *Corn Law Rhymes*, speaks to another aspect of Victorian extraction economies: maximizing output from minimal input into laborers’ bodies, or systemic working-class starvation. Whether the Corn Laws and the agricultural protectionists who defended them constituted key drivers in this starvation, as Elliott believed, or whether those whom Thomas Carlyle addressed as “Captains of Industry” were equally or more complicit in driving down wages is another question (*Past and Present* 192). These conflicting agendas contributed to Dickens’s refusal to write in support of factory reform in response to the CEC reports. In noting this contrast with Barrett Browning in my conclusion, I also address her first published critique of the Corn Laws in the 1844 text of “The Cry of the Human.” This critique prompted League ladies to invite Barrett Browning to contribute a poem for their 1845 London bazaar, which in turn provoked a family quarrel, as Barrett Browning clashed with her father and brothers over the role of poetry—women’s poetry especially—in politics, and considered writing “an agricultural-evil poem to complete [her] factory-evil poem into a national-evil circle” (Kelley et al. 10: 60). For Barrett Browning, conceptions of “agricultural-evil” were deeply influenced by the “Corn Law Rhymer.”

## I. Contexts: Ebenezer Elliott, Victorian Writers, and Anti-Corn Law Politics

In 2008, Elliott's only modern-day editor described him as "virtually forgotten" (Storey 13). Several factors explain this historical forgetting, beginning with the twentieth-century decline in studies of the anti-Corn Law movement. In *The People's Bread* (2000), Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell attribute this decline to "Labour historiography" and equations of League politics with Thatcherite neo-liberalism, arguing that the League was actually a "more varied, vital, robust, and even radical organization" than "text books" indicate (250). Since 2000, Henry Miller and others have analyzed broader manifestations of "popular hostility to the corn laws" in political petitioning, broadside print culture, and intersections with antislavery campaigns (Miller, "Popular" 909). However, popular anti-Corn Law activism remains overshadowed by the "huge historiography on Chartism," with its emphasis on "mutually antagonistic" Chartist-League relations (Miller, "Free Trade" 36). Elliott's focus on Corn Law repeal thus reinforces his marginal status, despite Martha Vicinus's identification of the "Corn Law Rhymer" as the "single most important predecessor of Chartist poets" (96), Brian Maidment's inclusion of Elliott's poems in *The Poorhouse Fugitives*, Mike Sanders's treatment of Chartist anti-Corn Law poetry by John Watkins (Elliott's son-in-law) in *The Poetry of Chartism*, and the essays and articles on Elliott I cite below. In Malcolm Chase's *Chartism: A New History*, Elliott appears once: not as the famous Corn Law Rhymer, but instead as "a Sheffield business man" and "early supporter of Chartism" who broke away over "its stance on the Corn Laws" (125). Disciplinary boundaries further contribute to Elliott's obscurity. Pickering and Tyrrell note Elliott in passing in *The People's Bread*, but do not include literary figures in their multi-faceted treatment of anti-Corn Law cultures.<sup>8</sup> Victorian literary studies in turn give little attention to revisionary histories of the anti-Corn Law movement. Barrett Browning's connections with Elliott have also remained unexamined because of the critical tendency to segregate writers by class and/or gender—despite authors like Elliott shuttling between class and gender registers—and problems in defining "working-class poetry" cogently delineated by Florence Boos (17).

Questions about the poetics, politics, and authenticity of working-class poetry figure in the response to Elliott from the start, beginning with Radical MP Edward Bulwer's saluting in the *New Monthly Magazine* a "Remarkable Poem by a Mechanic": the anonymous *Corn Law Rhymes: The Ranter* (1830), published by the Sheffield Mechanics' Anti-Bread Tax Society. Elliott's two expanded

1831 editions—both titled *Corn Law Rhymes*, but with important differences in content, audience, and genre illumined by Jayne Hildebrand—attracted much wider attention. The first 1831 edition intersperses “The Ranter” and five additional poems with prose critiques of the Corn Laws. The third edition (published as the second edition) from a London publisher—featuring thirty-two poems, a “Preface,” and notes—established Elliott’s national reputation.<sup>9</sup> “All genuine poets are fervid politicians,” Elliott declared in his “Preface,” saying he could even quote “fine illustrative poetry . . . from the prose of Jeremy Bentham” (217). Resonating with class tensions intensified by the First Reform Bill, *Corn Law Rhymes* was discussed in “reviews and magazines, whether Tory, Whig, or Radical,” as its author observed (Elliott 224). Several reviewers, including Thomas Carlyle, were especially struck by Elliott’s defence of poetry as “impassioned truth” in explaining his response to suffering caused by the bread tax (238): “my feelings are *hammered* till . . . they snap and fly off in sarcasm. . . . Is it strange that my language is fervent as welding heat, when my thoughts are *passions*, that rush burning from my mind, like white-hot bolts of steel?” (Elliott 217–19).

While Williams singled out Carlyle for capturing “that structure of contemporary feeling which is only ever apprehended directly” (*Culture* 78), Carlyle himself pointed to Elliott. Casting the “Corn Law Rhymer” as a manly authentic witness “from the deep Cyclopean forges where Labour . . . beats with his thousand hammers” (Carlyle 339–40), he obscured the class of an author who “was more iron-dealer than hammer-handler” (Waithe 140). William Johnson Fox similarly declared, “God said, ‘Let Elliott be’—and there was a poetry of the poor” (qtd. in Storey 13). The mixed-class affiliations of Elliott and his poetry contribute to Victorian and modern critics’ differing interpretations of him: the radical mechanic and political satirist versus the semi-middle-class lyricist articulating a domesticated working-class masculinity.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Bulwer, Maria Jane Jewsbury in *The Athenaeum* denounced Elliott’s making “poetry a mere vehicle for politics” (qtd. in Hildebrand 102). John Stuart Mill, however, defended Elliott’s view of poetry as “impassioned truth” in “What is Poetry?” (1833)—ironically, in presenting his own influential definition of poetry as solitary and “*overheard*” (Mill 64). In contrast, Elliott clearly intended “rhymes” like his epigram on starvation under the bread tax to be *heard*: “‘Prepare to meet the King of Terrors,’ cried / To prayerless Want, his plunderer ferret-eyed: / ‘I am the King of Terrors,’ Want replied” (Elliott 97).

Barrett Browning had good reason to “hear” of Elliott and the debates *Corn Law Rhymes* inspired. Elliott was reviewed in periodicals she read, and his poems regularly appeared alongside her own in the *New Monthly Magazine*. In

1836, for instance, Barrett Browning's ballads "The Romaunt of Margret" and "The Poet's Vow" appeared in volumes 47 and 48 of the *New Monthly*, which featured numerous poems by Elliott. She noted the *Athenaeum's* coupling of "E. B. B." with Elliott in singling out "some fine sonnets by the corn law Rhymer" and "The Poet's Vow," which it considered a "fine although too dreamy ballad" (Kelley et al. 3: 197). In 1845, she told Mary Russell Mitford that she had "always estimated [Elliott] highly as a true poet, earnest & heart-sound," though of "no great imaginative scope" (10: 263). Earlier, in 1839, she probably had Elliott's definition of poetry as "impassioned truth" in mind when asserting the importance of feeling to writing with "passion & pathos" and exclaiming to Mitford, "suppose *me* to write a treatise upon the Corn laws! Or a disquisition on Jereny [sic] Bentham's panopticon! A fine business I shd. make of it!" (4: 148).

Cross-class hostility to the Corn Laws intensified between 1838 and 1839 with the first Chartist petition and founding of the League, when "membership of the two movements overlapped" in many regions, notwithstanding Elliott's own split with Chartism (Pickering and Tyrrell 60).<sup>11</sup> Fox's anti-Corn Law politics and time as editor of the radical *Monthly Repository* had earlier influenced both Horne and Robert Browning, who regarded Fox as his "literary father" (Kelley et al. 3: 313). In 1836, Horne joined Fox in his editorial work, fighting the Corn Laws which "bake . . . our bones to make our bread" (qtd. in Blainey 66). In 1839, Henry Cole, acting for Cobden, recruited William Makepeace Thackeray—who had "not had occasion to think much on the subject of Corn Laws"—to produce illustrations for the *Anti-Corn Law Circular* (Cole 144). The election of Peel's Tories in 1841 led many others to think about the Corn Laws: popular petitions against them spiked at "more than 4,700" that year (Miller, "Popular" 885). Dickens fired off three satiric poems published in *The Examiner*; mocking Peel's proposed "sliding scale" of duties in "Doctor Peel," he cast the prime minister as "a famous corn-doctor, of wonderful skill— / No cutting, no rooting up, purging, or pill!" (qtd. in Sheldon 331–32). Dickens subsequently battled the Corn Laws in the *Morning Chronicle*, *The Chimes* (1844), and, in the *Daily News*.<sup>12</sup> Barrett Browning described the *Daily News* as representing "ultra politics at the *right end*" in taking on "anti-corn law interests & the like" (Kelley et al. 11: 186).

Tennyson's *Poems* (1842) reflect these "interests" more obliquely. Friends "split" over the Corn Laws in "Audley Court" (written in 1839) (line 34), while "Locksley Hall" presents "a hungry people" (line 135)—people suffering "famine" in Tennyson's starker manuscript phrasing (*Tennyson* 190). Horne's *Orion* (1843) similarly expressed what Barrett Browning termed "anti-cornlawisms" (Kelley et al. 7: 175) in its description of a "hungry people" taking up arms, "their war-cry 'bread!'" (qtd. in Kelley et al. 7: 175–76). Tennyson's vision of



future “commerce” bringing “the Federation of the world” in “Locksley Hall” (lines 121–28) may more specifically echo Elliott, who in “The Ranter” similarly envisions a “world-reforming Commerce” showering “enfranchised nations” with “plenty and peace” (Elliott 87). This free trade vision may have increased the popularity of “Locksley Hall” among working-class readers noted by Kirstie Blair,<sup>13</sup> as it did for middle-class liberals like Robert Browning. Notably, Browning salutes “Locksley Hall” as “noble” (Kelley et al. 6: 32) in the same 1842 letter where he discusses “Peel in the matter of the Corn Laws” (6: 33). Barrett Browning also repeatedly praised “Locksley Hall” in 1842, and in 1845 suggested its appeal for members of mechanics’ institutes.<sup>14</sup>

As Simon Avery demonstrates, the “men” in Barrett Browning’s family were politically “active” Whigs, whose views the young poet enthusiastically shared (Avery and Stott 34). However, she expressed more radical views than her father in controversies over the First Reform Bill. By 1837, she told Mitford she was “called Quixotic & impracticable” by her father and brothers for going “so much beyond them into republican depths” (Kelley et al. 3: 224). Her letters from 1838–48 register increasing sympathy with the Chartists.<sup>15</sup> British universities “are as open to Chartism . . . as our government. We require reforming altogether,” she declared to Mitford on 17 August 1843 (7: 287). In March of 1842, she told Mitford that she “could have wept when the whigs went out,” though her “republicanism” went “far beyond them” in its rejection of “pedigrees & landed estates” (5: 287). In the same letter, she denounced Peel as a “paltry slippery artful” statesman with a mind like a revolving “mill-wheel” in one of his “father’s mills,” as he “flagellat[ed] the Country” with a “rod” that “falls altogether upon the operative & commercial classes” (5: 287). Much as Barrett Browning’s mill-wheel metaphors complicate distinctions between “landed estates” and industrial interests, she also links the “operative & commercial classes” in ways historians might question, given Chartist ripostes to Leaguers and Whigs that Corn Law “repeal would benefit only ‘the commercial interests’” (Chase 159). Many Chartists wanted repeal, however, and many Whigs were “fixed duty advocates” (Turner 49); Barrett Browning’s father firmly advocated a “fixed duty” (Kelley et al. 10: 61). If Barrett Browning did not distinguish clearly between Chartist and anti-Corn Law activism, she was not alone. During the 1842 strike wave—which began in the “north Staffordshire Potteries” with workers marching “with loaves of bread on poles” (Chase 211)—headlines like “The Riots in the Manufacturing Districts” and “The Anti-Corn Law League Riots” intermingled in the *Times*, as correspondents confounded Chartist with anti-Corn Law agitators or speculated on their collusion or conflicting agendas.<sup>16</sup>

These interminglings figure in the *Times* reports that Barrett Browning alludes to in the midst of the strike wave (and a heatwave) on 18 August 1842. Praising Tennyson's *Poems* as "divine" to Mitford, she turns to politics:

In the meantime, poetry does not harmonize the land!—There is a continual cry in the streets of "second editions" "dreadful conflicts between the military & the populace" "shocking burnings of property" & all such horrors as may be said or sung. It makes me half nervous to lie upon Papa's floor (my habit during these burning broiling days) & hear the bloodthirsty chant along the pavement. And Spitalfields is expected to be up every day, which is comforting! So much for the subjects of congratulation dwelt upon by the queen's speech. She had better have congratulated Mrs. Lilly. (Kelley et al. 6: 54)

These remarks, like her 1841 comments on Horne among "pottery" and "pits," hardly seem to reflect concern for an oppressed "populace"; they conclude with a quip about Queen Victoria's "nurse Mrs. Lilly," described in a gossipy story in the same letter as "cheered & inebriated" by a "brandy-bottle dearer than royalty" while "embracing the royal baby" (6: 54). However, a closer look at reports that Barrett Browning loosely quotes, and at her tone, suggests another interpretation.

In "London, Monday, August 15," the *Times* vilifies the "contagion" of "virulent" disorder spreading through "disturbed districts," with attacks on "property" and "political agitators" circulating "manifestoes . . . pledging the rioters to the 'People's Charter,' the repeal of the Corn Laws, &c." The article expresses fear of "serious collision between the military and the populace"—wording very close to Barrett Browning's "dreadful conflicts between the military & the populace." Also on 15 August, "The Anti-Corn Law League Riots" reports on "mobs" and "stoppages" in industrial districts as well as on mobilizations of troops, magistrates, and the police, backed by the queen's proclamation, which denounced "lawless and disorderly persons" and offered fifty-pound rewards to informants for each person "convicted." Parallel mobilizations and London's state of alert are reflected in the *Times*'s "Movements of the London Chartists" on 18 August, the date of Barrett Browning's letter. This article reports on a "very numerous meeting of the National Charter Association" in London, inflaming anxieties that "a grand Chartist demonstration was really about to take place." It also reassures readers that "the London and Birmingham Railway" would "have trains in constant readiness for any emergency." Barrett Browning's comment that "Spitalfields is expected to be up" may allude to another section of this article titled "The Chartist Meeting at Stepney," reporting that Chartists had been "labouring" to enlist the "Spitalfields weavers," but an "alleged assemblage of 8,000 or 10,000" had not materialized.

The ironic tone of Barrett Browning's reference to these reports is underscored by her anti-Peel politics. If her quotation marks signal passages loosely cited from the *Times*, then they also indicate her disagreement with the newspaper's slant, evident in its language of "riots" and "virulent disorder." Her own description of "the bloodthirsty chant" she hears is similarly loaded, but notably, she is only "half nervous." Her phrase "all such horrors as may be said or sung" implies skepticism of sensationalized reports exaggerating crowd size or the state of emergency, as if the newspaper were a street crier. Her political stance comes through especially in her allusion to Queen Victoria's speech pro-roguing Parliament on 12 August, printed in the *Times* under "Parliamentary Intelligence" the next day. The queen congratulated Peel and his government on legislation promoting the "welfare of all classes of [her] subjects" and expressed hope that "recovery" would alleviate the "privations and sufferings" of "large classes of [her] people." Barrett Browning's remark that the queen might "better have congratulated" her tipling nursemaid is thus a sardonic repudiation of both the queen's and Peel's complacency. Although more Whig than Radical in its inflections, her response to the 1842 strike wave is an intriguing instance of an apparently "private, idiosyncratic" experience that is simultaneously a "social experience . . . *in process*" with its "emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics" (Williams, "Structures" 132).

The Chartist speeches in a *Times* report of 18 August on the "Great Chartist Meeting on Clerkenwell Green" more starkly charge Peel with "murder" for sending "troops . . . to cut down a suffering and unoffending class of men" seeking to "prevent themselves, their wives, and families from dying of starvation." Popular anti-Corn Law sentiments associated with starvation are a neglected thread in studies of 1840s "hunger movements" (Scholl 9) and the "humanitarian discovery of hunger" (Vernon 18). One index of their intensity, however, is the series of recollections in *The Hungry Forties: Life Under the Bread Tax. Descriptive Letters and Other Testimonies from Contemporary Witnesses* (1904). While partisan framing renders problematic this now little-cited collection introduced by Jane Cobden Unwin (Richard Cobden's daughter), its working-class rural witnesses vividly recall chronic "clemming" in a period when many "starved" or were "nigh starvin" (24) on "crammings" ("what was left after the flour and the bran was taken away") (20), or "growy bread" forming long "strings" in the "mouth" (28), or often only "potato peelings" and stolen turnips (29). *Corn Law Rhymes* testified to the starvation "under the bread tax" that these aged laborers recall, as Elliott's "*hammered*" feelings generated impassioned poetical representations of suffering that resonated across classes.

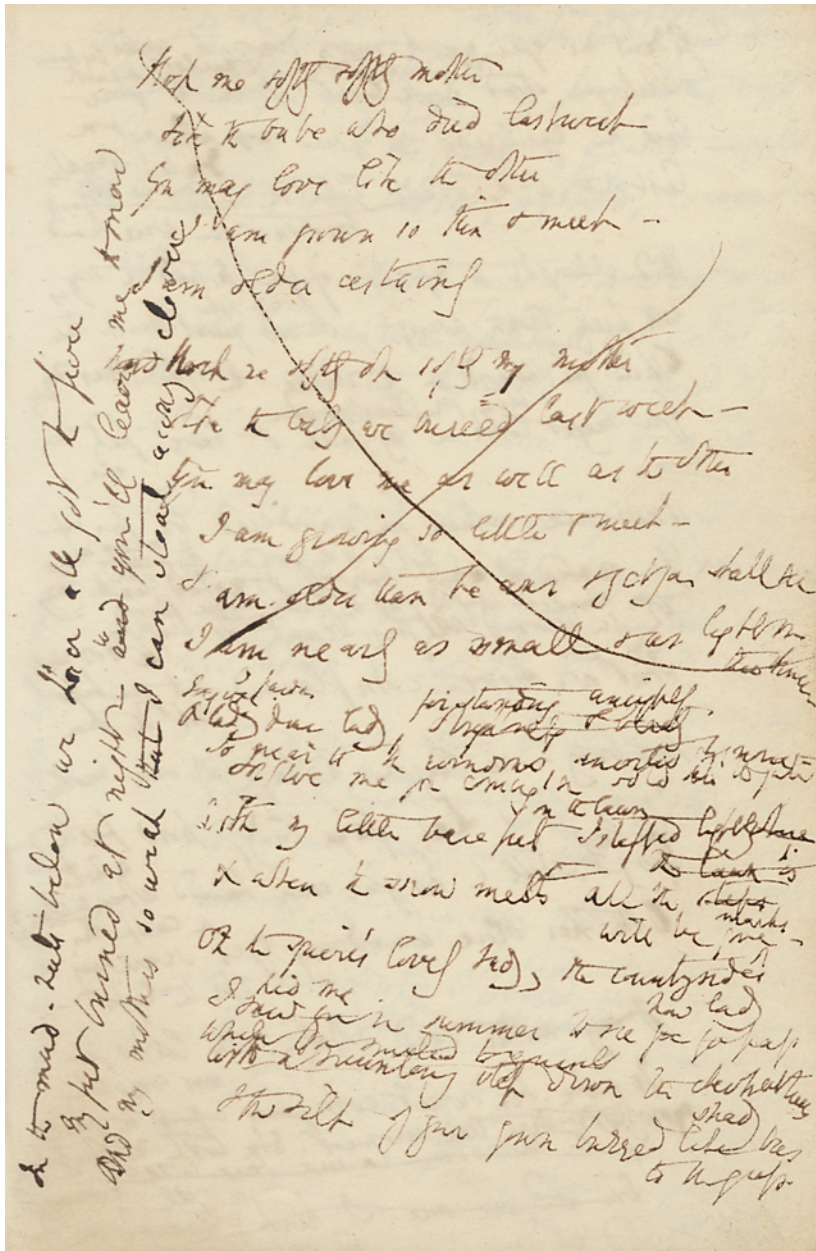
## II. Witness Narratives: *Corn Law Rhymes*, “O pardon dear lady,” and “The Cry of the Children”

While Barrett Browning’s letters suggest that Chartism and the 1842 strike wave were catalysts for her unfinished dramatic ballad in the voice of a famished child, the poem itself indicates that *Corn Law Rhymes* more directly influenced its subject matter and form. “O pardon dear lady” appears in a notebook she titled *Sonnets—by Elizabeth Barrett 1842*, which included a second unpublished ballad, “The Princess Marie,” associated with *Times* articles about the French royal family published July through August of 1842. “O pardon” appears after “The Princess Marie” in the notebook, and its subject also chimes with Barrett Browning’s remark to Mitford on 19 November 1842 concerning attempts to reason away “depression & despondency”: “arguments of consolation addressed from man to man, are . . . like an argument against hunger to the poor” (Kelley et al. 6: 159). While the comparison might suggest Victorian “naturalizing” of such hunger as providential (Bhattacharya 2), “O pardon”—Barrett Browning’s most extended treatment of rural working-class experience prior to Marian Erle’s account of her girlhood in *Aurora Leigh* (1856)—engages with hunger politics at a deeper level. As a dramatic monologue, “O pardon” seeks to cross the “experiential divide” Charlotte Boyce explores in her analysis of 1840s objectifying representations of starvation in periodicals like *Punch* (422). In the process, the poem manifests an intersubjective empathy quite unlike the elision of workers in Barrett Browning’s 1841 description of Horne’s work among “pits” and “pots” in Wolverhampton.

Whereas the wheels of industrial production drive the ideological systems, sensations, and prosody of “The Cry of the Children,” “O pardon” represents the invisible somatic and psychological experience of starvation through rocking. Barrett Browning first drafted a related dramatic lyric:

Rock me softly—softly mother  
 Like the babe who died last week.  
 You may rock me like another  
 Let me [sic] head lie on your shoulder  
 Though you tell me I am older  
 I have grown too like a baby—I am thin & I am weak  
 Rock me mother from the hunger (*Works* 5: 628–29)

The rocking, reinforced by hyper-regular trochaic meter, is a method of subduing gnawing hunger here as it is in Fanny Forrester’s later dramatic monologue,



**Fig. 1.** Drafts of "Rock me softly" in *Sonnets—by Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1842*. Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, Waco, Texas. Link to Image: <https://baylor.app.box.com/s/wxzgpdn0rb1r19wrzs51x38ohnwc43n>

“The Bitter Task” (1873), or in Pamela White Hadas’s 1982 monologue in which an anorexic mothers her “Hunger” by rocking it in endless sit-ups (263). After reworking the rocking fragment four times, including two canceled retries not included in the *Works* transcription (fig. 1), Barrett Browning abandoned the fragment and began drafting “O pardon.” Here, the rocking disappears, then resurfaces midway. Written in a ballad stanza in flexibly varied anapestic meter, the poem opens:

O pardon dear lady for standing unsightly  
 So near to the windows, invited by none—  
 With my little bare feet I stepped on the lawn lightly  
 & when the snow melts all the marks will be gone—(lines 1–4)

We subsequently learn that the child speaker’s infant sibling has died, as in “Rock me softly,” and that this child too desires the baby’s “place” on their mother’s lap, where she “rocks me softly so softly she charms me / Away from the hunger-pain aching within” (lines 89–90).

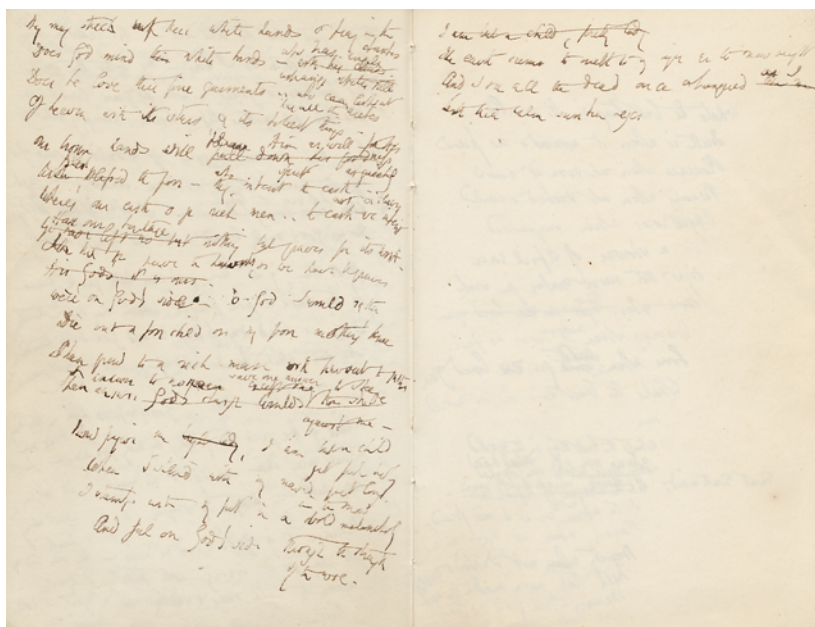
The “dear lady” the child addresses through “windows” is the “squire’s lovely lady,” but if the lady constitutes the auditor in the monologue, then she is no listener to the child’s mind in dialogue with itself (line 5). The lady feeds to the birds “ryebread as white as wd. suit a Duke’s daughter” but ignores the human hunger on her estate (line 11). She has visited the child’s cottage only to ask directions, blocking out the sun in the doorway and attracting the dying gaze of the baby’s “wandering eyes searching on for the light”—one of many instances of occluded vision and haunting eyes in the poem (line 24). The mother, “mad with sorrow” and “worn with the fast,” cries out, wroth that her infant should “look off from her face” in dying, and exclaiming that “proud ladies” displace even the “sweet angels’ places” (lines 31–36). If the mother’s feelings are conflicted, then so are the father’s and the surviving sibling’s. The father rejects the minister’s pieties and “mourned in his swearing / That only the dull ones indeed wd. live on” (lines 43–44).

The child speaker who does “live on” is the most obviously conflicted in confessing a “secret”: “Though I loved little babe, I am glad that she died” (line 75). Why? First, “there’s one crust more at supper now baby is dead” (line 66). As if still imagining baby eyeing the crust, however, the speaker adds, “I hope God shut her eyes,” as “so hungry!” she “climbed up to the sky for her bread” (line 67–68). Second, the child dreams that baby is “happy . . . knee deep in the rye fields of Heaven,” with “spikes of the corn” rustling “brightly around her” (lines 78–81). The “last reason” is that, since “they say” (i.e., the minister and mother) baby now has “the heart” of “a great holy Father to lie on” (lines

93–94), the speaker can be rocked on her mother's lap, can "feel dizzy & faint away softly" (line 97), can "forget all the hunger" and "float" like a "king of the islands" (line 103)—longing to "die so! . . . not to fall back / To the dim heavy pain—like a bird filled with flying / But to die on, die on, to the cold & the black" (lines 106–08). "The cold & the black" terminating the child's fantasy of being "king of the islands" undercuts an escapism otherwise reminiscent of Barrett Browning's utopian vision in "An Island" (1837). Is the parallel unconscious, or a self-critical recognition of the class privilege underlying her earlier poetic fantasizing? For this child, neither island fantasies nor rocking can enable escape from inexorable hunger.

In later stanzas, the speaker of "O pardon" turns from familial to social relationships, from "secret" guilt and sibling rivalry to more militant questioning. Is it "true" (line 117) that children exist like "the queen's little children" who are "never hungry all day," while the poor plead at the palace door, "Give us good daily bread—we are hungry & wait" (lines 112–116)? Will wealthier people praying "in the church / 'Give us bread day by day'" (lines 118–19) see through the child's prayers "to the want in [its] heart" (line 124)? The child reasons that the "brown hands" of the poor may please God who "[b]lest the poor," then asks, "Where's our earth o ye rich men—the earth we inherit[?]" (lines 133–35). Declaring that the poor are "on God's side—So God I would rather / Die out a poor child on my poor mother's knee / Than grow to a rich man with harvests to gather" (lines 137–139), the speaker "stamp[s]" "naked feet long in the snow" in "bold melancholy" (lines 142–43). The double meaning of "harvests" (and the question of who may most need "pardon") is reinforced by the next line: the rich who "answer to no man" will "answer to" God (line 145). While "grow[ing] to a rich man" might imply that the child is a boy, the speaker's gender is not made clear; earlier attention to the lady's "silk" gown (line 8) and baby's "pretty" look in the "coffin" might suggest a girl (line 38).

"O pardon" shares several images and themes with "The Cry of the Children." Its speaker is similar in age to the children "leaning their young heads against their mothers" in "The Cry of the Children" (line 3); in the associated "Rock me softly" lyric, the speaker asks the mother, "Let me [sic] head lie on your shoulder." The speaker's lingering by the "graves . . . all flat in the snow" where baby lies beneath the "softly rocking" poplar in "O pardon" (lines 53–55) also anticipates the children's envying Alice's grave like "a snowball in the rime" in stanza 4 of "The Cry of the Children." In both poems, the children are told of a heavenly Father, but their visions of heaven are distorted or blocked. In "O pardon," the child's starvation generates her fantasy of heaven's rye fields, where baby is literally "in bread" with the "angels" (lines 79–82). In "The Cry



**Fig. 2.** “O pardon dear lady,” Concluding Stanzas, in *Sonnets*—by Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1842. Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, Waco, Texas. Link to Image: <https://baylor.box.com/s/usdn4de7oxik21xrspeppqv3r9aic85>

of the Children,” the small laborers who “live in” or “under” wheels (line 96) ask, “Who is God that He should hear us . . . ?” (line 105); they find only a “speechless” (line 26) magnified image of their master in a heaven of “wheel-like, turning clouds” (line 130). Both poems also become more militant in their conclusions. As the child in “O pardon” indicts “rich men” and feels “on God’s side,” the poem breaks off in mid-stanza with a vision of hosts of “ahungered” dead (fig. 2):

The earth seems to melt to my eyes  
 And I see all the dead once ahungered as I  
 With their calm sunken eyes (lines 145–47)

These “calm sunken eyes” bearing and demanding witness constitute the most direct link to “The Cry of the Children,” where the children “look up with their pale and sunken faces” not once, but twice: first in stanza 3, with “looks . . . sad to see,” and again in stanza 13, where their “look is dread to see / For they mind you of their angels in high places / With eyes turned on Deity.” In the draft manuscript of “The Cry of the Children,” the later apocalyptic “look” appears early in the compositional process in stanza 3, suggesting that the aborted ending of one poem possibly helped to catalyze composition of the other.



Additional parallels emerge from resemblances to *Corn Law Rhymes*. Elliott repeatedly treats the effects of the bread tax on children, describing for instance the “famine in our children’s eyes” (109) in “The Jacobin’s Prayer” or, in his much-cited “Song,” a dialogue with a child whose father has “clamm’d” to death: “Child, is thy father dead? / Father is gone! / Why did they tax his bread? / God’s will be done!” (89). Elliott’s plaintive “gone”/“done”/“none” rhyme (repeated in stanzas 2 and 3) echoes in the “none”/“gone” rhyme of Barrett Browning’s opening stanza of “O pardon,” where the melting of the child’s footmarks in the snow implies that the speaker too may soon be gone. The snow, frost, and children’s graves connecting “O pardon” to “The Cry of the Children” likewise echo motifs in Elliott’s poetry that complicate a pastoral aesthetic and Wordsworthian representations of childhood, contributing to his “innocent seeming pathos but bitter ironies,” in Isobel Armstrong’s terms (128). Elliott’s “Flowers for the Heart” exemplifies these “bitter ironies” as the narrator seeks “a snowdrop” for the “coffin’d infant” of a mother who has lost five children (157–58); similarly, the child speaker in “O pardon” lays “five snowdrops” on her sister’s coffin (line 45). A similar ironizing of innocence amidst children’s graves appears in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789) which Barrett Browning was transcribing in 1842. However, the bread and grain images of “O pardon” connect it more directly to Elliott’s poetry.

In *Corn Law Rhymes*, “the religious signification of ‘bread’ is commuted into practical and classist terms” (Leonard 169). Similar iconography pervades the propaganda disseminated by the League, as it pumped out pamphlets, medallions (a corn sheaf in place of the abolitionists’ kneeling slave), illustrated envelopes, and membership cards depicting a poor family praying under the banner, “GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD” (Liberty Fund, Illustration 11). In noting the “prayer . . . ‘Give us bread day by day,’” the speaker in “O pardon” might be a child in such a family (lines 118–19). Less generically, Barrett Browning’s “O pardon” has affinities with “Where the poor cease to pay,” among Elliott’s hymn-like works sung at anti-Corn Law and Chartist meetings.<sup>17</sup> Addressing a sister figure, Elliott’s poem’s speaker invokes a heaven where no “bread-tax” creates a “maw like the grave,” and mourns the loss of “our father,” “thy husband,” two sons, and “their mother” who “sank / Broken-hearted to rest,” together with the baby, “that drank / ‘Till it froze on her breast” (88). The mother is survived only by a “son” of “her pain,” and “poor little Jane,” who looks “sadly like thee” (88–89). “O pardon” similarly portrays a baby dying at its mother’s breast, although without the immediacy created by Elliott’s dialogical address (“thee”). This dialogical dimension also characterizes Elliott’s “The Death Feast,” often

cited in “middle-class reviews,” given its evocation of “psychological states” through “lyric interiority” (Hildebrand 118). The poem’s young female speaker holds a “funeral feast” with one surviving brother on the family grave to mourn their father, mother, and two siblings, expressing a grief so deep her “tears refuse to flow,” and scorning observers who see her as simply begging for “burial bread” (91–93).

Poems like “The Death Feast” suggest how the Victorian social protest poems in *Corn Law Rhymes* employ “metrics of authenticity” structurally and rhetorically analogous to the conventions Smith and Watson identify in modern witness narratives. Thus Elliott creates a “*you are there*” immediacy by, in Fox’s words, allowing the “poor [to] speak of and for themselves” (qtd. in Easley 303). Survivors like the maiden and the “child” whose father “clamm’d” to death tell an “experiential history” of trauma and memorialize the dead—as Barrett Browning’s child speaker in “O pardon” does and the children do with Alice in “The Cry of the Children.” Through ballad conventions and affinities with the Evangelical hymns that increasingly displaced metrical psalms in the period,<sup>18</sup> *Corn Law Rhymes* also incorporates working-class cultural forms more extensively than do Barrett Browning’s two poems. Finally, it presents a pattern of working-class victimization by the bread tax that Elliott denounces in his satiric poems and documents in bristling notes condemning the culpable (the state, the Church, landowners). Through these various means, *Corn Law Rhymes* bears witness to the insidious violence of institutionally sanctioned starvation.

Barrett Browning does not present herself as a direct witness of the suffering children she portrays. She does, however, position herself as an “advocate” (in Smith and Watson’s terms), more effectively because more transparently in her *Blackwood’s* “utterance.” Despite the first-person perspective and psychological realism of “O pardon,” the poet’s distance from and difficulties in witnessing via the famished child are manifested in the monologue’s shifting auditors (the lady displaced by the “rich”) and the child’s transformation into a militant, miniature Corn Law Rhymer. In “The Cry of the Children,” the poet-advocate is still at a distance, as her opening “Do ye hear . . . ?” implies (line 1). Nevertheless, she is a closer witness than the “brothers” in industry, church, and state whom she publicly interrogates (*passim*), employing the formal structures of the irregular Pindaric ode, and framing the children’s voices within a commenting voice reminiscent of the chorus in Greek tragedies. In a lecture for the London Working Men’s Association, Fox described the poem as lending the children “its own voice to claim their rights, to describe their wrongs” (Kelley et al. 12: 404). While this lending may entail the appropriation or denial of voice that modern critics note in middle-class factory poetry,<sup>19</sup> the “lending”

enables readers to “hear” what even the commissioners in the CEC reports do not, because the children they question do not cry: they are instead so “passive and *uncomplaining*” that Horne urges “Her Majesty’s Commissioners” not to mistake the “low and depressed” state arising from “much wretchedness” as “evidence” for the absence of suffering (Q21: 239–40). To hear the children crying, then, requires an act of empathetic imagining.

The auditory registers of “The Cry of the Children” foster this intersubjective engagement by creating the “*you are there*” immediacy also found in Elliott’s witness poems. Structurally, Barrett Browning’s poem takes readers progressively closer to the children’s overheard voices (speaking among themselves), generating an intimacy beyond the spectacle of pity in the primarily visual pastoral imagery of stanzas 1 and 2. As Martha Cutter demonstrates in her analysis of illustrated slave narratives that “create new structures of feeling for abolitionism,” visual rhetoric can foster “affective and cognitive” connection (9). Stanzas 4 through 7 of “The Cry of the Children,” however, foster connection through sound. We hear the children’s mourning/envying of Alice’s rest in her “pit” (manifesting a grave-hunger also depicted by Elliott) (line 41); the poet-advocate’s choral comment on them “seeking / Death in life” (line 54), another possible Elliott echo;<sup>20</sup> the children’s evocations of their trembling knees in dragging burdens in the “coal-dark, underground” (line 74); and their breaking out in “mad moaning” in futile resistance to the “droning” wheels (line 87). Much as readers of “O pardon” hear the speaker address the “lady,” then enter into the child’s memories and sensations of rocking, dizziness, and falling back into “dim heavy pain,” readers at the midpoint of “The Cry of the Children” are positioned with the children before the wheels, feeling as they do the “wind” in their faces, and experiencing with them their “hearts” turning, their “pulses burning,” the “walls” turning, and the “sky in the high window . . . reeling” (lines 79–81). This “hallucinatory” stanza left some Victorian readers feeling “dizzy” (Henry 548), as Barrett Browning combines Elliott and Blake’s psychological poetics with the “physiological poetics” that Jason Rudy explores in Victorian poetry (*passim*).

While the wheels have other sources than *Corn Law Rhymes*,<sup>21</sup> both “O pardon” and “The Cry of the Children” are especially reminiscent of Elliott in their politicized use of prophetic discourse to indict powerful perpetrators. Too often dismissed as excess religiosity,<sup>22</sup> this fusion of spiritual with social justice discourse is a prototype of the “moral grammar of rights discourse” that Smith and Watson find in contemporary witness narratives. “O Lord, How Long?”—one of Elliott’s “protest hymns” that “transform religious vocabulary into political weapons” (Leonard 167)—exemplifies how Elliott’s “rights discourse” may have informed the rhetorical tactics that Barrett Browning uses in “The Cry of the Children”

and that Dorothy Mermin finds reminiscent of Blake.<sup>23</sup> Devoting a stanza to child labor arising from the bread tax, Elliott asserts of toiling children, “thy woes make angels weep in Heaven— / But England still is free,” before calling on “Father of all! hear Thou our cry,” then describing “waves” and even voices in the “clouds” upbraiding the nation’s hypocrisy (101–02). While the bread tax in “O pardon” is not connected to child labor, it similarly causes “woes” that angels witness. “The Cry of the Children” more extensively echoes Elliott’s hymn in its ironic reference to “the country of the free” (line 12), “wheel-like . . . clouds” above the child-workers, and biblically resonant questioning in portraying their suffering: “How long, . . . how long, O cruel nation, / Will you stand, to move the world, on a child’s heart . . . ?” (lines 153–56).

As a middle-class woman, Barrett Browning is less caustic than Elliott, who ventriloquizes masculine working-class voices crying “Revenge,” even as he fore-swears “swords” in striking “blows” with his “whip of words” (102). Nevertheless, the angels in the conclusion of “The Cry of the Children” intimate an apocalyptic violence accomplished by both human and divine agents. They do not “weep” over the children’s “woes.” They hear “the child’s sob in the silence” as it “curses deeper / Than the strong man in his wrath” (lines 159–60) and the sob/curse entails its own judgment, as the curse of slavery does in Barrett Browning’s “A Curse for a Nation” (1855): judgment wrought by “wrath” on earth as well as in heaven.<sup>24</sup> Similar invocations of working-class wrath pervade Elliott’s more militant poems; even the hymn “O Lord, How Long?” opens with “Up, bread-tax’d slave!” (101).

Another instance of Elliott’s politicized use of prophetic discourse against powerful perpetrators echoes in the apocalyptic images connecting the final stanzas of “O pardon” and “The Cry of the Children”: the child’s vision of the dead with their “calm sunken eyes” and the children’s “pale and sunken faces” with a “look . . . dread to see.” In Elliott’s “The Recording Angel,” a sardonic angel addresses the “King of dear Corn!” and “Famine’s lord!” at the Last Judgment, as “pallid crowds plebeian” arise around him:

Nay, shrink not from the crowd of hollow eyes!  
Thou know’st their children live to toil and pine,  
And that eternity’s long roll supplies  
No nickname, deathless, grand, and just as thine. (*Splendid Village* 80–81)

Here the “hollow eyes,” like the “sunken eyes” of the “ahungered” dead in “O pardon,” condemn those who profit from the bread tax and toiling children. Similarly, in Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children,” the children’s “look” mirrored in seraphims’ “eyes” face-to-face with “Deity” constitutes the

judgment of “God’s witnessing universe,” as Barrett Browning later terms it in “A Curse for a Nation” (line 117). Opening with its own recording angel commanding the poet to bear witness and “Write!” (line 2), the anti-slavery “Curse” suggests Elliott’s continuing impact on Barrett Browning’s later uses of politicized prophetic discourse.

There are also striking differences between Barrett Browning’s unpublished hunger ballad “O pardon” and her child-labor poem “The Cry of the Children.” One features a rural child-witness, indicts a failure of private charity, and avoids larger political contexts, despite dramatizing the starvation resulting from the bread tax and class inequities. The other shifts from the agrarian to the industrial; from a solitary child to the collective voices in the CEC reports; from a “lady” and working-class mother to brothers and masters in a “Fatherland” (“The Cry of the Children” line 24); and from dramatic indirection to outspoken critique of “Captains of Industry”—the last probably influenced by Barrett Browning’s reading of Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) in late April/early May 1843. While this indictment of “brothers” is compelling, “The Cry of the Children” does not address justifiably wrathful working men directly as agents, as Elliott’s poems often do. It also addresses class differences among women less authentically than her unpublished ballad does. “O pardon” opposes a lady oblivious to the gaze of the starving poor with a realistically rendered working-class mother keenly responsive to this look in both her dying babe and the starving sibling she comforts. “The Cry of the Children” reduces working-class mothers to anonymous, passive, periphrastic “bosoms” and evades the complicity of middle- and upper-class women in industrial exploitation (line 23).<sup>25</sup> Barrett Browning appeals to such women in “My sisters!”, another unpublished fragment associated with “The Cry of the Children,” but only to “confirm” her own poetic “voice” (qtd. in Stone and Taylor, “Poetic Audiences” 394).<sup>26</sup> In her advocacy against “factory-evil,” she thus glosses over the class-inflected power differences separating women that she underscores in her “agricultural-evil” hunger ballad.

The “sunken faces” are the only sign that the children may suffer from hunger along with exhausting labor in “The Cry of the Children”—even though the poor continued to starve, Horne’s reports document malnourishment delaying puberty,<sup>27</sup> and the horror of the Irish famine was yet to come. This one sign (of absent food, but also of hunger’s absence from the poem) suggests how completely Barrett Browning’s attention had pivoted from the Corn Laws to the labor conditions central to the CEC reports. Her shift in gears is embodied in what Herbert Tucker characterizes as the “mechanically driven” trochaic “industrial meter” of “The Cry of the Children” (88). I would add that this

rhythm—especially pronounced in the anaphoric “Turns the” of the “wheels” stanza (lines 81–83, my emphasis)—replicates the machine-punch openings of successive depositions in the reports themselves, as in the frequently cited deposition for Eliza Field recorded by Horne: “Works at *pressing washers*; works with an iron machine” (Q13: 54, my emphasis). It thus is an instance of what Williams describes as the new “rhythms” often signalling an emergent structure of feeling that simultaneously manifests “a social material process” (133).

What Barrett Browning omits in bearing witness to the conditions revealed by the CEC depositions deserves more analysis than it has received: mutilating accidents from “hammering” wheels that “punch” off fingers and hands, “young persons” with sexual desires, and much else.<sup>28</sup> What she captures is “young, young children” (line 9) whose “suffering” arises, in Eric Cassel’s terms, from “social and psychological” dimensions of their “personhood” (639), not simply bodily pain. In this respect, her *Blackwood’s* “utterance” involves a collaboration with Horne’s “causations” more fruitful than their abandoned “Lyrical Drama.” While the industrial-scale data entries of the CEC reports often risk subduing child witnesses to what they *work* at, Horne’s humane commentaries periodically foreground the individuality of his subjects and articulate the forms of suffering central to Barrett Browning’s poem. Thus, he observes of one ten-year-old boy in an iron foundry, “the constant pressure of work, upon the child’s mind as well as body, overwhelms all other ideas. . . . [A]sked if he could read, he replied that he ‘could read small words—if they were not very heavy’” (Q20: 234).

In writing “The Cry of the Children” and submitting it to a prominent periodical, Barrett Browning as a middle-class liberal presents an intriguing contrast with that champion of oppressed children, Dickens. He described himself as “perfectly stricken down” when Southwood Smith sent him “an advance copy” of the child labor blue book in February 1843 (qtd. in Leighton 94). Nevertheless, he declined to write supporting factory legislation, instead affirming his alliance with anti-Corn Law free trade advocates and factory owners against agricultural interests.<sup>29</sup> Barrett Browning, however, followed her public indictment of industrial perpetrators in “The Cry of the Children” with a blow against agricultural interests and the Corn Laws in revising “The Cry of the Human” (1842) for her 1844 *Poems*. In an inserted stanza, she invokes a sardonic angel and the gaze of the starving in ways again reminiscent of Elliott’s “Recording Angel”:

The rich preach “rights” and future days,  
And hear no angel scoffing,—  
The poor die mute—with starving gaze  
On corn-ships in the offing. (lines 50–53)

The lines, echoed by Lady Wilde in “The Stricken Year” (1847) on the Irish famine, were applauded in the *The League*—unsurprisingly, since Barrett Browning’s “corn-ships in the offing” mirror a visual motif in League propaganda.<sup>30</sup> Barrett Browning, flattered by inferences that Cobden himself was a fan of her poetry, does not mention criticism in the same review of “The Cry of the Children” as “misled by the factory cry,” written by a woman who had “never visited one of those ‘hives of industry’” (Kelley et al. 9: 379).

Nonetheless, “The Cry of the Human” led to an invitation in January 1845 from the League’s Leeds Ladies Committee to contribute a poem for the Anti-Corn Law London Bazaar. Barrett Browning hesitated, telling Mitford that they had “writers infinitely better qualified—& they need not go further than their own Corn law rhymers, Elliott” (Kelley et al. 10: 47). However, describing herself as a “free-trade” woman opposed to her “fixed-duty” father and “leagues before the rest of [her] house in essential radicalism,” she reasoned that she might write not a “mere party-poem,” but rather one addressing a “grievance (admitted by liberals of every class), just as the ‘Cry of the Children’” addressed “the Factory Grievance” (10: 60–61). Her father was adamantly opposed, and she had a “regular quarrel” with her brothers, who “abused the League & laughed at the ladies committee, & at very idea of [her] verses doing good at all” (10: 65). She ultimately declined the League’s invitation, yet vowed to Mitford “to write something with a League-object, though out of the League-livery—THAT, I *will* do” (10: 66).

Given the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, she never published such a poem. Late in 1845, she received an invitation from the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society to write something for their annual fund-raising bazaar, and she channelled her political convictions into “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point.” Thus, it was the antislavery poem that she subsequently paired with her “factory-evil” poem in her expanded collected *Poems* (1850), in order “to appear impartial as to national grievances” (Kelley et al. 16: 200). One cannot help wondering, though, if her resolve to write “with a League-object” had not been overtaken by repeal, would she have turned back to and reworked “O pardon dear lady”? Or would she have written an entirely different “agricultural-evil poem” to complete her “national-evil circle”?

*Dalhousie University*

## NOTES

1. Horne is hereafter cited by section, page, and paragraph number.
2. See Mermin 22–25; Avery in Avery and Stott 57–61; Browning, *Selected Poems* 11–14.
3. See the variants for lines 62 and 116 of “The Cry of the Children” in Browning, *Works* 1: 440, 442.
4. On echoes of the reports, see Leighton 94–97; Waddington 96–97; and report excerpts in Browning, *Selected* 327–30. On industrial metaphors and contexts, see the criticism summarized in Browning, *Works* 1: 435–36; also Moine. Tucker analyzes “industrial meter” (86–89); see also Hair 148–51. On the critique of industry-harnessed familial and institutional structures, see Leighton 94–97, and Levine 639–51.
5. For the draft in reference, see “Berg Notebook” IV: D1400 in Kelley and Coley 373.
6. First published in Browning, *Works* 5: 629–33; initially transcribed (with some errors) by Sharp 49–61. Blair briefly treats the poem’s critique of a “seemingly Anglican church” (*Form* 137).
7. See the multiple discussions of slave narratives indexed in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*.
8. See Pickering and Tyrrell 147, 198.
9. See Hildebrand 104, 107, 113–14.
10. Wolven and Leonard emphasize the radical satire, Easley the domesticated masculinity, Hildebrand the shifting generic registers in differing editions.
11. See also Miller, “Popular” 909–10.
12. See Sheldon 334–35.
13. Blair attributes the poem’s popularity to its “thwarted cross-class marriage” (“Tennyson” 292) and notes that Tennyson owned Elliott’s “complete works” (280).
14. See Kelley et al. 6: 212, 219–20, 225; 11: 213.
15. Barrett Browning compares her rebelliousness to Chartists’ on 4 January 1840 (Kelley et al. 4: 221), describes herself as a “(Magna) Chartist” in discussing the “Anti-cornlaw League” on 10 December 1844 (9: 265), and expresses repeated support for the 1848 Chartist petition (15: 66, 89).
16. On Chartist-League interactions in 1842, see Turner 45–55, Chase 193–201, Loose 100–03.
17. See Easley 306.
18. See Temperley 207–08.
19. See Moine 3.
20. In Elliott’s “Preston Mills,” the “little captives” pour forth, smiling like “death-in-life” (141).
21. See Browning, *Selected* 326–27; Henry on Ezekiel’s vision of wheels (548); and Horne Q9: 96.
22. Sanders notes Vicinus’s ambivalence regarding Elliott’s “fervid language and urgent appeals to God” (Vicinus qtd. in Sanders 45).
23. See Mermin 96.
24. On the “curse” in the two poems, see Stone, “Cursing” 189.



25. The *Medea* epigraph may imply this complicity; see Levine 642–43.
26. First published and discussed by Stone and Taylor 394–97.
27. See, for example, Horne Q14: 144–50.
28. Horne Q9: 6; Q11: 138–40.
29. See Shelden 333.
30. On Lady Wilde's echo, see Stone, "Politics" 51; for League images of corn-ships, see Liberty Fund, Illustrations 24, 32, and 50.

## WORKS CITED

- "The Anti-Corn Law League Riots." *The Times*, 15 Aug. 1842, p. 5.
- Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. Routledge UP, 1993.
- Avery, Simon, and Rebecca Stott. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Pearson Education, 2003.
- Bhattacharya, Sumangala. *Victorian Hunger*. 2002. U of Southern California, Ph. D. dissertation.
- Blainey, Ann. *The Farthing Poet: A Biography of Richard Hengist Horne 1802–84: A Lesser Literary Lion*. Longmans, Green, and Co., 1968.
- Blair, Kirstie. *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion*. Oxford UP, 2012.
- . "Men my brothers, men the workers': Tennyson and the Victorian Working-Class Poet." *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*, Edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 276–95.
- Boos, Florence S., editor. *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology*. Broadview Press, 2008.
- Boyce, Charlotte. "Representing the 'Hungry Forties' in Image and Verse: The Politics of Hunger in Early-Victorian Illustrated Periodicals." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2012, pp. 421–49.
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. "The Cry of the Children." *Works*, edited by Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, vol. 1, pp. 431–45.
- . "The Cry of the Human." *Works*, edited by Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, vol. 2, pp. 232–36.
- . "A Curse for a Nation." *Works*, edited by Sandra Donaldson, vol. 4, pp. 601–04.
- . *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Selected Poems*. Edited by Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, Broadview Press, 2009.
- . "O pardon dear lady." *Works*, edited by Sandra Donaldson, Rita Patteson, Marjorie Stone, and Beverly Taylor, vol. 5, pp. 630–33.
- . "Rock me softly—softly mother." *Works*, edited by Sandra Donaldson et al., vol. 5, pp. 628–29.
- . *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Edited by Sandra Donaldson et al., Pickering & Chatto, 2010. 5 vols.
- Carlyle, Thomas. "Corn-Law Rhymes." *Edinburgh Review*, no. 55, Jul. 1832, pp. 338–61.
- . *Past and Present*. Chapman and Hall, 1897.
- Cassel, E. J. "The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine." *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 306, no. 11, 1982, pp. 639–45.
- Chase, Malcolm. *Chartism: A New History*. Manchester UP, 2007.

- Cobden Unwin [Jane], editor. *The Hungry Forties: Life Under the Bread Tax. Descriptive Letters and Other Testimonies from Contemporary Witnesses*. T. Fisher Unwin, 1904.
- Cole, Sir Henry. *Fifty Years of Public Work of Sir Henry Cole, K. C. B.* Edited by Alan S. Cole, George Bell and Sons, 1884. 2 vols.
- Cutter, Martha J. *The Illustrated Slave: Empathy, Graphic Narrative, and the Visual Culture of the Transatlantic Abolition Movement, 1800–1852*. U of Georgia P, 2017.
- Easley, Alexis. "Ebenezer Elliott and the Reconstruction of Working-Class Masculinity." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2001, pp. 303–18.
- Elliott, Ebenezer. *Selected Poetry of Ebenezer Elliott*. Edited by Mark Storey, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2008.
- . *The Splendid Village: Corn Law Rhymes; and Other Poems*. Benjamin Steill, J. Pierce, 1833.
- "Great Chartist Meeting on Clerkenwell Green." *The Times*, 18 Aug. 1842, p. 6.
- Hadas, Pamela White. "To Make a Dragon Move: From the Diary of an Anorexic." *Poetry*, vol. 140, no. 5, 1982, pp. 261–63.
- Hair, Donald S. *Fresh Strange Music: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Language*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2015.
- Henry, Peaches. "The Sentimental Artistry of Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children.'" *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2011, pp. 535–56.
- Hildebrand, Jayne. "The Ranter and the Lyric: Reform and Genre Heterogeneity in Ebenezer Elliott's *Corn Law Rhymes*." *Victorian Review*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, pp. 101–24.
- Horne, Richard Hengist. "Reports by R. H. Horne." *Appendix to the Second Report of the Commissioners: Trades and Manufactures. Part II. Reports and Evidence from Sub-Commissioners, Children's Employment Commission, William Clowes and Sons*, 1842.
- Jensen, Meg. "The Fictional is Political: Forms of Appeal in Autobiographical Fiction and Poetry." *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights*, Edited by Meg Jensen, Mary Robinson, and Margaretta Jolly. U of Wisconsin P, 2014, pp. 141–57.
- Kelley, Philip, and Betty A. Coley. *The Brownings Collections: A Reconstruction with Other Memorabilia*. Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, The Browning Institute, Mansell Publishing, Wedgestone Press, 1984.
- Kelley, Philip, et al., editors. *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Wedgestone Press, 1984–. 26 vols. Digitally available at [www.browningscorrespondence.com](http://www.browningscorrespondence.com).
- Leighton, Angela. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. U of Virginia P, 1992.
- Leonard, Angela M. "Subverting Tradition: Ebenezer Elliott's Corn Law Rhymes." *Semiotics*, 1995, pp. 167–76.
- Levine, Caroline. "Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2006, pp. 625–57.
- The Liberty Fund. "Cobden and the Anti-Corn Law League." *Online Library of Liberty: A Collection of Scholarly Works about Individual Liberty and Free Trade*, [oll.libertyfund.org/pages/cobden-and-the-anti-corn-law-league](http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/cobden-and-the-anti-corn-law-league).
- "London, Monday, August 15, 1842." *The Times*, 15 Aug. 1842, p. 4.
- Loose, Margaret A. *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice*. The Ohio State UP, 2014.
- Maidment, Brian, editor. *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain*. Carcanet Press, 1987.

- Mermin, Dorothy. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Mill, John Stuart. "What is Poetry?" *Monthly Repository*, 7 Jan. 1833, pp. 60–70.
- Miller, Henry. "Free Trade and Print Culture: Political Communication in Early Nineteenth-Century England." *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, pp. 35–54.
- . "Popular Petitioning and the Corn Laws, 1833–46." *The English Historical Review*, vol. 127, no. 527, 2012, pp. 882–919.
- Moine, Fabienne. "Voices in the Machine: Class, Subjectivity and Desire in Victorian Women's Factory Poems." *Cahiers victoriens et éduardiens*, vol. 87, 2018, pp. 1–22.
- "Movements of the London Chartists." *The Times*, 18 Aug. 1842, p. 6.
- "Parliamentary Intelligence." *The Times*, 13 Aug. 1842, p. 2.
- Peschel, Lisa Anne. "'Structures of Feeling' as Methodology and the Re-emergence of Holocaust Survivor Testimony in 1960s Czechoslovakia." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 161–72.
- Pickering, Paul A., and Alex Tyrrell. *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League*. Leicester UP, 2000.
- "Riots in the Manufacturing Districts." *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1842, p. 5.
- Rudy, Jason R. *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics*. Ohio UP, 2009.
- Sanders, Mike. *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Scholl, Lesa. *Hunger Movements in Early Victorian Literature: Wants, Riots, Migration*. Routledge, 2016.
- Sharp, Phillip David. *Poetry in Process: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Sonnets Notebook*. 1985. Baylor University, Ph. D. Dissertation.
- Shelden, Michael. "Dickens, 'The Chimes,' and the Anti-Corn Law League." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1982, pp. 328–53.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- . "Witness or False Witness? Metrics of Authenticity, Collective I-Formations, and the Ethics of Verification in First-Person Testimony." *Biography*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2012, pp. 590–626.
- Stone, Marjorie. "Cursing as One of the Fine Arts: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Political Poems." *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, edited by Sandra Donaldson G. K. Hall, 1993, pp. 184–201.
- . "Politics, Protests, Interventions: Beyond a Poetess Tradition." *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry*, edited by Linda K. Hughes, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 145–60.
- Stone, Marjorie, and Beverly Taylor. "'Confirm my voice': 'My sisters,' Poetic Audiences, and the Published Voices of EBB." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2006, pp. 391–403.
- Storey, Mark. "Introduction." *Selected Poetry of Ebenezer Elliott*, edited by Mark Storey, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2008, pp. 13–32.
- Temperley, Nicholas. *The Music of the English Parish Church*. Vol. 1, Cambridge UP, 1979.
- Tennyson, Alfred. "Audley Court." *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*. Edited by Christopher Ricks, Longman, 1969, pp. 193–97.

- . "Locksley Hall." *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*. Edited by Christopher Ricks, Longman, 1969, pp. 181–93.
- . *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*. Edited by Christopher Ricks, Longman, 1969.
- Tucker, Herbert. "Tactical Formalism: A Response to Caroline Levine." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2006, pp. 85–93.
- Turner, Michael J. *Independent Radicalism in Early Victorian England*. Praeger, 2004.
- Vernon, James. *Hunger: A Modern History*. Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2007.
- Vicinus, Martha. *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature*. Croom Helm, 1974.
- Waddington, Patrick. "Russian Variations on an English Theme: The Crying Children of Elizabeth Barrett Browning." *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, vol. 21, pp. 94–131.
- Waithe, Marcus. "The Pen and the Hammer: Thomas Carlyle, Ebenezer Elliott, and the 'Active Poet.'" *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1780–1900*, Edited by Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 116–35.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society 1780–1950*. Doubleday, 1960.
- . "Structures of Feeling." *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford UP, 1977, pp. 128–135.
- Wolven, Karen. "Ebenezer Elliott, the 'Corn-Law Rhymer': Poor Men Do Write—The Emergence of Class Identity Within a Poetics of Transition." *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods*, edited by C. C. Barfoot, Rodopi, 1999, pp. 235–46.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.