

**WARS OF WORDS:
A HISTORICAL AND RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL
AND LITERARY TEXTS IN THE ENGLISH 1830'S AND 1840'S.**

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RESUMEN.- Nuestro ensayo consiste en un análisis del uso manipulativo del lenguaje en dos momentos muy próximos del siglo XIX británico: por un lado se estudian varios de los procedimientos lingüístico-literarios empleados por las clases dirigentes inglesas para preparar el camino de la Ley de Pobres de 1834. A saber: 1- "The Poor Law Amendment Act"; 2- "The Report from His Majesty's Commissioners"; y 3- la propaganda literaria efectuada por medio de los escritos de la prosista Harriet Martineau.

En la segunda parte del artículo se analiza la nueva cosmovisión que, a través de la manipulación lingüística, intentaron llevar a cabo los poetas del movimiento cartista con objeto de defender los intereses de la clase trabajadora.

Unos y otros pretendieron obtener la victoria política ayudados, en buena manera, por la retórica y la demagogia; pero las clases privilegiadas fueron quienes, una vez más, supieron sacar el mejor partido en esta "guerra de palabras".

ABSTRACT.- This article focuses on two major political events of the first half of the 19th century, namely: The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the Chartist Movement (starting 1838).

The aim of this research is to examine the hidden or less obvious messages that can be traced through these apparently self-explanatory texts.

Thus, the first part of the article concentrates on the analysis of three texts, each reflecting a different stage in the elaboration of the final Poor Law Act of 1834. From the study of these extracts the "vested interests" of the classes in power at the time become more apparent.

In the second half of the article, the same type of analysis is applied to Chartist Poetry, with the subsequent discovery of underlying political messages of hope and future victory directed to the working class readers.

We are living in the age of marketing and propaganda. Our normal, purely sensorial perception of the world is being mediated and distorted by a continuous

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flux of images and linguistic messages which attempt to partially modify our worldviews and therefore our necessities: new ones are created by the media and the result, as everybody knows, is the consumer's society. However, if we look back in time, it is possible to perceive unsophisticated inklings of what was to develop into the present overwhelming power of the media. Somehow, the examples which constitute the basis of this paper are a clear proof of the nominalistic power of language (such a "big issue" for the contemporary critical inheritors of Modernist theories¹): the aim we investigate is political and should not have anything in common with the processes operating in our consumer's society, however the evidence presented in these pages and the rhetorical analysis which follows² will perhaps show the reader that the manipulating techniques the upper classes and the lower classes of the 19th century applied on language to fulfil their aim are not very different from the ones used to sell any consumerist product.

This article is comprised of two parts. The first essay will be dedicated to examining the threefold process of "selling a product" (the 1834 Poor Law) to the masses. Although this famous Poor Law Amendment Act was, as we shall see, conceived and outlined for the benefit of the middle classes, it did not satisfy the lower classes in the least and the latter's reaction was manifested, not only in the historically famous mass-meetings, but also by means of language. In the 1830's Chartism appeared as a mass movement to counteract the Government's one-sided policy and defend the working classes' rights. Once again, written messages -now in literary form rather than in legal jargon- appeared to distort perceptual reality and "sell" a horrifying worldview to their readers. The examples offered in one and another part of this article, although few in number, are representative of the class struggle which lasted several decades along the 19th century, a struggle in which language was the most powerful tool used on either side.

I

MANIPULATING TECHNIQUES AND SPECIFIC AIMS IN THREE DIFFERENT STAGES OF THE 1834 POOR LAW.

Most people are so accustomed to endow "The Law" with a mysterious or almost supernatural power, that they neglect to measure the true limits of its authority and to ascertain the mode of its creation and operation.

1 See, for instance, Fredric Jameson *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981).

2 The historical texts we have selected are quite self-explanatory at times but so as to highlight the power which language holds to distort apparent reality, we have also introduced in our activities a rhetorical analysis, such as the one developed by the Spanish School of Stylistics. See, for instance, Damaso Alonso *Poesía española. Ensayos de métodos y límites estilísticos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1950); Amado Alonso *Materia y forma en poesía* (Madrid: Gredos, 1977; 3th ed.); F. Lázaro Carreter and E. Correa Calderón *Cómo se comenta un texto literario* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1987; 25th ed.); and Ricardo Senabre *Literatura y público* (Madrid: Paraninfo, 1987).

With the passing of the Reform Act in 1832 began the reign of liberalism; and the utilitarianism of common sense acquired, at least in appearance, despotic power. It determined man's way of looking at by far the most pressing social problem of the day. The years from 1832 to 1848 were among the most critical in the history of England. The time was out of joint. The misery and discontent of city artisans and village labourers was past dispute. The revolutionary 1834 Poor Law was designed to remove at a stroke the wretchedness and pauperism created by the old poor law. But the "cure" contained in the new poor law, with its drastic severity, its curtailment of outdoor relief, and its detested bastilles, in fact provoked intense popular resentment (see second part of this essay).

Considering that Government determined to take the matter into hands, it may be argued that the conditions just referred to appear insufficient to account for the widespread discontent of the years 1834 to 1848. Such a doubt may be lessened by the following reflection: the beneficial effects of legislation are direct and, so to speak, visible - easily noticeable, while the evil effects are indirect, and lie out of sight.

In order to appreciate the combined effects of law and authority with reference to this particular question of poor relief, we must bear in mind that laws and institutions have not always been altered or revolutionized as a result of public opinion but, on the contrary, legislative reform has often been guided solely by the convictions and/or interests of small numbers of men who happened to be placed in a position of authority.

The purpose of this first survey is therefore to analyze, as a sample of manipulation techniques one of the main points of the 1834 Poor Law. The three "stages" of language will not only reveal who held the reins of power at that precise historical moment but also how and why these controlling instances actively wished to promote either a misunderstanding or a particular understanding of the text.

A clear example of the first level of language could be the following passage from the Poor Law Amendment Act as it came out in published form:

And whereas a practice has obtained of giving relief to persons or their families who, at the time of applying for or receiving such relief, were wholly or partially in the employment of individuals, and the relief of the able-bodied and their families is in many places administered in modes productive of evils in other respects: and whereas difficulty may arise in case any immediate and universal remedy is attempted to be applied in the matters aforesaid; be it further enacted, that from and after the passing of the act it shall be lawful for the said commissioners, by such rules, orders or regulations as they may think fit to declare to what extent and for what period the relief to be given to able-bodied persons in any particular parish or union may be administered out of the workhouse of such parish or union ... and all relief that shall be given by any overseer, guardian or other person having the control or distribution of the funds of such parish or union, contrary to such orders or regulations, shall be, and the same is hereby declared to be unlawful, and shall be disallowed in the accounts of the persons giving the same, subject to the exceptions hereinafter mentioned³.

³ *An Act for the Amendment and Better Administration of the Laws Relating to the Poor in England and Wales* (London: Eyre & Spottishwoods, 1834), p. 54-55.

In his work *The Prince*, Machiavelli supposed his statesman a villain and then taught him how to fulfill his purposes! This could well have been one of the suggestions forwarded: obscure language - obscure language as a means of wielding power.

As early as 1787, a powerful thinker, Jeremy Bentham had already made perfectly plain his critical opinion about the fact that: the more complex the law, the greater the number of those who could not understand it⁴, which leads to the following question: who could this benefit?

Looking back over the years, it must be granted that in matters of legislation men have been and are guided by their real or apparent interests. This is so true, that from a look at the laws of a country it is often possible to find out, and this without much hesitation, what is the class which holds, or has held, predominant power at a given time. One only has to glance at the laws and institutions of the Middle Ages to see that power at the time went with ownership of the land. Who could look at the English land law and not perceive that political authority was held for years by large landowners? Likewise, the growing number of trade laws in the 18th century point to the increasing influence of merchants or the free-trade legislation of 1846 and the succeeding years tell us that political authority had come into the hands of manufacturers and traders. These are only a few examples but they go to show, as has already been mentioned, the obvious connection between legislation and the supposed interests of the legislators.

It seems that obscure and unintelligible laws could be a safeguard for two different types of interests. First a political one and secondly an economic one. A concrete example from history will serve as an adequate illustration of the first possibility: for instance, when the French Revolution broke out, the reaction in Great Britain was by no means unanimous. Some cheered and some trembled. The famous controversy that arose between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine sums up more or less the general feeling in the Nation. Thomas Paine, among other writers, thinkers or intellectuals, welcomed the storming of the Bastille as a fresh departure from the encumbrance and throttling effect of centuries of prejudice and custom. In defence of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, he stated: "the more simple anything is the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when disordered"⁵. In other words, he advocated that constitutional law should be clear, simple and accessible to every individual's

4 Bentham's diagnosis of the sickness of the English body politic centred on his analysis of the English common law. Neither the rights nor the duties of the citizens were well defined, and the law was inaccessible to anyone but lawyers and judges. There was no way in which the general public could know what the law was. He therefore sought to devise a system of classification of jurisprudence which was to be comprehensive and complete to all and everyone. In addition to his scheme for classification, his writings abound with ideas for the transformation of the language of the law. In his opinion the ideal would be a "vocabulary of the terms of Universal Jurisprudence, with definitions disposed in a chain, consisting of sounds importing simple ideas which would replace the technical, ambiguous, obscure and fictitious language of English Jurisprudence". (University College Manuscript quoted by J.Streintrager in his book *Bentham*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1977; p.23).

According to Elie Halevy: "The whole force of Bentham's criticism is concentrated not on the principles of metaphysics but on the established institutions, as a source of corruption and oppression". (*In The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955; p. 34).

5 In *Common Sense* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980 [1776]); p. 68.

common sense. On the other hand, Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* put forward the theory that a time-worn constitution like the English one was an advantage to the nation because it embodied years and years of gradual elaboration, discussion, re-balancing and reparation. In his opinion, the mere fact that so many English laws had been maintained over the centuries went in favour of these laws and consequently, the resulting complexity of the English constitution, gave it splendour and authority. Most important of all, he believed that an intricate and elaborate constitutional machine could be amended but never completely wiped out because no one could be so absolutely sure of understanding the whole as to declare it - simply - *wrong*. This is why Burke was terrified of the sudden and systematic simplicity, clarity and transparency of the new French constitution.

Unfortunately, when the news of the massacres in France reached England, the country was shaken from top to bottom. Everyone suddenly dreaded some wild outbreak of the uneducated masses that would overthrow the long-standing established order. So the events in France not only helped to consolidate the influence of Edmund Burke's conservative warnings but they also reinforced the traditional upper classes' hold on power. In other words, Parliament, or all the members of Parliament shut their ears to any kind of reform and held on tight to their power and position. It was easier to rule over an ignorant population. Clarity of language was too dangerous, for people could then think and form opinions. Obviously, it was not then that any revolutionary change was to take place in the making or fashioning of the laws. This latent fear of the French example spreading to Great Britain was to affect law making for many decades in the 19th century.

As mentioned before, there also existed a second type of interest: the economic one. Government, it has just been explained, clutched on to power for political reasons, or rather, for an apparent interest - that of political stability; but they had active allies in the members of what could be called the Lawyers' tribe. Lawyers were more likely than most people to be totally "in love" with the alleged excellences of the English Constitution for it was to their advantage that the English system of law should be preserved intact. The confusions and complexities of the common law meant money to them. Even the simplest case required their expert advice, since there was no way of knowing what anything meant without consulting them. The lawyers were aided in their exploitation of the public by their fellow professionals, the judges and the solicitors, who also profited financially from the elaborate and puzzling language of laws. This recalls Charles Dickens's bitter attacks on the "profession" in *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*.

Coming back to the Poor Law and, more concretely, to the second stage of its creation, it could be stated that before the actual elaboration of the law, two important steps were taken, each of which produced in turn, a certain "level" of language. First, the realization of the newly formed parliament of 1832 that something really had to be done to counteract the huge increase in the poor rates. By law, paupers, or people out of work were entitled to receive some kind of indemnification from the state. The money necessary to pay this poor relief was levied as a parish tax called the poor rate. But as time went by, it was coming to the point when the working population was being

so heavily taxed that they were, in fact, becoming paupers themselves for most of their earnings were taken from them to support the growing number of paupers. In other words, the whole process was becoming a kind of vicious circle. Therefore a commission was set up to inquire into the workings of the poor law and it then had to give account of its conclusions to parliament. Logically, at the hour of presenting their conclusions, the commissioners already had in mind what measures would, in their opinion, be necessary to curtail the growth of pauperism. In other words, their job was to convert parliament to the measures they proposed. This is probably why so much of the report was dedicated to describing the abuses of the system (pages and pages of the report are filled with hair-raising instances of corruption, violence and vice on the part of both paupers and administrators of relief). The method is clear. First, the audience is won over by carefully chosen examples and then the remedial measures are outlined in simple, clear and forceful language as the most logical way out of the problem. This tactic is still well-known and common today. It is usually termed *Demagogy*. The following passage is the exact paragraph in the Official Report which corresponds to the first quote of this survey. That is, these are the words which were then "translated" into legal language:

The chief specific measures which we recommend are that all relief whatever to able-bodied persons or to their families, otherwise than in well-regulated workhouses shall be declared unlawful, and shall cease in manner and at periods hereafter specified⁶.

The commissioners were so convinced that they had the clue to the problem that the language they used implied that every opponent of the proposals was either a fool or a rogue who deliberately preferred his own private advantage to the general benefit of the nation. This is obviously a device or even a weapon very much used even today in electoral campaigns, but it could also be seen from another angle. It seems that men easily come to believe that whatever suits them will automatically be beneficial to others. In other words, a man's personal interest gives a bias to his judgement and, by extension, a party's interest gives a bias to *its* judgement. A concrete example of this occurrence could be the famous Corn Laws: English manufacturers were sincere believers in protection as long as they thought it beneficial to trade, and became equally sincere enthusiasts for freedom of trade from the moment they were convinced that free trade in corn would be favourable to commerce and would give additional weight to the manufacturing interest. A more recent example is the complete reversal of attitude of Felipe González's party with regard to Spain's entry in N.A.T.O.

This leads on to our third point or stage. The Poor Law Amendment Act was one of the major undertakings of the newly elected 1832 Parliament. It was the first time that members of the pushing middle class had got seats as Members of Parliament. This new sector in Parliament immediately set to and directed their newly acquired

⁶ Report from his Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws. Published by Authority (London: B. Fellowes, 1837), p. 262.

power and fresh energies to tackling social problems of importance. With the population boom of the first decades of the 19th century the pauper problem was reaching its peak. The poor rates were gradually becoming heavier and heavier⁷, but, since the population kept multiplying to the point of starvation, the poor rates in question never seemed to cover the demand. And who, one might ask, was paying for all this? Not the aristocracy or the great landowners, but the wage earning population -the people who worked for a living- above all, the Middle Classes. This is where the class bias mentioned before enters again, for the measures prescribed were directed to relieving the Middle Classes of their burden, and not to making life more comfortable for the hungry lower classes. However, the latent fear of the French Revolution was still in the air. Something had to be done to persuade the population at large that the coming reform of the poor laws was going to benefit everyone, especially those who could see the logic of its principles. So the Government enrolled the help of a famous young writer, Harriet Martineau, and asked her to vulgarize the main points of the poor law in such a way as to convince those who were going to suffer it that, in fact, it was going to be for their own good. Sponsored by the Government, this writer wrote out several short didactic stories which showed how the existing abuses undermined the energies and good will of both those who paid for the poor rates and those who received them. In other words, her job amounted to advertising the coming law and presenting it as the "long awaited for", final solution to existing problems. But obviously, if her writings were to reach a wide public, the principles had to be presented in diluted form and the ideas transmitted in simple and clear language. The following passage is taken from the tale *The Hamlets*, and yet again, the subject matter corresponds exactly to the two quotes analysed earlier on in this survey:

Mr. Barry, the new overseer, is determined to reduce expenditure and pauperism in the district. He is now attending to the paupers who are queueing up for their weekly pay from the parish poor rates. A pauper comes with a certificate from his employer where the sum earned for the week is stipulated,

⁷ Relief in money covered the practice most usually employed in the different districts in the country. The commissioners distinguished five varying systems whereby sums of money were granted to able-bodied paupers:

Relief without Money: This practice was so common that it acquired the technical name of "Relief in lieu of labour". The plan entailed the donation of a few pence or shillings for the pauper's support - the only condition being that the recipient should then shift for himself and give the parish no further trouble.

The Allowance System: "Allowance" is confusing since it refers to various kinds of assistance: either it meant relieving occasional wants (fuel, money, blankets, food) or it could take the form of a weekly sum. Sometimes the sum was determined according to the number of children, or according to the price of bread (the famous Speenhamland System).

The Roundsman System: Also called the House Row, Billet, Ticket or Stem system. This was a contract between overseers and employers of the parish. The parish sold the employers the labour of a pauper at a certain (low) price. The difference between what the pauper earned and the minimum income established by the Speenhamland scales was then paid out of the parish funds. The Billet or Ticket system: these names come from the note of assignment given to the pauper by the overseer which the pauper then had to return duly signed by the person who had employed him.

Parish Employment: When there was no way of employing the paupers in any other way, the parish found odd jobs for the paupers on the roads or in gravel pits (this was expensive because of the necessary supervision).

The Labour Rate: Each rate-payer had to employ and pay out of his own money a certain number of paupers. This was very unfair because workers were forced upon parishioners - not according to their need but according to their rating (this was especially hard on parsons who received the parish tithes and had to pay or "employ" in proportion).

Apart from these five different types of out-door relief, there also existed in-door relief. That is, relief given within the walls of a workhouse. This was the only form of relief permitted under the New Poor Law.

-“Did farmer Dove sign this?” asks Mr. Barry.

-“Yes, sir.”

-“He might have saved himself the trouble” observed Mr. Barry: “it has nothing to do with our business.”

-“Lord bless me sir! what am I to do with nine shillings a week?”

-“That is for you to judge. If you cannot subsist, take this order for the workhouse. If not, make way for the people behind you. If you want time to consider, you may apply again in an hour’s time. After that, the gates will be shut.”

After this interchange of words, the “story” goes on:

Mr. Barry pointed out (to the assistant overseer next to him) that one of the advantages of the new plan was its freeing the administrators of parish affairs from all responsibility of inquiring into the circumstances of each applicant. If the applicant wanted relief, he knew he might get it in the workhouse⁸.

The moral to be drawn from this passage is no more and no less than what is stated in the actual Poor Law Amendment Act and delineated in the Official Report. That is, that no help of any kind was to be given to the poor except in the workhouse.

The study of the three “stages” or levels of language has therefore revealed three corresponding “control instances of society” for, it is interesting to notice that on the one and same point, the reader has passed from a cluster of muddled constitutional or legal terminology to the Report, that aimed at converting Parliament to the spirit of the law, to the popularization or vulgarization of the measures proposed.

Another point of interest that has emerged from the analysis is the fact that each of these “stages” was determined by a particular strategy: first, obscure language, the exclusive domain of lawyers and judges; secondly, demagoguery which entails the use of clear language but carefully selected examples that will ultimately shock and convert the readers; and thirdly, propaganda or the over-simplification of facts and distortion of reality in order to present a carefully constructed and idealized world which will convince the public that life is not worth living without the product in question, the product being the long awaited-for Reform of the Poor Law.

II

LITERATURE AND PROPAGANDA: THE ANSWER OF CHARTIST POETRY

As has already been discussed in the first part of this essay, political power and language manipulation were not elements on the side of the working classes during the

⁸ Harriet Martineau *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (London: C.Fox, 1833), p. 89-90.

period leading up to the 1834 Poor Law. The topical and bourgeois predominance was soon, however, to be shattered by the rising of the popular movement which came to be named Chartism. It constituted an assault upon political power which was to combine the forces of large numbers of people approximately from 1838 to 1850.

The Chartist Movement has been studied by many historians but not by many philologists. Chartist poetry is something practically unknown to many specialist of the period not to say to almost everybody. Despite its general lack of aesthetic values, Chartist poetry becomes quite a relevant instrument when considering the relationship between power and language. As shall be seen in the pages which follow propaganda also became a useful tool wielded by popular poets to counter-attack the manipulative use of legal and fictional language on the part of the ruling classes.

Chartism came to life with the publication of a Charter on May 8th 1838. This document, the Charter of the People, summarized the basic points for which a huge percentage of the working classes -under the common denomination of the "People of Great Britain" -were ready to fight. They were asking for democratic rights such as universal suffrage and frequent elections. But they had to confront both the traditional landed power in the British Government and the political influence of the middle classes and, obviously, things were not going to be easy for them. For over twelve years the Chartist movement fought for the fundamental rights of the People; there were moments when Queen Victoria's Government actually believed that the country was on the brink of revolution. But things calmed down definitely after 1850⁹, once again the Government and the middle classes had won the battle; some democratic rights would be conquered later on by the people but by then Chartism was already a defeated movement.

The question at hand is, therefore, to highlight the social instruments that made possible such a huge movement of workers so early in the 19th century. Apart from the obvious general discontent of the lower classes -markedly strong in certain periods- Chartism came about, to a great extent, because of its leaders' insistence on the necessity of a Chartist Church and a Chartist School. Needless to say, a Chartist School also meant Chartist education and the appearance of a popular literature, written for and quite often by the working classes. It did not take long for Chartist authors to produce various works of fiction and, meanwhile, a Chartist poetry was also created and published in such newspapers as *The Chartist Circular*, *The Northern Star* or, later, *The Red Republican* and *Notes to the People*. In other words, members of the "other nation", the poor one, became the writers of the people.

In the political struggle between Chartism and the Government poetry became one of the most effective tools to exacerbate the spirits of the people. The "power" of poetry was recognised by some as a very efficient weapon in the battlefield of politics. This is made evident in the following article in which the writer discloses the potential of a poem to operate as a political instrument:

⁹ For more details on the subject, see Eric Hopkins *A Social History of the English Working Classes 1815-1945* (London: Arnold, 1979); and Brian Inglis *Poverty and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971).

Poets and their poetry have, and will continue to exert an extensive influence on the destinies of mankind. Armed with the most splendid intellectual powers, they have made their opinions to tell on their own, and left them to influence other ages. From the hidden cell "thoughts that breathe and words that burn" have passed, and startled mankind from their sleep of indifference, roused them into action, shaken the long-established foundation of things, revolutionized the feeble mind, and raised man, as a moral and intellectual being, to a loftier elevation¹⁰.

Basically the message was an instigation for the working classes to rise massively in revolt. Consequently, poetry was established as an effective weapon to support the Chartist movement and ideology, and rhetoric became an all-important element in the description and distortion of British daily life: the manipulative language used by the lawyers and politicians of the upper classes was to be counterattacked also by language, and a new cosmovision was going to be offered to the readers of Chartist poetry.

In the one-sided portrayal of political reality which is presented in Chartist verse there are several elements worth mentioning¹¹. Namely:

1- In many poems the common people are compared or metamorphosed into actual, real "slaves", whereas businessmen, noblemen and the privileged classes in general become "tyrants". The summons is all clear in Ernest Jones's lines:

Never fulfil
A tyrant's will
Nor willingly live a slave!¹²

The equivalence of the ruler as a tyrant -decidedly based on visible or acknowledged facts- sometimes experiences a more twisted distortion when the privileged are turned into "entities" whose very presence -it seems- has always horrified and haunted the human mind. Such is the case in the following lines by Gerald Massey:

Vampires have lapped the human hearts best blood;
Kings robbed, and Priests have cursed us in God's name!
Out in the midnight of the past we've stood,
While fiends of darkness plied their hellish game¹³.

The above passage illustrates how the initial *tyrants* have now been converted into *vampires* and *fiends of darkness*. In this way, the reader is made spectator to the

¹⁰ In *The Chartist Circular*, a Scottish periodical published from september 1939 to september 1941, edited by William Thompson (Glasgow: W. & W. Miller). The quoted paragraph appeared in the 24th October 1840 issue.

¹¹ A further analysis of Chartist poetry can be found in F. Collado Rodríguez *Pueblo y Literatura: la Poesía del Cartismo* (Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza, 1985).

¹² In *Notes to the People*, a periodical edited by Ernest Jones from may 1851 to april 1852; reprinted by Merlin Press (London, 1968), p. 69-70.

¹³ In *The Red Republican and Friend of the People*, a periodical edited by Gerald Massey from june 1850 to july 1851; reprinted by Merlin Press (London, 1968), p. 16.

creation of a whole gallery of monsters. These monsters are invariably portrayed as spending a substantial part of their time sucking the blood out of the poor English worker (=slave).

2- Religion is another very important factor to be considered. As mentioned previously, the Movement had its own Chartist Church and, as is the case in many human communities (not to say in all), Chartist members started to believe that God was, of course, "on their side", because God is good and just:

The seats in heaven are for the just,
And neither bought nor sold:
God is not bribed with granite-dust,
As men are bribed with gold¹⁴.

According to the beliefs of many a follower of the Charter, God is good, so good that He cannot be made responsible for the deeds of the wicked privileged class:

All men are equal in His sight,-
The bond, the free, the black, the white;-
He made them all, them freedom gave -
He made the man, - Man made the Slave!¹⁵

But there existed some disparity in the beliefs of those who made up the rank and file of Chartism. The more rational minds were not entirely satisfied with the benevolent figure of God in Heaven. To those level-headed people the Kingdom of God ought to belong here, on Earth, not up there in a promised Heaven. And in "The People's Anthem", Ernest Jones does not mince his words when he affirms who God really is:

Awake, ye slavish things!
Beneath your Priests and Kings!
Long curbed by lies!
The altar's but a sod
The sceptre but a rod,
A People is a god!
O God, arise!¹⁶

Here again, we find a clear metamorphosis of the introductory *slavish things* into *God*. In both cases the signified are obviously the people. The mutation has taken place in scarcely six lines. Another detail that may be pointed out is the fact that we have gone from *god*, written in the lower case on line six, to *God*, written with the capital letter on line seven.

3- There is also an abundance of Chartist poems in which images help to establish a clear link between the people's movement and Nature.

¹⁴ In *Notes to the People*, op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁵ J.H. Bramwich, "A Hymn". Reprinted by Y.V. Kovalev, ed., in *An Anthology of Chartist Literature* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), p. 118.

¹⁶ In *Notes to the People*, op. cit., p. 933.

Chartism moves, spreads in a "natural" way, as a flood, or a storm, or the morning, which brings the light to all the places where only darkness was before:

Though the darkness of night may at present surround us,
The clouds shall disperse - and appear the bright morn;
And thou, blessed freedom, shall tell the glad story -
The Charter for ever shall weather the storm¹⁷.

4- Finally, in the poetical and romantic distortion produced in so many Chartist poems and songs a last element should also be mentioned : the historical past. "Where is the spirit of old?", sing many Chartist poets. Why have the people forgotten their past liberties and ancient rights, conquered by their brave ancestors? The spirit of Romanticism is still present in the poetry of Chartism, among whose main influences poets like Percy B. Shelley and E. Elliot or novelists as W.Scott can be found. Romantic beliefs and cosmovision are assimilated into the political views of the People's movement and names such as King Alfred the Great, Howell and Llewelin of Wales, Sir William Wallace of medieval Scotland are invoked in the Chartist press to convince the people that the Isles were a much better place to live in than they are now, in the 1840s and 1850s. In fact, it can be affirmed that history is also "retold" to inflame the people into rebellion. The following lines, written by a certain William Hick, will prove that the above statement is by no means an exaggeration. The poet in question was upset by the way in which the Parliament was acting against Chartism:

Oh, where is the justice of old?
The spirit of Alfred the Great?
Ere the throne was debas'd by corruption and gold,
When the people were one with the state?
'Tis gone with our freedom to vote;
'Tis under each despot's control;
And now, e'en the right to petition is naught;
A farce and a mock'ry the whole
O shade of the honour'd and patriot King.
Thy mantle o'er modern royalty fling!¹⁸

King Alfred's reign recovers nothing but the spirit of a democratic Golden Age which had never existed. But in Chartist times the ways to convince the people to do something were limited. One of those ways was poetry, a poetry written by a large number of popular bards -very bad ones, most of them- and some better educated writers. What they produced was a distorted picture of dayly Great Britain, a place were the champions had to be the People, equal to God and the Brave, whereas the vanquished were bound to be the Privileged, transformed into vampires, black clouds, or greedy priests.

¹⁷ In *An Anthology of Chartist Literature*, op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

WAR OF WORDS

Influenced by the already dying Romanticism and playing with old images of manichean distortion the Chartist poets substituted signifieds and signifiers. In this way they tried to impose a new language order which would ultimately lead to a perception of reality different from the one their political enemies were also trying to force on the readers. It seems clear that both the power-wielding classes and the social strata undergoing subjection knew of the power of language and used it so as to reach their social and political aims. However, whereas the upper classes fulfilled their wishes once the New Poor Law became a reality, the working classes should have to wait a few more decades before being granted the political and democratic rights so strongly demanded.

The upper classes' linguistic persuasive techniques had clearly been more effective over society at large than the lower classes' attempt to impose their own cosmovision by means of language.