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Poetry and Political Struggle: The Dialectics of Rhyme

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Theme: History

"When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses." from John F. Kennedy

Introduction

Poetry is often associated with genteel people and laid-back lifestyles, yet over the decades since the Enlightenment many poets have been actively involved in the most radical of political and art movements. Setting up a solid foundation for such attitudes was the poet extraordinaire, **Alexander Pope**. In this essay I shall look at the connection between poetry and socio-political struggles over the centuries. From Pope to the Chartists, and from the Irish revolutionary poets to the postcolonial writers writers of Africa, poetry has played an important part in social change. The recent explosion of global demonstrations and rallies has also been connectioned with radical poetry as will be seen in Chile for example.

The New Augustans v Medievalism – 'shall not Britain now reward his toils?'

Imagine being one of the generation of poets to follow Shakespeare. The Enlightenment poets response to Shakespeare was that they believed that Shakespeare was good but not perfect and so looked back to Roman times, to that of Augustus for a more political and satirical model for their poetry. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was highly influenced by the poet Horace (65 BC–8 BC) whose work was created during a momentous time when Rome changed from a republic to an empire. Pope's poem *Epistle to Augustus* (addressed to George II of Great Britain) initiated The New Augustans, as they were known, and they created new and bold political work in all genres as well as sharp and critical satires of contemporary events and people. Pope's best know works *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Dunciad*, and *An Essay on Criticism* made him famous in his own time for their biting criticism and wit. Equally satirical but with more emphasis on prose than poetry was his contemporary Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), the Anglo-Irish satirist, essayist, pamphleteer, poet and cleric whose *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1712), *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729) led to the creation of the term 'Swiftian' for such sharp satire.

The Augustan era was also know by other names such as the age of neoclassicism and the Age of Reason. It was a time of increased availability of books and a dramatic decrease in their cost. This in turn meant that education was less confined to the upper classes and that writers could hope to make more money through the sale of their works and therefore be less dependent on patrons.

Image on the right: Alexander Pope, painting attributed to English painter Jonathan Richardson, c.?1736, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The greatest patron of the arts throughout the Middle Ages was the Church. Patronage was also used by nobles, rulers, and very wealthy people to endorse their political ambitions, social positions, and prestige. **Leonardo da Vinci** and **Michelangelo, William Shakespeare**, and **Ben Jonson** all looked for and received the support of noble or ecclesiastical patrons.

The sales from Pope's works allowed him to live a life less determined by other peoples' wealth, and this independence is reflected in his lines from *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*:

> "Oh let me live my own! and die so too!
> ('To live and die is all I have to do:')
> Maintain a poet's dignity and ease,
> And see what friends, and read what books, I please."

While Pope read a lot of philosophy, his concerns were mainly poetic. As David Cody writes:

"Like many of his contemporaries, Pope believed in the existence of a God who had created, and who presided over, a physical Universe which functioned like a vast clockwork mechanism. Important scientific discoveries by men like Sir Isaac Newton, who explained, in his *Principia*, the nature of the laws of gravitation which helped to govern that universe, were seen as corroborating that view. "Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night," Pope wrote, in a famous couplet intended as Newton's epitaph, but "God said, Let Newton be ! and All was Light." This view of the universe as an ordered, structured place was an aspect of the Neoclassical emphasis on order and structure which also manifested itself in the arts, including poetry."

Pope was famous for his biting criticism which spoofed the mores of society or mocked his literary rivals. His critical political savvy was also on show in lines like:

> "'T is George and Liberty that crowns the cup,

And zeal for that great House which eats him up.
The woods recede around the naked seat,
The sylvans groan—no matter—for the fleet;
Next goes his wool—to clothe our valiant bands;
Last, for his country's love, he sells his lands.
To town he comes, completes the nation's hope,
And heads the bold train-bands, and burns a pope.
And shall not Britain now reward his toils,
Britain, that pays her patriots with her spoils?
In vain at court the bankrupt pleads his cause;
His thankless country leaves him to her laws."

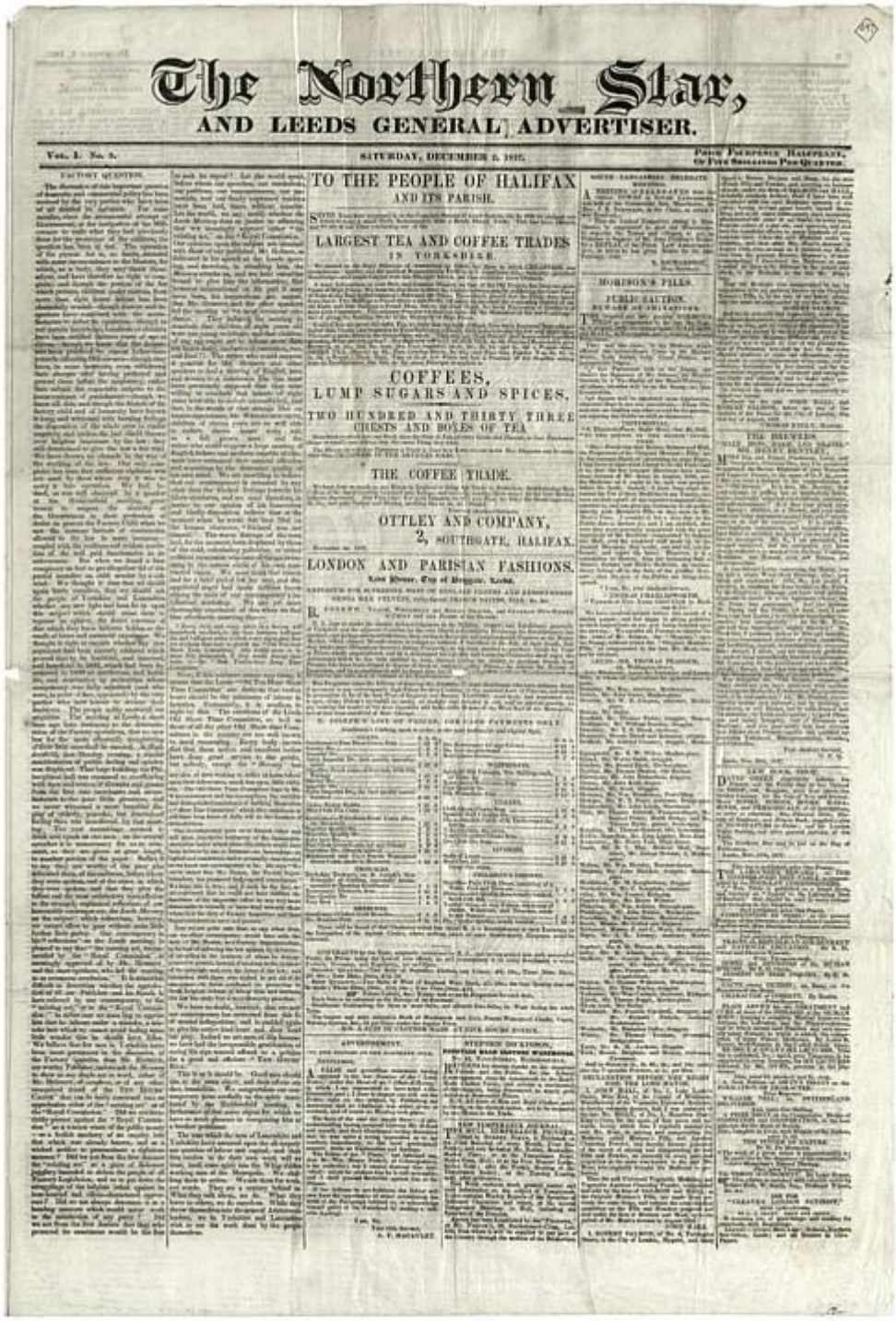
Pope's poetry reflected the Enlightenment popularisation of science through scientific and literary journals, the development of the book industry, the promulgation of encyclopedias and dictionaries, and new ideas spread like wildfire through learned academies, universities, salons and coffeehouses. The Enlightenment period can be dated from the beginning of the reign of Louis XV (1715) until the turn of the 19th century but was soon followed by the Romantic period from about 1800 to 1860.

Chartism v Romanticism – 'How comes it that ye toil and sweat?'

The Romantics preferred intuition and emotion to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and placed a high value on the achievements of "heroic" individualists and artists. They turned inwards, seeing art as an individual experience and emphasising such emotions as apprehension, horror and terror, and awe. Romanticism looked backwards to folk art, ancient customs and medievalism. As the bourgeoisie achieved their main aims of wresting control of land and power from the aristocracy, the responsibility for continuing the struggle for the principles of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' fell upon the organisations of the working classes.

In England, Chartism was a major working class movement called after the People's Charter of 1838 and was a movement for political reform in Britain until 1857. The movement's strategies were constitutional and they used petitions and mass meetings to put pressure on politicians to concede manhood suffrage. The Charter demanded: a vote for every man twenty-one years of age, secret ballots, payment of Members (so working people could attend without loss of income), equal constituencies, and annual Parliamentary elections. The Chartist movement was a reaction to the passing of the Reform Act 1832, which failed to extend the vote beyond those owning property. The political leaders of the working class felt that the middle class had betrayed them.

In conjunction with Chartist demonstrations and strikes, the Chartist press as the voice of radicalism existed in the form of *The Poor Man's Guardian* in the 1830s and was succeeded by the *Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser* between 1837 and 1852. The press covered news, editorials, and reports on international developments while becoming the best-selling provincial newspaper in Britain with a circulation of 50,000 copies. It also became an organ for the publication of working class poets and poems.



The Northern Star,
AND LEEDS GENERAL ADVERTISER.

Vol. I. No. 3. SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1837. Price Fourpence Halfpenny, or Five Shillings Per Quarter.

FACTORY QUESTION.

TO THE PEOPLE OF HALIFAX AND ITS PARISH.

LARGEST TEA AND COFFEE TRADES IN YORKSHIRE.

COFFEES, LUMP SUGARS AND SPICES,
TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTY THREE CHESTS AND BOXES OF TEA

THE COFFEE TRADE.

OTTLEY AND COMPANY,
2, SOUTHGATE, HALIFAX.

LONDON AND PARISIAN FASHIONS.

MORISON'S PILLS.

PUBLIC SALTING.

Front page of The Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser, 1837

With such a wide circulation, it was no wonder that so many sent their poems in for consideration. According to Mike Sanders:

> "The Northern Star's poetry column was not an attempt to impose 'culture' from above, rather it was a response to a popular demand that poetry could and should speak to working-class desires and needs. From the start, literally hundreds of Chartists sent in their poems and quite a few appear to have pestered the editor with enquiries as to when their work would appear."

It is believed that up to 1,000 poems by up to 400 Chartist and working-class poets were

published in the Northern Star between 1838 and 1852. Michael Sanders notes that:

> "Most have names, but a high percentage are published either under initials, under a pseudonym or anonymously, presumably by writers who would fear reprisals, such as dismissal or blacklisting, if they were known to be writing for the Northern Star. By and large, we know nothing of these people. They are permanently lost to history. But these poems show us that poetry was once central to the way working-class communities expressed themselves both politically and otherwise."

Ordinary people used poetry as a way of demonstrating their humanity in the face of grinding poverty and dehumanising industrial capitalism. By composing poetry they showed they could produce 'beauty' as well as surplus value.

An example of an anonymous poet's endeavour is AW's poem *To The Sons Of Toil* published in 1841:

> "How comes it that ye toil and sweat
> And bear the oppressor's rod
> For cruel man who dare to change
> The equal laws of God?
> How come that man with tyrant heart
> Is caused to rule another,
> To rob, oppress and, leech-like, suck
> The life's blood of a brother?"

Image below: Photo of Ernest Charles Jones (1819–1869)

We still don't know anything about AW but he or she is an example of many men and women who turned to poetry to express their desires for social justice. However, several important poets did arise out of the Chartist movement such as **Ernest Charles Jones** (1819–1869) novelist and Chartist. In 1845, Jones 'joined the Chartist agitation, quickly becoming its most prominent figure, and vigorously carrying on the party's campaign on the platform and in the press. His speeches, in which he openly advocated physical force, led to his prosecution, and he was sentenced in 1848 to two years' imprisonment for seditious speeches. While in prison he wrote, it is said in his own blood on leaves torn from a prayer-book, *The Revolt of Hindostan*, an epic poem.'; **Thomas Cooper** (1805–1892) poet, leading

Chartist and known for his prison rhyme the Purgatory of Suicides (1845); **Gerald Massey** (1828–1907) was an English poet and only twenty-two when he published his first volume of poems, Voices of Freedom and Lyrics of Love (1850); George Binns (1815–1847) was a New Zealand Chartist leader and poet.

There was **Ebenezer Elliott** (1781–1849) who was an English poet, known as the Corn Law rhymer for his leading the fight to repeal the Corn Laws which were causing hardship and starvation among the poor. Though a factory owner himself, his single-minded devotion to the welfare of the labouring classes won him a sympathetic reputation long after his poetry ceased to be read; and John Bedford Leno (1826–1894) was a Chartist, radical, poet, and printer who acted as a "bridge" between Chartism and early Labour movements, he was called the "Burns of Labour" and "the poet of the poor" for his political songs and poems, which were sold widely in penny publications, and recited and sung by workers in Britain, Europe and America.

The Poets' Revolution v Modernism – 'Viewing human conflict from a social perspective'

The connection between the radical poets and the working class continued into the twentieth century even as Romanticist modernism took hold. Modernism rejected the ideology of realism, while promoting a break with the immediate past, technical innovation, and a philosophy of 'making it new'. As such:

> "Modernist poetry in English is generally considered to have emerged in the early years of the 20th century with the appearance of the Imagist poets. In common with many other modernists, these poets were writing in reaction to what they saw as the excesses of Victorian poetry, with its emphasis on traditional formalism and overly flowery poetic diction. […] Additionally, Modernist poetry disavowed the traditional aesthetic claims of Romantic poetry's later phase and no longer sought "beauty" as the highest achievement of verse. With this abandonment of the sublime came a turn away from pastoral poetry and an attempt to focus poetry on urban, mechanical, and industrial settings."

Modernist poets moved further away from Realism as they developed literary techniques such as stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, as well as the use of multiple points-of-view, undermining what is meant by realism. Thereby moving further away from the kind of narrative and descriptions of external reality that seekers of political change and social justice use as an art form to create and propagate awareness of their social conditions.

Image on the right: Photo of James Connolly, c. 1900

The Chartist tradition of radical politics associated with radical content in poetry was continued in Ireland whose revolutionary radicals perceived in the First World War and opportunity encapsulated in the slogan, "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity". The culmination of nationalist and radical politics of the previous centuries was demonstrated in the Easter Rising of 1916. Indeed it is often described as the The Poets' Revolution as three of the men who signed the Proclamation in 1916, Pearse, MacDonagh, and Plunkett, were published poets, while many other participants were also writers of plays, songs and ballads. The leader of the Irish Citizens Army, **James Connolly** wrote:

> "Our masters all a godly crew,
> Whose hearts throb for the poor,
> Their sympathies assure us, too,
> If our demands were fewer.
> Most generous souls! But please observe,
> What they enjoy from birth
> Is all we ever had the nerve
> To ask, that is, the earth."

The leaders of the Irish revolution were generally a young, artistic group of revolutionaries and their executions by the British colonists sent shock waves throughout Ireland leading to the War of Independence (1919-1921) and the Civil War (1922–1923).

Later in the 1920s and 1930s a more politically conscious working class poetry developed. In the United States the combination of influences from the Soviet Union and the Great Depression led to the growth of many new leftist political and social discourses. Milton Cohen summarised the aesthetic, stylistic, and political concerns being debated at the time. He noted that poets were expected to:

> "(1) View human conflict from a social perspective (as opposed to personal, psychological, or universal) and see society in terms of economic classes.
>
> (2) Portray these classes in conflict (as Marx described them): workers versus bosses, sharecroppers versus landowners, tenants versus landlords, have-nots versus haves.

> (3) Develop a "working-class consciousness," that is, identify with the oppressed class in these conflicts, rather than maintaining objective detachment.
>
> (4) Present a hopeful outcome to encourage working-class readers. Other outcomes are defeatist, pessimistic, or "confused."
>
> (5) Write simply and straightforwardly, without the aesthetic complexities of formalism.
>
> (6) Above all, politicize the reader. Revolutionary literature is a weapon in the class struggle and should consciously incite its readers if not to direct action then to a new attitude toward life, 'to recognize his role in the class struggle.'"

These 'proscriptions' ran straight in the face of every tenet of Modernist poetry which emphasised the personal imagination, culture, emotions, and memories of the poet. Major poets of the radical movement in the United States include Langston Hughes (1902–1967), Kenneth Fearing (1902–1961), Edwin Rolfe (1925-1954), Horace Gregory (1898–1982), and Mike Gold (1894–1967).

Post colonial poetry v postmodernism – 'The bitter taste of liberty'

As the United States suffered under the heightened political repression of McCarthyism in the 1950s the mantle of radical culture moved to the countries who wrestled themselves out of British colonial stranglehold in the form of postcolonial literature. The English language was imposed in many colonised countries yet came to be the language of radical anti-colonial poets during the liberation struggles and afterwards in the independence era. African poets, for example, were able to use poetry to communicate to the world not only their "despairs and hopes, the enthusiasm and empathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain … but also a nation's history as it moved from 'freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and from independence to tasks of reconstruction which further involve situations of failure and disillusion'."

David Diop's poem *Africa* weighs up past and present political complexities:

Africa, my Africa

> Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs ….
> Is this you, this back that is bent
> This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
> This back trembling with red scars
> And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun…..
> That is Africa your Africa
> That grows again patiently obstinately
> And its fruit gradually acquires
> The bitter taste of liberty."

The development of the postcolonial in the South paralleled the development of the postmodern in the West. However, the philosophical bases of postmodernism would not sit easily with the practical contingencies of newly achieved nationhood. Postmodernism rejected the grand narratives and ideologies of modernism, and like modernism, called into question Enlightenment rationality itself. The tendencies of postmodernism towards self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence would make

it an uncomfortable bedfellow with the socialist and revolutionary nationalist exigencies of the newly decolonised. As the Kenyan writer **Ngugi wa Thiong'o** notes:

> "Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and other forces cannot be ignored especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against the same stunting, dwarfing background."

In a way the radical political changes wrought by anti-colonial struggles kept the culture tied down and anchored to the values and aspirations of the masses. Postcolonial ideology was relevant to society in a way that postmodernism was not. It could be argued that postmodernism actively sought to remove itself from political relevance by decrying grand narratives and elevating relativism.

Radical poetry today? – 'only injustice and no resistance?'

Until relatively recently it seemed that the sentiments of Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) poem *To Posterity* had become almost universally true in the 21st century:

> "For we went,changing our country more often than our shoes.
> In the class war, despairing
> When there was only injustice and no resistance."

However, there has been a sea change in attitude with people demonstrating on the streets in many cities globally in only one year: the Yellow Vests in France (October/November, 2018), Sudanese Revolution (19 December, 2018), Haiti Mass Protests (7 February, 2018), Algeria: Revolution of Smiles (6 February, 2019), Gaza economic protests (since Mar, 2019), Iraq: Tishreen Revolution (1 October, 2019), Puerto Rico: Telegramgate (8 July 2019), Ecuador Protests (3 October, 2019), Bolivian protests (since Oct, 2019), Chile Protests (14 October, 2019), Lebanon Protests (7-18 October, 2019).

Protests in Plaza Baquedano, downtown Santiago

The eruption of protest and violence in Chile started with students demonstrating against the proposal to raise the subway fares. This was unexpected as Sofía del Valle noted:

> "Economists have long called Chile's economy "the miracle" of Latin America, where GDP per capita has noticeably grown from $2,500 in 1990 to $15,346 in 2017. However, these numbers hide a fundamental problem: they do not account for inequality. Chile's late poet Nicanor Parra said it best: "There are two pieces of bread. You eat two. I eat none. Average consumption: one bread per person."

She also states that the people themselves are starting to participate in political activity with the "proliferation of "cabildos ciudadanos," or self-organized participatory meetings of citizens that have gathered to discuss problems and solutions for the country we dream to be."

This has led to the connection between the masses and poetry, similar to Chartist times, being restored to Chile. According to Vera Polycarpou, the people on the streets are "singing the songs of Victor Jara, listening to symphonic music in the squares, making street theatre and reciting the poems of Pablo Neruda, declaring that it will not tolerate military rule, repression and injustice again."

Pablo Neruda (1904–1973) was a Nobel Prize winning Chilean poet-diplomat who wrote in a variety of styles, including surrealist poems, historical epics, overtly political manifestos, a prose autobiography, and passionate love poems from a very young age. Neruda was living in Madrid at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936 to 1939) and with some friends had formed the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals bringing popular theater to the people, plays from Cervantes to Lorca. The assassination of the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca

(1898–1936), a friend of his, a month into the war had a profound affect on Neruda. According to Mark Eisner:

> "Beyond the horror of a friend's assassination, Lorca's death represented something more: Lorca was the embodiment of poetry; it was as if the Fascists had assassinated poetry itself. Neruda had reached a moment from which there was no turning back. His poetry had to shift outwardly; it had to act. No more melancholic verse, love poems dotted with red poppies, or metaphysical writing, all of which ignored the realities of rising Fascism. Bold, repeated words and clear, vivid images now served his purpose: to convey his pounding heart and to communicate the realities he was experiencing in a way that could be understood immediately by a wide audience."

This shift away from Romanticism can be seen clearly in Neruda's poem *I Explain Some Things*:

> "You will ask why his poetry
> doesn't speak to us of dreams, of the leaves,
> of the great volcanoes of his native land?
>
> Come and see the blood in the streets,
> come and see
> the blood in the streets,
> come and see the blood
> in the streets!"

The demonstrations in Chile have also seen the return of the 'cacerolazo' or 'casserole' a form of popular protest used globally consisting of people making noise by banging pots, pans, and other utensils at demonstrations. The Chilean rapper Ana Tijoux brought out a song about this form of protest, called 'Cacerolazo' (on YouTube) where she raps about cacerolazos as a form of massive protest in defiance of police and military violence describing them as "[w]ooden spoons against your shooting":

> "Vivita, guachita, Chile despierta
> Cuchara de palo frente a tus balazos
> Y al toque de queda, ¡cacerolazo!
> No somos alienígenas ni extraterrestres
> No cachai na', es el pueblo rebelde
> Sacamos las ollas y nos mataron
> A los asesinos ¡cacerolazo!
>
> (Vivita, guachita, Chile wake up
> Wooden spoon in front of your bullets
> And at the curfew, cacerolazo!
> We are not aliens or extraterrestrials
> Don't shit, it's the rebel people
> We took out the pots and they killed us
> To the killers cacerolazo!)"

Conclusion

The Chartists may not have had the access to the internet or video production of Ana Tijoux but their newspapers achieved large distributions and sales, spreading a similar culture of revolt and opposition. Since the time of Alexander Pope, poetry has played an important part in the struggle for change and social justice and the potential for poetry to consolidate people's feelings, aspirations and desires has remained strong. The decision by poets themselves to participate and apply their art to the issues at hand has reinforced and inspired people the world over.

*

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