Chapter 2

No more for Now or Praps Never': The meaning and function of pauper writing 1750s to early 1900s

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INTRODUCTION

The 1601 Old Poor Law was framed on the basis that parish officials and people falling into dependence on poor relief would know and see each other. In essence, the relief transaction was assumed to be one in which orality dominated and the written record would stem from disputes (legal records) or spending (overseers' accounts). We now know that by the 1750s and strongly from the early 1800s, such oral encounters were increasingly supplemented or replaced by epistolary negotiation. This was inevitable when migration took larger and larger numbers of people away from places where they 'belonged' under the law and thus from the sites where they had a right to apply for poor relief.[1] Until recently, it was less well-known that the poor, paupers and their advocates continued this epistolarity after the advent of the New Poor Law in 1834. They wrote locally (little of which survives), to the variously constituted central authorities (much of which survives) and to third parties such as newspapers. Indeed, they wrote with such frequency, intensity and purchase that the central authorities even considered imposing a blanket no reply policy.[2] The poor's grasp of literacy may in many cases and places have been fragile, but the existence of a substantial set of letters with little evidence of the presence and activity of scribes points to an important seam of attainment well before the familiar benchmarks for improving literacy from the mid-nineteenth century.[3] In turn, such material has been used to argue that the poor could exert

agency in shaping the scale, duration and form of relief even though neither the Old nor New Poor Law gave them any rights to welfare.[4]

My purpose in this chapter is not to continue and deepen the discussion of agency. I am not particularly interested in the way that the poor law worked, the function of letters in negotiating welfare, and the detailed rhetorical tropes deployed. Rather, I want to look at the meaning and function of writing for the poor correspondent, asking questions such as: where did the poor gain their literacy and how did they maintain it? Why did the poor write themselves as opposed to adopting some other means of communicating with those who held power? How did the poor understand the act and process of writing? What value and meaning did they ascribe to the written word? And how did poor writers learn and unlearn the linguistic registers that ebbed and flowed in this long period of societal and cultural change? Ultimately, a corpus of the size and reach of that deployed here allows us to understand and trace different models of writing circulating amongst the poor: writing as habit; writing as last resort; writing as (literally in some cases) painful necessity; writing as investment; writing as precaution; writing as a symbol of respectability and honesty; and writing as an expression of self.

A LETTER CORPUS

The chapter brings together for the first time in publication terms the pauper and advocate letters located and transcribed as part of two consecutive AHRC grants, one (‘Pauper letters in Britain and Germany 1780-1929’) covering the Old Poor Law from the 1780s until the 1830s and the other (‘In their own write’) covering 102 poor law unions under the New Poor Law from 1834 until the early 1900s.[5] Amounting to some 5m transcribed words in total, the corpus contains material from communities in every county in England and Wales and also

several Scottish counties.[6] The quality of literacy varies across a wide spectrum. One end is located by Richard Garlick of Kirkby Lonsdale (Westmorland), who on 2 May 1820 wrote to say that:

> my Rint is Due on the 11th of May and I ham not Hable to pay it my self my Famley is so large for it is verey hard work to get meat for them let a lone aney thinges whitch I hope you will have the gudness to send my Rint and a trifell be sides for we are most nacked for Cloathing and wear all of want of shirting we have non casley of aney sort and I hame not habel to get them aney for the times is so verey bad for ther is nothing to be haded with weving with Children at present but I hame Hired with my Hould Master a gane for the sumer Cesan that is ould Martlemess so I hope you will have the Goodness to send It by the Beare for I hame in Great nessitey at present and I am not hable to get out of it with out the help of you you If I could I schud think it verey gret shame to send to you[7]

The other end is embodied in the perfect hand of James Richards of Kilmington (Devon), who opened his 963 word letter of 7 October 1846 in the following way:

> Gentleman
>
> I have presumed the liberty to lay before you the following Case for your immediate Adjudication and Attention. I Married my present Wife the proprietor of a small Freehold in Axminster parish in April 1844, on the conditions of a Deed, settling it on her, as her own during her life, giving me my life interest in the Property conveying the after Freehold on her Son (not born under Wedlock) if he survived me, but if I survived him for the Freehold to my Heirs &c. This Property was Mortgaged in 50£ to Mr le Bond Attorney, Axminster, which I knew of when I married my Second Wife in

> 1844 she proved to be labouring with the Cancer in the left Breast which was cut off in October 1844.[8]

He went on to ask for help in realising the value of the property that he might pay for further treatment.

Broadly, the quality of literacy amongst the poor, advocates and officials improves over time, but even by the 1890s it is possible to find instances of remarkably tenuous writing skills. There is more continuity to other aspects of the dataset. Thus, while both the pre- and post-1834 samples include formalised petitions, almost all letters from poor writers and their advocates took the form of familiar letters.[9] We find by accident (changes in handwriting style and literacy quality in a letter series) or statement (someone acknowledges authorial help) some 600 instances of the use of scribes in the corpus. In terms of wordage or author numbers, however, this pales into insignificance given the dimensions of the wider sample, and we can be relatively certain those who signed pauper letters also generally wrote them. Women and children are under-represented as writers throughout the period covered, while men, the aged and sick are over-represented in almost all places. Under both poor law systems, advocates and poor writers who sent just one or two letters dominate a count of the number of writers. Equally, however, those who wrote multiple letters and entered into sustained correspondence account for a much larger share of the letters sent and the wordage of those letters than their numerical importance might allow. These biases mean that we have to beware of simply reconstructing the meaning and significance of writing for sick and aged men. One further contextual variable is also important: the pre-1834 material contains a handful of letters written from inside workhouses, whereas for the New Poor Law this rises to more than 37%. These disparities reflect the very different roles and longevity of workhouses under the Old Poor Law versus the New, but also the fact that post-1834 paupers understood

that they had an unobstructed right to send and receive letters in the workhouse context. The right was affirmed by the central authorities in disputes over missing mail or that which had been opened by workhouse staff prior to its being given to the pauper.[10] This is an important observation of the data, not least because New Poor Law workhouses tended to cater for the perennially poor but also the shamefaced poor who had once 'been' somebody. We find little evidence of these people becoming *de facto* workhouse scribes, but there is evidence (often from their own pens) that they percolated knowledge of how to confront the poor law authorities through the workhouse hierarchies.[11]

FINDING WRITTEN WORDS

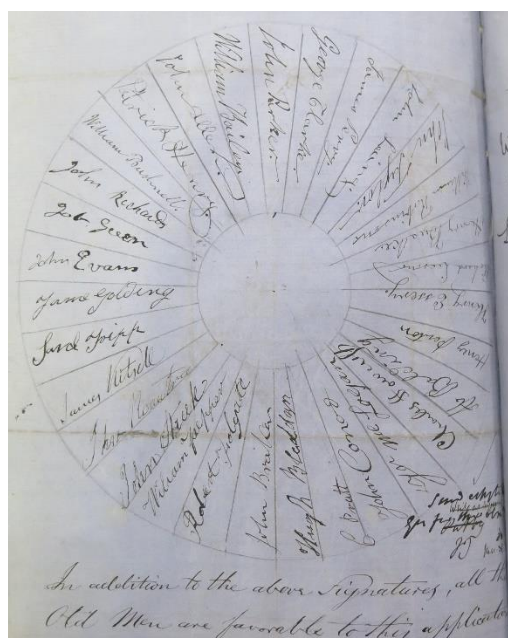
The question of where ordinary people learned whatever literacy skills they had is now well trodden ground for Britain.[12] In the letter corpus, however, surprisingly little reference is made to personal histories of schooling, apprenticeship, Sunday schools or work-related literacy. Nor do we find a single reference to learning obtained via the variously constituted workhouse schools in the post-1834 period. Even young people writing in the three decades after the 1871 Education Act or Catholics and others with a nonconformist background who were often given specific additional instruction by nonconformist ministers while living in institutions, fail to mention learning to read or write. This may be a reflection of the immediacy of the sources and their function as mechanisms of reportage, embellishment and contestation. Certainly poor people and paupers/pauper children who went on to write autobiographies tended to reflect on this issue at least in passing.[13] We can also imply more from the letters than is boldly stated. In particular, and as noted above, both the pre- and post-1834 letter sets contain texts from the shamefaced poor who would have been used to reading and writing as part of their jobs and professions. We encounter everyone from ex-poor law

officials, clerks and authors through to master sailmakers, inventors, and printers. This sort of writer is found more often after the 1850s and more frequently in larger urban areas, but they are nonetheless a core feature of Old Poor Law writing too. Still, the presence or absence of this group and related mechanisms of transference does not explain the origin of most literacy, and without further record linkage work at scale it is impossible to speculate confidently.

Two further thing are however important. When John Hennis wrote to the parish of St Clements Dane (London) on Friday 4 March 1814 and worried in a postscript ‘I fear you cannot read this Scrawl’, he was one of only a handful of pre-1834 writers who was self-aware enough to reference the quality of his handwriting.[14] In part this absence reflects the fact that the poor wrote to people who were not in general more literate than themselves; some of the worst handwriting in the pre-1834 corpus is from officials rather than the poor themselves.[15] For the New Poor Law sample, self-knowledge of handwriting was much more frequent and sustained, with 198 direct or indirect (as in blaming the quality of pen, ink or paper) references to poor writing or expression. This is typified by James Barnett, writing from Sheffield workhouse on 28 August 1882, who apologised for his letter and explained that ‘Having no ink for that purpose, and having been forbidden to borrow any, I am compelled to use a substitute’, clearly signalling that the central authorities could and should expect a better hand; that there was an acceptable quality of writing.[16] The second observation of the data is that multiple signatory letters increase over time. Under the Old Poor Law we see husbands and wives both signing letters, but only in the letters of advocates do we see multiple unconnected people signing a single letter. For the post-1834 period, the frequency of husband and wife letters increases but we begin to see a new genre of text in the sense of grievance letters signed by multiple paupers and poor writers. Sometimes these take the form of a petition, but mostly they are familiar letters which take up a collective issue to

do with the workhouse, local policy or the actions and reputations of a particular member of staff. Figure 2.1 shows the ending of one such letter, where the writers signed in a circular form so as to ensure that no one was identified as the original author. Instances such as this provide a hint at how authors found their linguistic registers but they also perhaps tell us about how partial literacies were fused together to be more than the sum of the contributing parts.[17]

Figure 2.1: Chelsea Workhouse Letter, 1871.


In addition to the above Signatures, all th
Old Men are favorable to this applica

Source: TNA: MH12/6996, 12662/1871.

It is easier to see how literacy levels were maintained and linguistic registers developed by poor writers than how they were attained in the first place. Inevitably, the process of sustained reading, writing and correspondence about relief created a circularity in

which we might expect improvement. Given the sheer variety of orthographic text and the ebb and flow of writing quality according to the health and momentary circumstances of the individual it is impossible to conceive of an index of literacy that would capture changes over time and duration of correspondence, at least at the corpus level. Poor writers sometimes explicitly noted impediments to writing as for instance did Mary Forde, writing from Caversham (Berkshire) on 5 June 1788 who explained that her handwriting was different to prior letters because 'the bones in my hand is broke', or John Watson of Sheffield who noted on 7 December 1878 that 'I have had to write this upon my knee amid the noises that are so common in this place'.[18] Nonetheless, writers in both the pre- and post-1834 samples also explicitly noted, or more often implied, that sustained correspondence had led to better and more extensive expression. David and Martha Clark, for instance, wrote from Norwich (Norfolk) to Peterborough (then Northamptonshire) in February 1801 after a period of sustained correspondence and were confident enough to be 'flattering myself [the hand was David Clark, though both husband and wife signed] I write to gentlemen well aquainted with every circumstance'.[19] Literacy for those on or negotiating to get poor relief was also maintained and improved by interaction with advocates. Under the Old Poor Law Jones and King have shown that few extended letter series relating to a single individual or family did *not* also contain advocate letters, and we too easily assume that turning to an advocate reflected lack of literacy as opposed to other strategic reasons.[20] It is much less often appreciated that advocates were also a prominent group of writers to the central authorities under the New Poor Law. The single advocate Joseph Rowntree, for instance, wrote more than 100,000 words of the corpus, and there are many reasons to think that poor people both had input into what was written on their behalf and how it was written, with more than 200 instances where it is stated or implied that the subject of the letter had read and approved it. In turn, such advocates often wrote on behalf of those who they assumed would be able to

regain their independence. Many did, even if they then returned episodically to request relief or to have a sojourn in the New Poor Law workhouse. How literacy levels were maintained in the newly joined public domain is unclear, though we know that at least some of the formerly dependent poor followed the example of Thomas Robinson of Preston, who left the relief lists to take up a factory job that would have required him to maintain and even improve his literacy levels.[21] Certainly there is little evidence for any part of our period that those who moved between dependence and independence and back again were any less literate when they took up the pen to write once more.

The fact is, then, that literacy levels were maintained and that many paupers and claimants were much more literate than we could ever have expected. In turn, they used linguistic registers which demonstrated both very significant continuity *and* change over the period 1750 to 1900. There is not the space here to survey the intricate detail of these registers. Some are obvious given the discussion above. Joseph Rowntree provoked poor people and paupers to write and even admitted to telling them what to write or what models of writing would be successful.[22] In similar fashion it is a short speculative step to suggest that the letter in figure 2.1 was written by one of the clerks who had fallen down the social scale to become an inmate of Chelsea workhouse, and that those who signed the letter also learned from its writing.[23] And of course the serial letter writers who do so much to bring the whole corpus to life inevitably conveyed their own knowledge of letter structure, rhetoric and linguistic register to other claimants, recipients and institutional inmates who wished to author their own texts, as I have already suggested. Indeed, many of them were like Frank Burge in the Poplar workhouse and explicitly acknowledged helping other people plan what to write even if he did not write the letters himself.[24] In short, there can be no doubt whatsoever that a common pot of linguistic knowledge on which the poor could draw existed and grew organically. Part of that growth was the emergence of completely new registers

including languages of disability, rights associated with trade union membership, necessary and proper relief, and registers rooted in the changing popular knowledge of medicine and science. We also see from the 1820s an increasingly important seam of language related to the sense that the conditions and experiences described in letters should, must and would be brought to the attention of the general public. The frequency with which writers under the New Poor Law sent in press cuttings suggests that this was not mere rhetoric. On the other hand, there are also startling absences. Luddism, Swing Riots, Chartism, Radicalism and their associated registers have the smallest footprint in the sample. More detailed consideration of 'networks of textual transmission' is clearly required.[25]

For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is the continuities in registers that are most striking. Three are of particular reach. Thus, under both the Old and New Poor Laws, our writers used the words of (and sometimes directly quoted) the responses they received from officials and the laws and public debates that framed their decisions.[26] In the pre-1834 system this sort of linguistic acquisition was common but not systematic. Thus, Elizabeth Lang wrote from London on 3 December 1812 to tell her parish that she had got 'the Last 2 pounds you sent Me which I Recd with Every Insult that Cold possable be offered' and went on to give a rebuttal of the doubts about her honesty in the letter that had accompanied that relief.[27] Sartory Gray likewise wrote from London, on 13 March 1796, to say that his hopes of becoming independent by putting two of his children to work in a starch warehouse had been 'Disapointed' because 'just after I got to Town their was a Bill pass in the House of Commons' which blocked the use of wheat for the making of starch until 1797.[28] In the post-1834 period, the establishment of centralised processes, central-local referencing systems, formal rules and regulations for the remit of workhouse and union employees, and massive publicity of the law and codified regulations of poor relief meant that the poor and their advocates systematically appropriated the linguistic registers of officialdom.[29] By way of

example, Wiliiam Leeson wrote to the Centre from Chelsea workhouse on 16 August 1866 and his 473 word letter was precisely wrapped in this sort of language. Complaining that he had been assaulted by the Master and a pauper servant, Leeson:

> don't know whether it is contrary to your rules, and regulations, to allow one pauper to domineer, over another, Gentlemen. I am 61 years of age, and I believe according to your Rules, I am entitled, to an aged diet and having applied to the master, which he refuses to transfer me without I Produce my Register of Birth. which does not lay in my power of doing.[30]

Leeson had not read the codified regulations of the Poor Law Board ('I believe') but his outline knowledge of their intent suggests that both knowledge and the associated linguistic register was in common circulation.

A second continuity is the use of registers rooted in the symbolism of religion and associated Christian philosophies including philanthropy. These were not static registers. The Christian opposition to slavery and the conditions of slavery wherever they might be found was a fleeting reference point in the pre-1834 letters but attained real purchase in the post-1840s as the poor were likened and likened themselves to black slaves, in un-Christian thraldom to employers, ratepayers and the state.[31] However, it was constellated, the linguistic motif of Christian values is a constant, starting with the phrasing of the title for this chapter. Here John Cuthbertson wrote from Daventry on 12 January 1755 to say that the overseer would likely hear from him 'No more for Now or Praps Never' given that he was about to enter the 'Vale of Tears and Shadow'.[32] Towards the end of our period, John Price, writing from Aberystwyth (Cardiganshire) on 6 May 1869, was even more explicit. Noting that he did not want to produce a text in the 'nature of the long winded-epistle more especially so as my penmanship is at times not *now* above legible' he nonetheless went on to write a 1,244

word excoriation of the Aberystwyth Board of Guardians.[33] This was framed at either end with Christian theology, philosophy and linguistic registers. Price warned the officials to 'take warning & not provoke the Lord to vengeance he has no pleasure in the Death of the wicked in proof of which he offers forgivness upon very easy terms –Belief or Faith Reformation or Repentance so why will you perish by doing the Devil's work'. Recalling God's will, the Christian logic of forgiveness, false prophets, and the importance of Christian philanthropy, he reminded the central authority that:

> It will not do for your Board or myself to go to war with Heaven for it is useless kicking against the Pricks _ God has commanded all to be kind & compassionate towards the poor _ What does your concience say does it answer in the affirmative or the negative does it say yes or no to you that you are or are not kind to them _ I hope Gentlemen as men & brethren that have hereafter to stand before that Judgement [Sect] of Christ & that your conscience is not drunk

Finally, and very importantly for this chapter Price noted that 'I am taught that the English Tongue is not confined to any particular class but is common property' and that they had 'no power to muzzle a British Subject'.[34] He had a right to write as a citizen of the State and a subject of God, but more than this he had an obligation to write in order to prevent tyranny. Lest we think that Price was unusual in knowing and employing these linguistic registers, almost every one of the 102 poor law unions dealt with here was home to a writer like him. Given the well-rehearsed decline in Anglicanism in the nineteenth-century, this long-term persistence in registers of the religious is notable and important.[35]

A third continuity can be observed in registers that signal the inevitability of dependence and a corresponding obligation to offer welfare. Historians of the later nineteenth-century have understood such registers as intimately connected to the

development of poverty lines and the changing location of fault for poverty, arguing that we see the emergence of a language of ‘honest poverty’ and universal citizenship.[36] We certainly see this in the corpus, as for instance in the case of Benjamin Handcock of Great Yarmouth (Norfolk) who on 15 June 1864 wrote to the Centre asking that they:

> please condescend to make an order that when the aged or afflicted cannot go in person for what guardians allow which is not enough to feed a dog that the person insult not honest & afflicted poverty its no use complaining against jack in office his is sure to injure the person complaining not with truth but [by] base insinuation[37]

In practice, however, even poor writers under the Old Poor Law framed in their writing a notion of honest poverty. They pointed in sustained fashion to prior contribution, the raising of independent children, the inevitability of declining labour power with age and the pervasiveness of disabling sickness or spousal death. Some even lectured or hectored the officials to whom they wrote, as did George Hales, writing from the Isle of Man to Brimpton (Berkshire) on 16 October 1827. He had been struggling for 16 months ‘in Consequence of the Death of my Wife who Died in Child Bed of her Twenty Second Child and left me with A large Family with out Any Employment to suport them Sir I Now Apply for Mentainence for five out of Seven the youngest’. Hales assumed relief would be inevitable, but ended with a strong assertion of the consequences of inaction, stating: ‘Now Sir I hope you will be so Good to Let me have An Answer by Return of Post that I may Know how to Act in my Present State if I Receive No Answer in three Posts I shall Embark my Family for Liverpool and Proceed Direct to my Parish’.[38] Well before the development of poverty lines, then, poor writers could elaborate a model of respectable citizenship (in this case raising 22 children) which deserved, indeed required in natural justice, a favourable response. It was part of what

we might understand as the 'writing knowledge' or discourse community of every pauper and poor applicant.

VALUING WRITTEN WORDS

It would be easy to continue the analysis of where the poor found words, but there is also a more important question that should tax us: why did the poor write as opposed to adopting some other means of communicating with the powerful? The answer is obvious if the writer lived many miles or counties away from those making decisions. Yet under the Old Poor Law some 75% of all writers lived within walking distance of the place to which they wrote.[39] The dynamics changed under the New Poor Law, since what the sample captures is letters to London many (but not all) written after other letters had been exchanged by the parties at the level of the poor law union. Nonetheless, it would have been possible for the poor to systematically seek advocates, to speak to journalists, or to send collective petitions as did ordinary people seeking redress for a variety of other reasons.[40] Yet the personal familiar letter remained the dominant form across our period. How did poor writers understand the act and process of writing? What value and meaning did they ascribe to the written word? The corpus provides a remarkably comprehensive answer to these questions.

Thus, and in line with much research on other forums of epistolary exchange, poor writers across the temporal and spatial dimensions of the letter sets associated writing with authenticity and honesty. When Mary Life of Clitheroe (Lancashire) wrote on 13 January 1830 she provided information on the condition of another pauper and ended her last sentence with the assertion that for 'the truth of this you may refer to Mr Grundys as he Know I shoud not write false'.[41] The sense that writing was conceived simultaneously as a signal of truth and that it also imposed an obligation to *tell* the truth is intriguing but by no means unique in

the sample. If we turn back to the eighteenth century then George Bradford also provides a similar exposition. He wrote a series of letters from London to Oxford in the 1750s and 1760s. His of 15 August 1754 apologised for giving 'you So Much Trouble'. Nonetheless, he hoped that Mr Brown the overseer would 'be So Good as to Excuse Me for if I was not in the Condition I Mention'd I should not have Been so Earnest In My Request But as I Told you In My Last that my Few Goods that I Have are Liable to be taken every Day for Rent that I owe and I Have made away with Every thing that Possible I can Spare to Subsist with'.[42] The earnest request of Bradford's prior letter was meant to convey desperation and precariousness and he assumed that the circumstances would speak for themselves both in that letter and in the one he now conveyed. As a postscript, he invited the overseer to visit him if the written word was insufficient.[43] Poor writers in the post-1834 New Poor Law also persistently implied or stated that the fact of their writing should convey honesty over and above the exact contents of the letter. Some, like William Josh Davies of Aberystwyth added further embellishment to convey honesty. His letter of 7 January 1869 offering a comprehensive list of charges (and supporting evidence) against Mr Griffiths the workhouse master, noted that he provided this information out of integrity and honesty. To give the letter extra weight he signed himself 'formerly Magd. Coll Cambridge' (once again giving a sense in which workhouses could contain highly literate members of the shamefaced poor) and told the Poor Law Board that:

> I have tried to remedy matters locally without troubling your honourable board but to no purpose I have therefore no alternative but a public Expose sense of shame alone will act upon some bad constitutions and habits & caustic [alone] will suit some cases – how I have been insulted & snubed I will not trouble you with my motives have been pure & I appeal to my God for the truth[44]

Here then God was the ultimate arbiter of the truth of the written form, an elegant elision of the linguistic registers and functions of writing already encountered in this chapter.

These claims to what we might style 'honest writing' overlapped with a second consistent motif: the claim to respectability as evidenced by the act of writing. This is subtly different from the familiar sense that literacy and respectability were linked in the popular imagination. Many writers knew that their literacy was what John Swales called 'shabby' in his letter of 18 March 1798.[45] Rather, poor people and paupers tried to suggest that their struggle to write in an unfamiliar or at least episodic medium or under particularly trying circumstances should be taken as a sign of that respectability.[46] Struggle codified character and character moved seamlessly into the respectable self. Thus, on 23 March 1888 Hannah Berry Pearson began a remarkable series of letters to the Local Government Board about her experiences in the Dorking (Surrey) workhouse. Here she 'do hereby humbley ask your protection and aid', melding together the opening of a petition with the content of a familiar letter. This spoke to her uneasiness with the medium (at least in terms of how to approach the Centre), but she noted that:

> My age is fifty nine years I am an honest sober and respectable woman having no home or friends to assist me, and as the law demands that I should find shelter I am compeled from time to time to seek a home in Dorking Union where if I dare to utter a complaint I am in danger of having a Magistrate and a doctor brought to me to try to catch me in my words in private in order to intimidate me with a threat to send me to a lunatic asylum, (where I may be kept for years at an unnecessary expence to the country.[47]

Deploying familiar rhetorical tropes of feminine dependency and a knowledge of the law (she was in danger of being classed as a vagrant), Pearson claimed to be the subject of persecution in a determined attempt to drive her mad. Ultimately, though, she was respectable and the

letter contrasts the competing authority of her private oral words and the now public written transcript.

Most writers also assumed or (sometimes) stated that they wrote because the written word carried weight and reach, something we see clearly in Pearson's story. Post-1834, it mattered that a poor writer knew the correct form of address for the Poor Law Commissioners in London, that they knew to quote reference numbers in their replies to central authorities, and that they could quote or paraphrase the regulations, orders and processes that governed local poor relief. Whether the central authorities or the local poor law guardians thought in the same way is doubtful, but this is not the point. A letter to the Centre was more than words; it carried some sense of formality and expectation.[48] Thus, Robert Hawkins wrote to the Poor Law Board from Faversham (Kent) on 8 May 1851 to say: 'Kind sirs I have been persuaded to right these few lines to you hoping to receive your kind advice upon a very important buseness as concerns myself'.[49] He then outlined a separation from his wife and asked under what circumstances he might avoid prison for not supporting her. His friends (he was persuaded) and Hawkins himself invested the Centre with ultimate authority and expected a written and authoritative judgement from them which would provide a waymarker in his turbulent relationship. It is a short step from cases such as this to a sense that even episodic or intermittent 'wins' for poor writers were enough to sustain a view that letter writing gave the poor a formal place in the business of poor relief. In the pre-1834 Old Poor Law there was not of course a central authority, but this did not lessen the belief of the poor in the authority bestowed by writing. These authors quoted precedent, imposed time limits for replies (as we saw above), and asserted that the written record should act as a warning in the case that inaction resulted in spiralling parish bills or untimely deaths.

Some of these themes are familiar from the epistolarity of other social groups. Rather less obvious is that the struggle for literacy we plainly see in many written texts masks the

fact that some poor people *enjoyed* writing. They valued the act in and of itself and interpreted the ability and opportunity to write as a protection to selfhood at a time when they found themselves under the authority of poor law officials, confined to workhouses, or managing on what were always residual welfare payments. Writing was in other words understood as a creative act. We see these emotional infusions on a number of levels, including constructing the inability to write or the inability to get writing materials as 'torture'[50], adding literary and personal flourishes to letters, setting an agenda for reform, rehearsing a personal story at length or recounting a history of written engagement with the public sphere.[51] These observations apply across the whole period covered here but are wonderfully captured in the 5,459 words of John Watson, encountered earlier writing from Sheffield in the late 1870s. His opening letter of 4 December 1878 noted that he had initially been admitted to the vagrant ward but 'had no opportunity of testifying to the correctness of Mr Greenwood's general observations', a literary reference to the sensational expose of life in a tramp ward by a Victorian journalist.[52] He then went on across several letters to set out his personal history as an inventor of numerous devices, illustrate a wide awareness of public debate and above all to embellish texts with his own poetry, which he claimed had been subject to wide perusal and approval by the public elite, starting with these lines:

> "Big things have little things upon their backs that bite 'em
>
> "But little things have lesser things and so ad infinitum
>
> "The rats came in nor wanted stairs
>
> "Yes they came to act as preyers[53]

In every sense then his writing was a creative act, one which embodied, captured and maintained a public selfhood in uncertain times.

CONSTRUCTING AND CONCLUDING

Thus far, this chapter has dealt in the currency of individual stories drawn from a vast dataset and which embody or emblematise core approaches to the act and understanding of writing. It is, however, possible to go further and through close and persistent reading identify several models which locate and crystalise the wider culture of writing by the dependent and marginal poor. These are set out in table 2.1. Of course elements of the different categories could appear in the same letter and repetitively over a whole letter set. Nonetheless, almost all Old and New Poor Law letters can be said to have a dominant approach. This is perhaps exemplified by the letter of 16 year old Charles Smith, written from Newbury (Berkshire) on 28 April 1866. He outlined a series of abuses by the master of the workhouse and noted that he had begun to draft a letter, in pencil, to the Chair of the Board of Guardians Mr Eyre. The Master and Porter had seen him writing and:

> I was going to bed and the Master asked me what I had in my pockets I told him I had some Paper – he told the Porter to see what I had – they were both together. The Porter pulled out all I had and took them away from me. No one told me to write this Letter I meant to send it to Mr. Eyres I thought it was best to write first before I spoke to the Guardians about the Master's conduct. I did not sign the Letter as I had not quite finished it. I bought the Paper to write on. I bought 4 sheets and gave three of them away to some of the Men in the Workhouse.[54]

Smith's story contains elements of writing as habit, last resort, and emotional act, but it is primarily an example of writing for defence against tyranny.

Table 2.1: Models of the writing cultures of the poor

Model/typology	Expression
Writing as habit	Carrying paper; scribing; advice to others; apologies for something other than a ‘normal’ hand; references to prior authorship; lack of apology for writing.
Writing as last resort	Registers of exhausted possibility; constructing officials as the last hope; apologies for writing quality; being advised to write; calls for rescue.[55]
Writing as emotional act	Literary references and flourishes; personal story at length; direct or implied registers of emotion to frame the letter or the act of writing; notions of selfhood; demands for justice; fear; sadness.
Writing as painful necessity	Lack of choice; the physical and emotional turmoil of writing or completing a letter; submission; shame.
Writing as precaution/investment	Desire to have written judgements or decisions; forewarning of future problems; written word as authoritative; requirement to enter into correspondence; the value of writing versus other forms of communication and in terms of time, work or postage foregone.

Writing as a symbol	Text embodying selfhood, identity, respectability, honesty, rationality and knowledge.
Writing as defence	Defence of self against local authority; defence against tyranny; defence of others; the singularity of the writers and her/his circumstances; outlining costs of inaction.

There is not the space here to explore these models further – though the examples encountered already in this chapter can slot neatly into the schema – but we do need to reflect on the wider context. Thus, it goes without saying that for our understanding of the Old and New Poor Laws, the fact that the poor wrote or encoded[56], had an understanding of the meaning and purpose of writing and invested real significance in the act and record of writing, mattered. But their activity also has wider implications. The cultures of writing outlined in table 2.1 encourage us to think of the dependent poor as active citizens, and well before the later nineteenth-century when many historians have come to see citizenship as concept and practice extended to the poorer sorts. Equally, we can see that the dependent and marginal poor framed multi-level expectations of the state and that as the information state expanded our writers were able to extend, codify and rationalise those expectations and duties. And of course we can see that even in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the poor were often surprisingly literate and able to experience epistolary culture in emotional and creative, as well as simply functional, terms. Above all, these letters encourage us to look again at the way in which dependence affected the sense of self for those who had been independent and would mostly go onto independence again.[57] Quietly, if not altogether

expertly, the poor created what Martyn Lyons styles a 'rich subterranean world of ordinary writings' with the intent of locating and challenging their place in wider matrices of cultural and social power.[58]

Notes

[1] Steven King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s-1830s*, London (McGill-Queens University Press), 2019.

[2] Natalie Carter and Steven King, '"I think we ought not to acknowledge them [paupers] as that encourages them to write": The administrative state, power and the Victorian pauper', *Social History*, 46: 2, 2021, pp.117-44.

[3] On this benchmark see Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe c.1860-1920*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press), 2013, p.10.

[4] King, *Writing the Lives*; King et al, *'In Their Own Write': A New Poor Law History From Below*, London (McGill-Queens University Press), 2022.

[5] Held respectively with Andreas Gestrich of the German Historical Institute, and Paul Carter of The National Archives (TNA).

[66] England and Wales constituted legally and structurally a single welfare system. Scotland was partially aligned in 1845 and only fully in 1905.

[7] Cumbria Archive Service (CAS), WPR19-7-6-13-9. On qualities of literacy see Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World*, Basingstoke (Palgrave), 201, p.179.

[8] TNA MH12/2098, 12526/A/1846.

[9] See Thomas Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731-1837*, Oxford (Oxford University Press), 2001, pp.1-52.

[10] Carter and King, '"I think we ought not to acknowledge them"', pp.119-20.

[11] On this process see Lyons, *The Writing Culture*, p.48.

[12] Elaine Brown, 'Gender, occupation, illiteracy and the urban economic environment: Leicester 1760-1890', *Urban History*, 31: 2, 2004, pp.191-209; Ros Crone, 'Educating the labouring poor in nineteenth century Suffolk', *Social History*, 43: 2, 2018, pp.161-85; and

David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press), 1989.

[13] See most recently Alannah Tomkins, 'Poor law institutions through working-class eyes: Autobiography, emotion, and family context, 1834-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 60: 2, 2021, pp.285-309.

[14] City of Westminster Archive Centre B1350-9.

[15] This issues carries on post-1834. The magistrate Edward Coke wrote to the Centre from Mansfield on 5 March 1846 and noted that 'I marked my letter "Private" because it was, like this, a mere hurried scrawl and quite unfit for an office file'. TNA MH12/9361/238, 3296/B/1846. The observation that class, status or role did not always correlate with literacy is consistently made in other European contexts. See for instance Kaisa Kavranen, 'Did writing lead to social mobility? Case studies of ordinary writers in nineteenth-century Finland', in Martyn Lyons, ed., *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives: Writing Practices in 19th and early 20th Century Europe*, Bern (Peter Lang), 2007, p.61.

[16] TNA MH 12/15488, 84988/1882. Patrick Joyce, 'The people's English: Language and class in England 1840-1920', in Peter Burke and Roy Porter, eds., *Language, Self and Society: A Social History of Language*, Cambridge (Polity Press), 1991, p.169, argues that writing was used as a tool to construct deservingness.

[17] On delegated writing see Emily Pyle, 'Peasant strategies for obtaining state aid: A study of petitions during World War I', *Russian History*, 24: 1, 1997, p.43, and Martyn Lyons, Sofia Kotilainen and Ilkka Mäkinen, 'The function and purpose of vernacular literacy: An Introduction', *Journal of Social History*, 49: 2, 2015, p.286.

[18] Rothersthrope Parish Chest; TNA MH12/15485, 83044/1878. Both writers draw attention to the fact that writing required concentration, something which is now well established more

widely. See Ivor Timmis, *The Discourse of Desperation: Late 18th and Early 19th Century Letters by Paupers, Prisoners and Rogues*, London (Routledge), 2020.

[19] Northamptonshire Record Office, 261p, Overseers Correspondence of Peterborough St John Parish.

[20] Steven King and Peter Jones, 'Testifying for the poor: Epistolary advocates for the poor in nineteenth century England and Wales', *Journal of Social History*, 49: 4, 2016, pp.784-807.

[21] CAS WPR19-7-6-21-25.

[22] Peter Jones and Steven King, *Pauper Voices, Public Opinion and Workhouse Reform in Mid-Victorian England – Bearing Witness*, Basingstoke (Palgrave), 2020, chapter 3.

[23] This seems a universal observation. See for instance Arun Kumar, 'Letters of the labouring poor: the art of letter writing in colonial India', *Past and Present*, 246: 1, 2020, pp.149-90.

[24] Jones and King, *Pauper Voices*, chapter 4.

[25] Matylda Włodarczyk and Irma Taavitsainen, 'Introduction: Historical (socio) pragmatics at present', *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 18: 2, 2017, pp.159-74, p.165. Contrast these absences with Bart De Sutter and Maarten Van Ginderachter, 'Working-class voices from the late nineteenth century: "Propaganda Pence" in a Socialist paper in Ghent', *History Workshop Journal*, 69: 1, 2010, pp.133-45.

[26] As ordinary people did in other contexts. See Ian McNeely, *The Emancipation of Writing. German Civil Society in the Making, 1790s-1820s*, Berkeley (University of California Press) 2003, pp.13-128.

[27] West Sussex Record Office (WCRO), Par.206-37-8-35, Westbourne Overseers' Correspondence.

[28] Ibid. This was because of widespread famine in the 1790s.

[29] On borrowed language see Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing*, pp.75-82.

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[30] TNA MH12/6994, 34141/1866. The emphasis here was added in a different ink *after* the letter had been completed or sent.

[31] As for instance did John Smith, writing to the Poor Law Board about the things he had seen when a resident of the Liverpool workhouse in November 1865. TNA MH 12/5978, 41230/1865. We also see references to monastic slavery.

[32] Rothersthorpe Parish Chest.

[33] My italics. The sense that he was increasingly unable to write is centrally conveyed. On apologies for writing more generally see Lyons, *The Writing Culture*, p.35.

[34] MH12/15801, 28020/E/1869, 6 May 1869. This evidence sits well with that of Joyce, 'The people's English'.

[35] For an overview see Keith Snell and Paul Ell, *Rival Jerusalem's: The Geography of Victorian Religion*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press), 2000.

[36] Marjorie Levine-Clark, *Unemployment, Welfare and Masculine Citizenship: So Much Honest Poverty in Britain 1870-1930*, Basingstoke (Palgrave), 2015.

[37] TNA MH 12/8640, 24531/1864.

[38] Berkshire Record Office, D/P 26/18/1, Brimpton Overseers' Correspondence.

[39] Peter Jones and Steven King, *Navigating the Old English Poor Law: The Kirkby Lonsdale Letters, 1809-1836*, Oxford (Oxford University Press), 2020, pp.1-27.

[40] See Mike Sanders, 'From "technical" to "cultural" literacy. Reading and writing within the British Chartist movement', in Ann-Catrine Edlund, Timothy Ashplant and Anna Kuismin, eds., *Reading and Writing from Below. Exploring the Margins of Modernity*, Umeå (Royal Skyttean Society), 2016, pp.285-300.

[41] CAS, WPR/19/7/6/23/27.

[42] Oxfordshire Record Office, PAR 207/5/A7/6, Oxford St Martin Overseers' Correspondence.

[43] While Lyons, 'Writing upwards', p.324, suggests that attending in person or being seen 'was a way of validating' the written word of the weak, in our sample the poor clearly and persistently constructed the written word as having primacy over being seen. Tonally, many of the writers sought to convey hurt when their written text was met with disbelief.

[44] TNA MH12/15801, 1607/1869.

[45] Rothersthorpe Parish Chest.

[46] This has also been observed for other socio-economic groups; Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing*, p.95.

[47] TNA, MH 12/12231, 29615/1888.

[48] For context see Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing*, pp.103-05.

[49] TNA, MH12/5058, 20004/1851.

[50] TNA, MH 12/15488, 84438/1882.

[51] TNA MH 12/14691, 44795/1882.

[52] See Jones and King, *Pauper Voices*, chapter 2.

[53] TNA, MH 12/15485, 83044/1878.

[54] TNA MH12/261, 16268/1866.

[55] The latter phrase is that of Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and citizens: Public letter writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 55: 1, 1996, p.86.

[56] On encoding see Marina Dossena, 'The study of correspondence: theoretical and methodological issues', in Marina Dossena and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, eds., *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*, Amsterdam (John Benjamins), pp.18-20.

[57] For an important discussion of imposed identity see Christophe Pons, 'The mystical and the modern. The uses of ordinary writings in identity construction by Icelandic spiritual mediums', in Lyons, *Ordinary Writings*, pp.85-100.

[58] Martyn Lyons, 'A new history from below? The writing culture of ordinary people in Europe', *History Australia*, 7: 3. 2010, p.4. See also Lyons *The Writing Culture*, p.3, 35, and 67.