

A Tale of a Table:
Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, and the
Legacy of Thomas Carlyle

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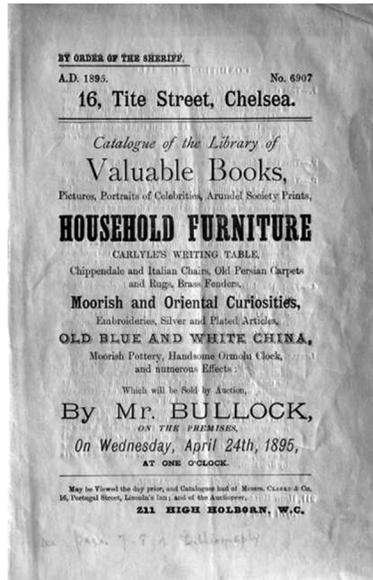
The following essay is a version of a plenary address given at the Carlyle Conference, University of Edinburgh, 10–12 July 2012.

THE STORY BEGINS WITH AN ENTRY IN AN 1895 AUCTION catalogue for 16 Tite Street, Chelsea—Oscar Wilde’s residence. The auction was part of the bankruptcy sale occasioned by the costs of the infamous trials that resulted in his imprisonment for gross indecency. The catalogue entry reads as follows: “Lot number 171: An Antique Mahogany Writing Table, with 2 flaps, rising slope, and draw-out desk, fitted—formerly the property of Thomas Carlyle, the Historian” (Munby 386). In addition, the auction catalogue prominently features “Carlyle’s Writing Table” on its cover, clearly as a selling point. The listing raises two important questions: first, how did Oscar Wilde get the desk, and second, why would he of all people particularly want Carlyle’s writing desk?

Each biography of Wilde, from the earliest to the most recent, claims roughly the same thing: Wilde purchased the desk sometime around the time he moved to Tite Street with his new wife Constance (so presumably in 1883 or thereabouts).¹

¹ See R. H. Sherard, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1911); Hesketh Pearson, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Wit* (1946); Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (1987), and Thomas Wright, *Built of Books: How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde* (2008).

According to the biographers, the writing table was the one used by Carlyle while writing *The French Revolution*, and Wilde told friends he hoped it would inspire him to write. He kept the table in the first floor study (where he actually did his writing) rather than in the library on the top-floor of the house. There is no information as to where Wilde bought the desk—no letters mentioning the purchase—no bill of sale. Not surprisingly, however, the shocking dispersal of Wilde’s goods at the Tite Street sale and the notoriety of his name in the years immediately following his trials meant that many things—letters, manuscripts, books, etc.—were dispersed and some irretrievably lost. There is no bill of sale from the Tite Street auction either, so there is no way to know who purchased the table, or where it went.



Cover of the Tite Sale Catalog, 24 April 1895

In fact, Carlyle’s writing table remains at his house today because it was never sold, and thus never purchased by Oscar Wilde. In the codicil to his Will (1878), Carlyle revoked the gift to his niece Mary Aitken Carlyle of the table “in the Drawing Room at No. 24 Cheyne Row” and bequeathed it instead to

Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, whom he had named, along with his brother John Aitken Carlyle and James Anthony Froude, as one of his three executors. Carlyle's justification demonstrates both his high opinion of Fitzjames Stephen and the desk's importance to him: "I know that he will accept it as a distinguished mark of my esteem. He knows that it belonged to my honoured Father in Law and his daughter. And that I have written all my Books upon it except only Schiller and that for the fifty years and upwards that are now past I have considered it among the most precious of my possessions" (Froude, *My Relations* 78). According to Lin Skipplings, the curator of Carlyle's House, after Fitzjames Stephen's death in 1894, the table was given by his daughter to the London Library, who then lent the table to the House museum, where it remains. But there was another table, one belonging to Alexander and Mary Carlyle that was disposed of while they were living in the house with their uncle. Alexander Carlyle writes in his essay for the Carlyle House Catalogue (1896) that the back bedroom "was furnished as their private sitting room in 1879, by Mr. and Mrs. Alex. Carlyle; and that certain of their furnishings (an etching table and a large easy chair) had to be disposed of when Carlyle required to use the room as his bedroom [1880]. A dealer bought these for a few shillings, a condition being that he should not sell them as having been Carlyle's, who had never used them, nor scarcely seen them. Notwithstanding this, it appears they have been sold as such; and at the present time, a gentleman in London is rather vehemently asserting his possession of 'Carlyle's writing table and easy chair'" (58). It is not clear whether this "gentleman" was Wilde (already in prison), the dealer who had purchased the table from the Tite Street auction, or another person. But Alexander Carlyle's account certainly suggests a provenance for the table Wilde purchased in 1883.

The entire historical question of the table purchased by Oscar Wilde—where it came from, where it went—speaks to a central Carlylean concept: the troubled relation of "truth" to "facts," or more precisely, the desire for the former coupled with the near impossibility of ever arriving at a complete retrieval of the latter. In his essay "On History" (1830) Carlyle offers a useful exemplar for the problem of retrieving facts, "[t]he old story of

Sir Walter Raleigh's looking from his prison-window, on some street tumult, which afterwards three witnesses reported in three different ways" (*Historical Essays* 6).² The story informs an attempt to understand Wilde's acquisition of Carlyle's "writing" table. There is no actual report from him (thus, no report of the "historical Transaction"); there are several witnesses who saw the table in Wilde's study and heard him speak about it, but none of them provides information that confirms the table's authenticity. What information the witnesses do give—generally years after the fact—is conflicting.

The only concrete evidence is the apparently small fact of the Tite Street sale catalogue. But, as Carlyle declares in "Biography" (1832), "how impressive the smallest historical fact may become, as contrasted with the grandest fictitious event; what an incalculable force lies for us in this consideration: the Thing which I here hold imaged in my mind did actually occur" (54). The appearance of the table in the Tite catalogue can be viewed a "King Lackland" sort of moment: "For King Lackland was there, verily he" (*Past and Present* 44). There was an actual table that could be advertised, bought, and sold. The table was a fact. But the truth of the table is more problematic, and not simply because it was not the table Wilde thought it was. The table throws the light of "truth" on Oscar Wilde and his perception of Thomas Carlyle and his identity as a writer and thinker even if the table at which he sat was not Carlyle's actual writing table. Given his delight in forgeries such as Thomas Chatterton's poetry, or the famous forged "portrait" of Willie Hughes in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," it seems reasonable to conclude that Wilde would have enjoyed knowing he had purchased the wrong desk. As he claims in "The Critic as Artist," "The one duty that we owe to history is to rewrite it" (147).

Another person intrigued both by the table and the re-writing of history now enters the tale: Virginia Woolf, who like Wilde, shares a curious intersection with Carlyle's table. Born Virginia Adelaide Stephen, she was daughter to Sir Leslie Stephen, and thus niece to Fitzjames Stephen, inheritor of the table. Unlike his elder brother, Leslie Stephen had less patience

² John Rosenberg insightfully discusses this passage in detail; see 43–46.

with Carlyle's querulous conversation and dogmatic views. But it gives one pause to think that, had Leslie Stephen been a bit less sensitive to Carlyle's gruff manner,³ it might have been him rather than Fitzjames who inherited the table. Virginia (heir to her father's books and study) rather than her cousin, who donated the table to the London Library. Or perhaps, like Wilde, she might have chosen to keep it and use it as her writing table.

And so the tale of the table takes a rather Shandean, cock-and-bull turn, since neither Wilde nor Woolf owned the actual table upon which Carlyle wrote. And yet for them both, the writing table—along with the house and the soundproof room in which it stood—looms large in their respective psyches. Wilde's purchase of and evident pride in owning the table and his admiration for Carlyle as a writer (particularly shown in his fondness for quoting *The French Revolution* at length) establishes his strong psychological connection to the table. For Woolf, the table, especially in the context of its soundproof room, suggests her associations of it to the act of writing. In 1897, at age 15, she visited the newly opened museum with her father, who had served as the vocal chair of the Carlyle House Purchase Committee.⁴ The record of the visit in her journal suggests her fascination with Carlyle and the act of writing: "we saw the drawing room, and dining room, and Cs sound proof room, with double walls—His writing table, and his pens, and scraps of manuscripts" (*Passionate Apprentice* 24). The table, for both Wilde and Woolf, serves as a metaphor for an important set of inheritances they received from Carlyle: their playful yet deep

³ In 1874, Leslie Stephen had a falling out with Carlyle over a misunderstanding about a visitor to Cheyne Row. After the incident (which seems to have affected Stephen's sensitivity more than Carlyle's), Stephen wrote to Charles Eliot Norton: "I did feel, and do feel, that Carlyle . . . talked to me as he would not have talked to any one whom he liked. In short, I am convinced—or rather know—that he disapproves of my writing, and thinks me an irreverent creature; and I think further that he does not like me personally. . . . I don't mean to go on seeing a man whom I admire and respect as much as ever but who would—I feel sure—rather have my room than my company" (qtd. in Maitland 249).

⁴ In a letter to the editor of *The Times*, 31 December 1894, Leslie Stephen writes movingly about the house and argues that it embodies "the most graphic portraiture of a man of genius that has ever appeared in our language" (6).

concern with the distinction between facts and truth, their attentiveness to the gaps of history, and their desire to place history in the service of life rather than leaving it to languish in a Hades ruled by Dryasdust.

The prevalent critical assumption has been that Wilde and Woolf largely rejected Carlyle's social and historical visions—Wilde by gleefully embodying the dandy aesthetic that Carlyle mocked in *Sartor Resartus* and Woolf by persisting with what Marie Laniel describes as “her lifelong arguments with the prophet” (118) and her “challenge [to] his conception of history” (125). But Laniel miscalculates the value of Carlyle's historiographical method to Woolf's approach to history, which is not, as Laniel argues, a “direct contradiction” to her “model of historical writing” (126). The writing table—as artifact and symbol—offers a convenient figurative locus for understanding these intersections.

Woolf engages and builds upon Carlyle's historiographical method by exploring the relation of facts to truth, and in particular of the ways that facts may be interpreted in multiple ways, much like Sir Walter Raleigh at the window. Truth emerges, according to Woolf, precisely through multiplicity: “But these [historical] facts are not like the facts of science—once . . . discovered, always the same. They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times changes. . . . Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking-glasses at odd corners” (“Art of Biography” 194–95). The key, for Woolf—as for Carlyle—is to find those “true facts” that give insight: “When and where did the real man live; how did he look; did he wear laced boots or elastic-sided” (“Art of Biography” 196). She asks almost exactly the questions that Carlyle the historian asks of Jocelin the chronicler: “O Jocelin, what did he say, what did he do; how looked he, lived he;—at the very lowest, what coat or breeches had he on? Jocelin is obstinately silent” (*Past and Present* 43). But, as Woolf and Carlyle both insist, a minor detail, artifact, or “insignificant-looking passage” will point towards a deeper truth, which Carlyle finds in the hob-nailed shoes that reveal a “genuine flesh-and-blood Rustic of the year 1651” (“Biography” 55), and which Woolf finds in the lack of indoor plumbing at 24 Cheyne Row that helps her to understand a marriage: “Both husband and wife had genius; they

loved each other; but what can genius and love avail against bugs and tin baths and pumps in the basement?" ("Great Men's Houses" 35).⁵ The purchase of a writing table by an up-and-coming young writer might be exactly the sort of detail that Carlyle and Woolf would scrutinize to flesh out the living truth mysteriously hidden under a mountain of facts.

Woolf also explores that which is missing in the account of history, gaps that Carlyle writes of in "On History Again" (1833): "History is the Letter of Instructions, which the old generations write and posthumously transmit to the new. . . . [I]t is the only articulate communication . . . which the Past can have with the Present. . . . [Yet] our 'Letter of Instructions' comes to us in the saddest state; falsified, blotted out, torn, lost and but a shred of it in existence; this too so difficult to read or spell" (*Historical Essays* 104–05). In Woolf's comic epic "biography" of Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* (1928), she clearly evokes Carlyle's idea of the "Letter of Instructions": "Often the paper was scorched a deep brown in the middle of the most important sentence. Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred years, there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through. We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination" (119). This is not simply an interesting coincidence; it is an instance of Woolf applying Carlyle's methods as she tries to read and to re-create the past from the gaps and the holes in the "*Palimpsest*" (*Historical Essays* 8) of history, as Carlyle calls it in "On History." Far from rejecting Carlyle's approach to the past, as Laniel argues, Woolf's historiographical method in *Orlando* forms an innovative combination of biography, history, and fiction. Woolf uses Carlylean tools to create a "true" portrait of Sackville-West and by extension a "true" history of women writers in England, despite the fact that many of her "facts" are

⁵ David Sorensen notes that Carlyle's interest in seemingly insignificant details about the ordinary people who populate history is a view he inherits from Edward Gibbon ("Miraculous Thing" 39). Woolf also was deeply influenced by Gibbon and shares with Carlyle the concern with the ordinary as it surfaces into the extraordinary.

fictions.⁶ Carlyle mined deeply into the relationship of truth and imagination in works such as *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution*.⁷ In this light Woolf's modernist innovation becomes a thinly veiled appropriation of Carlylean methodology.⁸

Throughout her works, Woolf returns to the image of a light-beam—what she calls the light-house “stroke” (*To The Lighthouse* 63). C. Anita Tarr associates this beam correctly as the beam of genius that Woolf saw in Carlyle and men of his generation. The beam of light, however, can also be viewed as Carlylean metaphor that resides at the center of his historiographical method—Woolf places it the heart of her method as well. Carlyle utilizes the metaphor in various places in multiple ways as the “light-gleam” (“Biography” 57) or “magical speculum” or “camera lucida” or “magic mirror” (*Past and Present* 46, 47, 48): an illumination that with sudden and startling incisiveness reveals something true about the past that we in the present absolutely need to know despite (and perhaps because of) the deplorable state of the past’s “Letter of Instructions.” It is the experience of gestalt-like awareness that allows the viewer of the present to see in an apparently non sequitur moment of the past as “a light-gleam, which instantaneously excites the mind, and urges it to complete the picture, and evolve the meaning thereof for itself” (“Biography” 57)

For both Woolf and Carlyle, the light-gleam moment represents the moment of insight that resurrects a dead past returned to life by a fleeting yet penetrating glance. Most notably, it is in the recurring phrases “there he is” or “there she is” or

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of how Carlyle himself uses the techniques of fiction to create a vibrant sense of the immediate moment in history, specifically in *The French Revolution*; see H. M. Daleski, 62–72.

⁷ Sorensen identifies “On History” as the essay in which Carlyle “defined the connection between intellect and imagination in the recovery of the past” (“Natural Supernaturalism” 446).

⁸ Beverly Taylor discusses Carlyle’s innovations in *The French Revolution* and other historical writings, noting that most nineteenth-century historians and philosophers would have “deemed the phrase ‘historical imagination’ essentially incongruous,” and Carlyle’s methods opened him up to substantial critique as a historian. But, as she further notes, Carlyle is in the vanguard of the emerging “Victorian historical imagination—which produced not only informed fictive recreations of the past, but also imaginative visions of the present and future” (29).

“there she sat” that both Woolf and Carlyle use as the moment of “capture.” Carlyle’s description of Jocelin is emblematic of the method: “Here he is; and in his hand a magical speculum, much gone to rust indeed, yet in fragments still clear; wherein the marvelous image of his existence does still shadow itself, though fitfully, and as with an intermittent light!” (*Past and Present* 42). Similarly, Mrs. Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse* (1927) is raised from the dead as “the wave of white” from the lighthouse goes “over the window pane” and reveals her presence to Lily: “Mrs. Ramsay—it was part of her perfect goodness—sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat” (202). The fact of Mrs. Ramsay’s present has little to do with the truth of it. Consistently throughout Woolf’s literary-historical essays, she uses the metaphor of the light-gleam to create moments of vision and insight—with such varied figures as Christina Rossetti, Emily Brontë, and John Keats.

If Woolf utilizes the Carlylean beam of light as the interlocutor between fact and truth, then applying her method to the tale of the table reveals some interesting and unexpected insights. Wilde does not tend to be associated with historiography, but his writings continually explore the relation of the past to the present. In addition, like Woolf, he playfully contrasts truth and fact in the similarly paradoxical context of history and narrative in such works as “The Decay of Lying” (1891) and “The Critic as Artist.” As an essayist, Wilde seems to be more interested in what ought to be true rather than adhering to what he calls a “monstrous worship of facts” (“The Decay of Lying” 77). Whether something actually happened matters little to Wilde. Take, for example, the story of Wilde being asked by a New York reporter whether he really did walk down Piccadilly with an aesthetic lily in his hand: “To have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph” (qtd. in Holland 3).

If Wilde dismisses the relevance of fact, he does still seek a deeper truth. In “The Decay of Lying” Wilde draws attention to the tension between truth and fact, and he focuses on how facts can sometimes—often, he suggests—distract from the truth. Playfully, he evokes Carlyle’s name to support his argument that historiography at its best has always drawn on lies:

[I]n the works of Herodotus, who, in spite of the shallow and ungenerous attempts of modern sciolists to verify his history, may justly be called the “Father of Lies”; in the published speeches of Cicero and the biographies of Suetonius . . . ; in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*; in Napoleon’s despatches, and in the works of our own Carlyle, whose French Revolution is one of the most fascinating historical novels ever written, facts are either kept in their proper subordinate position, or else entirely excluded on the general ground of dullness. (87)

Wilde’s argument about Carlyle’s accuracy remains important to the continuing debate about his status as a historian⁹ Carlyle himself reminds his readers through the figure of the historian “Dryasdust” that the living truth about the past all too easily becomes sucked dry by a pedantic attention to facts, facts, and more facts. The mountain of facts, what Carlyle calls the “huge piles of mouldering wreck” (*Cromwell* 2) that Dryasdust uncovers in the basement of the British Museum runs counter to the claims of living history. The “chilling touch” of facts at work in the basement of the British Museum reflects Wilde claim that we “have sold our birthright for a mess of fact” (“Decay of Lying” 83).

The “chilling touch” is potentially present in all artifacts associated with the dead, tables and otherwise. Accordingly, Carlyle, Wilde, and Woolf all embody an uneasy fascination with the relics of the dead—particularly people who they regarded as heroes. For example, Carlyle eagerly sought relics in 1842 from Cromwell’s Battle of Naseby (14 June 1645). Carlyle’s friend Edward FitzGerald, who lived near the battlefield, kindly visited the excavations and sent Carlyle teeth and bullets. Carlyle wrote on 29 September to FitzGerald: “There is a horrible impressiveness in these jaw-teeth; a stern matter of fact that there was a Fight at Naseby. . . . To think that this

⁹ Mark Cumming offers a definition of Carlyle’s understanding of “facts” that may intersect with the more serious side of Wilde’s intent: “For Carlyle, every event occurs at the conflux of two eternities, the past and the present, and every object is an emblem of the entire universe. Consequently, no fact exists except in its relation to all other facts. . . . Given Carlyle’s conception of history as the imaginative reconstruction of fragmentary evidence into a more complete whole, error and misapprehension are inevitable products of its creation” (56–57).

grinder chewed its breakfast on the 14th of June 1645, and had no more eating to do in the world, or service farther there—till now, to lie in my drawer, and be a horror! (*CL* 15: 108; *CLO*).¹⁰ Wilde too was keen to possess relics of the literary-historical sort, as is perhaps obvious from his purchase of what he thought was Carlyle's desk. Besides the desk, he owned one poem manuscript of Keats, given to him by Keats' niece.¹¹ Through her parents, Woolf possessed any number of literary relics of famous authors, including photographs, letters, and autograph copies of books. She also shared Carlyle and Wilde's fascination with such relics, and she enjoyed visiting (and writing about) such literary shrines as the Carlyles' house and Haworth Parsonage, the Brontës' home in Yorkshire.¹²

Although they sought to possess relics, all three were ambivalent about their desire to own them. Carlyle, for example, uneasily conceded that the artist in history is often little more than a grave-digger and a vampire feeding on the dead. Such brands of possession also are emblematic of the presumptiveness of the living towards the helpless dead—the dead no longer can deny the people to whom they undoubtedly would have shut the door to in life. When Woolf visited Carlyle's house again, in 1909, she imagined the person behind the looks in the pictures of Jane Welsh Carlyle on the wall: "There were portraits of Mrs. Carlyle which seemed to look out quizzically upon the strangers as though she asked what they really found to look at: did they think that her house and her had been like that? Would she have tolerated them for a second?" ("Carlyle's House" 3). At the Brontë museum in Yorkshire, Woolf was enthralled at seeing Charlotte Brontë's dress and shoes, and yet found herself uncertain in her reaction:

But the most touching case—so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze—is that which contains the little personal relics, the dresses and shoes

¹⁰ John Ulrich discusses in detail Carlyle's fascination with the 1842 excavation of the Naseby battlefield and contends that his "fetishization" of the relics stemmed not only from their power to evoke the past, but also from their power to evoke its loss (38–40).

¹¹ See Ellmann 203.

¹² Thomas Lewis notes that for Woolf, "objects (a book, a house, a chair) and individuals carry the facts of their history with them" (193).

of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. Her shoes and thin muslin dress have outlived her. ("Haworth, November 1904," *Essays* 1: 7)

The problem with material artifacts, for Woolf, is that they distract the viewer from the "greatness" of the person in question, just as they reduce the person simply to a body that once touched or used the items left behind—shoes, dress, teeth, leather pouch, desk. The strangeness of simultaneous absence and presence—the same strangeness that unsettled Carlyle with the Naseby teeth—becomes a sort of parlor game that shifts the emphasis to what the person owned or wore and away from what they actually did that made them worth remembering in the first place.

Relics also raise the question of who owns the legacy of the dead. Is it the person who can afford to pay high prices at auction? Or the lucky person who inherits or finds? Or perhaps it is the person who writes the biography? Wilde had sharp words for the "brawlers of the auction mart" (*Poems and Poems in Prose* 165–66), as he calls them in his sonnet on the sale of Keats's love letters. He also made disparaging comments about the "hero-worshippers" who sought relics from Jesse James, the well-known American outlaw gunned down while Wilde was on his American tour (*Letters* 164). But his sharpest words he reserved for the professional relic-hunters, the biographers who swoop in the minute the corpse is cold. As he famously puts it in "The Critic as Artist," "Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography. . . . [W]e are over-run by a set of people who, when poet or painter passes away, arrive at the house along with the undertaker, and forget that their one duty is to behave as mutes. . . . They are the mere body-snatchers of literature. The dust is given to one, and the ashes to another, and the soul is out of their reach" (126–27). Wilde keenly articulates the power of the biographer over the hapless dead. And Judas writing the biography seems a clear reference to the debate over Froude's controversial biography of Carlyle, particularly the revelations about the Carlyles' marriage, an editorial decision that many

felt over-stepped the boundaries of appropriate disclosure in biography.¹³ The concern about the biographers also strangely anticipates what would end up happening to Wilde, between the free-for-all of the Tite Street sale and the long and strange line of biographers who have attempted to capture the “real” Oscar while serving their own ideological or personal ends.¹⁴

Like Wilde, Woolf worried about biographers. She finds that Carlyle’s magical speculum can be all too easily mishandled by the biographical manipulator. In her essay “I am Christina Rossetti (1930), she remarks:

Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank; all we have to do is to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the little figures—for they are rather under life size—will begin to move and to speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant, for they thought when they were alive that they could go where they liked; and as they speak we shall read into their sayings all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different. (*Essays* 5: 554)

Woolf’s cautionary note is not simply for her predecessor Carlyle; it is for her own benefit, to remind herself about the terrible liberties one can take with the dead, if one does not care enough—or if one cares too much. Carlyle’s answer to

¹³ Much has been written on the “Froude-Carlyle controversy,” and, as Brent Kinser and David Sorensen have pointed out in a recent essay, “[w]hat began as an emotional and vituperative family disagreement has now been transformed into a literary-theoretical abstraction—the Carlyle marriage’—that stands as a synonym for patriarchal Victorian hypocrisy and double-standards” (89). Kinser and Sorensen offer an excellent summary of the controversy; other earlier treatments include David Alec Wilson’s *Mr. Froude and Carlyle* (1898), Waldo Hilary Dunn’s *Froude and Carlyle: A Study of the Froude-Carlyle Controversy* (1930), and Dale Trela’s “Froude on the Carlyles: The Victorian Debate over Biography” (1992).

¹⁴ See Merlin Holland for an in-depth discussion of the difficulty of arriving at an adequate biography of Wilde. Holland claims that biographers, with the exception of Richard Ellmann and Hesketh Pearson, “for the most part took rough aim with a meat-cleaver” (5).

this problem was simple—perhaps too simple. The biographer needs only to love his subject, he says, and all else will follow (see “Biography”). But as Woolf and Wilde suggest, it may be possible to love one’s subject a little too much. While Wilde grimly suggests in “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” that “all men kill the thing they love” (*Poems and Poems in Prose* 649), Woolf implies the unsatisfying voyeurism at the heart of the process: “We shall read her life; we shall read her letters; we shall study her portraits, speculate about her diseases—of which she had a great variety; and rattle the drawers of her writing-table, which are for the most part empty” (“Christina Rossetti,” *Essays* 5: 554).

In the end, then, obsessing about the connections among Carlyle, Wilde, Woolf, and their writing tables also represents a voyeuristic act. But seeking them at the table returns the focus to what was written on it, away from the table itself. Carlyle suggests that the best way to activate the magic mirror of the past is to read the still living words of those who lived in the past. The walls of St. Edmondsbury monastery are silent and useless—“dry rubbish shot” (*Past and Present* 51)—without Jocelin’s words to bring them to life. Wilde recognizes a similar problem in the context of biography. For him, it is better to “know. . . a poet through his song, than that the image of a great man should be marred and made mean for us by the clumsy geniality of good intentions” (“A Cheap Edition” 50). In turn Woolf proclaims, only half-jokingly, that the true price of admission to Carlyle’s house ought to be knowledge of his works: “I should be inclined to set an examination on Frederick the Great in place of an entrance fee; only, in that case, the house would soon have to be shut up” (“Haworth” 5).

By focusing on the produce of the table, it can be returned to its rightful owners—the living rather than the dead. Throughout their works Woolf and Carlyle repeatedly ponder the image of houses, shoes, and all sorts of other possessions as they retrieve them “from the tooth of time”¹⁵ in order to restore them to living inheritors—whether to children, to lovers, or to readers. For example, in *To The Lighthouse* Woolf traces in

¹⁵ The phrase “from the tooth of time” is from the thirteen-year-old Woolf’s essay on the efforts to save the Carlyle house, which she wrote for the Stephen children’s homemade newspaper, the *Hyde Park Gate News* (184).

her evocative “Time Passes” sequence the house’s descent into decay and near ruin, until she hoists it back out of the abyss, cleans it, sets it to rights, and restores it to the children, just as the lost mother returns, albeit momentarily. The description of the process of retrieval can be read as a metaphor for Carlyle’s historical and biographical imperative: bring the scattered pieces of the past back to the present for the living to use. Only through a literary beam of light shined upon creative and fertile fact can the table be brought back from the brink of oblivion and restored to the living. There is Wilde, leaning on “Carlyle’s writing table” in his study at Tite Street, musing over truth, lies, and art. There is the young Virginia Stephen receiving her own first writing desk the week she sees Carlyle’s table. And there is Carlyle himself, receiving the table from his new wife, Jane Baillie Welsh, in promise of works yet to be written. The rest is silence, and the act of reading what was written on and inspired by that table.

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