

“Amid the Thickest Welter”:
Manuscript Fragments from
Thomas Carlyle’s *Shooting Niagara: And After?*

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CARLYLE’S *Shooting Niagara: And After?* (1867) APPEARED in the August 1867 issue of *Macmillan’s Magazine*, but a crossed-out date at the conclusion of a manuscript fragment of the essay now held at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University—“Aug^t 2-1866” (see below, 21)—indicates that Carlyle was working on the essay at least twelve months prior to its publication. Previous research has focused on the revisions that Carlyle made to the *Macmillan’s* paper in his effort to expand the piece for a pamphlet edition in October 1867. Dale J. Trela speculated that Carlyle began writing the essay in the spring of 1867 in response to Disraeli’s proposal for reform.¹ The evidence of the fragments suggests that he was prompted to write it by a sequence of earlier events, which as he notes in the essay, came “swifter and swifter, at a strange rate . . . so that the wisest Prophecy finds it was quite wrong as to date; and patiently, or even indolently waiting, is astonished to see itself fulfilled, not in centuries as anticipated, but in decades and years” (*Works* 30: 2–3).

Many of the portentous “achievements” (*Works* 30: 2) to which Carlyle alluded in *Shooting Niagara* occurred between May and December 1866: the financial panic caused by the bankruptcy

¹ See Trela’s “The Writing and Revising of an Article and Pamphlet” and “Carlyle and the Periodical Press.”

of the discount house Overend and Gurney on 10 May forced the Chancellor of the Exchequer William E. Gladstone (1809–98) to lend the firm money in order to avoid the collapse of the Lombard Street banking system; the outbreak of mass rioting at Hyde Park on 23 July followed a meeting organized by Edmund Beales (1803–81) and the Reform League in favor of universal suffrage; the defeat of Austria by Prussia resulted in the unification of the North German states under Bismarck's control, which was ratified at Nikolsburg on 26 July; the first meeting of the Eyre Testimonial and Defense Fund held on 29 August, chaired by Carlyle, responded to the Governor's recall from Jamaica and to the organization of a campaign led by John Stuart Mill's Jamaica Committee to prosecute him for murder; and the petition submitted on 17 November by a delegation that included members of the Sheffield Trades Council and the London Trades Council requesting that the Home Secretary Spencer Horatio Walpole (1806–98) take measures to investigate accusations that unions had been engaged in violent actions against both union members and employers.

Amid this "thickest welter" (*Works* 30: 21) of circumstance, Carlyle continued to mourn the loss of Jane Welsh Carlyle, who had died suddenly on 21 April. In a remarkable outburst of energy, he began the composition and revision of *Shooting Niagara* while he wrote the memorials of her, Edward Irving (1792–1834), and Francis Jeffrey (1773–1850) that would later form part of *Reminiscences* (1881). Perhaps because of his grief, rather than in spite of it, Carlyle found solace in immersing himself in the controversies of the day. The intensity of his involvement was electric, and as Janice Carlisle has persuasively argued, *Shooting Niagara* "emerges as genuine relevant contribution to the reform debates that took place both inside and outside Parliament, both before and after the second Reform Bill became law" (20). Throughout the essay, Carlyle's commentary bristled with an indignation that mixed personal pain with political outrage. The result was kaleidoscopic, with the narrative disclosing a broad range of his emotional and intellectual extremes.

Few of Carlyle's previous writings exhibited such a close convergence between his personal and his public life. For example, in his summary of the American Civil War, he remarks

that “three million absurd Blacks, men and brothers (of a sort), are completely ‘emancipated’; launched into the career of improvement,—likely to be ‘improved off the face of the earth’ in a generation or two!’ That is the dismal prediction to me, of the warmest enthusiast to their Cause whom I have known of American men” (*Works* 30: 7). Carlyle was almost certainly recalling a letter that Emerson wrote to him, 7 January 1866, in which he described the return of a toxic status quo following Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865:

In the war, it was humanity that showed itself to advantage,—the leaders were prompted & corrected by the intuitions of the people,—they still demanding the more generous & decisive measure, & giving their sons & their estates, as we had no example before. . . . But Peace came, & every one ran back into his shop again, & can hardly be won to patriotism more, even to the point of chasing away the thieves that are stealing not only the public gold, but the newly won rights of the slave, & the new measures we had contrived to keep the planter from sucking his blood. (Slater 548)

Elsewhere in the essay, in his attack against “cheap and nasty” British manufactured products, Carlyle referred to the views of “one of the wisest and faithfulest German friends I ever had, a correct observer, and much of lover of both his own country and of mine,” a native of “Würzburg country” in “Central Germany,” who commented on the once invincible reputation of goods produced by the English: “If you can find an English article of the sort wanted, buy that; it will be a few pence dearer; but it will prove itself a well-made, faithful and skillful thing.” The opposite view now reigned supreme, with English goods identified with “a more cunningly devised mendacity than any of the others” (*Works* 30: 37). Carlyle was referring to his former research assistant Joseph Neuberg, from whom he received a most welcome letter on 23 August. In response, he expressed his delight at opening “one of the pleasantest [letters] I have had for a long time.” Neuberg had sent a “weird, graphic, [and] sunny” account of German politics, which buoyed Carlyle with hope that the country could “stand on her feet henceforth, and not be dismembered on the highway; but face all Napoleons and hungry sponging dogs, with clear steel in her hand, and an honest purpose in her

heart." Neuberg had included a photograph of Bismarck, who from Carlyle's perspective was "perhaps the nearest approach to a Cromwell that is well possible in these poor times." Here was a "royal enough physiognomy" (qtd. in Sadler 295) of Prussian Junker stock that might serve as an inspiration to England's aristocracy, which had lost sight of his duties to govern and to "drill" the laboring classes into hard work and order.

Seven months later Carlyle would suffer a renewed bout of anguish at the news that Neuberg had died suddenly on 22 March. Awkwardly confronting his own anti-Semitic inclinations, Carlyle lamented the loss of this "Jew of the better type or almost the best: a man of perfect integrity, of serious reflective temper, of fine strong faculties (able to understand anything presented to him), and of many high aspirations" (qtd. in Fielding 5). That Neuberg should become a catalyst for Carlyle's paean to Bismarck in *Shooting Niagara*—"a magnanimous and fortunate Herr von Bismarck, whose dispraise was in all the Newspapers" before he united Prussia "in a few of the current weeks" (*Works* 30: 3)—illustrated the tragic irony of this friendship. Jonathan Steinberg has pointed out in his recent biography of the "Iron Chancellor" that Bismarck may have "abandoned the Christian state in the name of the secular state," but he "retained the unspoken belief . . . that *ein Jude* cannot be a German." And it was Bismarck who "played a vital role" in stoking the "wave of public anti-Semitism, which completed the end of the liberal era and began another stage in German history that ended in the Holocaust" (311).

But it would be a mistake to dismiss *Shooting Niagara* solely as the reflex of a temper soured and despoiled by misanthropy and bigotry. These fragments demonstrate the adamant "veracity and probity" (*Works* 30: 55) with which Carlyle addressed the most important question of his day: what did it mean to be free? What was liberty to the vast bulk of the British population? His answer flattered neither liberals nor conservatives, revolutionaries nor reactionaries. Liberty was an internal power that could never be realized through the modern idolatries of Utilitarian democracy and unrestrained capitalism. It was a "sore duty" rather than a "right," and it emanated from God, not from the doctrines of Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill. Carlyle's relentless effort to define this elusive yet vital power are richly

exhibited in his deletions, qualifications, and corrections. What was at stake for both Britain and Europe was the survival of civic life, which had degenerated into a “swarmery” of mindless slogans and ephemeral “isms.” Without a deeper conception of freedom informed by faith, these self-declared harbingers of progress would face the “anarchic” ruins of their own spiritual and philosophical bankruptcy.

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