

*Carlyle “versus the Devil and All men”:*  
The Ironic Rhetorical Success of  
Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*

CHENE HEADY

**T**HOMAS CARLYLE’S *Reminiscences* (1881) RECEIVED WHAT may be the worst reception of any major Victorian autobiography. The book comprised “a devastating blow” to Carlyle’s “reputation,” the like of which has been suffered by “few literary celebrities” (Sorensen and Kinser 109). Honored as a sage in the 1870s, Carlyle was a figure of mockery by the turn of the century. The reception of *Reminiscences* is strangely foreshadowed in the text itself. Later critics of the book tended to forget that Carlyle wrote it at the height of his popularity, shortly after he had delivered his triumphant Inaugural Address as rector of the University of Edinburgh. The speech had restored his literary reputation and given him his first taste of mass popularity. The address was printed in most major newspapers, and reprinted as a book in John Hotten’s pirated edition. To Carlyle’s dismay, a biography of him was appended to this volume that represented his life as a conventional rags-to-riches success story.

Considered in historical context, the problem of *Reminiscences* is not Carlyle’s disgrace but his popularity. Carlyle wrote the memoir as the Second Reform Bill was being debated in parliament. Soon after completing the first full draft, he composed *Shooting Niagara: And After?* (1867), his vitriolic attack on the proposed legislation. Both pieces are marked by Carlyle’s fear of a world in which the economics of supply and demand dominate the world of ideas as thoroughly as they

regulate industry. The “dirty ‘*reform-bill*’” as Carlyle dubs it, is the “product of mere *insanity*,” and will usher in a mad world (*Reminiscences* 178). He particularly fears how the value of his own writings will be affected by these changed circumstances. In themselves, they will possess no worth other than what they will fetch in the marketplace. Responding to these anxieties, Carlyle attempts in *Reminiscences* to construct a narrative that is immune to the degrading influences of mass popularity.

## I.

Reader reception poses serious challenges to Carlyle’s stature as a prophet. As George Landow has pointed out, Carlyle was an outsider who understood the defects of his society more incisively because of his marginal status (23, 52). He was certain that he had grasped the truth, but he opposed empirical methods of ascertaining it. He did not regard this conundrum as an insoluble problem, since his prophetic message possessed an inherent fixed value that was authorized by the integrity of his character. The sage’s speech is in actuality what the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) insists that all human speech should be: a “banknote for an inward capital of culture, of insight and noble human worth” (*Works* 20: 179). The value of such utterance is not dependent on reader reception, but if it is going to generate substantial change, then it must have a readership. The reverse side of Carlyle’s preoccupation with heroes was his fascination with quacks, who differed from heroes in that the value of their proclamations derived almost entirely from audience appeal. Carlyle articulates these fears in *Shooting Niagara*, in which he warns that in an increasingly democratic Britain, free trade and supply and demand would soon determine value “not in shop-goods only, but in all things temporal, spiritual and eternal.” The “Count of Heads” rather than truth or reality, will be “the Divine Court of Appeal on every question and interest of mankind.” Quacks—or, as they reveal themselves as literary figures, “Stump Orators”—are the gods of this age to come. They rule the age (or the age rules them) especially through the overlapping worlds of Parliament and “Penny Newspapers” (*Works* 30: 1). In *Latter-Day Pamphlets* Carlyle had defined Parliament as a “National Palaver recognised as Sovereign, a solemn Convocation of all the Stump-Orators

in the Nation to come and govern us" (*Works* 20: 220). This "Palaver" is reinforced by "divine popular literature" (*Works* 20: 174), which offers falsely consoling dreams that guide the nation down the "broad way that leadeth to destruction for so many" (*Works* 20: 192), meaning delusive inaction.

Just as the quack is a false prophet who compiles his false visions into an empty literature, so too is the quack's speech the antithesis of the sage's. While the latter's speech is a valid intellectual banknote with an inherent, fixed worth, the speech of the "Stump Orator" is a "*forged* one passing freely current in the market; but bringing damages to the receiver, the payer, and to all the world" (*Works* 20: 179). If the sage reveals the nature of the universe and in some manner speaks for God, the "Stump Orator" is "[a] mouthpiece of Chaos to poor benighted mortals that lend ear to him as to a voice from Cosmos" (*Works* 20: 176). Quacks are dangerous because they have an audience that will listen to them and act. What Carlyle in *Shooting Niagara* would call the human "swarm" seeks out "[s]ome big Queen Bee . . . in the centre of the swarm . . . and the swarm once formed, finds itself impelled to action, as with one heart and one mind" (*Works* 30: 3-4).

Though Carlyle was always confident of his ability to identify quacks, he realized that his system provided few objective criteria for distinguishing the hero from the quack. He likened the hero's word to a "banknote" that could be exchanged for gold, but, as Chris R. Vanden Bossche has noted, in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe bills first ceased to be redeemable for a fixed amount of gold. Paper currency no longer possessed meaning through a hierarchical relation to a fixed point outside of itself, namely the King's treasury. Instead, money became a "self-enclosed system" (6) devoid of fixed values. In the same period the end of the patronage system and rise of market dominance brought about an analogous transformation in literature. No longer estimated by its relation to a social hierarchy, literature came to be appraised in reference to fluctuating relations of supply and demand (see 6-8). In an age of paper currency, Carlyle's metaphor implicitly emphasizes the difficulty of determining the worth of prophecy. In such circumstances, he is obliged to acknowledge that "really excellent speech . . . is terribly apt

to get confounded with its counterfeit, sham-excellent speech” (*Works* 20: 174).

In attempting to set a definitive boundary between the sage and the quack, Carlyle posits two basic theories of reception, each of which implies an audience whose opinions about his work do not vary. His first and most Romantic impulse is to imagine himself confronting universal apathy and complacency. Carlyle suggests that if authors in the process of composition ignore this audience, then the apparent value of their work will fluctuate while its true value remains fixed. Authors who remain true to themselves constitute their own audience, and the public response, however indifferent, is irrelevant. Thomas remarked to Jane soon after completing the *French Revolution*, “What they will do with this Book, none knows . . . but they have not had, for a two hundred years, any Book that came more truly from a man’s very heart; and so let them trample it under foot and hoof as *they see best!*” (*Reminiscences* 94).

But Carlyle also realizes that for a book to change the world someone must read it appreciatively. His second theory of audience envisages readers as the elect. Unlike the popular author whose floating value is determined by a fickle mass audience, the true sage possesses a loyal audience of disciples, whose own worth is determined by their reaction to the sage’s writing. Drawing on biblical and Reformation-era models, Carlyle in *Shooting Niagara* imagines the size of the prophet’s true band of disciples to be both numerically small—“the noble Few”—and divinely predetermined—the “chosen of the world” (*Works* 30: 21, 44). He pictures his work reaching its few appreciative readers as the Gospel reaches Calvin’s followers, redeeming them as it ignores the multitude of humanity. The value of the elect, established in the eternal order of nature, mirrors the value of the prophecy that they heed. Carlyle remarks in his Edinburgh address, “many people” are “hard and indifferent” to one, but this response is acceptable because of the support of “noble hearts” whose approval is “precious . . . beyond price.” It is they who “consult the eternal oracles” and “disregard . . . the temporary noises, menacings and deliriums” (*Works* 29: 481, 483).

Carlyle’s two models of audience are not entirely reconcilable and at times they conflict. To maintain the value of his discourse, he seeks to limit its demand. He insists in *Shooting*

*Niagara*, “To recognise merit, you must first yourself have it; to recognise false merit, and crown it as true, because a long tail runs after it, is the saddest operation under the sun” (*Works* 30: 38). A work’s rejection by the reprobate, valueless masses can serve as a sign of its prophetic merit. Carlyle adamantly asserts in “Stump-Orator,” the “market-demand” for the kind of hero he valorizes is “*nil*” (*Works* 20: 190). In “Jesuitism,” the last of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, he explicitly identifies the true audience for the work, the “one in a thousand” readers who now “see at all . . . what I see and have long seen” (*Works* 20: 296). In a similar spirit, Carlyle rejoiced over his defeat in the 1854 rectorial election for the University of Glasgow, declaring that the majority never decides rightly in any election. He was grateful that the only students who have “any real right to vote”—those who belong to the “wiser class”—chose him (to John Nichol, 16 December 1854; *CL* 29: 217). Carlyle idealized both the remnant audience and the authorial audience of one. The approbation of the ignorant and misguided multitude threatened the value of his work. The objective sign by which the prophet can be distinguished from the quack is that the masses instinctively dislike truth-tellers.

## II.

This sign was no longer available to Carlyle in December 1865 after he accepted the position of rector of Edinburgh University following his election victory over Benjamin Disraeli, whom he had long considered to be the consummate Stump Orator or “the Talking King of England.”<sup>1</sup> He was then obliged to deliver a speech to an audience, the majority of which had voted for him. Carlyle was aware of the difficulty that this occasion posed for his ideas about authorship, and he feared that “speaking would be impossible; that I should utterly break down.” On the day of the speech, he went to the stage expecting to give a speech consistent with his adversarial model of authority and delivered in “a mood of defiant despair” (*Reminiscences* 189). Instead, Carlyle suddenly found himself confronting adulation. His plight is best expressed by a single moment in

<sup>1</sup> Compare Carlyle’s letters to John A. Carlyle (23 February 1852; *CL* 27: 51–52) and to John Childs (26 May 1852; *CL* 27: 123) .

the Inaugural Address, in which he attacked rhetoric, clearly under the impression that he was shocking and challenging his audience: "Oh, it is a dismal chapter all that, if one went into it—what has been done by rushing after fine speech! I have written down some very fierce things about that . . . but they were and are deeply my conviction." Instead of shocked silence, the crowd enthusiastically shouted in response, "*Hear, hear*" (29: 470). The crowd heard Carlyle as merely another purveyor of "fine speech," an eloquent "Stump Orator" who had eclipsed Disraeli. Contemporary reports stress that his talk was "listened to with delight" and "ended amidst rounds of applause" (Froude, *Life* 2: 307). This enthusiasm carried over into the periodical press. The inaugural speech, contemporary chroniclers agreed, suddenly rendered Carlyle immune to attack. Froude comments that "[h]ostile tongues ceased to speak against him, and hostile pens to write. The speech was printed in full in half the newspapers of the island. It was received with universal acclamation" (*Life* 2: 306). Reprinted in book form, it went through three editions in three months, and then saw eleven other printings in various editions before Carlyle's death (Tarr 199–204).

Carlyle carefully noted the popular and critical reception of his address. Froude believed that its reception bothered him for the rest of his life (*Life* 2: 306). The moment the dreaded majority came to like his writing, Carlyle feared that he had lost his identity as a prophetic writer. Rather than an author who wrote his own audience, Carlyle had become an author who was written by his audience. In a leader column, the *Times* distinguished between the public's enjoyment of the address and their resistance to Carlyle's ideas: "A man may differ as much as he pleases from the doctrines of Mr. Carlyle, he may reject his historical teachings, and may distrust his politics, but he must be of a very unkindly disposition not to be touched by his reception at Edinburgh" (qtd. in Shepherd 42). Reviewers and readers alike treated Carlyle not as a confrontational messenger of God, but as a kindly old man uttering truisms. The *Pall Mall Gazette* commented, Carlyle "talked . . . like a patriarch about to leave the world to the young lads. . . . His voice is a soft, downy voice—not a tone in it that is of the shrill, fierce kind that one would expect" (qtd. in Shepherd 37). Froude

summarized the situation succinctly: “The Edinburgh Address contained his doctrines with the fire which had provoked the animosity taken out of them. They were reduced to the level of church sermons. . . . Carlyle, people felt with a sense of relief, meant only what the preachers meant, and was a fine fellow after all” (*Life* 2: 307). The success of the address led to the first cheap edition of Carlyle’s collected works, placing the rest of his writings for the first time in the hands of those he thought most likely to misread them (see Dyer 124; Campbell 2). In Froude’s judgment, Carlyle became “the fashion of the moment with the multitude” (*Life* 2: 320). As a result, he had to confront the erosion of authority that popularity inevitably brought with it.

The Edinburgh address also coincided with the publication of an early biography of “the Sage of Chelsea” written by R. H. Shepherd and published by John Hotten, which Carlyle read with disgust. The book conveys an impression of the author that tends to complement the “fashionable” reception of the Edinburgh address. Shepherd praises Carlyle in lavish terms, but subsumes him under a preexistent standard, destroying his singularity and tailoring him to fit market demands. The Carlyle who emerges is a literary success story, a middle-class popular author whose rise to prominence presents an inspiring rags-to-riches tale worthy of Samuel Smiles. Shepherd’s Carlyle takes up writing simply because he is “convinced that neither as minister or schoolmaster was he to successfully fight his way up in the world” (11). Shepherd and the publisher John Hotten, who wrote a “Preliminary” to Shepherd’s biography, represent the adult Carlyle as an unusually skilled writer and orator whose “Naturalness” and “shrewd common sense” are his two most distinguishing traits (37).

Shepherd and Hotten’s Carlyle is a genial and prosperously middle-class popular author in the mould of Thackeray and Dickens. Hotten writes, “The general belief that Carlyle is a gloomy misanthrope, scarcely ever seen outside his own door, is quite an error. Like Thackeray—and, indeed, most other sensible authors—he has no disinclination to accept an invitation to a good dinner” (Shepherd 5). Hotten’s and Shepherd’s Carlyle spends his spare time like a converted Scrooge; he is socially awkward, but he delights in giving

“extravagant quantities of cheap sweet meats to the poorer neighbor children” (7). This staid Carlyle also pays public homage to conventional Christianity. Far from being the man who refused to participate in family prayers, this Carlyle “bow[s] very low” during the prayer that precedes his talk at Edinburgh (34). The great rhetorical prowess of the address itself reveals the true nature of Carlyle’s artistry, which is no way different from the artistry of other authors. As Shepherd writes, “Carlyle’s real anathemas against rhetoric were but the expression of his knowledge that there is a rhetoric beyond all other arts” (40).

This characterization of Carlyle as a conventional Victorian gentleman and crowd-pleasing professional author especially infuriated his wife. Jane complained to her husband that the Scrooge-like, child-loving Thomas was the “last of calumnies that I should ever have expected to hear” (19 April 1866; Froude, *LM* 2: 387). Hotten’s crime was all the more damaging in that he had also taken possession of Carlyle’s life and work in a more literal, economic sense. The Hotten and Shepherd account of the Sage’s life was published not as an independent volume, but as *On the Choice of Books* (1866), which included the Inaugural Address, together with “additional articles, a memoir of the author, and two portraits.” Hotten, a publisher who specialized in cheap reprints of respected works of literature with expired copyrights, reset the text of the address as it appeared in the *Times*, and so owed no copyright duties to its author. Carlyle complained that “a London pirate [Hotten] quite forestalled” him and ruined the book he intended to write, substituting in its place a “spurious Address” (Froude, *LM* 2: 381, 387). Hotten and Shepherd’s collection amounted to a theft of Carlyle’s literary identity. He was being marketed as a popular author catering to a popular audience.

### III.

*Reminiscences* is, in large part, an attempt to undo the effects of the Edinburgh address and to remove Carlyle’s authorship and work from the sphere of supply and demand. To recover a secure level of authority, Carlyle systematically established his own singularity and demonstrated his isolation from both authors and readers. He tried to throw off Hotten and

Shepherd's account of himself and to escape from Disraeli's England by stressing his Scottish identity and by reiterating his hostility to popular authors. Carlyle's famously grim mood in *Reminiscences* also served as an underlying—and, occasionally, explicit—assertion of his isolation from all known authors and audiences. He speaks in the book, he declares, with the “continual gloom and grimness . . . of a man set too nakedly *versus* the Devil and All men” (89). He grounds his isolation and, thereby, his authority on two incontestable and seemingly commonplace elements of his life: his place of birth (rural Scotland) and choice of a mate (Jane Welsh Carlyle). He juxtaposes rural Annandale—a collective term for Carlyle's birthplace of Ecclefechan and the neighboring town of Annan—with capitalist England, casting Annandale as an organic society whose virtues throw the vices of England into sharp relief.

The implications of this rhetorical strategy for the author-audience relation are most explicit in Carlyle's distinction between current Britain with its “Demosthenic Disraelis” and the “kind of citizen” Annandale once possessed (*Reminiscences* 206–07). Carlyle exemplifies this contrast by means of a story about the Seceder farmer, Old David Hope. Dangerously high winds and a “deluge” of rain suddenly hit Annandale, but Old David Hope refuses to interrupt his “family worship” to go out and save his crops. When a neighbor “rush[es] in” and warns that he must act immediately to avoid a failed harvest, Old David replies, “Wind canna get ae straw that has been appointed mine; sit down, and let us worship God’ (that rides in the whirlwind!)” (207). The passage suggests that Annandale is a place where value, rooted in divine truth, is fixed, and the results of individual efforts do not depend on variable, outside factors, but are predestined from all eternity. Annandale is a place where the Carlylean models of audience and authorship hold true, and stands in sharp contrast to Disraeli's Reform Bill England. Scotland enables him to transport himself from a world where the value of his work fluctuates and his identity has become unsettled to a more secure sphere where not “ae straw that has been appointed” to him can be removed.

The second foundation of Carlyle's literary authority in *Reminiscences* is also derived from rural Scotland. Carlyle possesses the ideal literary audience—Jane Welsh Carlyle—whom he met

while teaching in rural Scotland. Ian Campbell has alleged that *Reminiscences* was written as a response to Carlyle losing his “domestic audience,” and one of Jane Carlyle’s principal roles in the text is to shape the proper response to Carlyle’s writing (9). She is cast as the ideal hero-worshipper. Carlyle writes that she “gaily approved” (103) of his most controversial works and that her reception, unlike that of Carlyle’s various publics, was stable and invariable: “[S]he cared little about criticisms of me, good or bad. . . . *Her* opinion of me . . . was curiously unalterable from the first” (105). When facing the “Hostility of the Press” towards his late work, Jane and Thomas shared in “innocent laughter” (149). She is his true audience, the embodiment of the Carlylean elect. The controversy stirred by the publication of *Latter-Day Pamphlets* never unsettled him because in “the whole world I had one complete Approver [Jane]; in that, as in other cases, *one*; and it was worth all” (149).

In *Reminiscences*, Carlyle depicts his spiritual conversion and prophetic call as a pre-emptive deliverance from the mass audience that would later besiege him. Carlyle experienced this conversion in 1825 when he spent a year at Hoddam Hill engaging in “pious musings; communings, silent and spontaneous, with Fact and Nature . . . in these poor Annandale localities” (321). There he rose above the world, escaping into the “eternal blue of ether” and rediscovering his “spiritual part.” From this new vantage point, he viewed other people and their ideas as if from an infinite distance, “looking down upon the welterings of my poor fellow-creatures, in such multitudes and millions, still stuck in that fatal element; . . . and no feeling of my own, except honest silent pity for the serious or religious part of them, and occasional indignation, for the poor world’s sake, at the frivolous, *secular* and impious part.” He had “become independent of the world” and as a direct result, his “thoughts were very peaceable, full of pity and humanity as they had never been before.” (321). Not coincidentally, Hoddam Hill was where his courtship with Jane Welsh Carlyle also came to fruition. In was also in Annandale where Carlyle later conceived and composed his first major prophetic work, *Sartor Resartus*, in the company of his best and truest audience. At Craigenputtoch (Jane Welsh Carlyle’s by inheritance) he was “perfectly left alone, and able to do *more* work, beyond doubt, than elsewhere” (82–83).

Carlyle's famously disparaging treatment of the literary world in *Reminiscences* serves, in large part, to reinforce this idyllic picture of his artistic singularity and authority. Carlyle represents himself as a stranger in the London literary world. Far from the being the amiable, impressionable member of the coterie that Hotten and Shepherd describe, the Carlyle of *Reminiscences* is an acerbic loner who despises the herd of popular authors and their cravenly susceptible audience. His famously satiric treatment of the Edinburgh and London literary coteries accentuates the profile of Carlyle as a self-contained anomaly. The thematic importance of Carlyle's satirical dismissal of his literary contemporaries is summarized in his account of Thackeray's "Laudation, in the *Times*" of *The French Revolution*: "'One other poor judge voting,' I said to myself; 'but what is he, or such as he? The fate of that thing is fixed! I have written it; that is all my result'" (394). By disassociating himself from the opinions and identities of other major authors, and by showing that—counter to Hotten's assertion—he is not "like Thackeray—and, indeed, most other sensible authors" (Shepherd 5)—he fixes the value of his self and work, and frees himself from reviewers and the public. With respect to *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution*, critical opinion eventually dictated popular opinion: "The *Plebs* of Literature might be divided in their verdicts about me (though, by count of heads, I always suspect the 'Guilties' clean had it); but the Conscript Fathers declined to vote at all" (*Reminiscences* 395). In *Reminiscences*, Carlyle's rude treatment of other authors and celebrities provoked a public outcry and won him notoriety as an angry outsider (see Broughton 87, Campbell 92).

The last significant events that Carlyle narrates in *Reminiscences* are, from a chronological perspective, the Edinburgh address and the death of Jane Carlyle. While Carlyle presents these events as closely linked tragedies, the narrative logic of the work as a whole permits even them to be reconciled with Carlyle's model of authority. The Edinburgh address in particular is what the logic of work suggests it must be: an illusory, meaningless experience yielding an illusory, meaningless result. Carlyle re-creates it as a nightmare, possessing a transitory, insubstantial character, and delusive quality. The election produces "an inane though

rather amusing hurly burly of *empty congratulations*, imaginary businesses, etc., etc.” (*Reminiscences* 187). The day of the speech is made wretched by the dominance of the mob, “the gloomiest day, nearly intolerable for confusion, crowding, noisy inanity and misery.” Delivering the address, Carlyle is driven by his revulsion to the circumstances: “My Speech was delivered as if in a mood of defiant despair, and under the pressure of nightmares. Some feeling that I was *not* speaking lies, alone sustained me. The applause etc., I took for empty noise, which it really was not altogether” (189).

Yet when Carlyle discusses the general public response to the written speech, he employs no qualifiers: “No idea, or shadow of an idea, is in that Address, but what had been set forth by me tens of times before: and the poor gaping sea of Prurient Blockheadism receives it as a kind of inspired revelation;—and runs to buy my Books (it is said) now when I have got quite done with their buying or refusing to buy. If they were to give me £10,000 a year, and bray unanimously their *hosannahs* heaven-high for the rest of my life,—who *now* would there be to get the smallest joy or profit from it? (*Reminiscences* 104). His true audience—Jane Welsh Carlyle—died during his trip to Edinburgh. She was replaced by the fickle mob, and in this substitution, there was no personal profit to Carlyle himself. Since Jane constituted the elect, her joyful response was the address’s “one value” to her husband, its worth being “nearly *naught* otherwise (in very truth); and the *last* of such that could henceforth have any such addition to it” (190). With its true audience expired, the Inaugural Address was worthless and the admiration it generated aptly reflected the shallowness of the reading public: “The ‘recent return of popularity greater than ever,’ which I hear of, seems due alone to that late Edinburgh affair; especially to the Edinburgh *Address*; and affords new proof of the singularly dark and feeble condition of ‘Public Judgment’ at this time” (104). Carlyle refuses to acknowledge the existence of the author celebrated in the pages of Hotten’s fantasy and lashes out against his “foolish” audience: “[A]s if ‘the Address’ were anything, or had contained the least thing in it which had not been told you already!” (190). Elsewhere he proclaims with pride, “My Books were not, nor will ever be ‘popular,’ productive of money to any but a contemptible degree” (103).

Throughout *Reminiscences*, Carlyle imagines the book's real audience to consist either of himself alone or of the elect, who are "interested survivors—friends only, I will hope" (198). In his present predicament, he must dismiss his popularity as an illusion and instead concentrate on this select group. He can consider himself successful only to the extent that he succeeds in alienating critics and readers, and in forsaking economic gain:

[A]s for the speaking and criticising multitude, who regulate the paying ditto, I perceive that their labours on me have had a twofold result: Primo. That, after so much nonsense said, in all dialects, and so very little sense, or real understanding of the matter, I have arrived at a point of indifferency towards all that, which is really very desirable to a human soul that will do well; and Secundo. That in regard to money, and *payment* etc. in the money kind, it is essentially the same.

On these terms alone can *Reminiscences* be identified with the "very highest kind of 'success'!" (104).

*Longwood University*

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