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Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle's Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism. Edited by Paul E. Kerry and Marylu Hill. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010. 288 pp. \$67.50.

THE PAPERS IN THIS VOLUME REPRESENT THE COLLECTIVE fruit of an international Carlyle Studies conference held at Villanova University in 2007. There can be little doubt that the Villanova conference will be remembered as a turning point in Carlyle studies—if not in their critical or intellectual history, exactly (that remains to be seen), then in their institutional and social history. As an outsider with a scholarly interest in the Carlyles who was not at the conference in 2007, I can attest to its lively survival in the imaginations of those who were there and to the sense of a new beginning that the participants carried away with them. Certainly there is evidence in the volume before us of a collective desire to establish the continued relevance and value of Carlyle's writings in the face of a decline in Carlyle's reputation after the Second World War, particularly with the advent of an ideologically charged critical practice around 1980. *Thomas Carlyle Resartus* aspires to being both a conference proceedings and a thematically coherent set of new directions in Carlyle's philosophy of history, political theory and cultural criticism. However, even Kerry and Hill's admirably clear introduction mapping the "problem" of Carlyle's reputation and establishing a genealogy for the ambitious reappraisal they have in mind—"More work needs to be done in addressing his political ideas . . . and the essays here represent an effort to do this" (15)—cannot gloss over the anomalies created by trying to achieve both aims. As

the final sentence of the opening paragraph rather lamely puts it: “Jane Welsh Carlyle’s distinct literary achievement is also considered” (13). Yes, it is, but the two meditations on Jane’s life and writing, on life writing, and on the real and hypothetical lives written about her—Aileen Christianson’s abbreviation of her study *Jane Welsh Carlyle, Biography and Biographers* (2008) and Kathy Chamberlain’s “Finding Tales for Our Time: Writing about Jane Welsh Carlyle’s Life in the 1840s”—while they have their own relationship and coherence, cannot help but seem misplaced in the volume. It may well be that Jane’s life and letters will be central to a retailored Carlyle studies, but no attempt is made to fold them into the editorial vision.

It would be wrong to attribute the decline in Carlyle’s reputation exclusively to a handful of ugly pronouncements on class and race late in his career, to which many of his especially liberal contemporaries were no less liable to take exception than we are. And if, like Hans Mattingly, we are anxious that Carlyle’s work is suffering because it falls outside or between our current disciplinary boundaries, it is worth reminding ourselves that Carlyle has always been what Mattingly calls “a platypus” (228) and difficult to classify—and, with his being difficult to classify (but not only with that), difficult to read. Mattingly uses an essay of Stefan Collini’s in *Rethinking Victorian Culture* to trace “the history of the difficulty of absorbing Carlyle studies within the present-day academic configuration” (229), but the younger Carlyle’s problems finding an audience and the publishing history of *Sartor Resartus* indicate that Carlyle’s absorption has always been an issue. Nineteenth-century French intellectuals, as Catherine Heyrendt reminds us in “Reappraising Carlyle In and Through France,” were “startled” by “the near impossibility of classifying Carlyle and his work” (172) and reacted against Carlyle’s untranslatable “Anglo-German style” (176). So did many British and American intellectuals, as it happens, many of them otherwise sympathetic and respectful. The style was and is the man and if Pope can be said to have made hatred into an art form, Carlyle made stylistic perversity and intellectual and ethical bloody-mindedness into an art form.

Eventually, the Victorians would respond with the right blend of annoyance and admiration, resisting Carlyle’s more dogmatic pronouncements while exalting the independence

of his intellect and seriously questioning some of their own cherished assumptions. The contentious and influential Sage is still available to historical scholarship, though it is unlikely that the twenty-first-century reader can recover the sadomasochistic frisson of a Victorian encounter with Carlyle's prose. That Carlyle's writings have other kinds of frisson to offer the twenty-first-century reader, however (only some of them sadomasochistic), should be apparent to anyone working through this volume. *Past and Present* looms largest in the essays, and after that *Sartor Resartus*, *Frederick the Great*, and *On Heroes*, with a handful of the essays we would expect of a volume sensitive to Carlyle's reputation and seeking to reappraise his philosophy of history writing and cultural criticism: "Signs of the Times," "On History," "On History Again," *Shooting Niagara: And After?*, "An Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question." It seems odd that a volume devoted to "reappraising Carlyle's contribution to the philosophy of history, political theory, and cultural criticism," as the subtitle says, would not address directly the one major work that offers itself as formal history, but *The French Revolution* does have a presence, if not a strong presence, throughout.

Interestingly, the decline in Carlyle's reputation appears at times to exert a fascination beyond and almost independent of that of the writings themselves, and it is suggestive that some of the best scholarship of the last decade (I recall an excellent paper delivered by David Sorensen in Dumfries a year after the Villanova conference) engages with the appropriation and rejection of Carlyle by twentieth-century ideologues and literary critics. So in the present volume, Jonathan McCollum directs all eyes to the elephant in the room when he confronts head on "The Nazi Appropriation of Thomas Carlyle: Or How *Frederick* Wound Up in the Bunker," tracing the significance to the Third Reich of Carlyle's *Führerprinzip* (his work on heroes generally and *Frederick the Great* in particular) from Hitler's early incarceration and the banning of the Nazi party through the triumph of national socialism to Goebbels' and Hitler's final days in the bunker. "To this day, Carlyle's reputation has never fully recovered from its arrival in the Hitler bunker" (200), writes McCollum, who goes on to challenge the "aptness" that historians like Hugh Trevor-Roper and John Rosenberg discover

in the Nazi appropriation of Carlyle—not by attempting a strenuous defense based on a careful rereading of Carlyle’s prose, it should be said, but by shifting his focus onto Nazi ideology itself. Beyond pointing out the obvious anachronism that would brand Carlyle with a swastika, McCollum proceeds by carefully circumventing Carlyle’s writings, arguably making the writings themselves the elephant in the room. A comparable shift can be found in F. S. J. Ledgister’s essay on British rule in the West Indies, which is more interested in the “Racist Rantings” of Carlyle’s disciple and biographer, J. A. Froude, than in the rantings of Carlyle, in an article that also features the conflicted liberalism of John Stuart Mill and spirited counter-attacks by the West Indian writer, John Jacob Thomas. Again, Catherine Heyrendt uses Carlyle’s “relative disfavor with the French and international public” (with Hippolyte Taine as the exception who proves the rule) to anatomize and analyze aspects of French ideology and sensibility, rather than use the resistance of Carlyle’s writings to translation into French and into France as a way into the writings themselves.

Most of the contributors make the revision and resurrection of Thomas Carlyle their conscious agenda, though sometimes with the tentativeness betrayed by the question mark in Ralph Jessop’s title: “Shooting the Enlightenment: A Brave New Era for Carlyle?” In an attempt to establish what it was, exactly, that Carlyle thought, a number of essays offer a select and disembodied paraphrase of Carlyle’s opinions on crucial topics. Editor Marylu Hill’s comparison of Carlyle and Burke on “the necessity of a monarchy against the rising surge of democracy” is a case in point (85), drawing as it does on a number of Carlyle’s works (though mainly *On Heroes* and *Past and Present*) to establish his investment in a non-hereditary notion of necessary kingship (94–95). Ian Campbell’s essay on “Carlyle and Education” pits Carlyle against the institutionalization and mechanization he saw in the educational revolution of the early nineteenth century and establishes Carlyle’s preference for the private reading of the autodidact. “A collection of books is the best of all Universities,” protests Carlyle, offering (apparently without irony) the explanation that “the University only teaches us how to read the book: you must go to the book itself for what it is” (55). But as Campbell points out, this was

not all Carlyle had to say on the matter, and the future Rector of the University of Edinburgh would elsewhere trumpet “a right Education” as the foundation of all “order, arrangement and all blessedness,” irradiating with intelligence the “Chaotic” and the “Unintelligent” (59). Campbell is right to remind us of Carlyle’s “changing response to his age as the decades succeeded one another” (59). There is always the danger that any selection of more or less dogmatic pronouncements (especially those refracted through Teufelsdröckh’s experiences), whether on education or on any other issue or idea, will in the end amount to little more than just that: a selection of more or less dogmatic pronouncements. “At their heart,” however, Campbell identifies the “self-achieved if Goethe-inspired” imperative that the individual break free “from the limitations of mechanical knowledge to some understanding of the mystery of the universe, of society, of himself” (59).

Chris R. Vanden Bossche, in “Chartism, Class Discourse, and the Captain of Industry: Social Agency in *Past and Present*,” reads *Past and Present* “as an attempt to imagine alternative possibilities of social agency” (35). According to Vanden Bossche, Carlyle strives to rescue the issue of social and political agency from “the contemporary discourse of individual self-interest” characteristic of political economy and the “ballot” mentality of contemporary reform, and “to reframe it in relation to the fundamental need of human sociality” (37). Through the project of heroic leadership figured in the “Captain of Industry,” Carlyle hoped to transform self-serving power into “paternal guidance” (39). In “History as Biography, Biography as History,” Lowell T. Frye seeks to explain and extrapolate from Carlyle’s controversial definition of history as “the essence of innumerable Biographies,” adapting Teufelsdröckh on the symbol as an ontological entity that for Carlyle (as for Coleridge) embodies “Eternity looking through Time” (136). We are brought via Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* and philosopher Stuart Hampshire’s *Innocence and Experience* to an appreciation of the individual as “an indestructible portion of the miraculous All” and of the highest history as aspiring to the condition of poetry (145).

The object of these essays is to represent Carlyle’s thinking as accurately as possible, rather than to apologize or to exonerate.

“My aim has not been to explain away the troubling aspects of Carlyle’s attitude toward lower-class agency,” writes Vanden Bossche, for example, “but to understand how he regarded this view as consistent with his attempt to imagine a more just, ‘loving’ form of social relations” (43). Understanding, however, inevitably brings with it a measure of exoneration, and a careful reconstruction cannot help but contribute to Carlyle’s reevaluation.

Restoring a statement like Carlyle’s “Despotism is essential in most enterprises” to its argumentative context, as Vanden Bossche does (42), is a necessary first step in setting the record straight; the next is to restore such statements to their formal and rhetorical contexts, the project of Jessop and many of the other contributors to the volume. Jessop’s essay rereads by recontextualizing Carlyle within both the eighteenth century that Carlyle so loved to hate and a twentieth century that seems compelled to repeat Enlightenment antagonisms, arguing that we cannot fall back on an understanding of Carlyle in reflex opposition to the Enlightenment without recognizing that the Enlightenment was itself deeply divided between “optimism and skeptical pessimism” (62). In attacking a nihilistic eighteenth century and “figuring skepticism as delusory, as one of many other falsities, Carlyle is both a staunch anti-skeptic and also one of our greatest skeptics” (70). What is especially productive about Jessop’s approach, it seems to me, is his willingness to move between philosophy (Hume, Reid, Hamilton) and literature (Swift, Sterne, Dickens), and (for the sake of analogy) between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the twentieth and twenty-first (Foucault, Habermas, van Eemeren). Only a criticism prepared to engage with the many and various influences on Carlyle’s mental world (including those of contemporary science glimpsed at the end of Paul Kerry and Laura Judd’s article on layered history in *Past and Present*)—and, I would add, with Carlyle’s ideas as embodied and contingent—can hope to keep faith with a complex utterance over which Carlyle did not always have control, as his subsequent (mis)-appropriation suggests.

The one text to survive the ideological Inquisition of post-war criticism has been, not surprisingly, *Sartor Resartus*—this is implicit, perhaps, in Kerry and Hill’s title—precisely because in

Sartor Carlyle has, according to Frye, “learned the usefulness of wearing masks and wielding romantic irony as a way to confront the Chaos of Being” (135) and thereby found a form able to give full play to his humor and satire (including, of course, self-satire). Why this should have been so—why deconstruction and postmodernism should have been able to find a special place for *Sartor*’s ironies and indeterminacies—Tom Toremans makes impressively clear in his “Perpetual Remnant: *Sartor Resartus* and ‘the Necessary Kind of Reading’” when he revisits G. B. Tennyson’s *Sartor ‘Called’ Resartus* and Geoffrey Hartman’s and J. Hillis Miller’s famous essays on *Sartor* of 1979 and 1989 respectively. Whether or not we choose, with Toremans, to reappropriate Carlyle for a theoretical tradition altogether different from that of the “slightly outdated and altogether tragic Victorian Sage” (221)—my own feeling is that there is room for the humanist, the humorist, *and* the ironist—Toremans’ injunction to read Carlyle rhetorically and (citing Vanden Bossche’s *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*) “with an understanding of the rhetorical contexts in which he wrote” (221) is one that can be heard again and again throughout *Thomas Carlyle Resartus*.

Indeed, the revision (retailoring) promised and practiced by this volume of scholarly articles on the writings of the Carlyles is, arguably, a retrovision, confirming G. B. Tennyson’s unexceptionable yet critically indispensable proposition that “every treatment of Carlyle as a philosopher has served to make more necessary a real understanding of Carlyle’s literary methods” (qtd. on 206). Paul Kerry’s own contribution to the volume (with Laura Judd), “Temporality and Spatial Relations in *Past and Present*: New Insights into Carlyle’s Philosophy of History,” exemplifies this truth in a formal and rhetorical reading of *Past and Present* that identifies the variety of ways in which Carlyle effectively disrupts the complacencies of third person, documentary, linear history to bring past and present into a “reciprocal” or “dialectical” (mutually modifying and ironizing) relationship (150–51). As Carlyle chafes at the disciplinary, the generic, and the temporal boundaries placed upon him, he simultaneously exposes the contingencies and the opacities of historical “knowledge,” interrogating the past and allowing the past to interrogate the present, we witness a

man in urgent conversation with his contemporaries, framing figure and argument to what passes as conventional wisdom. At the same time, we become acutely aware of just how important “a real understanding of Carlyle’s literary methods” is.

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