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Tom Toremans and Tamara Gosta, editors. "Thomas Carlyle and the Totalitarian Temptation." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 45.1 (Spring 2012).

IN HIS 1816 SONNET "TO WORDSWORTH," PERCY B. SHELLEY broods: "thou leavest me to grieve, / Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be" (13–14). At twenty-one, Shelley was England's new poetic champion challenging the increasingly conservative Wordsworth—who was at the ripe old age of forty-five. But the bitter irony is that Wordsworth was decades away from "ceasing to be," and it was Shelley whose bright star fell. Yet one could argue that Shelley's legacy was improved, rather than damaged, by his early death. Byron was afforded a similar fate, dying at thirty-six—and as a freedom-fighter to boot. Others were not so lucky. The nineteenth century is riddled with authors who began their careers as fiery revolutionaries only to transform into righteous conservatives. Critics have admonished Thomas Carlyle for following a similar path, one in which the thunderous, hopeful prose that defined his early writing gave way to vicious, despondent invectives waged against systems he deemed irreparable and people he found irredeemable. The unsettling fury of his later work has motivated some misguided critics to create imaginary links to twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. These reckless suppositions have inspired the spring 2012 special issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, titled "Thomas Carlyle and the Totalitarian Temptation."

In their introduction to the issue, Tom Toremans and Tamara Gosta write that "there is at present an acute need to re-examine critically Carlyle's politics after the often uncritical assumption of his adherence to a totalitarian ideology that

dominated the twentieth-century reception of his work” (v). Part of the problem, Toremans and Gosta argue, has been the critical bifurcation of Carlyle’s corpus: “The particular challenge facing Carlyle scholars today is to confront the *relations* between the earlier and the later writings . . . and the paradoxes that such a confrontation always again appears to generate” (vii). Readers of Carlyle must attempt to reconcile the early and the late, to acknowledge the dialectical conundrum that Carlyle’s writing generates, in order to make sense of how his words have been warped by oppressive ideologies that he had no intention of motivating. It is imperative as well to make sense of the reason that textbooks often include “Signs of the Times” and smatterings of *Sartor Resartus*, *Past and Present*, and *The French Revolution*, yet invariably exclude the no-less influential prose of Carlyle’s later years. Why is it that the Carlyle of the 1830s and 40s seems more relevant to scholars than the Carlyle who scandalized the subsequent decades? Readability is one answer, certainly. But the other is an unwillingness to confront the unsettling ideas and images with which Carlyle constantly assails his readers. In this sense, he has achieved an unmatched literary success: what made so many contemporary readers uncomfortable, what made them close Carlyle’s books and vilify the author, similarly affects readers today. It is clear that contemporary readers remain absorbed, inspired, and disturbed by his writing—an achievement in endurance that few other nineteenth-century figures have achieved.

In the issue’s opening essay, “Discriminating Idolatry,” Ian Campbell remarks that “different Carlyles summoned admiration from different critical groups” (2). Like no other author of the nineteenth century, Carlyle has been molded, rearranged, and misread so that he may stand as the figurehead for conflicting movements. Indeed, the same text, if not the same sentence, can motivate vitally different arguments. Again, however, this is partly the result of his captivating and frustrating prose, which is violently lucid and yet opaque enough to be misrepresented. Campbell urges readers to practice “discrimination in admiration rather than of idolatry” (2). But this is a difficult step to take for readers of an author who was himself so inspired by heroes. Any of Carlyle’s texts, Campbell observes, “will be startling, original,

and upsetting" (3). But one must ask: Is not the effect of being shocked, of making knee-jerk assessments and hand-wringing condemnations more revealing of our own shortcomings? Could Carlyle's unparalleled ability to make readers react in such passionate, violent, and unguarded ways be a sign of his genius rather than proof of his hostility? Campbell concludes by acknowledging that Carlyle's writing "evoked a barrage of different responses at first appearance, as it continues to do. That, assuredly, is a mark of his genius as well as of the length of his productive life" (16). Precisely the fact that this special issue is necessary is a testament to Carlyle's enduring mark on not just literary studies, but also historical, cultural, theological, economic, and political pursuits.

One of the several connective strands of this special issue concerns the paradoxical nature of Carlyle's writing. In "'One Step from Politics': *Sartor Resartus* and Aesthetic Ideology," Tom Toremans argues that the "tension between his aesthetic and political views" and the "rhetorical struggle to articulate them" in *Sartor Resartus* would "condition Carlyle's later writings" (25). The text presents a "double vision" (29), simultaneously aesthetic and political, which ultimately concerns the capacity for language to communicate the "transcendental truth [*Sartor*] aspires to transmit" (30). In this sense, the multiple narrators and editors that Carlyle introduces have the effect of a "rhetorical disarticulation of aesthetic ideology" (39). The path to meaning in *Sartor* may be to acknowledge Carlyle's attempt to disarticulate rather than to articulate, to break down and dissolve rather than to build upon and resolve. If we consider Carlyle's most creatively ambitious work in this light, then we might reevaluate the intended effects of his more troubling writing that was to come. Was he seeking merely to alter perceptions or to explode systems entirely? And did this scheme require him to sacrifice his own posterity for the greater good?

The next set of essays offer new readings of Carlyle's mid-career works. David R. Sorensen tackles the misreading of Carlyle's historical prose in his essay "'The Great Pioneer of National Socialist Philosophy?': Carlyle and Twentieth-century Totalitarianism." Sorensen argues that Carlyle's "salvation lies not in his prophecies, but in his histories, in which he

dramatized the vicious reality of political religions” (45). Sorensen also points out that Carlyle “immersed himself in the psychology of totalitarianism” in his historical writing, “re-enacting in his imagination the *sturm und drang* of its seductive and fatal appeal” (45). John M. Ulrich’s essay, “Carlyle’s *Chartism* and the Politics of the (In)Articulate,” argues that *Chartism* “resists efforts to bring it into a genealogical line or network of prior, current, or future political thought” (69). In this sense, it is possible to read the “inarticulate crowds” in the text as simultaneously achieving conflicting states: “hopelessly incoherent and perfectly clear, they are powerless and powerful, they are at the mercy of their oppressors, and they are a force for progressive change” (75). Tamara Gosta draws on a similar paradox in her essay “Thomas Carlyle’s ‘Real-Phantasmagory’: The Historical Sublime and Humanist Politics in *Past and Present*,” arguing that the text “is a promise and a threat” (90). For Gosta, Carlyle presents a “historical truth which is at once true and a fiction” (92). *Past and Present* is a “two-in-one book, an anxious vision of historical simultaneity and excess, an unsustainable promise of a marred idealized medieval past and a threat of the decaying present” (93).

The issue’s final set of essays take on Carlyle’s most controversial pieces. Lowell T. Frye’s “‘This Offensive and Alarming Set of Pamphlets’: Thomas Carlyle’s *Latter-Day Pamphlets* and the Condition of England in 1850” argues that Carlyle’s despondency and vitriol “reveal a man who has given up on reasoned social and political discourse” (115). For Frye, the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* suggest Carlyle’s “loss of faith not only in the state of the world but also in the efficacy of language as persuasion” (115). Brent E. Kinser tackles what is likely Carlyle’s most disturbing writing in “Fearful Symmetry: Hypocrisy and Bigotry in Thomas Carlyle’s ‘Occasional Discourse[s] on the Negro Question.’” Kinser claims that “the essay/pamphlet becomes a rather manageable instance of Swiftian sarcasm,” but then suggests that Carlyle “never seems to remove the mask of satire so the reader may detect his actual views clearly, neither in his other late works, nor in his more private correspondence” (144). Owen Dudley Edwards rounds out the issue with his essay “‘The Hero as Historian’: Pieter Geyl and the Condition of Carlyle after Hitler,” which incisively

undermines critics who link Carlyle's writing to totalitarianism. Edwards draws his own parallels to Geyl, a twentieth-century historian, who is "but one of the many great historians to find Carlyle inimitable, unique, and of primary influence on their interpretation of the past" (180).

This special issue ultimately raises more questions than it resolves, but its success is in creating a new discourse not only to reconsider the entire scope of Carlyle's prose, but also to introduce a more measured understanding concerning his alleged links to totalitarianism. The looming question, however, concerns how today's readers are to conceive of Carlyle. In spite of the efforts of this issue's authors to invalidate foolish claims, he remains an equivocal, unsettling figure. His detractors will assert his villainy, making direct links to totalitarian rule and genocidal despots, while his admirers will observe his service to the under- and misrepresented and point to his weighty contribution to Victorian aesthetics, politics, and faith. If Campbell's essay urges "discrimination in admiration" (2), then scholars might practice by adopting a cautious approach to reading Carlyle without reacting too passionately—from falling into sentences that are "themselves little abysses" (152), to use Geoffrey Hartman's words. Readers might benefit from thinking of Carlyle as neither a hero nor a villain, but instead as a figure who straddles, if not undermines entirely, these categories. The questionable rift between early and late work suggests a change in the author's attitude about nation, humanity, and self. Before attaching a label, however, I would like to pause briefly to consider Carlyle's definition of the hero:

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. (*Heroes* 3)

These words appear almost immediately in the first part of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), a text that lies between *Chartism* (1840) and *Past and Present* (1843). After this point in Carlyle's writing career, arguably, the transformation begins—a forthright antagonism that reaches its apex (or perhaps nadir) at "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question" (1850) and *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1851) and never recovers. It might be possible to trace Carlyle's attempt to be a hero in his early writings, to be a leader, a modeler, a pattern(er), and a creator. But then what happens? As Frye contends, Carlyle's "loss of faith in the power of language to effect change, led [him] to use language as a hammer" (116). We continue to be the nails. Indeed, it might be prudent to think of Carlyle's changing output as an abandonment of the hero fantasy, as he found that the persona of another sort of character altogether could be more effective in forcing people to listen. If he failed to inspire change through positive energy, perhaps vitriol was a better method. Kinser's observation is crucial: that what we see as blatant, merciless enmity may be opaque, but carefully planned satire—not of the implausible Swiftean kind, but of a variation that relies on shocking invective to stir debate that quickly becomes marked by the fear of both hypocrisy and bigotry.

So how might scholars classify the new Carlyle? The Byronic hero label is perhaps overused, but the category of anti-hero might fit the bill. These figures pervade literature, from Beowulf to Macbeth, but are typified by Milton's Satan. In his "Essay on Burns" (1828), Carlyle writes that Byron "strives towards the Infinite and the Eternal; and soon feels that all this is but mounting to the house-top to reach the stars! Like Burns, he is only a proud man; might, like him, have 'purchased a pocket-copy of Milton to study the character of Satan'; for Satan also is Byron's grand exemplar, the hero of his poetry, and the model apparently of his conduct" (309). Could not Carlyle have later said the same of himself? Teufelsdröckh, Carlyle's approximate alter-ego in *Sartor Resartus*, lives at "the pinnacle of Weissnichtwo" (16), and certainly attempts to find the "Infinite and the Eternal." One could argue that Carlyle modeled his nebulous protagonist on previous anti-heroes, such as Shelley's creature and Maturin's Melmoth, both of which borrow heavily

from Milton's doomed central figure. When Anna Jameson visited the Carlyles in January 1844, she wrote that Jane leads "neither a healthy nor a happy life—married to a man of genius 'with the Devil in his liver' (to quote his own words) it must be something next worse to being married to Satan himself" (Thomas 160). In no way do I wish to claim that Carlyle modeled himself after Milton's Satan, but I do hope to make meaningful connections between the hypnotically eloquent, ultimately downcast orators. At the very least, the anti-hero is a productive model with which to reconsider Carlyle's alluring and frustrating rhetorical methodology.

The reason that readers remain captivated by Carlyle is the same reason that so many people are drawn to the anti-hero in its modern manifestations. Tony Soprano, Don Draper, Walter White, and Frank Underwood—each excites and frustrates, attracts and repels. They are fascinating because viewers can enact their own fantasies through fictional deviant behavior, while simultaneously they recognize the humanity that lurks behind the rough exterior. Look no further than Julia Margaret Cameron's 1867 photographs of Carlyle. The frontal image is a haunting chiaroscuro that captures his silent intensity. Trauma lurks behind his eyes, the gaze of a passionate, raging, and yet defeated man—one that today's film and television anti-heroes similarly portray. But the issue with becoming an anti-hero is that it is easy to be mistaken for a villain. And in their fictional manifestations at least, these figures are almost invariably sacrificed to appease the demands of the lynch-mob. Carlyle's spiteful detractors, to use his Editor's words in *Sartor Resartus*, *have tried* "[t]o pick out the choicest Plums, and present them separately on a cover of [their] own' (214). But the same, rather unfortunately, might be said about Carlyle's most ardent supporters, though in this case it is an attempt to rebalance their hero atop a pedestal that he may have abandoned of his own accord. Scholars should accept that Carlyle was and is more Heathcliff than Werther, perhaps more Satan than God—a deeply troubled and troubling figure who demands both admiration and aversion. Perhaps the nineteenth century, for Carlyle is, borrowing from Thackeray's homage to vanity, a "Novel without a Hero."

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