

“Je suis la Révolution Française”:
Carlyle, Napoleon, and the Napoleonic Mythus

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OF THE INSTINCT for hero-worship, Carlyle writes that “it is very cheering to consider that no sceptical logic, or general triviality, insincerity and aridity of any Time and its influences can destroy this noble inborn loyalty and worship that is in man” (*Heroes* 14). Though he regarded Napoleon as a deeply flawed hero, Carlyle would not have been surprised either by the controversy or the interest that has been stirred as a result of the 200th anniversary of his coronation as Emperor in Notre Dame Cathedral on 2 December 1804. While “le bicentenaire du sacre” has generated widespread criticism of Napoleon’s legacy—the French *Historia Thématique* devoted its entire November–December 2004 issue to a “Contre Enquête Explosive” centered around the question, “Napoléon: Empereur ou Dictateur?”—the occasion has also demonstrated the enduring strength of what Carlyle would have called the Napoleonic “Mythus” (*Sartor* 144). Its power and its allure are best summarized by Dominique de Villepin, the present prime minister of France, who asserts in his best-selling study, *Les Cent-Jours, ou l'Esprit de Sacrifice* (2001): “The conjunction of a man and a nation, Napoleon lives indissolubly in our collective destiny” (593).

For Villepin, Napoleon’s life illustrates his boast that “Je suis la Révolution française.” In peculiarly Carlylean language, he celebrates the Emperor’s legacy: “Not a day goes by without my feeling the imperious need to remember so as not to yield in the face of indifference, laughter or gibes . . . and to advance in the service of French ambition” (65, 10). Villepin’s response suggests

that even in an age dominated by postmodern skepticism, hero-worship remains a vital force. As Carlyle observes in *Heroes*, unbelievers might mock the tendency, but “in no time whatever can they entirely eradicate out of living men’s hearts a certain altogether peculiar reverence for Great Men; genuine admiration, loyalty, adoration, however dim and perverted it may be” (13). Nonetheless, Carlyle rejects Villepin’s conviction that Bonaparte incarnates the French Revolution. According to Carlyle, Napoleon betrays the very principles that first distinguished him as a great man: “He apostatised from his old faith in Facts, took to believing in Semblances” (*Heroes* 206). Carlyle was characteristically contradictory, independent, and prescient in his assessment of Napoleon, though his views are seldom mentioned either by historians or biographers. From an early stage in his career he rejected the myth of redemption that the Emperor, together with his publicist Emmanuel Las Cases, had artfully cultivated in *Mémorial de Sainte-Helène* (1823), and that was perpetuated by a wide range of writers, including Byron, Walter Scott, and Hazlitt in England, and Vigny, Balzac, Stendhal, Chateaubriand, and Hugo in France.

Las Cases represented Bonaparte’s defeat as an heroic triumph: “By abdicating, Napoleon . . . destroyed every idea of his own personal ambition: he departed as the hero of a cause of which he was the master” (1: 61). Napoleon’s apotheosis was watched, Chateaubriand commented in *Mémoires d’outre tombe* (1811–41), “by the whole world” (1: 1531). The Emperor was acutely aware of the judgment of posterity. With Las Cases’s assistance he invents a legend that merges his own fate with that of France and the French Revolution: “The universe has its eyes on us! . . . We live as the martyrs of an immortal cause! . . . Millions of men weep for us, the country sighs, and glory mourns our fate! . . . We here struggle against the gods, and the prayers of nations are for us! . . . Misfortunes also have their heroism and their glory!” (2: 252). Carlyle ridicules the myth in which the Emperor “enveloped himself” (*Heroes* 208). He insists that Bonaparte be judged according to “what he did *justly*; what Nature with her laws will sanction. To what of reality was in him; to that and nothing more.” The “organic” bond that the Napoleon develops between his own fate and that of France is a shabby fiction: “France is great, and all-great; and at bottom, he is France. . . . He cannot

understand it: inconceivable that the reality has not corresponded to his program of it; that France was not all-great, that he was not France" (*Heroes* 206).

In exploding the myth of St. Helena, Carlyle joins the ranks of those French historians who reject the terms of the Emperor's rebirth at St. Helena. Twenty-two years before Pierre Lanfrey (1828–77) attacked the Napoleonic legend in *Histoire de Napoleon I* (1867–75)—a work that Carlyle read in 1873—the author of *Heroes* anticipated many of the French scholar's conclusions. Yet unlike Lanfrey, a disillusioned Jacobin, Carlyle acknowledges the greatness of Napoleon, the magnitude of his achievements, and the psychological appeal of his "Mythus." His position is closer to that of two twentieth-century skeptics, Jacques Bainville and Jean Tulard. In *Napoléon* (1931) Bainville recognizes the visionary quality of Bonaparte's character: "[He] was made complete by the fact he was able to make his place of exile not only a Caucasian rock, but also a prophet's tripod. He became the prophet and spokesman of the new age" (394). What Bainville regrets is the incubus of violence that Europe endured as a consequence of Bonaparte's conquests: "Except from the point of view of glory, or of 'art,' it would probably be better that Napoleon should never have existed. All in all, his reign, which was meant to continue the Revolution, ended in dire failure. His genius prolonged a contest which he was foredoomed to lose" (403–04). In *Le myth de Napoléon* (1971), Tulard unravels Napoleon's cunning strategy to take advantage of new political alliances in order to represent himself as a republican icon: "Napoleon laid claim to the two rising forces of the nineteenth century—the nationalism and the liberalism against which he had fought. As a prisoner of the Holy Alliance, the fallen sovereign could bury the anti-liberal Caesar in favor of a democratic Napoleon, the soldier of a Revolution which belonged no longer to the bourgeoisie alone, but which had encompassed the Fourth Estate." Like Carlyle, Tulard sees that the Napoleonic "Mythus" is a literary, as well as a political phenomenon: "Initially Royalist, Romanticism swung towards a poetic Bonapartism which provided the Napoleonic legend with the literary support without which its success could not have been so brilliant" (347). But Carlyle, who demands that historians rise to the vision of poets, will not allow his own view of the Emperor to be obscured by Las Cases's "French Fanfaronade" (*Heroes* 208).

Regrettably, the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl excluded Carlyle from his remarkable analysis of the Napoleonic legacy, *Napoleon For and Against* (1949), despite the fact that Geyl's own summary of Bonaparte's career echoed the author of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*: "He was a conqueror . . . who could not help turning an ally into a vassal or at least interpreting the relationship to his own exclusive advantage decorated his lust of conquest with the fine-sounding phrases of progress and civilization; and who at last, in the name of the whole of Europe, which was to look to him for order and peace, presumed to brand England as the universal disturber and enemy" (9). Geyl's oversight was probably deliberate. He admired Carlyle as an historian, but he later accused him in *The Use and Abuse of History* (1955) of espousing "Romantic notions [that] lured him into a more naked idolatry of power than Ranke" (39–40). Yet nowhere does Geyl acknowledge Carlyle's antipathy to the Napoleonic cult, which dominated French history for half a century, and played an important part in the Emperor's entombment at Les Invalides in 1840, and in Louis Napoleon's later accession to the throne. For one who supposedly idolized power, Carlyle's criticism of Napoleon in *Heroes* and elsewhere seems oddly perverse. It is tempting to dismiss his judgment as symptomatic of his contempt for the French nation and its "Gallic-Ethnic Excitability and effervescence" (*French Revolution* 3: 43). Carlyle savored such complaints, and in *Heroes* he playfully indulges those who seek evidence of his anti-French prejudice. He marvels that the French could venerate Voltaire, but concedes he is "the realized ideal of every one of them; the thing they are all wanting to be. . . . *He* is properly their god,—such god as they are fit for" (*Heroes* 14). Typically, he drops such remarks to disguise the extent of his own intellectual and emotional engagement. In the same way that Carlyle keeps returning to the subject of Voltaire in his writings, so too does he persist in reading and thinking about Napoleon.

Particularly in the period following the publication of *The French Revolution* (1837), Napoleon performs the role of the hero as tyrant in Carlyle's writings. On the one hand, he represents an historical phenomenon that must be fathomed and defined; on the other, his status as a hero must be circumscribed, if hero-worship itself is to have any value or meaning in a world in which the notion of a natural order is being challenged by the principles

of liberty and equality. Bonaparte's example is crucial to Carlyle as a reminder of the limitations, as well as the possibilities, of hero-worship. Keenly alive to the charge that he is an advocate of "might equals right," Carlyle seeks in the final lecture of *Heroes*, "The Hero as King," to distinguish between a ruler who governs in deference to the eternal laws of nature and God—Cromwell—and one who invests himself with the power and authority to transcend these laws—Napoleon. In essence the difference between true and false heroes lies in their capacity for belief, veracity, and conscience. Carlyle, the alleged worshipper of physical force, advances a view of heroism that he equates with spiritual rather than physical force. It is a distinction that perplexes and intrigues him, and will dominate his edition of Cromwell's *Letters and Speeches* (1845), and later, his biography of *Frederick the Great* (1858–65).

The comparison that Carlyle draws between Cromwell and Napoleon in *Heroes* is partly shaped by his desire to redress the balance of their respective reputations. He was familiar with the biographies of Napoleon written by Scott and Hazlitt. While Scott in *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1827) endorses the romantic view of Napoleon as a tormented genius, he attacks him for his Cromwellian contempt for political liberty: "[I]t must always be written down, as Buonaparte's error as well as his guilt, that misusing the power which the 18th Brumaire threw into his hands, he totally destroyed the liberty of France, or, as we would say, more properly, the chance which that country had of attaining a free, and at the same time, a settled government. He might have been a patriot prince, he chose to be an usurping despot—he might have played the part of Washington, he preferred that of Cromwell" (4: 223). Carlyle recalls the distinction in *Heroes*, where he assails those who identify Cromwell with "[s]elfish ambition, dishonesty, duplicity; a fierce, coarse, hypocritical *Tartufe* . . . [a]nd then come contrasts with Washington" (179).

Hazlitt refers briefly to Cromwell in his *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1828–30), which Carlyle used in *The French Revolution*. Referring to the fact that they both were involved in equestrian accidents, Hazlitt remarks, "If this is any thing more than a mere casual coincidence, it might seem as if usurpers, or those who have seized the reins of government into their own hands, have

an ambition to be charioteers, where there is a sense of power, and of difficulty and dexterity in directing it" (2: 363). Yet elsewhere, Hazlitt exonerates Napoleon in terms that Carlyle may have found useful. In Hazlitt's view, Bonaparte is trapped between the need to assert his authority and his desire to realize the ideals of the French Revolution:

[He] was not strictly a free agent. He could hardly do otherwise than he did, ambition apart, and merely to preserve himself and the country he ruled. France was in a state of siege . . . [and] required a military dictator to repress internal treachery and headstrong factions, and repel external force. Who then shall blame Buonaparte? . . . The English, who having set the example of liberty to the world, did all they could do to stifle it? Or the Continental Sovereigns, who were only acquainted with its principles by their fear and hatred of them? Or the Emigrants, traitors to the name of men as well as Frenchmen? Or the Jacobins, who made the tree of liberty spout nothing but blood? (3: 3–4)

Ironically, this is precisely the defense that Carlyle later employs when he attempts to redeem Cromwell and Frederick the Great, and to contrast them favorably with the unscrupulous Bonaparte.

Cromwell's name was frequently invoked by early French historians of the Revolution and was invariably connected with images of dictatorship and tyranny. F. A. M. Mignet, whose *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1824) Carlyle reviewed in 1837, argued that the tragedy of Napoleon was that he too closely resembled the Protector. Mignet observes that "Napoleon has presented in France what Cromwell presented for a moment in England; the government of the army, which always establishes itself when a revolution is contended against; it then gradually changes, and from being civil . . . becomes military" (453). But Napoleon exercised a more constructive influence than Cromwell, partly due to circumstance: "[Napoleon] disposing of immense force and of uncontested power, gave himself up in security to the vast designs and the part of a conqueror" while Cromwell, "deprived of the assent which popular exhaustion accords, incessantly attacked by factions, was reduced to neutralise them." In Mignet's

view, Napoleon “had the frankness and decision of power; [Cromwell] the craft and hypocrisy of opposed ambition.” In the end, both suffer “the fate of all powers which, arising from liberty, do not continue to abide with her” (453–54).

In the case of Mignet, Carlyle welcomed his analysis but rejected his conclusions. Cromwell emerged as a hero in his eyes because he devoted himself to the Sisyphean task of restoring order and appeasing factionalism in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Echoing Hazlitt, Carlyle argues that Cromwell had no other choice. He was destined to be exhausted by this endeavor, yet he pursued it nonetheless, tremulously confident that he was the vehicle of God’s holy purposes. Blair Worden has persuasively demonstrated that Carlyle’s primary motive in affirming Cromwell’s spiritual integrity was to counter the Whig civil libertarian interpretation of his actions: “The biblical fervour of the Puritans, their taste for Old Testament parallels . . . their preoccupation with Antichrist, features of the movement which Whig and republican historians had always suppressed or disowned, delighted Carlyle.” Worden rightly notes that at this stage in Carlyle’s career—between 1839 and 1845 when he studies Cromwell—his “theory of hero-worship, which always had its authoritarian streak, was taken over by it” (140–41). Yet simultaneously, this is also the period in which Carlyle turns decisively against Napoleon, to whom he had referred in 1830 as “our chief contemporary wonder, and in some sort the epitome of his age” (*CL* 5: 197; to Macvey Napier, 16 December). And why does he reject Napoleon? In simple terms, because he is an authoritarian without the mitigating virtue of a transcendent belief, other than the “Quack” faith of personal glory.

For Carlyle, a religious sense is the essential characteristic of any true hero, who must recognize that his own strength is a faint impression of God’s majesty and who shapes his ambition around this irrevocable “Fact.” Napoleon’s career illustrates the violation of the fragile boundaries that separate man from God. In claiming the territory of divinity, Bonaparte allows his authority to degenerate into a “falsehood” (*Heroes* 207). Carlyle connects Napoleon’s lack of belief to his tyranny. He is a lesser figure than Cromwell because he never acknowledges the limits of his power: “No silent walking, through long years, with the Awful, Unnameable of this Universe; ‘walking with God’ . . . and faith

and strength in that alone. . . . Napoleon lived in an age when God was no longer believed . . . he had to begin not out of the Puritan Bible, but out of poor Sceptical *Encyclopédies*" (*Heroes* 204). Napoleon conceives of human beings "mechanically" rather than religiously. They are the agents of his will and he values them as an extension of his personality. Carlyle's spiritual perspective allows him to view Napoleon's character from a vantage point unencumbered by what Pieter Geyl has called "the Napoleonic legend." According to this script, Napoleon is to be regarded as "the representative of the Revolution, the Revolution as it was understood by the bourgeoisie, and as the creator of unparalleled *gloire*" (Geyl 53). Blair Worden has shown how Carlyle freed himself from the Whig interpretation of Cromwell's life and captured an essential aspect of the Protector's character—his fervent spiritual "sincerity"—that previous historians had either denied or misunderstood. Similarly, Carlyle rejects the myth that Napoleon was the incarnation of the French nation and its revolutionary destiny, and represents him as an artful propagandist who cunningly transformed his military defeat into an aesthetic triumph.

One of the chief advocates of the Napoleonic legend was Louis Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877), who had administered the return of Napoleon's remains to France, and who had celebrated his life in two massive histories, *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1823–27) and *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire* (1848–62). Carlyle had used Thiers' first history in *The French Revolution*, and in a review in 1837 dismissed it as "waste, inorganic" (29: 3). In this earlier work Thiers connects Napoleon to the world-historical movement of democracy: "[H]e came to perform a mysterious task, imposed, without his being aware of it, by Fate, of which he was the involuntary agent. It was not liberty that he came to continue, for that could not yet exist. He came to continue, under monarchical forms, the revolution in the world; he came to continue it, by seating himself, a plebian, on a throne; by bringing the pontiff to Paris to anoint a plebian brow with the sacred oil; by creating an aristocracy with plebians" (5: 436). Carlyle agrees that Napoleon was the harbinger of the Revolution and the democratic ideal. He insists that in "the first period" the Corsican's lieutenant's "faith" was genuine, and that he was a "true Democrat." Napoleon was an enthusiast of "Democracy

asserting itself in the French Revolution,” and his interpretation of this momentous movement “includes whatever the French Revolution, or any Revolution, could mean.” He believed wholly in the principle of “*La carrière ouverte aux talents*, The implements to him who could handle them” (*Heroes* 205).

In practice, this meant not “anarchy,” but a hierarchy of authority based on natural aptitude. Napoleon’s greatest challenge was to “bridle-in that great devouring, self-devouring French Revolution; to *tame* it, so that its intrinsic purpose can be made good, that it may become *organic*, and be able to live among other organisms and *formed* things, not as a wasting destruction alone.” This was “the true purport” (*Heroes* 206) of Napoleon’s life, and at least until the period of his coronation as Emperor, he succeeded in realizing his goal. Carlyle’s language here suggests his resistance to political interpretations or specific policies. Napoleon understood, with brilliant clarity, that the Revolution signified a popular repudiation of aristocratic “Shams” and hypocrisies, and of a society organized by the wealthy and the idle to protect and expand their privileges. He also realized that democracy was a “formula” rather than an “organic” reality to the French people. If it were not to serve as a prescription for chaos and terror, it had to be built on the solid foundation of “a strong Authority.” Carrying forward the mission of Mirabeau, which was thwarted by his early death, Bonaparte aimed to reconcile “kingship” with the heroic popular energies of the Revolutionary movement.

In Carlyle’s view, it is precisely at the moment in which Napoleon establishes himself as a true “King”—a monarchy based on the strength of his talents and character, rather than on his name, his title, and his blood-line—that he betrays the legacy of the French Revolution. The Napoleonic legend is a fallacy because Napoleon deliberately forsakes his historical role as the incarnation of the French national will. He ignores the spiritual underpinnings of the Revolution—it is a cry for order, as well as a rejection of lies and hypocrisies. French “hunger” is more than physical. The Revolution manifests itself in destruction and violence, yet its true “intrinsic purpose” is constructive. Read symbolically, it is a plea for God’s justice on earth. Carlyle disputes Hazlitt’s and Thiers’s argument that Napoleon was somehow an “involuntary agent” who “hardly could do otherwise than he did.”

On the contrary, Napoleon's rulership becomes a highly self-conscious piece of theatricality, intended to celebrate his increasingly swollen self-image. Corrupted by absolute power, Napoleon can only see it as an instrument to exploit those weaker than himself. Whereas he once held the "Democratic" notion that all men could be heroes, he now regards them only as instruments of his will. Carlyle observes, "he believed too much in the *Dupeability* of men; saw no fact deeper in man than Hunger than this!" (*Heroes* 207).

Napoleon's subsequent career exhibits the effects of his conversion to "Semblances": he "strove to connect himself with Austrian Dynasties, Popedoms, with the old False Feudalities which he once saw clearly to be false;—considered that he would found 'his Dynasty' and so forth; that the enormous French Revolution meant only that!" Everything had become a matter of consolidating power, rather than using it to realize his once cherished "Democratic" ideals. His attitude to religion reveals the extent of his cynicism. This man, who once had "an eye to see . . . a soul to do and dare" is now mesmerized by the pageantry of his own ambition. His "transcendent" objective becomes the extension of his own cult of power. Carlyle treats the coronation ceremony as Napoleon's attempt to re-clothe religion in the garments of his own glory: "What a paltry patchwork of theatrical paper-mantles, tinsel and mummery, had this man wrapt his own great reality in, thinking to make it more real thereby!" (*Heroes* 206).

Contrary to what Hazlitt and Thiers maintain, Napoleon grows to despise the French Revolution and its ideals. Carlyle pointedly contrasts Cromwell's inauguration—"by the Sword and Bible"—with Napoleon's gaudy ceremony, "'wanting nothing to complete the pomp of it,' as Augereau said, 'nothing but the half-million of men who had died to put an end to all that!'" (*Heroes* 207). Having deluded himself about the cause of his authority, Bonaparte manufactures a cult of authority by deluding others: "*Self* and false ambition had now become his god: self-deception once yielded to, all other deceptions follow naturally more and more" (*Heroes* 206). He fatally confuses might with right, and acts the role of the brutal tyrant rather than the enlightened hero. Carlyle singles out his execution of the Johann Philip Palm (1768–1806), a German publisher who had refused to name of the author of an anti-French pamphlet, as being the nadir of his

reputation: "It was a palpable tyrannous murderous injustice, which no man, let him paint an inch thick, could make out to be other. It burnt deep into the hearts of men, it and the like of it; suppressed fire flashed in the eyes of men, as they thought of it,—waiting their day!" (*Heroes* 207). Writing in the apocalyptic language of the *French Revolution*, Carlyle achieves solidarity with those who seek revenge.

The vigor of Carlyle's portrait of Napoleon is partly dependent on his own confused notion of what separates unjust tyranny from just authority. If *Heroes* marks Carlyle's turn towards authoritarianism, then it is a tentative and often uncertain turn. From the *French Revolution* onwards, Carlyle had struggled to define the proper boundaries of political freedom and obedience, while scrupulously avoiding political explanations. Politics meant "mechanical" distinctions between tyranny and democracy that seemed unreal to him in the context of nineteenth-century government. English opposition to Napoleon was severely compromised by the notion that Liverpool, Castlereagh, and Wellington had somehow played the role of the "liberators" of Europe. Carlyle knew of no democracy that in any significant way had lived according to its basic ideals, other than Louis Napoleon's France, which he had visited in 1851. Consequently, he tended to see "liberty and equality" as symptoms of despair at the lack of genuine heroes, rather than as legitimate political ends. Wherever he looked, he saw that "[s]ociety . . . is some representation, not insupportably inaccurate, of a graduated Worship of Heroes;—reverence and obedience done to men really great and wise" (*Heroes* 12).

By linking "reverence" to "obedience," Carlyle constricts rational choice and dissent, weakens the distinction between the private and public sphere of judgment, and leaves little room for the vital check of doubt. In short, his conception of the hero erodes the role of politics in civil society, and leaves the "obedient" dangerously vulnerable to the will of the "great and wise." The baneful effects of this one-sidedness are evident in Carlyle's defense of Cromwell's actions at Drogheda, which accompanies his condemnation of Catholic massacres. But elsewhere, Carlyle's authoritarianism is undercut by his profound conception of what religion involves. In *Heroes* he remarks that "the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough

without asserting it even to himself, much less to others). . . concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him" (*Heroes* 4). A religious sense is vital because it constrains the hero's will to power. Referring to Cromwell, Carlyle argues that "We exaggerate the ambition of Great Men; we mistake what the nature of it is" (*Heroes* 191). For Cromwell, "God's Word . . . was great, and all else was little to him. To call such a man 'ambitious' . . . [is] the poorest solecism" (*Heroes* 192). In Napoleon's life no such force operated to remind him of his fallibilities, other than his native common sense, the impact of which his worldly ambition gradually eclipsed.

Carlyle did not recognize the fragility of the comparison he had drawn between these two modern "Kings" until he came to write the biography of a third claimant, Frederick the Great. The Prussian leader often seems to make a mockery of his conviction that the religious sense mattered to the hero. In private Carlyle complained frequently about Frederick's lack of spirituality. To his assistant Joseph Neuberg he wrote, 16 February 1852, "I continue reading about *Frederic*; ordering Maps, running after books &c. to see what I am to order. The thing seems to myself very idle: what have I, here where I am, to say about the 'lean drill-serjeant of the World'? I do not even grow to love him better: a really mediocre intellect, a hard withered soul; great only in his invincible courage, in his constant unconscious loyalty to truth and fact: the last and only *King* I know of in Europe since Cromwell" (*CL* 27: 46). Carlyle omits Napoleon's name here, and again in the "Proem" of the first volume of *Frederick*: "This . . . is one of the peculiarities of Friedrich, that he is hitherto the last of the Kings" (*Works* 12: 6). Yet Napoleon remains crucial to Carlyle's "Historical Conception of this Man and King" (*Works* 12: 4). Just as he had used Napoleon in *Heroes* and the *Letters and Speeches* to rescue Cromwell's reputation, so too does Carlyle invoke the French Emperor's example to vindicate Frederick as a just ruler rather than a tyrannical "lean drill-serjeant."

Carlyle quietly ignores Napoleon's hero-worship of Frederick, yet his silence may be deliberate. In the *Mémorial* Las Cases reminds his readers of the deep fascination that Frederick exercised on the Emperor, who kept his sword by his pen at St. Helena: "I observed that, as a curious fact, that I had never heard

the name of Frederick the Great uttered by Napoleon. Nonetheless, the large silver watch, a kind of alarum used by that Prince, which hangs by the fire-place in the Emperor's apartment at St. Helena; the eagerness with which Napoleon, on his entrance into Potsdam, seized the sword of the grand Frederick, exclaiming, 'Let those who will seek other spoils; I value this beyond millions!'; Napoleon's long and silent contemplation of the tomb of Frederick; together these amply demonstrate the exalted rank that this prince occupies in the Emperor's spirit, and how he venerates everything connected with him" (2: 249). Typically, Las Cases reserves judgment about their relative merits, while he stresses the Emperor's awe and humility at the tomb of Frederick. Bainville is more candid about Napoleon's use of the Frederick parallel. Following the battle of Jena, the Emperor is keen to pay homage to the Prussian leader. For Bainville, the gesture is significant: "It was one of Bonaparte's most glorious hours: to a man of the eighteenth century the King of Prussia, soldier, legislator, philosopher, had seemed the perfect hero. But in the imagination of the peoples, it was he who should take the place of that Frederick whose sword was his most glorious trophy, whose alarum clock he would take to St. Helena" (230). Carlyle was aware of these details, but he does not mention them in *Heroes*. Instead, he reserves comment on Bonaparte's ambitions until he writes his biography of Frederick the Great, which stands as an epic refutation of the Frenchman's claim to have eclipsed the greatness of the Prussian king.

In the "Proem" to *Frederick the Great*, Carlyle openly acknowledges that "Fritz" is "by no means one of the perfect demigods; and there are various things to be said against him with good ground. To the last, a questionable hero; with much in him which one could have wished not there, and much wanting which one could have wished" (*Works* 12: 14). Carlyle was familiar with his rival Macaulay's stinging summary of the Prussian ruler's amorality in his essay on "Frederic the Great" (1842)—"a politician destitute alike of morality and decency, insatiably rapacious, and shamelessly false" (9: 577)—and he had no desire to overstate his subject's merits. He was too honest an historian to pretend that Frederick shared any of Cromwell's enthusiasm for "Christ's Law, the Right and True" (*Heroes* 201), but his sources had convinced him that the King of Prussia possessed a deep

inner “veracity” of a religious quality. Frederick was an honest ruler in a dishonest century, and like Cromwell, he grew in inner strength as he faced greater adversity: “How this man, officially a King withal, comported himself in the Eighteenth Century, and managed *not* to be a Liar and Charlatan as his Century was, deserves to be seen a little by men and kings, and may silently have didactic meanings in it” (*Works* 12: 15). Carlyle realized that in order to extract these “meanings,” he would have to distance the Prussian king from the French “Charlatan.”

In *Frederick the Great* Carlyle continues his attack against the Napoleonic legend. He is determined to show that the Prussian ruler stays true to his nature and character throughout his life, and that he never sacrifices his principles and loyalties for the sake of “*Self* and false ambition” (*Heroes* 206). Frederick is everything that Napoleon is not. Writing to a young correspondent in search of heroes in 1856, Carlyle dismisses Bonaparte as a “Play actor-turned-Pirate in his character and history—an immense Gambler à la Dick Turpin, who after all his huge reckless bettings and enormous temporary successes (more astounding to the foolish than to the wise) ended by losing his last guinea, and by being flung out of the room head foremost” (*CL* 32: 34–35; 28 November). Yet the reputation of this “Gambler” has soared since the French Revolution, while Frederick’s name has been forgotten. In the “Proem” Carlyle remarks, “On the breaking-out of that formidable Explosion, and Suicide of his Century, Friedrich sank into comparative obscurity; eclipsed amid the ruins of that universal earthquake.” Historians have allowed their critical judgment to be undermined by the Napoleonic legend: “[I]t seemed as if there had been no generals or sovereigns before: as if Friedrich, Gustavus, Cromwell, William Conqueror and Alexander the Great were not worth speaking of henceforth” (*Works* 12: 7). In his biography Carlyle strives to overturn the assumption that Napoleon’s heroic example had rendered Frederick’s obsolete.

Implicitly, Carlyle reveals the way in which tyrants and their acolytes falsify the past in order to justify their brutal policies. In the period in which he writes *Frederick*, the Napoleonic legend continues to be exploited by his nephew Louis Napoleon, whom Carlyle derides as the “Brumagen Cromwell” (*CL* 27: 3; to James Marshall, 5 January 1852). Carlyle may have been familiar with

Thiers's massive *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire* (1845–62), which portrayed the first Bonaparte in the very terms that Carlyle ridiculed in his "Proem." Though Thiers was opposed to the new Emperor, his version of Napoleon I's career occasionally bordered on hagiography. According to Thiers, Napoleon was an unprecedented historical reality. Thiers explained his uniqueness by contrasting him with Frederick:

Greatness! there is no lack of that in him who succeeded Frederick, and surpassed him in the admiration he excited, and the destruction he caused! It was reserved for the French Revolution, destined to change the aspect of European society, to produce a man who would fix the attention of the world as powerfully as Charlemagne, Caesar, Hannibal, and Alexander. He possessed every qualification . . . whether we consider the greatness of the part he was destined to perform, the vastness of the political convulsions he caused, the splendour, extent, and profundity of his genius, or his majestic gravity of thought. (*Works* 12: 433)

Thiers acknowledges Frederick's brilliance as a strategist and leader, but argues that he fell short of Napoleon in relation to both accomplishment and character:

Frederick, the jesting sceptic, the crowned leader of the philosophers of the eighteenth century, the despiser of all that is respectable in mankind, who turned his very friends into ridicule; who was in some sort predestined to defy, insult, and humble the pride of Austria, and of the old system it represented; who dared, in the midst of that firmly seated Europe, in whose position it was so difficult to effect a change—dared, we repeat, to undertake the creation of a new power, and had the honour of succeeding, though opposed alone to the entire continent. . . . This Frederick is an original and striking character, who, though not deficient in great deeds, is deficient in greatness, either because he only changed the relative proportion of power in the interior of the Germanic Confederation, or because his mocking physiognomy is deficient in that dignity which impresses mankind. (*Works* 12: 433–34).

For Carlyle, the opposite is true: Frederick's "greatness" can be attributed to his lack of dignity and to his realistic and honorable ambitions.

By defying the powers of Europe and exposing the hypocrisy of eighteenth-century diplomacy, Frederick sets in motion a political movement that culminated in the French Revolution. The keynote of his character is his brutal honesty, and his refusal to countenance lying as a conventional form of political conduct. Frederick is a warrior, but not one who uses force for the sake of personal prestige or martial glory. On the contrary, he is forced to defend himself because Europe will not tolerate his "veracity." Like Cromwell, Frederick has little choice but to fight in order to preserve his country. Though physically broken and mentally exhausted by the task, he perseveres with tenacity and courage. In Carlyle's view, "Napoleon did indeed, by immense expenditure of men and gunpowder, overrun Europe for a time: but Napoleon never, by husbanding and wisely expending his men and gunpowder, defended a little Prussia against all Europe, year after year for seven years long, till Europe had enough, and gave-up the enterprise as it could not manage" (*Works* 12: 7).

Frederick's "might" derives from his "right," and his kingship stands in sharp opposition to Napoleon's: "So soon as the Drawcansir equipments are well torn off, and the shilling-gallery got to silence, it will be found that there were great kings before Napoleon,—and likewise an Art of War, grounded on veracity and human courage and insight, not upon Drawcansir rodomontade, grandiose Dick-Turpinism, revolutionary madness, and unlimited expenditure of men and gunpowder" (*Works* 12: 8–9). But at certain moments in the biography, Carlyle must confront evidence that reveals a strong Napoleonic streak in Frederick's character, and a "Dick-Turpinism" worthy of the French Emperor. For example, the Prussian king justifies his invasion of Silesia by stating that "It was a means of acquiring reputation; of increasing the power of state; and of terminating what concerned that long-litigated question of the Berg-Jülich Succession." Whereas Carlyle can explain Cromwell's excesses at Drogheda by appealing to divine justice, here he finds it difficult to attribute a religious motive to Frederick's resolution. He refers evasively to the King as "a man who expects to be believed . . . his eye set on the practical merely" (*Works* 14: 405). In such instances, Carlyle

quietly tolerates his “questionable” hero. From his perspective, Frederick is at his least admirable when he most resembles Napoleon Bonaparte.

Elsewhere Carlyle tries to invest Frederick’s actions with a loosely defined religious sense. Referring to the Würtembergers allusion to Frederick as a “Protestant Hero,” Carlyle comments “that there is something of real truth in it.” Though Frederick’s creed “differed extremely” from that of Martin Luther, Carlyle believes that they share one “all-essential” conviction in common: “That it is not allowable, that it is dangerous and abominable, to attempt believing what is not true. In that sense, Friedrich, by nature and position, was a Protestant, and even the chief Protestant in the world” (*Works* 18: 169–70). Carlyle chooses his words carefully here, and outlines Frederick’s “Protestant” qualities in a manner that might have satisfied Voltaire. The Prussian king interprets religion in a negative way, yet there is a genuine spiritual element in his outlook. Frederick’s faith amounts to an instinctive revulsion at the way in which European rulers exploit spiritual “shams” to delude the masses and to sanctify their tyranny. Frederick boldly refuses to emulate them, and though he is tolerant of other religions, he makes it clear to his people that his “Protestant” attitude is the distinctive “Mythus” of the Prussian nation.

While Frederick’s belief cannot rival Cromwell’s “Christ’s Law,” it does operate on his character as a transcendent restraint. Unlike Napoleon, he shows no interest in establishing a cult of personality. Modest and austere, he gains loyalty by judging events through the eyes of ordinary Prussians. Carlyle uses the episode of Miller Arnold to demonstrate his simple humanity. When the King learns in 1779 about the case of a Miller who had a stream diverted by a wealthy aristocrat but is denied legal compensation, he risks his reputation for impartiality by overturning the Court’s decision and imprisoning the justices. Carlyle lauds his conviction that “everybody, be he high or low, rich or poor, get prompt justice” and supports his initiative against the “attorney species” (*Works* 19: 239). Though the case eventually proves to be more complicated than Frederick at first grasped—a later decision finds that the Miller had not been affected by the diversion—Carlyle sympathizes with Frederick, who is ridiculed by polite Berlin Society for his interference: “To Friedrich respectability of

wig that issues in solemnly failing to do justice, is a mere enormity, greater than the most wigless condition could be" (*Works* 19: 244). He may have been wrong to act, but Frederick's sympathies link him to the people. He achieves what Napoleon only pretends to achieve—and the episode itself stands in stark contrast to Bonaparte's cruel treatment of Palm, the Berlin bookseller.

Carlyle's epic attempt to refute the Napoleonic legend in *Frederick the Great* unintentionally reveals his ambivalence about Bonaparte, whom he had called "our last Great Man!" in *Heroes* (208). Curiously, he continues to read about Napoleon long after he completes *Frederick*. In a letter to John Carlyle in November 1873, he admits that he has again revised his opinion of Napoleon after reading Lanfrey's *Histoire*:

Lanfrey's book is hard and dry, but not without intelligence and vigour; and says throughout the very worst that can be said of that wonderful man. . . . In *Lanfrey* Napoleon gradually delineates himself as the nearest approach ever made to Lucifer, called otherwise Satan *Saltoun*: but I found there were grave omissions in that delineation and that the man was actually human after all. Hardly ever man so strangely situated and so strongly tempted in this world before! (MS: NLS 527.102)

In its negative aspects, Lanfrey's portrait of Napoleon resembles Carlyle's in *Heroes*. In Lanfrey's view Bonaparte is consumed by ambition and glory:

[He] . . . loved glory ardently, and by it his ambition, selfish as it was, rose far above the vulgar level. On this side at least it was disinterested, and, though insatiably greedy for power, he was not the man to be content with power without grandeur. But the glory that he proposed to his soldiers was not glory in the sense which the modern world, and especially the French Revolution, had attached the word: it was glory as understood by the great conquerors of antiquity, which consisted in vanquishing, subjugating, and dazzling men,

and not in raising and ennobling them; glory which has in view victories of the sword, and not the conquests of civilisation. (1: 91)

Yet Carlyle refuses to accept this withering judgment of Napoleon because it excludes what is transcendently “wonderful” about him. In a recent biography of Napoleon, Frank McLynn has astutely remarked that “[i]f Napoleon became a mythical figure, this was because for once the cliché was true, and the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. If aspects of Napoleon’s career and personality are scrutinized one by one, it is possible to mount a devastating critique. But what remains overall defies such a reductive analysis” (664). Carlyle’s perspective is similarly nuanced. He does not deny that the Napoleonic legend contains elements of truth. What disturbs him about Bonaparte is his profound lack of a spiritual sense, which undermines his noble intentions. Oddly, Carlyle’s verdict on Napoleon anticipates the views of a writer who was resolutely opposed to any reading of history as the biography of great men. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy’s summary of Napoleon’s character serves indirectly to vindicate Carlyle’s understanding of heroic greatness: “‘Greatness’ would appear to exclude all possibility of applying standards of right and wrong. For the ‘great’ man nothing is wrong; there is no atrocity for which a ‘great’ man can be blamed. . . . For those of us who have the standard of good and evil given us by Christ, nothing can claim to be outside the law. And there is no greatness where simplicity, goodness and truth are absent” (1268).

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