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*Criticism of Thomas Carlyle*. Selected and edited with introduction and notes by Michael DiSanto. Herefordshire, Eng.: Brynmill Press/Edgeways Books, 2006. xxiv + 278 pp., £9.60.

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HIS SELECTION OF CARLYLE'S "criticism," Michael DiSanto acknowledges that neither this volume, nor "any other collection of reasonable length, can do justice to Carlyle's breadth" (viii). Indeed, when preparing a volume of modest length and modest price such as this one, deciding what to include and what to exclude, what to print in full and what to excerpt, is particularly onerous. All the more reason, then, for the editor to supply us with the rationale for his selections. Excerpts from *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution* are not included in the volume, DiSanto says, "because those works are available for purchase" (viii). Fair enough. Those who adopt this volume for classroom use are thus forewarned that they will need to place separate orders for *Sartor* and/or *The French Revolution* (presumably the Oxford World's Classics and the Modern Library editions, respectively). *Chartism* and "Boswell's Life of Johnson" are also absent from the volume, says DiSanto, "because of their length" (viii). Here the rationale, particularly in the case of *Chartism*, is less justifiable. Certainly *Chartism* is a long essay, but it is conveniently divided into discrete, self-contained units, even just one of which (the opening "Condition-of-England Question" segment, for example) might suffice as a representative excerpt from what is surely one of Carlyle's most important essays of political and social criticism. Quite surprisingly, also absent from this volume are any excerpts from *Past and Present*. No reasons

are offered for this exclusion, and one is thus left with the unfortunate impression that *Past and Present*, in the editor's view, does not merit the status of "essential reading" (viii) where Carlyle's "criticism" is concerned. I trust this is not really DiSanto's view, but some rationale for excluding *Past and Present* is called for here.

What, then, has been included? In the first two-thirds of the volume, texts from 1828 to 1840 are featured. "Signs of the Times," "On History," "Characteristics," and "Biography" appear in their entirety, while "Burns," "On History Again," and "Sir Walter Scott" are excerpted. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* is represented by two selections, "The Hero as Poet" and "The Hero as Man of Letters," both excerpted. In the latter third of the volume, we jump to 1850 for excerpts from three of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*: "The Present Time," "Downing Street," and "The New Downing Street." The volume continues with another mid-century selection—"Coleridge"—and concludes with two complete later works, the "Inaugural Address at Edinburgh" and *Shooting Niagara: and After?* The inclusion of several of Carlyle's early essays in their entirety is certainly welcome here; these essays are not always found in their full-length version in modestly priced collections or British literature anthologies, although "Signs of the Times," "On History," and "On History Again," do appear in their entirety in G. B. Tennyson's *A Carlyle Reader* (1969), currently available in a reprint edition from Copley Publishing. The early essays, however, are better represented in DiSanto's edition than they were in Alan Shelston's now out-of-print Penguin Classics edition, *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings* (1971), which excluded "Characteristics," "On History Again," and "Biography" and provided only an excerpt from "On History."

The basis for the essays and excerpts in the *Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* is the thirty-volume Centenary edition of Carlyle's works, edited by H. D. Traill (1896–99). Many reprints of Carlyle's work rely on this edition, including Tennyson's *Carlyle Reader*, but it is an unfortunate choice. The Centenary edition is based on the People's edition (1871–74), one that received very little, if any, input from Carlyle, and which is rife with errors (see Chris R. Vanden Bossche's *Historical*

*Essays* [xcii] and Michael K. Goldberg's *On Heroes* [cii–ciii]). Shelton based his *Selected Writings* on the Library edition (1869–71)—not a flawless copy-text either, but one that at least has the virtue of Carlyle's direct involvement. Moreover, DiSanto's volume merely reproduces Carlyle's writings as they were printed in the Centenary edition. For example, the early essays have footnoted titles, as they do in the Centenary; the footnotes indicate the original publication venue for the essay, but no further information is provided, and thus other relevant details (such as the names of the books under review in "Signs of the Times") are omitted. Lecture dates for "The Hero as Poet" and "The Hero as Man of Letters" are provided, but nothing indicates that these lectures were gathered into the volume *On Heroes*. Similarly, individual dates are provided for "The Present Time," "Downing Street," and "The New Downing Street," but nothing indicates that these publications are part of a group known as *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. A year (1851) is provided for the "Coleridge" selection, but no mention is made of its larger context, Carlyle's *The Life of John Sterling*. Contextual headnotes—even brief ones—for each selection would have made a big difference here, particularly for student users of the volume unfamiliar with Carlyle's works.

DiSanto does provide his own annotations, gathered at the end of the volume. No doubt due to space constraints, these notes are typically brief and to the point, and they are mostly restricted to identifying proper names as well as literary allusions and quotations. The notes appear to be generally accurate, but sometimes there are puzzling omissions. For instance, in the annotations for "Signs of the Times," Dugald Stewart rates a note, as do Lagrange and Laplace. However, a sentence from the same paragraph that mentions Stewart, Lagrange, and Laplace—"The land of Malebranche, Pascal, Descartes and Fenelon, has now only its Cousins and Villemains; while, in the department of Physics, it reckons far other names"—merits no note at all.

The nature of DiSanto's introductory essay makes the lack of contextual headnotes or some other mechanism for briefly introducing each selection even more pronounced. Rather than providing an overview of Carlyle's life and career as a

writer, DiSanto's introduction argues for Carlyle's central place in nineteenth-century British literature and culture. It is DiSanto's contention that our own contemporary prejudices (a distaste for racist diatribe, for instance, coupled with an affectation for French theorists) have relegated Carlyle, at best, to the margins of Victorian studies, and at worst, to the dustbin of history. Our contemporary tastes may indeed find Carlyle—particularly the later Carlyle—unpalatable, but this was the reaction of many of Carlyle's contemporaries as well. That said, Carlyle has hardly disappeared from the academic scene. He remains solidly ensconced in the most widely used British literature anthologies. Carlyle, in fact, leads off the new Victorian Era literature anthology from Broadview Press. He is the subject of two ongoing and ambitious editorial projects: *The Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle* (University of California Press) and *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (Duke University Press). A reference work, *The Carlyle Encyclopedia*, was published in 2004, and a revitalized *Carlyle Studies Annual* is now up and running. A double issue of *Literature and Belief* on the subject of Carlyle and religion was released last year. Carlyle is the subject of a recent biography by John Morrow, and Rosemary Ashton's highly praised *The Marriage of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* appeared just a few years ago. Since the mid-1990s, academic conferences devoted to the Carlyles have been held in Canada, Scotland, and the United States. And these are just a few examples.

Although he laments Carlyle's "diminishing presence in the university," DiSanto does acknowledge that some contemporary critics have made use of "theory" in their engagement with Carlyle's texts. However, he is dismissive of such efforts, taking Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor to task for their "attempted transformation of *Sartor Resartus* into a postmodern novel" (x) in their introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Sartor*: "Although the structure of *Sartor Resartus* makes the claims sound plausible," writes DiSanto, "Carlyle's opposition to this kind of assimilation is evident in the essays" (x). DiSanto here charges McSweeney and Sabor with an anachronistic theoretical project—"to assimilate Carlyle's writings into our postmodern categories"—then counters their efforts with his own anachronistic theory,

here presented as fact: in his essays, Carlyle already opposes “this kind of assimilation.” Elsewhere, DiSanto tells us that Carlyle “learned to respect the connection between the artist’s life and work that theorists in our age, such as Barthes and Foucault, have attempted to destroy” (xii). This statement oversimplifies both Carlyle’s position and that of Barthes and Foucault, in order to place Carlyle on the “right” side of a theory/anti-theory binary that in any case has long since gone out of fashion. Using the same argument, one might as well pit Carlyle against T. S. Eliot or Wimsatt and Beardsley. It may be true to some degree, as DiSanto claims, that Carlyle thought an “artist’s works can hardly be understood except as an expression of an individual life” (x). Yet is also true that Carlyle was highly aware that the typical medium for such an expression—the written word—is an extremely problematic one. It is hard to imagine a Victorian writer more self-conscious about the provisional, fragmentary nature of reading, writing, and interpretation than Carlyle, particularly when his subject is the past. Carlyle always foregrounds the partial nature of texts and other artifacts of the past, while at the same time he expresses his fascination with the tantalizing glimpse into history that such items appear to provide. As Suzy Anger has noted in the introduction to her collection of essays, *Knowing the Past* (2001), Carlyle’s “writings on history already manifest much of what is often regarded as contemporary: awareness of the effects of representation, the textuality of historical knowledge, and the impossibility of a fully objective account of the past” (3). It is precisely this aspect of Carlyle’s writing—his complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes—that makes him particularly interesting for many critics, whether their approaches are overtly theoretical or not. Indeed, it was no less an authority than K. J. Fielding who observed that Carlyle was “intellectually self-conscious about History” and thus plagued “by doubts and questions about the very nature of historical writing” (“Carlyle and Cromwell: The Writing of History as ‘DRYASDUST’” 48).

Elsewhere in his introduction, DiSanto argues quite rightly that Carlyle’s influence on the development of the novel in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries has been largely under-appreciated; more work is needed here, as DiSanto

suggests, particularly on the impact Carlyle had on Conrad. DiSanto's take on Carlyle's style is also nicely articulated, emphasizing the humor and affectation of Carlyle's rhetoric, and especially his indebtedness to Sterne.

DiSanto's *Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* seeks to fill a market niche previously held by Tennyson's *Carlyle Reader* and Shelston's *Selected Writings*. Because the Tennyson and Shelston volumes are now more than thirty-five years old and in the case of Shelston no longer available, such an attempt is certainly welcome. In my judgment, however, *Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* does not supersede its predecessors. What we need now, I believe, is a selection of Carlyle's works that combines the textual authority and comprehensive annotations of the Strouse editions with the convenience and affordability of a single-volume, paperback format. Whether or not such a volume can be produced remains to be seen.

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