

“A Flowing Light-Fountain”:
Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and the
Architecture of Heroism in *The Stones of Venice*

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PERHAPS NOT COINCIDENTLY, MARCEL PROUST WAS ONE OF THE first writers to comment on the similarities between Ruskin’s evangelical aestheticism and Carlyle’s hero-worship. Proust thought of himself as their disciple, and the great theme of his *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27)—how the ennobling consolation of genius enables the artist to transcend the tragic futility of social ambition and romantic love—abundantly illustrates his indebtedness to them. In his preface to his translation of Ruskin’s *Bible of Amiens* (1880), published in 1903, Proust notes that “the poet being for Ruskin, as for Carlyle, a sort of scribe writing at nature’s dictation a more or less important part of its secret, the artist’s first duty is to add nothing of his own to the sublime message” (34). The message itself, Proust infers, can be conveyed through a multiplicity of inventive channels: “[I]f reality is one and if the man of genius is he who sees it, what does it matter what medium he represents it in, be it in paintings, statues, symphonies, laws, or acts? In his *Heroes* [1841], Carlyle does not discriminate between Shakespeare and Cromwell, between Mohammed and

Burns" (35). Though critical of Carlyle and Ruskin's lack of discrimination—"the weakness of the system is that, because of the unity of the reality expressed, it does not differentiate deeply enough between the various modes of expression"—Proust understands that what binds them is a "deep religious feeling . . . a something of the divine" (35–36) that fires their imagination and informs their judgments.

The customary way of charting the relationship between Carlyle and Ruskin is to focus on social and political issues, and to construct a "genealogy of morals" that links *Past and Present* (1843) with *Unto This Last* (1862) and *Munera Pulveris* (1872). G. K. Chesterton deftly adopted this approach in *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913). Realizing that art and aesthetics provided a less inviting terrain for comparison, he grounded his comparison of the two writers on the basis of their mutual loathing of "Political Economy" and their passionate engagement in the "Condition of England" debate. In Chesterton's estimate, Ruskin was "the young lieutenant of Carlyle in his war on Utilitarian Radicalism" (15: 447). More recently, Tim Hilton has shown how Carlyle's reactionary detestation of art proved to be "a great obstacle to easy intercourse with Ruskin." The sly denunciation in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) of the "insane condition of [the Fine-Arts]" (321) horrified Carlyle's young admirer, who stoically ignored this uncomfortably personal attack until the last chapter of his autobiography *Præterita* (1889). His influence on Ruskin, Hilton astutely remarks, was never "straightforward" (32).

But as Proust rightly insists, Carlyle and Ruskin's common moral and spiritual "center of gravity" was displayed in "various modes of expression" (36). They tended to shape and re-shape each other's methods and ideas without necessarily acknowledging specific affinities. Ruskin succinctly described this process in a letter to Carlyle dated 23 January 1855: "[I]t is very possible for two people to hit sometimes on the same thought—and I have over and over again been somewhat vexed as well as surprised to find that what I really *had* and *knew* I had, worked out for myself, corresponded very closely to things that you had said much better" (Cate 63). Of these interweaving "thoughts," one in particular exerted a profound impact on them both—the notion of the sacredness of human imperfection, which Carlyle celebrated in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*

and which Ruskin singled out as the leitmotif of Gothic architecture in his famous chapter six on “The Nature of Gothic” in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53).

Both in broad outline and close particulars, Ruskin’s use of this notion in *The Stones of Venice* suggests his philosophical proximity to *On Heroes*. Carlyle’s motley assemblage of heroes—Odin, Mahomet, Dante, Shakespeare, Luther, Knox, Johnson, Rousseau, Burns, Cromwell, and Napoleon—are united by their “Gothic” idiosyncrasies and their “unfinished” nobility of character. Contrary to the popular assumption that they incarnate different aspects of his “might equals right” philosophy, they evince the “prickly independence” (*Stones* 10: 240) of mind and the irregularity of nature that Ruskin later associates with the greatest Gothic buildings. Carlyle’s heroes are “leaders of men . . . the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense the creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain.” And although “chosen out of widely distant countries and epochs,” they differ only “in mere external figure” (*Heroes* 3–4). The “moral elements” (*Stones* 10: 184) that Ruskin attributes to the Gothic style—savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity, and redundancy—are already intricately textured in the lives of Carlyle’s exemplars. But underlying this variation is the “imperfect” quality that Carlyle and Ruskin revered beyond all others, which is expressed most purely in the spiritual instinct of heroes, and the “manner . . . in which . . . [they feel] . . . related to the Unseen World or No-World” (*Heroes* 4).

To comprehend the meaning of this imperfection, Carlyle argues, surface and substance must be distinguished. Ruskin employs a similar strategy in separating the “external forms and internal elements” (*Stones* 10: 183) of Gothic architecture. For Carlyle, the hero “is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near . . . a flowing light-fountain . . . of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them” (*Heroes* 3–4). The inner spiritual “radiance” of a hero eclipses the value of his or her specific actions or achievements. Moreover, this elusive possession should not be mistaken for an ideology or a “church-creed,” which “is often only a profession and assertion from the outworks of the man, from the mere argumentative region of him, if even so deep as that” (*Heroes* 4). Carlylean hero-worship

was the unfolding of a “Universal” (*Heroes* 3) impulse, and countless nineteenth-century radicals, revolutionaries, reactionaries, socialists, liberals, conservatives, feminists, abolitionists, and temperance reformers demonstrated its “widely distant” appeal.

For both Carlyle and Ruskin, “the something of the divine” and the sincere struggle to realize it is always inherent in the nature of a true hero. Religion matters most to them because it marks the point at which extraordinary human beings are obliged to recognize the limits of their genius, and like all mortals, to defer to the wonder and the mystery of creation. Paradoxically, Carlyle’s heroes only became “great” after they discover the finitude of their divinely driven ambitions and their solidarity with fallen humanity—it is earthly failure that discloses the heavenly purport of their endeavors. Like Carlyle, Ruskin is vulnerable to accusations of equivocation in relation to his faith. He too might be called a “Calvinist without the theology,” as Froude described Carlyle (2: 2), or worse, an “atheist who makes it a point of honour not to be one,” as Nietzsche said of him (49). But in the case of both Carlyle and Ruskin, these labels are misleading. They were humanists who struggled fiercely to reconcile their piety with their confusion. The intensity of their skepticism heightened their keen imaginative susceptibility to the conflicts of conscience experienced by those who lived in periods that combined what Ruskin called “simplicity of faith . . . [with] . . . a healthy serenity of mind and energy of will . . . and a habit of heroism that never failed” (*Stones* 9: 27).

The continuum between Carlyle and Ruskin is their distrust of perfection, which corrupts religious feeling by subordinating it to artificial measures of human worth and happiness. As Ruskin warns, “[W]e are to desire perfection, and strive for it, we are nevertheless not to set the meaner thing, in its narrow accomplishment, above the nobler thing, in its mighty progress; to esteem smooth minuteness above shattered majesty” (*Stones* 10: 191). *On Heroes* offers Ruskin a moral blueprint for retelling the rise and decline of Venice in relation to its stones. Repeatedly, Carlyle describes his heroes in language that is richly architectural. Odin is the Norse representative of “the genuine Thought of deep, rude, earnest minds, fairly opened to the things about them . . . [n]ot graceful lightness, half-sport, as in the Greek Paganism; a certain homely truthfulness and rustic strength, a

great rude sincerity discloses itself here.” The Norse lack “old Grecian grace,” but in their “recognition of the divineness of Nature,” they exhibit “far superior” sincerity of purpose (*Heroes* 18, 27). Mahomet and his followers also reject smooth finish and theological ornament in favor of grainy actualities. The Prophet adeptly “looks through the show of things into *things*.” His religion is “Scandinavian Paganism,” with a “truly celestial element superadded to that.” In essence it is a “kind of Christianity,” which like Ruskin’s Gothic cathedrals, “has a genuine element of what is spiritually highest looking through it, not be hidden by all its imperfections” (*Heroes* 48, 65).

In the character of the more polished and educated Dante, Carlyle witnesses the fusion of human suffering and exile with a musical vision of salvation. His “*Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradisio*, look out on one another like compartments of a great edifice; a great supernatural world-cathedral, piled-up there, stern, solemn, awful: Dante’s World of Souls!” (78), where “[e]ach answers to the other; each fits in its place, like a marble stone accurately hewn and polished” (79). The “world-wide architectural” symbolism of this epic poem flows from the “inmost parts” of Dante’s soul and bears “the fruit of the Christian Meditation of all the good men who had gone before him” (83–84). In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin sharpens and corrects Carlyle’s metaphor, with the admission that Dante’s rhythms are “quite as strict as the symmetries of rhythm of the architecture,” but the “verses were neither made to order, nor to match, as the capitals were; and we have therefore a kind of pleasure in them other than a sense of propriety” (10: 206).

In contrast to Dante, Shakespeare’s imperfections are due less to the limitations of his faith—he is the “Priest of a *true* Catholicism”—than to the conditions under which he labored. His writings betray his bondage to the commercial dictates of the “Globe Playhouse.” Shakespeare’s plays are “so many windows, through which we see a glimpse of the world that was in him. All his works seem, comparatively speaking, cursory, imperfect, written under cramping circumstances.” Like Ruskin’s medieval builders, he could not “set his own free Thought before us; but his Thought as he could translate it into the stone that was given, with the tools that were given” (94). A worse fate awaits Carlyle’s men of letters, Rousseau, Johnson, and Burns, all three of whom

fight against and are vanquished by the “*spiritual paralysis*” of the eighteenth century. They inhabit a world in which authentic “Formulas,” once the “skin, of a substance that is already there,” have been transformed into “empty . . . Idols” (147, 155). For Ruskin, the corresponding architectural moment in Venetian history is the Roman Renaissance, during which “purity of form” and “accurate knowledge” (*Stones* 11: 45, 47) become substitutes for heroic belief.

Those of Carlyle’s heroes who do gain some measure of victory, such as Luther, Knox, and Cromwell, never cease to persevere in their effort to translate their ideals into practical action. Their “Gothic” errors are a proof of their inner harmony. As Carlyle observes, “No bricklayer builds a wall *perfectly* perpendicular, mathematically this is not possible; a certain degree of perpendicularity suffices him; and he, like a good bricklayer . . . leaves it so” (170). The notable exception to this rule is Napoleon, “our last Great Man,” who is undone by his delusions of omnipotence. Unlike Cromwell, Bonaparte lacks any spiritual sense to restrain his will to power. He thinks it “inconceivable that the reality has not corresponded to his program of it; that France is not all-great, that he was not France.” Appropriately, the edifice that he envisages is a monument to his political cult, “a pedestal to France and him,” built on the “trodden-down . . . masses” (*Heroes* 208). By the conclusion of his life, the Emperor differs little from Ruskin’s Renaissance autocrats, who demanded from their builders images of their own “ambitious barrenness” and who left architecture that “had in it no submission, no mercy” (*Stones* 11: 80, 75).

Writing to Ruskin on 9 March 1851, Carlyle thanked him for the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* and praised his “most true and excellent *Sermon* . . . as well as the best piece of Schoolmastering in Architectonics; from which I hope to learn in a great many ways” (*CLO*). It took almost four years for Carlyle to acknowledge receipt of volumes two and three: “The truth is, I have been eclipsed into nearly utter darkness this long while, by Prussian dust and other sore sufferings hard and tender” (*CLO*: TC to JR, 23 January 1855). Yet Carlyle’s epic *History of Frederick the Great* (1858–65) would eventually confirm the benefits of his tutorial in Ruskinian “Architectonics.” In a curiously cyclical manner, Ruskin developed in *The Stones of Venice* “Foundations” (“Preface” [1851], *Stones* 9: 8) that he owed to

Carlyle from his first reading of *Heroes* in 1842. Towards the end of the decade, Carlyle jettisoned these same “Foundations” in a desperate Swiftian quest to locate Houyhnhnm leaders who could “drill” Yahoo English civilization back into order. But when he came to write *Frederick the Great*, Carlyle drew on lessons he had been taught by his disciple.

Ruskin had given him a powerful warning of the need to resist “perfection,” which “is always a sign of a misunderstanding,” whether of the “ends of art” (*Stones* 10: 202) or of the stubborn realities of history. Carlyle ardently wanted to re-create Frederick the Great as a complete Protestant hero, yet he was too honest and scrupulous a historian to overlook the evidence. In an unpublished series of notes that he jotted down sometime after the erection of Christian Daniel Rauch’s huge equestrian monument of Frederick the Great in Berlin in May 1851, Carlyle invokes the familiar Ruskinian distinction between “external forms and internal elements.” He shares the frustration of “anyone that will look with correct human eyes, on that ‘Rauch’ . . . sublime monument of him, lately set up, with universal &c shouting in the Linden Street of Berlin, and then ask in vain over all the city for any reliably correct Portrait of the man’s real features” (MS: NLS 1798 [xiv]). Carlyle’s own eyes have been “corrected” by Ruskin to question such “sublimity.” In *Frederick the Great* he probes beneath the polished surfaces of myth and hagiography. His biography is less a paean to a despotic “drill-sergeant” than to a nobly flawed and humbled iconoclast, not without “something of the divine,” who challenged the corrupt monarchies of Europe and prepared the way for the firestorm of the French Revolution. Proust rightly criticized Ruskin for repeating the mistake of Carlyle and failing to “differentiate” between “various modes of expression” of the “unity of reality,” particularly between art and politics. The dangers of this confusion were apparent in Carlyle and Ruskin’s misguided hero-worship of Governor Eyre in 1866. But in the *History of Frederick the Great*, Carlyle largely resisted this “error” (Proust 35) and faithfully delineated the imperfect career of the Prussian king. Inspired by Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, he learnt to esteem Frederick’s “shattered majesty” above “the smooth minuteness” of his official Prussian image.

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