

“Free of Formulas”:  
Innovation, Prophecy, and Truth in  
Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*

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THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY RECEPTION OF THOMAS CARLYLE’S *The French Revolution* (1837) has followed a trajectory similar to that of the event it described. On its publication, John Stuart Mill saw Carlyle’s epic as the work of a “Social Prophet,” one that revealed essential truths of human nature and exposed the fallacies of scientific Enlightenment history. But soon after the sage’s death, opinion turned against him. Victorian respectability and a new class of professional historians condemned Carlyle as a crank who revelled in the violent myths surrounding the Revolution and who treated its political connotations in a shamefully irreverent manner. According to this line of argument, he was a malevolent daydreamer rather than a compassionate truth-teller. Worse, his history had been superseded by more authoritative interpretations.

In the past fifty years Carlyle’s reputation as a historian of the Revolution has enjoyed periodic revivals. In 1966 William Ferguson cited the example of Alfred Cobban to illustrate the volatility of critical opinion with respect to Carlyle. In his pamphlet *The Causes of the French Revolution, A Course of Reading* (1946), Cobban dismisses *The French Revolution* as a “fantastic parody of French society” and derides its author for his sensationalist narrative techniques and his slipshod use of dubious memoirs (qtd. in Ferguson 4–5). By 1963, however, Cobban had sharply changed his view. In an article published in the journal *History*, he admits that “the very deficiencies of [Carlyle’s]

approach bring with them certain compensating advantages.” According to Cobban, Carlyle “saw the Revolution not in terms of the actions of a few dominating men, but as the field in which innumerable lesser lives crossed and tangled. Carlyle saw the Revolution in terms of the history of *sans-culottism*, precisely the terms in which the most recent writers on the Revolution see it” (qtd. in Ferguson 5). Ferguson himself explains Cobban’s revisionism as indicative of the fact that “scientific history” had “outgrown the cocksureness of its nineteenth-century youth” (6). Carlyle’s prophecy had materialized; “Dryasdust” had had his day.

Cobban’s assertion that the author of *The French Revolution* anticipated later developments in historiography has been reaffirmed in the late twentieth century by a number of critics, including Hedva Ben-Israel, Hayden White, G. B. Tennyson, Kenneth J. Fielding, David R. Sorensen, and John Rosenberg. Previously attacked for ignoring the politico-economic factors and over-emphasising the importance of the sansculottes, Carlyle has now been recognized as a major influence. As Sorensen has observed, his method and style permeates the writings of such figures as Richard Cobb, Norman Hampson, Mona Ozouf, Munro Price, George Rudé, and Simon Schama, all of whom immerse themselves in the “reality” of human experience that they seek to recreate. In Sorensen’s view, these writers “understand that historical knowledge is always slippery, hydra-headed, and contingent, and that it can never be predicated on . . . simplistic prescriptions” (16). Carlyle has been a constructive, as well as a combustive force in the development of twentieth- and twenty-first century French Revolutionary historiography, though few historians have been prepared to acknowledge his importance.

Carlyle himself claimed that his book was “a kind of French Revolution” (*CL* 9: 116) and a conscious reaction against the cold retrospection of Enlightenment history. In “On History” (1830) he emphasizes that one must study history before one can construct a philosophy, not the other way round. Further, the historian can only (partly) understand the past by seeking to reconstruct or experience it from as many perspectives as possible. Any work of history is essentially imperfect, however, because historical action is the physical expression of God and

his infinite universe, which are both ultimately “unfathomable” (*Historical Essays* 7). This approach represented an emphatically different conception of history from Carlyle’s contemporaries. His thought was formed by Scottish Presbyterianism, political radicalism, and immersion in German literature, particularly in Goethe, whom he devotedly translated into English. But Carlyle refused to subscribe entirely to any particular movement. His thought cannot be generalized and this elusiveness confuses and frustrates many of his critics—he seems to oscillate furiously between disgust and celebration of the Revolution’s principles and events. Paradoxically, his lack of a coherent argument in *The French Revolution* justifies the historical worth of his interpretation.

Carlyle’s narrative form was in itself revolutionary and actively expressed his historical conception of reality. In his introduction to *The French Revolution*, Fielding explains that Carlyle was regarded as a “verbal terrorist” whose “linguistic barbarity” was manifest in his “grotesque anglicising of French words” such as “Sansculottism” (x). In *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (1913), G. P. Gooch argues that Carlyle was “the greatest of showmen and the least of interpreters” (327). But more recent critics such as Ben-Israel and Rosenberg refuse to accept this facile distinction between style and substance. Ben-Israel notes that via the “‘literary’ aims which [Carlyle] indeed professed, he tried to achieve not at the expense of historical accurate and factual truth, but emphatically through it” (128). Rosenberg observes that Carlyle’s judgments are “shaped not by reasoned arguments, but like controlled dreams, in which recurrent symbols do the work of discursive logic” (17). Carlyle regularly employed the terms “reality” and “phantasm” to expose the virtue or fallacy of a historical action, object, or character. Surveying the urban world of London in 1833, he was appalled by the pervasiveness of “shams.” Human expression was being strangled by the artificial “machinery” of political economy; materialism was consuming human dignity, and the masses had no spiritual authority to guide them. Carlyle’s heightened sensitivity to the fundamental social aspects of the Revolution freed him from superficial political generalizations.

By the early twentieth century, he had been marginalized by the dominance of post-Rankean historiographical

assumptions. Paying homage to “scientific” priorities, Gooch claims that the *French Revolution* rests upon “slender foundations.” He limits Carlyle’s sources to the *Moniteur*, Buchez and Roux’s *Histoire Parlimentaire*, Lacretelle, Thiers, and “a few volumes of memoirs” (325). Yet Carlyle did visit the British Museum regularly during the first stages of his research. He was understandably despairing of the Croker collection, which was still very disorganized. Ben-Israel points out that Carlyle does attempt to substantiate every fact in the history. He uses only those sources with which he is intimately familiar. Nor is he indiscriminating. He realizes that the final thirteen volumes of the “Deux Amis” are biased and unreliable. He rightly dismisses Thiers’s narrative as dull and erroneous. In general he is alert to the mendacious quality of many of his sources. For example, he defends Barrère’s presence in the new National Convention, against the slander of “exaggerative [Louis-Sébastien] Mercier.” In this case, Barrère is not “the greatest liar in France,” but a “man serviceable to this Convention” (*FR* 2: 254). It may be true that Carlyle relies too heavily on intuition, and that this weakness undermines his commentary, but only in a strictly factual and even pedantic sense.

But the inconsistencies of autobiographers in fact prove Carlyle’s theory of historical experience. In “On History” he proclaims that “all men are historians,” as “we do nothing but enact history, we say little but recite it” (3–4). Demonstrating that experience is essentially subjective, he cites the example of Sir Walter Raleigh’s witnessing an incident from his “prison window,” which “afterwards three witnesses reported in three different ways.” The anecdote suggests that “all narrative is *linear*; action is *solid*” (6, 8). This differentiation is an insight echoed much later by writers working with the benefit of theories of the unconscious outlined by Jung, Freud, and others. For them, it is an obvious truth that humans are unable to explain an event without attempting to see it from all angles at once. Historical action is not formulaic but chaotic, and memory is similarly inconsistent. Still, the mind remains the one reliable means of understanding for humans. The contrary to “History” is “Oblivion,” which in Rosenberg’s definition is the “unravelling of collective human memory that holds civilisation together” (15). This quasi-Jungian notion forms the entire

basis of Carlyle's argument and of literary method. Memoirs legitimize a powerful history of human experience, and they are therefore "true" in unexpectedly profound ways.

Gooch repeatedly contends that Carlyle places drama over accuracy in his acceptance of certain legends, such as the sinking of the *Vengeur*, or the story of Sombreuil's daughter drinking the blood of an aristocrat in order to prove her father's innocence. But Carlyle studiously re-examined, and then corrected the tale of the sinking of the *Vengeur*. In his revision, however, he sardonically defends the legend's historical credentials: "So has history written, nothing doubting, of the sunk *Vengeur*. . . . Alas, alas . . . this same enormous inspiring Feat, and rumour 'of sound most piercing,' turns out to be an enormous inspiring Non-entity, extant nowhere save, as falsehood, in the brain of Barrère! Actually so. Founded, like the World itself, on *Nothing*; proved by Convention Report, by solemn Convention Decree and Decrees, and wooden '*Model of the Vengeur*'; believed, bewept, besung by the whole French People to this hour, it may be regarded as Barrère's masterpiece" (*FR* 2: 371-72). Historical fact is here legitimized by its active involvement in the human experience of reality, rather than by its own abstract factual reality. The narrative plays upon the ambiguities of appearance and perception, central to everyday life. In a similarly nuanced manner, Carlyle recounts the legend of Mlle. Sombreuil and her father's rescue: "The man lifts blood (if universal Rumour can be credited); the poor maiden does drink" (*FR* 2: 153). In his narrative he signals the factual unreliability of its source. But at the same time, he insists that the story's historical worth lies in the fact that it was believed at the time. Regardless of whether it is "true," it is an illustration of the perceived desperation being felt during the September Massacres.

In *The French Revolution* Carlyle rejects Enlightenment history's self-consciously "objective" aesthetic, which links "instruction" to narrow notions of historical understanding. Instead, he sets out to shock and inspire. Conventional critics may complain that the narrative is distorted by hyperbole and lacks any structural coherency—as Gooch insists, "no reader learns how one stage passes to another" (326)—but confusion is employed to convey the perception of the Revolution as

it happened. Witnesses did not often see a logical progression between events. The method is therefore the active expression of Carlyle's "picture" of history as "an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being," which he refuses to subordinate to arbitrary "chainlets of 'causes and effects'" ("On History" 7–8). Carlyle's multiple narrative voices, each emphatically human and individual, work in an anti-harmonic chorus to create a strange sense of impartiality. Carlyle himself did not in fact understand the Revolution before he began to write its story. On the contrary, he believed that the process of re-creation would yield its own meaning.

For Carlyle, historical reconstruction involves a dynamic three-way interaction among the author, the reader, and the dead but once living actors of history. Rosenberg has referred to this latter conjunction as a "willed *fellowship* with the dead" (17). This engagement with the past is shrouded in uncertainty because it is the direct result of Carlyle's acute sense of the mysterious unreality of everyday existence. For example, in his description of "the Three Votings" to decide the fate of King Louis XVI, he refers to the episode as "one of the strangest seen in the Revolution":

Long night wears itself into day, morning's paleness is spread over all faces; and again the wintry shadows sink, and the dim lamps are lit: but through day and night and the vicissitudes of hours, Member after Member is mounting continuously these Tribune-steps; pausing aloft there, in the clearer upper light, to speak his Fateward; then diving down into the dusk and throngs again. Like Phantoms in the hour of midnight; most spectral, pandemonial! Never did President Vergignaud, or any terrestrial President, superintend the like. . . . "Tout est optique" says Mercier, "the world is all an optical shadow." (*FR* 2: 226–28).

The deliberation appeared surreal to all involved. They were exhausted by the Revolution and they were voting for the death of their King. Just as legends possess historical worth because they help shape perceptions of events, so too does Carlyle's aesthetic of unreality lend objective credibility to his "spectral" rendition of the plebiscite.

In *The French Revolution*, a cacophony of voices, each contending for the reader's attention, forces the audience

into the confusion of the drama itself. Carlyle's approach is postmodern in that he playfully subverts the narrative in a conscious effort to attract the reader's attention and to express the complexity of human experience. He extends this revolutionary approach in his use of language, which is a rich fabric of text, interwoven with vocal imagery, classical literary references, natural and metaphysical metaphor, dramatic characterisation and epithets. As a result the reader is invited to fathom Revolutionary events in countless independent contexts, to sympathize with every character, and to resist judging human action from an abstract political perspective. Drama and immediacy are implicit in the historic present. Further, Carlyle's language is emphatically symbolic. Readers comprehend historical action through a pattern of repeated abstract nouns: "Patriotism" conquers "Solipsism"; "Patrollotism" attempts to restrain "Rascality"; "Constitutionalism" falls victim to "Pure Patriotism"; "Hope," "Rage," "Chaos," and "Preternatural Fear" control human action and define stages of the Revolution; and "Falsehoods" and "Phantasms" are in constant battle with "Realities." Finally, "SANSULOTTISM" rises and asks, "What think ye of *me*?" (*FR* 1: 222). Spoken, written and shouted, the "Voice of France" begins as a low hum, and "waxes" louder and louder until it becomes a roar of "cartilage and metal" (*FR* 1: 199).

The structure of *The French Revolution* illustrates the people's changing perceptions as the upheaval progresses through a series of successive stages. The book is formed around four royal processions. Each recalls the one before it and is prophetic of the next. Moreover, they are the objects of Carlyle's prophetic "all-seeing" eye, as he looks down upon events from an abstract eternity. The first is a procession of the ghosts of Medieval Kings, in mourning of Louis XVI's grandfather, "Louis the Well-Beloved": "Sovereigns die and Sovereignties; how all dies, and is for a Time only; is a 'Time-phantasm, yet reckons itself real!' The Merovingian Kings, slowly wending on their bullock-carts through the streets of Paris, with their long hair flowing, have all wended slowly on—into Eternity. Charlemagne sleeps at Salzburg, with truncheon grounded. . . . They are all gone; sunk,—down, down, with the tumult they made; and the rolling and the trampling of ever new generations passes over them; and they hear it not any more for ever" (*FR* 1: 9). These kings

remain a foreboding presence throughout the book, haunting the present with reminders of their lost past.

The second procession involves the monarchy in a forced emigration to Paris from Versailles in October 1790: “Rascality” has now taken prisoner of its King. Nonetheless, the people’s voices indicate their goodwill towards the King, who remains a symbol of the regeneration of France: “And still ‘*Vive le Roi!*’ and also ‘*Le Roi à Paris,*’ not now from one throat, but from all throats as one, for it is the heart’s wish of all mortals” (*FR* 1: 294–95) Yet Carlyle’s tone is ominous: “The weather is dim drizzling; the mind confused; the noise great.” The procession itself is “Miles long, and of breadth losing itself in vagueness, for all the neighbouring country crowds to see. Slow; stagnating along, like shoreless Lake, yet with a noise like Niagara, like Babel and Bedlam . . . the truest segment of Chaos seen in these latter Ages!” (*FR* 1: 298). The noise created by the people is the active agent in the scene. The courtly participants themselves are inert, rendered mute by their stunning defeat: “[L]ike frail cockle, floats the royal lifeboat, helmless, on black deluges of Rascality” (*FR* 1: 299) A “Menadic Cohort” surrounds the Royal carriage, covered with *tricolore* and singing “allusive songs.” Carlyle echoes Joseph Weber’s description of the King on the upper balcony, wearing a large *tricolore* in his hat: “[A]ll the people grasped one another’s hand;’ thinking *now* surely the New Era was born.” Their hope lies in the reconciliation of revolution and monarchy. But the all-seeing historian prophesizes that the king’s popularity will be short-lived: “Poor Louis has Two other Paris Processions to make—one ludicrous-ignominious like this; the other not ludicrous nor ignominious, but serious, nay sublime” (1: 299–300).

The third procession (22 June 1791) reveals the enormity of the change. The monarchy’s former escorts are no longer present. Mirabeau is dead and the people are embittered by the King’s betrayal of them. Paris by hundreds and thousands is again drawn up, but this time in “silence, with vague look of conjecture, and curiosity mostly scientific” (*FR* 1: 494). The scene is “comico-tragic; with bound Couriers, and a Doom hanging over it; most fantastic, yet most miserably real.” The monarchy passively “gets itself at length wriggled out of sight; vanishing in the Tuileries Palace—towards its doom, of slow

torture, *peine forte et dure*" (*FR* 1: 494–95). Finally, on 21 January 1793, Louis proceeds to his death. Carlyle's photographic eye roams back to the first procession and to the ancestors of Louis in order to emphasize how much has changed: "Behold the Place de la Revolution, once Place de Louis Quinze: the Guillotine mounted near the pedestal where once stood the statue of that Louis!" The present contemplates the past in a moment of eerie silence: "Through the rest of the streets there is silence as of the grave. . . . Eighty thousand armed men stand ranked, like armed statues of men; cannons bristle, cannoners with match burning, but no word or movement: it is a city enchanted into silence and stone: one carriage with its escort, slowly rumbling, is the only sound" (*FR* 2: 234). This fourth of the processions illustrates how each one is interconnected, and how the dynamics of the Revolution demand constant adaptation to change. Historical characters who do not react to shifting circumstances lose reality and become "spectral": "Today is not Yesterday, for man or for thing. Yesterday there was the oath of Love; to-day has come the curse of Hate. Not willingly: ah no; but it could not help coming. The golden radiance of youth, would it willingly have tarnished itself into the dimness of old age?" (*FR* 1: 409).

In Carlyle's vision, those attempting to stop the process of the Revolution offend nature itself. The Jacobin "Mother Society" is immortal until her own self-destruction, because "she has a *preternatural* life in her" (*FR* 2: 213). Royalism is condemned to a half-existence from the moment the Revolution begins. Her struggles for survival are futile and expose her to estrangement from reality, which is represented by "Sansculottism." Carlyle recognizes that the "unspeakable blessing" of the Revolution is that society no longer rests on hollow lies. Displaced by nascent truth, "Falsehood . . . grows ever falser" until it "decompose itself . . . and return to the Father of it . . . probably in flames of fire" (*FR* 1: 223). The demise of the monarchy is akin to the passing of a ghost because monarchy itself is already "decomposed." Incompatible with that which succeeds it, it "stagger[s] distractedly from contradiction to contradiction; and wedding Fire to Water, envelope itself in hissing, and ashy steam" (*FR* 2: 33). On the eve of his execution Louis reads in his book of devotion the prayers of

the institution that he symbolizes—both kingship and religion are consubstantial in their doom. Both are irrelevant, doomed to “stand and fall together” (*FR* 1: 13). The Constitution has become “*rheumatic*, full of shooting internal pains, in joint and muscle,” and what remains of it are “dead cerements” (*FR* 2: 31, 123).

Carlyle’s treatment of the Constitution has drawn accusations from critics that he presents the Revolution as a simple act of destruction. The sansculottes themselves are cast as the agents of a modern apocalypse, a primeval force that disdains the calculations of bourgeois leadership. Perhaps not coincidentally, Carlyle’s chief defenders have been Marxists. E. H. Carr has argued that “[a]ll effective movements have few leaders and a multitude of followers; but this does not mean the multitude is not essential to their success; numbers count in history” (50). For Carr, spontaneous uprisings such as the insurrection of women, the storming of the Bastille, and the popular pressure for the Maximum, testify to a sense of empowerment amongst the lower orders. Historical change in reality lies in the hands of “humble millions” (93). Carlyle powerfully demonstrates that the masses alone are responsible for creating the phenomenon known as the “French Revolution”: “The oak grows silently in the forest, a thousand years; only in the thousandth year, when the woodman arrives with his axe, is there heard an echoing through the solitudes; and the oak announces itself when, with far-sounding crash, it *falls*” (1: 29). The people are a constructive, as well as a destructive force, and their achievement is “world-historical”: “This, namely: that Man and his Life rest no more on hollowness and a Lie, but on solidity and some kind of Truth. . . . Fear not Sansculottism; recognise it for what it is, the portentous inevitable end of much, the miraculous beginning of much” (*FR* 1: 223).

For Carlyle, the Sansculottes are the progenitors of a nascent revolutionary consciousness. Like children, they are only dimly aware of their purpose. Carlyle refuses to condemn them for their “rage.” Instead, he urges readers to sympathize with their unprecedented position: “Pity thy brother, oh son of Adam! The angriest frothy jargon he utters, is it not properly the whimpering of an infant which cannot *speak* what ails it” (*FR* 2: 195). Carlyle is moved by their effort to link themselves to classical prototypes.

Rosenberg observes that “the actual participants saw themselves as actors in a universal drama with antecedents they traced back to the ancient Greeks and Romans” (42). For Carlyle, this is a sign of their desire to be taken seriously. They may have lost their faith in God, but they have discovered a new source of transcendental hope in the “gospel” of Jean Jacques Rousseau. This creed is necessarily ephemeral because it originates as a negation of established order: “The truth that was yesterday a restless Problem, has to-day grown a Belief burning to be uttered: on the morrow, contradiction has exacerbated it into mad Fanaticism; obstruction has dulled it into sick Inertness; it is sinking towards silence, of satisfaction, or of resignation” (*FR* 1: 409). Again, Carr finds this explanation convincing: “The criterion is once more historical: what fitted one epoch had become a solecism in another, and is condemned on that account” (127). Carlyle’s narrative is not simply about destruction. He recognizes that the Revolution represents vital and constructive social transformation, but not necessarily “progress,” as other historians working in the Enlightenment tradition insisted.

In *The French Revolution* Carlyle strives to re-create the subversive conditions that fuelled mass radicalism. Raymond Williams rightly argues that Carlyle is writing in the context of the social revolt feared in England, and that Peterloo and the dehumanizing effects of political economy were inherent in his “developed method and convictions” (78). These social pressures made him sensitive to the psychological drive behind the Revolution, which was just as important as political or economic factors. Economic issues, such as scarcity of corn, quickly become confused in the people’s imagination with their inveterate fear of aristocratic plots. The fracture of radicalism produces “Preternatural Suspicion.” Carlyle describes the charged atmosphere as the “reign of Fraternity and Perfection” is threatened by internecine strife: “But indeed, as to the temper there was in men and women, does not this one fact say enough: the height SUSPICION had risen to? Preternatural we often called it; seemingly in the language of exaggeration: but listen to the cold deposition of witnesses. Not a musical Patriot can blow himself a snatch of melody from the French Horn, sitting mildly pensive on the housetop, but Mercier will recognize it to be a signal which one Plotting Committee is making

to another. Distraction has possessed Harmony herself; lurks in the sound of *Marseillaise* and *Ça Ira*" (*FR* 2: 280).

Vocal imagery and witnesses of memoirs express the extent to which fear has pervaded the conscience of the people. And though Carlyle seems to neglect the international aspect of the conflict, we are constantly being made aware of "a whole Cimmerian Europe girdling [France], rolling in on her, black, to burst in red thunder of War" (*FR* 2: 44). Physical hunger generates a metaphysical sense of spiritual starvation: "'Give us Bread, or else kill us!' Bread and Equality; Justice on the Traitor, that we may have Bread!" (*FR* 2: 223). Fear is a corrosive influence on the Revolution, but it is almost impossible to resist. Carlyle employs a range of metaphors to show that France is being consumed by panic: "[W]hat help is there? Such a Nation is already a mere hypochondriac bundle of diseases; as good as changed into glass; atrabiliar, decadent, and will suffer crises" (*FR* 1: 297). Carlyle's historic present is the agent of a palpable anxiety throughout the narrative. He takes part in the fear as it gradually eclipses all other concerns. He justifies his technique as a means of delineating the truth of human experience: "For indeed it is a most lying thing that same Past Tense always; so beautiful, sad, always Elysian-sacred, 'in the moonlight of Memory,' it seems; and *seems* only. For observe, always one most important element is surreptitiously . . . withdrawn from the Past Time: the haggard element of Fear! Nor *there* does fear dwell, nor Uncertainty, or Anxiety: but it dwells *here*: haunting us, tracking us; running like an accursed ground-discord through all the music-tones of our Existence;—making the Tense a mere Present one!" (*FR* 2: 204).

Anticipating the approaches of modern historians, Carlyle treats such subjects as "Terror," "Fear," "Madness," and "Panic" as being constitutive of revolutionary action. Culture and context are priorities to him because he aims to make the reader part of the process of historical reconstruction and understanding. He wants his audience to appreciate the shocking novelty of the Revolution, and in doing so, he appeals to dimensions of experience that have previously been ignored. With the demise of the ancien régime, France is now "Free of formulas": "Free of Formulas! And yet man lives not except with formulas; with customs, and *ways* of doing and living. . . . There are modes

wherever there are men. It is the deepest law of man's nature." Yet the Revolution presents a spectacle new to human judgment: "Twenty-five millions of men, suddenly stripped bare of their *modi* and dancing them down in that manner, are a terrible thing to govern!" (2: 191). Carlyle pities the "Apocalyptic" predicament of the National Convention, which is faced with a France "fallen wholly into maddest disarrangement" (2: 193). Girondin formulas are redundant in such a situation. Radical sansculotism is closest to nature, irrefutable in its demonic purity. As a result, the attempts by the Girondists to counter Jacobinism are futile. Referring to their efforts to imprison Marat, Carlyle notes: "The Gironde has touched, this day, on the foul black-spot of its fair Convention Domain: has trodden on it, and yet *not* trodden it down. Alas, it is a *well-spring* . . . this black spot; and will not tread down!' (FR 2: 199).

Carlyle's obsession with "shams" is intricately connected to his criticism of democracy and democratic institutions. His history is mock-epic as well as epic. Fielding rightly observes that his view of revolutionary change is frequently "disinfected with irony" (xiv–xv). The rituals of the sansculottes reflect "theatrical" qualities that inevitably betray the confused emotions of the masses: "For the theatricality of a People goes in a compound ratio: ratio indeed of their trustfulness, sociability, fervency; but then also of their excitability, of their porosity, not *continent*; or say of their explosiveness, hot-flashing, but which does not last. . . . How true also . . . is it that no man or Nation of men, *conscious* of doing a great thing, was ever, in that thing, doing other than a small one!" (FR 1: 351). Exceptional leaders like Mirabeau and Danton have an instinctive grasp of the people's aspirations, whereas the Girondins ignore these in favor of political and legislative "formulas." Carlyle's attack against the Girondists offended his British contemporaries, who hoped that "Respectable" parliamentary-style solutions represented the will of the majority. G. B. Tennyson regards Carlyle's apostasy as an act of intellectual courage. He had the nerve to ask, "[W]hat is it we want society to *do*?' The political system has to apply to the situation: it must address natural law and the human condition" (10). The reality is, Tennyson argues, that revolutionary France craved decisive action rather than indecisive abstract intellectualizing. In fundamental respects, Carlyle's consistent

efforts to expose the superficiality of appearances affords him a unique historical insight undistorted by the political generalizations of his time. It is a history of the common man, but it is also a history of the hero who represents the common man.

In history, just as in life, nothing should be taken at face value. Carlyle confronts this truth unflinchingly—nothing is as it seems to be in his re-creation of the French Revolution. Characters lead double lives as both realities and emblems, and they cast long symbolic shadows over their epoch. In Rosenberg's words, the narrative "literalises the figurative and figuralises the literal" (63). The reader is therefore forced into the reality of the historical situation and encouraged to look beyond the hyperbole of the Revolution's visual and verbal rhetoric. Ironically, Carlyle's impartiality is born from his own single-mindedness. He refuses to accept any totalizing theory because history is essentially inexplicable. Instead, he seeks to be honest both about the human experience of the event, and the limits of historical inquiry. *The French Revolution* is a condensed mosaic of subjective observation, historical fact, and transcendent truth—it is both impressionistic and expressionistic. The essence of the modern historical approach is an awareness of the need to read history writing itself in a context. The overall effect of this methodology on readers, regardless of personal credo, is sympathy for humans at the mercy of circumstances. Postmodern readers, therefore, can value *The French Revolution* for its bold refusal to ignore the importance of personal human experience in history, for Carlyle's narrative works in unique ways to create emphatic impressions of historical reality. The artist is never far from the historian, and both make vital contributions by throwing fresh light on the order and the meaning of the past.

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