

Revisiting a Great Man's House: Virginia Woolf's Carlylean Pilgrimages

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ALTHOUGH MANY EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITERS TEND TO disparage Thomas Carlyle's moral earnestness, emphatic hero-worship, and stern authoritarianism, most of them also feel strangely compelled to express ambivalent feelings of involuntary allegiance towards the Victorian sage. Enveloped in spiritual turmoil, Bertrand Russell found comfort by reading Carlyle's account of his own religious crisis in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) and felt obliged to acknowledge that he was oddly “moved by rhetoric which [he] could not accept. . . . Carlyle's ‘Everlasting No’ and ‘Everlasting Yea’ seemed to me very splendid, in spite of my thinking that at bottom they were nonsense” (27). Such remarks help to explain Carlyle's curiously cloaked influence in the novels of the period, ranging from E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) to D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920). In these circumstances, it was perhaps inevitable that James Joyce should recognize the advent of Carlylean rhetoric as a momentous stage in the development of English prose writing by including a true-to-life, if slightly irreverent, impersonation of the Victorian prophet in the “Oxen of the Sun” chapter in *Ulysses* (1922).

Of all modernist writers, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) was perhaps the most reluctant to acknowledge any debt towards Carlyle. Throughout her life she was impervious to his egotistical rhetoric and critical of his authoritarian streak. In a letter to Margaret Llewelyn-Davies (23 January 1916), Woolf derides his oracular tone and dismisses his gloomy insights as the ravings of a misguided prophet: “I've been reading Carlyle's Past and Present, and wondering whether all his rant has made a scrap

of difference practically" (*Letters* 2: 76). Thirty years later in her diary (30 May 1940), she was still bemoaning Carlyle, who represented "the imposition of personality in writing" (*Diary* 5: 290) and who upheld a vision of authorship radically different from her own. In other words, he remained her chief literary antagonist. Yet she also had an enduring interest in the lives of Thomas and Jane, who were, according to David Bradshaw, "in their different ways, key figures in her development as a writer" (xxi). Woolf's essays on the Carlyles' correspondence—"The Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle" (1905), "More Carlyle Letters" (1909), and "Geraldine and Jane" (1932)—indicate the extent of her fascination with the residents of No. 5 Cheyne Row. In "The Carlyles, the Stephens and Virginia Woolf," Malcolm Ingram has illustrated the deep-rooted connections between the Carlyle and the Stephen families. But what his analysis overlooks is Woolf's gravitational attraction to Carlyle the stylist. However scathing she might have been about him as a thinker, she was never blind to his narrative genius. His ominous figure looms large in her essays and in her fiction.¹ Eventually, her lifelong arguments with the prophet bore fruit in the form of her frequent and subversive pilgrimages to Carlyle sites in order to "revisit" him without preconditions.

It was her father, Leslie Stephen, a great admirer of the Victorian sage, who first introduced her to the works of Carlyle with the aim of training her as a historian. Under his guidance, Woolf discovered the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott and the historical essays of Carlyle and Thomas Babington Macaulay. Their dramatic re-creation of the past, which broke from the classical conception of history as "philosophy teaching by example," and their ability to infuse life into historical figures, fired her with a passion for historical writing. By the time she was sixteen, Woolf had read Scott's *The Antiquary* (1816), J. G. Lockhart's *Life of Scott* (1837), Macaulay's *History of England* (1848), and J. A. Froude's *Life of Carlyle* (1882–84), as well as Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837), *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (1845), *The Life of Sterling* (1851), and *Reminiscences* (1881). A keen interest in her "beloved Macaulay" (*Apprentice* 83), her "beautiful Lockhart" (25), and in the works of Carlyle is well documented in her early journals: "I have now got Carlyle's French Revolution—the 5th volume of Macaulay

being restored to its place. In this way I shall become surfeited with history. Already I am an expert upon William [of Orange] (Hear Hear!) & when I have mastered C[arlyle]'s 2 vols. I shall be eligible for the first B.A. degree—if the ladies succeed" (87).² In "Hours in a Library" (1916), Woolf remembers her discovery of these writers, the "admitted giant[s]," the "minds of the very first order," as an exhilarating experience. In a slight parody of Carlyle's hero-worship, she recalls how, as an adolescent reader, still lacking in judgment and insight, she preferred to follow the lead of these charismatic guides than to walk in the steps of "smaller men." Ironically enough, she pictures herself, in her younger days, as a Carlylean disciple, fascinated with the great works of the past, and led by "an absurd arrogance and desire to show [her] familiarity with the greatest human beings who have ever lived in the world, . . . [to fight] under their leadership, and almost in the light of their eyes" (*Essays* 2: 56–57).

True to her first impressions as a dazzled neophyte, Woolf kept reading "masses of Carlyle" in her twenties (15 August 1924; *Diary* 2: 310). On re-reading the *Reminiscences* in 1921, she even sides with Carlyle against Lytton Strachey, the severest critic of "eminent Victorians," and pays tribute to Carlyle's vigorous prose, finding "more punch in his phrase than in Lytton's" (15 April 1921; *Diary* 2: 110). What she revered most about Carlyle was his mastery of "poetical prose," his refusal to comply with the tedious demands of Dryasdust, and his ability to "[subdue] his army of facts . . . under the same law of perspective," so that "they work upon our minds as poetry works upon them . . . without any sense of strain" (*Essays* 4: 361–62). In an essay devoted to "Henley's Criticism" (1921), she gives credit to "the peculiar power which men like Carlyle and Macaulay possess of so absorbing their subject that it grows again outside of them, a real character; utterly different perhaps from the original, but no more to be ignored." Suggestively, Woolf then expresses her fascination with Carlyle in military terms and adopts his own rhetoric of strife and struggle. One has to "do battle with Carlyle's Boswell or with Macaulay's Warren Hastings before they will let us come by an opinion of our own! True or false, faithfully or malignantly set down, there they stand before us like living men" (*Essays* 3: 286). Some forty years earlier, in "Carlyle's Ethics," an essay first published in

the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1881, Leslie Stephen had come to the same conclusion about Carlyle's ability to breathe life into the protagonists of his historical narratives: "Whether his portraits are accurate or not, they are at least set before us as conceivable and consistent human beings" (3: 273).

Woolf's early interest in Carlyle's narrative genius is a legacy of Stephen's own peculiar fascination with Carlyle. Though his loyalties rested with Carlyle's Benthamite opponents—he produced a three-volume study of *The English Utilitarians* (1900)—Stephen was deeply inspired by the Victorian prophet, whom he referred to on different occasions, for example on 24 January 1873, as "the most interesting of all the eminent men whom I have seen" and "a really noble old cove & by far the best specimen of the literary gent that we at present produce" (*Impressions* 107; *Selected Letters* 117). Stephen, who was fully aware of Carlyle's position on the great divide separating German idealism and British empiricism, records his own conflicted allegiance, "sitting at the feet of J. S. Mill" but all the while reverencing "the prophet who was at the opposite pole of thought" and "[feeling] something like the editor of a Sadducees' gazette interviewing St. John the Baptist" (*Impressions* 102–04). Stephen was strongly repelled by some of Carlyle's views, such as his rejection of democracy and his fear of reform.³ He did not share Carlyle's gloomy doctrines about the modern industrial age and was uneasy about his dogmatism, peremptory statements, and general misanthropy, which he half-humorously attributed to Carlyle's dyspeptic condition. Yet, he was impressed and attracted by his blazing style and poetic genius: "One went to Carlyle to be roused—not to get cool scientific formulas, and so rare a phenomenon as a prophet-humorist must be taken on his own ground" (*Impressions* 105). In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton (21 December 1895), Stephen even favors Carlyle's charisma over the "cool formulas" of Mill: "Now I agree with Mill in some ways rather than with Carlyle; but as a man, Carlyle seems to me to be worth a wilderness of Mills" (*Selected Letters* 450).

In his biography of Stephen, Noel Annan emphasizes the role of Carlyle as the historian who, even more than Guizot, Grote, and Tocqueville, was the most apt to arouse his enthusiasm (172). Notwithstanding his allegiance to Positivism and

his strong distaste for exaggeration, Stephen fell under the spell of Carlyle's prose, which led him to qualify his own scientific approach to historical writing. In "Carlyle's Ethics," Stephen vindicates Carlyle's dramatic and synthetic vision, as well as his ability to grasp the driving "organic forces" governing historical events, which substitutes "the dynamical for the merely mechanical view of history" (3: 273–74). He pays homage to Carlyle's Miltonian *chiaroscuro* effects, "[his] strange vivid flashes of humour and insight casting undisputed gleams of light into many dark places; and dashing off graphic portraits with a single touch." And, in truly Carlylean fashion, he draws a dramatic picture of the Victorian prophet as the greatest luminary of historical writing: "It is something to feel at times as no one but Carlyle can make you feel, . . . that history is like the short space lighted up by a flickering taper in the midst of infinite glooms and mysteries, and its greatest events brief scenes in a vast drama of conflicting forces, where the actors are passing in rapid succession—rising from and vanishing into the all-embracing darkness" (262).

Stephen's own work as a biographer was decisively shaped by Carlyle's teaching and by his definition of history as "the essence of innumerable Biographies" ("On History" [1830], *Historical Essays* 5). Though Stephen had qualms about Carlyle's hero-worship, a doctrine which he tried to mitigate in "Carlyle's Ethics," his own work for the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) implicitly serves as a tribute to Carlyle's view of history. In the course of his career as the editor of the *DNB*, Stephen often referred to the huge task of collecting great men's lives as a Carlylean feat in keeping with the sage's gospel of work. In his memoirs and in his correspondence, Stephen frequently represents himself as a Carlylean disciple, snowed under with heaps of unsorted documents: "I fear that I rather sympathised with Carlyle's lamentations at having to take service under Dr. Dryasdust, and spend years in exploring the rubbish-heaps accumulated by former specimens of the genus" (*Impressions* 155). Virginia Woolf was fully aware of these deep-seated connections and of her father's sometimes histrionic identification with Thomas Carlyle. In *Moments of Being* (1976), she recalls with bitter irony Stephen's thwarted ambitions and his "frustrated desire to be a man of genius" (118). She derides his fascination

with literary lionism and with his hero-worship of Carlyle. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Virginia Woolf dramatizes the relationship in the character of Mr. Ramsay, who reflects conflicting sides of Carlyle's personality. Ramsay's friend Bankes likens him to the Chelsea prophet, with whom he shares a passion for the gospel of work and an unhealthy interest in "the causes of the French Revolution" (51–52).⁴ His famous quest for the letter "R," which is a reference to Stephen's alphabetical compiling of the *DNB*, also points further back to Carlyle's notion of Universal History as "at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" (*Heroes* 3). Significantly, Woolf sets the location of the novel in Scotland, the country of Scott and Carlyle, rather than in Cornwall, the site of her Victorian summer holidays. Pushing the process of mimicry one step further, she has Mr. Ramsay speak with a "little tinge of Scottish accent," reminiscent of Carlyle's notorious rustic drawl (*Lighthouse* 179).

Obsessed with literary lionism, Mr. Ramsay naturally shares Carlyle's views on hero-worship and ponders over the prophetic mission of great men in terms clearly reminiscent of Carlyle's meditations in "The Hero as Poet": "If Shakespeare had never existed, he asked, would the world have differed much from what it is today? Does the progress of civilisation depend upon great men? . . . Possibly the greatest good requires the existence of a slave class" (*Lighthouse* 48–49). As a true disciple of the Victorian sage, Mr. Ramsay is fully aware of his duty to mankind and often describes himself as a Carlylean follower. The lighthouse itself becomes in his mind an objective correlative of his Carlylean ambitions, or as C. Anita Tarr has noticed, Carlyle serves as the "lighthouse genius" (257). Marked by Carlyle's general pessimism, Mr. Ramsay knows that "life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness . . . one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure" (8). A close reading of Stephen's essays reveals similar Carlylean overtones. In "Carlyle's Ethics," for example, Stephen describes Carlyle's Puritan creed as "no flickering ray in the midst of gloom, but a steady, unquenchable light—a permanent 'star to every wandering bark'" (3: 259). Although Tarr may be correct when she posits that "Mr. Ramsay is . . . likely a portrait of Leslie Stephen as a *failed Carlyle*" (265),

a more concrete conclusion seems to be simply that Woolf echoes her father's Carlylean rhetoric in *Lighthouse* and suggests only that she recognizes implicit connections between the two Victorian figures.

Since "life is difficult" and "facts uncompromising," Mr. Ramsay feels that it is his duty to lead the benighted masses out of the murk of ignorance and doubt. Like Teufelsdröckh, who "stands there, on the World-promontory, looking over the infinite Brine, like a little blue Belfry" (*Sartor* 137), it is his fate "to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, . . . and so to stand on his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance" (*Lighthouse* 50). In the manner of the world leaders of *Past and Present*, he would like to be "a Loadstar, . . . an everlasting light, shining through all cloud-tempests and roaring billows," and a "blessed beacon, far off on the edge of far horizons, towards which we are to steer incessantly for life" (*Past and Present* 39). Despite his failure to prove himself a first-rate mind, and true to Carlyle's spirit, Mr. Ramsay is comforted by the consoling thought that "his own little light [will] shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and [will] then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still" (*Lighthouse* 41). He hopes that he will fit into the grand scheme of history, as one of the great men who are consumed like moths in a "Phoenix-cremation," at the end of each historical cycle (*Sartor* 180).

But contrary to his "brightest hopes," Mr. Ramsay is unequal to the task of discipleship and proves nothing more than a "desolate seabird," perched up on a stake in the middle of the channel (*Lighthouse* 50). To do away with the Victorian myth of literary lionism, Woolf deliberately converts Mr. Ramsay into a mock-heroic and bitter version of the Carlylean hero. Like Thomas Carlyle, "a crusty old grumbler who lost his temper if the porridge was cold," Mr. Ramsay has failed in his prophetic mission and his "preaching" has alienated him from the concerns of the younger generation (52). As Mr. Ramsay experiences loss and bereavement, the meteoric rhetoric of the Carlylean disciple gives way to the lament of the afflicted widower, whose mournful tone conjures up memories of Carlyle's *Reminiscences*. Tormented by a guilty conscience and revelling in grief, Mr. Ramsay is condemned to vent his own frustrations and to mourn forever for the loss of his loved one. Woolf's identification of

Mr. Ramsay and the guilt-ridden widower of the *Reminiscences* is rooted in her memory. Stephen had deliberately modeled his grief on Thomas's after the death of Jane.

Stephen's *Mausoleum Book* (1977), a memorial to Julia Stephen that he wrote for his children, alludes to Carlyle's mistreatment of Jane, which caused Stephen to wish that he had been less exacting with his wife: "I have spoken of Halford Vaughan and of Carlyle and of their wives. If I felt that I had a burthen upon my conscience like that which tortured poor Carlyle, I think that I should be almost tempted to commit suicide. I cannot, I am thankful to say, feel that. Yet neither can I feel myself to be so absolutely free from blame as I should wish to feel" (89). The exaltation of grief and the expression of bereavement may have appealed to Stephen, but his daughter regarded the contrition as a foil for her father's egotism. Reading Carlyle's *Reminiscences* in 1921, she heard nothing but "the chatter of an old toothless grave digger" (29 April; *Diary* 2: 115). In Mr. Ramsay, she creates the character of a stern and difficult philosopher, whose absorption in his intellectual performances made him "[blind] to a wife's devotion" (*Mausoleum* 70). Ramsay is least attractive when he most resembles both Carlyle and Stephen.

Throughout her life, Woolf was fascinated by the Carlyles' marriage and tried to account for the singular nature of their relationship, which was bound by "the only connection [between them] the flash of the intellect" ("Carlyle's House" 4). She made several pilgrimages to the Carlyles' house in Chelsea and became quite oddly familiar with the surroundings. Stephen, who was involved with the Carlyle's House Purchase Fund Committee and who helped gather funds to turn the house into a museum, took her to 24 Cheyne Row as early as 1897 (*Apprentice* 24). Somewhat ironically, Woolf continued to pay a contribution for the maintenance of the Carlyle Museum, long after the death of her father.⁵ In "Carlyle's House," a short sketch written after one of her visits there in 1909, she attempts to re-create a sense of the past by evoking scenes from the Carlyles' daily life. To draw a vivid picture of a house "which it needs much imagination to set alive again," Woolf resorts to her favorite device of scene-making. She imagines Carlyle "[tramping] off into muddy lanes" in nineteenth-century Chelsea. She sees "his long gaunt

figure, leaning or lying back, pipe in hand” and hears “bursts of talk, all in the Scotch accent; and the deep guffaw.” She imagines Mrs. Carlyle “telling her day’s narrative, and hitting off some ‘admirer’ in a phrase or so” (3–4).

Woolf revisits the topic in her 1931 essay, “Great Men’s Houses.” In this piece she is more successful in eliciting emotions and evoking daily scenes, but she is also more irreverent. Instead of inspiring her with profound reverence for Carlyle’s environment, her visit to 5 Cheyne Row prompts her to challenge his conception of history. She opens in a mock-fetishist fashion, parodying the Victorian quest for great men’s relics, “the chairs they sat on” and “the cups they drank from” (23). As a tourist, Woolf chooses to focus on “fact[s] that escaped the attention of Froude” (23), and to depict the daily toil of the Carlyles, deprived of “bath, h. and c., gas fires in the bedrooms, all modern conveniences and indoor sanitation” (26). Woolf writes a mock-epic of the Carlyles’ everyday life. The prophet who raged against materialism was wholly dependent on his wife’s daily conquest of drudgery. The prophet of spiritual emancipation now must suffer the silent hostility of objects and appliances:

Take the Carlyles, for instance. One hour spent in 5 Cheyne Row will tell us more about them and their lives than we can learn from all the biographies. Go down into the kitchen. There, in two seconds, one is made acquainted with a fact that escaped the attention of Froude, and yet was of incalculable importance—they had no water laid on. Every drop that the Carlyles used—and they were Scots, fanatical in their cleanliness—had to be pumped by hand from a well in the kitchen. (23)

Although she neglects the presence of an upper-floor, gravity-fed cistern that supplied water for various purposes, Woolf seems correct in concluding that the Carlyles’ house “is not so much a dwelling-place as a battlefield—the scene of labour, effort and perpetual struggle” (25), in other words a “scene” reminiscent of the battlefields of Frederick the Great.⁶

By substituting the scene of daily labor for *Frederick’s* famous battlefields, Woolf grimly contrasts the domestic labour of exhausted women, “[fighting] against dirt and cold for cleanliness

and warmth,” and the intellectual struggle of the great man, soliloquizing in his notorious soundproof study: “Up in the attic under a skylight Carlyle groaned, as he wrestled with his history, on a horsehair chair, while a yellow shaft of London light fell upon his papers and the rattle of a barrel organ and the raucous shouts of street hawkers came through walls whose double thickness distorted but by no means excluded the sound” (24). While Carlyle writes about Frederick’s military feats and tries to track down vestiges of the past, Jane strives to maintain order in the present. By contrasting Thomas’s intellectual struggle with Jane’s daily toil, Woolf seeks to “bemoan the waste, the futility, for him and for her, of the horrible domestic tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time chasing beetles, scouring saucepans, instead of writing books” (*Essays* 3: 422).

In his study of soundproof rooms, John M. Picker explains that the pre-emption of domestic space by eminent Victorians who worked at home was a common fact of the time. It implied the creation of a muffled and secluded work space in the domestic sphere and often led to a desperate quest for immunity from outside noises of all kinds. Carlyle’s annoyance with commotion was legendary. According to Picker, he built the soundproof study in order to prevent the intrusion of both domestic and exterior noises: “With its double walls, skylights, and new slated roof with muffling air chambers beneath, the [soundproof] room itself signified a professional seizure of domestic space, an architectural tactic that encapsulated the oddly positioned existence of silence-seeking professionals whose living and working spaces overlapped” (431). In her essay, Woolf stresses the cruel division of domestic space between Jane’s drawing-room and Thomas’s soundproof study, which in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), stands for the archetypal place of literary fulfilment from which women were symbolically and physically excluded.⁷ It is ironic that Carlyle’s “soundproof” room in fact seems to have made the noise worse, especially far-away noises.⁸ One can imagine what he would have thought of conditions today. Cheyne Row is situated almost directly beneath the final landing approach to London’s Heathrow Airport.

By evoking a scene of domestic labor and by focusing on Jane’s daily cares, Woolf upholds a model of historical writing that directly contradicts Thomas’s biographical version.⁹ In her

essays on Jane, Woolf presents her letter-writing as a domestic art in its own right, which enabled her to re-create a sense of the past and to challenge her husband: "While [he] sat upstairs in the sound-proof room deciphering the motives and characters of the actors in some long-forgotten drama, Mrs. Carlyle was practising the same art over her teacups" (*Essays* 1: 55). Because she "could infallibly select the one word or scene which, written down, brings the spirit of the past before us," Jane could rival her husband's narrative gifts in a domestic medium. Woolf, who also practiced art of daily letter-writing, regards Jane as a kindred spirit, who shares her "power of seizing on the essential" (*Essays* 1: 54). Whereas Thomas self-consciously frets about his biographical reputation in his letters, Jane sheds such inhibitions and allows her imagination to roam freely over the "little dramas that enact themselves in her drawing-room" (*Essays* 1: 56).

In "Great Men's Houses," Virginia Woolf does not merely vindicate Jane's domestic art, but she also parodies Thomas's writings. The Chelsea sage, "up in the attic under a skylight [lightened by] a yellow shaft of London light," bears a striking resemblance to Teufelsdröckh, "the indomitable Inquirer . . . perched up in his high Wahngasse watchtower . . . often, in solitude, outwatching the Bear," fighting "all his battles with Dulness and Darkness" (*Sartor* 21). But whereas Teufelsdröckh looks for a naked world underneath the clothed one, and tries to apprehend a spiritual reality beyond mere phenomena, Woolf's Carlyle is entangled in the throes of domestic predicaments. While Teufelsdröckh "[looks] at all Matter and Material things as Spirit" (23) and believes that "all objects are as windows, through which the philosophic eye looks into Infinitude itself" (56), Woolf's Carlyle is confronted with the opacity and blind hostility of matter. Teufelsdröckh's creed—"All visible things are Emblems" (56)—suddenly becomes irrelevant, and the intuitive power of "Fantasy . . . the organ of the Godlike" (165), proves of no avail against entropy and decay. As Tarr has also noticed, Teufelsdröckh, like Carlyle himself, is a "lighthouse genius," who is "impossible to steer by, because the illumination is offset by darkness, the absence of clarity" (263).

Read in the light of *Sartor Resartus*, Woolf's essay takes on a more subversive dimension. In an ironic reversal of Carlyle's

sartorial philosophy, Woolf draws significant parallels between the housewife and the philosopher. While Carlyle weaves his “Organic Filaments” and darns up the holes in the “universal World-Tissue” (*Sartor* 186), Jane must stitch the decaying upholstery back together: “The horsehair couch needed recovering; the drawing-room paper with its small, dark pattern needed cleaning; the yellow varnish on the panels was cracked and peeling—all must be stitched, cleansed, scoured with her own hands” (“Great Men’s Houses” 24–25). Woolf’s sketch of Jane seems to draw on Thomas’s account of Teufelsdröckh’s faithful servant and “general lion’s-provider,” the “speechless Lieschen,” who prevents the accumulation of litter in the great man’s den and who regularly rids him of the cinders of his burning thoughts. Like Lieschen, who “scoured, and sorted, and swept, in her kitchen, with the least possible violence to the ear” (*Sartor* 19), Jane and her maids must regularly confront the reality of litter and material decay. Crude matter takes precedence over transcendental ideals. The “Everlasting Yea” can barely be heard on the floors beneath the soundproof study.

Woolf’s visit to Chelsea is first and foremost a pilgrimage on literary ground. In “Carlyle’s House” and “Great Men’s Houses,” she presents her own modern-day version of Carlyle’s visits to twelfth-century Bury St. Edmunds or to the battlefields of Frederick the Great. Like a holy shrine, No. 24 Cheyne Row has been turned into a grim memorial, strewn with relics of long forgotten days: “Few of the spoils of life—its graces and its luxuries—survive to tell us that the battle was worth the effort. The relics of drawing-room and study are like the relics picked up on other battlefields” (“Great Men’s Houses” 25). In a scene that recalls Carlyle’s pilgrimage to St. Edmundsbury, Woolf describes her excursion to Cheyne Row in mock-hagiographic terms. Instead of the hallowed and sanctified body of St. Edmund, the modern pilgrim lays her eyes on “a cast of the thin worn hands that worked here; and of the excruciated and ravished face of Carlyle when his life was done and he lay dead here” (25). Having finally given way to the world of matter and decay, the Victorian prophet of Spirit has joined his nemesis Dryasdust. His blazing thought is now reified and his fiery expression is reduced to a death mask. Unwrapping the past “from its thick cerements” of time (*Past and Present* 46), Woolf can only experience the irretrievability of

the past. But like Carlyle, she does succeed in defeating the irrevocability of the past by envisioning nineteenth-century Chelsea as “it looked to the Carlyles” (“Carlyle’s House” 3).

Among the dead relics, Woolf discovers a token of the eternal conversation between past and present: “There were portraits of Mrs Carlyle which seemed to look out quizzically upon the strangers as though she asked what they really found to look at: did they think that her house and her had been like that?” (“Carlyle’s House” 3). In a flashing moment of recognition, she stares into Jane’s eyes, in the same way that Thomas had looked at Jocelin of Brakelond, “whom we could hail if he would answer;—and we look into a pair of eyes deep as our own, *imaging* our own, but all unconscious of us; to whom we for the time are become as spirits and invisible!” (*Past and Present* 53). Although she had sought to repudiate Carlyle’s historical vision, Woolf cannot disown it entirely. This scene of flashing recognition between then and now is a more fitting memorial to the inhabitants of Cheyne Row than all the relics collected in the museum. What tribute to the two great historians—one epic, one domestic—could be more fitting than Woolf’s visceral recognition of Thomas and Jane’s living presence in a place where all is “fallen now and vanished” (*Past and Present* 120).

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Notes

1. Carlyle is mentioned on several occasions in Woolf’s novels. In *Jacob’s Room*, for instance, Jacob writes a paper on a topic inspired by Carlyle’s *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*: “Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?” (31).

2. Women were not granted degrees at Oxford until 1920.

3. In a letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes (24 January 1873), Stephen writes about his mixed feelings concerning Carlyle’s political views: “Politically & philosophically he talks a good deal of arrant & rather pestilent nonsense—that is, what I call nonsense. He is indeed a genuine poet & a great humourist wh. makes even his nonsense attractive in its way; but nonsense it is & will remain” (*Selected Letters* 117).

4. For a trenchant discussion of Carlyle's presence in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, see C. Anita Tarr, who eloquently asserts that Woolf "used Carlyle as a swimmer does a wall of the pool: to push off, further, faster" (258).

5. In 1933, Woolf sent a contribution to Daphne Sanger, who was gathering funding for the maintenance of the Carlyle Museum (11 June 1933; *Letters* 5: 196).

6. In an essay on literary pilgrimages, Woolf suggests "[setting] an examination on Frederick the Great in place of entrance fee" to Carlyle's House (*Essays* 1: 5). She obviously had Carlyle's epic in mind when describing the Carlyles' domestic trials.

7. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf describes the irritations that Carlyle suffered while he was writing *The French Revolution*: "[D]ogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down." And she sets these difficulties in sharp contrast with the even greater difficulties of women writers: "But for women, I thought, looking at the empty shelves, these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century" (51–52).

8. See David Alec Wilson, who reports that while the soundproof study "excluded adjacent noises, it let in from far away the sounds of railway-whistles and bells and so on, that [Carlyle] never heard in the rooms below" (60).

9. In 1906, Virginia Woolf wrote an article about Frederick's sister, Wilhelmina, entitled "The Sister of Frederic the Great" (*Essays* 1: 87–91). This literary pilgrimage gave her the opportunity to take a completely different stand on a typically Carlylean subject and to shift the perspective to a woman's point of view.

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