2006

Heroic individualism: the hero as author in democratic culture

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HEROIC INDIVIDUALISM:
THE HERO AS AUTHOR IN DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Political Science

by

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December, 2006
It has been well said that the highest aim in education is analogous to the highest aim in mathematics, namely, to obtain not results but powers, not particular solutions but the means by which endless solutions may be wrought. He is the most effective educator who aims less at perfecting specific acquirements that at producing that mental condition which renders acquirements easy, and leads to their useful application; who does not seek to make his pupils moral by enjoining particular courses of action, but by bringing into activity the feelings and sympathies that must issue in noble action. On the same ground it may be said that the most effective writer is not he who announces a particular discovery, who convinces men of a particular conclusion, who demonstrates that this measure is right and that measure wrong; but he who rouses in others the activities that must issue in discovery, who awakes men from their indifference to the right and the wrong; who nerves their energies to seek for the truth and live up to it at whatever cost. The influence of such a writer is dynamic. He does not teach men how to use sword and musket, but he inspires their souls with courage and sends a strong will into their muscles. He does not, perhaps, enrich your stock of data, but he clears away the film from your eyes that you may search for data to some purpose. He does not, perhaps, convince you, but he strikes you, undeceives you, animates you. You are not directly fed by his books, but you are braced as by a walk up to an alpine summit, and yet subdued to calm and reverence as by the sublime things to be seen from that summit.

Such a writer is Thomas Carlyle, It is an idle question to ask whether his books will be read a century hence: if they were all burnt as the grandest of Suttees on his funeral pile, it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest. For there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle’s writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived. The character of his influence is best seen in the fact that many of the men who have the least agreement with his opinions are those to whom the reading of Sartor Resartus was an epoch in the history of their minds. The extent of his influence may be seen in the fact that ideas which were startling novelties when he first wrote them are now become common-places. And we think few men will be found to say that his influence on the whole has not been for good…

George Eliot, unsigned review in Leader, October, 1855
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents, Bruce and Marianne Baily. Without their encouragement and support I never would have embarked on this project, let alone completed it. Also thanks to James R. Stoner, Jr. and Jeremy Mhire, for their helpful comments and suggestions. Of course all errors herein are mine. Finally, thanks to all my teachers, in particular, Charles R. Embry, Cecil L. Eubanks, and G. Ellis Sandoz; and to my colleagues and friends, David Gauthier, Dylan Rickards, Scott Segrest, Aaron Collins, Zack Henry, and Mr. and Mrs. Weaver.
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Abstract

My study focuses on the literature of democratic morality, with specific reference to the question of “heroic individualism.” I attempt to elucidate the notion of heroic individualism by examining three modern democratic moralists whose work occupies the space between politics and literature: Jean Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Carlyle and Friedrich Nietzsche. In brief, I conclude that the central aspiration of heroic individualism is to bridge the gap between writing and action, the Text and the Voice.

The dialogue among Rousseau, Carlyle, and Nietzsche reveals that the problem of writing as action is central to heroic-individualist morality. Each of these authors demonstrates an abiding concern with the relationship between life and language that reveals, at a deeper level, their common sensitivity to the differences between the Text and the Voice, and to the dominant place of texts in modern democratic cultures, which are also print cultures. To postmodern ears the theme of the Text and the Voice rings familiar; I explore its prehistory in the dialogue among heroic individualists.

In this study I highlight Thomas Carlyle, for three reasons: First, Carlyle’s place in the dialogue on heroic individualism has been ignored, or misunderstood, by political theorists especially. The habit of associating Carlyle’s writings with a grossly authoritarian “great-man theory” of politics and history leaves contemporary interpreters unaware of Carlyle’s qualifications as a democratic thinker. Second, Carlyle’s role as a critic and interpreter of Continental philosophy to the English-speaking world, and his influence on Emerson and, indirectly, Nietzsche, bespeaks Carlyle’s importance as a participant in this dialogue. Finally,
restoring Carlyle to his context can obviate the tendency of interpreters to discount his writings as products of a reactionary, fanatical doctrine of “hero-worship.”

Carlyle’s philosophy of heroism is more subtle than most interpreters suppose. Here I attempt to sketch out the historical and philosophical circumstances in which Carlyle finds himself as an author and to which he hopes to reply constructively, with the aim of encouraging sympathy for the great man. By restoring this context, we can better acknowledge the presence that Carlyle still exerts as an educator of modern democratic culture.
Chapter One: Writing and Action

The substitution of private German for public English reveals the depth of [Carlyle’s] personal anguish…. For the time being, his notebook was a solace. The very act of writing provided emotional relief, and his entries in the next few months exceeded in length those of the previous four years. A line of Goethe’s spoke to him with autobiographical intensity. The unhappy man is one “who is possessed by some idea which he cannot convert into an action, or still more which restrains and withdraws him from action.” Aristotle also came to mind: “The end of man is an Action not a Thought.” “How many eulogies of Activity, and Nothing acted!” On the same day, he quoted the German Romantic writer Ludwig Tieck: “My whole life has been a continued nightmare: and my awakening will be in Hell.”

Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle*

The Question of Heroism

What place is there for heroism in modern democratic regimes? Is there any? The way we answer this question has consequences for our understanding of the nature of citizenship and the intention of modern democratic culture. To some end, it may even define what sort of ambition modern democracy can (and cannot) tolerate.

   In this study, I limit my attention to the question of literary ambition. Literary ambition is the most particular form of heroism in modern democratic culture. This is true to the extent that modern democratic culture is the culture of print, the culture of practically universal literacy. Though distinguishable in thought, democratic culture and print culture are inseparable in reality. As early as 1840, Thomas Carlyle observed thus: “Printing…is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable.”

   My study focuses on democratic philosophical literature, with specific reference to the moral question of “heroic individualism.” I attempt to elucidate the notion of heroic

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The dialogue among Rousseau, Carlyle, and Nietzsche reveals that the problematic relationship between writing and action is central to heroic-individualist morality. Each of these authors demonstrates an abiding concern with the relationship between life and language that reveals, at a deeper level, a common sensitivity to the differences between the Text and the Voice, and to the dominant place of texts in modern democratic cultures, which are also print cultures. To postmodern ears the theme of the Text and the Voice rings familiar; I explore its prehistory in the dialogue among heroic individualists.

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sympathy for the great man. By restoring this context, we can better recognize the presence that Carlyle still exerts as an educator of modern democratic culture.

Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche answered the call of literary ambition from a unique historical position: the birth of the modern world. A conspicuous tension between man’s historically natural, essentially aristocratic, recognition of greatness in human action, and the leveling and mechanizing tendencies of modernity define the cultural environment of their age. Each of these authors was profoundly sensitive to this situation, in a way that we, far off in the wake of these tumults, hardly can imagine. Living and writing about the “long” nineteenth century, each of these authors had firsthand experience of some of the major events that shaped the modern world in which we still dwell.

Behind all these changes, of course, lay that original modern innovation: the printing press. A study of the hero as author, then, must be an extended investigation of the problem of writing as action, or of the relationship between writing and action. This is a problem that possessed Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche deeply. For each of them took up a peculiarly modern vocation, one that Carlyle dubs “man-of-letters heroism”:

The Hero as Man of Letters…is altogether a product of these new ages; and so long as the wondrous art of Writing, or of Ready-writing which we call printing, subsists, he may be expected to continue, as one of the main forms of Heroism for all future ages.\(^2\)

Carlyle goes on to comment on the “curious spectacle” of a modern man of letters, “a Great Soul living apart in that anomalous manner; endeavoring to speak-forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books.”\(^3\) The attempt to communicate with one another, about questions of good and evil, especially, is an essential aspect of man’s life as an active, political being. The ability to

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 154.

\(^3\) Ibid.
communicate across larger expanses of space and time through printed texts significantly modifies how we conduct this basic activity. Writing changes the world of action.

The phenomena of print culture are no less “curious” today, despite that they seem normal to most of us. Text and the technologies that it supports have altered permanently the landscape of human existence. This study revisits Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche with an eye to their contributions to the morality of print culture. I pay particular attention to Carlyle, whose place in this debate has been either forgotten or ignored. By remembering the place of Carlyle, however, we can better understand the positions of Rousseau, and Nietzsche.

Political Philosophy and Literature

Occasionally political philosophers address directly the question of heroism, but more often they treat the heroic media: myth epic and tragedy. Political philosophers treat leadership in moral terms, undertaking to examine the relationship between leadership and character, both of individuals and regimes. From this perspective the heroic leader appears more often as an exemplary character than as an agent of historical change. Accordingly political theorists may discuss seemingly disparate cases of heroism—from Odysseus to Martin Luther King, Jr.—in similar terms.

One recent example of this approach is Patrick Deneen’s *The Odyssey of Political Theory*. Deneen discovers a political theory in Homer’s *Odyssey* by paying close attention to the theme of exile-and-return, or of homecoming (*nostos*). In *Vergil’s Empire*, Eve Adler similarly proposes that Vergil’s epic theme in the *Aeneid*—founding a home in exile—implicitly replies to

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4 (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000)

5 (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003)
Lucretius’ materialist and Epicurean argument in *De Rerum Natura*. According to Adler, Vergil accepts the philosophy of Lucretius but rejects the Epicurean tendency to passive resignation in favor of a philosophy of moral action.

Carlyle is also this type of epic writer. The dynamic structure of exile-and-return informs much of Carlyle’s literary work. Moreover, Carlyle is to the Romantics as Vergil is to the Epicureans. His main message, summed up by his “gospel of work,” is that moral action is a better alternative than Byronic self-pity.

A case in point is Carlyle’s “great man theory” of history. This so-called “theory,” identified most closely with Carlyle’s lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, has been held to blame for inspiring fascist cults-of-personality. Yet close examination reveals that *On Heroes* is not a theory at all, but a literary reflection on exile-and-return in its modern form. In its modern guise, exile-and-return takes the specific form of a tension between the voice and the text. Carlyle calls the modern reader to return from the exile of literary self-absorption.

The modern Odysseus runs the danger of losing himself on the Calypso-island of the text. Modern, literate, man runs the danger of losing himself in the habitual activity of intense self-reflection encouraged by print literacy. In both reading and writing there is an inescapable element of self-reflection that is not present, or not as intense, as in oral communication. In contrast to oral man—for whom communication always involves personal presence, who “is not so likely to think of words as ‘signs’, quiescent visual phenomena,” and for whom, as for Homer, words are “winged words”—which suggests evanescence, power and freedom,” literate man exhibits a
complacency in thinking of words as signs...due to the tendency, perhaps incipient in oral cultures, but clearly marked in chirographic cultures and far more marked in typographic and electronic cultures, to reduce all sensation and indeed all human experience to visual images.\(^6\)

In writing, as opposed to speech, both the writer and the audience are not present to each other, but each must supply the presence of the other through imagination:

The writer must set up a role in which absent and unknown readers can cast themselves. Even in writing to a close friend I have to fictionalize a mood for him, to which he is expected to conform. The reader must also fictionalize the writer.\(^7\)

In the personal diary, we see the extreme case of this mutual fictionalization, where writing approaches its ironic limits:

Indeed, the diary demands, in a way, the maximum fictionalizing of the utterer and the addressee. Writing is always a kind of imitation talking, and in a diary I therefore am pretending that I am talking to myself. But I never really talk this way to myself. Nor could I without writing or indeed without print. The personal diary is a very late literary form…. [T]he kind of verbalized solipsistic reveries it implies are a product of consciousness as shaped by print culture. And for which self am I writing? Myself today? As I think I will be ten years from now? As I hope I will be? For myself as I imagines myself or hope others may imagine me? Questions such as this can and do fill writers with anxieties and often enough lead to discontinuation of diaries. The diarist can no longer live with his or her fiction.\(^8\)

Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche are writers who became obsessed with these paradoxes of writing. Here I argue that Carlyle’s “real” hero is his reader. Caryle’s authentic aim, in *On Heroes* and elsewhere, is to bring the modern reader home to the voice, from having been exiled, so to speak, in the text. Accordingly, Carlyle also emphasizes the personal presence of writers as actors in, not spectators of, political life. From the perspective taken here, then, Ferenc Fehr’s criticism of Carlyle’s politics merits our most serious consideration:

\(^6\) All quotes in this paragraph are from Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Meuthen, 1982) pp. 76-77.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 102.

\(^8\) Ibid.
The synthetic authority of the new hero was supposed to replace the vanished authority of the Voice behind the Text. However, this was an unequivocally antihermeneutic subject, in addition to being a capricious-tyrannical one. The Hero of Carlyle, whose metamorphoses may become identical with World History, Siegfried, Zarathustra or the “New Emperor,” increasingly tended not just to lend an overtly arbitrary authority to shattered texts in their lightningly short appearance in the political theater, but to eliminate texts outright and replace them by these respective voices. Wotan in Wagner’s political mythology still had a shaky legitimacy of a kind. Siegfried had none apart from that of his sword. Zarathustra was a prophet (and a legislator) in a highly ambiguous constellation where the audience had to accept upon his word that God had died and—perhaps—was resurrected in the voice of the prophet.9

“Out of the anti-hermeneutic drive in the public space” continues Fehr, “charismatic politics was born.”10 This “charismatic politics” is of course the same type of politics identified by Max Weber in the early twentieth century. It is the politics of Hitler, Lenin, Mussolini, Mao, and a host of other petty-grandiose dictators.

It is anachronistic, at least, to accuse Carlyle and company of begetting a type of media-driven charismatic politics that was inconceivable at the time that On Heroes was given. The twentieth century ideological mass-movements were driven by the mass media, but print is the only medium that Carlyle and company are concerned with.11 However, Fehr seems to identify correctly what is at stake in the ambitious author’s attempt to reconcile the voice and the text. Nevertheless, Carlyle’s political-literary effort, shaped largely by his perception that a fanatical fundamentalism for “theories-of-government” fueled the Revolutionary mania, probably did more good than harm in terms of its impact on Victorian political culture.

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10 Ibid.

11 The first commercial telegraph was installed from Paddington to West Drayton in 1839. Carlyle delivered On Heroes in the spring of 1840.
The Heroic in Political Philosophy

With this general background in mind, let us consider heroism more directly from the side of philosophy. Recently one political philosopher has tried to vindicate a modern concept of the heroic. In *Liberalism With Honor*,\(^\text{12}\) Sharon Krause draws on the work of Montesquieu and Tocqueville in an attempt to vindicate the role of “honor” in modern liberal regimes. Krause fights this battle on two fronts. On the one hand, she faces the defenders of moral altruism who claim that honor is incompatible with the other-interested dictates of liberal ethics; while, on the other hand, she critiques the defenders of self-interest who contend that liberalism cannot tolerate so-called “altruistic” norms. Opposed to both of these theoretical fundamentalisms, Krause promotes a liberal version of honor that resides somewhere in between altruism and self-interest. In liberal regimes, she claims, it is permissible to pursue glory and a high reputation—the self-interested goods we associate with honor—by risking oneself to champion the dignity of others. Heroes such as these are not altruists by a strict definition. Rather, they are motivated by the acute human desire to enlarge one’s reputation and to stand above the crowd. However, liberal heroes meet this desire by participating in the effort to achieve public recognition of the dignity of others. It is this interest in “otherness,” in particular, that makes for liberal honor.

Krause’s arguments are refreshing and insightful; however, it is difficult to tell whether her liberal heroes are paragons of character in a classical sense or highly exalted cogs in the modern rights-machine. If the latter is true, then we must arrive at a point when both heroism and honor cease to be historically necessary; namely when civil rights have been extended to the utmost degree. The end of history would spell the end of honor. On the other hand, it seems possible that each of us must, in an appropriate degree, possess heroic qualities of character just

\(^{12}\) (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002)
to be morally honorable people. Thus, in some form or another, the heroic would be an abiding impulse of human nature, one that must continue to manifest itself in some form or another.

Krause’s portrayal of liberal honor in terms of heroism for the “other” conveys a significant insight regarding the peculiar nature of modern heroism. What does it mean to say that modern heroism issues from other ambition? Ancient heroism, by contrast, issues from self-ambition—either the ambition for personal glory, as seen in Achilles, or ambition on behalf of one’s own family or people, as seen in Odysseus. Ambition on behalf of one’s own is easy to understand. Ambition for the sake of the other is a difficult, abstract notion. The intensity of the debate over altruism itself is evidence of the intractability of the questions brought up by a heroism based on otherness.

In particular, “otherness” is a highly abstract notion that seems to rely for its genesis on the abstract idea of the self intensified by the experiences of reading and writing. This returns us from the philosophical back to the literary side of the question. Perhaps Ong is right to suggest that literacy is key to understanding the differences between ancient and modern heroism (or antiheroism). If this is true, the phenomenological contrast between the voice and the text is not out of place in a discussion of heroism in modern democracy.

Another political philosopher who sheds light on our question is Sheldon Wolin. Clearly, there is common ground between a concern with the heroic and Wolin’s interest in “epic theory.” Wolin shares the view that the methodological, or spectatorial, bias of modern political science has deep roots in modern philosophy itself. Against this methodological tendency Wolin posits the more publicly engaged, active, figure of the epic theorist.

Although Wolin does not draw a clear connection between the idea of epic theory and the political philosophy of literature, or heroism, the very word “epic” reaches out to the imagination
of action. Much like the term “heroic individual,” “epic theorist” is an evocative contradiction: epics are for singing, while theories appeal to the spectator; epics begin in medias res and proceed in an episodic manner, theories begin at the origin and proceed logically, or chronologically; epics appeal to the ancient economy of the voice, dialogue and rhetoric; theories, to the modern economy of the text, of formula and method. The construct “epic theorist,” then, communicates at the very least an impulse to relate the voice and text.

In “Political Theory as a Vocation,” Wolin suggests that the choice of the methodological life “was a profound personal choice, perhaps the closest functional equivalent to a conversion experience that the modern mind can achieve.”\(^{13}\) As exhibited in the life of its prophet and first adherent, the vita methodica is intended “at the very least...as a form of re-education as the title of one of Descartes’ works, Regulae ad directionem ingenii, [implies].”\(^{14}\) Descartes takes up the vita methodica in order to circumnavigate the effects of personal prejudice and bias, and to correct for inherent weaknesses in the human intellect. According to Wolin, much the same intent animates modern “methodists” in the social sciences who forsake tradition in order to arrive at a secure, easily communicable and generalizable dialect of the truth about human things.

Wolin suggests that the modern vita methodica takes the place of the ancient bios theoretikos at no small cost. The “cultural resources” that sustain the theoretical life, namely “metaphysics, faith, historical sensibility, or, more broadly…tacit knowledge” is a cargo to be dumped overboard if the ship of modern science is to progress toward the El Dorado of clear and


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
distinct knowledge. “Because these matters [of tacit knowledge] bear a family resemblance to ‘bias,’ they become a sacrificial victim to the quest for objectivity in the social sciences.”

Against the tendency of “methodists” Wolin opposes the figure of the “epic theorist” and the vocation of political theorizing. Epic theory is distinguished from methodological theory, first, on account of the magnitude of the problems it addresses. While methodists hone in on particular elements of social theories or social organizations, epical theorists seek knowledge of the social whole. Secondly, epic theory is set apart from methodology by its “structure of intentions,” or, in plainer language, the public concern of the theorist. Whereas behaviorists focus on “problems-in-a-theory” epical theorists concern themselves with “problems-in-the-world.” I think we can sum this up by saying that epic theorists attempt to merge the embodied, participatory character of the voice with the more disembodied, speculative character of texts. Rather than adapt itself to the facts, epic theory insists that the facts adapt themselves to the teloi affirmed by the theorist. Thus, epic theory relies on the theoretical imagination, to propose visionary or symbolic alternatives to a diseased state of affairs. Among such theories Wolin counts Plato’s city-in-speech, engendered by the crisis of Athenian Democracy, and Marx’s critique of capitalism, which issues in the Marxian vision of a “realm of freedom."

For Wolin, the contemporary dominance of methodists is explained by the unprecedented level of conscious organization in modern societies. Earlier societies, for the most part, conceived of themselves as subjects of mysterious historical articulations of character, religion, or tradition. By contrast modern states understand themselves to be “the product of design, the product of theories about human structures deliberately created rather than historically

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15 Ibid., p. 1074.

16 Ibid.
articulated.” This has the paradoxical effect rendering modern methodism into an anti-tradition-tradition, suppressing the imagination of action, and relegating all thinking to the task of description rather than prescription. Strangely enough, a world organized so completely must protect itself from the very sort of thinking that made it possible, for theoretically armed imagination poses the greatest threat to the organizational status quo.

Yet, as Hannah Arendt has observed, the theoretical alternative to the epic imagination is not the avoidance of perplexity but the introduction of a new perplexity:

For the great unknown in history, that has baffled the philosophy of history in the modern age, arises not only when one considers history as a whole and finds that its subject, mankind, is an abstraction which never can become an active agent; the same unknown has baffled political philosophy from its beginning in antiquity…. The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although the agent frequently remains the subject, the “hero” of the story, we can never point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome.

...It is noteworthy that Plato, who had no inkling of the modern concept of history, should have been the first to invent the metaphor of an actor behind the scenes who, behind the backs of acting men, pulls the strings and is responsible for the story. The Platonic God is but a symbol for the fact that real stories, in distinction to the ones we invent, have no author; as such, he is the true forerunner of Providence, the “invisible hand,” Nature, the “world spirit,” class interest, and the like, with which Christian and modern philosophers of history tried to solve the perplexing problem that although history owes its existence to men, it is still obviously not “made” by them.

Arendt’s great contribution to political theory has been to remind us of the primary place of action—“words and deeds”—as an essential aspect of human reality. Arendt’s notion of action, too, recalls the close relationship between action and the spoken word. Without the words and deeds of heroes there is no history to write. “That every individual life between birth and

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17 Ibid., p. 1081.

death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end.”

It is popular today to dismiss the question of heroism as a matter of merely adolescent concern, belonging to a certain psychological stage of development or an idyllic corner of the imagination. But our perspective changes if we understand the heroic in this way, as a function of the engaged moral/political imagination, the “epic theorist” that may be in every one of us. Of course, few reasonable people doubt that our ideas of heroism take shape in large part as a response to wish-fulfilling impulses that are aroused by, although they never can be satisfied under the circumstances of, lived reality. With this said, it is also true that the element of heroic imagination is lived reality, action. The heroic is the plane on which dream, or nightmare, and reality converge. It stands to reason, then, that the heroic in human nature is more than just an adolescent concern. It is a political concern, albeit mediated by imagination. In modern democratic culture, that mediation takes on a particular form: the politics of heroism is the politics of literature.

Our three principals—Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche—ought to be understood in the first place as representatives of the politics of literature and only secondarily as proto-fascists, democratic totalitarians and the like. While remaining alive to the unease that surrounds the connection between literary politics and modern aesthetic politics, we ought to keep in mind that these thinkers have made a broader, lasting, impact on our culture. Since the time of Homer, myth and poetry have played a significant role in politics; and since the time of Plato philosophers have voiced concern about the political affects of poetry. But Plato did not abandon literature, nor should we. Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche are literary philosophers who, despite

19 Ibid., p. 184.
their disagreements, take seriously the problem of writing and action. Moreover, they attempt, as far as possible to act through their writing. In other words, the story of these ambitious authors is the prehistory of the idea of epic theory.

Modern Science and Democratic History

Having considered the concept of the heroic, let us turn to the matter of history. Critics of “progress,” not one of our authors views the revolutionary changes that ushered in modernity with unqualified optimism. Despite their obvious tendency towards individualism, Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche evince a profound awareness of the trade-offs attending the rise of modern scientific civilization and the downfall of the ancient, feudal, regime. In this, they resemble one of the greatest sociologists of democracy, Alexis DeTocqueville, who without hesitating to offer advice to “friends of democracy,” nevertheless, counsels against democratic excesses. An example is Tocqueville’s notion of the tyranny of the majority: Revealing his own aristocratic sympathies, Tocqueville warns his reader time and again that the greatest danger to democratic society is likely to issue from an excess of democratic equality.

Tocqueville, on account of his judicious balance of criticism and amity towards democracy, retains a high place in the pantheon of modern sociologists. However, it is telling that a recent history of sociology dubs Tocqueville “the last gentleman.” For, Tocqueville is one of the last philosophers to adopt the aristocratic stance unapologetically. If the democratic stance towards history is typified by modern scientific objectivity, the aristocratic stance is characterized by a different focus; namely, on ambition and great actions.

Although he is not a central figure in my study, Tocqueville’s prescient insights into the strange and somewhat paradoxical influence of democracy and science on our personal and
social self-understanding provide an instructive context for understanding the problem of modern democratic heroism. Specifically, Tocqueville observes a paradox in democratic ambition. In well best known work, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville laments that democratic ambition is mediocre, despite that so many democrats are ambitious:

> I confess that I apprehend much less for democratic society from the boldness than from the mediocrity of desires. What appears to me most to be dreaded is that, in the midst of the small, incessant occupations of private life, ambition should lose its vigor and greatness; that the passions of man should abate, but at the same time be lowered; so that the march of society should every day become more tranquil and less aspiring.  

This dread of mediocrity is common to critics of democracy from the French Revolution to our time. Carlyle and Nietzsche share in it, to be sure. It is not the democratic form of political association merely that Tocqueville diagnoses as detrimental to the modern spirit. For, coincident with the rise of democratic institutions is the near-universal sanction of the rationalist standpoint of modern natural science, a standpoint that, in democratic societies, penetrates to our historical self-understanding. “The historians who live in democratic ages,” writes Tocqueville, “are not only prone to assign a great *cause* to every incident, but they are also given to connect incidents together so as to deduce a *system* from them.”

> While historians in aristocratic ages normally produce narratives of great men and tend to disregard systematic causes, perhaps excessively, “those who write in democratic ages have another more dangerous tendency”:

> As it becomes extremely difficult to discern and analyze the reason which, acting separately on the will of each member of the community, concur in the end to produce movement in the whole mass, men are led to believe that this movement is involuntary, and that societies unconsciously obey some superior force ruling over them…. [T]he principle of free will is not secured…

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20 *Democracy in America* II.iii.46.

21 Ibid. II.i.25. The italics are mine.
Historians who live in democratic ages, then, not only deny that the few have any power of acting on the destiny of a people, but they deprive the people themselves of the power of modifying their own condition, and they subject it either to an inflexible providence or to some blind necessity.\textsuperscript{22}

To sum up: Even as our modern democratic form of social organization appears to bestow on human agents an unprecedented level of freedom, our modern democratic self-understanding is yoked more and more to necessity. Our age advertises the right of every person to stand as the author of one’s own biography, one’s own history. Yet, perhaps never have human agents felt more inclined to interpret themselves as the products of foreign powers. We moderns construe the self more and more as “caused” by external forces, than as “causing” its own destiny. Judging from modern historical narrative and the modern philosophy of history, “it would seem that man is utterly powerless over himself and over all around him. The historians of antiquity taught how to command: those of our time teach only how to obey; in their writings, the author always appears great, but humanity is always diminutive.”\textsuperscript{23}

Tocqueville’s observations set the stage for an inquiry into literary ambition. As Tocqueville points out, the diminutive scale in which humanity appears in democratic historical narratives has another consequence; namely, it makes the author appear in gigantic scale. Thus the enlargement of the author proceeds apace with the diminution of the average man.

Where writers like Hegel and Marx exhibit the ambition to reveal the hidden causes the move history, Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche figure the writer as a historical actor, in the extreme as a creator, of history. Men of bold ambition themselves, Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche insist on exploring the possibility of self-creation; and assert in the face of intellectual

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
adversity that a serious encounter with the question of heroic action is vital to the health self and society. Accordingly each of them grapples with the modern problem of the heroic, with varying degrees of success and failure.

In their social and political context, these heroic philosophers criticize the middling tendency of democratic culture. But of course, they are not the first philosophers to recommend heroic virtue. In the distant prehistory of our problem lay the two initiators of Western political philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, for whom aristocracy, literally the “government of the best,” is the ideal regime against which all others should be measured. Let us briefly compare their views to those of the modern philosophy of history represented by Hegel and Marx.

The idea of accountability that we associate with the intuitive notion of agency implies in principle that the agent, the doer, behind any action can give an account of what he or she has done, and why. This suggests in turn the possibility of giving alternative accounts, and accordingly, the legitimacy of critiquing the moral choices of great leaders to assess the relative goodness of such choices. Of course the logic of accountability applies to all individuals, not alone to leaders of the community.

We can construe Classical moral philosophy, from Socrates on, as the practice of holding (great) men to account for their opinions and actions. Plato’s dialogues refer directly to the great political men of Athens: Solon and Pericles, as well as lesser figures like Alcibiades, Polus and Laches. Moreover, to indicate that the political philosopher’s interest in great men is not restricted to “men of action,” Plato interrogates renowned wise men (sophistes) like Gorgias and Protagoras. Finally, the philosopher interrogates the poets, also. Plato-Socrates’ critiques of Homer, Hesiod and the tragedians are well known, and so is the attempt that Plato sustains
throughout most of his corpus to use Socrates as a foil to the great Homeric heroes, Achilles and Odysseus, and other popular heroic figures such as Hercules.

Aristotle, too, situates the exceptional individual at the center of his moral and political thought albeit in a more abstract way than his predecessor, Plato. Instead of well-known personages, in Aristotle’s work we meet more often with “ideal types” of men, meant to serve as the models according to which the science of moral action is grounded. Examples of these include the Spoudaios, Phronimos, Megalopsychos, and so on. It is not clear whether Aristotle has any particular person in mind when he invokes these ideal examples. There is no doubt that Aristotle’s moral paradigms are the final reference points for moral action, however; in contrast to dogmatic rules or systematic imperatives.

Revolving as it does around the exceptional person; the ancient approach is a double-edged sword. One obvious benefit of it is that it is founded upon the commonsensical approach of evaluating moral action by reference to concrete moral agents instead of relying on abstract, speculative schemes. However, the drawback of this approach is evident in Aristotle. There is a conspicuous tension between Aristotle’s insistence on the engaged human agent as measure of moral action, and his unwillingness, or inability to provide concrete cases of such paradigmatic agents. This difficulty—and the possibility that its source lay in a deeper, pre-philosophical ambiguity about the nature of heroism—surfaces again in Aristotle’s account of ambition (the “heroic” virtue *par excellence*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: there are no names for the excess and deficiency of ambition, nor can the philosopher offer any. “As a result, the men who occupy the extremes lay claim to the middle position. We ourselves, in fact, sometimes call the middle
person ambitious and sometimes unambitious; sometimes we praise an ambitious and at other times an unambitious man.”

Over and against the ancient tradition, the nineteenth century orthodoxy represented here by Hegel and Marx attempts to circumvent the ambiguity mentioned above by appealing to abstract historical forces and substituting for commonsense agency a mechanistic notion of the human subject as a conduit of these forces. The Hegelian “cunning of reason” and the Marxian class struggle are classic cases of this approach. As the familiar modern adage has it, “there are no moral or immoral actions, only evaluations.” Moral praise and blame, then, are glosses merely, since actions inevitable issue from causes out of the individual’s control.

Hegel’s gloss on the world-historical individual in the Philosophy of History sums it up:

Such are all great historical men—whose own particular aims involve those large issues which are the will of the World-Spirit. They may be called heroes, inasmuch as they have derived their purposes and their vocation, not from the calm, regular course of things, sanctioned by the existing order; but from a concealed fount—one which has not attained to phenomenal, present existence—from that inner Spirit, still hidden beneath the surface, which, impinging on the outer world as on a shell, bursts it into pieces, because it is another kernel than that which belonged to the shell in question.

Hegel’s world-historic individuals include practical men of political expertise, to be sure. Also, such men are conscious of an aim: namely, in Machiavelli’s words, to usher in “new modes and orders.” But what Hegel is saying is that this is all that a world-historic individual is aware of. In other words, these supremely ambitious men do not answer the call of their age on account of some apperception of justice but because they are savvy enough to discern “what [is] ripe for development” at a particular time. “Such individuals [have] no consciousness of the general Idea they [are] unfolding, while prosecuting those aims of theirs; on the contrary, they [are] practical,

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24 1107b33-1108a2.

political men.”

According to Hegel, such concrete personages are the measure of truth, at least for a particular epoch, in a physical rather than a moral sense. This recalls the equation between world history and world justice. Thus the classical dilemma is resolved:

> World-historical men…must, therefore, be recognized as its clear-sighted ones; their deeds, their words are the best of that time. Great men have formed purposes to satisfy themselves, not others…. For it was they who best understood affairs; from whom others learned, and approved, or at least acquiesced in—their policy.

Marx, following Hegel (or taking Hegel’s logic to its extreme) venerates the bare opportunism and ambition of a world-historic class, the proletariat. For our purposes, that Marx takes classes rather than individuals for the instruments of world-historical change is less important than his agreement with Hegel, to discount the problem of a morally accountable heroism. While Marx proposes strategies and scientific rationalizations for the communist struggle, he denies emphatically that philosophy can interrogate the question of moral greatness. Philosophical form merely follows world-historical function: “When people speak of ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express the fact that within the old society the [material] elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence.”

For the classical philosopher, political philosophy demands the interrogation of great leaders from the standpoint of a contemplative insight into the human good. To this end, classical philosophy falls back on examples, or constructions, of superlative men that can serve as paradigms of moral excellence. By contrast, the modern systems of history regard heroic

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
individuals as existing beyond the reach of philosophy. They are themselves the first manifestations of historically inevitable permutations of human subjectivity, heretofore unthinkable. It may be profitable to think of the doctrine of world-historical individuals (or classes) as the peculiarly modern version of so-called “onto-theology.” World-historic individuals are both indispensable and superfluous, from a metaphysical standpoint, constituting an impenetrable substratum of discourse in a given epoch.

This broadly-sketched divergence frames the discussion Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche to follow. As we have said, these authors dissent from the modern orthodoxy in ways that incline towards the views of the ancients. Hence, an inquiry into their views is both timely, since the modern orthodoxy is subsiding, and perennial, since it can serve as a link between modern concerns and ancient, timeless themes. Finally, Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche occupy a space between ancient and modern that recommends them as representatives of a modern counter-tradition. This is the tradition that I refer to as “heroic individualism.”

**History and Language: Vico**

Our discussion, above, of the voice and the text suggests that man’s manner of relating to language is an important aspect of the human world that helps to account for the historical evolution of consciousness. One early modern thinker in particular makes similar claims relating historical change and the development of language. This is G. B. Vico. Vico objects to the marked tendency among modern political philosophers to adopt the Cartesian, methodological or mathematic definition of science. Vico deploys his notion of *scienzia* in conscious opposition to

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29 This does not mean that Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche are all attracted to the *same* ancients. However, by taking the phenomena of heroism seriously, they evince distaste for the modern leveling tendency. In this way, all three incline toward the ancient preference for aristocracy.
this prejudice of method; namely, that the only scientific truths are those than can be quantified or mathematized and situated within a grand theoretical scheme.

For Vico, mathematics does not offer the appropriate model for understanding the human world. Rather, the human world is constituted by language, which makes an understanding of poetic logic, or poetic wisdom, crucial to an understanding of history. Vico’s philosophy relies on the principle, *verum ipsum factum*: the true is the made. Because man makes the human world through language, it is possible for man to know the human world without the mediation of abstract formulas. Accordingly, Vico’s philosophy of history is a history of language.

The three ages of Vico’s universal history—the divine, the heroic and the human—correspond to three regimes of language. In the divine and heroic ages of history, poetic or metaphorical language dominates the scene. Only in the human age does the mathematical habit of modern science so dominate as to obscure from man the poetic origins of all language. For Hegel, the modern state represents the “end of history,” that is, the democratic state is the perfection of world-historical progress. By contrast, then, Vico portrays modernity as a “human age” that enjoys the blessings of scientific clarity and political equality, but also portends the danger of a loss of poetic wisdom that was accessible to earlier ages. This loss of poetic truth portends an egoistic “barbarism of humanity.”

By recapturing the poetic or metaphorical insights of earlier ages—the “divine” and “heroic,” respectively—Vico hopes to avoid the descent into modern barbarity. Modern barbarity is a “civil disease” that reproduces the barbarism of prehistoric times by returned man, now depraved through reflection, to a bestial existence. As a remedy to this danger, Vico recommends not a return to heroic civilization, but the discipline of a heroic mind.


The Hero as Author: Rousseau

Vico’s significance lay in his discovery of the constitutive role of language in human reality, over and against mere description. But the discipline of Vico’s heroic mind basically is contemplative. What sets apart Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche from both the modern theorists of history and from philosophers of language like Vico is their common endeavor to act through writing, in a sense, to realize the voice in the text, in a strange manner, to speak through texts.

In our immediate context Rousseau’s importance is paramount. Briefly, the uniqueness of Rousseau flows from his ironic position as an author who addresses a public about the relationship between legislators and peoples. The irony here can be traced to the significantly different relationships between a “great legislator” and his people, and an “author” and his public. The legislator figures a personal, and particular, relationship to a particular people, while the author bears an anonymous and general (market-driven) relationship to the reading public. There is a virtual equality between an author and his readers that does not obtain between legislators and subjects: the reader can always become a writer, but there can be only one “great legislator.” If it is true that literacy is a great modifying feature of modern democratic culture, then the tension between the legislator-people relationship and the author-public relationship—as a particular case of the general tension of the voice and the text—points to a constitutive tension, even irony, in the modern democratic notion of authority.

Rousseau’s modern renovation of the ancient institution of the great legislator in the *Social Contract* serves as the paradigm of the modern hero as author. One cannot fail to notice that the great legislator is not a mere stand-in for Rousseau as an author, however. To the contrary, the great legislator is an ideal-type of the citizen-author. Rousseau’s aim as the author of the *Social Contract*, then, is both to hold apart and to reconcile the appeal to personal or
charismatic authority represented by the great legislator, and the appeal to individual self-interest represented by the contract. Neither of these alone will suffice to establish a just and stable regime.

It is for the reader to judge whether Rousseau succeeds at this particular attempt to reconcile the patriarchal intimacy of the legislator’s voice with the egoistic rationality of the contractual text, an attempt that resembles so many of Rousseau’s efforts at reconciliation through literature. That he makes such an effort is enough to qualify Rousseau as a founding father of the regime of writing as action, however.

In these pages, we shall not attempt to dissolve this mystery but to understand it better for what it is. The problem of self-creation in the modern sense dovetails with the question of the hero as author, and with notion of one’s self as being capable of authorizing one’s own destiny. This is close to what Carlyle means when he equates history and biography: “life-writing.” Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche merit our close attention because of the seriousness and intensity with which they think through the problem of life as literature.

Carlyle and Nietzsche

Both Carlyle and Nietzsche criticize the enlightenment at the same time as they criticize Rousseau. In particular, both thinkers reject the mathematical, mechanical view of nature in favor of one that is more “organic.” In On Heroes, Carlyle conveys this organic view through the Norse myth of the Tree Igdrasil. The tree figures human history, while the heroic impulse of human nature is “hero-stuff,” or in Shakespeare’s phrase, “the stuff dreams are made on.” More importantly Carlyle portrays the development of human language through the same metaphor of a tree:
“Considering how human things circulate, each inextricably in communion with all,—how the word I speak to you today is borrowed...from all men since the first man began to speak—I find no similitude so true as this of a Tree. Beautiful; altogether beautiful and great. The ‘Machine of the Universe,’—alas, do but think of that in contrast!\(^{30}\)

These two applications of the tree-image convey the two facets of Carlyle’s literary objection to theories of abstract-mechanical causation in history. For Carlyle, history is nothing but the story of man’s natural impulse towards “the heroic” coming to expression in different ways. While chronologically earlier expressions condition later expressions of the heroic, the important point is that, fundamentally, each is a reappearance of the same human nature in a novel form.

This true heroic essence Carlyle finally defines in terms of “originality,” or “sincerity,” a faithfulness to the moral law of the universe, the law of duty. In “The Hero as Poet,” Carlyle expresses a conviction in the identity of moral imaginations: both the prophet and the poet, he says

have penetrated...into the sacred mystery of the universe, what Goethe calls ‘the open secret.’ ‘Which is that great secret?’ asks one.—‘The open secret,’—open to all but seen by almost none! That divine mystery, which lies everywhere in all Beings, ‘the Divine idea of the World,’ that which lies at ‘the bottom of Appearance,’ as Fichte styles it; of which all Appearance, from the starry sky to the grass of the field, but especially the appearance of Man and his work, is but the vesture, the embodiment that renders it visible.... [Both the poet and the prophet] is Vates, first of all, in virtue of being sincere. So far Poet and Prophet, participators in the ‘open secret,’ are one.\(^{31}\)

By asserting that a fundamentally identical heroic impulse animates great souls from Mohammad to Milton, Carlyle denies implicitly that heroic leaders must be active men, in the sense of homines politici. Rather, from the beginning of On Heroes, with its portrayal of Odin, Carlyle imagines the hero as both a thinker and a doer: Odin is a forest-feller as well as the inventor of runes. By the same token, Carlyle portrays Johnson, Rousseau and Burns, the heroic men of

\(^{30}\) On Heroes, p. 21.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 80.
letters, as valiant warriors fallen in the line of duty. At the most simple level, then, Carlyle blurs any hard and fast distinction between contemplation and action—at least contemplation that has entered public expression in the form of writing.

Nietzsche, too, and to a greater degree in his writings, defies the boundaries between contemplation and action. Although Ralph Waldo Emerson is not represented adequately in the present study, his work serves as a bridge between Carlyle and Nietzsche. In fact, the reader of all three of these writers will find in Nietzsche, echoes of Emerson, which trace back to Carlyle. One fine example will suffice. In “Schopenhauer as Educator,” Nietzsche, quoting from Emerson’s “Circles,” says that philosophy ought to be…something fearsome, and men called to the search for power ought to know what a source of the heroic wells within it. Let an American tell them what a great thinker who arrives on this earth signifies as a new centre of tremendous forces. ‘Beware,’ says Emerson, ‘when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk. It is as when a conflagration has broken out in a great city, and no man knows when it is safe, or when it will end. There is not a piece of science but its flank may be turned tomorrow; there is not any literary reputation, not the so-called eternal names of fame, that may not be revised and condemned; the things which are dear to men at this hour are so on account of the ideas which have emerged on their mental horizon, and which cause the present order of things, as a tree bears apples. A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits.”

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32 Although Ralph Waldo Emerson is known to most as the preeminent representative of “American Transcendentalism,” the so-called Sage of Concord took great pains never to brand himself with that label. And, while he was first initiated into the mysteries of German Idealism by Thomas Carlyle (to whom Emerson referred, before their introduction in 1833, as his “Germanick new-light writer”), Emerson also took great pains not to appear as Carlyle’s disciple in the New World. Evidently the philosophical Emerson who emerged in 1832 had no desire to cling to yet another “movement.” However, Emerson did attach himself to some like-minded companions among whom not only the other American Transcendentalists, but Carlyle himself, figures prominently. In fact, it may have been at Carlyle’s urging, and as a response to Carlyle’s On Heroes, that Emerson undertook his Representative Men. Hence, it is worthwhile for us briefly to consider the connection between Carlyle and Emerson. It is also possible that Emerson provides the mediating link between Carlyle and Nietzsche. Nietzsche disavows any debt to Carlyle (although he does admit that Carlyle is “interesting”), but Nietzsche was an avid reader of Emerson.

The continuity between this Emersonian-Nietzschean utterance and what Carlyle says of “Odin” in *On Heroes* should speak for itself:

For the Norse people, the Man now named Odin, and Chief Norse God, we fancy was such a man. A Teacher, and Captain of soul and body; a Hero, of worth immeasurable; admiration for whom, transcending the known bounds, became adoration. Has he not the power of articulate Thinking; and many other powers, as yet miraculous?... By him they know what to do here, what to look for hereafter. Existence has become articulate, melodious by him; he first has made Life alive! —We may call this Odin, the origin of Norse Mythology: Odin or whatever name the First Norse Thinker bore while he was among men. His view of the universe once promulgated, a like view starts into being in all minds; grows, keeps ever growing, while it continues credible there. In all minds it lay written, but invisibly, as in sympathetic ink; at his word it starts into visibility in all. Nay, in every epoch of the world, the great event, parent of all others, is it not the arrival of a thinker in the world?—

For Carlyle, as for Emerson, the turn from Romantic speculation to pragmatic history takes the form of a study of heroic historical actors. Yet Emerson’s heroes, his method of selecting and analyzing them, his whole purport is not quite the same as Carlyle’s. Both Carlyle and Emerson are more individualistic than authoritarian in spite of Carlyle’s use of theocratic language. For Nietzsche, however, Emerson’s less theocratic emphasis on the individual cultivation of greatness must have been a crucial difference. But it also portends the politically ominous figure of the superman.

**Democratic Perfectionism or the Doctrine of Supermen?**

Emersonian greatness prefigures the Nietzschean imperative, cited by John Rawls in his critique of perfectionism in *A Theory of Justice*, that

mankind must work continually at the production of individual great men—that and nothing else is its task…. For the question is this: how can your life, the individual life

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34 *On Heroes*, p. 22.

receive the highest value, the deepest significance? How can it be least squandered? Certainly only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars, and not for the good of the majority, that is to say those who, taken individually, are the least valuable exemplars.\textsuperscript{36}

Stanley Cavell, glossing Rawls’ choice of this particular passage, remarks: “This sounds bad. Rawls takes it straightforwardly to imply that there is a separate class of great men (to be) for whose good, and conception of good, the rest of society is to live.”\textsuperscript{37} If Nietzsche’s utterance has this straightforward meaning, then, according to Cavell, Rawls is correct to refuse perfectionism “as a principle of justice pertinent to the life of democracy. But…if Nietzsche is to be dismissed as a thinker pertinent to the founding of democratic life, then so, it should seem is Emerson…”\textsuperscript{38}

“Nietzsche’s Meditation on Schopenhauer is, to an as yet undisclosed extent, a transcription and elaboration of Emersonian passages.”\textsuperscript{39} We have just observed the additional layer of transcription from Carlyle. But what commonalities does this indicate? Specifically, Cavell claims that Emerson and Nietzsche share more than a common fund of rhetoric—they both endorse a teaching that Cavell calls democratic moral perfectionism. “Perfectionism,” as Cavell interprets it,

is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one’s soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and one’s society…\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Meditations, pp. 161-162
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., pp. 156-157.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 157.
In defense of perfectionism, Cavell critiques Rawls, whom, citing the Nietzschean dictum above, argues that perfectionism in the extreme is a dangerous form of elitism and cannot be circumscribed within a democratic theory of the just society. Even in milder forms, perfectionism, for Rawls, is a more-or-less comprehensive teleological principle that “[directs] society to arrange its institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, in science and in culture.” For Rawls, this teleological principle manifests an unjust (read: unfair) allocation of social resources.

Rawls misses the point, according to Cavell. By interpreting perfectionism as a matter of policy pertaining to the “basic structure” of society, Rawls neglects the perfectionists’ characteristic aloofness from the political institutions of one’s society. More importantly, Rawls overlooks the fundamental perfectionist attitude that the individual’s own “constitution,” (read: the soul) and not the social structure, is the authentic subject of justice. In light of these things, Cavell claims not only that perfectionism is compatible with modern democracy, but that a democratic perfectionism is indispensable to the (Rawlsian) endeavor to elaborate a critique of democracy from within. As I shall claim in the next chapter, this perfectionist critique-from-within is precisely the standpoint of “heroic individualism.” Furthermore, this critical standpoint is characterized by the authorial practice of writing-as-action, of inscribing the exception within the rule, or representing the voice in the text. Heroic individuals are not “great men (to be)” but imagined figures, whose only existence belongs in texts.

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41 Theory, p. 325, note 51.
Summary

As I have said, a major aim of this dissertation is to revisit Carlyle in his proper context as an author who grapples honestly with the difficult problem of writing as action. Chapter two elaborates on the conception of the heroic individual as a literary figure and narrows in on the contemporary philosophical context of heroic individualism. There I continue with my discussion of Nietzsche and the contemporary problem of the aestheticization of politics. By way of a brief discussion of supererogation, I also try to show how the question of moral perfectionism is related historically to the moral and religious problem of the state of one’s soul.

Chapter three addresses Thomas Carlyle’s historical context as member of the generation following the French Revolution. This chapter concentrates on two themes: the religion of literature and the language of religion. The first theme speaks to the immediate historical circumstances of a fully secularized society in the wake of revolutionary change, while the second reaches far back in history to recover the meaning of political-religious language. The chapter culminates in a discussion of what Carlyle meant when he posited that “All true Reformers…are by the nature of them Priests, and strive for a Theocracy.”

In chapter four we delve deeper into the heart of the matter with an extended discussion of the roles of the “great legislator” and civil religion in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. The great legislator and the civil religion form a side of Rousseau’s political thought that modern democrats tend to skirt around, while modern critics of fascism and democratic totalitarianism will see in these elements of Rousseau’s political philosophy ominous forebodings of horrors yet to come. In a sense, Rousseau’s great legislator is an archetype of the heroic individual, however. Thus, while I, too, am critical of Rousseau’s political philosophy, I think it is important to place

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42 *On Heroes*, p. 152.
the problem of the great legislator at the center of this study. Rousseau revives the ancient institution of the legislator in a modern context, and his effort, in the *Social Contract*, to exploit the potential of heroic authority without violating the dictates of democratic equality is a paradigmatic instance of the authorial ambition to inscribe the exception within the rule.

Chapter five returns the attention to Carlyle, through a discussion of Carlyle and Rousseau. The focus of this chapter is the figure of the hero as king and the resilience of the moral appeal to ideal kingship. Both Carlyle and Rousseau make a literary appeal to ideal kingship as a moral standard. They both insist on the persistence of ideal kingship as an essential feature of democratic morality. However, this chapter focuses on the differences between these two authors’ appeals and more particularly, on Carlyle’s critique of Rousseau.

In chapter six, we revisit the theme of Carlyle’s historical position. Only here, I engage more directly Carlyle’s philosophy of history. Specifically, this chapter returns to the question of theocracy and the role of the literary “prophet” in modern secular culture. While Carlyle himself is hesitant to invoke God, he takes it for a truism that there is always a “godlike” in man’s affairs.

The tension between the text and the voice, in *On Heroes* especially, is the focus of chapter seven. The impression I hope to make with this chapter is that Carlyle is not an “ideologue,” precisely for the reason that he recognizes a need to address the tension between the voice and the text, but resists the urge to reconcile the two, or create texts that can communicate perfectly the voice. Carlyle intentionally leaves unresolved the tension between the hero as “man of letters” and the hero as “king” because he perceives the irony that keeps writing from being able to span the gulf between contemplation and action. At the same time, however, Carlyle
resists the temptation that Marx succumbs to, of abandoning contemplation altogether for a project of revolutionary activism.

Finally, chapter eight returns to the beginning of our discussion by revisiting the Carlyle-Nietzsche relationship. Recently, Leslie Paul Thiele has argued that Nietzsche’s “heroic individualism” is a far cry from Carlyle’s “hero-worship.” This is not so. Without denying that there are significant differences between the philosophies of Carlyle and Nietzsche, I want to suggest that we can better understand both authors by acknowledging what they have in common. In addition to having a common exemplar in Goethe and a common point of reference in Rousseau, Carlyle and Nietzsche—like Emerson—are possessed by a common problem; namely, the relationship of writing and action. They belong together in the context of a discussion of modern authorial ambition.
Chapter Two: The Heroic Individual

For what is freedom? That one has the will to self-responsibility. That one preserves the distance that divides us. That one has become more indifferent to hardship, toil, privation, even to life. That one is ready to sacrifice men to one’s cause, oneself not excepted. Freedom means that the manly instincts that delight in war and victory have gained mastery over the other instinct for “happiness.” The man who has become free—and how much more the mind that has become free—spurns the contemptible sort of well-being dreamed of by shopkeepers, Christians, cows, women and other democrats. The free man is a warrior.

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Virtue is its own reward, but in a very different sense than you suppose, Dr. Gowkthrapple. The pleasure it brings! Had you ever a diseased liver? I will maintain, and appeal to all competent judges, that no evil conscience with a good nervous system ever caused a tenth part of the misery that a bad nervous system, conjoined with the best conscience in nature, will always produce. What follows, then? Pay off your moralist, and hire two apothecaries and two cooks. Socrates is inferior to Captain Barclay; and the ‘Enchiridion’ of Epictetus must hide its head before Kitchener’s ‘Peptic Receipts.’ Heed not the immortality of the soul so long as you have beefsteaks, porter, and—blue pills. Das hole der Teufel! Virtue is its own reward because it needs no reward.

Thomas Carlyle’s *Journal*

What does it mean to be free? This is the fundamental question of modern, or liberal, political philosophy. That liberalism takes individual freedom as its first principle does not minimize but rather increases the importance of asking this question; we must pursue the meaning of freedom with infinitely greater vigor if we are going to stake our public life on it alone. Yet the meaning of freedom is elusive, and, if Nietzsche is right, liberalism completely misses it. Of course, one does not need to rely on Nietzsche for a critique of the ambiguity of liberal freedom. But Nietzsche’s argument is peculiar: more than a critique, it poses a challenge to the liberal regime. Every merely conventional idea pales in comparison to Nietzsche’s radical understanding of freedom. Freedom is creative force: crafting one’s own meaning, defining oneself at will, making up new identities, devising new moves. Freedom bears no traces of obedience to the law of another, and that includes other editions of oneself. Strictly interpreted, this Nietzschean freedom
is as unattainable as perfect obedience to the moral law in Kant’s sense. If such a freedom even is possible it must be the preserve of a select few in the whole history of human experience. Democracies certainly cannot rely on it, let alone turn it out in the people at large. If Nietzsche is correct—if freedom just is this creative action—then authentic freedom necessarily opposes every sham-freedom endorsed by democracy, its flimsy pursuits of happiness, comfort, commodity, well-being, equal opportunity, and liberty of conscience. Democracy is the very antithesis of freedom; it is slavish obedience to sheepish conventions.

Yet if it is not freedom, there must be something of adamantine strength supporting liberal democracy; for it has been able to survive the powerful and incisive criticisms of Nietzsche—and more than merely survive, democratic culture has been able to appropriate Nietzsche’s frantic thought and translate it into the apparently levelheaded talk about “values” that we participate in every day. This truly is an impressive feat considering that there is no reason to believe Nietzsche wanted to make bedfellows with liberal-democratic culture. After all, democrats regard it as a chief merit of our culture that it produces the sort of person who is reluctant “to sacrifice men to one’s cause, oneself not excepted.” What, then, accounts for democracy’s fascination with Nietzsche? If his thought is so antidemocratic—and it is—then why has he become a darling of latter-day liberal philosophy? Surely the answer is in his individualism.

Nietzsche’s individualism is as obvious as his support for democracy is obscure. Of course his is not the sort of individualism that fixates on equal rights. On the contrary, Nietzsche insists that there is an order of rank, specifically, a hierarchy of wills. Freedom “preserves the distance that divides us”: This cryptic remark suggests that freedom is not a given, rather, it is

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1 This seems to be the premise of the popular “democratic peace” theory, for example.
the supreme attainment of a self-sovereign will. Democracy is not an end in itself but a means to the end of sovereign individualism. Democracy is but the political attaché, the *vehicle* of individualism, desirable only because it brings into being the psychological and social circumstances in which the great individual can emerge.

Thus, Nietzsche’s philosophy lends itself to an internal critique of democratic culture from the perspective of an idealized individualism. For Nietzsche, however, great men redeem democracy; it is emphatically not the other way around. The merely “democratic” individual is defective insofar as he imagines himself as a moral equal with the same rights and deserving the same freedom as every other individual. This encourages a facile mediocrity and discourages the will to become who one is. To the democratic individual “it seems sufficient…to get free from the overpowering domination by society (whether that of the state or of the church). He does not oppose them as a person but only as an individual, he represents all individuals against the totality.” The democratic individual is one among many identical atoms whose actions flow from identical motives and interests. He claims no particular status for himself: “he instinctively posits himself as equal to all other individuals; what he gains in this struggle he gains not as a person but as a representative of individuals.”

Nietzsche’s aim is to overcome this “herd instinct,” or “herd morality” that characterizes the democratic individual. One scholar has interpreted Nietzsche’s attempt to overcome this complacency as “heroic individualism.” Heroic individualism is antidemocratic, according to this author, yet it is not incompatible with democracy. Admittedly, heroic individualism “necessitates immorality by herd standards. It demands that the hero sacrifice himself for his own ideals.” But there is no political incompatibility with democracy here because the struggle, the “politics,” of

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individuation is internal to the self. The soul is a multiplicity of conflicting desires, drives, “motives,” and “interests” that the heroic individual must subdue, so that he may become a law unto himself. “The [heroic] individual becomes his own moral legislator, his own taskmaster and most ferocious enemy, and his own physician. Success is not measured by a long life, moral capital, fame, or worldly power, but by the courage needed to sacrifice these goods in the pursuit of one’s autonomy.”

The portrayal of Nietzsche as a heroic individualist is somewhat persuasive though it flies in the face of Nietzsche’s remark that freedom demands the readiness “to sacrifice men to one’s cause, oneself not excepted.” What type of individual is that? And can a democracy tolerate him? More importantly, how does it come about that the “free” man is “his own cause,” his own moral legislator, to whose sole purpose every sacrifice is consecrated? What accounts for this strange heroic ideal, neither classical nor Christian, though sometimes appearing in the guise of both; and most remarkably, as “Caesar with the soul of Christ”? Finally, is the idea of heroic individualism tenable? In order to answer these questions we will have to ask yet broader questions concerning the relationship between heroism and politics, and between heroism and moral freedom.

**Heroism and Politics**

Heroism is the literary way of talking about politics. The “heroic,” so to speak, is where the political regime meets the poetic and moral imagination. Stories about heroes, epic stories, are a basic mode of moral and political education. Because human beings are by nature tellers of

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stories, and we first learn by stories, epic narratives have a powerful educative effect—for better or worse—on the listener. At least, this has been the conventional wisdom ever since Plato inscribed his famous quarrel with Homer in the *Republic*. The poets’ portrayal of heroes has remained a topic of vigorous debate in the Western tradition of political philosophy. Political philosophers try more or less to *tame* the hero, to domesticate him for the regime. Philosophy presupposes civilization. What civilizations need are not heroes, strictly speaking, but citizens or subjects. Generally one can say that by the time philosophy enters the scene, the heroic age has ended.

This old wisdom needs a defense. For the modern viewpoint suggests that literature and politics belong to opposite realities. Political science, *qua* science, addresses itself to the external, objective world. This is a world made up of concrete goods regulated by positive law, or perhaps determined by sociological law. The literary mind tends to reach the same conclusion as the scientific, but for opposite reasons. Literature addresses itself to the interior realm. It is only tangentially related to the external world of behavior. The poetic imagination resists being defined or determined by the outside world. These two realities exist alongside each other, but apparently cannot speak on common terms. If heroism has anything to say to politics, political science is deaf to it.

Perhaps the question belongs to political philosophy, if not to political science. Yet modern political philosophy rejects the entire discussion of virtue and the quarrel with poetry along with it, on the one hand; while, on the other hand, anti-modern philosophers of both individualist and collectivist sympathies commend activism of the sort one normally associates
with the heroic, that is, pre-philosophical, age of history.\(^4\) What has happened to \emph{paideia} in all of this? Does the modern dispensation annul this old question, since individuals are free to choose any poet they like, because everyone ultimately gets to be his own poet? This fails to satisfy common sense. The way heroism speaks to politics may be radically different today, but it still speaks if we will only listen. To get ears for it we shall have to turn elsewhere, to ancient philosophy.

**Aristotle on Moral Action**

We are proceeding on the hunch that by thinking through the problem of heroism we can find a point of communication between literature and politics—in contrast to the voiceless relationship between facts and values. The first thing we must do, then, is clarify what we mean by heroism. The key to this is to distinguish between the hero as a (real or fictional) character, and the heroic, which, as a specific quality, pertains not to character but to \emph{action}. In the \emph{Poetics}, Aristotle rectifies the common error of mistaking the hero for what is heroic:

> The Unity of a Plot does not consist, as some suppose, in its having one man as its subject. An infinity of things befall one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and...there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action. If not the life or character of the hero, what gives unity to the plot of an epic? Aristotle replies that it is the unity of action:

\(^4\) Here I refer to early modern political philosophy. There are two tendencies that either diminish or totally reorient the discussion of moral virtue in modern (vs. ancient) political philosophy. The first, represented by Hobbes, is the claim that morality is radically conventional, that all right is based on the right of ‘nature,’ namely, the right to self-preservation in the war of all against all. Morals are as artificial as civil society, both of which come into being with the creation of a sovereign power. The second tendency is represented by Montesquieu, and boils down to the claim that moral virtue is not necessary in a society based on the spirit of commerce. Rousseau’s effort to redefine civic virtue on modern terms combines a vigorous rejection of Montesquieu’s claim with an equally strong embrace of Hobbes’s claim. Of course, Rousseau’s sovereign differs from Hobbes’s in that, for Rousseau, the sovereign is the “general will” of the people.
The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole.\(^5\)

Aristotle comes shortly hereafter to a rather remarkable conclusion about the poet. “The poet,” he judges, “must be more the poet of his stories or Plots than his verses, inasmuch as he is a poet by virtue of the imitative element in his work, and it is actions that he imitates.”

What does Aristotle mean by the unity of action? What sort of thing is it that the poet is said to imitate? Aristotle does not give an account of action in the *Poetics*. To learn more we must turn to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle talks a great deal about action.\(^6\) One might say that action is the chief theme of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*. It is here that Aristotle explores the faculty of practical wisdom, which is the ability to deliberate well and thus to make good choices. Action and choice are intimately related. “Choice is the starting point of action: it is the source of motion but not the end for the sake of which we act. The starting point of choice, however, is desire and reasoning directed toward some end.”\(^7\)

The unity of an action is *moral* unity. Actions are moral wholes to which we attach evaluative terms like “good” or “bad.” As agents responsible for moral actions we are subject to praise or blame since what we do reflects the quality of our ability to deliberate, as well as our character. As moral agents all of us can make choices. We are the “starting point” of our own activity. But we do not choose arbitrarily; before taking action we consult any number of needs and desires, the various goods within reach, and the means at our disposal. “No one deliberates about things that cannot be other than they are or about actions that he cannot possibly perform.”

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\(^5\) Both quotes are from Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a15-35.

\(^6\) See *Nicomachean Ethics*, books III and VI especially.

\(^7\) *N. Ethics*, 1139a31-34.
Rather, deliberation over potential actions takes the form of “reasoning directed toward some end.” In the process of deliberation we consult various desires and goods, ordering them toward a goal that is prescribed by nature or convention. All people are not equal when it comes to the ability to deliberate. To be morally good, an action has to be performed at the right time, in the right way, for the right reasons and so on. In turn, to act well one must be skilled in deliberation. The ability to deliberate well is called practical wisdom; “virtue makes us aim at the right target, and practical wisdom makes us use the right means.”

Practical wisdom is a unique faculty in that it connects the human intellect with the world of particular and changeable things; that is, the world of action. Practical wisdom “is neither a pure science nor an art. It is not a pure science, because matters of action admit of being other than they are, and it is not an applied science or art, because action and production are generically different.”

What remains, then, is that it is a truthful characteristic of acting rationally in matters good or bad for man. For production has an end other than itself, but action does not: good action is itself an end. That is why we think that Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom. They have the capacity of seeing what is good for themselves and for mankind, and these are, we believe, the qualities of men capable of managing households and states.

A great statesman like Pericles deserves to be praised as a paragon of practical wisdom. The example of such men also affords the best education in practical wisdom. There cannot be theoretical knowledge of particular things, not even of the “ultimate particular fact, of which there is perception but no scientific knowledge.” Therefore, we ought to pay as much attention to the sayings and opinions, undemonstrated though they are, of wise and experienced older men.

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8 Ibid., 1144a5-10.
9 Ibid., 1140b1-11
10 Ibid., 1142a25
as we do to demonstrated truths. For experience has given such men an eye with which they can see correctly.”

Returning to our main interest, the heroic, we now can appreciate that the poet’s imitation of action is not simply entertainment, but a mirror of moral reality. Accordingly the complete representation of an action will include all of the elements of deliberation just enumerated. A good poet must be able to distinguish between good and bad characters, deliberations and actions. This begins to account for the political relevance of poetry. Since political life builds upon moral life, it is apparent that poetry is a medium of considerable relevance to the *polis*. Although one can disagree, as Aristotle disagreed with Plato, regarding the effect of poetry on the polis, one cannot deny this educative function. For this reason Aristotle concludes that “poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history.” History merely “describes the thing that has been,” but poetry, “a kind of thing that might be” (i.e. an action).

**Nietzsche and the Aestheticization of Action**

There is no greater contrast than that between Aristotle’s rendering of action as the product of moral reasoning and Nietzsche’s depiction of action as a masterful exercise of the creative will. For Aristotle action springs from character; whereas for Nietzsche, characters are made by action. For Aristotle literature imitates moral life; for Nietzsche life is literature. Nietzsche

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11 Ibid., 1143b10-14

12 *Poetics*, 1451b1-5

13 Aristotle, too, affirms that actions make characters: imperceptibly we form habits by engaging in certain actions and, crudely put, the sum of habits is one’s character. Often it is not we, but our educators who “control” these early actions that go to form habits. What I want to imply here is that, still, there is little of the aesthetic to Aristotle’s notion of action. Habit-forming action is aesthetic in the sense that it, like all strictly moral action, has to do with pleasure and pain. But there is nothing of modern “creativity” to this ancient notion of the “aesthetic.”
concludes that the moral reasoning described by Aristotle is no longer tenable; there is no longer a rational foundation for morality because there is no longer an invisible world of nature or god to back it up. All that exists is the world of appearances, nature is red in tooth and claw, and god has been murdered. Of course Nietzsche does not claim responsibility for this historical fact: the death of God for Nietzsche is a *fait accompli*. But rather than live out his inheritance in a world without meaning Nietzsche emerges as the prophet of his own divinity. The Nietzschean hero “refuses to be armed by the gods, as was the boon claimed by the greatest heroes of the ancient poets. The overman is the hero of an atheistic and morally destitute world; he presents the paradox of the avid pursuit of greatness when no transcendental standards exist.” ¹⁴

Human action appears in a radically different light depending upon how one conceives of the reality in which man acts. Accordingly, the wide gulf between Aristotle’s and Nietzsche’s concept of the heroic can be accounted for by the difference between the ancient and modern views of cosmology and human nature. For Aristotle man is a social and political creature; moral deliberation and action is a socially informed process. The social nature of action does not rule out the interpretation of moral virtue is a sort of freedom; in fact, Aristotle concludes that the human good is *autarchia*, or self-sufficiency, which is a sort of freedom. However, the ancients “define something as self-sufficient not by reference to the ‘self’ alone. We do not mean a man who lives his life in isolation, but a man who also lives with parents, children, a wife, and friends and fellow citizens generally, since man is by nature a social and political being.” ¹⁵

Aristotle bases his account of morality on the twin premises that “the good is the aim of all action” and that “politics is the master science of the good.” To be sure, a great deal of

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¹⁴ Thiele, p. 12.

¹⁵ *N. Ethics*, 1097b9-11.
uncertainty and disagreement attends any discussion of the human good. “Problems of what is noble and just, which politics examines, present so much variety and irregularity that some people believe that they exist only by convention and not by nature. The problem of the good, too, presents a similar kind of irregularity.” Yet, despite the relative imprecision of moral knowledge Aristotle insists that the good *is by nature*, for it is the discovery of nature (over and against convention) that underlies the philosopher’s authority. That we do not have demonstrable knowledge of the human good is no reason to deny its existence; all it implies is that knowledge of the good is mediated by experience and common opinion rather than “theoretical” demonstration. Moral knowledge is social knowledge; its object is moral and political action. The crown of moral virtue is justice, that is, virtuous action towards one’s fellows.

Modernity turns Aristotle on his head. For Aristotle an action is the *conclusion* of reasoning process that reflects the quality of deliberation and character of the agent; and consequently deserves either praise or blame. But for the moderns, man is “really” an individual and not a social creature. “It is the interior world by which man defines himself and a command man addresses himself; he is at once sovereign lawgiver and subject. He becomes the man he is by giving himself the law which he obeys, and by obeying the law he gives himself.”

To abide by the rule of nature or any other man is to fall short of one’s own humanity. If every man is his own lawgiver, then human freedom takes the form of *autonomy* rather than autarky. Autarky was seen as the raison d’être of *nature*: self-sufficiency *par excellence*.

Accordingly, the moderns characterize action as *initiative* rather than conclusion. As Hannah Arendt summarizes: “To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to

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begin...to set something into motion.”¹⁷ Qua individual, man is a legislative being and comes into his own only by asserting the autonomous will over and against nature. Modern man avows that no rule is legitimate which he has not imposed on himself. He is an entrenched skeptic, if not nonbeliever, with respect to the existence of an overarching teleological good. He will define the good for himself, according to his own lights.

Nietzsche’s heroic individual is the most radical, not to say absurd portrayal of the type of heroism that results from this modern concept of man. Classical heroism necessitated a great public deed such as facing up to a king, founding, or saving a nation. Without this publicity—confined within the individual alone—heroism makes little sense. Certainly the publicity of classical heroism is incompatible with the self absorption of modern individualism. It comes as no surprise, then, that the modern heroic individual has never appeared as an actor on the stage of world history but only in speculation or fiction, on the pages of books and in the eye of the mind. The modern heroic individual is only sovereign in the realm of imagination.

Nevertheless the heroic individual is a politically significant fiction. Moreover, it not merely a Nietzschean idiosyncrasy, but a pervasive mood of nineteenth and twentieth century social philosophy with deep roots in our culture, that shows no sign of waning. We do ourselves a disservice to the extent that we let Nietzsche’s radical and idiosyncratic expression monopolize all thought on this subject. For, the difficulty we have encountered in interpreting Nietzsche’s political philosophy results precisely from his desire to unshackle the heroic individual from the imaginative realm and make it a socially operative principle. Paradoxically, this task required the absorption of all reality into Nietzsche’s aesthetic imagination. Again, all that is “real” for Nietzsche is the creative act. “The world, in [his] view, exists only as a ‘sign-chain’ awaiting

investment...” To the extent that Nietzsche actually succeeds at impressing the world with his own image, that image becomes meaningless, simply another object of interpretive violence. “Insofar as the audience does have a place in the Nietzschean paradigm, it is in the contemporary form of interpretivism: the audience is seen as an aggregate of interpreters or critics, each seeking to impose his own reading on any given performance.”

The heroic individual is a denizen of the literary intellect that emerges in one shape or another in countless modern minds. He is born of a virulent reaction against the shabby individual at the foundation of modern political philosophy. Modern political philosophy is most familiar with a different type of individual, a creature of formalism, animated by self-preservation, motives and interests, defined by “freedoms from” and so on. This is the democratic individual we encountered earlier. The heroic individual looks down his nose at anyone so preoccupied with the base drive for survival; he would be willing to die for his cause. Nevertheless it must be emphasized that the heroic individual still is an “individual”—that is, an estranged creature of modernity, a “free man.” The heroic individualist may adhere to democracy but not for its own sake, nor that of “community.” He is possessed by a familiar concern about democracy: that democratic political emancipation creates a dangerously false, albeit attractive sense of freedom; and that under the pressure of this illusion and its egalitarian tendency to suppress distinction, authentic freedom—greatness—will disappear from the world.

Understood in this way, heroic individualism relies on the elevation of the will (over reason and nature) initiated by Kant and Rousseau. These philosophers aimed to elevate the social contract morally by reinterpreting it as an ethical imperative of the universal or general

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will that the individual can—indeed, must—obey without annulling his inherent freedom. Put
over-simply, Kant’s and Rousseau’s theories would make of all men moral equals under the
aspect of a Moral Law that each can respect because it respects the dignity of all. The heroic
individualist merely collapses this scheme by asserting the sovereignty of the particular will over
and against any corporate will, be it general or universal.

Once Rousseau had pushed to its farthest limits by compressing it into extreme
generality and extreme particularity, political philosophy abandoned the notion of
contract. No other mind after him dared or was able to embrace such a contradiction. The
way out could be sought in two directions: either from the side of pure particularity that
would perhaps allow the will and nature to be reconciled in an unprecedented way; or
from the side of pure generality which would necessitate at least a rupture of law with
nature, even if the attachment had been tenuous and reluctant. The first is the path chosen
by Nietzsche.19

In its initial formulation social contract theory deployed a notion of legitimacy that for
the first time made the individual the foundation of moral and political right; but this was
purchased dearly, at the expense of the particular personality with all its distinction. In the early
modern scheme the “individual” is an automaton motivated by his innate drive for self-
preservation and affiliated interest in the protection of property. This creature is not, as Aristotle
has it, the deliberating agent responsible for his own actions but a mere pleasure-seeking-pain-
avoiding machine. The regime, which used to have as its first aim the formation of the character
of citizens, is now a machine for the preservation of life, or property, or for the perpetuation of
the Pleasure Principle. Contract theory elevates the individual only to submerge his particularity
under the incalculable weight of communal necessity. Kant opposes this tendency of modern
political theory by championing the good (moral) will; while Rousseau’s distaste for this
ignobleness led to his famous “intoxication” with virtue.

19 Manent, p. 186.
We are still living in the wake of this revolution. To a great degree, its radical elevation of the will explains our contemporary intoxication with action. For if man is will, the life of action is the most appropriate life for man, rather than the life of contemplation. Contemplation is discredited as an activity. Hitherto “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

Everyone is familiar with activism of the collectivist type. Collectivist activism takes the second path mentioned above; it radically interprets modern idealism “from the side of pure generality.” Consequently the heroic actor of the collectivist historical narrative is a whole class which, according to historical law, finally will effect man’s mastery over nature. The heroic individualist like Nietzsche takes the opposite route, and, rejecting law altogether, celebrates the irrationality of the will. The result, on the political side, is what has been called “prophetic irrationalism.”

On the intellectual side, the result is a new aesthetic interpretation of history: for if man is will, human being essentially is historical being. Furthermore, if the will is “irrational,” then history also is somewhat irrational. History is the story of the will; history is moved by what most pleases the will. More specifically, then, history is the history of human greatness, or of “triumphs” of the will. History happens whenever humanity breaks its own mold.

But what is “greatness”? Understood thus, greatness no longer appears to be a moral distinction. Was it ever a moral distinction?—moral categories apply to ordinary life but great actions are extraordinary by definition. Does action, in the most precise sense, transcend moral judgment? Is action answerable only to the aesthetic judgment, as Arendt, for example, suggests?

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Arendt’s view of history is a much more sober counterpart of Nietzsche’s heroics. But Arendt, too, insists that human action—political action—is self-disclosure, the expression of one’s image in words and deeds. This creative activity is the real distinguishing mark of politics, the activity of making the world in common.

Arendt rejects Nietzsche’s sovereign individualism because it is anti-political; hers is a non-sovereign, pluralistic view of political action, a “whole world of heroes,” to borrow Thomas Carlyle’s phrase. Nevertheless, Arendt sustains the aesthetic interpretation of freedom/action/history. Arendt curbs Nietzsche’s solipsism by introducing the role of the disinterested spectator as a sort of referee who judges action according to the common sense, or sensus communis. The spectator’s faculty of judgment, described in Kant’s third critique, is an aesthetic rather than a moral or intellectual faculty. Therefore action has its own idiom—“virtuosity”—that is impenetrable to moral or intellectual considerations. “Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of virtu…. Its meaning is best rendered as “virtuosity,” that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts…where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in the end product which outlasts the activity…virtuosity of performance is decisive.”

Is the free man, then—the genuine hero—a Machiavellian prince? This image may satisfy the literary imagination but it hardly does justice to the moral intuition which urges, at least, that a hero should not be a dissembler. We will return to this point much later. For now, to get a better grasp of the issue, we must recount the story of morality as it relates to freedom and to heroism especially. For the question seems to revolve around the proper manner of political judgment. “Whereas in the Aristotelian model it is the exemplary quality of the phronimos that

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grants it validity, in the Kantian [Arendtian] model the ground of the validity of our (aesthetic) judgments is their universal communicability with the hope of winning the assent of all.” The relativization of the modern world compromises the Aristotelian model by bringing into question any context-bound standards of morality; while the aesthetic model threatens to unmoor us from moral standards altogether.

**Heroism and Morality**

The obverse of Nietzsche’s heromania is the notion that we are in a post-heroic (to some, anti-heroic) age. Nietzsche seems to agree with this assessment, only he finds it so distasteful that he dedicates himself to combating it. Nietzsche’s literary manner of acting out heroic impulses is unique in that his own activity, his exercise of a freedom beyond good and evil, never actually occurs outside of his texts. Indeed, it may be that only a post-heroic culture can abide a doctrine of radical heroism like Zarathustra’s, since it is unlikely to produce any significant political consequences. Of course, this is highly debatable. In any case, the remainder of this chapter will consider the problem of heroism from the side of morality, or of the moral law. From this perspective the hero appears as a perennial difficulty of moral philosophy, suggesting that Zarathustra’s radical heroism is at the core of Nietzsche’s “immoralism.”

**The Taming of the Ancient Hero**

In its Homeric origins the word hero is an honorific affixed, not surprisingly, to the “free man.” Nevertheless, classical heroism is social, not individualistic: “hero” merely designates every

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Greek who participated in the Trojan War. “Honorific” implies honor, and—as every reader of Plato knows—honor needs a public. It is the fickleness of public honor that encouraged the classical philosophers to reject political activity as the highest or, most free, way of life; they judged philosophical contemplation to be a higher pursuit than the active (political) life precisely because the pleasure of philosophy is more self-sufficient than that of politics, for its fulfillment does not require an adoring public. The classical philosophers meant to tame the hero for the sake of the regime.

Although the status of heroism is often overlooked in moral and political discourse, one cannot deny that heroism—heroic courage and freedom of action—plays an important role in shaping civilization. Once civilization has been achieved and the hero’s work done, the heroic ideal continues to inform civilization in the literary mode of moral education. In civilized society, “heroism is the domain of the poet’s formation of the people.” But in heroic society, such stories constitute the moral dialect: they are the primary account of morality.

A typical example of heroic society is ancient Greece before the rise of philosophy. At this time the authoritative account of moral life could be found in the Homeric epics and the cosmological poems. Such poems are more than mere allegory; they form a symbolic dialect coextensive with practical (moral) life, and descriptive of man’s place in the world, within his family and his society, and under the canopy of heaven. “What is involved in…understanding…the connections between courage, friendship, fidelity, the household, fate and death…? Surely that human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story…. [I]n their narrative form poems and sagas capture a form…already present in the lives to

which [people] relate.” Epic stories do more than just chronicle life; they give people their bearings in life. Once this has been captured in an epic narrative it can be conveyed, through tradition, to many generations, providing a sense of national identity. It is hard to overstate the importance of this development, for without the gigantic act of social cooperation required to build and sustain civilization is unimaginable.

Even the philosophers honor Homer as the “educator of Hellas.” After all, philosophy owes its existence to heroic society. Accordingly philosophy credits poetry as an approximation of truth. Although philosophy claims superiority over poetry in closeness to truth, and thus holds poetry to a philosophical standard, philosophy does not reject the use of stories to communicate moral truth. Moreover, the morality of virtue (or excellence) enjoined by classical philosophy has as its backdrop the heroic view of life portrayed by Homer.

Heroic society is hierarchical by nature, because its only standard is one’s ability to act. One is whatever one can do. “By performing actions of a particular kind in a particular situation a man gives warrant for judgment upon his virtues and vices; for the virtues just are those qualities which sustain a free man in his role and which manifest themselves in those actions.”

In theory, at least, there is no difference between the virtuous and the strong, between morality and social structure, right and might, in a heroic society. With classical civilization, however, this begins to change. Although classical society remains hierarchical, it refines the distinction between might and right. In the classical mind the virtues are appreciated for their own sake; accordingly, they suffer detachment from the particularity of a “free man in his role.” The “unfree” man basically remains unaccounted for in the classical view (except perhaps as the


25 Ibid., p.122.
“slave by nature”). The “free” man, no longer a hero, becomes a virtuous citizen. Classical morality encourages in the citizen (the free man) many of the aristocratic virtues associated with heroism, but citizenship in a regime is not sovereign heroism. “There are no more kings, even though the virtues of kingship are still held to be virtues.”\textsuperscript{26}

The heroic age comes to an end with the dawn of philosophy. The philosopher lifts the hero out of his circumstances and looks for the simple enduring essence of his greatness. Under the gaze of philosophy, heroism becomes moral virtue. If this abstraction seems awkward—even foreign—to the reality of heroism, that is because it is. After all, “the free man is warrior” passionately \textit{engaged} in pursuing his object in a detailed world of diverse particular things. All of these particularities are “accidents” from the point of view of a philosophical spectator; they belong to the world of mere appearance. Philosophy interrogates heroism for its essential qualities, which are the virtues; and reduces the hero into essential greatness of soul. Furthermore, \textit{political} philosophy defines the measure of greatness by reference to the aims of the regime, or of the laws, or ideal justice. This is the rationale behind the infamous censorship of poetry in Plato’s \textit{Republic}: certain depictions of heroism are incompatible with the type of citizens desired in a perfectly just regime.

Of course, modern society is a great distance from classical and heroic society. In terms of morality, the key difference is that moderns assume that every human being by nature is (or ought to be) “free.” This assumption is manifest in the social contract view. In all its various forms the social contract consistently implies that man in his natural state is an autonomous moral agent. This makes individual consent the basic, apparently natural, measure of justice.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p.132.
It is true that classical philosophy entertains some notion of a universal human nature; it does so merely by taking “man” as its object. But classical philosophy does not assert that man by nature is “free”—far from it. In the classical scheme, freedom is not the basic condition so much as the *object* or goal of a human life. Freedom, understood as self-sufficiency, defines the good life and is the highest possible achievement of virtue. “Courage,” “temperance,” “wisdom” and “justice” name hard-won freedoms over fear, passion, the appetites, ignorance and self-preference. The virtues form the basis of ethics, whose aim is to prepare free men for the political activity of citizenship.

The assumption that man is free by nature is a source of significant disagreement between modern and ancient political philosophy. If man is free by nature, then there is no natural hierarchy of human types; there are no “natural” leaders (or followers). All relationships of unequal status suddenly appear questionable and in need of justification. As Rousseau radically formulates the problem, “Man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains.”

The assumption of man’s natural freedom reverses the classical scheme. Consequently the object of modern morality is not to so much to achieve freedom as *not to lose* it. The central concern of modern ethics is to avoid, as much as possible, having one’s liberty taken away (on account of the selfish designs of others, for example, or the structural inequalities of society). The morality of virtue or excellence does not suit this end nearly as well as the morality of rights and duties, which elevates fairness over merit. “For the classical philosopher, the virtuous man is one who transcends the world of claims and counter-claims, rights and duties. For the [modern]
deontological theorist, he is the person who is ‘conscientious and scrupulously fair’ in his conduct.”

If the ancient notion of the great man is the engaged man of action, the modern notion is that of the ideal judge or spectator, who observes perfectly the rules of fairness and objectivity. Both of these formulations put forward plausible rules of justice, but for practically opposite reasons. The old morality of virtue continues to have a strong hold on us because of its connection with strength of character and concrete achievements. The new morality of fairness aims to avoid the exploitation of the weak by the strong, but at the expense of any positive criterion of excellence save that of the perfectly objective spectator. This view implies a connection between justice and perfect passivity; or, at least, it obscures the meaning of action severely. To get a better grasp of this, let us survey the problem of heroism in contemporary morals.

The Ambiguity of Heroism and Duty
In contemporary morals, heroism belongs to a little-discussed category of acts known as supererogatory acts. “Supererogation” means giving more than what is due: supererogatory acts are acts that go above and beyond the call of duty. By definition, a supererogatory act is morally praiseworthy, but not obligatory. Accordingly, it is not blameworthy to forbear from a supererogatory act. This corresponds to our basic intuition that heroism is a species of excellence, is something extraordinary: most people will not act heroically (most of the time). But modern morality maintains that it would be unfair to hold someone to account for this failure, because we do not expect the mass of people to be morally excellent. We expect, rather,

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that they will meet their basic obligations; and only in rare circumstances will anyone exceed the minimum.

Such is our contemporary idea of heroism. But as it turns out, this idea may not hold up to philosophical scrutiny. The problem of heroism has only recently appeared in academic philosophy. In “Saints and Heroes,” J.O. Urmson proposes that heroism and saintliness are the paradigmatic cases of supererogation. To illustrate his theory of heroism Urmson uses the following example: imagine a soldier, who, during a training operation, notices a live grenade on the field and jumps on it, rather than letting his fellows perish. The soldier has performed a supererogatory act; the example easily satisfies the three conditions attaching to heroism: we consider the soldier’s action to be praiseworthy, all the while acknowledging that he was under no obligation to perform it; and we would not blame him—nor do we blame the other, surviving, soldiers—for omitting so to act. The remarkable correspondence between our pre-philosophical notion of heroism and the technical one here illustrated is almost enough to confirm that heroism really exists and can be classified as a moral phenomenon, as supererogation.

But it is not that simple. “Anti-supererogation”—the argument that there is no praiseworthy act that is not also obligatory—has a long history. Furthermore, it exerts a surprisingly strong influence on modern moral philosophy. Anti-supererogationism constitutes a large body of philosophical and theological objections to this modern concept of the heroic. It will be easier to understand the widespread suspicion of supererogation if we have a better grasp of its history. Significantly, “supererogation” enters the moral vocabulary not by way of philosophy proper, but of Christian theology. In the Summa Theologica, Thomas Aquinas argues for the possibility of supererogation action by relating it to the difference between God’s counsels, and His commandments:
The difference between a counsel and a commandment is that a commandment implies obligation, whereas a counsel is left to the option of the one to whom it is given. So in the New Law, which is the law of liberty, counsels are fittingly added to the commandments, but not in the Old Law, which is the law of bondage.28

Commandments are obligatory. As the word “bondage” implies, one can rightly be coerced into observing, or punished for violating the commandments. On the other hand, counsels relate to the free choice, the liberty, of moral life. Thomas clearly advises that it in our best interest to abide by God’s counsels much of the time, though not always. Counsels are to be observed to varying degrees depending upon the person. The three areas of life to which God’s counsels apply are wealth, carnal pleasure and ambition.29 The three virtues that emanate from these counsels—poverty, chastity and obedience—typify the Monastic ideal. Certainly not everyone ought to be a monk.

Thomas’ account of supererogation obviously has an important place in the intellectual bulwarks of Christianity. The priestly or monastic life is not for everybody; nevertheless poverty, chastity, and obedience are praiseworthy virtues—in fact, they are supremely praiseworthy. In this sense everyone is called to sanctification, regardless of how many are chosen. Subduing his or her own worldly inclination, in obedience to the will of God and the supreme law of love, the saint enacts a most heroic accomplishment. The greatest liberty inheres in this inward discipline by which the saint overcomes bondage to the world.

Whatever the appeal of Aquinas’ view, it suffers the misfortune of having been implicated in the greatest political scandal of the Church in the eyes of the Protestant Reformation: the sale of indulgences. Although not designed for the purpose, the doctrine of

28 *Summa Theologica* IIIa, q.q. 49-52.

29 “Ambition” = *superbia vitae*
supererogation could be brought in to defend the sale of indulgences, since it ostensibly supports the Church’s claim to possess a capital of unspent good works that lesser souls could take advantage of in order to reduce their stay in Purgatory. As the sale of indulgences was abhorrent to the protestant reformers, the doctrine of supererogation endured devastating theological criticism. Luther and Calvin both strike at the very root of the idea by denying the basic distinction between God’s counsels and God’s commandments; for the reformers, all divine law has the force of a commandment or imperative. To the extent that one has liberty, it is the liberty to believe (and so abide by the whole of) the revealed law of God, or not. This has the effect of writing supererogation out of existence, but it also tends to identify the natural obligations of the individual with obedience to the divine law of love. It ought to be observed, then, that the denial of supererogation tends to increase, rather than lower what is required of the ordinary believer. Calvin’s famous dictum on the “utter depravity” of human nature is quite understandable in light of this strenuous interpretation of the scope of God’s commandments.

On the other hand, by absorbing counsels into commandments, the reformers also greatly restrict the role of freedom within the realm of moral action, as mentioned above; this has the effect of obscuring the relationship between liberty and the law of love. Calvin claims that “the Schoolmen” turn commandments into counsels because “they seem too burdensome and too heavy, especially for Christians who are under the law of grace. Do they dare thus to abolish God’s eternal law that we are to love our neighbor?” The law, for Calvin, is a uniform code “delivered to all Jews and then to all Christians in common,” and making equal demands upon
all. “Either let them blot out these things from the law,” he complains, “or recognize that the Lord was Lawgiver, and let them not falsely misrepresent him as a mere giver of counsel.”

Generally speaking, in the judgment of Reformation theology there is no morally praiseworthy act that is not also morally obligatory. “Given their position, the laws of God are obligatory without exception, and they are directed to all persons without exception.” The scope of our duty under God’s Law is so comprehensive that it is impossible to imagine any person achieving what it demands. In this light, the claim of supererogation appears not only as unrealistic, but arrogant, even deluded. In the radical perspective of Protestantism, the only person capable of a supererogatory act is God; and indeed He performs a supererogatory act by extending grace to human beings, when He has no such obligation. But it is precisely God’s supererogatory extension of grace that makes personal salvation from the worldly self possible. The human will is perverse; rectitude is predicated of the divine will working through the individual.

Secular moral philosophy since the reformation generally adheres to the twin tendencies of interpreting morality in terms of universal law, and treating claims of supererogation with suspicion. That there are good actions which exceed the bounds of duty is a claim modern morality is hard pressed to accommodate. The two main schools of modern morals, Kantianism and utilitarianism, leave little or no room for supererogation. In Kantian (deontic) morality, whatever goes beyond duty is morally indifferent; on the other hand, for the utilitarian or consequentialist, whatever is good is also obligatory. Heroism appears not to fit with the moral law. But does that put it beyond morality?

30 Calvin, quoted in Mellema, Beyond the Call of Duty, p. 49.

31 Mellema, p. 51.
This question is exceedingly complex. The moral idealism underlying modern democratic individualism retains a strong bias against greatness on account of the apparent connection between greatness and selfish ambition, or the blind drive for success, or the desire for public distinction, or for honor. Morally good acts, it is said, ought to proceed from an internal sense of duty: the inherent dignity of the individual, rather than the external drive for distinction. Modern democratic idealism insists that autonomy of the will is the essence of moral goodness as strenuously as the reformer insisted on the dependence of individual goodness on the will of God. On the surface there appears a complete reversal of terms, but in actuality an important coherence exists between the views of the reformer and the modern democratic idealist, both of whom agree on the endogenous quality of moral goodness. Put very simply, the democratic idealist merely replaces the divine will with formal notions like the will of universal humanity or the “general will” of society. In both cases moral goodness means voluntary obedience of the individual to the moral law. This obedience is an intentional determination of the soul, or of consciousness, that is strictly indifferent to external considerations.

The public distinction associated with “greatness” thus renders heroism suspect not only as a moral but as an educational ideal. The ostensible hero might really be a Machiavellian prince, who merely cultivates the appearance of goodness as a contrivance designed to satisfy his real object; namely, personal ambition and lust for power. Kant, for instance, expresses a common fear of “non moral motives producing actions which appear to be highly moral.

The pursuit of merit is regarded as a ‘pathological’ inclination. People are attracted by the fact that supererogation is not restricted by obedience to the moral law. But this is exactly the educational danger. Men should be taught that the moral worth of an action derives
from a ‘submissive disposition.’ A duty can be traced in any noble or magnanimous act, and it is that element of the act, rather than its merit, which should be emphasized.  

No longer considered as a moral ideal or a useful element of character education, heroism seems to have escaped completely into the realm of literature, aesthetics, and the imagination. But it is not at all clear that this escape renders heroism as a phenomenon of merely literary interest. For we have seen that there is a longstanding connection between the heroic and the political; and, if this connection still obtains, then the literary fiction of the heroic individual is a political fact of considerable significance. Again we find confirmation of this possibility in the figure of Nietzsche, whose contribution to modern moral discourse is marked not only by his conception of ethically creative action, but also by his unparalleled defense of ambition. From the very beginning of his career, Nietzsche attempts to return humanity to nature by trying to inculcate a duty to be ambitious. Thus at the beginning of his career Nietzsche already is reminding the reader of the ancient imperative that “every talent must unfold itself in fighting: that is the command of Hellenic popular pedagogy, whereas modern educators dread nothing more than the unleashing of so-called ambition.”

Conclusion: Heroic Authority and the Philosophy of Literature

Let us pause a moment and go over what we have said so far of the heroic individual. In the first part of this chapter we took up the question of heroism from the side of freedom, relying on the original (Homeric) designation of the hero as a “free man.” Heroism is broadly associated with

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32 Mellema, p. 67. Mellema mentions two other reasons why Kant is critical of supererogation as a moral example or ideal: 1) “Kant believes that as a matter of empirical fact the influence of duty on our minds is more definite and penetrating than that of merit;” and 2) supererogatory acts “can never ‘wipe out…one act of injustice to an individual.’ That is to say, the priority of acting according to one’s duty over any other meritorious acts is absolute and should be so presented in moral education.” (pp. 67-68)

free action; but there is a great difference between the ancient and modern senses of action. For the ancients, action is the conclusive element of a moral or practical syllogism (and freedom is freedom from error), but the moderns see action in terms of initiative and creativity (and freedom in terms of virtuosity). The ancient archetype of the political actor is the *phronimos*, whose moral understanding derives from experience in practical affairs; alternatively, the modern archetype is the political artist, whose first exemplar is the Machiavellian prince. As a political artist, Machiavelli’s “armed prophet” supposedly constructs society from a standpoint outside of society, as if he were a painter or a sculptor—or perhaps, an engineer.\(^{34}\)

In the second part we considered heroism generally from the side of moral philosophy, and then, in particular, the moral law. Here we find a thornier relationship between heroism and freedom, the history of which involves a gradual extension of the law over the field of moral action that culminates in the exclusion of greatness as a moral notion. In the first phase of this history, moral virtue is seen as a mark of distinction, and freedom is connected with superlative moral achievement. But in the second phase virtue is redefined as duty, meaning obedience to the moral law. By submitting to the moral law, each person can achieve moral freedom. In this final phase, at the culmination of enlightenment, moral freedom and submission to the law become identical. The sense of “greatness” in modern philosophy is almost exclusively aesthetic because goodness takes the place of greatness as the object of modern morality.

Although some will argue that these developments warrant discarding heroism as uninteresting or irrelevant to political philosophy, I want to suggest that in actuality they make the question of heroism deeply interesting and awfully relevant. On the one hand, we accept as a

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\(^{34}\) It is fitting to note again that Machiavelli’s *Prince* primarily exists as a character in a book. The prince is as much, nay more, of a figment of its author’s imagination than an actual human personality.
self-evident truth that all men are equal by nature and consequently believe that each individual possesses certain inalienable rights or freedoms; but, on the other hand, this same pronouncement of equal freedoms sounds uncanny when translated in terms of a “whole world of heroes.” However, if the ancient connection between heroism and freedom holds, then in an important sense, a world of heroes is a just interpretation of our modern democratic ideal. Without suggesting that these two senses of democracy are incompatible, it fair to say that investigating the democratic ideal under these two different aspects brings to view extraordinarily different features of democratic life.

Democracy, understood as a “world of heroes” presupposes the heroic individual. But we have seen that the heroic individual is not the same as the democratic individual: to put it simply, the heroic individual—unlike the merely democratic individual—has what we would call an “identity.” This particular identity is not mere ornamentation, but embodies an indivisible claim of authority that may or may not be compatible with conventional democratic institutions. In Nietzsche’s case especially, the heroic individual seems to embody an authority that, while based on democratic (individualist) premises, outstrips the rationalistic authority of liberal-democracy.

The first specimen of the heroic individual seems not to be Nietzsche’s, however, but Rousseau’s. Up to this point, we have viewed Rousseau and Kant equally as defenders of the modern view of morality as autonomy of the will. Kant’s dichotomy between heteronomy and autonomy of the will, necessity and freedom, is similar to Rousseau’s dichotomy between nature and humanity. “Both distinguish the humanity of man from his nature and define humanity in terms of human freedom.” Moreover, they both advance the claim that individual freedom (self-rule) is the authentic determining ground of morality. But, there is a significant disjoint in the ways that Rousseau and Kant interpret the dichotomy between nature and freedom:
While for Rousseau nature versus humanity represents a sad choice between mutually exclusive and equally valuable alternatives, a choice between a happy life of independence and a sublime life of self-rule, for Kant, the choice between the two is clear and unambiguous. Goodness and virtue, independence and self-rule, which Rousseau divides between nature and humanity, are combined in Kant’s concept of autonomy, so that there is nothing of value left on the natural side of his dichotomy except pleasure.\(^{35}\)

Rousseau’s interpretation of nature and freedom, as two “mutually exclusive and equally valuable alternatives,” generates a problem for Rousseauean political philosophy that Kantian moral philosophy never has to address. For Kant the supreme value of autonomy of the will, humanity, or freedom need not be embodied perfectly in man’s social life and institutions.

Given [Kant’s] dichotomy between noumenal freedom and phenomenal necessity…it would not be difficult to develop an argument that ‘true freedom,’ moral autonomy, has nothing to do with the ‘principles of political association.’ For the self-legislation that legitimates authority in the moral sphere can have no analogue in the political sphere, conditioned as it is by natural necessity. In politics we face each other as conditioned and interested individuals.\(^{36}\)

Kant’s philosophy arguably warrants a wall of separation between morals and politics. However, one cannot interpret Rousseau’s political philosophy in this manner. For Rousseau the equivalent of Kantian autonomy is citizenship; accordingly moral freedom has everything to do with the ‘principles of political association.’ For Kant, one might say, the individual approaches moral freedom by conceiving of himself as member of the universal “kingdom of ends.” The ability thus to conceive of oneself presupposes a native capacity on the part of individuals to apprehend the universal value of “humanity.” Rousseau doubts the existence of such a capacity. For example, that Rousseau’s dichotomy between independence and citizenship perfectly parallels the distinction between nature and convention implies that man and citizen are mutually


\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 103.
exclusive identities. The “man” is natural, while the “citizen” is artificial. This is confirmed further by Rousseau’s repetitious insistence that human nature undergoes “transformations” throughout history. The historical “revolutions” of human nature form the subject of Rousseau’s *Discourses*, while his *Social Contract* suggests the possibility of another transformation, wrought by the discovery of the proper ‘principles of political association.’

The legendary figure responsible for adapting the true principles of political science to a particular political community is Rousseau’s “great legislator.” In Rousseau’s modern revival of this ancient institution we catch a revealing glimpse of the nature of the modern heroic individual, who turns out to be the figure at the center of what one might call “revolutionary literature.” The great legislator is a rare soul who possesses the strength to “win over” the people “without violence and persuade without convincing.” As this familiar dictum implies, the legislator is responsible for devising and adapting political institutions to a particular people; and more especially, for persuading the people to subscribe to them without using coercion—for that would violate the sacrosanct principle of consent—or rational demonstration—for that would require the people to understand the science of politics. If everyone understood the science of politics or if understanding the nature of law were the same as abiding by it, then the legislator’s art of persuasion would not be necessary. That Rousseau insists on reviving the legislator speaks volumes about his view of human nature. “A blind multitude must be made to sense the things it cannot see, and these things must be made agreeable to win consent.”

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Rousseau’s conception of the great legislator, then, prefigures the “aesthetic” model of political action brought up earlier in this chapter. “While the art of the ‘true political thinker’ may be philosophic, that of the legislator must also be, in Rousseau’s terms, ‘imitative’ or artistic.”39 The legislator combines the knowledge of a political seer with the aesthetic sensibility of a blind poet. Speech and deed are united in the text, which in Rousseau’s case aspires to inscribe the identity of a whole people. Until Rousseau, social contract theory had bracketed out the question of identity, but at once, with the great legislator, the political problem of the relationship between universality and particularity returns in its modern, aesthetic form.

In order to appreciate more fully the heroic individual’s place in the scheme of modern democracy it will be necessary to investigate more deeply the imaginative and literary side of democratic thought. To this end certain “literary” philosophers recommend themselves; in particular Rousseau and Nietzsche, as well as Carlyle and Emerson, despite that the latter two are thought of more as writers than philosophers. One general trend marks the fate of the heroic individual from Rousseau to Nietzsche—what begins as Rousseau’s great legislator ends as Nietzsche’s iconoclastic contender. Only Carlyle and Emerson, by adhering to the principle of representativeness rather than identity, hold out a view of heroic authority that avoids implying the existence of a kind of aesthetic bellum omnium contra omnes in which individuals seek to create and impose their “identities” on one other. In this sense, I argue that Carlyle—and accordingly Emerson—have been unjustly overlooked as philosophers of democracy.

Modern skepticism, the progenitor of both individualism and scientific “theory,” has cut off the old notion of the practical intellect at its knees. But the object of practical reason—the adaptation of universality to particularity—reemerges in literature. This development informs a

39 Ibid.
popular contemporary view of (moral) action, according to which each person is the hero of his or her own narrative. This theory may have promise, but it can be fulfilled only if a connection between the moral and aesthetic realm is made explicit. We have seen that Nietzsche’s heroic individualism, being radically aesthetic, denies any such connection. I propose that a broader examination of nineteenth century heroic individualism can offer insights into the nature and problems Nietzsche’s view.

In principle it remains true that “heroism is the domain of the poet’s formation of the people.” Heroism is the poet’s way of informing politics, or of being a political actor. But how does this principle relate to practice in an age where the relationship between author and audience is brokered by the activity of private reading? Notwithstanding the truism that every novelist owes a debt to Homer, we must acknowledge the obvious differences between the worlds of Homer and, say, Cervantes: Achilles is no Don Quixote; ancient epic and the modern novel differ from each other as unity differs from diversity, peoples from persons. The epic speaks a whole society but the novel addresses itself to one individual reader. The society of readers (and writers) of books is real enough—but it differs from heroic society in its whole constitution. Rousseau laments this condition when he attacks printing as a “disease” that undermines civic virtue. But Carlyle puts the point more palatably:

Printing…is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable. Writing brings Printing; brings universal every-day extempore Printing, as we see at present. Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures: the requisite thing is that he has a tongue which others will listen to…. The nation is governed by all that has tongue in the nation:

40 See McIntyre; Arendt’s theory of action shows a similar tendency.
Democracy is virtually there… Democracy virtually extant will insist on becoming palpably extant. In heroic society the free man is a hero; in post-heroic society, the free man is Homer.

The insight that literature is a diffuse source of authority in democratic culture serves as a starting point for a consideration of the hero-as-author; and of the author as bearer of a certain type of “heroic” authority that is peculiarly democratic because it is, so to speak, the authority of freedom. The first glimpse of this sort of authority is not afforded by Carlyle or Nietzsche, but by Rousseau. In a later chapter we will examine the tension between democracy and the heroic individual by looking into the relationship between Rousseau’s notion of heroism and his concept of the great legislator. In the following chapter we turn to events of generations spanning from Rousseau’s to Nietzsche’s: the French Revolution, the early stirrings of democratic culture, and the falling silent of God.

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41 *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. Carl Niemeyer (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966) p. 164. The context of this remark is Carlyle’s criticism of Burke for not giving the journalistic “fourth estate” its due. Carlyle is not a champion of the newspaper; he is as critical of popular journalism as any other conservative. Only, this does not alter his perception that the fourth estate is at least a quasi-institution.
Chapter Three: The Hero as Author

Because the Revolution seemed to be striving for the regeneration of the human race even more than for the reform of France, it lit a passion which the most violent political revolutions have never before been able to produce. It inspired conversions and generated propaganda. Thus, in the end, it took on that appearance of a religious revolution which so astonished contemporaries. Or rather, it itself became a new kind of religion, an incomplete religion, it is true, without God, without ritual, and without life after death, but one which nevertheless, like Islam, flooded the earth with its soldiers, apostles and martyrs.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*

The Religion of Literature:

In this chapter, we attempt to outline the role of the author, and of the religion of literature, as it appeared to Thomas Carlyle and his readership. To this end, we shall discuss here the emergent “religion of literature” in modern society, as well as the social role of religion in ancient, predominantly oral, cultures. Overall, the aim of this chapter is to put into context the entirely novel cultural situation faced by Carlyle and his readers.

Rousseau, Carlyle’s predecessor, deployed his epochal critique of the moderns in response to much the same conditions. But as we shall see later, Carlyle criticizes Rousseau for failing to escape the labyrinth of his own texts. Ultimately Rousseau ensnares himself in an attempt to institutionalize his own autobiography, to live according to the dictates of his own writings. In contrast to Rousseau, who wanted both to write and to hide, Carlyle wants to reveal authors—and readers—in their bodily presence as actors, agents called upon to judge and respond to new conditions and new insights emerging with each moment.

Before we enter into a more thorough consideration of the dialogue between Carlyle and Rousseau we must go back one step, however. We must begin with Voltaire. This is where Carlyle himself begins, for the discerning reader will notice that the opening lecture of *On
Heroes, ostensibly about Odin, “The Hero as Divinity,” is equally concerned with the “divinity” of Voltaire, “the withered pontiff of Encyclopedism.” Is Encyclopedism a religion, as Carlyle implies? Did not Voltaire aim to rid the world of superstition? In Voltaire’s anonymously published Philosophical Dictionary we find the following entry confirming the “withered pontiff’s” idiosyncratic and of course unsympathetic view of religion. The entry, on “Abraham,” reads:

Abraham is one of the names famous in Asia Minor and in Arabia, like Thoth among the Egyptians, the first Zoroaster in Persia, Hercules in Greece, Orpheus in Thrace, Odin among the northern nations, and so many others whose fame is greater than the authenticity of their history.¹

With this dubious “definition” Voltaire reduces Abraham to a national father figure, a patriotic caricature “whose fame is greater than the authenticity of [his] history.” In On Heroes, Carlyle performs a similar operation on Voltaire: “Truly, if Christianity be the highest instance of Hero-worship, then we might find here in Voltaireism one of the lowest! He whose life was that of a kind of Antichrist,” Voltaire’s cult of personality demonstrates, in spite of himself, that hero-worship is a social fact. After all, the French “feel that [Voltaire], too is a hero; that he has spent his life in opposing error and injustice, in delivering Calases, unmasking hypocrites in high places;— in short that he, too, though in a strange way, has fought like a valiant man.” Carlyle concludes that the skeptical Voltaire “is properly [France’s] god—such god as they are fit for.”²

For Carlyle, then, the religion of literature is a fait accompli. Hence, despite its own rationalistic pretensions, “Encyclopedism” includes its fair share of superstition. “At Paris, [Voltaire’s] carriage is ‘the nucleus of a comet, whose train fills whole streets.’ The ladies pluck

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a hair or two from his fur, to keep it as a sacred relic.” The fate—fame—of Voltaire only confirms Carlyle’s belief in the propensity of human nature for “transcendent admiration” of the great man. Perhaps only Rousseau can be definitively excluded from Carlyle’s verdict on the French: “There was nothing highest, beautifulest, noblest in all France, that did not feel this man to be higher, beautifuler, nobler.”³

The project to build a statue of Voltaire foreshadows the transition from the Republic of Letters to the Religion of Literature. Subscription, a practice that came in with Encyclopedism, now was being turned to a novel use:

Voltaire was the star, the media whiz of the 1760s and 1770s. While Diderot retreated to the small circles of friendship and the circulation of manuscripts, Voltaire took the spotlight. As Diderot’s work on the Encyclopedie wound down, Voltaire’s campaign to ecraser l’infame heated up. When Diderot was venting his anger in the Apologie in the fall of 1770, Voltaire was calling for unity and friendship among the disarrayed citizenry of the Republic of Letters…. In the eyes of his contemporaries, he was, at the age of seventy-six, the living embodiment of the republic, so universally acclaimed that its leading citizens decided to erect a statue of him as a representation of the republic. The project to erect a full-length statue of Voltaire (the first time in modern history that any living person other than a reigning monarch was so represented) and to pay for it by public subscription was arguably the most important event of the year 1770.⁴

On Heroes epitomizes of Carlyle’s struggle with a problem that epitomized his career: What is the moral and political role of the author? For Carlyle this is both a political and a religious question, for he takes it as an axiom that “every government is a theocracy.” In contrast to Voltaire—and Rousseau—Carlyle insists that society is a “standing wonder” that science never can explain adequately. In so far as it propounds a social philosophy, then, the aim of On Heroes is to shed light on nescience rather than to present yet another “scientific” theory of politics.

³ Ibid.
Hence, the common social sentiments that enlightened philosophy looks down on as superstition, Carlyle has sympathy for, as a type of reverence.

This is not to say that Carlyle prescribes hero-worship in an unqualified sense, however. To the contrary, *On Heroes* warns against the potential danger of mistaking quacks for saviors, a danger of which Carlyle is acutely aware, and a warning that the twentieth century failed to heed. Indeed, Hero-worship, the product of an almost reflexive emotion of social hope, is no more natural than in times of desperation. And it is precisely such desperate times in which the danger of quack-worship is greatest. For the authentic hero always comes bearing a difficult truth, but most of the time, men would prefer the easy path. Only by awakening in the average man the capacity for authentic moral heroism is the victory of true over false leadership even possible. Hence, the heroism of the reader is Carlyle’s true object and this is what makes Carlyle an important philosopher of and contributor to democratic culture, if he is not a “democrat” in any simple sense of the word.

One instructive example of Carlyle’s nuanced point of view is his reaction to the Saint-Simonians, a movement with whom he, like J.S. Mill, had some flirtations. In fact, Carlyle was so fond of the Saint-Simonian’s hopeful ideals that he translated the *Nouveau Christianisme* into English. Having adopted from the Germans a historical (or more accurately, temporal) point of view, Carlyle could accept the idea that periodic redefinitions of “Gods’ Truth” are natural, even necessary. Accordingly, he hoped to encourage a revival of belief in his own century, as a corrective to the skepticism of the eighteenth. Yet Carlyle could not adapt his independent mind to the Saint-Simonians’ anthropomorphic superstitions:

much as he agreed that the eighteenth century was one of ‘Denial, of Irreligion and Destruction; to which a new period of Affirmation, of Religion, must succeed, if society is to be reconstituted,’ he could not accept, could not even understand how the Saint-
Simonians could accept, the key point of Saint-Simonian doctrine: that ‘God has returned to France in Saint-Simon, and France will announce the new God to the world.’ To Carlyle, the Saint-Simonian Analysis of what was wrong…was ‘scientific,’ by which he meant accurate…. But the Saint-Simonian prescription—a revival of Christianity with Saint-Simon as a latter-day Jesus Christ—seemed, like [Edward] Irving’s revivalism, sheer folly…. He could not understand how [their] moral precepts and…social doctrine…could be called a religion, since there seemed to be no ‘SYMBOL OR SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION’ of divinity. How could there be a religion without a God?5

Suffice it to say that, from Carlyle’s perspective, the Saint-Simonians fell for the same facile and superficial notion of hero-worship that many of Carlyle’s critics assume to be his own.

In sum, there is an abundance of reasons to disagree with Carlyle, but the shallow notion that he endorses “quack-worship” is not one of them.6 Nevertheless, it is difficult to get past the misunderstandings connected with the notorious phrase, “hero-worship.” In order to clarify this problem, Yoon Sun Lee has argued that we would do better to understand the Carlylean notion of hero-worship in terms of fetishism.

“Without receiving the kind of insistent emphasis that turned concepts like hero-worship into bywords for Carlyle’s thought,” writes Lee, “the topic of fetishism becomes central to the ways in which Carlyle represents the act of reading, the practice of conservative nationalism and


6 In Culture and Anarchy, Matthew Arnold pigeonholes Carlyle, somewhat unfairly, as a representative of the Aristocracy. Arnold hangs upon the Aristocracy the equivocal moniker, “Barbarians,” in reference to the actual class of Teutonic warriors who yoked modern Britain. Despite that Arnold makes an excellent case against Carlyle’s excesses, Arnold’s Carlyle is a straw man: Carlyle’s defense of “aristocracy” idealizes the rule of the wise over the ignorant, but he does not endorse a hereditary regime. In fact, despite Carlyle’s unsavory views on racial slavery, A.L. LeQuesne is correct to observe that even Carlyle’s opposition to abolitionism in the “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question” is “not primarily…racist…. But racist it is nevertheless.” (Carlyle, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982, p. 78.) In sum, there is in Carlyle a heavy dose of the Teutonism that Arnold associates with the Barbarian/Aristocrat, and Arnold is right to imply how much sweetness and light there is wanting in Carlyle. The late Carlyle is an especially enigmatic figure. One almost senses that he is out to sabotage his own “legacy.” One thing seems certain: the later Carlyle was more convinced than ever that no one was listening, and his work bears this out inasmuch as it has the character of a primal scream more than a sane plea. However, as Albert LaValley observes, Carlyle’s Reminiscences and Life of Sterling defy this pattern (Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern, New Haven: Yale UP, 1968). Whether the private nature of these works—as opposed to the public character of the Latter-Day Pamphlets, “Shooting Niagara,” and the “Occasional Discourse”—accounts for these differences is an open question.
the relationship between the two.”\(^7\) What, then, differentiates fetishism from Carlylean heroism? In short fetishism involves a phenomenon of unconscious absorption in the product of one’s own labor. By contrast Carlyle recommends a practice of conscious recollection of forgotten labor. In this context, Lee refers to Carlylean reading as “amnesiac labor.” In other words, Carlyle does not deny that symbols or symbolic representations of religious truth are human fabrications; but still, he insists on their authentically symbolic quality, manifested in the maker’s *forgetting* the work of symbol-production. It is worthwhile here to recall the distinction between symbol and allegory. People do not *believe* in allegories or poetic sport, Carlyle suggests; allegory, poetic fancy: these are the products of later epochs of a culture in which belief already is extant. The great error of enlightenment and romantic theorists of myth is the failure to recognize this, a failure that leads to their expecting more from allegories and lyrics than these modes can deliver. Allegory cannot create belief, and lyric poetry cannot transcend personal expression. The only activity where this “amnesiac labor” is possible, for Carlyle, is literature, and in particular, history.

According to Lee, Carlyle created a “new national role” for literature as sort of civil religion. “Carlyle’s reader…figures the British subject contemplating his own sublime image of the nation, forgetting his own role in the creation of that plenitude.”\(^8\) Carlylean history is an answer to the problem of civil religion that emerges in the wake of the democratic revolutions.

Religion, for Carlyle, is what a person believes practically; that is to say, religion is not necessarily the same as one’s “church-creed” or profession of faith. Rather, the manifestation of belief is one’s conduct. The religion of literature, then, corresponds to a set of beliefs and habits

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\(^8\) Ibid.
conceived in the Renaissance and Reformation that crystallized in the Enlightenment. Importantly, these habits may be characterized specifically as habits of reading and writing. With the inception of cheap printed material, the religion of literature was spread far and wide. For Carlyle, this development was a key factor behind the democratic revolutions, especially the French Revolution of which he was a student. Of course Carlyle sees the revolution in part as a destructive movement, bringing an end to a period of unsettling that began when Luther stumbled upon a Bible and accidentally spurred on the Reformation. The French Revolution is the third and final act of this drama, with the Puritan Revolution in England coming between. Carlyle’s prophecy of a “world of heroes” figures his hope for the future, taking as its foundation this view of the irrevoicable past.

Voltaire is the anti-heroic foil against whom Carlyle deploys his notion of the heroic individual. For Carlyle, Voltaire illustrates the paradox of hero-worship writ small. Try as he might, man does not get along in this world without some kind of higher moral example; and as hard as a Voltaire may work to rid the world of ignorance and “superstition,” if successful he will be the initiator of a new sect but not the liberator of man from the facts of his condition. Voltaire aimed to bring the Enlightenment out of the salon. Along with Diderot and the other philosophes, Voltaire wanted to share the fruits of modern learning with the general public and promote the enlightenment values of autonomy and free inquiry. In the course of this project the philosophes essentially, if also accidentally, created the modern public, which would serve as the basis for the authority of modern public opinion as we know it.
In the years leading up to the French Revolution, a tremendous change in the order of authority was taking place in the society of the ancien regime. As the recently established community of critical intellectuals moved out of the salon and into print, a new type of public opinion began to take shape as an arbiter of mores. This was to the apparent advantage of men of letters, for whom an entirely new space was evolving, a new “invisible community” in which they could achieve precious goals: glory, honor, reputation. Formerly, to enjoy such symbolic goods in one’s own lifetime would have been difficult since memory, history, or posterity was the imaginative realm where immortal fame was achieved. But the popular press changed all of this and men of letters welcomed this change. “Men of letters…redefined public opinion to take the place of posterity as a living tribunal. The rationality and universality they claimed for it both legitimated it and made women, the monarchy and other ‘irrational’ and ‘subjective’ beings into nonparticipating objects of its judgment.” In newsprint one has the makings of the ultimate institutional church: scripture and inquisition combined. And, with the “public” standing as both judge and jury, perhaps it seemed as if many of the old problems of parochialism might be obviated.

The one true faith that animated this movement is symbolized by the Encyclopedia. Enlightenment wishes and dreams of scientific cosmopolitanism, of a philosophy based on clear and distinct ideas, of an end to ignorance and superstition and of immanent improvement of society, were the immaterial soul around which the body of journalism grew. But to fulfill such dreams the philosophe would have to reorient his goals from the pursuit of truth to the service of “humanity.”

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9 Goodman, p. 237.
Suddenly, philosophy was torn asunder from its ancient roots in contemplation, and re-cast in the mold of active citizenship:

In 1730 the term *philosophe* evoked the figure of the sage or scholar; over the course of the years 1740-1770, it became a defensive term within a conflict between those who called themselves true philosophes and those who attacked them as ‘so-called philosophes.’ At the same time, the meaning of *man of letters* shifted from the educated amateur to the newly defined, newly militant philosophe who was proud to declare his independence [of the Academy and the absolute state]. In a third key, the term author was devalued and *writer* rose. When [Antione-Leonard] Thomas spoke of the ‘man of letters’ at the French Academy in 1767, the term resonated with the associated terms *philosophe* and *writer*. It was this man of letters whom he identified with the good citizen, and it was this identification that [was used] uncritically eleven years later.10

With the publication of the Encyclopedia, the *philosophes* knew that they were effecting a change that would redefine authority in the Republic of Letters. Formerly, men of letters were bound to the academy; the state and the aristocracy were the elite patrons of literary culture. When Diderot proposed the Encyclopedia, however, he “was proposing a reformation of the Republic of Letters which would inaugurate a new era in its history…

Diderot was now suggesting not only that the republic was no longer contained within the bounds of the academies but that the structure of the academy was not conducive to its work. He saw a new basis of unity in a new universal: not the academic language of Latin, but the universal concern for the good of humanity. And that concern would only be undermined by the limited interest of any corporative body…. Only the Republic of Letters was truly universal…11

The *philosophes*’ aim was to create a new type of institution, in print, based on the modern republican values of liberty, participation, and freedom of conscience, as they had evolved inside the community of men of letters in the seventeenth century. As Dena Goodman has shown, these values are rooted in the habits and customs of published epistolary exchange that first made it possible for private persons to associate publicly and engage in mutual

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10 Ibid., p. 51.
11 Ibid., p. 28.
discourse, using private, critical, reason. The open-ended nature of discourse and the mode of exchanging ideas in print, particularly in open-ended forms like public letters and editorials, contributed to the values of autonomy and reciprocity that are now a familiar aspect of democratic public culture.12

As an invisible community (of writers and readers), combined for the sake of promoting the general good, the Republic of Letters bears more than a trivial resemblance to the church. This is true of pre-Revolutionary France, especially. As Michael Burleigh observes in a recent history of church and state in the revolutionary era, the clergy, whom the *philosophes* were to upend, perhaps unwittingly, had an active role in promoting social welfare in France.

“The French clergy were not like Lutheran pastors in Frederick the Great’s Prussia, who had become little more than state officials, but they had various quasi-governmental functions.”13 Among these were education, record-keeping and the provision of public welfare. Moreover, the church served a valuable social purpose by diffusing throughout society a sense of moral order:

The clergy were responsible for setting the moral tome in society in general, with these functional merits of religion being blindingly obvious even to skeptics such as Voltaire. There was virtual unanimity on the need for Hell to stop the servants stealing the spoons: anyone who cast doubt on the reality of eternal torment was certain to experience it.14

Whatever merits the *philosophes* might have recognized in the church, it would be their lot to become its competitor, however. In hindsight, it is hard to imagine how things could have been otherwise. These critical intellectuals managed to form a quasi-cosmopolitan community based on the ideal of universality, that, having established itself on the printed page and transformed

12 See Goodman, chapter one, especially.
13 Burleigh, *Earthly Powers*, p. 24. On the subject of education, Burleigh remarks wryly of the “many future revolutionaries indebted to Jesuit or Oratorian schoolmasters for their easy Latinity and knowledge of the politics of Roman antiquity.”
14 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
itself into a public sphere, now exerted an impressive presence in historical reality as a community mobilized for meaningful action. “The Republic of Letters [has] both historical specificity and ideal universality—like the pre-Reformation church. Having gradually superseded the church as the home of European intellectual life, the Respublica literaria et christiania became simply the Respublica literaria.”15

Words, or symbolical actions, are the concrete currency of every moral exchange, divine or diabolical. One might conclude accordingly that there is an invisible element in any discourse, and especially that of the Republic of Letters. But we have come to learn that human words are not as clear and distinct as, at one time, some may have believed. The well-known contrast between orality and literacy is a good illustration of this problem. In oral exchange, for example, we lack the tangibility and durability of visual representations; but writing, on the other hand, distracts the reader from the immediacy of oral discourse, thereby blurring the connection between speech and action. Print exacerbates the shortcomings of writing by practically guaranteeing the absence of the author (who, in addition to being removed spatially from the reader, is dead in most cases). Of course, what we lose in terms of the author’s presence is offset by the enduring presence of written artifacts. Texts provide a locus of communicative association that defies the finitude of a mortal life. The absence of the author is only one aspect of print dominance, however. Another aspect is the substitution of the personal authority of the author with that of the tightly regulated, typically closed system. Walter Ong’s observations on the “closure” of print space resonate here:

Eventually…print replaced the lingering hearing-dominance in the world of thought and expression with the sight-dominance which had its beginnings with writing but could not flourish with the support of writing alone. Print situates words in space

15 Goodman, p. 16.
more relentlessly than writing ever did. Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space. Control of position is everything in print.\textsuperscript{16}

Although, arguably, the modern religion of literature is parasitic on the scriptural religions,\textsuperscript{17} the latter differ from the former insofar as they admit a categorical distinction between the divine Word of Creation, not the literal word of the text but a silent word that wells up in the soul upon contemplation of God’s infinite universe; and the human word that manifests a paltry ersatz-creativity, by comparison. Of course the human word is a fine tool for communicating meaning between human beings, but still, it is a poor, disfigured, all-too-mortal vehicle for expressing the truth of the creation.

One of the most striking excesses of that great liberation from religious superstition called modernity is a stern refusal to acknowledge that there is any word but the human word. Divine or diabolical in its intention, deliberately polemical or hermetically systematic, this cacophonous human word aims, tragicomically, to be all, and in all. Often this aim is presupposed tacitly; for example, every time “ideology” passes the lips as a code-word for the scientistic reduction of belief to a mere allegory.

Ideology is a political word, so in concluding this section let us spell out the political implications of this mechanical terminology. The student of “ideology” might well concur with Aristotle on the general principle that political philosophy relies on a view of human nature. Yet the ideologist would disagree with Aristotle that human nature is moral; “virtue” or moral

\textsuperscript{16} Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (New York: Methuen, 1982) p. 54.

\textsuperscript{17} Burleigh, op. cit., introduces Earthly Powers with this quote from Tocqueville, observing a similarity between Jacobinism and Islam. Although it serves as the epigraph to this chapter, it is worth repeating here by way of evidence: “[The Revolution] itself became a new kind of religion, an incomplete religion, it is true, without God, without ritual, and without life after death, but one which nevertheless, like Islam, flooded the earth with its soldiers, apostles and martyrs.”
excellence is for the ideologist a “construct,” mere convention, supported by violence (the violence of coercion, the violence of the letter) and in principle alterable, given a complementary amount of violence in the corrective way, perhaps. Being indifferent to moral agency, then, ideology determines the true content of belief in terms of physical reflexes: Bentham’s “twin sovereigns,” fear of pain and desire for pleasure. Thus the “invisible reality” behind language just is power; or what one might be able to get by using language, how one can use it to manipulate, rather than to communicate or persuade.

The ancient view of language was articulated by Plato, who describes the creation of the world as the victory of persuasion over force. The modern view is something else; among the first to articulate this view was Mary Shelley. As Frankenstein’s (ugly, unnamed) monster observes: “these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by means of articulate sounds…[which] sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness in the minds and countenances of the beholders. This was indeed a godlike science.”

The Language of Religion:

In fact it is memory—the most basic type of “writing”—that makes transfinite communication possible. Before Thucydides inscribed his history with the express intention of producing a “work for all the ages,” the Hellenic bards set to memory the great deeds of gods, heroes and kings. Such myths, lyrics and epics represent the earliest form of social constitution. “Constitution” in this sense, means any shared narrative, corresponding to beliefs and customs

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18 See, especially, Timaeus

19 Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus (Dell, 1971), p. 112.
that structure the relational reality of authority. For example, the narratives of Achilles and Odysseus, of King David, or of Gilgamesh, all serve to express a national consciousness, and more importantly, they provide cues as to the respective roles of god(s), kings, prophets, heroes and peoples in the order of authority.

A main objective of the discussion that follows is to clarify what Carlyle could have meant by the axiom: “every government is a theocracy.” This utterance has been misinterpreted widely. Before going on, then, it will help to explain the function of the language of kinship in ancient polities that were, in a noncontroversial sense, theocratic.

In a recent study of the political theology of ancient cultures, Dale Launderville has mapped out the historic connections between literary, theological and political discourse. Launderville points out that several features surrounding the ancient theological notion of kingship served to inform and moderate political action in the ancient world. The first of these, naturally, is the notion of accountability of the king to God, or to the king of gods (e.g. Zeus). Ancient societies had no theory of divine right, quite the opposite is the case: “On the basis of the guarantee that the king was accountable to God or the gods, the community was able to take the risk of shaping its identity around the king.”\(^{20}\) The strength of this basic association between royal and divine authority did not rely on coercive power over life and death, salvation or damnation, attributable to the king as God’s earthy vicegerent, but on “the vitality of the metaphors symbols and narratives which delegitimated an unjust king just as they legitimated a just one.”

\(^{20}\) All quotes in this paragraph are from Dale Launderville, *Piety and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003) p. 10.
These ancient narratives, then, must be seen as a kind of dialect of the community’s authority whose morally regulative power worked itself out in the process of discourse. “The vitality of figurative language…was most favorably generated in a performative context where truth emerged in the interaction and dialogue of the participants. Metaphoric truth played a key role in freeing theology from the grasp of wooden ideology.”

The other features of the “traditional pattern” legitimating royal authority follow from this basic relation, or imaginative identification, between God, king and people. The second feature that Launderville addresses are those authoritative speech-acts that “operated in but also shaped the sociopolitical context in which [the king] ruled.” This is “royal speech.” Royal speech did not attach to the “officially” constituted king but to any leader in time of crisis: For example, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus manages to save the king, Agamemnon, from his botched attempt to use reverse psychology. Odysseus persuades the Achaians to stay and fight rather than to retreat, per Agamemnon’s absurd order.

“The activities of performing good deeds and speaking inspiring words lie at the heart of authority,” Launderville observes, following Hannah Arendt. Royal or authoritative speech acts also bear a direct association with myth. Drawing on classicist Richard P. Martin’s definition of *mythos* as “a speech-act indicating authority, performed at length, usually in public, with a focus on full attention to every detail,” and John Searle’s analysis of speech-acts as an important feature of the human capacity to shape the world, Launderville concludes that in the culture of

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 11.
23 Ibid., p. 57.
24 Quoted in Launderville, p. 57.
ancient kingship, the “creative power of the speech-act, particularly a promise or declarative statement, indicates how an individual can have an impact on the world in spite of the many circumstances and forces to which an individual is subject.”

The narrative of the myth was a dictionary, or dialect, for morally heroic action.

The third dimension of kingship lay in the king’s role as a symbol of the people. To say that the king “is” the people is not the same as King Louis’s saying *l’etat c’est moi,* because the ancient king is not a modern sovereign, but symbolizes the life and character of the community. The person and actions of kings are meaningful in a more than material, more than allegorical sense. “The king was the chief redistributor of the material and symbolic goods in the community that exerted a centripetal force on the practices of the community…within the field mapped out by royal authority.”

As a “symbol,” the king could represent the participatory life of the community without necessarily demanding conformity to a rigid model. Kingship is not an allegory of citizenship, nor is citizenship a mimesis of ideal kingship (or ideal heroism). Rather, the person and actions of the king symbolizes the life of the human community existing in a field of tensions, between the Divine and human; nature and culture; insider and outsider; noble and common; and life and death.

As the distinction between the body of the king, and the authority of royal speech-acts suggests, the ancient king is not supposed to contain a plenitude of knowledge or authority mystically in his person, nor has he any special mandate from, or ability to, communicate with

25 Launderville, p. 60.

26 Ibid., p. 11

27 Launderville diagrams these relationships and their mutual connections on p. 12.
divinity, except of course that general mandate by which any king ought to act as a shepherd of his (and God’s) people. This brings up two related features of the pattern of royal authority. In the first place, the practices of memory, and narratives of the community’s past—of the exploits of its gods, heroes and kings—warded off the tendency to oblivion by constantly recreating the identity of the historical community in the imaginative and spiritual life of its members. These practices constitute a “visionary context within which to understand innovations within the continuity of the tradition.”\textsuperscript{28} Secondly, communication between the invisible divine realm and the king’s earthly realm could be mediated within this visionary context. “The authoritative king did not simply receive his divine election at the beginning of his reign, and report back to the king of the gods at the end of his reign.” In order to receive communications from god or the gods, “he called upon prophets, diviners and sages to assist him in gaining [divine] direction.” In discussing this point, Launderville notes that the ambiguity connected with prophecies, oracles and other such divinations is an important feature of ancient political culture. “The ambiguity of such divine communications and the politics of their reception and interpretation provided ample grounds for skepticism and questioning.” Often such communications provided an opportunity to reevaluate the possibilities for action. Launderville suggests that within this context it was possible to negotiate a fortuitous “combination of oracular knowledge and clever discernment” that enabled the king to continue leading his people with authority.\textsuperscript{29} The prophet plays a special role in this figurative economy: he presents his prophetic utterances as divine oracles, but with no other basis but his own, personal, credibility. “The proof of the divine authorship of an oracle could not have been verified before the authoritative command or exhortation in the oracle had

\textsuperscript{28} Launderville, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 12.
materialized in history; therefore, the prophet had to mount a persuasive case for the veracity of the oracle through his credibility as a spokesperson within the tradition.” Answering as it does to particular events, prophetic utterance is characterized by a “poly-vocality [that]…call[s] for its interpretation within the collective memory and current circumstances of the community.” In this way, the participation of prophetic speech in the nature of moral action is made clear.

Finally, Launderville turns to the question of crises in royal authority. Both ancient and modern communities are familiar with the threat of crises so magnificent that they can call into question both the legitimacy of the regime and its leadership. We might think of these moments in terms of constitutional crises, which are, in the ancient culture of kingship, unequivocally religious crisis as well. “In extreme crises where an individual or a community saw no practical solution at hand to resolve their difficulties, they cried out to their gods in lament.” Lamentation is the attempt to get beyond an irreconcilable tension or contradiction through the very “act of crying out.” In the worst cases—where it is determined that the king has failed his divinely-instituted charge to care for the people—there enters the possibility of regicide, which “was legitimate…if the gods approved it. A king’s unjust actions removed the legitimacy of his authority and so were grounds for a coup. Some coups were themselves unjust since they were fueled by the opportunism of aspirants to the throne.”

Evidently, the idea of royal authority did not demand thoughtless, slavish or self-effacing submission to the earthly king (as the caricature of “divine-right” theory implies). Moreover, the notion of royal authority has its roots in a shared sense of the ethical world order, not an amoral

30 Ibid., p. 238.
31 Ibid., p. 286.
scheme of power, and so applies to every sort of leader. We cannot overstress that royal authority was never connected arbitrarily to the person of the king.

In ancient civilizations it was not the theory of divine right, but a “vision of ideal kingship” that served as a measuring-rod of political legitimacy. Such a vision was literary in the widest sense:

The vision of the ideal king was necessarily shaped by symbols, metaphors, and narratives that created their meaning through engagement with an audience. Such a vision evoked the intuitive understanding of a larger world order.... The polyvalence of symbols, metaphors, and narratives respected the particularities of individuals’ experience; but at the same time, engagement with the same metaphors and narratives fostered a convergence of understanding among the various individuals involved. Nevertheless, it is also possible that these symbols, metaphors, and narratives, whose truth becomes manifest in the engagement provoked by the act of interpretation, could be used to manipulate the people or to create a false consciousness. Religious language is not free from ideological terms, nor is it defined by them.  

To return our attention to the modern Republic of Letters, it is clear that this institution had more than just a memorializing or traditional aim. The prophets of enlightenment would make the public into an ideal king—final judge and arbiter of the ethical order—by inviting public participation in the various discourses of the sciences and letters. The easy circulation of print made it possible to construct a sort of paper agora, where criticism, discussion and debate on matters of present concern took place much as it had formerly in the academies and salons. Under the nose of the fatally disconnected monarchy at Versailles, the circulation of philosophes was creating a new type of political order, a literary republicanism. Their newspapers, journals or reviews, their Encyclopedia, constituted a new form of association, not less moral or political, but assuming a different aspect compared to all previous forms of association:

The very means by which the Encyclopedie was marketed to the public brought together the notions of readership and association. Public subscription was a novel practice

32 Ibid., pp. 289-290.
recently imported from England, just like Chambers’s *Cyclopedia*… Those who decided to subscribe to the *Encyclopédie* were joining an association just as the contributors were, a voluntary association of contributors and subscribers, writers and readers; the *Encyclopédie* was the mark of their common commitment to its principles. Their commitment was not, of course, equal, and certainly many of the subscribers would deny any allegiance to the encyclopediasts. Implicitly, however, publishers, editors, contributors and subscribers were bound together in this special way through the project of the book, and therefore, the project took on public meaning and public value.33

The Resurrection of the Reader

Thomas Carlyle was quick to point out parallels between the old church of evangelists and believers and the new, democratic, church of writers and readers. For Carlyle, Diderot was the “apostle” of this new religion and Voltaire was its “pontiff.” Of course, in Rousseau, the new religion found its true “evangelist.” But this is not to say that these men had any intention of setting up a new religion; perhaps they believed merely that encyclopediasm and journalism would put an end to religion.

As Tocqueville recognized, there is a kind of necessity about the religion of literature that escapes anyone’s control, however. For Carlyle, the religion of literature is an unintended consequence of print culture. In reflecting on this, Carlyle became one of the first thinkers seriously to consider the issue of writing as a type of action. Like all action, writing has consequences that escape the control of the agent. In his *French Revolution* Carlyle proclaims, with typical irony, the new age that has been ushered in by the press:

One Sanscullotic bough that cannot fail to flourish is Journalism. The voice of the people being the voice of God, shall not such divine voice make itself heard? To the ends of France; and in as many dialects as when the first great Babel was to be built! Some loud as the lion; some small as the sucking dove….

Folded and hawked Newspapers exist in all countries; but, in such a Journalistic element as this of France, other and stranger sorts are to be anticipated. What says the

33 Goodman, p. 32
English reader to a *Journal-Affiche*, Placard Journal; legible to him that has no halfpenny; in bright prismatic colours, calling the eye from afar? Such...as Patriot Associations, public and private, advance, and can subscribe funds, shall plenteously hang themselves out: leaves, limed leaves, to catch what they can!... Great is Journalism. Is not every able Editor a Ruler of the World, being a persuader of it; though self-elected, yet sanctioned by the sale of his Numbers? Whom indeed the world has the readiest method of deposing, should need be: that of merely doing *nothing* to him; which ends in starvation.  

Carlyle’s aim can be characterized as the resurrection of readers. I mean, Carlyle draws attention to the fact that writing is a kind of acting, and as a writer, he is self-conscious of his own role as an agent. Moreover, Carlyle focuses on the relationship between writers and readers as a relationship of authority, a political relationship broadly speaking. The resurrection of the reader means raising awareness that writers make claims on readers: for “there is a divine right or else a diabolical wrong at the heart of every claim one man makes on another.” The result of this is a type of writing that is acutely aware of its political situation.

In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, for example, “history” figures society or community; “hero-worship,” figures reading; and “hero,” figures the author, or his alter-ego, the reader. In turning towards history, psychology, and pragmatism to reply to contemporary conditions, Carlyle follows the general trend of the nineteenth century. Carlyle’s erstwhile foe is the great systematizer, Hegel. In order to understand the Carlylean axioms, “universal history is biography,” and “history is the biography of great men,” it helps to contrast Carlyle’s position with that of Hegel and Rousseau.

For Rousseau biography means *autobiography*. Rousseau the author claims to be transparent to himself, the authoritative and infallible interpreter of his own being. Alternatively, Carlyle sees biography as pre-reflective (although not for that reason unintelligent) activity; a

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35 *On Heroes*, p. 199.
process of self-making through action rather than self-knowing through reflection. Biography is a sort of writing (graphe) that one impresses on the world with one’s deeds. For “know thyself” Carlyle substitutes the Goethe-inspired maxim “know what thou canst work at.” For, there is no “self” to reflect upon, until first one performs a deed (or as the Romans had it, primum acti, deinde philosophari).

Similarly, Hegel’s philosophy of history purports to be the reflective autobiography of the world-spirit. For the first time, “World History” is supposed to have reached transparent self-consciousness in the mind of Hegel. Therefore Hegel claims, for the first time, to have a transparent, scientific knowledge of history. For Carlyle, again, this is impossible. So long as dynamic time subsists, as the element in which we have our being, we will continue to make history. Only a disembodied consciousness can have the kind of knowledge that Hegel and Rousseau claim to have, and unfortunately, disembodied consciousness offers no way of translating the experience of embodied intellects that dwell on earth. For Carlyle, then, the authentic outcome of self-examination—conscious reflection on biography and history—ought to be nescience, or learned ignorance. “Science has done much for us; but it is a poor science that would hide from us the great deep sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which all science swims as a mere superficial film.”

A philosophy of mystery, Carlyle’s philosophy of history (and biography) is quite different from Hegel’s. For Carlyle “History” is a kind of literature; at bottom, history is a myth, or narrative, that manifests the self-expression of a community. Indeed, Carlyle tends to see history, religion and myth as different expressions of a common human nature that answer to the ultimate human mystery of transcendent meaning:

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36 On Heroes, p. 8.
History has been written with quipo-threads, with feather-pictures, with wampum belts; still oftener with earth-mounds and monumental stone-heaps, whether as pyramid or cairn; for the Celt and the Copt, the Red man as well as the White, lives between two eternities, and warring against oblivion, he would fain unite himself in clear conscious relation, as in dim unconscious relation he is already united, with the whole future, and the whole past.37

Human beings fabricate history as a way of coming to terms with the mystery of mortality, of the origin and end of human life. Since history is, in the first place, a “text,” history cannot become conscious of itself. How can a text, a monument, or a narrative become conscious of itself, unless it is a person? How can a person become transparent to himself without becoming an object, like a stone monument, or a text? History does not have a self-conscious aspect, like a person. Rather, history inscribes the process of human beings relating themselves to time and mortality, to the “two eternities” between which each soul finds itself, to the starry vault from which each issues, and to the grave that represents the mysterious, inexorable destiny of each.

It is no accident, nor is it a mere rhetorical flourish, that Carlyle associates written history with memorials like “earth-mounds and monumental stone heaps, whether as of pyramid or cairn.” Carlyle’s understanding of history is tied up inextricably with his view of spirituality and religion. “History,” in this sense, is the archetype of religion—it evinces the common spiritual denominator in human nature:

In a certain sense, all men are historians. Is not every memory written quite full with Annals, wherein joy and mourning...manifestly alternate; and, with or without philosophy, the whole fortunes of one little inward Kingdom, and all its politics, foreign of domestic, stand ineffaceably recorded? Our speech is curiously historical. Most men, you may observe, speak only to narrate.... Cut us off from Narrative, how would the stream of conversation, even among the wisest, languish into detached handfuls, and among the foolish utterly evaporate! Thus, as we do nothing but enact History, we say little but recite it nay, rather in the widest sense, our whole spiritual life is built thereon. For, strictly considered, what is all Knowledge too but recorded Experience, and a

product of History; of which, therefore, Reasoning and Belief, no less than Action and Passion, are essential materials?  

Carlyle refuses to make a strict distinction between philosophy and history because he understands both philosophy and history as species of narrative. Accordingly both philosophy and history rely on the human experience of meaning. Philosophy and history are similar, in that both are modes of recording and expressing the humanly meaningful content of experience. It is precisely this point of view that justifies Carlyle’s attitude of skepticism towards “theory,” and also towards theoreticians like Hegel and Rousseau. Carlyle is the first modern English-speaking author to insist upon the point that philosophy is a “kind of literature.” And again, literature is a kind of action.

There is yet another important philosophical axiom of Carlyle’s, regarding the insurmountable gap between narrative and action: “Narrative is linear, action is solid.” This counter-point to the identification of writing and action points to the existence of a fundamental dilemma. As Aristotle proposes, the end of man is an action in the present; however, narratives of the past are all we have as a guide to present conduct. Accordingly, the self-conscious project of writing-as-action requires Carlyle to avoid intently any desire to reduce lived history to mere narrative or to construct a meta-narrative that explains all history (i.e. a “system”). On the level of action, history is a process of experimentation, trial and error. On the level of narrative, history is our effort to understand, explain, justify and hopefully learn from past actions, that we might make more felicitous decisions in the future. Both history and biography have this double-sense for Carlyle. They signify the “Action and Passion” of human life; and, from this side, the

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38 Ibid., p. 56
meaning of existence, of lived experience, exceeds the possibility of perfected knowledge or expression.

When Carlyle equates history and biography in On Heroes, his purpose it seems is to point out the limits of historical knowledge, not, as so many assume, to recommend the “great-man theory” as a shortcut to moral or intellectual certainty. Moreover, Carlyle asserts that these limits—both epistemological and existential—are obvious to anyone who has studied history and human affairs in earnest: “[L]et anyone who has examined the current of human affairs, and how intricate, perplexed, unfathomable, even when seen into with our own eyes, are their thousandfold blending movements, say whether the true representing of it is easy or impossible.”

For Carlyle, such a true representation is impossible. And the reason that this should be obvious is evident from what we know (or cannot know) of ourselves, since biography is the basic stuff of history.

Social life is the aggregate of all the individual men’s lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies. But if one Biography, nay, our own Biography, study and recapitulate as we may, remains in so many points unintelligible to us; how much more must these million, the very facts of which, to say nothing of the purport of them, we know not, and cannot know!

We know little more than the “facts” of our own lives, to begin to grasp the significance of which requires strenuous and interminable self-examination on one’s own part. Of other people’s lives we hardly have the facts; and the life of a society or historical community is so much more impenetrable owing to layers of biographical obscurity and complexity. If Carlyle uses the “great man” as a shortcut to history, then, it is with full awareness of the limits of this enterprise, which

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39 Ibid., p. 57
40 Ibid.
is based, in turn, on the limits of self-awareness, for human consciousness is the ultimate mystery. Hence, a Carlylean hero is a symbol or a hieroglyph, an “incarnate sign.” But Carlyle’s deepest interest is in man as an incarnate sign.

Most of Carlyle’s heroes are dead—whatever life they may be said to have is extant in the memory and imagination of living human beings. That this is a relationship of exemplary authority is beyond doubt. This relationship is not a simple case of command-and-obedience, any more than cult-ism, however. In fact, it is difficult to think of any living contemporary of Carlyle’s before whom he would have recommended that the masses fall prostrate in the caricaturist’s rendition of “hero-worship.” From the small set of potentially heroic contemporaries, Carlyle prefers figures like Robert Peel over the Duke of Wellington, Mirabeau over Robespierre. Hitler would have seemed to him a quack; for Carlyle’s aesthetic turn was motivated by a perception of the dangers of art to politics, not faith in the artist-as-savior.

It is typical to explain Carlyle’s suspicion of “art” and of all things merely aesthetic as a remnant of his Calvinist upbringing. While there may be a measure of truth here, unfortunately there is nothing instructive or philosophically interesting in this explanation which is in fact more deterministic than Carlyle’s purported “Calvinism.” A similar criticism of hero-worship, mistakes Carlyle’s hypothesis for an ideology or a recommendation. But for Carlyle, hero-worship is natural, it is an “everlasting adamant” of social order precisely because it needs no recommendation. In the conduct of one’s life it is natural to choose moral exemplars. What Searle has called the “relational reality” of authority is a fact of social life whether one chooses to acknowledge it or not.

The author of a recent monograph on Heroes levels the most typical critique of Carlyle: “An exaggerated veneration for an exceptional individual poses an insidious temptation. It
allows worshippers to abnegate responsibility, looking to the great man for salvation or fulfillment that they should more properly be working to accomplish for themselves.”

Either this writer has not read Carlyle (who happens to concur: “all but foolish men know…but that the only solid, though a slow reformation, is what each begins and perfects on himself”), or she disagrees with the more fundamental proposition that authority is real and ineradicable and involves an hierarchical relationship between persons. While she does not breach the question of authority in these terms, the writer addresses the question of personal authority in another connection: “Carlyle approvingly called [hero-worship] ‘the germ…of all religion hitherto known,’ but to make a fellow human the object of religious devotion is unwise. Hero-worshippers…are frequently disappointed in, and lay themselves open to abuse by, the heroes of their choice.”

This brings us a little closer to the heart of the matter. What is to be made of Carlyle’s (re)turn to personal authority in our age of reason, science, law and determinism? Far from noticing the divinity in others, modernity questions the very existence of others and regards divinity as the highest delusion of one’s self. Why would Carlyle put himself out for the abuse of the naïve hero-worshipper in this age of criticism, whose highest show of intellectual devotion consists in a reluctant willingness to recognize that the self is all-too-human, and a sincere disappointment that man cannot achieve his dream of becoming God?

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42 “Signs of the Times,” in A Carlyle Reader, p. 54.

43 Heroes (Hughes-Hallet), p. 3
Titanism

The simple answer is that Carlyle’s historical perspective is “backward-looking,” not “forward-looking” and a candid look behind us, at historical evidence, reveals that men do not believe in abstractions. What other sort of divinity are men supposed to have worshipped but one sensuously manifest? What is the likelihood that man could have begun with such a sublime apprehension of transcendent divine reality? It is a high achievement to be able to worship God without the meditation of sensuous appearances (including “ideas”), and historically, this has been the achievement not of rationalism, but rather of mysticism. Moreover, even the mystic does not begin with mysticism, but has to move up the ladder of appearances before having anything resembling mystical experience. Basically hero-worship is a variation of the premise that worship proceeds by appearances—eidola, idols—and more specifically, appearances of “the most godlike form of a man.”

But there is more. Not merely backward-looking, Carlyle craves simultaneity—he, too, wants to grasp the relation of past and present; therefore, he is unwilling to ignore myth, or the symbolic or figurative aspect of human self-interpretation. The age of science does not put an end the age of myth: this is the hard core of Carlyle’s opposition to Hegel, Darwin, Mill and the rest of the “progress-of-the-species” camp. Modernity is not an age of disenchantment, but of self-enchantment.44

Myth, symbol, is an enduring aspect of human thought expressing man’s desire to know the whole (that, ultimately, he cannot know). Science, analysis, merely chops up this reality into parts. At the epistemological limits, human reason can grasp fully neither the whole, nor the

44 For an extended discussion of this issue, see William Vander Lugt, “Debating Disenchantment” (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2005).
parts. Scientific analysis is incapable of grounding the belief in progress; in fact, it is the belief in progress that validates a scientific “worldview” which in turn produces the dogmas of necessary historical-evolutionary advancement. Turning its back on the past, the idea of “progress” merely transfers the reality of the whole into a mystified future, even as it satisfies the present believer with the illusion of immanent knowledge of the whole: one has only to believe that progress is fate. Progress is future worship; as such, it is the mirror-image of ancestor worship, and a reversion to primitive belief. Progress is the religion of titanic humanity.

Evidently this is the situation to which Carlyle alludes when he remarks that modern man has become Titanic “in a deeper than metaphorical sense.”

45 Borne on the extraordinary achievements of modern natural science in augmenting man’s power over physical nature, the ghastly spectacle to which Carlyle bears witness is the penetration of the inner life by the alien force of mechanism. The power of science to subdue external nature gives rise to the faith that man’s moral nature can be mastered in the same way. All this requires is to turn man’s soul inside-out, to make the invisible visible and of course to ignore whatever cannot be systematized.

46 In other words, as Carlyle laments, the only publicly acceptable path to the inside of man is by way of his outer body. “The truth is, men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe, and hope, and work, only in the Visible.”

47 What is at stake here is the incompatibility between the mechanical dictates of ideology and the morality of virtue: “The infinite, absolute character of Virtue has passed into a finite,

45 “Signs of the Times,” in A Carlyle Reader, p. 47.

46 In 1839, ten years after the publication of “Signs” and one year before the lectures On Heroes, the first statistical journal was founded in London. In 1899, the editors of the same journal began to disclaim responsibility for the opinions published therein.

47 “Signs of the Times,” p. 46.
conditional one…a calculation of the profitable…. Our true Deity is Mechanism…. We are Giants in physical power: in a deeper than metaphorical sense we are Titans, that strive, by heaping mountain upon mountain, to conquer heaven also.”

Carlyle’s alternative to the mute Babel of modern mechanism does not entail the rejection of science, technology or analytical thinking. His is no vulgar irrationalism. However, what Carlyle clearly rejects is the totalizing claim that analytical reason is the only legitimate way of thinking and knowing. The “irrationalism” that Carlyle recommends is not so much the worship of heroes, but the religion of wonder:

An intellectual dapperling of these times boast chiefy of his irresistible perspicacity, his ‘dwelling in the daylight of truth,’ and so forth; which, on examination, turns out to be a dwelling in the rush-light of ‘closet logic,’ and a deep unconsciousness that there is any other light to dwell in or any other objects to survey with it. Wonder, indeed, is on all hands, dying out: it is the sign of uncultivation to wonder.49

A latter-day defender of the “philosophy of wonder,” Christopher Lasch, situates Carlyle in a tradition of thinkers that begins with Jonathan Edwards and ends with William James. Lasch reiterates this tradition’s critique of skepticism:

Scientific rationalism gives a ‘shallow’ and ‘superficial’ account of man’s spiritual life. It cannot explain religious belief even when it tries to argue in support of religion instead of arguing against it. A rationalistic God is no more convincing than a universe with no God at all.50

This presumptuous skeptical attitude merely disconnects the calculative from the chthonic in human reality. Accordingly, Carlyle casts himself on the side of the uncultivated, the “irrational.” But he does this while remaining a man of culture. As a man of culture, Carlyle

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48 Ibid., pp. 46-47.
49 Ibid., p. 47.
tries, like Rousseau, to bring the Lockean *camera-obscura* of consciousness out of the realm of closet-logic and to awaken the reader to the mystery of conscious existence.

In *On Heroes*, we find Carlyle deploying the familiar *camera-obscura* metaphor in at least three different ways: following Locke, it is a figure for intentional consciousness. Secondly, the *camera-obscura* is a figure for the human sensorium. Finally the *camera-obscura* figures tradition, which is Carlyle’s (Burke-derived) version of historicism: “What an enormous *camera-obscura* Magnifier is Tradition! How a thing grows in the human Memory, in the human Imagination, when love, worship, and all that lies in the human Heart is there to encourage it.”

We need to clarify that Carlyle’s turn to tradition, memory, and the moral imagination is not a turning-back on modernity. As Ruth ApRoberts observes:

> One of Carlyle’s challenges was to come to terms with Hume… Carlyle acclaims [Hume] for seeing that…we must at last develop a science of religion. But Hume’s values are all wrong. Hume ‘regards [Religion] as a disease, we again as Health; so far there is a difference; but in our first principle we are at one.’

From Carlyle’s perspective, it is not that the Humean discovery that science is a mere habit of mind is false. However, what Hume reveals to Carlyle is that even science partakes of the imagination.

> Science, myth, literature: all are modes of meaning, clothes—“habits”—woven together and worn by the imagination. In turn, all of these are comprehended by the “great thaumaturgic art of Thought!”

> Thaumaturgic I name it; for hitherto all Miracles have been wrought thereby, and henceforth innumerable will be wrought; whereof we, even in these days witness some. Of the Poet’s and Prophet’s inspired Message, and how it makes and unmakes whole

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worlds, I shall forbear mention: but cannot the dullest hear Steam-engines clanking around him? Has he not seen the Scottish Brassmith’s IDEA (and this but a mechanical one) traveling on fire-wings round the Cape, and across two Oceans; and stronger than any Enchanter’s Familiar, on all hands unweariedly fetching and carrying: at home, not only weaving Cloth; but rapidly enough overturning the whole system of Society; and for Feudalism and Preservation of the Game, preparing us, by indirect but sure methods, for Industrialism and the Government of the Wisest. Truly a Thinking Man is the worst enemy the Prince of Darkness can have; every time such a one announces himself, I doubt not, there runs a shudder through the Nether Empire; and new Emissaries are trained, with new tactics, to, if possible, entrap him, and hoodwink and handcuff him.\footnote{Carlyle, \textit{Sartor Resartus}, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) pp. 92-93. Carlyle puts these words in the mouth of an alter ego—Herr Diogenes Teufelsdrockh, the “clothes-philosopher” who surveys the world from his private residence in a high tower on the “dream-street” in the town of “knows-not-where.”}

The higher intellectual ground claimed by enlightenment science is not truly “higher,” unless it can comprehend what is lower. Since self-enchanted skepticism cannot comprehend the near-universal fact of religious belief (the kind of belief that does not ask for the “evidences”), its claim to a higher knowledge is flawed, fatally. This attitude of mental complacency reveals popular skepticism for what it is: another form of enthusiasm.

But, again, Carlyle’s philosophy of wonder is not hostile to natural science. The Teufelsdrockhian passage above indicates clearly enough how Carlyle intentionally plays with the distinction between myth and science. Popular skepticism is all talk, cant, incantation—at best, all speculation, armchair analysis—and no action. By contrast Carlyle’s heroism is a mute ethics, an ethics of exempla not formulae: it aims to give expression to virtue, the aim of which is itself infinite, in the only language available, the language of moral action.

Why did Carlyle find it necessary to write those forty volumes in praise of silence? An important part of the answer, that often critics fail to appreciate, lay in Carlyle’s attention to the vicissitudes of language. In particular, Carlyle’s insights into the complex phenomenal relationship between the voice and the text deserve to be recognized as a key contribution to
Anglo-American thought, as well as a governing theme of his work. Both Carlyle’s and Emerson’s writings are shot through with awareness of the action-character of thought, speech and writing. Thought, a divine gift and sole apparent object of Carlyle’s reverence, is a silent virtue. Thought cannot be translated into public action until it erupts into speech. Speech is a kind of writing already, a king of doing or making; for, speech is “shaped, spoken thought.” On the one hand, this means that there is an inherent fallibility in the human word: the human word is a tool like other tools and consequently we should not be surprised when words sometimes “break,” failing to serve their constituted purpose as vessels of thought and meaning. On the other hand, there is no human culture without language—no spirit, but only brute bodies.

With writing, especially, come the blessings of civilization. Unlike Rousseau, Carlyle neither praises nor recommends the primitive or uncivilized life of the so-called noble savage. Carlyle’s savage is Montaigne’s cannibal. For Carlyle, writing is especially miraculous; without writing, only a tribal existence is possible. But, unlike Hegel, Carlyle does not fall prey to the illusion that the meaning of history can be captured fully in a text. History, like life, is made of time. Time is persistent activity that does not come to an end—or another beginning—with a mere text. Carlyle’s renovation of the voice reminds the reader of the action-character of moral life and brings to the fore the personal reality of communication between authors and readers. But this is a doubly-mediated form of communication. At the same time, then, Carlyle keeps in view the peculiarities that come along with communication by way of print.
Chapter Four: The Democratization of Heroism

How does the problem of the heroic individual relate to the seemingly distant questions of democratic theory? To begin to understand this relationship it will be necessary to examine more fully the political philosophy of Rousseau. Rousseau was the first thinker to combine the “mechanical” perspective of social contract theory with the emerging “organic” themes of individual and social self-determination. In this chapter, I focus specifically on Rousseau’s renovation of the great legislator and the civil religion as the primary manifestation of these organic themes in Rousseau’s political philosophy. My interpretation here leads to two broad, and related, conclusions. The first is that Rousseau’s legislator figures the rehabilitation of personal (or in Weber’s terms, charismatic) authority in the new guise of the hero as author. The second is that Rousseau’s ambivalence towards heroism in general, combined with his rehabilitation of heroic authority in the figure of the legislator, in particular, has the effect of suppressing the heroic voice and identifying the legislator with the text of the law, in this case, with the science of politics and the dogmas of the civil religion. The effect of this is evident in Rousseau’s portrayal of citizens as mere carbon-copies of the legislator’s character.

In short, Rousseau’s great legislator appears as the exclusive author of the character of citizenship. While this author-text relationship is impressive in theory, it is untenable in practice. Since Rousseau, however, democratic political philosophy has continued to be vexed by Rousseau’s dilemma of how best to relate the exceptionalism of the legislator with the rule of citizenship. In the next few paragraphs we shall consider the contemporary relevance of this
The Democratization of Heroism

The democratization of heroism poses a problem. The hero is a species of the “exceptional” person; whereas contemporary democracy thinks of itself as the regime of ultimate equality. Democracy—ideal democracy—cannot tolerate exceptional or superlative personalities. Without denying the compelling vision of justice that democracy represents, we must admit, then, that on its own terms democratic morality cannot accommodate the radical inequality implied by our intuitive sense of the hero as one who excels his fellows in virtue, who thereby is entitled to a more exalted status than common people. If we take this basic intuition seriously, we must further acknowledge that despite the real moral progress heralded by proponents of democracy, the urge for democratic equality contains in itself the potential for at least one injustice: it privileges mediocrity. This injustice is implicit in the democrats’ denial of merit, or desert; its epitome is democracy’s intolerance of heroes.

It goes almost without saying that democracies must be vigilant in defense of individual liberties and in opposition to potential tyrannies. Certainly the customary disapprobation of vulgar hero-worship in liberal-democratic culture is a salutary normative bulwark against possible oppression. At first glance, then, the suggestion that we ought to be concerned about democracy’s potential injustice to the “exception” may seem extravagant, even dangerous. Moreover, the commonsensical critic will observe that if we put theoretical abstractions aside, it is clear that people today do attribute excellence to certain individuals and even allow these
individuals a rather lofty—maybe too lofty—status on account of it. “Perhaps there is no more
gross example of this than the phenomenon of ‘celebrity-worship,’” someone might say, “and far
from being an inducement to defend the principle of heroism, this celebrity-worship exposes the
baseless superstition that underlies all sorts of hero-worship and only suggests that the
demolition of arbitrary inequality has yet to be completed.” The point is compelling. It would be
hard to find a sensitive person who disagrees about the lamentable state of a society in which the
typical referents of the term “hero” are entertainers or athletes, and where for lack of another
common authority many people have come to expect political wisdom from the former, or to
demand moral excellence from the latter. The perceptive social observer knows better than to
look for such qualities in these quarters. But of course most such observers lack the bully pulpit
of celebrity. Moreover, social critics tend to mute each other’s voices by the force of their own
internecine disagreements.

Not that the vociferations of social critics, on the one hand; or, the silencing of
disagreement on the other, should be expected to resolve the problems associated with the
democratization of heroism. These problems are too deeply rooted in our philosophy to be
reached by criticism alone. They are bound up in the basic assumptions that make criticism in the
modern sense possible; namely, the belief in the possibility of an impartial “critical” perspective
from which the detached individual observer may evaluate the world “objectively.” This belief,
speaking as it does in the language of modern natural science, turns out to be a profoundly
democratic belief—“democratic” in the leveling sense we just portrayed—and so it begs our
question. The reason for this is that the dialects of natural science, “objectivity,” “philosophical
critique” and so on, are all variants of the modern dialect of *method*. And method is the greatest leveler.

Descartes, the first convert to the *vita methodica*, understood well that method is the proper enemy of genius. His philosophical project was not to annihilate, but to correct “genius” by subordinating it to a clear and distinct method. Today the desirability of such a methodology is a given, but for Descartes it implied a personally meaningful decision. As Wolin has observed, the *vita methodica* implied “a profound personal choice, perhaps the closest functional equivalent to a conversionary experience that the modern mind can achieve. At the very least, it was intended as a form of re-education, as the title of one of Descartes’ works, *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, implied.”\(^1\)

By now methodology has become hegemonic as the optic through which we view the human things. Indeed, methodology is so dominant that it has provoked a counter-conversion against method, and in favor of what can only be called genius. But this putatively postmodern “genius” also is a leveling notion—a genius open to all. The affect of this conversion is manifest in the popularity of a so-called relativism, the meaning of which is, for the obvious reasons, all-too-ambivalent. Is relativism an empirical notion, implying that each person creates one’s own world as a matter of fact? Or alternatively, is it a moral or normative demand that each person ought to have the right to create one’s own reality? To confront these difficult questions is to begin to understand why Descartes was so attracted to method in the first place.

The problem with genius, recognized by Descartes, is that it is far too particular; and therefore variable, and unpredictable. As the notions of civilizational “genius” and the individual “genius” suggest, genius is too particular to be scientific in the modern sense. A thinker who, like Descartes, aims to establish a regime of universally commensurable, “clear and distinct” ideas, must forsake genius at the very least because of this irreducible particularity. The whole aim of method is to correct the bias, prejudice and inherent weaknesses of human genius. Method is “universal,” then, both in the sense of its scientific objectivity, and in the sense that it is accessible to everyone. You do not have to be anybody in particular in order to understand or use a scientific method. Genius, by contrast, implicates a particular tradition—or at least a personal talent—that may be difficult to understand from an “objective” vantage point. The price one pays for the vita methodica, then, is the suppression of particularity along with whatever resources particular cultures might carry. For this price one purchases a more general means of communication, but it is a communication limited to the externalities and incapable of expressing internal, particular realities.

A new sort of critic, the defender of tradition, emerges in reaction to the hegemonic view that the vita methodica is the only legitimate expression of the life of the mind. It is no coincidence that, often, defenders of tradition see the disjoint between democratic theory and practice that subtends the problem of merit, and accordingly of heroism. Edmund Burke’s defense of prejudice and Alexis deTocqueville’s fear of a “democratic despotism” based on systematic equality are early cases of this sort of insight. A more recent defender of tradition, Alasdair McIntyre locates a basic shortcoming of democratic theory in its inability to cope with
the problem of “desert.” In a comparison of John Rawls and Robert Nozick, the two antipodes of contemporary democratic theory, McIntrye\textsuperscript{2} evinces one key point of conformity:

Neither of them make any reference to desert in their account of justice, nor could they consistently do so…. [F]or both Nozick and Rawls, a society is composed of individuals, each with his or her own interest, who then have to come together and formulate common rules of life. In Nozick’s case, there is the additional negative constraint of a set of basic rights. In Rawls’s case the only constraints are those that a prudent rationality would impose. Individuals are thus in both accounts primary and society secondary, and the identification of individual interests is prior to, and independent of, the construction of any moral or social bonds between them.

The dereliction of desert makes sense within the horizon of social contract theory, because contract theory aims to demonstrate how legitimate political authority could arise from the consent of free and equal rational individuals. Instead of basing political legitimacy on tradition, history or religion, the contractarian is bound to employ the scientifically-inspired method of constructing a hypothetically legitimate regime based on a carefully defined “axiomatic” notion of the pre-social individual. What an axiomatic individual can be expected to accept is “legitimate.” Unsurprisingly, these sorts of theories have the virtue of being applicable to any political regime, but not to any regime in particular. For the abstract nature of these premises cannot but produce abstract conclusions.

McIntyre’s critique would be unremarkable if it was restricted to this expose of radical individualism in democratic theory. The charge of radical individualism is commonplace among opponents of the contract view. But to this McIntyre appends the observation that, in political practice, people make claims of desert all the time. Indeed, such claims often take the place of the theoretical claims made by Nozick and Rawls. Commonplace political discussions trade in

terms of merit and desert, regardless of whether one adopts the Nozickean or Rawlsian view of distributive justice. To use McIntyre’s illustration: Party “A,” representative of the former view, feels that massive redistribution (i.e. high taxes) threatens his ability to achieve personal goals. But he has earned these resources through hard work. Therefore “A aspires to ground the notion of justice in some account of what and how a given person is entitled to in virtue of what he has acquired and earned.” On the other hand, party “B” represents the Rawlsian view. “He is, if anything, even more impressed with the inability of the poor and deprived to do very much about their own condition as a result of inequalities in the distribution of power.” He tends to regard such inequalities as rather arbitrary, and in need of justification. Therefore “B holds that principles of just distribution set limits to legitimate acquisition and entitlement.” This conflict, typical of today’s debates, is usually dealt with in terms of “weighing” the claims of the opposing parties. But McIntyre argues that “these two types of claim are indeed...incommensurable, and the metaphor of ‘weighing’ moral claims is not just inappropriate but misleading.” The reason for this is that “our pluralist culture possesses no method of weighing, no rational criterion for deciding between claims based on legitimate entitlement against claims based on need.” Parties A and B, respectively, invoke two incommensurable standards of desert:

What A complains of on his own behalf is not merely that he is entitled to what he has earned, but that he deserves it in virtue of his life of hard work; what B complains of on behalf of the poor and deprived is that their poverty or deprivation is undeserved and therefore unwarranted. And it seems clear that in the case of the real-life counterparts of A and B it is the reference to desert which makes them feel strongly that what they are complaining about is injustice, rather than some other kind of wrong or harm.

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3 All quotes in this paragraph are from McIntyre, pp. 244-46. The long quote below is from p. 249.
McIntyre’s argument parallels that of other critics in so far as it relies on the sense of a fundamental disconnect between political theory and practice. But rather than finding fault with the “real-life counterparts” of parties A and B, McIntyre assigns the flaw to modern political theory, with its entrenched bias towards individualism. “The notion of desert is at home only in the context of a community whose primary bond is a shared understanding both of the good for man and of the good of that community and where individuals identify their primary interest with reference to those goods.” Desert does not and cannot have any place in a political theory that relies strictly on methodological individualism, and this includes all contract theories. Individualism rules out the appeal to tradition, and more generally to history, on which the notion of desert relies.

For McIntyre a solution to this theoretical impasse would involve not throwing out the notion of desert. Instead, we have to acknowledge that modern theory is destined to fail at achieving a new moral consensus. Any solution, he concludes, would then seem to involve some kind of return to tradition. But this return is complicated because individualism also stands for a social reality, and it cannot just be abandoned. The reality is that, from the perspective of the modern state, the traditionalist is now a dissenter. “Modern systematic politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical or socialist, simply has to be rejected from a standpoint that owes genuine allegiance to the tradition of the virtues; for modern systematic politics expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of that tradition.” To whatever extent this is possible, individualism is our tradition; or, put alternatively, it is our anti-tradition.

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4 Ibid., p. 251.
5 Ibid., p. 255.
The question we are pursuing is not exactly whether some people deserve more (or less) than others. But the problem of desert is instructive because it shows how modern democratic theory can fail to account for even our most basic intuitive notions about justice. If the reader needs to see the connection between this example and the problem of heroism, let McIntyre’s own remarks suffice. For, after he dispenses with the question of desert, he goes on to talk about the most characteristic presence of the heroic in politics—patriotism:

Patriotism cannot be what it once was because we lack in the full sense a *patria*. The point that I am making must not be confused with the commonplace liberal rejection of patriotism…. [M]y present point is not that patriotism is good or bad as a sentiment, but that the practice of patriotism as a virtue is in advanced societies no longer possible in the way that it once was. In any society where government does not express or represent the moral community of the citizens, but is instead a set of institutional arrangements for imposing a bureaucratized unity on a society which lacks genuine moral consensus, the nature of political obligation becomes systematically unclear.⁶

Now let us try to spell out how all of this relates to our problem, the democratization of heroism. First, we have to clarify our terms. “Democracy” here means modern democracy, or the regime made up of freely consenting individuals. Only within this specific modern horizon can the democratization of heroism become a problem. The reason for this is that “heroism” is emphatically a traditional notion. Most recently Joseph Campbell⁷ has shown that although the *figure* of the hero is universal (in the sense that all mythologies contain hero-characters, whose journeys exhibit a remarkably similar form) the *function* of the hero is particular to a community. The archetypal consummation of the heroic journey is the hero’s return to the community, bearing the gift of a “new truth” for his people. Despite the obscurity of what Campbell means

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⁶ Ibid., p. 254

by a “new truth,” it is clear that even his rather formal account of heroism would lose all sense if the connection between hero and community was severed. Yet this is precisely what the “democratization of heroism” implies. Heroism and democracy are potentially as incommensurable as tradition and individualism. With this established we can state the problem, or paradox of democratic heroism in terms of a question that shall guide our research: Is heroic individualism possible?

Rousseau and the Heroic Legislator

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was perhaps the first political thinker to recognize and try to solve this problem. If we wish to understand what modern patriotism means, or can mean, then we must begin with Rousseau. Rousseau’s critique of social contract theory is one of the first great attempts to synthesize the ancients and the moderns. His unique contribution “lies in his attempt to combine a view of human nature derived from moderns like Hobbes and Locke with a view of history derived from Plato and Aristotle.”

Like the moderns, Rousseau views human nature primarily in terms of individual self-preservation. Conversely, the ancients understood human beings primarily as social creatures. For example, Aristotle acknowledges the possibility of a person without a *polis*, but summarily declines to consider such an isolated “individual.” He only remarks that the *apolis* man is either a god or a beast. By choosing the form of a “social contract,” Rousseau announces his sympathy with modern individualism. Yet he replaces the “aggressive or rational egoism of Hobbes and Locke with the more passive and instinctive self-

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preservation of isolated animals.” On the other hand, Rousseau sides with the ancients in his view of history, interpreting history in rather pessimistic terms. From his early critiques, in the Discourses, of the corrupting effects of civilization, to his mature attempt, in the Social Contract, to demonstrate how the corrupt relations of modern society might be legitimized, Rousseau displays an ancient “skepticism towards radical historical progress” while nevertheless upholding a quasi-Platonic idealism as a radical standard “that show[s] how to construct a legitimate and free government, at least in some instances.”

Interpretation of Rousseau’s political thought is notoriously difficult. One reason for this lay in his synthesis of the modern view of human nature and the ancient view of history. Another reason seems to be that none of Rousseau’s views can be understood in strictly ancient or modern terms, but require the reader constantly to participate in Rousseau’s imaginative effort of synthesis. What is remarkable about Rousseau’s “modern” view of human nature, for example, is that he deploys it in the Social Contract to construct an ideal of political community that much more closely resembles the ancient polis than the modern state. Many critics have observed this tendency; Hannah Arendt diagnosed it as Rousseau’s polis envy.

Another remarkable transformation of an idea that has received less attention concerns Rousseau’s view of the legislator, as well as his view of the hero. There is much to suggest that Rousseau saw a close connection between the figures of the hero and the legislator. “The legislator is the most exceptional example of heroic virtue discussed in [Rousseau’s early] Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero.”

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9 Ibid., p. xxv.
In the *Social Contract* and *Geneva Manuscript*, the figure of the hero returns in the guise of the great Legislator. Rousseau’s legislator “is an extraordinary man in the State in all respects. If he should be so because of his genius, he is no less so by his function. It is not magistracy, it is not sovereignty. This function, which constitutes the republic, does not enter into its constitution.”

The great legislator’s “function” is to persuade selfish men to abide by the common good. Since this function “constitutes the republic” the legislator is constrained to fulfill it without recourse to coercive force or constitutional authority (coercion does not create citizens, and a constitution is yet lacking). It is easy to see, then, why Rousseau refers to the legislator as “an extraordinary man...in all respects,” for he takes upon himself the burden of “an undertaking beyond human force and, to execute it, an authority that amounts to nothing.”

What sets the great legislator apart from other men? What sorts of qualities are required to fulfill this audacious task? In the *Hero* Rousseau refers to a virtue that he calls “strength of soul,” but as we have seen he also mentions the lawgiver’s “genius.” The legislator must also have knowledge of the “science of the legislator,” or the “maxims of politics.”

Rousseau’s appreciation for the heroic-lawgiving virtue epitomizes the ancient side of his political thought. Earlier moderns had not addressed the ancient question of the “lawgiver” and it almost seems like a *non sequitur* in a discussion of the “social contract.” On the level of theory Rousseau basically agrees with the contract theorists, defining political legitimacy in modern terms as an idealization of popular sovereignty. But he is quick to admit that, in practice, most

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11 Ibid. (*Collected Writings* 4:156).
people lack the ability to discern and apply abstract principles of political science. Here enters the special function of the legislator, who adapts the universal maxims of politics to a particular people. This explains why, in the Social Contract, the legislative

‘genius’ discovering the laws best suited for a particular community is personified as an individual...[who] is somehow above the level of ordinary men.... Because a successful policy cannot be based on popular understanding of the ‘science of the legislator,’ the patriotic opinions needed to support good laws are transformed into dogmas—the ‘civil religion’ that converts selfish individuals into virtuous citizens.12

The Legislator, the maxims of politics, and the civil religion form a coherent complex of ideas that enable Rousseau to rebuild ancient republicanism on modern premises. While the theory of the “general will” begins from modern premises, his political practice begins from ancient premises. Rousseau the republican believes in the importance of tradition, and the timeworn idea of civic virtue. But just as Rousseau the democrat conjures an ancient polis from modern premises, his treatment of the ancient Legislator leads to a strikingly modern conclusion. Since Rousseau views the heroic legislator with all the suspicion demanded by the modern view of human nature, he is unable to conceive of a disinterested heroism: “Let us not conceal anything; public felicity is far less the end of the Hero’s actions than it is a means to reach the one he sets for himself, and that end is almost always his personal glory.”13 This conclusion does not alter Rousseau’s conviction that “of all the qualities of soul...heroism is the one with which it is most important to Peoples that those who govern them be adorned.”14 However, it does lead to a strict distinction between the hero and the “Wise Man.”

12 Kelly, “Introduction,” p. xxv.
13 Hero (Collected Writings 4:3).
14 Ibid. (Collected Writings 4:2).
The Wise Man possesses all the virtues but is not a public benefactor, while the Hero “compensates for the virtues he lacks by the brilliance of those he possesses.”\textsuperscript{15} This is a critical distinction:

Indeed, the care of his own felicity is the Wise Man’s entire occupation and that is doubtless a large enough one for an ordinary man. The views of the true Hero extend further. The happiness of men is his object, and it is to this sublime labor that he devotes the great soul he received from Heaven. The Philosophers, I admit, claim to teach men the art of being happy, and as if they were expecting to form nations of Wise Men, they preach to peoples a chimerical felicity which they do not have themselves and of which the people never acquire an idea or taste. Socrates saw and deplored the misfortunes of his fatherland; but it fell to \textit{Thrasybulus} to end them. And Plato, after having wasted his eloquence, his honor, and his time at a Tyrant’s court, was forced to abandon to someone else the glory of freeing Syracuse from the yoke of tyranny. The Philosopher can give the Universe some salutary instructions, but his lessons will correct neither the nobles who scorn them or the People which does not hear them at all. Men are not governed in that way by abstract views; one makes them happy only by constraining them to be so, and one must make them experience happiness in order to make them love it. Those are the occupation and talents of the Hero.\textsuperscript{16}

This early treatment of the hero is worth quoting at length because it bears a striking resemblance to Rousseau’s account of the legislator in the \textit{Social Contract}. The peculiar function of the great legislator is the same as that of the hero: to make the people happy “only by constraining them to be so” If the legislator is to perform this feat without the aid of coercion or the yet-unmade law, then he must of course have a superior share of wisdom. But this does not eradicate the distinction between the hero and the philosopher. For the distinguishing quality of the philosopher is prudence, or the care of his own self; whereas the lawgiver-hero has the audacity to “undertake the founding of a people...transforming each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole...altering man’s constitution in order to

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
strengthen it; [and] substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical independent existence we have all received from nature.”  

Rousseau has no illusions regarding what we call the “audacity” of the legislator, for properly speaking the effective transformation of human nature that makes equal and “partial” citizens out of “perfect and solitary” individuals is a divine act. “Gods would be needed to give laws to men.”  

Rousseau does not mention the egotism of the legislator in the relevant passages of the Social Contract. However since he expressed this view in the Hero, we may take Rousseau’s later silence on this point as evidence that his view has not changed. Moreover, the relevant passages of the Social Contract plainly indicate that the legislator is not a god, but merely attributes his own wisdom to the gods in order “to win over by divine authority those who cannot be moved by human prudence.” The hero-legislator, then, is emphatically a modern “individual.” He is an egotist like all other men; his nature is that of “perfect and solitary whole.” Indeed, the legislator is a standing threat to the constituted republic because in the wake of the founding he alone persists in his whole individuality.

As we have seen, the common good is but the hero’s means to the egotistic end of immortal glory (rivalled only by the gods). This heroic immortality project sums up the natural telos of every human being. “So it is that the World has often been overburdened with Heroes, but nations will never have enough citizens.” For every man, as a man, craves the undying fame

17 Social Contract, II.vii (Collected Writings 4:155).
18 Ibid. (Collected Writings 4:154).
19 Ibid. (Collected Writings 4:156).
of heroism; but as citizens, men must learn to satisfy this desire through the less natural (and consequently more difficult) virtues of obedience.\textsuperscript{20}

The important result of this investigation is that the Rousseauean hero unequivocally is a heroic \textit{individual}. Our paradigmatic example is the great legislator: It is precisely in consequence of the legislator’s heroism that he can never be a citizen. The citizen by contrast can never be a hero. Citizenship is but an imitation of the hero since heroism implies the natural egotism of man, thereby corrupting the sense of a common good on which citizenship depends. That there \textit{really is} a common good is what Rousseau is attempting to prove with his political science. But as we have seen he identifies this science with the person of the legislator. In this sense Rousseau’s revival of the legislator represents a significant departure from ancient political thought. The ancients attempted to domesticate the hero by criticizing traditional heroes from the perspective of the regime; Rousseau inscribes the person of the hero upon the regime. Rousseau may share with the ancients the aim of producing citizens, but his method rather opposes the ancients. Presupposing that the hero cannot be domesticated, Rousseau chooses to situate the hero in a transcendent and unitary relation to the regime of citizenship, the Rousseauean hero is a sort of \textit{deus ex machina}.

To understand Rousseau’s modernity on this point, we must consider the sources that underlie his belief that the hero cannot be domesticated. Briefly, they are to be found in the

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Hero (Collected Writings} 4:3). Note that the hero is a product of the “World” whereas the “nation” is the element of citizenship. The only possible exception to this rule is the Wise Man: “A Conqueror would consent to be a wise Man sooner than a Wise Man would consent to be a Conqueror. But what man in the world, with the exception of the Wise Man, would not consent to be a Hero?” (\textit{Hero} pg. 1). Two impressive accounts of heroism as an “immortality project” are Ernest Becker, \textit{The Denial of Death} and Otto Rank, \textit{The Myth of the Birth of the Hero}.\textsuperscript{20}
originators of modern political science, Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli. Two general considerations support this view. The first is drawn from the character of Rousseau’s life-project of criticizing the Enlightenment. For Rousseau “Enlightenment” means the popularization of science, and more specifically the thesis that the diffusion of scientific knowledge necessarily leads to progress. His lifelong opposition to this prejudice of the *philosophes* is a constant theme from his very first published *Discourse.* At first glance Rousseau’s critique of science seems to amount to a rejection of Hobbes and Machiavelli, but the reality is quite opposite: It is the *truth* of modern science that makes it so dangerous. Not science itself, but the popularization of science is what Rousseau fears. This point can be validated by a second consideration drawn from our discussion of the heroic legislator. The legislator must be kept at arm’s length from the constituted republic because he is the very personification of the science of politics. And since Rousseau thinks of the community as a nation or *patria* (that is, a closed or particular association), the diffusion of strictly scientific knowledge can only be negative in its effect on the public. Science will either be too abstract for the common people to understand, or will lead to a widespread skepticism that undermines the dogmas of the civil religion. For the civil religion expresses the maxims of politics in such a way that the people can understand and believe them. Common men are not naturally disposed to doubt the civil religion. The systematic doubt introduced by science, therefore, can only lead to a malignant confusion that will vitiate citizenship, leading not to progress but decline.

21 “[Rousseau maintained the thesis] that there is a fundamental disproportion between the requirements of society and those of philosophy or science. It is opposed to the thesis of the Enlightenment...[that] the diffusion of philosophic or scientific knowledge is unqualifiedly salutary to society.” Leo Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau,” in *Hobbes and Rousseau* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972) p. 287.
As Leo Strauss observes,23 “Rousseau who warns the common men of the dangers of science is so far from considering himself a common man that he boldly compares himself to Prometheus who brings the light of science, or the love of science, to the few for whom alone it is destined.” Evidence abounds to suggest that Rousseau accepts modern science on principle and that his particular objection to science is that of a political philosopher who is concerned with the effects of philosophy or science on politics as well as the reciprocal effect of popularization on philosophy or science itself. Accordingly, one way to understand Rousseau’s revival of ancient republicanism is as an attempt to protect modern science from society, and vice-versa. If this is true then it makes sense to look for the foundation of Rousseau’s view of heroism in the philosophy of Machiavelli and Hobbes.

The Modern Origins

The “Question of Machiavelli,” as Isaiah Berlin phrased it, has bedeviled political philosophers since the sixteenth century. Whether it will ever be resolved is a mystery, so the best way to get at the impact of Machiavelli may be to state the question instead of attempting to answer it. The “question” concerns the so-called “Reason of State”: Is there a peculiar logic (and perhaps a morality) of political action that stands alone without reference to the logic of personal action, or of the government of a household, or of the Church, et cetera? Does political action have reference to an aim that transcends politics itself; or is politics a self-referential activity?

Classical political philosophy tends toward the first answer, modern political philosophy the second.

The ancients routinely analyzed the regime with reference to some teleological aim. Plato’s *Republic* is the most famous example of this approach, since it examines politics with an eye to its highest aim, which is the idea of Justice or Right (*dike*). But this is only one variant of the teleological approach. Since most existing governments are not “ideal,” Aristotle suggested at least four different approaches to the question of the “best” regime. First, we can consider the best regime “simply.” This is the method of the *Republic*. Second, we can ask which regime is the best “on a presupposition.” This approach presumably takes into account the character of the particular regime in question. Third, we can ask with regime is best under the circumstances given. Finally, we can inquire as to what regime is best “in most cases.” This combines the theoretical tendency of the *Republic* with a practical recognition of the limits of human nature. In every case, however, politics makes no sense as an end in itself; politics must be understood with reference to overriding aims, if it is to be understood properly. Machiavelli was the first philosopher to openly call this view into question. It is not clear whether politics has any end for Machiavelli, save the acquisition and maintenance of a territorial state; or whether the prince has any aim, save his own glory.

Michel Foucault has proposed that, regardless of the true interpretation of Machiavelli’s political philosophy, the politics of *The Prince*...from which people sought to distance themselves, was characterized by one principle: for Machiavelli, it was alleged, the prince stood in a relation of singularity and externality, and thus of transcendence, to his principality. The
prince acquires his principality by inheritance or conquest, but in any case he does not form part of it, he remains external to it.\textsuperscript{24}

As Foucault observes, the “synthetic” relation Machiavelli imposes between the prince and his principality denies implicitly that there is anything “fundamental, natural, essential [or] juridical” about the art of ruling.\textsuperscript{25} Properly speaking, Machiavelli’s science of politics is nothing but an instrumental science of how to acquire one’s estate, and secure it against rivals, both from without and from within. The result of Machiavelli’s political theory, which identifies this dismal wisdom exclusively with the person of the prince, is a scientific despotism. The \textit{Prince} is a textbook in absolutism, a primer in the science of management.

Obviously Rousseau’s praise of \textit{The Prince} as “a book for republicans” represents a minority view. For Rousseau, Machiavelli’s Prince is a satire on absolutism. If anything, Machiavelli himself is the prince who teaches his readers republicanism, albeit indirectly. Nevertheless, Rousseau’s legislator, like the prince, stands in a relation of singularity and externality with respect to the regime. In particular, Rousseau’s legislator figures the prince as the author of the regime.

Criticism of Machiavelli’s science of politics, from many perspectives, continues to be a main occupation of political thinkers. Foucault argues that one wellspring of criticism that emerged in the sixteenth century pits the “art of government” against the “science of politics.” The art-of-government tradition emphasizes the diverse, particular and differentiated aims of civil association(s) over and against the singular, transcendent, and self-referential “science” of


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
the *Prince*. Most importantly, this tradition rejects the impersonal relation between the
Machiavellian prince and his estate or territory, preferring a conception of government that
relates the prince to his people.

The art of government, as becomes apparent in this literature, is essentially concerned
with answering the question of how to introduce economy—that is to say, the correct way
of managing individuals, goods, and wealth within the family (which a good father is
expected to do in relation to his wife, children, and servants) and of making the family
fortunes prosper—how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father toward his
family into the management of the state.

Thus, the basic problem involved in the art-of-government tradition is “the introduction
of economy into political practice.” The difficulty of this problem may not be obvious today,
since the word “economy” by now has come to designate a field of social reality amenable to
scientific study. However this was not the case in the sixteenth century. At that time the
dominant (if not the only) meaning of “economy” was roughly the same as that attached to it by
the ancients: Economy was a practical art related to managing a household, not a theoretical
science pertaining to the wealth of nations. So the pedagogical approach of art-of-government
tradition was more Aristotelian than Machiavellian. Whereas Machiavelli takes a top-down
approach to the science of politics, regarding personal ethics as a roadblock to the prince’s ability
to use cruelty well; the art-of-government takes a bottom-up approach, regarding ethics (the
study of character) and economics (the art of household management) as the proper foundation
for the study of rulership. The only problem with this classical Aristotelian approach is that the
object of modern political science is not the *polis*, but the territorial state. The art-of-government

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26 Ibid., p. 234
tradition, therefore, introduces the new problem of political economy into modern political science.

Foucault points out that Rousseau thought this problem was still unresolved in the eighteenth century. In his article on “Political Economy” Rousseau says...roughly...that the word ‘economy’ can only be properly used to signify the wise government of the family for the common welfare of all...the problem, writes Rousseau, is how to introduce it, mutatis mutandis...into the general running of the state. To govern a state will mean, therefore...to set up an economy at the level of the entire state, which means exercising toward its inhabitants, and the wealth and behavior of each and all, a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and his goods.

From this perspective, it makes sense to interpret Rousseau’s political theory as an attempt to project the paternal and filial aspect of household “economy” onto the modern territorial state. It is obvious that this project requires converting the territorial state into a national and territorial state, a modern patria. “Nation” of course is derived from the Latin natio (to be born), and signifies just this filial aspect of Rousseau’s republican project. One way to see the difference between ancient and modern politics, then, is in terms of the relation between the cultural entity called “nation” and the territorial entity called “state.” This distinction would make little sense to the ancients: It was Machiavelli’s philosophy that generated the rigid concept of the state as a territorial parcel of property owned by the prince. Rousseau found a certain virtue in ancient political philosophy’s lack of a distinction between the territorial “sovereignty” of the prince and the economic welfare of the “people.” In this he remains true to form as an opponent of science and the Enlightenment. Yet his return to ancient republicanism is not a

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27 Ibid.
return to ancient philosophy; although he rejects the popularization of modern science Rousseau does not deny its rectitude. It is on the foundation of modern, not ancient political science that Rousseau sets up his republican edifice. For the sake of the people, he circumscribes the knowledge of science within the sphere of the legislator.

Already we can see a resemblance between the Machiavellian prince and Rousseau’s legislator, in so far as they both occupy a singular and external position of authority with respect to the state.\textsuperscript{28} One might even say that Rousseau considers the basic question of rulership to have been answered by Machiavelli’s science of politics. The only remaining aspects of political science, then, are ethics and economics. But Rousseau inherits more than Machiavelli’s science; in the form of social contract theory, he inherits a tradition of modern political philosophy that has already begun to deal with the problem of ethics in an attempt to coordinate the science of politics with the art of government. The classic example of this is the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

[The] art of government tried, so to speak, to reconcile itself with the theory of sovereignty by attempting to derive the ruling principles of an art of government from a renewed version of the theory of sovereignty…. Contract theory enables the founding contract, the mutual pledge of ruler and subjects, to function as a sort of theoretical matrix for deriving the general principles of an art of government. But although contract theory, with its reflection on the relationship between ruler and subjects, played a very important role in theories of public law, in practice, as is evidenced by the case of Thomas Hobbes (even though what Hobbes was aiming to discover was the ruling principles of an art of government), it remained at the stage of the formulation of general principles of public law.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} There is one crucial difference between the legislator and the prince: the former, it seems, cannot use coercion whereas the latter certainly can. This obviously is a crucial point of moral and political practice. However, the theoretical question at hand concerns authority, not power.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 240.
The great achievement of Hobbes’s philosophy is that it accounts for the relation between the Machiavellian executive and his subjects in terms of the hypothetical consent of free and equal individuals. The costs, or drawbacks of this approach are first, that by dealing in the abstract and theoretical terms of a science of sovereignty, it cannot really penetrate to the level of particulars that would make a true art of government possible; secondly, the only way that Hobbes can justify in terms of free and equal individuals the radical domestic inequality implied by sovereignty, is to make every individual a potential prince. In other words, Hobbes scientifically defends the Machiavellian executive by rendering the selfish egoism of the prince as a fundamental characteristic of human nature. Human beings are equal because we are all about as capable of murdering one another. The coercive state is legitimate because the only alternative is to live in fear of a violent death.

**Historical Heroism: Vico and Rousseau on Hobbes**

By substituting the *summum malum* for the *summum bonum* as the systematic reference-point of political theory, Hobbes completes the revolution in political science. Even Machiavellian politics can be rationalized in terms of a positive aim: civilizational greatness, or glory. But the Leviathan aims to put down “the proud.” Hobbes’s state has no positive aim, pagan or Christian; it aims only to avoid disaster by subduing the political passion. Why would Hobbes so degrade the aims of politics? One reason may be that he had seen enough of heroism.

As Vico well observed, historical heroism is rather more severe than romantic heroism. Historical heroism builds cities, protects allies, fights invaders from without and cultivates
strenuous virtues within. Vico held that eventually every nation experiences a “heroic age” in its history that exhibits these civilization-building characteristics. Heroic ages do not philosophize. Heroic ages by definition are not cultivated or reflective ages. In the classical world, heroism would be more closely associated with the Romans than the Greeks; in modern times, English society with its common-law institutions and latter-day conflict of the orders is representative of heroism for Vico. Heroism speaks a rough but unequivocal language. The historical hero “lives by agreements and laws, but interprets them so rigidly that he is often unjust; he defends his family and property, but with a religious zeal bordering on open violence. The hero is only midway between man and beast, and not, as the Greeks anachronistically believed, between men and the gods.”

If we take Vico’s characterization of the “heroic” and add that Hobbes witnessed an England destroyed by religious violence, it becomes quite plausible to interpret Hobbes’s political philosophy as a critique of heroism. But, understood in this way, the force of Hobbes’s critique would not lie in negating the “heroic” in man. It would rely rather on the exposure of man’s heroic nature as his vainglorious nature, and the suggestion that it should be systematically suppressed by the state.

Vico might have approved of Hobbes’s dire characterization of the heroic element in human nature. What Vico could not abide was Hobbes’s abstract method of explaining civilization by recourse a hypothetical agreement between self-interested individuals in an imaginary state of nature. Despite the atrocities of historical heroism, the heroic age represents a

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31 He would not agree with Hobbes’s radical materialism and egoism, which he puts down as “Epicurean.”
crucial step between mere nature and civilized society. Moreover, even in the heroic age human beings are naturally social, not individualistic. Hobbes’s expose of the heroic is too abstract. It fails to acknowledge the social value of heroism, not to speak of its historical importance.

Rousseau’s critique of Hobbes takes a slightly different direction. Rousseau maintains that Hobbes’s mistake was to read the self-serving rationalism of modern “civilized” man back into the state of nature. Rousseau claims to the contrary, that “the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal.” However, for Rousseau this critique of Hobbes does not entail a rejection of Hobbesian individualism. Rousseau agrees with Hobbes that man in the state of nature is asocial, and acts on the basic instinct of self-preservation. Only Rousseau distinguishes the innocent amor-de-soi of the noble savage from the vain and avaricious amor-propre of civilized man. Hobbes attributes to the savage a level of self-consciousness that would be impossible in a state of nature lacking language. For language is the basis of civilization as well as rational reflection. That pre-social man lacked language is sufficient proof for Rousseau that he was also innocent of pride:

For the same reason for which natural man lacks, pride, he also lacks understanding or reason and therewith freedom. Reason is coterminous with language, and language presupposes society: being presocial, natural man is prerational.... Rousseau draws a necessary conclusion from Hobbes’s premises which Hobbes had not drawn. To have reason means to have general ideas. But general ideas...are not the products of a natural unconscious process; they presuppose definitions; they owe their being to definition. Hence they presuppose language. Since language is not natural, reason is not natural.”


Rousseau’s critique of Hobbes is a critique of the whole social contract tradition. Contract thinkers had always premised their accounts of the genesis of society on the abstract definition of pre-social man as a “rational animal.” But if Rousseau is right (about Hobbes), then natural man cannot yet be a rational animal. Furthermore, if the “nation” is to be the object of the art of government, then political philosophy must understand societies in their particularity. But we have seen that Hobbes’s approach cannot go beyond the level of “general principles.” The question regarding the formation of society thus demands a “physical” or anthropological treatment, not a theoretical one. Rousseau moves in this direction when he conceives of the natural man as a dumb yet compassionate, self-interested animal. This dumb innocence is what Rousseau means by man’s natural “goodness.”

Strictly speaking, Hobbes argued that natural man was neither “good” nor “evil.” The core of Hobbes’s moral theory is that moral evaluations are only possible within the State, as products of conventional agreements backed up by the sovereign. “The desires, and other passions of men, are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions, that proceed from those passions, till they know a law that forbids them: which till laws be made they cannot know: nor can any law be made, till they have agreed upon the person that shall make it.”

Ultimately there is only one right of nature, namely self-preservation. From this right Hobbes derives the fundamental law of nature, “to seek peace, and follow it.” Peace or collective security, therefore, is the true end of politics. This nullifies the appeal of idealistic political goals. The

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34 *Leviathan*, I.13.11. The other two “principal causes of quarrel” are competition (over scarce goods) and diffidence.

very purpose of Hobbes’s politics is to foreclose on the classical appeal to ideal greatness; furthermore, since there is no good or bad in nature there can be no appeal to natural greatness.

The Critique of Heroism

It may help to elaborate on the theme of Hobbes’s philosophy as a critique of heroism. Hobbes did not critique heroism without purpose. He had a definite intent: to create a genuine political science, modeled on the natural sciences. Ancient political philosophy, whatever its merits, lacks the mathematical rigor of modern natural science. Hence, it cannot legitimately claim the status of a “science” in the modern sense. Due to its prodigious practical success in our day, modern natural science has a tendency to impose itself as the model of all science, indeed of all knowing. To be sure, any attempt at “constitutional engineering” presupposes a mathematical science of politics similar to modern physics, the science that makes mechanical engineering possible. Hobbes aspired to create just this type of science and he knew these requirements well. In short, they are the subordination of practice to theory and the pursuit of stability rather than grandeur.

Now, if the historical hero really is the unsophisticated and parochial creature that Vico describes, or even if he is something akin to the “noble savage,” one can see easily the tension that will arise between the hero and the sovereign state. Heroes tend to have intense and myopic visions of their own purposes, which if pursued with comparable intensity, could put the regime at risk.\(^{36}\) The pursuit of security demands this systematic repression of heroic ambition; and this

\(^{36}\) Cf. Rousseau’s remarks on Gustavus Adolphus II and Oliver Cromwell: “The Soldier from the North, with a narrow genius and unlimited courage, lost forever—right in the middle of his career—the glory he had acquired by marvels of valor and generosity; and public opinion is still unsure whether the murderer of Charles Stuart is not one of the greatest men who ever lived even with all his heinous crimes.” *Hero (Collected Writings* 4:7).
requires the theoretical reduction of heroism to mere ambition. Scientifically speaking, there are no great men; there are only more or less ambitious men.\footnote{Cf. Machiavelli’s theory of the “two humors.”} Hobbes’s scientific reduction of all human motivation to passion (or intelligent passion; “interest”) signals a great departure from ancient political philosophy. The ancients made an important character distinction between the “tyrant” and the “king.” The tyrant is motivated by passion alone, putting his calculating mind at its service; whereas the king subordinates his passions to reason, in pursuit of the good. (The pedagogy of the art-of-government tradition follows the ancients in this, requiring the potential king to learn ethics before politics.) However from the perspective of Hobbesian political science this distinction is functionally irrelevant.

For Hobbes, the single highest occasion for rivalry between men is the pursuit of glory. The objects of “glory” Hobbes defines as “trifles, a word, a smile, a different opinion, and [the liquidation of] any sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their profession or their name.”\footnote{\textit{Leviathan}, I.13.7.} Glory is a good reputation. In the final analysis, then, the aims of quarrelsome men must be self-serving. Hobbes here foreshadows Rousseau’s principle that “public felicity is far less the end of the Hero’s actions than it is a means to reach the one he sets for himself.”

This modern attitude of suspicion towards the great man pales in comparison to the admiration of heroic valor in antiquity. For that matter, it runs against the grain of Medieval Chivalry, as well as the Reformation ethic. In these traditions, suspicion towards the hero is tempered by the conviction that authentic heroes are selfless servants of a greater good. These
traditions are not naive. Rather, the Western tradition as a whole has always recognized the tension between the hero and the regime.\textsuperscript{39} For examples of this one has only to consider Achilles and Agamemnon; Antigone and Creon; Aeneas and Turnus; Lancelot and Arthur; monastic reformers and the Church; and Luther against it. So, tensions can always arise between constituted authority and a heroic cause. Sometimes this tension can be resolved, sometimes it cannot. Indeed, many of our traditional narratives leave us guessing as to which party—the hero or the regime—is “right.” This is one of the great themes of tragedy, at least.

The evasion of tragedy is a basic theme of political philosophy. The attempt to avoid tragedy is especially pronounced in modern political philosophy since its main objectives are security and stability. Philosophical idealism can be an invitation to tragedy; therefore the moderns reject it altogether. For, if the goal of politics is to secure a state from all possible ruin, then it is better to establish political philosophy on a theory of human nature as it “is,” not as it “ought to be.” Machiavelli sets this agenda when he proclaims that his philosophy is the first “to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.”\textsuperscript{40} Machiavelli’s “realistic” view of human nature translates into Hobbes’s empirical or “scientific” philosophy. Hobbes universalizes Machiavelli’s view of human nature to contrive law-like generalizations about politics that could

\textsuperscript{39} As some of the following examples show, the regime commonly is embodied by the king.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{The Prince}, ch. XV.
be applied in political practice as geometry is applied to architecture. With such a tool in hand, one might be able to construct an unshakeable political order. That order is the modern state.

Rousseau was one of the first thinkers to react powerfully against the cold and mechanical edifice of modern political philosophy. His revolutionary criticism of modern politics coalesces with his censure of the Enlightenment. In the interest of democracy, Rousseau contends that science and freedom are incompatible. This may sound strange since our modern ears are used to hearing “science” uttered in the same breath as “freedom” and “progress.” Yet Rousseau’s objection to enlightenment “is not unintelligible.” After all modern political science is a science of power conceived with one object in mind: namely, the concentration of power at the level of the state. “That enlightenment is a pillar of absolute monarchy was admitted by the two men who are still popularly considered the greatest defenders of despotism in modern times, Machiavelli and Hobbes.”

Machiavelli insists that the prince must concentrate all power in his person, uno solo. The arguments and examples he offers in this connection are too infamous to bear repeating. Suffice it to say that Machiavelli’s science of legislation relies on fear and not love, since the prince has control over the former but not the latter. Like other contract theorists, Hobbes sees political legitimacy as a product of the consent of individual subjects. But since Hobbes defines human nature in terms of rational self interest, and rational self interest in terms of the fear of murder, he concludes that anyone but a fool would consent to despotic government.

Rousseau views the formation of society as a transformation into human nature, an education (educere: “to draw out”) from our original savage state into “humanity” properly

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speaking. As the following quote indicates, the great legislator plays the central role in this process: he educates men to humanity by making them into citizens:

He must, in short, take away man’s own forces in order to give him forces that are foreign to him and that he cannot make use of without the help of others. The more these natural forces are dead and destroyed, and the acquired ones great and lasting, the more the institution as well is solid and perfect. So that if each Citizen is nothing, and can do nothing, except with all the others...it may be said that legislation has reached its highest possible point of perfection.

The great legislator, the science of politics and the civil religion, form a coherent complex of ideas that are meant to account for this educative function of politics. Rousseau learned about the educative function of politics from the ancients. But he believes in Hobbes’s theory of human nature. For this reason, Rousseau’s assigns a most extraordinary task to the legislator: The legislator must destroy men in their original independence, and build them up again as interdependent citizens. Rousseau acknowledges the difficulty of this task, in the subjunctive, when he remarks that “Gods would be needed to give laws to men.” Nevertheless, this superhuman office belongs to the human legislator. The task would be less difficult, perhaps, if most men understood the language of science. But they do not. It would also be easier if the legislator could use fear to coerce men into citizenship. But Rousseau knows that the only true way to civic virtue is through love. “And according to the definition I have given of virtue, love of the fatherland necessarily leads to it, since we willingly want what is wanted by those we love.”

The way to virtue would not seem to be science, then. Science attests to the necessity of

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42 Social Contract II.vii (Collected Writings 4:155).

43 i.e., civic virtue

44 Political Fragments, XI.3 (Collected Writings 4:59).
virtue, but it is too difficult for most men to understand and too remote to seize their hearts.\textsuperscript{45}

Nor can virtue come from coercion or fear:

This is what has always forced the fathers of nations to have recourse to the intervention of heaven and to honor the gods with their own wisdom; so that the peoples, subjected to the laws of the State as to those of nature, and recognizing the same power in the formation of man and of the city, might obey with freedom and bear with docility the yoke of public felicity.\textsuperscript{46}

This accounts for Rousseau’s revival of civil religion. A civil religion is the only institution capable of expressing political wisdom in a commonly accessible form, and of compelling men to obey it by persuasion instead of force. In addition, the civil religion has the added benefit of constraining the most obstreperous men by fear of divine punishment.

One of Rousseau’s grievances against Machiavelli and Hobbes is that the former substitutes the fear of the prince, and the latter the fear of bodily death, for the fear of God.\textsuperscript{47} Rousseau accepts the science of Machiavelli and Hobbes, but he also recognizes the limits of this science: It can account for sovereignty, but not society; the state, but not the nation. Rousseau could see that a modern “art of government” would have to append an account of civil society to that of the sovereign territorial state. Only then could it rule a genuine “People,” animated by the sort of providential care that makes good household management possible. In other words the state would have to become a fatherland, a democratic republic, for political economy to be

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. Cf. \textit{Fragments} XI.4: “Love of humanity gives many virtues...but it doesn’t inspire courage or firmness, etc., and does not give them the energy they receive from love of the fatherland, which raises them to heroism.”

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Social Contract} II.vii (\textit{Collected Writings} 4:156).

\textsuperscript{47} Cf. Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau,” p. 256. “To see this, one has to take into account the fact that Rousseau regards the Enlightenment, which he attacks in the \textit{Discourse}, as essentially hostile to religion and thus by considering the Enlightenment a pillar of despotism he implies that despotism, as distinguished from free government, can dispense with religion.”
possible. Rousseau’s politics follow from these concerns. He wanted to graft a nation onto the
state, make equal citizens out of unequal men, supply fear with love, and improve on collective
security with collective welfare. The abstract idea of the “general will,” and the heroic legislator,
compose Rousseau’s unique contributions to this project.

Conclusion: The Problem of the Hero

Strauss has remarked that “all the serious difficulties with which the understanding of
Rousseau’s teaching remains beset...can be traced to the fact that he tried to preserve the classical
idea of philosophy on the basis of modern science.”48 It seems no less true that our problem—the
democratization of heroism—can be traced to this fact. We have examined Rousseau’s
philosophy as an attempt to reproduce ancient republicanism on a modern basis. Specifically, we
took an interest in the role of the great legislator in Rousseau’s modern patria. We have already
glossed some of the difficulties with this relationship. It boils down to this: the modern view of
human nature makes it impossible for Rousseau to view the hero without suspicion. The gloomy
suggestion that, ultimately, the hero is an egotistical glory-seeker becomes downright perplexing
in light of Rousseau’s elevation of the legislator to an unparalleled position of moral authority.
One is tempted to say of the legislator what Rousseau said of Oliver Cromwell: “public opinion
is still unsure whether the murderer of Charles Stuart is not one of the greatest men who ever
lived even with all his heinous crimes.”49


49 Hero (Collected Writings 4:7).
But there is evidence that Rousseau was aware of the tension between the age-old figure of the hero and his modern legislator. We have proceeded on the assumption that there is a basic similarity between Rousseau’s notion of the legislator in the *Social Contract* and in his early discourse on the *Hero*. Yet Rousseau never submitted the *Hero*. In fact he regarded the piece as “very bad,” and when he finally published it, it carried this disclaimer: “It is easy to do less bad on the subject, but not to do well, for there is never a good answer to make to frivolous questions.”

Why does Rousseau regard the question of heroic virtue as “frivolous”? Is it because heroes are at least half-vicious, while the wise man is the true example of virtue? Or is it because there is no human virtue until the heroic-legislator brings an ethical world into being, as the account of the legislator would suggest? If the former is true, then why does Rousseau refer to Socrates as a hero? If the latter is true, then why is the question of heroic virtue “frivolous” rather than fundamental?

This forces us to face up to the difference between the hero and the legislator. It seems hard to deny that the legislator is “heroic.” And Kelly is right to observe that “the legislator is the most exceptional example of heroic virtue discussed in the *Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero*.” However, in the *Social Contract* Rousseau never identifies the legislator with the hero.

The importance of the legislator is obvious. If the question of heroic virtue is frivolous, that of the legislator clearly is not. The chapter on the great legislator stands apart so conspicuously from the egalitarian tendency of the *Social Contract* that it demands the reader’s

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50 Ibid. (*Collected Writings* 4:1).
attention. How can the unimportance of the hero be reconciled with the monumental importance Rousseau assigns to the legislator? Let us venture a preliminary answer: The reason is that the legislator is the only “hero” that Rousseau can admit into his political system. And even the legislator cannot be admitted into the constituted republic but must stay just outside its walls. Owing to his patrimony in the Machiavellian prince, Rousseau conceives of the workaday leader as a mere functionary, while his great legislator is the sole author of the moral personality of the state—uno solo. “The latter is the mechanic who invents the machine; the former is only the workman who puts it together and starts it running.”

The ambiguity between heroism and Machiavellian ambition is a product of Rousseau’s modern premises. Initially, modern political philosophy substitutes narrow self-interest for the moral good of the whole as its basic point of reference. This can be understood as a part of the broader modern enterprise of subjugating nature to human purposes: We have seen this at work in Machiavelli and Hobbes, both of whom reduce human nature to self-interest for the purpose of developing a “how-to” guide for the potential state-builder. But Rousseau’s return to a moral concept of human nature complicates this design. According to Rousseau, the natural man has a specific potentiality to “enter into” human being by virtue of becoming a citizen. In a sense, mere individuals can only become human beings in the context of a good society. Rousseau attempts to describe such a society in the Social Contract. His political science combines antique morality with a quasi-Hobbesian hypothetical contract, to baptize the “general will” as the infallible moral sovereign from which all legitimate obligations flow.

52 Social Contract II.vii (Collected Writings 4:155).
Rousseau’s democratic republicanism points up the demand of radical equality within the state. “For the will of the individual tends naturally to privilege, the general will to equality.”53 It is clear from the Social Contract that the only rightful “sovereign” is the comprehensive assembly of citizens, jointly enacting the general will. The “government,” for Rousseau, is just a neutral instrument whose object is to administer the general will without being partial to one interest or another. “Power can be transmitted [to the government], but not will.” Within the constituted republic, the sovereign People alone can “legislate.”

In Hobbes’s philosophy power and authority (“might” and “right) are equated in such a way as to engender radical inequality between the omnipotent Sovereign (who is not a party to the social contract) and his subjects. The despotic king is indeed the sine qua non of Hobbes’s political order. By contrast, Rousseau’s republicanism is democratic and egalitarian in spirit.54 The people must participate actively in the approval of laws, as their consent is the only true ground of obedience. “Once the Master appears upon the scene, the sovereign vanishes, and the body politic suffers destruction.”55 Rousseau criticizes Hobbes on this point; for, if Hobbes’s reckoning of human nature is correct, “then humanity is divided into herds of livestock, each with its ‘guardian’ who watches over his charges only that he may ultimately devour them.”56 Rousseau specifically denies Hobbes’s implication that the political relation is essentially

53 Social Contract II.i (Collected Writings 4:145).


55 Social Contract II.i (Collected Writings 4:145).

56 Ibid. Note that Rousseau’s critique acknowledges Hobbes’s attempt to adapt the theory of sovereignty to the art-of-government tradition (whose typical figure of the leader is the shepherd), while simultaneously pointing out the inadequacy of Hobbes’s solution.
amoral. “The reasoning of Caligula, of Hobbes, and of Grotius is fundamentally the same. Far earlier, Aristotle, too, had maintained that men are not by nature equal, but that some are born to be slaves, others to be masters.” \(^{57}\) This unequal power-relation between ruler and subjects must be made legitimate, Rousseau claims, for the sake of moral liberty.

Rousseau’s moral egalitarianism inspires a powerful reaction against all sorts of social inequality. But if Hobbes and Rousseau have a fundamental dispute here, as moderns they share an equally important agreement: namely, that the dichotomy between despotic kingship and the egalitarian “general will” exhausts the possibilities of modern politics. In short, an “aristocratic” political theory must be excluded on principle. This difficulty results from the fact that Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s common starting-point is radically individualistic. However deployed, the principle of radical individualism can support only two theoretical accounts of society. On the one hand, a despot can be given power and authority over all other individuals. This is Hobbes’s solution. On the other hand, one may take up Rousseau’s challenge and try to “‘find a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.’ This is the fundamental problem which is solved by the social contract.” \(^{58}\)

We have already touched on the relation of individualism and ambition. Machiavelli set the stage for this problem; and he also tried to solve it. In the *Prince*, Machiavelli suggests that the leader should form an alliance with the common people to put down the threat of other “great

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., I.vi (*Collected Writings 4*:138).
men” (read: ambitious men) who would seek to steal the prince’s property. Hobbes’s hypothetical contract is but a systematic elaboration of this story, told from the perspective of the “people.” A prudent people would be foolish reject the protection of any king, when the alternative is an anarchical rivalry between “great men” into which all people would likely become unwillingly embroiled. Machiavelli and Hobbes conduct their analyses on the level of power. Rousseau’s turn to virtue downplays the aspect of power, but the suspicion of great men remains alive, and even receives new importance in the context of his moral interpretation of individualism.

The phenomena of heroism, therefore, present a genuine problem for modern democratic theory. The reason for this is that modern political philosophy lacks a reliable standard to distinguish heroism from mere ambition. Rousseau’s failure to finally incorporate the hero into his philosophy—or to be more precise, the fact that Rousseau can only incorporate the hero in the form of the legislator (Carlyle will say “king”), who is in a relation of perfect identity with the character of the state—serves to indicate that this is a substantial problem. Rousseau’s democratic-republican project can tolerate heroism in one form only, viz. the artificial heroism of citizenship. The legislator is the only “natural” hero, and this is precisely why he must stay at arms-length from the regime. For once the secret of the hero is revealed, the regime faces danger.
Chapter Five: The Hero as King

To mend and remake all which we have, indeed, victorious Analysis. Honour to victorious Analysis; nevertheless, out of the Workshop and laboratory, what thing was victorious Analysis yet known to make? Detection of incoherences, mainly; destruction of the incoherent. From of old, Doubt was but half a magician; she evokes the spectres which she cannot quell. We shall have “endless vortices of froth-logic”; whereon first words, and then things, are whirled and swallowed. Remark, accordingly, as acknowledged grounds of Hope, at bottom mere precursors of Despair, this perpetual theorizing about Man, the Mind of Man, Philosophy of Government, Progress of the Species, and such like; the main thinking furniture of every head. Time, and so many Montesquieus, Mablys, spokesmen of Time, have discovered innumerable things: and now has not Jean-Jacques promulgated his new Evangel of a Contract Social, explaining the whole mystery of Government, and how it is contracted and bargained for,—to universal satisfaction?...

And now if a whole Nation fall into that? In such case, I answer, infallibly they will return out of it! For life is no cunningly-devised deception or self-deception: it is a great truth that thou art alive, that thou hast desires, necessities; neither can these subsist and satisfy themselves on delusions, but on fact. To fact, depend on it, we shall come back: to such a fact, blessed or cursed, as we have wisdom for. The lowest, least blessed fact one knows of, on which necessitious mortals have ever based themselves, seems to be the primitive one of Cannibalism: That I can devour Thee. What if such Primitive Fact were precisely the one we had (with our improved methods) to revert to, and begin anew from!


The Legacy of Carlyle

It is fitting to begin this discussion of Carlyle by observing how, knowingly or unknowingly, the past lives on in the present. Carlyle’s work itself is a fragment of our past whose voice still reverberates in the English-speaking mind, although to popular consciousness the man has been nearly forgotten. Direct contact with Carlyle’s work now is the province of a handful of scholars. And yet Carlyle’s ideas unwittingly furnish the mind of most literate people. One can get a sense of Carlyle’s legacy by reflecting on the awesome popularity of his neologisms: It was Carlyle who first described capitalism as the replacement of traditional social bonds with an impersonal “nexus of cash-payment”; he also saddled political economy with the appellation “dismal science.” More significantly, Carlyle was the first to employ the word “environment” in its
modern sense, as the totality of circumstances in which a being develops. It is safe to say that most people who employ such phrases and concepts today have at best a dim awareness of their extraction.

What survives of “Carlylese” today not only attests to Carlyle’s lasting impression on English thought and language, it also bespeaks the Sage of Chelsea’s Janus-faced legacy. The fate of Carlyle as an historical figure is quite opposite of that of Carlyle’s idioms. For example, our short list of Carlylisms suggests that Carlyle’s social gospel has left its stamp on the left, or at least on leftist rhetoric. But Carlyle is hardly a leftist; indeed, many chide him as a reactionary. In his eulogy of Carlyle, Emerson relates this curious phenomenon of Carlyle’s appeal to the left, which apparently had taken root during Carlyle’s lifetime:

Young men, especially those holding liberal opinions, press to see him…. He treats them with contempt; they profess freedom and he stands for slavery; they praise republics and he likes the Russian Czar...they praise moral suasion, he goes for murder, money, capital punishment and other pretty abominations of English law…. They go for free institutions, for letting things alone and only giving opportunity and motive to every man; he for a stringent government, that shows people what they must do, and makes them do it.

Emerson’s aim here is not to show that Carlyle is a “conservative,” but that Carlyle intentionally defies such categories, admiring independence of mind above all else. “[Carlyle] throws himself readily on the other side. If you urge free trade, he remembers that every laborer is a monopolist.” The purpose of Emerson’s caricature of Carlyle-the-reactionary is not, therefore, to associate the man with radical conservatism but to remind us of Carlyle’s radical individualism. “He never feared the face of man,” and this fearlessness was the ground of Carlyle’s prophetic authority. Upon this foundation Carlyle rebuked partisans of every stripe, aspiring himself to be a partisan of no cause, save the facts. “It is not so much that Carlyle cares for this or that dogma, as that he likes genuineness (the source of all strength) in his
companions.”¹ As we shall see, Carlyle considered genuineness, or sincerity, to be the *sine qua non* of a clear moral vision.

Nevertheless, Carlyle’s moral vision is obscure to our twenty-first century eyes. No one doubts that Carlyle preached a certain type of morality, but its content is as protean as its author. Perhaps only this is certain: Carlyle’s preeminent practical concern is the re-establishment of authority. The revolutionary era, he thought, affirmed that the old well-springs of authority (namely tradition/the *ancien régime* and revelation/the Church) had become dry, and it confirmed the victory of science and democracy. Carlyle despaired that the ideology of laissez-faire, which accompanied the triumph of science and democracy, would undermine all moral claims to authority. This despair was deep-felt in Carlyle, because he saw moral leadership as the one needful thing for a people. Without this the triumph of democracy is only a chimera of freedom. “The true liberty for a man,” he wrote, consists “in his finding out, or being forced to find out the right path, and to walk thereon. To learn, or to be taught, what work he actually was able for...to set about doing of the same! That is his true blessedness...if liberty be not that, I for one have small care about liberty.”²

Carlyle’s vision seemed obscure to many of his contemporaries, even to his disciples. Matthew Arnold called him a “moral desperado.” For better or worse Carlyle’s was always a voice crying in the desert, but his voice is so compelling that he lured a large following “into the desert,” where he is said to have left them.³ Carlyle rejected dogmatism, but he believed in the authority of wisdom. He taught that the substance of wisdom is not dogmatic but dynamic, even visionary. He believed in insight. For Carlyle, there was no higher goal of man or civilization

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² *Past and Present*, III.xiii (Works 10:212).

than to be ruled by wise and capable leaders. By nature such leaders always keep the good of the community in sight. Carlyle seemed to regard all forms of government as mere methods for selecting these “capable men.” His own “theory of government” can be reduced to the axiom that good leadership is the one needful thing for a people.

Carlyle insisted on the distinction between *salus populi*—the healthiness of the people—for which all sincere leaders must provide, and *vox populi*—the voice of the people, or public opinion—which often speaks mistakenly. On account of his strict attentiveness to this distinction, Carlyle systematically mistrusts the ballot-box. Indeed, Carlyle sometimes appears to have violated his own anti-dogmatic principles, treating the latent antagonism between *salus populi* and *vox populi* as if it was a rigid truth. This disposition has greatly obscured Carlyle’s legacy as a political writer since, as it turns out, he was chronicling the early days of democracy’s still-unfinished advance through the world. Carlyle therefore appears to be on the wrong side of history, making him easy to pass over as a political thinker. At first sight Carlyle seems totally blind to the possibilities of democracy. But a closer look will show that there is a democratic side to Carlyle’s thought that shines through, for example, in his peculiar sort of individualism. Like Emerson and Nietzsche following him, Carlyle has a genuine interest in the good of the whole, but fears that under the rule of democratic procedure the voice of genuine leadership will be drowned out by the more clamorous *vox populi*. This would only produce the appearance of progress since, as Carlyle believes, the “people” are incapable of sustaining the coherent vision required for leadership—the whole is given a genuine voice by way of its natural leaders, not any electorate. To the extent that democratic peoples facilitate the emergence of natural leaders, Carlyle approves of democracy; to the extent that they accede to antiheroic, egoistic individualism, Carlyle abhors democracy. As an engaged political writer, then, Carlyle has two broad aims. The first is to offer a moral interpretation of democracy, to oppose the procedural interpretation. Naturally, such an interpretation addresses the individual, rather than
public opinion. Carlyle’s second aim is to teach the public to seek heroic leaders who inspire them to action, not to settle for those who countenance inaction and complacency. These two aims converge in the protean figure of the Carlylean hero, which allows Carlyle simultaneously to elevate the “great men” of history over other, “average” men, and to address each average individual as a hero, to awaken their potential for public action.

So as it turns out, Carlyle may be of more than antiquarian interest as a political thinker. There is even evidence that he thought of himself this way. Though an author and historian by profession (he had given up theology and mathematics before becoming an author), by mid-life, Carlyle would confess that he had a “political” nature. Yet, his politics never quite conformed to the extant schools of thought; nor did he develop his own political vision, except perhaps the sibylline vision of a “world of heroes” that we consider here. Carlyle’s political legacy confirms the pattern of two-sidedness. On the one hand, Carlyle put the “Condition of England Question” atop the Victorian agenda, rebuked the rich to care for the poor and conceded that, for all its shortcomings, “the Gospel according to Jean-Jacques” was “a further step in the business” of liquidating a reckless aristocracy. Yet this same Carlyle heaped scorn upon the ballot-box, opposed the emancipation of black slaves (in a particularly nauseating dialect), and captained the defense of Governor Eyre. For all his evangelizing on behalf of “the People,” Carlyle referred to the run of Englishmen as “twenty-five millions, mostly fools.” Any interpretation of Carlyle’s politics must acknowledge these paradoxes as insurmountable obstacles, perhaps intentional, to singling out any ideological dogma in his work.

Like his forerunner, Edmund Burke, Thomas Carlyle’s position as an authority on history and politics derives from his popularity as an interpreter of the French Revolution. When, in 1837, Carlyle first published his epic history, the French Revolution was the most important political event in recent memory. Having transpired less than half a century before, its reverberations were still far from complete. In England, they would issue in the Chartist
uprisings that racked the country throughout the nineteenth century; Europe would face the Colonial and Continental uprisings of the middle nineteenth-century (esp. 1848); and the entire world witnessed countless national struggles for self-determination that continued into the twentieth century and show no sign of ceasing today. Arguably, the Revolution of 1789 remains the pivotal event in modern political history. We can find in the French case the general pattern of all subsequent (phyrric) “victories of Analysis,” including Communism. In any case, it would be hard to deny in earnest that the legacy of the French Revolution still affects modern politics. As such, is remains a living issue for us today.

As we have mentioned, Carlyle resembles Burke as an author. Like Burke, Carlyle essays both sides of the boundary between aesthetics and politics; poetry and religion; theology and economy; contemplation and action. But Carlyle is not as staunch a traditionalist as Burke (or Coleridge, his other predecessor). While Carlyle respects tradition, he epitomizes his generation by turning to “history,” to account for both continuity and change within traditions. Earlier thinkers advocated the return to tradition as a way to negate history. It had “appeared to Carlyle’s predecessors [Burke and Coleridge] that England and Europe had abandoned theocracy in favor of political economy, and they developed the analysis of political economy that represented this historical change not merely as a shift of authority but as the destruction of it.” On the basis of this view Burke put forth his preeminent criticism of the French Revolution: that it was merely an orgy of murderous desire played out under the banner of empty formalisms, its ideals being too airy, abstract, and remote to experience to guide real human conduct.

On [the revolutionary] scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman, a woman is but an animal—and an animal not of the highest order…. Regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity. The murder of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide—and if the people are by any chance or in any way gainers by it,

a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny.\footnote{Burke, \textit{Selected Writings and Speeches} ed. Peter J. Stanlis (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1963) pp. 551-552.}

To Burke, the French Revolution confirms that the replacement of theology with the ledger-book authority of political economy spawns a cold, inhuman existence. Carlyle agrees, in large measure, but he can see no way out but forward. His historical perspective aims to appropriate the Revolution rather than avoiding it. Accordingly, he cannot put forth a direct return to tradition but has to reinterpret tradition imaginatively, to fit the new, democratic circumstances.

Throughout, Carlyle shares the desire of Burke and Coleridge to replace a calculating political economy with a faithful moral order. What is more, he regards this desire as proper, and common to all honest human beings. As he puts it, all men desire some form of theocracy. In “the Hero as Priest” he remarks of the theocracy of John Knox’s “devout imagination”:

If we think his scheme of truth was too narrow, was not true, we may rejoice that he could not realise it; that it remained after two centuries of effort, unrealisable, and is a ‘devout imagination’ still. But how shall we blame him for struggling to realise it? Theocracy, Government of God, is precisely the thing to be struggled for! All Prophets, zealous Priests, are there for that purpose…. Nay, is it not what all zealous men, whether called Priests, Prophets, or whatsoever else called, do essentially wish, and must wish? That right and truth, or God’s Law, reign supreme among men.\footnote{Carlyle, \textit{On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History} (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966) p. 152.}

This is the sense in which Carlyle offers theology as a corrective to political economy. But at the heart of historical theology, for Carlyle, is not only tradition but a “devout imagination” that takes particular historic and biographical forms. Again, where Burke or Coleridge would return to tradition, Carlyle turns to history. This is confirmed by Carlyle’s view of religious belief. Carlyle construes belief in historical terms, as the variegated result of a natural human desire to reach out after what is truly good. For Carlyle what is truly good is the moral imagination, the
“devout imagination.” This moral drive is, so to speak, the empirical foundation of Carlyle’s historical alternative to the dismal science.\(^7\) Now and then, Carlyle expresses himself in unmistakable language, as in this passage from the *Latter Day Pamphlets*:

Not because Heaven existed, did men know Good from Evil; the “because,” I invite you to consider, lay quite the other way. It was *because* men, having hearts as well as stomachs, felt there, and knew through all their being, the difference between Good and Evil, that Heaven and Hell first came to exist. That is the sequence.\(^8\)

This “bottom-up” view of religion allows Carlyle to champion the needs of the soul over the needs of the stomach, while simultaneously rejecting traditionalism. “While [Carlyle] extended Burke’s and Coleridge’s critique of political economy, he did not share their belief that the religious and political institutions of the past could serve the present.”\(^9\) Carlyle’s disdain for the “game-preserving” Aristocracy, equal to his scorn for democracy, drips from all his social tracts. His religious views are more ambiguous perhaps, but whatever they are they are not orthodox:

As a dissenter and a Scotsman from the artisan class, he regarded the Church of England and the aristocracy as corrupt and hopelessly outmoded…. [He] also shared the Enlightenment assumptions underlying the theory of the social contract. Whereas Burke and Coleridge sought a return from revolution to authority, Carlyle sought a return to authority through revolution.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) In his “Introduction” to *On Heroes*, Archibald MacMechan observes that despite the “ethical appeal of Heroes,” which is “felt throughout” the lectures, “there is surprisingly little of direct exhortation to ‘hero-worship.’” MacMechan suggests that “the exhortation is unspoken, implicit” (Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. Archibald MacMechan [Boston: Athenaeum, 1901]). But one can conclude just as easily that, for Carlyle, “exhortation” is beside the point: Carlyle’s aim is not to exhort the reader so much as to encourage reflection.

\(^8\) *Latter-Day Pamphlets* VIII (Works 20:334)

\(^9\) Vanden Bossche, p. 9.

\(^10\) Ibid., p. 11. Vanden Bossche perceives another significant contrast between Burke’s and Carlyle’s views: “For Burke, the English Revolution was the Glorious Revolution of 1688... Carlyle, on the other hand, sympathizes with the Puritans and the revolution of 1640...”
Carlyle: Ancient and Modern

This estimation of Carlyle’s politics is correct, but only in part. The critic quoted above leaves us with a puzzle: How is it possible for the same Carlyle who sees in “theories of government” false hopes, “at bottom mere precursors of Despair,” nevertheless share “the Enlightenment assumptions underlying the theory of the social contract”?

Revolution is but one rope of Carlyle’s Gordian knot, the other rope, tradition, remains bound up in every particular revolution. Unlike later thinkers, Carlyle never conceives of revolution in a pure or abstract sense. Yet this critic senses an important difference between Carlyle’s views and those of his predecessors; a difference that appears in spades in Carlyle’s reading of the French Revolution. For example, Burke interprets the Revolution as a derailment from the collective wisdom embodied in tradition, a negation of the past. Alternatively, Carlyle sees it as an intelligible (if tragic, and even avoidable) episode in a still-unfolding European history. Where Burke disowns the French Revolution, Carlyle appropriates it. He names it, specifically, “the third and final act of Protestantism; the explosive and confused return of mankind to Reality and Fact, now that they were perishing of Semblance and Sham.”

As “Contract Social” attests, the reality and fact to which Carlyle believes the revolution has returned mankind is not the “rights of man and citizen,” but the primitive fact of cannibalism. Carlyle concedes to the democratic movement the world-historical significance it claims for itself. He finds in it an overwhelmingly negative significance, however, despite that the revolutionaries aspired to positive or progressive aims. From the perspective of a political theorist, Carlyle’s evocation of cannibalism in The French Revolution seems like a poetic expression of the “war of all against all” laid bare by Hobbes at the origin of modern political science.

11 On Heroes, p. 237.
“The hero of *The French Revolution*—if it has a hero other than its author—is the demonic Paris mob.”\(^{12}\) It is plain that the hero-as-Paris-mob resembles far less the ideal heroes of fiction than the coarse historical heroes described in our discussion of Vico in the last chapter. From this historical perspective, the French Revolution appears as the final gasp of a heroic age and the beginning of a new, people’s era, in which

the door to honors...is wide open by law to the greedy multitude which is in command, [and] in times of peace nothing remains but to struggle for power, not by law but by arms, and use the power to make laws with a view to the increase of wealth.

This is how Vico describes the transition from heroic to popular ages, which he sees as part of the temporal destiny of all nations. In his *New Science*, Vico illustrates this point with the example of Rome: “Such were the agrarian laws of the Gracchi at Rome. The result is civil wars at home and unjust wars abroad at the same time.” From this he concludes that the age of “Roman heroism is confirmed by contrast for the entire period before the Gracchi.”\(^{13}\)

To return to our main concern, the Vichian perspective sheds light on Carlyle’s perplexing attitude, of acceptance and rejection, toward democracy. Carlyle’s account of the French Revolution describes a comparable historical transition, “confirming by contrast” that the heroic age of Aristocracy, Chivalry, King and Church had ended in Europe, and the age of popular Democracy had begun. This explains how Carlyle can welcome democracy as a fact, while remaining distant from it as an ideal. Carlyle is modern enough to acknowledge the vicissitudes of history, but not enough to be resigned to them. His ancient side is reflected in the woe he expresses over the passing of the aristocratic ideal, along with his hope that a new order might someday emerge to replace the old.


\(^{13}\) *New Science*, I.xciii, p. 87.
Let us examine more closely Carlyle’s view of democracy. Despite his incessant rants against democratic politics, Carlyle never suggested that democracy could be undone. In fact, he saw democracy as inexorable in history: “It may be admitted that Democracy, in all meanings of the word, is in full career; irresistible by any...Son of Adam, as times go. ‘Liberty’ is a thing men are determined to have.”\(^{14}\)

Carlyle suggests that Democracy is produced by a yearning for liberty in human nature. Although he disagrees with the popular definition of “liberty,” Carlyle never denies the might of this natural yearning. As a result, he does not entirely dismiss the legitimacy of democratic claims. Carlyle’s reprobation of democracy is no mere reactionary’s ranting. On the contrary, at his best Carlyle is masterful interrogator of the meaning of liberty who offers a sympathetic, if acerbic critique of democracy’s self-understanding. One can say that Carlyle, like Rousseau, is a democratic moralist. Like Rousseau, Carlyle aspires to replace the laissez-faire version of liberty with a more sociable sense of liberty. However, Carlyle rejects Rousseau’s solution, with its collectivist merger of liberty and equality in the “general will.” If Rousseau’s political morality is _ultra_-democratic, conceiving of liberty as the maximum of equality, Carlyle’s morality is _trans_-democratic, conceiving of liberty in terms of individually consenting leaders and followers; and emphasizing the individual will to act, as well as to obey. If Rousseau’s vision of liberty is summed up by the general will, Carlyle’s alternative is a “World of Heroes.” But Carlyle’s and Rousseau’s differing views are products of the same project. Both thinkers aim to ennoble democracy by raising an edifice of moral idealism upon modern foundations of political realism.

Carlyle’s moral interpretation of democracy can be further illuminated by his view of history. Carlyle characterizes history as a “divine Book of Revelations, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch.”\(^{15}\) This meaning is not always obvious, however, but needs to

\(^{14}\) Carlyle, _Past and Present_ III.xiii (Works 10:217).

\(^{15}\) Quoted by J. Rosenberg, p. 9
be divined. One might say that history, like other revelations, stands in need of interpretation. Moreover, history is not a linear story of progress. From the start Carlyle insists on certain principles of historical interpretation that, interestingly, resemble our present-day view of history more than they conform to the views of his peers. In “On History,” for example, Carlyle points out a difference between history as-it-occurs and history as-it-is-told that has become a key insight to many students of history today: “Narrative is linear, Action is solid. Alas for our ‘chains’ or chainlets, of ‘causes and effects,’ which we so assiduously track through certain handbreadths of years and square miles, when the whole is a broad, deep Immensity, and each atom is ‘chained’ and complected with all!”\(^{16}\)

This differentiation between the forms of history and of narrative exhorts the historian always to bear in mind the irreducible complexity of his subject, but also to abide by an idea of the whole, however imperfect his expression of it is bound to be. Carlyle realizes that to grasp the whole actually exceeds the capacity of finite human intelligence. In fact, he suggests that we are limited in two directions. On the one hand, Carlyle agrees with the ancients that the proper orientation towards the human things lay in the direction toward transcendent meaning. In this sense, the elusive “whole” stands for an idea that transcends the sum of its parts. Carlyle also agrees with the ancients in regarding philosophy as the pursuit of this whole under the condition of Socratic doubt, which is the recognition that actual knowledge of the whole must be deferred into eternity.

The ancients did not regard immanent history as an ordered whole in the way modern science intends it. History for them is the very opposite of science or philosophy. Explaining the difference between the poet and the historian, Aristotle remarks “that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more

philosophic and of graver import than history,” Aristotle concludes, “since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.”

On the other hand, Carlyle sympathizes with the moderns in acknowledging another, immanent whole, in the sum of causal relations between material objects. Modern science is how we know this “descendental” whole. According to many of Carlyle’s contemporaries (and many today), science improves on philosophy by offering to man the chance for absolute knowledge in the form of causal laws governing the relations between things. While Carlyle never denies in principle the existence of the immanently ordered whole intended by modern science, he steadfastly doubts our ability to know it. Carlyle follows Thomas Reid here, constraining science according to the principle of “nescience.” Nescience stipulates that the inherent weakness of human judgment warps the interpretation of sensory evidence, upon which science is based.

Significantly, nescience does not imply that the senses are fallible in themselves, nor does it deny the “objectivity” of sensory data. It only puts science in its epistemological place, within the total compass of human nature. “Science is a drop; nescience is the ocean in which that drop is whelmed.”

Carlyle’s conditioned consent to modern science allows him to cast history in a different light; namely, as “philosophy teaching by experience.” Carlyle grants that the chronicle of separate events is one type of history, but besides this he places another type of history, one that aims to express a universal meaning. Despite the limitations just surveyed, Carlyle maintains that the historian who strives for this comprehensive expression is superior to one who settles for a dry account of the facts. The one is superior to the other as an artist is to an artisan. “For [in

\[Poetics\ 1451b4ff.\]

\[For a more comprehensive account of the affinities between Carlyle and the Scottish Common-Sense school of which Reid is a founder, see Ralph Jessop, \textit{Carlyle and Scottish Thought} (New York: St. Martins Press, 1997). On nescience, see esp. Jessop pp. 96-100.\]

\[Jessop, p. 101.\]
history], as in all other provinces, there are Artists and Artisans; men who labour mechanically in a department, without eye for the Whole, not feeling that there is a Whole; and men who inform and ennoble the humblest department with an Idea of the Whole, and habitually know that only in the Whole is the Partial to be truly discerned.”

By holding up another sort of historian—the one unable to avert his gaze from the Whole—as an “Artist,” Carlyle suggests that in some sense history ought to be made poetic to convey a human meaning. Carlyle does not imply that the historian-as-artist actually imposes significance on history (in the sense of creating it ex nihilo), but rather affirms that the historian-artist is constrained by the characteristic limits of human nature; that he, too, dwells “between two eternities, and warring against Oblivion...would fain unite himself in clear conscious relation, as in dim unconscious relation he is already united, with the whole Future, and the whole Past.”

There is a reflection of truth in history, to be sure. “History is a real Prophetic Manuscript”; but for all its surfeit of meaning, history “can be fully interpreted by no man.” In truth the historian-artist merely attempts to render the singular aspect of history into some meaningful relation to the Whole, having more or less success. Accordingly, the sincere historian-artist will own that his comprehension of the Whole, though of consequence, is dim and incomplete. Artistic or speculative history is really an essay in temporal possibility (as Aristotle said of poetry, it describes “a kind of thing that might be”), as opposed to a prosaic chronicle of past events, on the one hand; or a reckoning of deterministic fate, on the other. Carlyle steers between these two excesses, realizing that artisan-history, although certain, is humanly

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20 Ibid, p.61.

21 This is what Carlyle himself tries to do in The French Revolution, which is often described as an epic in prose.


23 Ibid, p. 61.
meaningless; while scientific or deterministic history promises a plenitude of meaning that it cannot deliver. Carlyle’s unique blend of ancient and modern perspectives explains why, although he obviously pursued speculative history, there is little evidence that he took the deterministic philosophy of history seriously. In the main, speculative philosophy of history and determinism go hand in hand. But Carlyle only complains of historical determinism as artisan-history taken to a speculative excess. The charge that historical determinism is prosaic history in the extreme comes out, for example, in Carlyle’s indictment of “cause-and-effect speculators, with whom no wonder would remain wonderful, but all things in Heaven and Earth must be computed and ‘accounted for’; and even the Unknown, the infinite in man’s Life, had under the words enthusiasm, superstition, spirit of the age and so forth, obtained, as it were, an algebraical symbol and given value.” In 1830, Carlyle expressed his belief that this type of history was “verging towards extinction.”24 Of course he turned out to be wrong on this point, but this shows that he understands his own project as something beyond the pale of nineteenth-century philosophy of history, something meant to replace it.

The Meaning of Democracy

Our next step is to assess Carlyle’s historical interpretation of democracy. According to Carlyle democracy is not an historical tabula rasa. Democratic culture does not entail a complete, conscious renunciation of tradition. Nor is democracy a historically contingent development, although it is dependent upon earlier events. Democracy can and must be understood as part of a larger history, which is meaningful as a whole. Broadly, this view of democracy is not uncommon. But mainstream nineteenth-century philosophy of history takes democracy and science to be the final stage of man’s historical development. This still-popular view is mainly associated with Hegel and the so-called “end of history” thesis. As the term “trans-democratic”

24 Ibid., pp. 61-62.
implies, Carlyle spurns the “end of history” thesis. Instead of exalting democracy as the end of history (or dismissing it, as a derailment from tradition), Carlyle incorporates democracy into history as a sort of transition between the decaying ethical structures of the past, and some undreamed-of future moral order. Following the romantic tendency, Carlyle discredits the claim that democracy, science and enlightenment portend a future of unlimited progress for mankind by shaking off the superstitious chains of tradition. As we have seen, Carlyle interprets the enlightenment rather as the destructive march of “victorious Analysis,” a force unable in itself to build anything. He also sees a certain value, or at least inevitability, in the “superstitious.” Indeed, Carlyle the social prophet performs the prophetic function by exposing the idols of democracy (e.g. procedural reform, extension of suffrage) as mere forms, urging us to behold the substance of democracy, often to question whether it has substance at all.

Carlyle frequently styles democracy as the political body—the corpus of common beliefs and practices—grown-up around the soul of “victorious analysis.” To put it densely, democracy is the ideo-practical social structure attendant on a “logic-chopping,” unbelieving, social state. It is the precise opposite of hero-worship and the heroic. Consider the following radical view, which Carlyle vents through his famous alter ego, Diogenes Teufelsdrockh:

Democracy...means despair of finding any Heroes to govern you, and contented putting-up with the want of them,—alas, thou...seest well how close it is of kin to Atheism, and other sad Isms: he who discovers no God whatever, how shall he discover Heroes, the visible Temples of God? 

In his more respectable persona, “the editor,” Carlyle concedes only partial truth to this grim view of democracy as the substantive absence of belief. The editor observes that indeed, “‘the liberty of not being oppressed by your fellow man’ is...indispensable, [though] one of the

25 Literally: “God-begotten Devil’s-dung”
26 Ibid., p. 215.
most insignificant fractional parts of Human Liberty.”

Through the editor Carlyle acknowledges what is good about the progress of liberty through democracy. This dialectical give-and-take between Radical and Editor builds up towards Carlyle’s distinctive view of democracy as historical transition. Democracy is an intermediate moment when “The Toiling Millions of Mankind, in most vital need and passionate instinctive desire of Guidance, shall cast away False Guidance; and hope for an hour, that no-guidance will suffice them: but it can be for an hour only.”

The French Revolution, which Carlyle sees as the apotheosis of democracy, enacts through regicide the casting away of false guidance. But instead of delivering the salvation hoped for, it exposes humanity once more to the “lowest, least blessed fact one knows of...the primitive [fact] of Cannibalism.” This revelation is certainly of “descendental,” as opposed to transcendental, import. It is tragic to contemplate mankind reduced to this episode of modern cannibalism. Nevertheless, it is an historical reality and must not be lost for its pedagogic significance. Carlyle rehearses this point in his ‘Flame-Picture’ of the Reign of Terror. Recounting the story of a human tannery at Meudon, he remarks: “History looking back over Cannibalism...will perhaps find no terrestrial Cannibalism of a sort, on the whole, so detestable.” In twenty-first century hindsight, this remark makes Carlyle look like a naive optimist.

From Carlyle’s perspective, the utter depravity of revolutionary things was grounds for an unusual sort of optimism. Like many of his radical contemporaries, Carlyle interpreted the revolutionary period as the beginning of a new epoch in history. Unlike his contemporaries,

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27 Ibid., p. 218.

28 Ibid., p. 220.

29 French Revolution, II.v.7: “There was a Tannery of Human Skins; such of the Guillotined as seemed worth flaying: of which perfectly good wash-leather was made’; for breeches and other uses.” The factuality of this account is uncertain.
Carlyle found the substance of this new beginning not in the democratic movement itself, or its principles, but in its remarkable power of destruction. Democracy had not set up new tablets of law; but it soundly annihilated the old. On the level of ideas democracy is the apotheosis of skepticism, atheism, “victorious Analysis.” On the practical level, it signals the Old World’s final surrender of responsibility: the “leaving of all to ‘Cash’...quietly shutting up the God’s Temple, and gradually opening wide...the Mammon’s Temple, with ‘Laissez-faire, and Every man for himself.’”

Carlyle sensed that society had descended to rock-bottom. Hence, as conventional wisdom goes, the only direction to go is back up. Carlyle’s faith, therefore, does not rest in democracy itself, but what it might lead to. Democracy for Carlyle is a transitional regime—a barren soil, but a soil that, with the right kind of cultivation, might yet bear fruit.

The implication of Carlyle’s view is that, properly speaking, democracy is no society at all. At best democracy is a society of the shipwrecked; at worst, a tremulous agreement among cannibals. Although such an agreement just barely provides the foundation on which “necessitous mortals” may base their lives, it is surely the lowest conceivable state of things. It is a potential anarchy, in which the “rind of habit” that separates civilized man from the cannibal-savage is at its thinnest, and most transparent; when the thought becomes most thinkable that “man’s civilization [is] only a wrappage, through which the savage nature of him can still burst.”

Carlyle and Rousseau

Although both Carlyle and Rousseau envision mankind through the lenses of nature and history, rather than theology and tradition, they see contrary images. Rousseau’s imaginary history, laid out in the Discourses, reveals that the natural man is a “noble savage,” a selfish but benevolent

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30 Past and Present, III.xiii (Works 10:209). This passage highlights Carlyle’s habit of using France as a warning to England. This habit helps to account for Carlyle’s equation of laissez-faire and radical democracy.
individual who becomes corrupt only when private property and the luxuries of civilization force
him into competition with others. By contrast, Carlyle’s poetic interpretation of actual history
exposes something like the “savage nobility” of man. The decadence of the aristocracy proves
how well corruption can subsist under the appearance of nobility, while the barbarism of the
sansculottes proves equally the barbarity of those who would seize power in the new order.

From Carlyle’s perspective the French Revolution has its proper consummation not in the
Republic, but in Napoleon. It reveals not the virtue of negative liberty, but the iron necessity of
leadership. To Carlyle, who seems to approve of the political economy of laissez-faire, the
morality of laissez-faire is hostile to human nature. It was the morality of laissez-faire that
suborned the indolence of the aristocracy, institutionalized chaos and made revolution inevitable.
For all its disorderliness, even despite itself, the revolution prefigures the restitution of order
under Napoleon. “Thus too all human things, maddest French Sansculottisms, do and must work
towards Order... [Man’s] very life means that; Disorder is dissolution, death. No chaos but it
seeks a centre to revolve round. While man is man, some Cromwell or Napoleon is the necessary
finish of a Sansculottism.”31

Carlyle infers from this observation that the King—the “capable man” who can institute
order among men—is the original and summary form of the hero. Paradoxically, the emergence
of the heroic king from the ashes of rebellion recalls the primitive beginnings of heroism. With
the arrival of Cromwells and Napoleons “the old ages are brought back to us; the manner in
which Kings were made, and Kingship itself first took rise, [are] again exhibited.”32

Chris Vanden Bossche interprets Carlyle’s belief in the identity between hero and king as
a turning point in his search for a new form of authority. In all of his major writings Carlyle
displays a preoccupation with the problem of the rise and fall of authority. But the manner in

31 On Heroes, p. 204.
32 Ibid.
which he treats this theme varies throughout his career. It is said that the “early” Carlyle, of *Sartor Resartus*, the *French Revolution*, and *Chartism*, hoped to reestablish authority on a new, literary, foundation. During this part of his career, “Carlyle continued to seek a literary form through which he could envision and represent the recuperation of authority.”

However, Carlyle abandoned the hope of rehabilitating authority through literature near the end of his preparation of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. This manifests in his decision to conclude the lectures with a demonstration of the hero as “king,” rather than the hero as “man of letters,” as originally planned.

With *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Carlyle shifted the locus of authority from the realm of literature to the realm of politics, a shift manifested in a last-minute change in the order of the lectures. He initially planned to end the series with a lecture on Burns, but...he altered his plan and decided to conclude with a lecture on Cromwell and Napoleon (*CL*, 12:103, 115, 128). In addition to demonstrating the importance he would give to the hero as king, this change indicates that, as Carlyle himself admitted, the lectures were “not so much historic as didactic” (*CL* 12:94). We must read them not as a history of authority, but as a history of Carlyle’s own attempt to envision a new form of authority.

Vanden Bossche conforms to the habit of many interpreters of Carlyle, who downplay the importance of his post-*Heroes* writings on account of the alleged shift from literature to politics. Understandably, such interpreters are troubled by the appearance that from *Heroes* onward Carlyle the socially-conscious aesthete loses ground to Carlyle the political ideologue and panegyrist of nation-builders. In light of subsequent history, the “political” Carlyle seems

33 Vanden Bossche, p. 97

34 Ibid., pp. 97-98.

35 In addition to Vanden Bossche, see Hill Shine, *Carlyle’s Fusion of Poetry History and Religion by 1834* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1938). Philip Rosenberg’s *The Seventh Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974) makes a similar case, although Rosenberg embraces *Hero-Worship* as one of Carlyle’s relevant works, including all his writings before 1843.

36 e.g. *Cromwell, Frederick, Latter Day Pamphlets*
eerily to prefigure twentieth-century fascism. “Admired, even revered, by his contemporaries as a preacher of righteousness, Carlyle now emerges as a prophet with a sinister message.... His views on social and political problems, divested of their moral appeal by the march of time, are revealed to be those of a fascist in their essential implications.”

Instead of dismissing Carlyle altogether, or trying to reconcile the early work with his less palatable later work, these interpreters attempt to rescue Carlyle by partitioning him into two distinct phases, and letting the first eclipse the second. While this approach has obvious appeal, it poses several serious problems. The first is that Carlyle did not construe his own work in this way. It may be presumptuous of a scholar to impose a pattern of development on an author, which the author himself would not acknowledge. Secondly, while this tactic presupposes a psychological or biographical explanation for Carlyle’s turn to politics, it seems just as reasonable to interpret the shift from literature to politics as a reply to historical events, even to events in the history of ideas. Recall that, in the eighteen-thirties, not only Carlyle but most of his audience would have found the question of Napoleon’s and Cromwell’s heroism more pressing than that of Johnson, Burns or even Rousseau. On the level of ideas, let us also consider the possibility that some deeper historical connection exists between figures like Rousseau and Napoleon, that Rousseau in some way prefigures Napoleon. It seems clear that Carlyle saw such a connection, whether his interpreters do or not. If this is the case, then there is for Carlyle an intelligible coherence between the man of letters and the king, between the literary and the political, the demands of the voice and the regime of the text, and so on. In general, this is of a piece with Carlyle’s avowed belief that “at bottom the Great Man, as he comes from the hand of

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38 Cf. Vanden Bossche, cited above: “We must read [Heroes] not as a history of authority, but as a history of Carlyle’s own attempt to envision a new form of authority.”
Nature, is ever the same kind of thing...that only by the world’s reception of [Great Men], and the shapes they assume, are they so immeasurably diverse.”

In the remainder of this chapter we shall explore an alternative thesis, that Carlyle’s identification of the hero and the king is not the result of a decision he made while preparing *Heroes*, but a discovery about the immanent logic of modern democratic culture. In the last chapter we uncovered preliminary evidence for this argument: The identity between hero and king was revealed as a necessary, if problematic, implication of Rousseau’s modern republicanism. Our thesis here is that Carlyle, despite his outspoken criticism of Rousseau, basically offers a friendly amendment to Rousseau’s political vision. In other words, even though Carlyle finds Rousseau’s account of the hero-legislator tragically incomplete in the details, he is for the most part in agreement with the premises of Rousseau’s political philosophy. We have found support for this partial agreement already in the differences between Carlyle’s and Burke’s disposition towards the French Revolution. While Burke attributes no legitimacy to the Revolution, Carlyle at least finds a negative justification in that it exposed the intractable illegitimacy of the old order. Of course, Carlyle regards this as a meager foundation on which to rebuild society. Yet he accepts it as a starting point, since he is convinced that the only other alternative, the attempt to resurrect a dead society, is worse. Carlyle sees no escape from history. But, for Carlyle, history will not consummate itself in skepticism or naive historicism. Rather, history will proceed beyond intellectual doubt and political revolt, towards a new and more sure moral order, that Carlyle prefigures as a “world of heroes.”

Carlyle bases his prognosis on a fundamental reflection on the importance of what he calls hero-worship. In hero-worship, Carlyle sees the one “everlasting hope...for the management of the world,” that will remain “[should] all traditions arrangements, creeds, societies that men ever instituted [sink] away”39 It cannot be emphasized too much that Carlyle does not endorse

the worship of heroic personalities. Rather, he hopes that, by encouraging readers to reflect on
the phenomena of heroism they might come alive to the reality of the devout imagination.
Carlyle’s re-discovery of hero worship as “the tap-root of all religion” is meant as a first step
toward rehabilitating belief on a new and true foundation. He consistently holds “belief,” rather
than doubt, disbelief or skepticism, to be the *sine qua non* of a healthy soul, and also of a healthy
society. But Carlyle is one of the first thinkers to confront an unequivocally modern world,
whose skeptical underpinnings confront the intellect with the quintessential challenge of modern
political thought, namely, how to rescue a common moral foundation without recourse to
“foundationalism.” The hero-theory represents Carlyle’s attempt to resolve this peculiar
dilemma.

Carlyle and Rousseau concur in diagnosing skepticism as the malady of modern society.
Both thinkers are particularly concerned about the negative social consequences that might
ensue—had already resulted, perhaps—from the diffusion of the skepticism characteristic of
modern philosophy and science to every level of society. Recall that Rousseau’s social project is
to neutralize the corrosive tendencies of enlightenment rationalism. Earlier we saw that the two
major components of this side of Rousseau’s political philosophy are the great legislator and the
civil religion. Like Rousseau, Carlyle regards religious belief as the organ of moral homonoia.
However, while Rousseau anchors belief to the dogmas of his civil religion, Carlyle seeks a more
flexible and natural ground of belief through reflection on the in the phenomena of heroism. For
Carlyle, then, the recovery of heroism is the one thing needed for the recovery of society. In
particular, the cultivation of heroic intellects, and of a receptive attitude toward heroic voices, is
Carlyle’s prophylaxis against the spiritual viruses loosed by the “Pandora’s box” of eighteenth-
century skepticism.

Skepticism means not intellectual Doubt alone, but moral Doubt; all sorts of *infidelity,*
isinsercity, spiritual paralysis. Perhaps, in few centuries that one could specify since the
world began, was a life of Heroism more difficult for a man. That was not an age of
Faith,— an age of Heroes! The very possibility of heroism had been, as it were, formally abnegated in the minds of all.\footnote{Ibid., p. 170.}

Like many other critics, Carlyle holds that Rousseau’s theory of government is deficient, despite Rousseau’s noble effort to restore a crucial and neglected aspect of political philosophy. That Rousseau’s endeavor to revive republicanism was “a step forward” is a point Carlyle readily acknowledged, however. In addition to qualified praise of “the evangelist” in the \textit{French Revolution}, Carlyle includes Rousseau among his heroes as men-of-letters. But in both works, Carlyle’s attitude towards Rousseau is best described as ambivalent. “He is not what I call a strong man,” observes Carlyle in \textit{Heroes}, “[he is] at best, intense rather than strong. He had not ‘the talent of Silence,’ an invaluable talent; which few...men of any sort in these times, excel in!”\footnote{Ibid., p. 187.}

Carlyle’s labeling Rousseau as “intense rather than strong” is somewhat mysterious in this context, since in \textit{Heroes} Carlyle also says that “strength” is a quality necessary for heroism. One might even say that, like Rousseau, Carlyle regards “strength” as the quintessential heroic virtue. The often-misunderstood Carlylean dictum, “might is right” (read also: “right is might”) neatly expresses his belief in the identity of the good and the strong, or capable. That “all Power is Moral” is for Carlyle the most sublime of human insights although he admits that “man first puts himself in relation with Nature and her Powers, wonders and worships over those,” and only later comes to recognize the preeminence of moral nature over physical nature.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 30-31.} Odin—“the hero as Divinity”—is revered chiefly for his physical strength. But Christianity deepens insight into our moral nature by making suffering, not conquest, redemptive. The triumph of moral over physical nature minimizes the importance of physical strength, and under the new insight
heroism is defined by the more stringent criterion of moral strength. Accordingly, heroic human beings no longer appear as divinities but as prophets, poets, priests and so on. After Odin, Carlyle reveres his heroes mainly for deepening and broadening man’s spiritual topography. At least this holds true until the modern revolutionary era in which, Carlyle suggests, “the old ages are brought back to us; the manner in which Kings were made, and Kingship itself first took rise, [are] again exhibited.”

That such a return should be possible, even necessary, must be seen as the result of the state of moral decadence that Carlyle associates with skepticism, in which he finds Rousseau still ensnared. Carlyle identifies the key symptom of this modern decadence as overweening self-consciousness—an attribute that Rousseau possessed in droves. The tragic flaw of Rousseau-as-hero is this vanity, which Carlyle diagnoses as the product of his Egoism; which is indeed the source and summary of all faults and miseries whatsoever. He had not perfected himself into victory over mere Desire; a mean Hunger, in many sorts, was still the motive principle of him. I am afraid he was a very vain man; hungry for the praises of men... How the whole nature of the man is poisoned; nothing but suspicion, self-isolation, fierce moody ways! He could not live with anybody.”

Carlyle thus linked Rousseau’s philosophical shortcomings with his personal disposition. The objections to this sort of critique are of course well known. Nevertheless, it may be fair to regard with suspicion the political philosophy of a man who, like Rousseau, “could not live with anybody.”

Perhaps Carlyle had Rousseau somewhere in mind when he observed in his journal:

The difference between Socrates and Jesus Christ! The great Conscious; the immeasurably great Unconscious. The one cunningly manufactured; the other created, living, and life-giving. The epitome this of a grand and fundamental diversity among

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43 Ibid. p.204.
44 Ibid., p. 185.
men. Did any truly great man ever go through the world without offence—all rounded in so that the current moral system could find no fault in him? Most likely, never.\textsuperscript{45}

It is unclear whether Carlyle sees Rousseau’s personality as the product of his philosophy, or the other way around, but overall the conclusion is unmistakable: “His Books, like himself, are what I call unhealthy.” On the other hand, perhaps Rousseau has done the best he can, given his disordered environment. “In Rousseau we are called to look...at the fearful amount of evil which, under such disorganization, may accompany the good…. [He] had grown to feel deeply that the world was not his friend nor the world’s law. It was expedient, if any way possible, that such a man should not have been set in flat hostility against the world.”\textsuperscript{46}

On Carlyle’s view, Rousseau’s shortcomings are mostly explained by his high degree of self-consciousness. Ironically, this puts Carlyle in the position of passing a Rousseauean judgment upon Rousseau; for it was Rousseau who conceived of the distinction between \textit{amor-de-soi}, which is a natural, healthy and unconscious sort of self-love, and \textit{amor propre}, which is an unnatural, diseased state of self-consciousness, where one is possessed by the desire to have an excess of goods (both material and immaterial) with respect to one’s fellows. With following anecdote, Carlyle clearly indicts Rousseau of \textit{amor propre}:

A man of some rank from the country, who visited [Rousseau] often, and used to sit with him, expressing all reverence and affection for him, comes one day, finds Jean Jacques full of the sourest unintelligible humor. “Monsieur,” said Jean-Jacques, with flaming eyes, “I know why you come here. You come to see what a poor life I lead; how little is in my poor pot that is boiling there. Well look into the pot! There is half a pound of meat, one carrot and three onions; that is all: go and tell the whole world that, if you like, Monsieur!”—

“A man of this sort,” Carlyle concludes, “was far gone.”\textsuperscript{47}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{On Heroes}, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
That Rousseau feels so agitated by his relative poverty, not to speak of his lack of honors, so rightfully deserved, is for Carlyle evidence of the weakness of Rousseau’s intense personality. This is not to deny Rousseau’s brilliance. Indeed, Carlyle marvels at Rousseau’s accomplishment. “Out of the element of that withered mocking Philosophy...there has arisen in this man the ineradicable feeling and knowledge that this Life of ours is true; not a Skepticism, Theorem, or Persiflage, but a Fact, an awful Reality. Nature had made that revelation to him; had ordered him to speak it out.”

The gospel according to Jean-Jacques, a revelation out of nature, was beginning to externalize itself in revolutions and new regimes. Rousseau’s philosophy unleashed something bigger than himself, in which Carlyle found himself implicated. Carlyle’s Rousseau is a sort of latter-day Socrates. “He could be cooped into garrets, laughed at as a maniac, left to starve like a wild beast in his cage;—but he could not be hindered from setting the world on fire.” Rousseau’s radical philosophy penetrated the depths, revealing the sources of modern civilization’s discontent. But the way France disparaged Rousseau is dwarfed by the atrocity of how Sansculottism dispensed with France. The comparison stops here since Rousseau, unlike Socrates, was allowed by France to live, and the forces unleashed by Rousseau, unlike those of Socrates, preferred coercion to persuasion. “Difficult to say what the governors of the world could do with [Rousseau]! What he could do with them is unhappily clear enough,—guillotine a great many of them!”

In this light it appears that Carlyle stresses hero-worship in order to rectify the shortcomings of Rousseau’s political philosophy in the particular area of leadership. Heroes can be viewed as a modern political liturgy that takes its cue from Rousseau’s renewed speculation on the legislator and the civil religion, but intensifies these aspects while diminishing Rousseau’s

48 Ibid., p. 185.

49 This and the preceding quote from On Heroes, pp. 187-188.
egoistic and mechanistic tendencies. Carlyle’s identification of the hero and the king is a personification of the attempt to reconcile civil society and the state, a fundamentally Rousseauian project. Key to this enterprise is Carlyle’s effort to undermine the belief that egoism, or pride, erects a wall separating the intentions of great men from those who follow them. The Carlylean hero aims not to attain glory in the eyes of his fellows but to communicate with them by virtue of a common vision of nature—specifically of human nature, as fundamentally resistant to disorder and falseness—that issues in cooperative effort on behalf of human order.

The Hero as Legislator

There are, then, two general aspects of Carlyle’s revision of Rousseau. The first pertains to leadership, and follows the lines just sketched. The second concerns the relationship between leaders and followers. This relationship receives little or no attention in Rousseau’s theory but becomes central to Carlyle, who wants to cast “hero-worship” as a form of participation in the “heroic”. It is only by demonstrating such a relationship that Carlyle can sustain his vision of a world of heroes, while holding to the obvious fact of human inequality. The success or failure of the hero-theory greatly depends on how convincingly Carlyle can portray the disciple as a hero in his own right. Carlyle does this by relying on a background notion of the “heroic” as something transcendent of both hero and hero-worshipper. Within the circumference of the heroic, a sort of equality attains on account of subordination to a common project.

One can get an impression of the difference between Rousseau’s and Carlyle’s sense of the hero by comparing two of their references to Mohammad, founder of Islam. In the section of the Social Contract that deals with the great legislator, Rousseau makes oblique reference to Mohammad as one of many political founders. Here Rousseau is arguing that the “sublime reason,” possessed by the great legislator, is the source of his abiding authority:
It is this sublime reason, which rises above the grasp of common men, whose decisions the legislator places in the mouth of the immortals in order to win by divine authority those who cannot be moved by human prudence. But it is not every man who can make the Gods speak or be believed when he declares himself their interpreter. The Legislator’s great soul is the true miracle that should prove his mission. Any man can engrave stone tablets, buy an oracle, or pretend to have a secret relationship with some divinity; train a bird to talk in his ear, or find other crude ways to impress the people. One who knows only that much might even assemble, by chance, a crowd of madmen, but he will never found an empire, and his extravagant work will soon die along with him. False tricks can form a fleeting bond; wisdom alone can make it durable.\textsuperscript{50}

We must presume that Mohammad, who famously claimed to have received his revelation from the angel Gabriel come down in the form of a pigeon, is one of the Legislators to whom Rousseau refers in this passage. Accordingly, Rousseau claims that Mohammad “train[ed] a bird to talk in his ear” and in this “crude way” he won over “by divine authority those who [would not] be moved by human prudence.” The implication is that Mohammad contrived this pigeon, in the light of his “sublime reason,” as a means to achieve this end. Mohammad’s “sublime reason” is the real source of his “great soul,” not the revelation he allegedly received from a talking pigeon. Rousseau does not insinuate that Mohammad’s soul is any less great for having “impress[ed] the people” with a “false trick.” That is not the point here. Rather, Rousseau is hinting that reason, and not revelation, is the authority behind Mohammad’s greatness as a legislator.\textsuperscript{51}

Now let us consider Carlyle’s treatment of Mohammad’s pigeon. For Carlyle, like Rousseau, the essence of greatness is sincerity or genuineness; but one might add that, for Carlyle, it is sublime insight and not sublime reason that marks a great soul. Sincere insight is the kernel of heroism. For example, Carlyle sees in Mohammad’s scripture “a merit quite other than

\textsuperscript{50} Social Contract II.vii (Collected Writings 4:156-157).

\textsuperscript{51} This is true of political greatness, at least. Rousseau concludes this section (in which he makes no obvious reference to Christ) with the equivocal remark: “One must not conclude from all this...that politics and religion have a common object for us, but rather at the origin of nations, one serves as an instrument of the other” (p. 157).
the literary one. If a book come from the heart, it will contrive to reach other hearts; all art and authorcraft are of small amount to that. One would say the primary character of the Koran is this of its genuineness, of its being a bona-fide book.” The merit of Mohammad as a Legislator, then, is that he proclaims the moral law in good faith. Mohammad’s authority emanates from the sincerity of his belief, not the sublimity of his knowledge.52 Carlyle explains:

I do not assert Mohammad’s continual sincerity: who is continually sincere? But I confess I can make nothing of the critic, in these times, who would accuse him of deceit prepense; of conscious deceit generally, or perhaps at all;—still more, of living in a mere element of conscious deceit, and writing this Koran as a forger and juggler would have done! Every candid eye, I think, will read the Koran far otherwise than so. It is the confused ferment of a great rude human soul; rude, untutored, that cannot even read; but fervent, earnest, struggling vehemently to utter itself in words.53

Carlyle singles out the suspicious attitude towards Mohammad’s pigeon as a symptom of enlightenment smugness. “The lies, which well-meaning zeal has heaped round this man, are disgraceful to ourselves only. When Pococke inquired of Grotius, Where the proof was of that story of the pigeon, trained to pick peas from Mahomet’s ear...? Grotius answered that there was no proof! It is really time to dismiss all that.”54

Carlyle dismisses “that story” as an instance of what he calls the “Fanatic-Hypocrite” theory. He attributes this theory to David Hume.55 “Hume and a multitude following him” originally applied the theory to the case of Oliver Cromwell: “Cromwell was sincere at first; a

52 “Their judges decide by [the Koran]; all Moslem are bound to study it, seek in it for the light of their life. They have mosques where it is all read daily; thirty relays of priests take it up in succession, get through the whole each day” (This and the quote above are from On Heroes, pp. 64-65).

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., p. 44.

55 Ibid., p. 228.
sincere ‘Fanatic’ at first, but gradually became a ‘Hypocrite’ as things opened round him. This…is Hume’s theory of it; extensively applied since,—to Mahomet and many others.”

Carlyle raises two objections to the Fanatic-Hypocrite theory; one rooted in his theory of heroic character, the other in his theory of belief. First, Carlyle finds the Fanatic-Hypocrite theory incompatible with heroic character. “Think of it seriously, you will find something in it; not much, not all, very far from all. Sincere hero-hearts do not sink in this miserable manner.” Heroes are seers and doers, capable men. A genuine hero, therefore, cannot be a hypocrite, or “play-actor.” Heroism by definition is the opposite of feigning.56

Secondly, Carlyle observes that no evidence exists either for or against the Fanatic-Hypocrite theory. Grotius had “no proof,” he simply believed the story of Mohammad having trained a pigeon to pick peas from his ear. By pointing out that this is a matter of belief and not of demonstration, Carlyle hints that the Fanatic-Hypocrite theory tells us more about those who believe it than those for whom it is meant to account. It is significant that Carlyle never tries to prove the opposite theory, that Mohammad actually received a revelation from the angel Gabriel come down as a pigeon. In his mind, this is quite another issue. Indeed, in On Heroes, Carlyle describes the Koran mildly as the “ferment of [one] great rude human soul.” Further remarks confirm that Carlyle does not mean to claim that Mohammad actually received a revelation of divine law that would be binding on all humanity. “We have chosen Mahomet not as the most eminent Prophet,” he explains, “but as the one we are freest to speak of. He is by no means the truest of Prophets; but I do esteem him a true one. Farther…I mean to say all the good of him I justly can,” he continues, since “there is no danger of our becoming, any of us, Mahometans.”57

While Carlyle’s idea of the nature of Christian revelation is hopelessly obscure, he clearly regards Islam as a derivative of Christianity. Islam is “a confused form of Christianity; had

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p. 43.
Christianity not been, neither had it been,” hence, Carlyle concludes, “the soul of Islam...is properly the soul of Christianity.” This helps to explain why Carlyle sees no danger of converting Christians into Muslims by simply giving a congenial account of Mohammad. Following Goethe, Carlyle believes the heart of both Christianity and Islam is dutiful submission to moral law. “That we must submit to God. That our whole strength lies resigned in submission to Him, whatsoever he do to us.... ‘If this be Islam,’ says Goethe, ‘do we not all live in Islam?’ Yes, all of us that have any moral life; we all live so.”

To Carlyle, this moral attitude of submission is the essence of all true and healthy belief. What originates in transcendent admiration of superlative physical strength, for example in Odin-worship, culminates in the adoration of superlative moral strength, epitomized by Christianity and reflected in Islam. Finally there emerges an antithetical, unhealthy, type of belief, summed up by skepticism. Skepticism, in a manner of speaking, is the opposite of belief. But Carlyle wants to maintain that, in an equally important sense, skepticism is a sort of corrosive faith. Carlyle presupposes that the need for faith cannot be overcome, though all of its objects become suspect. So the skeptic, too, must be a type of believer, only one with a mean and distrustful soul, who over time becomes incapable of trusting—of “living with”—any other soul. Skepticism becomes a debilitating type of faith, to the psyche and even to the intellect, since it undermines every criterion of relevance. “[Man] cannot know...unless he can worship in some way. His knowledge is a pedantry, and dead thistle, otherwise.”

The presence of skepticism must be accepted as given in even the healthiest culture. In fact, Carlyle identifies the unheroic attitude of the skeptic as an element of even the healthiest

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58 Ibid., p. 56.
59 Ibid., p. 55.
60 Ibid., p. 70. It may help to note here that at times Carlyle defines worship as “worth-ship.” We worship what we value.
Moreover, Carlyle characterizes the “valet-soul,” “fatal charlatan-element,” or “vulpine intellect, [in terms of] its knowingness, its alertness and expertness in ‘detecting hypocrites.’” Only the dominance of the valet-type is given away by the popularity of invidious stories like that of Mohammad’s pigeon.

The significance Carlyle finds in such “Fanatic-Hypocrite” stories lay not in their merit, but their testimony of spiritual decay. Carlyle indicts the skeptical eighteenth century, in which he partially includes Rousseau, as answerable for this decay. However, Carlyle’s interests do not lie in the direction of exacting retribution, but correcting the disease. With Heroes he hopes to stall, even reverse, the decay by reinforcing a bond of community between leaders and their followers based on a shared sense of submission to the moral good and a “devout imagination.”

One can see a similar effort unfolding in Rousseau’s evocation of the great legislator as a figure who commands authority without “either force or reasoning,” win over the people “without violence and persuade without convincing.” Precisely in this discussion, Rousseau observes that to perform his task the legislator “must...have recourse to another order of authority” than force or reason—namely, religion. Yet Rousseau conceives of religion-by-design, making Carlyle’s naturalistic concept of heroic authority appear in stark opposition. Rousseau’s legislator is nothing if not a master artificer, quite different from Carlyle’s occasionally rude, “untutored” heroes. For Carlyle, the hero’s sincerity of expression more than compensates for artlessness.

Carlyle’s focus on the expressive and communicative event resonates throughout Heroes. The hero gives to people their bearings in the universe. Around this achievement grow entire traditions, even civilizations. Odin, in particular, is not just a titan but also a “Thinker, [a] spiritual Hero.” Carlyle describes Odin as a “Teacher and Captain of soul and body.... By him

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61 Ibid., p. 227.

62 Social Contract, II.vii (Collected Writings 4:156).
[the people] know now what they have to do here, what to look for hereafter. Existence has become articulate, melodious by him; he first has made Life alive!“\textsuperscript{63}

Carlyle’s hero and Rousseau’s legislator thus occupy the position of a “center of gravity” in a human tradition. But Rousseau’s legislator seems self-consciously to design an order, while the Carlylean hero unpremeditatedly articulates a view of the world inscribed already “in all minds...as in sympathetic ink.” Carlyle’s hero is a discoverer rather than a designer. The hero discovers symbols that give outer expression to the latent sense of inner significance that makes a “people” possible.

Odin’s \textit{Runes} are a significant feature of him…. It is the greatest invention man has ever made, this of marking down the unseen thought that is in him by written characters. It is a kind of second speech, almost as miraculous as the first. You remember the astonishment and incredulity of Atahulapa the Peruvian King; how he made the Spanish Soldier who was guarding him scratch \textit{Dios} on his thumb-nail, that he might try the next soldier with it, to ascertain whether such a miracle was possible. If Odin brought Letters among his people, he might work magic enough.\textsuperscript{64}

Human letters are only “almost as miraculous” as original speech because, being mortal contrivances, they lack the faultlessness of original (divine?) communication. They only work their miracles if they convey the proper names of things, otherwise they can obfuscate, dissemble, and suborn falsehood, as the story of Atahulapa and the absent author of “\textit{Dios}” suggests. The miracle of letters, then—and of legislation—requires the coalescence of inner belief and outward forms and practices. Once belief is clothed in proper forms and practices, a people have attained healthiness. They are neither devout yet savage and inarticulate, on the one hand; nor sophisticated yet skeptical and unbelieving, on the other. Indeed, these two extremes mark the two different phases of disorder, the one, before belief has concrete forms; and the other when the rote rigidity of practice conceals an atrophy of inner meaning. The hero, in the

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{On Heroes}, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 27.
most specific sense, is he who first discovers a concrete expression of belief. The “heroic” typifies this coalescence of belief and practice. Within the broader scope of the heroic, enters a second definition of the hero as any individual who asseverates, or restores the link between belief and practice, once established. In this sense, anyone is heroic who participates actively in a living tradition.

Conclusion
Carlyle’s *On Heroes* offers a countervailing account of authority that agrees with Rousseau in general, but departs from him in many particulars, as if the hero and the legislator are two branches stemming off of the same philosophical trunk. Let us briefly recapitulate some of the differences. First, Carlyle and Rousseau converge in their tendency to equate the hero and the king as paradigmatic authority-figures. However, Rousseau finally contains the hero (as the legislator) within the compass of his republican theory, while Carlyle, it seems, would quit the law for a true king. Second, Carlyle and Rousseau agree that religion or worship is the distinctive organ of the type of authority in question. But where Rousseau’s civil religion aims at citizenship, or imitation of a great man, Carlyle’s aims for honor, loyalty, “transcendent admiration of a great man.” Third, what differentiates the hero from the run of ordinary men, for both Carlyle and Rousseau, is their capacity to “legislate” in a literal sense. However, Rousseau’s legislator and Carlyle’s hero differ in a couple of ways. First, Rousseau relies for the most part on the model of the ancient lawgiver who raises new tables of law, in the manner of the ancient stele. Also, the Rousseauan legislator derives authority from the science of politics, from sublime rationality and theoretical knowledge. By contrast, Carlyle leans on the model of the biblical prophet. The prophet turns out to be as much of an iconoclast as a legislator,

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65 To legislate, legere: from lex, legis, is to determine, pick out or collect certain words that give outward sanction to the inner determinations of things. Cf. Vico, *New Science* 240.
breaking the old tables of law in order to fulfill them.\textsuperscript{66} Also, Carlyle’s heroes derive their authority from passionate engagement and practical intuition. The hero does not need to possess science, but must have the courage and ingenuity to put nescience under foot.

Carlyle finds another heroic archetype in the antique Norse “sovereigns...who got the title \textit{Wood-cutter; Forest-felling Kings…. [For] true valour, different enough from ferocity, is the basis of all [heroism]. A more legitimate kind of valour that; showing itself against the untamed Forests and dark brute Powers of Nature, to conquer Nature for us.”\textsuperscript{67} As the original heroes enable us to tame literal forests, subsequent heroes thrash through the tangled forests of the mind and spirit. Finally the modern hero-kings emerge, to reestablish order in a social world given over to chaos as a result of skeptical negligence regarding human affairs. Carlyle’s highest hope is that such men will perform the ordering work necessary for genuine human advancement to occur.

In many respects, Carlyle and Rousseau share similar influences and aims. Yet they offer two alternative views of the moral relation between leaders and followers within the broad context of democratic morality. That Carlyle and Rousseau have both been branded “proto-fascists” does not disprove their commitment to a certain “democratic” vision of morality, indeed it only confirms that they were both moralists at heart. “Proto-fascism” is a charge that can be leveled against any thinker who questions the rule of lenience in the conduct of human life, and who would strive for a morally coherent alternative instead. Rather than rebuking these thinkers, it may be possible to temper their excesses by comparing their visions to one another with an eye to their strengths and weaknesses. We can learn from the struggles of these authors without

\textsuperscript{66} This warrants Carlyle’s inclusion of Rousseau—an almost pure iconoclast,—among his heroes. Of course this also points out the manner in which Rousseau himself departs from the ancient model of the legislator.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 33.
denying their obvious shortcomings. To ignore them, however, reflects our own failure of sympathy.
Chapter Six: “The Godlike in Human Affairs”

Hero-Worship

Thomas Carlyle delivered his famous lectures *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* in the summer of 1840. The series stood as the culmination of Carlyle’s four years as a professional lecturer. In the three preceding years he had given courses on German Literature, the History of Literature and Modern Revolutions. Carlyle’s lecture courses, all delivered in London, met with growing popularity every year; and by the time of *On Heroes* Carlyle had established a reputation in London literary society. Although he had already published two of his greatest works, *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution*, lecturing was the first career that brought Carlyle the public success with the English that he had desired for some time. London notables eagerly awaited the opportunity to hear the Sage’s utterances that summer.

*On Heroes* is the last lecture series that Carlyle would deliver. It is the only one he would print as a book. An anxious lecturer, Carlyle spent six entire months following the delivery of *On Heroes* renovating the lectures for publication. In many ways the course is an amalgamation and summary of themes Carlyle pursued during the early years of his career as an author. *On Heroes* aspires to a panoramic vision of man and society; presents an imaginative synthesis of history, poetry and society; and sustains a focus on Carlyle’s most abiding concern: religion. It is well known that the nineteenth century saw a wave of doubt regarding the permanence of accepted moral truths, propelled by the rapid transformations wrought by the scientific, industrial and democratic revolutions. Accordingly the nineteenth-century intellect was forced to face the challenge of understanding truth in historical terms. Over the course of *Heroes*, Carlyle unveils a view of universal history as an interminable process of change that, nonetheless, constantly manifests one animating principle—reverence for the highest potential of humanity:
For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is as bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense, creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.  

The lectures *On Heroes*, then, attempt to demonstrate the underlying persistence of hero-worship beneath all of the ephemeral revolutions in beliefs, habits, customs and institutions that ripple the surface of human history. But *On Heroes* offers more than just a perspective on history. For Carlyle also sees in the endurance of hero-worship the only hope for an inconstant present. What were the defining characteristics of Carlyle’s putatively anti-heroic time? Against what tendencies does he assert the heroic as the proper antidote?

Carlyle’s era—the nineteenth-century world of Reform Bills, Factory Acts, Chartist uprisings, *laissez faire* enthusiasms, utopian programs, workhouses and poorhouses—saw political bedlam and disorder throughout England and on the Continent. In Enlightenment skepticism Carlyle identifies the heart of all this disorder, the primary cause of a revolt against moral greatness, legitimate authority, loyalty and obedience, on the part of mass and elite alike. As Walter Houghton has observed, the nineteenth century saw itself clearly as a time of transition from a feudal past to an inalterably more democratic and capitalist future:

> [T]he past which [the early Victorians] had outgrown was not the Romantic period and not even the eighteenth century. It was the Middle Ages. They recognized, of course, that there were differences between themselves and their immediate predecessors, but from their perspective it was the medieval tradition from which they had irrevocably broken—Christian orthodoxy under the rule of the church and civil government under the rule of king and nobility; the social structure of fixed classes, each with its recognized rights and duties; and the economic organization of village agriculture and town guilds. That was ‘the old European system of dominant ideas and facts’ which Arnold saw dissolving on

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the nineteenth century. But the process had begun much earlier, starting with the Renaissance and the Reformation, gaining momentum, quietly but steadily, through the next two centuries of philosophic rationalism and expanding business, until it finally broke into the open when the French Revolution of 1789 proclaimed the democratic Rights of Man and the atheistical worship of the Goddess of Reason.²

The great authors of the early Victorian period, such as Carlyle and Mill, were acutely aware of the period of transition through which they were living. “Carlyle and Mill were not reflecting the general outlook in the England of 1830. They were attempting—and successfully—to form it.”³

The aftermath of the French Revolution was not one of liberation only; but the rapid changes, and apparent destruction, of the ancestral order underlay a sense of malaise about the future of society. Carlyle and Mill

were trying to revive the idea of progress which had lost its hold on the generation of the twenties, and by doing so, to check the impotent dismay which the revolutionary changes of the period produced in many minds. In itself, Carlyle insists, there is “nothing terrible, nothing supernatural” about change; it is the normal condition of life, from day to day, age to age. And though often painful, it is a wholly beneficent process. Change is progress, and the age is one of transition to a greater age—that is the underlying message of “Signs of the Times” (1829), “Characteristics” (1831) and Sartor Resartus (1833).⁴

Carlyle viewed the early industrial period as a time of decision as well as transition. To him, the burning question is whether modern commercial and democratic culture can absorb or re-appropriate the best qualities of the medieval society it had replaced. Carlyle’s idealization of the twelfth century, in a work like Past and Present, is paradigmatic of this early Victorian self-understanding: The Abbot Sampson, a just and wise leader, idealizes the virtues of a bygone order; while, in light of the reality of changing times, Carlyle directs an appeal for moral leadership to the new “captains of industry” (whom he also chastises for their selfishness and

³ Ibid., p. 31.
⁴ Ibid., pp. 31-32.
greedy behavior). Similarly, in *The French Revolution* Carlyle counterposes echoes of Homeric and Biblical song against an unswerving recognition of the power of print as the catalyst of a new, silent, scripture of universal humanity. For Carlyle, the democratic culture that reaches its apotheosis in the French Revolution, with its “atheistical worship of the Goddess of Reason” is inseparable from the culture of print, unimaginable without the intercession of inexpensive printed matter through which new habits of privacy were cultivated and new systems of justice devised. But even in this private, paper age—of pamphlets, treatises, journals and annals, constitutional theories, philosophical systems, heightening visions of the progress-of-the-species amidst a diminishing sense of the voice—even now, Carlyle observes, reformers admire their leaders; and in this fact he sees one glimmer of hope for the voice of authority. “In times of unbelief, which soon have to become times of revolution, much down-rushing, sorrowful decay a ruin is visible to everybody. For myself in these days, I seem to see in this indestructibility of Hero-worship the everlasting adamant lower than which the confused wreck of revolutionary things cannot fall.”

Often Carlyle’s teachings, the so-called “doctrine” of hero-worship, and the “great man theory” of history basically have been criticized for manifesting a naive form of authoritarianism. Yet any astute reader of Carlyle’s texts will recognize quickly that this criticism is naive. For it should be clear already that Carlyle does not advocate authoritarianism blindly, as a mere reaction against the anarchy he perceives: “Hero-worship” is neither a “policy” to be enforced by coercive techniques; nor is it an artificial panacea for the natural social decay whose symptoms are Chartist uprisings and French Revolutions. Rather—like all true worship in Carlyle’s view—it is a natural and voluntary attitude based on a just tie of loyalty between the hero and his followers. This tie of loyalty has deep roots in the hero’s insight into moral reality; and the hero is authoritative because his example expresses this insight most adequately. A Carlylean hero

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5 Ibid., p. 17.
figures ideal kingship. For, “man never yields himself wholly to brute Force, but always to moral Greatness.” Finally, the essential aspect that unites all Carlylean heroes, from Odin to Napoleon, is the sincere insight of the hero-as-thinker: “What he says, all men were not far from saying, were longing to say. The thoughts of all start up, as from painful enchanted sleep, round his Thought; answering to it, Yes, even so!” This relationship seems to holds even when the hero’s message is anti-heroic, as the example of Voltaire illustrates. Carlyle sees the link between the enormous influence of skeptical philosophes like Voltaire and the modern tendency to deny “as it were...the existence of great men; [to deny] the desireableness of great men. Show our critics a great man, a Luther for example, they begin to what they call ‘account’ for him; not to worship him, but to take the dimensions of him, —and bring him out to be a little kind of man!”

According to the fashion of a materialistic and skeptical age, such critics explain away the great man as a mere “creature of the Time.” Instead of seeing him as an example of human excellence and a pattern of moral conduct worth consulting, they ascribe his active greatness to dumb mechanical causes.

The modern skeptic believes that events make men, and that human agency has little to do with history. Carlyle’s view is nearly the opposite: history bears witnesses to a struggle of human freedom against natural necessity. “As Carlyle reads history [in Heroes,] he finds that the ‘marrow’ of it is the heroism of the ‘mortals superior in power, courage, or understanding.’”

He detects in the non-voluntaristic, amoral, outlook of materialism, the cardinal intellectual fault of his age, as well as the motive principle behind the dilatory conduct of game-preserving

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6 “Characteristics,” in A Carlyle Reader, p. 76.


aristocrats that had already given occasion to the destruction of the ancien regime in France, and portended the same for England.

Herein is the great paradox of Carlyle’s perspective—a paradox that Carlyle recognized, and in which we may also see the clearest mark of its complexity:

The unbelieving French believe in their Voltaire; and burst-out round him into very curious Hero-worship, in that last act of his life when they ‘stifle him under roses.’... No people ever were so little prone to admire as those French of Voltaire. Persiflage was the character of their whole mind; adoration had nowhere a place in it. Yet see!... They feel withal that, if persiflage be the great thing, there never was such a persifleur. He is the realised ideal of every one of them; the thing they are all wanting to be; of all Frenchmen the most French. He is properly their god,—such god as they are fit for.\(^9\)

This commentary on the French and their Voltaire evinces the subtlety of Carlyle’s sweeping idea of the heroic. It also restates Carlyle’s view that the hero is not an authoritarian dictator of belief, but rather reflects and refines tendencies that already prevail among the mass of “hero-worshipers.” I note this early in this chapter for the same reason that Carlyle notes it at the beginning of his lectures: If we wish to avoid simple misunderstandings of Carlyle’s intention, we have to bear in mind that the principle of the “heroic”—for Carlyle, the very marrow of human history—encompasses a complex relationship between two separate yet related aspects of heroism and hero-worship, or, of authority and audience. These aspects are intertwined in the phenomenon of the “heroic” itself. Despite that heroism ultimately relies on transcendent insight, wisdom, the hero in action is constrained necessarily by the prejudices of his own type, as well the endemic defects of human nature. On the other side, hero-worshipers may adopt such limited, and patently false, beliefs as, for example, that the man Odin really is a god, or that Voltaire is a figure worthy of abject obedience. But even in these most limited forms, all worship springs from an unbounded sense of admiration that is also endemic in human nature: “Worship is

transcendent wonder.”

For the pragmatic Carlyle, historical hero-worship—the evident phenomena of “transcendent admiration of [Great Men]”—is “the deepest root of all [historical forms of worship]; the tap-root from which in a great degree all the rest were nourished a grown.”

Therefore, even in its most nescient forms, men will opt for hero-worship over no worship at all. The practically unconscionable alternative is both spiritual and literal chaos:

Society is founded on Hero-worship. All dignities of rank, on which human association rests, are what we may call a Heroarchy (Government of Heroes),—or a Hierarchy, for it is ‘sacred’ enough withal! Duke means Dux, Leader; King is Kon-ning, Kan-ning, Man that knows or cans. Society everywhere is some representation, not insupportably inaccurate, of a graduated Worship of Heroes;—reverence and obedience done to men really great and wise. Not insupportably inaccurate, I say! They are all as bank-notes, these social dignitaries, all representing gold; —and several of them, alas, always are forged notes. We can do with some forged false notes; with a good many even; but not with all, or the most of them forged! No: there have to come revolutions then; cries of Democracy, Liberty, and Equality, and I know not what.

Heroes and Valets

We can identify from Carlyle’s impressionistic view of heroism two important indices of historical-cultural health, in Carlyle’s perspective. First, there is a difference between genuine heroes and “shams” or “quacks.” The prevalence of sincere heroism obviously is a sign of social health, while the prevalence of disingenuous quackery points to disease and decay. Carlyle ever is hostile to shams, and believes intensely in the duty to resist them at any risk. Secondly, some degree of mutual participation in, and understanding of, the hero’s moral insight is an indispensable prerequisite of genuine worship; in ideal terms, the hero merely gives voice to a moral dialect that the many understand though as yet they cannot express it. Moral heroism

\[\text{10} \quad \text{Ibid., p. 9.}\]
\[\text{11} \quad \text{Ibid., p. 11.}\]
\[\text{12} \quad \text{Ibid., p. 12. The etymology of Kan-ning is false, although Carlyle employs it habitually, both here and in Sartor Resartus.}\]
articulates the universal voice of moral duty in a particular and “not insupportably inaccurate”

form.

This second, transitive, quality of hero-worship underlay a distinction between the
healthy soul that is capable of reverence, and the critic, or valet-soul. Carlyle remarks
disapprovingly of the aphorism that “no man is a hero to his valet.” Or, to the extent that it is
ture, Carlyle retorts that “it is not the Hero’s blame, but the Valet’s: that his soul, namely, is a
mean valet-soul... The Valet does not know a hero when he sees him! Alas, no: it requires a kind
of Hero to do that; —and one of the world’s wants...is for the most part want of such.”\(^{13}\) A
sincere, heroic soul is required to recognize true heroism. In a healthy situation, what the hero
and hero-worshiper share is participation not in a cult of personal “identity,” but a common
understanding of transcendent moral duty.

With respect to this second register of health; Carlyle’s appraisal of his own historical
situation is relatively grim. In his view, the nineteenth century was a skeptical, unbelieving
century that had lost its faith in transcendent goodness, turned its intellectual attention to
materialist metaphysics, and its practical attention to the arts of avarice. Carlyle, too, experienced
a “descendental” phase of doubt and insecurity regarding the truth of moral order. His
conversion from this “everlasting no” to the “everlasting yea”—the affirmation of moral
dutifulness over material happiness—became a paradigmatic conversion story for the Victorian
age.

As we have seen, Carlyle puts a good deal of faith and hope in his principle that hero-
worship is “the everlasting adamant lower than which this confused wreck of revolutionary
things cannot fall.” But he knows well that the forces of skepticism and unbelief have not yet
spent themselves entirely, nor can they be overcome totally. What hope he has for the authentic
improvement of society, he puts off into the far future. Moreover, Carlyle has almost no faith in

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 184.
the possibility of social regeneration as a result of mechanical or evolutionary mechanisms. For the most part Carlyle is a critic of the modern idea of progress; it fails precisely to the extent that it reflects a sense of physical rather than moral advance. He recognizes the ascendancy of political and economic liberalism as inevitable, and not necessarily undesirable, historical developments; but they herald more chaos and social unrest in the immediate future, not less. In Carlyle’s view this results because the forces that propel such developments are largely technological and physical, manifesting nothing on the moral plane except for a tendency, based on confusion, to reject all authority; and foreshadowing no inherent principle of moral progress.

Not a Hero only is needed, but a world fit for him; a world not of Valets; —the Hero comes almost in vain otherwise!... Yes, it is far from us: but it must come; thank God, it is visibly coming. Till it do come, what have we? Ballot-boxes, suffrages, French Revolutions.... Why, the insincere, unbelieving world is the natural property of the Quack, and of the Father of quacks and quackeries! Misery, confusion, unveracity are alone possible there. By ballot-boxes we alter the figure of our Quack; but the substance of him continues. The Valet-World has to be governed by the Sham-Hero, by the King merely dressed in King gear.14

A passage like the one above should be evidence enough to dispel the popular view of Carlyle as a purveyor of personality cultism. For Carlyle, merely political revolution—however necessary it may be—is not sufficient to render society healthy. What is needed is a moral revolution. But such a revolution is much harder to effect as it cannot be accomplished by force, but by persuasion, education. Moreover, no society-at-large can experience moral revolution. Moral education is a mystery; it requires the willing participation of the individual soul. It seems, then, that Carlyle’s deferral of hope may be justified. That he maintains such a hope is certain, however. The lectures on heroism, whatever their shortcomings, stand along with the rest of his literary work as positive evidence of Carlyle’s hope for the future.

14 Ibid., p. 217.
In the remainder of this chapter, I shall attempt to explain more adequately Carlyle’s heroic individualism and how it conforms to his views of history and religion. An important concept here is Carlyle’s notion of “unconsciousness.” Before embarking on a more detailed examination of this aspect of Carlyle’s philosophy I shall offer a brief exposition of his position in the popular discourse of his age. After establishing the boundaries of common opinion, I will continue on a deeper investigation of Carlyle’s philosophical foundations. I hope to show that despite his virulent opposition to political democracy, Carlyle is a sort of radical individualist and, in this sense, is a democrat. Carlyle reveres the idea of democracy, even as he despairs at its actuality.

The Question of Action

Carlyle did not unleash his fiercest attacks on democracy until several years after the delivery of *Heroes*. But by the late 1830s he had already established the basis of his critical stance toward democracy. In “Signs of the Times” (1829), a seminal statement of Carlyle’s social thought, Carlyle chimed in on the much-debated “spirit of the age” question. In that essay he enunciates several judgments that recur throughout his later work. At the outset, Carlyle proclaims that the “grand business” of the age, “undoubtedly, is, not to *see* what lies dimly at a distance, but to *do* what lies clearly at hand.”\(^\text{15}\) The nineteenth century, he argues, should be an age of action rather than analysis. By “action,” Carlyle does not mean simple activism, however. Action refers not to coercive or revolutionary violence, nor does it refer to political virtuosity in a specialized sense. Rather, for Carlyle, “action” lays the foundation of habit. To act is to establish or reestablish one’s own regime of habits, one’s character. Action in this sense is by nature personal, and not social. Moreover, action understood in this sense, as moral domestication, is among the least esoteric of Carlyle’s ideas.

\(^\text{15}\) Carlyle, “Signs of the Times,” in *A Carlyle Reader*, p. 31.
Carlyle never ceases to reiterate this call for personal action; and in general he always prefers action to speculation. There are at least two major reasons for this. On the one hand, Carlyle sees a link between modern analytical speculation and the conditions of decaying faith, conditions he believes to be an inheritance of the skeptical eighteenth century that he hopes to overcome. The source of this decay was a too-complete adherence to the Enlightenment view of the universe. In “Signs of the Times” Carlyle captures this view under the figure of “Mechanism.”

According to Carlyle, the mechanical philosophy puts man at a distance from himself by turning his attention from the interior and invisible world of the soul’s motivations, towards the outer world of objects, “interests,” and the power to manipulate external nature. Carlyle characterizes our epoch as an “Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole, undivided might, forwards, teaches, and practices the great art of adapting means to ends.” By now this critique of modern instrumentalism may be familiar, but Carlyle was announcing something new. Ours is “not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age,” he concludes, but one of calculation and contrivance: “for the simplest operation...some cunning abbreviated process is in readiness.”

Of course machinery, industry and technology have worked wonders for the betterment of modern mankind. Carlyle, a beneficiary of such events as the dawn of industrialism and the birth of the railway, does not fail to notice this fact. However, he observes with dismay that the principle of Mechanism seeping into every aspect of modern life, including those in which it may not belong. “Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also.” Our perspective on things-in-general is becoming mechanized: education,

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16 Ibid., p. 34.
17 Ibid., p. 35.
religion, literature, politics; all turned into contrivances for commodious living, but standing in the way of life itself.

Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions,—for Mechanism of one sort or another, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions...are of a mechanical character.\(^\text{18}\)

All of this, Carlyle sees as the outcome of metaphysical materialism, the creed of the Enlightenment rationalist. In “Signs,” he points to Locke, and also Hume, as primary symptoms. Yet he sees in the contemporary generation of Common Sense philosophers—“the school of Reid”—signals of possible renewal. For, these men had seen through to the ultimate inadequacy of materialism. However, they were unable to correct Hume conclusively. “[T]hey let loose Instinct, as an undiscriminating ban-dog, to guard them against these conclusions;—they tugged lustily at the logical chain by which Hume was so coldly towing them and the world into bottomless abysses of Atheism and Fatalism. But the chain somehow snapped between them; and the issue has been that nobody now cares about either.”\(^\text{19}\) For Carlyle, then, the world rests at a “Centre of Indifference.” That there are fatal flaws in the dominant Mechanical outlook was no longer deniable, yet at the same time thinking men were unready, or unable, to make the choices necessary to correct it.

In another sense Carlyle believes that the masses had already acted to expose the bankruptcy of the dominant order of things. The French Revolution was the grand event that symbolized this overturning of a dead social and intellectual order, an order that paraded about in the raiment of aristocratic nobility but really operated on the vulgar principle of self-interest. According to Carlyle, the Revolution manifests the “Dynamic” principle in human nature. A

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 37.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 39.
counterpoint to the finite and mechanical, man’s dynamic nature manifests “the primary, unmodified forces and energies in man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and infinite character.” In past ages, this aspect of man’s nature has been the main concern of political and moral philosophy, especially. “A wide difference is manifest in our age. For the wise men, who now appear as Political Philosophers, deal exclusively with the Mechanical province” (for political philosophers read: political economists.)\textsuperscript{20} Carlyle divines that the political revolutions are nature’s way of warning against the ultimate inadequacy a finite, mechanical, treatment of human things. Human souls may appear in finite bodies, but our inner being is infinite and dynamic. The French Revolution manifests an up-swelling of dynamic energy that reveals the old forms to be false once and for all. But this liberation from false belief is not enough; for a healthy man is not only free from falsehood but also free to acknowledge and perform his moral duty:

The thinking minds of all nations call for change. There is a deep-lying struggle in the whole fabric of society; a boundless grinding collision of the New with the Old. The French Revolution...was not the parent of this mighty movement, but its offspring... France was the scene of their fiercest explosion; but the final issue was not unfolded in that country.... Political freedom is hitherto the object of these efforts; but they will not and cannot stop there. It is towards a higher freedom than mere freedom from oppression by his fellow-mortal that man dimly aims. Of this higher, heavenly freedom, which is ‘man’s reasonable service,’ all his noble institutions...are but the body, and more and more approximated emblem.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, despite Carlyle’s initial remark that the business of the age is “not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand,” this passage shows with remarkable clarity that Carlyle’s diagnosis of contemporary society emanates from a view of history in which events like the French Revolution have a meaningful place in a larger historical scheme based on the analysis of human nature. We will inquire more deeply into the details of this philosophy of

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 42.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 53.
history later on. For now, let it suffice to mention that Carlyle’s analysis of the age does not rely on his philosophy of history alone. A second principle, the principle of unconsciousness (or, “anti-self-consciousness,” as John Stuart Mill called it) bespeaks a non-historicist foundation for his critique of mechanical culture, reflecting Carlyle’s view of human nature.

Anti Self-Consciousness

Carlyle elaborates his principle of unconsciousness in the (1831) essay “Characteristics.” According to Carlyle unconsciousness is a sign of health in both the physical and psychological realms. “The healthy know not of their health, but only the sick: this is the Physician’s Aphorism; and applicable in a far wider sense than he gives it.” On the basis of this first principle, Carlyle proceeds in “Characteristics” to sketch out a theory of “moral, intellectual, political, poetical...therapeutics.” Just as Nietzsche later would do, Carlyle sets himself up as a “physician of culture.” And anticipating Nietzsche, Carlyle diagnoses the present state of society as diseased and corrupted. To put it simply the source of the malaise is unbridled analysis, attorney-logic, as Carlyle is fond of calling it, or “closet-logic.” As the word implies, analysis is the power of the human mind to interrogate and to decompose complex wholes into simpler components. Carlyle recognizes the analytical tendency as the dominant tendency of the age, but he insists on its shortcomings. “The beginning of Inquiry is Disease: all science, if we consider it well, as it must have originated in the feeling of something being wrong, so it is and continues to be but Division, Dismemberment, and partial healing of the wrong.”

Effectively, analysis is solvent of belief and inimical to intuition. For Carlyle, intuition and belief rely on an unmediated sense of the whole. In defense of intuition, Carlyle ruthlessly disapproves of the popular philosophical “systems,” so regnant in his time and in ours. The

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23 Ibid., p. 68.
healthy, believing man does not need a “system,” Carlyle implies. Systematic moral philosophy, in particular, is too self-conscious. This point is both historical and philosophical in its bearing: Historically, heroic civilizations need no such systems. “Unity, agreement,” in a word, health, “is always silent, or soft-voiced; it is only discord that loudly proclaims itself.”24 In terms of philosophical anthropology, Carlyle argues that human beings do not believe in systems but in symbols; the system is to belief as allegory is to symbol. Without the latter, the former would have no hold on the human affections.

Carlyle finds modern democratic rhetoric wanting because it relies so often upon precisely this kind of contrived moral philosophy, as if morality were merely an allegory for self-interest. It is not that Carlyle is hostile to individualism, however. On the contrary, he recognizes the dignity and worth of persons. Few thinkers have defended this belief more eloquently than Carlyle does in his more tenderhearted moods. Still fewer have given the individual so high a place in the scheme of religious belief.

In On Heroes Carlyle refers the reader to “St. Chrysostom’s celebrated saying in reference to the Shekinah, or Ark of Testimony, visible Revelation of God, among the Hebrews; ‘The true Shekinah is Man!’” Farther down on the same page Carlyle cites Novalis: “‘There is but one Temple in the Universe...and that is the Body of Man.’” Carlyle reiterates this belief in his own words, “We are the miracle of miracles, —the great inscrutable mystery of God.”25 It is hard to believe that this is the same Thomas Carlyle who courted, and finally achieved political infamy for himself by issuing increasingly vitriolic denunciations of the democratic and humanitarian—“progress-of-the-species”—movements, defending in rather obnoxious terms the institution of racial slavery and, according to some, idolizing authoritarian dictators.26

24 Ibid


As we said, Carlyle’s most scandalous political writings were not published until several years after *Heroes*, but this critical stance toward democracy’s excess is evident in his earlier work. In “Characteristics,” for example, we find a typical statement of Carlyle’s position. The underlying problem, as we have said, is self-consciousness. “Never since the beginning of time was there, that we hear or read of, so intensely self-conscious a society. Our whole relations to the Universe and our fellow-man have become an inquiry, a Doubt.” Rationalism has torn asunder the whole fabric of tradition. Under these novel circumstances, the only methods society can produce to cure its woes are artificial, mechanical, panaceas. Carlyle fears that, at best, such “cures” are capable merely of forestalling the inevitable process of degeneration.

The whole Life of Society must now be carried on by drugs: doctor after doctor appears with his nostrum, of Cooperative Societies, Universal Suffrage, Cottage-and-Cow Systems, Repression of Population, Vote by Ballot. To such height has the dyspepsia of Society reached; as indeed the constant grinding internal pain, or from time to time the mad spasmodic throes, of all Society do otherwise too mournfully indicate.27

The visible symptoms of this social disease are easy enough to observe. They are the woes of modern industrial society with which we are still familiar: alienation, avarice, labor troubles, criticism of property, and criticism of poverty. “Sad to look upon: in the highest stage of civilisation, nine-tenths of mankind have to struggle in the lowest battle of savage or even animal man, the battle against Famine.”28

But the roots of the problem lay not in these rapidly changing material conditions. Despite the undeniable significance of rapid socioeconomic change, such physical troubles are the reverberations of a deeper spiritual disorder. “Nothing [any longer] acts from within outwards in undivided healthy force; everything lies impotent, lamed, its force turned inwards,

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27 “Characteristics,” p. 82.

28 Ibid., p. 84.
and painfully ‘listens to itself.”’³⁹ Men have forgotten God, and societies are trying to do without Him. Moreover, what religion remains is not, according to Carlyle, “healthy religion, vital, unconscious of itself; that shines forth spontaneously in doing of the Work, or even in preaching of the Word…. Instead of heroic martyr Conduct, and inspired and soul-inspiring eloquence, whereby religion itself were brought home to our living bosoms...we have ‘Discourses on the Evidences.’”³⁰ Society is infected to its very core with the infirmity of doubt, disbelief, skepticism, materialism, fatalism, and calculation. The only genuine cure for this disease is spiritual regeneration; and one cannot effect this through ballot-boxes or clever feats of constitutional engineering. Men’s souls cannot be saved by mechanical means; and they certainly cannot be saved *en masse*.

In “Characteristics” Carlyle presents a quasi-Rousseauean vision of republican Rome as an example of the healthy society. More often, however, his tendency is to look back to medieval Europe for a model. Alternatively, in “The Hero as Divinity” Carlyle admires ancient Norse culture. He speaks with an intellectually qualified sympathy of those people, who were so simple as to take “the man Odin, speaking with a Hero’s voice and a heart, as with an impressiveness out of Heaven,” for a god. “[Odin’s] people, feeling a response to it in their own hearts, believed this message...thought it a message out of Heaven, and him a divinity for telling it them.” Hence, at bottom, Carlyle’s nostalgia results from his general appreciation of the positive qualities of naive religiosity. In the case of Odin, one simple instance of hero-worship constitutes the initial foundation of social order. As Emerson will say, institutions are the long shadow of one man. “Thus if the man Odin himself have vanished utterly, there is this huge Shadow of him which

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³⁹ At one point Carlyle asserts that the great social trial of the age is to decide “With what degree of vigour a political system, grounded on pure Self-interest, never so enlightened, but without a God or any recognition of the Godlike in man, can be expected to flourish...” (*Essays, Works* I:462).
³⁰ Ibid., p. 85.
still projects itself over the whole History of his People.”

The ties of loyalty and obligation that bind a society, emanate from this original outpouring of admiration for the hero. “I have said, these people knew no limits to their admiration of [Odin]; they had as yet no scale to measure admiration by.” He taught them the necessary initial lesson:

*Valor is still value.* The first duty for a man is still that of subduing *Fear*. We must get rid of Fear; we cannot act at all till then. A man’s acts are slavish, not true but specious; his very thoughts are false, he thinks too as a slave and a coward, till he have got Fear under his feet. Odin’s Creed, if we disentangle the real kernel of it, is true to this hour. A man shall and must be valiant; he must march forward, and quit himself like a man,—trusting imperturbably in the appointment and *choice* of the upper Powers; and, on the whole, not fear at all. Now and always, the completeness of his victory over Fear will determine how much of a man he is.

Carlyle ever sees one psychological alternative: the fear of God versus the fear of everything (and everybody) else.

The sense of loyalty and shared identity long outlives the hero in the forms of religion and tradition. Odin-worship, Carlyle observes, “seems to me the primary seed-grain of the Norse religion, from which all manner of mythologies, symbolic practices, speculations, allegories, songs and sagas would naturally grow.” Alternatively, folk-songs and sagas, speculations and allegories, songs represent later phases of hero worship. “Allegory and Poetic Delineation...cannot be religious faith; the faith itself must first be there, then Allegory enough will gather round it.” Carlyle turns to early Norse culture, rather than classical Greek culture, for the specific reason that it does not exhibit these more distant and sophisticated forms. “Superior

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31 *On Heroes*, p. 29.
32 Ibid., p. 25.
33 Ibid, p. 32.
34 Ibid., p. 38.
sincerity (far superior) consoles us for the total want of old Grecian grace. Sincerity, I think, is better then grace.”

This sincere and simple comportment with reality, that Carlyle so esteems, is not a quality of Odin exclusively among other Norsemen. While it is true that Carlyle characterizes Odin as the “type Norseman” and their “first Thinker”—the first Norseman to discover the intelligible significance of the universe and articulate it in language—Odin personally does not create or substantiate this significance. Odin merely conceives symbols that evoke this significance for a people ready to understand it. Carlyle depicts the appearance of the hero as a small infusion of “real light shining in the center of that enormous camera-obscura image” of the untutored mind. He later qualifies the metaphor: “I called it that small light shining and shaping in the huge vortex of the Norse darkness. Yet the darkness itself was alive; consider that. It was the eager uninstructed Mind of the whole Norse People, longing only to become articulate, to go on articulating even further.” Carlyle sees the religious impulse in this intense and vital darkness. The life-tree figures the kernel of inner experience from which centuries of Northern European civilization would grow. Carlyle insists that it still exerts its influence, even in modern England. “No Homer sang [the] Norse sea-kings; but Agamemnon’s was a small audacity, and of small fruit in the world to some of them; —to Hrolf’s of Normandy, for instance! Hrolf, or Rollo, Duke of Normandy, the wild sea-king, has a share in governing England at this hour.”

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35 Ibid., p. 30. Of course the view that Carlyle endorses here represents a departure from the enlightenment-rationalist view that allegory precedes myth. The opposing view with which Carlyle agrees is more characteristic of romanticism, having been pioneered by thinkers like Vico, Rousseau and Goethe.

36 “Such recognition of Nature one finds to be the chief element of Paganism: recognition of Man, and his Moral Duty, though this too is not wanting, comes to be the chief element only in purer forms of religion” (On Heroes, p. 31).


38 Ibid., p. 33.

39 Ibid., p. 32.
For Carlyle, then, “unconsciousness” has a two-fold significance. On the one hand, unconsciousness is the register of spiritual health. An unconscious sense of the unity, the wholeness, and the consistency of things allows man to bypass metaphysical speculation and attend immediately to the duty nearest at hand. This unprepossessing sense of a connection with the moral whole attends the birth of culture. The essence of faith, unconscious belief halts not to demand evidence, logical or sensible, as a justification for action. Moreover, belief does not have to fly in the face of reason or the evidences. Heroism is active proof of this capacity of connatural nobleness. It is the ideal-type of moral health. However, Carlyle recognizes that this ideal is idyllic and in some ways savage, thus, he rules out the possibility of a complete return to unconsciousness. “Our being is made up of Light and Darkness, the Light resting on Darkness.” Accordingly the disease of futile metaphysics lay dormant in the mind at all times, human nature is constitutionally jeopardized by the “attempt of the mind to rise above the mind; to environ and shut in, or as we say, comprehend the mind. Hopeless struggle, for the wisest, as for the foolishest”\textsuperscript{40} The hopeless struggle of metaphysics is simultaneously a necessary corrective to the savage potential of naive enthusiasm.

On the other hand, unconsciousness is not just an idealization of reality: it is the pragmatic \textit{sine qua non} of human action, and of social functionality. “Metaphysical speculation, as it begins in No or Nothingness, so it must needs end in Nothingness.” Since its power is exhausted within the realm of doubt speculation and inactivity, metaphysics cannot produce the certainty of conviction; rather, “in Action alone can we have certainty.”\textsuperscript{41} The converse of this formula also holds true: in certainty alone do we act, doubt cannot be resolved but by action. Reading the statement this way provides some insight as to the contemporary significance of Carlyle’s sweeping generalization that “society is founded on Hero-worship.” Society relies on a

\textsuperscript{40} “Characteristics,” p. 89.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p. 88.
hierarchical sense of the whole in order to function properly. These ties of obedience and loyalty that bind social superiors and inferiors are ultimately founded on belief. If all belief in the authority of the whole is shattered, then anarchic forces are loosed that may lead eventually to the annihilation of society. No amount of political economy or constitutional engineering can make up for this fact. Accordingly, no theory or ideology can provide for what Carlyle sees as an imminent need of modern society. It is in this context that we should read Carlyle’s unpopular (and satirical42) defense of divine right:

I esteem the modern error, That all goes by self-interest and the checking and balancing of greedy knaveries, and that, in short there is nothing divine whatever in the association of men, a still more despicable error, natural as it is to an unbelieving century, than that of a divine right in people called kings. I say, Find me the true King...and he has a divine right over me. That we knew in some tolerable measure how to find him, and that all men were ready to acknowledge his divine right when found: this is precisely the healing which a sick world is everywhere...seeking after.43

As the “great man” theorist, Carlyle takes it upon himself to defend the ideal of kingship, but not the institutions of monarchy. As the years go on and the tide of European revolution grows ever stronger, Carlyle’s denunciations of democracy, utilitarianism, humanitarianism and political economy become nastier and more frequent. However, by now it should be clear that his criticism is not the product of vulgar elitism, or merely a nostalgic reaction against modern circumstances.

In fact, Carlyle recognizes and approves of many of the insights of modern philosophy. Thinkers like Voltaire, Hume and Gibbon had convinced him that the old social forms were worn out. Carlyle saw their skeptical philosophy, along with its social fermentations, as part of a necessary, albeit infelicitous, phase of history. Though “the practical condition of man in these days is the saddest…. In no time was man’s life what he calls a happy one; in no time can it be

42 Carlyle never promotes a doctrine of blind obedience. See On Heroes p. 5.

43 On Heroes, p. 199.
so.”44 The meaning of human life ever resides in man’s existential struggle with anxiety, uncertainty and want, both spiritual and material; yet by putting our effort to the scarce (or abundant) materials given to us, it is possible to withstand “the pressure of things outward” and make for ourselves a purposeful existence. Carlyle depicts this perennial struggle as nothing short of the battle between good and evil. “Evil, in the widest sense we can give it, is precisely the dark, disordered material out of which man’s Freewill has to create an edifice of order and Good. Ever must Pain urge us to Labour; and only in free Effort can any blessedness be imagined for us.”45

As Carlyle maintains, belief is key to overcoming evil and achieving the highest human good of “blessedness.” Faith enlivens the “inward force” of man, enabling him to withstand the outward pressures of earthly existence. “It is by Faith that man removes mountains...” Faith imparts to man “an inward Willingness; a world of Strength wherewith to confront a world of Difficulty.”46 What alarms Carlyle about his own epoch is its enthusiastic hostility towards faith. Modern philosophy gives rise to an apotheosis of doubt and disbelief. Forces of rationalism, scientism and mechanism bring about the forgetting of God and the sterilization of faith. One might see this as the unintended consequence of the modern attempt to quarantine faith, as one would a dangerous virus. Carlyle sees the initial phase of this movement as salutary. Institutions such as the papacy (which died in the Reformation) and monarchy (which died in the French Revolution) in fact had ceased to embody the ideals of spiritual and secular order. But the later phase of enthusiastic rationalism precipitates ill-begotten projects to reconstruct the social order that fail, with fatal consequences, to account for the basic facts of human nature:

44 “Characteristics,” p. 90.


46 Ibid., p. 91.
Given a world of Knaves, to produce an Honesty from their united action? Were not experiments of this tried before all Europe, and found wanting, when, in that doomsday of France, the infinite gulf of human Passion shivered asunder the thin rinds of Habit; and burst forth all-devouring, as in seas of Nether Fire? Which cunningly-devised ‘Constitution,’ constitutional, republican, democratic, sansculottic, could bind that raging chasm together?... It is not by mechanism, but by Religion; not by self-interest, but by Loyalty, that men are governed or governable.

Remarkable it is, truly, how everywhere the eternal fact begins again to be recognized, that there is a Godlike in human affairs...\(^47\)

Modern political philosophy–political economy–commits a grave error; it fails to account for the inward dynamics of human nature, in both its synthetic-heroic-constructive and analytic-revolutionary-destructive manifestations. Beneath Carlyle’s objections to democracy lay the fear that such a distorted view of human nature might be incarnated in social institutions. Political economy is not defective in itself, but we should not mistake it for a complete theory of politics.

Democracy–ancient and modern–institutionalizes uncertainty. Carlyle sees modern democratic culture as fatally flawed, both theoretically and practically, to the extent that its foundations are merely skeptical and instrumentalist. At best, democracy in this *laissez-faire* sense is a transitory stage in the renovation of society. This is true because, in Carlyle’s judgment, what society really needs is a new sense of moral authority to replace the old, outworn forms. For Carlyle, this new sense of authority is more likely to emerge from the revolutionary ideal of careers open to talent than from a return to the old forms of hereditary aristocracy.

*Laissez-Faire*

Just as it institutionalizes the uncertain, democracy defers authority. To conditions that cry for leadership, it delivers *laissez-faire*. Over his literary career, Carlyle would spend a great deal of rhetorical effort trying to enlist one or another powerful class to take up the mantle of moral leadership that the landed classes abdicated. In his earlier years, he sees in the “captains of

\(^47\) Ibid., p. 102.
industry” a possible aristocracy of talent that might abandon their exploitative policies and regulate social production in a more humane way.\footnote{See \textit{Past and Present}. Incidentally, this is one of the books that inspired Friedrich Engels, who translated it into German after having excised all of its religious content of course. See, esp., chapter two of Peter Demetz, \textit{Marx, Engels and the Poets} trans. Jeffrey L. Sammons (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967).} Later he turns to the Aristocracy–whom he had chided earlier as idle pedants–in the hope that he might provoke them to a newfound recognition of their traditional responsibilities. Orderly regimentation of industry and society is an increasingly prevalent Carlylean theme; this supports the conclusion that Carlyle is concerned less with the outward form of government, than that society is substantively well-governed. The end of good government requires the restoration of a social tie of loyalty between rulers and subjects in which the former accept a moral obligation to serve the latter’s well being and the latter manifests enough passive wisdom to submit to fit rulers. Democracy as a form of government, or “no-government,” cannot guarantee this relationship, but Carlyle does not fall victim to the illusion that any other form of government can guarantee this end. No number of ballots, no mass-movement, and no sophisticated account of political economy can guarantee success in a field where moral action and a moral vision are the things needed.

We must stress the point that Carlyle does not reject democracy as an ideal, nor is he an enemy of the “common man.” Carlyle’s qualified approval of the French Revolution shows that he accepts the practical inevitability of democracy, the “march of freedom.” Yet he fears deeply the prospect of governance by public opinion. Why? According to Carlyle, “[the] Universe itself is a Monarchy and Hierarchy.”\footnote{Carlyle, \textit{Latter Day Pamphlets}, in \textit{A Carlyle Reader}, p. 438.} Public opinion cannot constrain the eternal laws of justice, or the tendencies of human nature. “If popular suffrage is not the way of ascertaining what the Laws of the Universe are...then woe is to us if we do not take another method. Delolme on the British Constitution will not save us; deaf will the Parcae be to votes of the House, to leading articles, to
constitutional philosophies.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 448-449.} For Carlyle, the characteristic excess of democracy is too much talk and not enough action. Moreover, when democracies do take action, it is piecemeal and self-interested rather than partaking of a comprehensive social vision. Carlyle is fond of citing the etymology of “Parliaments”: mere talking-chambers.

In his concern for workaday people, however, one may say decidedly that Carlyle is a democrat. Indeed, he considers himself to be more radical even than the Utilitarian philosophical radicals who represented the most “progressive” forces in British politics at the time.\footnote{Carlyle anticipates by a century T.S. Eliot, who fancied himself the first thinker “so radical as to be a conservative.” See David Donovan, \textit{Spiritual Selfhood and the Modern Idea: Thomas Carlyle and T.S. Eliot}. (Xlibris, 2004).} Whereas these thinkers advocate the greatest happiness for the greatest number; Carlyle stands for the infinite value of the person and of moral duty. As John MacCunn observes, “Carlyle is on many points in singular agreement with his democratic friend Mazzini. Like that apostle of the religion of democracy, he believes in the divinity of the individual man. ‘Through every living soul,’ so run his own words, ‘the glory of a present God still beams.’”\footnote{MacCunn, John, \textit{Six Radical Thinkers} (London: Edward Arnold, 1910) p. 146. MacCunn quotes from \textit{Sartor Resartus}.} Carlyle’s advocacy for the laboring classes, so impassioned in works like \textit{Chartism} and \textit{Past and Present}, is conspicuous evidence of where his sympathies lay in the great moral battles of the early industrial age. It was Carlyle who coined the pejoratives “cash nexus,” and the “dismal science,” that one continues to find in social criticism that is derisive of the morality of capitalism and of political economy. Yet Carlyle never places an unqualified faith in the creed that democratic political reform will effect the kinds of social reforms that justice demands.

For Carlyle, what is needed is not extension of the suffrage but reform of Downing Street, a new view of leadership. And the counterpart of good leadership, Carlyle insists, is morally justified obedience. Good follower-ship results neither from mass-enthusiasm, or even
enlightened self-interest; rather, healthy societies are composed of healthy souls. Good follower-ship is leadership in the passive voice: it, too, requires a heroic soul. This is the substance of Carlyle’s radical democratic ideal: a whole world of heroes. “In all this wild revolutionary work, from Protestantism downwards, I see the blessedest result preparing itself: not abolition of Hero-worship, but what I would call a whole World of Heroes... A world all sincere, a believing world: the like has been...will again be,—cannot help being. That were the right sort of Worshippers for Heroes.”

Such a world may be democratic in form, but assuredly it is not “laissez-faire” in moral content. Carlyle, ever the protestant, maintains an attitude of unconcern about the particular institutions that mediate the individual’s relation to the eternal and divine; but he is concerned passionately that this relation should be healthy, sincere. He is a democrat in the sense of salus populi, of vox populi he is more suspicious. Democracy as a political panacea disturbs Carlyle because it threatens to wedge the idol of a Rousseauean “General Will” between the individual and the divine source of authority. “The truth here is exactly as Mazzini puts it... Carlyle believes in God...[and] in the worth of the individual man however humble and homely; what he...abhors and distrusts for evermore is the Collective Will. ‘God and the individual man—Mr. Carlyle sees no other object in the world.’”

In light of Mazzini’s remark, we would do well to re-describe Carlyle’s radical democratic morality as a radically individualist morality. For it is in the idea of socially enforced “collective will” that Carlyle espies the side of democracy to which he is hostile, seeing it as a threat to the moral liberty of the individual: “Let the free, reasonable Will, which dwells in us, as in our Holy of Holies, be indeed free, and obeyed like a divinity, as is its right and its effort:

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53 On Heroes, p. 127.

54 MacCunn, p. 147. Here he quotes from Mazzini’s Writings, 4:80, “The Genius and Tendency of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle” (Smith, Elder & Co. 1890).
perfect obedience will be the silent one.”\textsuperscript{55} This passage recalls the idyllic imagery of silent and unconscious moral virtue that, as we have seen, Carlyle takes as the ideal if not perfectly achievable condition of moral man. However, despite his radical Protestantism, Carlyle is aware that an unmediated relationship with the divine source of moral order is not possible:

Is not all worship whatsoever a worship by Symbols, by \textit{eidola}, or things seen? Whether \textit{seen}, rendered visible as an image or picture to the bodily eye; or visible only to the inward eye, to the imagination, to the intellect: this makes a superficial, but no substantial difference. It is still a Thing Seen, significant of Godhead: an Idol. The most rigorous Puritan has his Confession of Faith, and intellectual Representation of Divine things, and worships thereby; thereby is worship first made possible for him. All creeds, liturgies, religious forms, conceptions that fitly invest religious feelings, are in this sense, \textit{eidola}, things seen. All worship whatsoever must proceed by Symbols, by Idols:—we may say, all Idolatry is comparative, and the worst Idolatry is only \textit{more} idolatrous.\textsuperscript{56}

Carlyle identifies the emerging secular ideologies of the nineteenth century as a sort of new Puritanism that has forgotten God and unwittingly made an idol of the text. This is evident, for example, in his satire of the new institution of the “literary lion” in the essay on Walter Scott. In Heroes, he applies this critique to the ideologies of progress: “Odinism was \textit{Valour}; Christianism was \textit{Humility}, a nobler kind of Valour…. And on the other hand, what a melancholy notion is that, which has to represent all men, in all countries and times except our own, as having spent their life in blind condemnable error…only that we might have the true ultimate knowledge!”\textsuperscript{57}

Carlyle not only recognizes the ersatz-religious quality of secular ideology, he also identifies its particular character as a Pygmalion-like fetishization of the self, or of public opinion, or of the author, through the mirror of the text. Carlyle criticizes public opinion for its tendency to replace un-self-conscious virtue with the deliberate desire to achieve popularity with one’s fellows, to see oneself in print. But the collective will is a mere idol of collective prejudice.

\textsuperscript{55}“Characteristics,” p. 73.

\textsuperscript{56}On Heroes, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., p. 119.
Democracy lowers the barriers against the domination of public opinion, which begins to replace healthy morality. “In fact, what morality we have takes the shape of Ambition, of ‘Honour’; beyond money and money’s worth, our only rational blessedness is Popularity... Wonderful ‘Force of Public Opinion’! We must act and walk in all points as it prescribes.”

Vox Populi Revisited

Carlyle’s critique of public opinion resembles both Plato’s and Rousseau’s. It involves two basic contentions. The first is that the cosmic law is not made by consent; “the Universe is a Monarchy and Hierarchy.” The second is that, ultimately, the pursuit of a “reputation” is a false means to obtaining the true ends of moral virtue. A comparison of Carlyle and Rousseau suggests possible departures from the Platonic tradition, however. Interestingly, these departures lead directly to the question of heroism, or heroic culture. We will treat this issue more thoroughly in other chapters.

In 1853 Carlyle affirmed his affinity with Plato in a letter to Emerson. And at the close of his life he still identifies with Plato “pouring his scorn on the Athenian democracy—‘the charming government, full of variety and disorder, dispensing equality alike to equals and unequals’—and hating that set quite as cordially as the writer of the Latter Day Pamphlets hates the like of it now.” In the Pamphlets Carlyle employs the familiar metaphor of the “ship of state” to explain the disjoint between democratic governance and the cosmic law. “[T]he ship, to get round Cape Horn will find a set of conditions already voted for, and fixed with adamantine rigour by the ancient Elemental Powers, who are entirely careless how you vote.” The tendencies

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58 “Signs of the Times,” p. 51.

59 See the Correspondence of Carlyle and Emerson, ed. Joseph Slater (New York: Columbia UP, 1964) p. 489.

of human nature that circumscribe the moral and political environment are similar to natural conditions. What the state requires is a captain who is expert in these laws; it would be mutinous and absurd for the crew to assume the helm of politics, especially amidst the stormy sea of revolutionary change. Sadly, democracies tend to mutiny in this way, and often the captains they choose are more adept at appeasing the crewmen than navigating the sea.

This metaphor is obviously meant to show that there is a difference between true and false leadership, according to nature. True leadership is statesmanship, false leadership is demagoguery. Democracy cannot claim to be a superior form of government on account of its institutions alone, because the people may elect either type of leader. In fact, the figure of the ship of state warns us that democracy is the regime most inclined to demagoguery, precisely because demagogues feed on public approval and honors. The demagogue is the exact type of honor-seeker that Carlyle describes: one who would forsake the ship to gratify the crew. The demagogue may win the people’s favor easily, by appealing their lowest desires. However, on the whole he does the people a disservice by conniving to appease their appetites rather than pressing on them the sacrifices and demands of citizenship. The demagogue does himself a disservice also, by forsaking genuine virtue to achieve a facile popularity and illusory success. In the long run the ship of state will go aground on account of his non-leadership. The fickleness of public opinion guarantees that his fame will be fleeting in the long run. In the end the demagogue’s spirit would be better compensated by the knowledge of having done a good job well.

Much like Plato, Carlyle finds that good leadership is an art that depends on the ability to discern what is good and prudent. Ideally, “wise” individuals who have such vision ought to rule over the “ignorant” whose insight is dimmer. Of course this aristocratic standard is very hard to meet in practice; but like Plato, Carlyle refuses to reject it to join the growing chorus of hurrahs
for democracy. Much of the “doctrine of the hero” may be interpreted Carlyle’s restatement of the ancient notion that the wise should rule. Ernest Barker attests as much:

[Carlyle’s] love of ordered rhythm is Platonic. The criticism of democracy, as a thing unstable and nugatory, is again Platonic. The Hero of Carlyle is the Philosopher King of Plato. Both opposed to democracy, Plato and Carlyle are none the less both radicals, anxious to pluck up society by the roots and plant it afresh in new soil... As Plato denounces in the Gorgias the shams and simulacra which usurp the place to truth, so Carlyle denounces in Sartor Resartus the clothes and quackeries which hide the light;... Plato denounces oratory ...Carlyle denounces the palavers and talking-shops which pretend to be the way of government. Both hasten from the phenomenal world to the divine Idea which alone is true...both hope for the realization of that Idea in the realm of politics by the hero who has seen and has attained unto wisdom.61

Barker’s comparisons are apt. Yet we should qualify them with the observation that, despite their radicalism, both Plato and Carlyle are fully cognizant of the unlikelihood of ever realizing the divine Idea in political or practical history. To be sure, they never fail to uphold that the Idea of justice is the ultimate bar of moral conduct; but their radicalism consists in just this intellectual tenacity, and not in any pragmatic agenda to pull up society by the roots.

Carlyle’s immediate predecessor, Rousseau, is another radical whose philosophy set him at odds with contemporary civilization. In “The Emergence of a Cross-Cultural Discourse,” Wolfgang Iser explains the position of Carlyle as one of the first thinkers to follow Rousseau in the genre that was initiated “when Rousseau [argued]...that the arts and sciences had not, in actual fact, improved morals but had corrupted them. Such a devastating statement marked the beginning of...cultural critique, sparked off by a crisis of culture that had not been in the orbit of those who had pleaded the superiority of their own culture over the ancients.”62

Rousseau’s notion of incommensurable difference between ancient and modern culture, and his subsequent attempt to bridge that difference, opened up a new field of thought. It also

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foreshadowed the crisis within Western culture that issued in the revolutionary era. The roots of postmodern, multi-cultural, discourse lay here in the West’s attempt to communicate with itself, and its own bygone culture. Carlyle plays a significant part in this effort. Iser continues:

A past cut off from the present is pushed back into an irredeemable pastness, thus inverting the very relationship highlighted in the evolving discourse of history as it had grown out of the Querelle [of Ancients and Moderns]. Furthermore, the Industrial Revolution divided the very nation into two nations: one that participated in the growing wealth, and another that had to bear the hardships. Crisis as a waning belief in a set of values—a belief indispensable for the stability of a culture—meant a split within the nation that eventually resolved itself into a nation of two cultures.

Thomas Carlyle was one of the first intellectuals who not only had forebodings of such a situation but gave expression to his fears in order to remedy what the crisis had laid bare. The rifts that had opened up in what one had been led to believe was a homogenous culture could no longer be closed by the discourse of history, for its inherent optimism as regards achieving perfection by progress had been shattered. Consequently, a renegotiation between past and present became an issue for Carlyle, which he tried to solve by translating the past into the present and also by transposing different cultures into his own.63

There is good reason to believe that Carlyle understands himself as being engaged in a literary discourse with Rousseau, in particular. To Carlyle, Rousseau is especially important because of the way that Rousseau’s “political evangel” sets civilization against itself. In “The Hero as Man of Letters,” Carlyle reiterates the belief that “the French Revolution found its Evangelist in Rousseau. His semi-delirious speculations on the miseries of civilised life, the preferability of the savage to the civilised, and suchlike, helped well to produce a whole delirium in France generally.”64

As the French Revolution is the signal event of modern European history, Rousseau’s significance radiates far beyond France. Carlyle sees the revolution as the one solid reality amidst a sea of semblance and confusion. “Cost what it may, reigns of terror, horrors of French

63 Ibid.

64 On Heroes., p. 200.
Revolution or what else, we have to return to truth. Here is a truth, as I said: a Truth clad in hellfire, since they would not but have it so!—“65 It may not be understatement to say that Carlyle saw the intellectual horizon of modernity embodied in Rousseau and the events that he inspired—for better or for worse.

Carlyle’s appraisal of Rousseau as a hero is instructive for two reasons: first, because it can tell us a great deal about Carlyle’s view of his times; and secondly, because Carlyle’s critique of Rousseau is a touchstone for Carlyle’s own social philosophy. By comparing his agreements and disagreements with Rousseau, we can gain a better understanding of what is “modern” and “anti-modern” in Carlyle’s politics.

65 Ibid., p. 231.
Chapter Seven: Political Education in *On Heroes*

Hero-worship would have sounded very strange to those workers and fighters in the French revolution. Not reverence for Great Men; not any hope or belief, or even wish, that Great Men could again appear in the world! Nature, turned into a ‘Machine,’ was as if effete now; could not any longer produce Great Men: I can tell her, she may give up the trade altogether, then; we cannot do without Great Men! But neither do I have any quarrel with that of ‘Liberty and Equality’; with the faith that, wise great men being impossible, a level immensity of foolish small men would suffice. It was a natural faith then and there. ‘Liberty and Equality; no Authority needed any longer. Hero-worship, reverence for such Authorities, is itself a falsehood; no more of it! We have had such forgeries, we will now trust nothing…. I find this, among other things, in that universal cry of Liberty and Equality; and find it very natural, as matters then stood.

* Carlyle, *On Heroes*

**On Modern Heroes**

In this chapter we shall investigate Thomas Carlyle’s political thought with more depth and specificity than previous chapters, paying special attention to the side of Carlyle’s political thought that we called his “democratic morality.” Carlyle’s moral convictions, manifested in his heroic individualism, stand in tension with his chief political aim, namely the rehabilitation of authority. Most of the confusion and difficulty that attends the interpretation of Carlyle’s politics can be traced to this basic tension between Carlyle’s belief in the autonomy of the clear-sighted individual and his equally powerful recognition of the need for some concrete social authority, beyond mere public opinion. Following thinkers like Kant, Rousseau and Goethe.¹ Carlyle turns inward to find the basis of authority in the moral autonomy of the individual. But for Carlyle, the philosophy of moral autonomy—the belief in the infinite moral value of the individual—does not underwrite the authority of the collective or general will. Carlyle has little faith in the wisdom of public opinion, that “level immensity of foolish small men,” as a guide to political action. Like Burke, Carlyle sees tradition as the authentic repository of collective wisdom; and the

¹ The case for these thinkers’ individualism is argued by Ernst Cassirer in *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe*, trans. James Gutmann, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1945).
manifestation of tradition is in customs and habits, not fickle opinion. This extreme philosophical and pragmatic distrust of public opinion signals Carlyle’s departure from Rousseau, who endorses the sovereignty of the “general will.” Carlyle’s defense of the “minority of one” against the whims of public opinion puts him in a class of sympathetic critics of democracy that includes thinkers like Tocqueville, J.S. Mill, and of course, Emerson and Nietzsche.

Yet this does not disqualify Carlyle as a modern democratic moralist. As Emerson observes, Carlyle belongs to a class of modern thinkers and artists who have “effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state…. Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common [is] explored and poetized” in their writing.²

This writing is blood-warm. Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote. The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature. This perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries. Goethe, in this very thing the most modern of the moderns, has shown us, as none ever did, the genius of the ancients.³

Carlyle’s lectures on Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History is our central text. In Heroes, Carlyle, too, looks to Goethe as the chief writer of the age, the first of the moderns:

I consider that, for the last hundred years, by far the notablist of all Literary Men is…Goethe. To that man too, in a strange way, there was given what we may call a life in the Divine Idea of the World; vision of the inward divine mystery: and strangely, out of his Books, the world rises imaged once more as godlike, the workmanship and temple of a God…. Our chosen specimen of the Hero as Literary Man would be this Goethe…. [For] I consider him to be a true Hero: heroic in what he said and did, and perhaps still more in what he did not say and did not do; to me a noble spectacle: a great heroic ancient man, speaking and keeping silence as an ancient Hero, in the guise of a high-bred, high-cultivated Man of Letters!⁴


³ Ibid., p. 58.

*On Heroes* is a representative volume, not only because it resonates Carlyle’s Goethe-inspired elevation of the common. *Heroes* also gives voice to Carlyle’s assembled views on crucial political topics such as the meaning of liberty; the historical role of democracy; the perennial necessity of leadership; the relation between liberty and authority; and the relation between politics and religion. Throughout *Heroes*, Carlyle variously relates these topics to one another to compose a complete, if not systematic, vision of modernity.

Perhaps some more explanation is in order before we proceed to speak for “Carlyle the democrat.” To anyone familiar with the literature on Carlyle, “Carlyle the democrat” may seem a strange, even suspicious, persona. In particular, that portion of scholarship which does weigh in on Carlyle’s politics tends to depict the “prophet” and “sage” more as an authoritarian than a democrat. Carlyle has been labeled everything from arch-fascist arch-socialist. Owing to his political-philosophical radicalism and his polemical stance towards democratic institutions, he is rarely counted among the intellectual cheerleaders for liberal democracy.

To be sure, in Carlyle’s measurement, modern democratic institutions are unequal to the chief political task of forming the character of citizens. The sense in which he regards democracy as “anarchy,” “no-government,” inadequate to the needs of subjects and insensitive to the duties of rulers, is expressed unequivocally in a passage like this one, from the *Latter Day Pamphlets*:

> Alas, on this side of the Atlantic and on that, Democracy, we apprehend, is forever impossible! So much, with certainty of loud astonished contradiction from all manner of men at present, but with sure appeal to the Law of Nature and the ever-abiding Fact, may be suggested and asserted once more. The Universe itself is a Monarchy and Hierarchy; large liberty of “voting” there, all manner of choice, utmost free-will; but with conditions inexorable and immeasurable annexed to every exercise of the same. A most free commonwealth of “voters,” but with Eternal Justice enforced by Almighty Power!\(^5\)

This summary indictment of democracy contains the germ of all Carlyle’s reactionary affinities. For Carlyle, democracy is “impossible” if it means that mere devices such as ballot-boxes, declarations of right, or theories of government are capable of overruling the eternal law of

nature. Democracy is impossible, especially, if it suborns the fantasy that by such conventions
the winds of public opinion can topple the monarchical edifice of fact; or that leaderless equality
can produce better governance than loyal hierarchy between leaders and followers based on
mutual recognition of a higher authority, submission to a common purpose. As we have seen,
Carlyle characterizes this fallacious enthusiasm for democracy as a rotten fruit of the great
political, economic and spiritual idol of his age: *laissez-faire*.

*Laissez-faire Revisited*

The philosophy of *laissez-faire* receives an inordinate amount of scorn in Carlyle’s political
writings. The apparent reason is that, for Carlyle, this “hands-off” doctrine—a product,
specifically, of the political economy of capitalism—symbolizes an entire set of social
phenomena peculiar to the Industrial and Democratic age. More than just an economic principle,
Carlylean *laissez-faire* is a synecdoche that characterizes a whole social order. Just as he portrays
the corrupt aristocracy in economic terms, as false notes of currency, Carlyle satirically chalks up
their abdication of *noblesse oblige* to the logical consequences of the *laissez-faire* creed.

In a manner befitting the modern prophet, Carlyle conceives of *laissez-faire* as a sort of
gospel, an account of moral truth that aspires to hegemony over everyday, practical life. Carlyle
declares this modern “Mammon-Gospel” to be hopelessly inadequate, and urges its speedy
demise. He summarizes:

In brief, all this…of Supply-and-demand, Competition, Laissez-faire, and Devil take the
hindmost, begins to be one of the shabbiest Gospels ever preached; or altogether the
shabbiest. Even with Dilettante Partridge-nets, and at horrible expenditure of pain, who
shall regret to see the entirely transient, and at best somewhat despicable life strangled
out of it?... Leave all to egoism, to ravenous greed of money, of pleasure, of applause;—it
is the Gospel of Despair. Man is a Patent-Digester, then: only give him Free Trade, Free
digesting-room; and each of us digest what he can come at, leaving the rest to Fate!”

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Carlyle connects *laissez-faire* to all of the other despairing-gospels of the eighteenth century such as skepticism, materialism and atheism. For Carlyle, these hopeless creeds reflect the most “unbelieving” era in all of history; “such an ocean of sordid nothingness, shams, and scandalous hypocrisies, as never weltered in the world before.”

It is proper that all these philosophies, so odious to the Sage, should be classified as gospels of despair. For, although the philosophical fruits of modern skepticism seem to liberate humanity from the oppressive burdens of ignorance and superstition, Carlyle discerns that they can do so only by resigning humanity’s fate to the more impersonal, and more inscrutable, forces of physical (and psychological) necessity. As Hume finally exposed, modern philosophy denies to the intellect any capacity for genuine knowledge regarding either the causes or purposes of things. In this view, man hardly can understand, let alone affect, his own destiny. Carlyle sees democracy and *laissez-faire* as social and economic concomitants of modern skepticism. Accordingly, these beliefs turn over the direction of human life to abstract causes—public opinion, the “general will,” or the invisible hand of the market, for example—mysterious invisible mechanisms the operation of which man can speculate about, but never understand.

This is not to say that Carlyle rejects modern ideas entirely. As we have seen, he takes a complex view of modernity, affirming the need to clear away the metaphysical dead weight of the past, while denying that modern philosophy contains in itself the resources to overcome its own skepticism. Appropriately, this relationship plays itself out in Carlyle’s own biography: in his early attraction to the philosophical radicals, the Utilitarians, and his later rejection of Benthamism as “an eyeless heroism.” Utilitarianism represents a noble attempt to ameliorate man’s estate, but one that fails ultimately, for want of insight. The amelioration of physical misery, however desirable, is not enough to satisfy man’s moral nature. For man is not a “Patent-

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8 *On Heroes*, p. 173.
“Digester” but a rational and spiritual being whose ultimate satisfaction lay in fulfillment of the soul, not the stomach.

Because of his tendency to indulge in pessimistic harangues, it may be hard to keep in mind that, in fact, Carlyle insists that the world is a place of hope. But only by recalling this point can we fully appreciate Carlyle’s abiding fear that the mechanistic fatalisms of modern philosophy would eventually obscure man’s inner, moral, nature from view. As he would reiterate to Emerson, Carlyle considers it the chief task of his century to correct these fatalisms by ushering in a new era of belief. Carlyle’s view of the hero is motivated in important ways by this sense of historical duty. Time and again his heroic figures emerge from a chaotic scene: Beginning in a “minority of one,” the hero bears the standard of invisible order like a divine missionary, to stake its claim in the everyday world. One by one the restless souls of common men come to see in this order the true path to moral and spiritual freedom. Freedom, for Carlyle, means answering to the call of moral reality, one’s duty; which, if one cannot always determine it for oneself, one can learn from the example of a wise leader or teacher.

We have seen that Carlyle is among the first to regard the French Revolution not as a beginning, but as the end of the reign of enlightenment ideas. Ironically, it is the very attempt to put the enlightenment into practice that erodes its claim to improve in all respects on the ancient condition of man. Just as the Revolution visited wrath on the decadent aristocrats, the ensuing Terror proved the bankruptcy of enlightenment “theories of politics” for producing the kind of moral leadership necessary to rebuild from the ashes a nation that nearly destroyed itself. Not the intellectual “man of letters,” but the clever, scheming and industrious Bonaparte emerges as hero in this context; seizing the authority king from a republic incapable of directing its own affairs.

Of course, Napoleon’s brand of heroism hardly rises to the standard set by most of Carlyle’s historical heroes. Frankly, it is hard today for the moralist to think of Napoleon as a great leader, let alone a great teacher. Indeed, in Carlyle’s view Napoleon ceases to be a hero in his own lifetime, as soon as he begins to employ falsehoods for the sake of his own glory and to
the detriment of his country. That Napoleon can be seen as a hero at all indicates how seriously Carlyle frets over the modern crisis of authority, however.

The failure of eighteenth-century social theory can be traced to its propensity to neglect the human element of tradition and to rely instead on mechanical abstractions, as if society is a simple machine that will go on successfully with only self-interest to fuel it. This may be true within the circumscribed limits of economic theory. However, the important thing to recognize is that when Carlyle attacks *laissez-faire* he does not intend an economic policy; he does not even think of it *primarily* as an economic policy but rather as a major abandonment of custom that is bound to produce a new way of life, a new set of habits. In this sense Carlyle agrees with Rousseau’s basic position that the problems of political economy cannot be answered on their own terms, but must be seen from the perspective of a broader political philosophy.

**The Hero as King Revisited**

For both Carlyle and Rousseau, the historic shift that classical political economy reflects—the shift from the household to the state as the basic unit of production and distribution—calls for a re-conceptualization of paternal authority. In pursuit of this modern paternalism Carlyle, like Rousseau, attempts to renovate the ancient notion of the king as father of the people. More importantly, they both construct a new the role for the author as legislator, and for texts as moral and political institutions. But unlike Rousseau, who, within his text, identifies the king with the great legislator, Carlyle stresses the heroic side of kingship. In other words Carlyle puts the author before the text, while Rousseau puts the text before the author.

As we saw earlier, heroic authority relies not only on the science of legislation but on strength of soul. Strength of soul is a personal quality that supports an authority different in kind from that of the collective wisdom embodied in traditions and institutions. In relation to the political wisdom for legislation, one may say that in a “great legislator” both qualities are present, more or less. Yet a tension must be recognized as well, between the personal authority
of strength of soul and the collective wisdom of the *nomoi*. Philosophers, in all ages, extol the superior virtues of the law as an impartial instrument of justice, yet philosophers also have observed the law’s greatest shortcoming: being composed of generalizations, the law cannot speak to every particular case. Strength of soul is that equanimity of character which allows the clear-sighted judge to assert that the law is inadequate, in those cases where it errs. This exceptional quality informs Carlyle’s portrait of the hero as an iconoclast, a minority of one. As an antidote to the modern fatalisms that Carlyle so deplores—laws of motion, laws of history, laws of interest—often the Carlylean hero figures the adversary of vulgar scientism:

Napoleon lived in an age when God was no longer believed; the meaning of all Silence, Latency, was thought to be Nonentity: he had to begin not out of the Puritan Bible, but out of poor Sceptical *Encyclopedies*…

Yet Napoleon *had* a sincerity: we are to distinguish between what is superficial and what is fundamental in insincerity. Across these outer manoeuvrings and quackeries of his, which were many and most balmable, let us discern withal that the man had a certain instinctive ineradicable feeling for reality; and did base himself upon fact, so long as he had any basis. He has an instinct of nature better than his culture was. His *savans*, Bourrienne tells us, in that voyage to Egypt, were one evening busily occupied arguing that there could be no God. They had proved it, to their satisfaction, by all manner of logic. Napoleon looking up into the stars answers, ‘Very ingenious, Messieurs: but *who made all that*?’ The Atheistic logic runs-off from him like water; the great Fact stares him in the face: ‘Who made all that?’ So too in Practice: he, as every man that can be great, or have victory in this world, sees, through all entanglements, the practical heart of the matter; drives straight towards that.9

We have only to look to Luther for another obvious example; but nearly every Carlylean hero constitutes a faithful “minority of one” at some point or another. From this position the heroic individual stands in lonely opposition to the law: the law of physical nature; the law of tradition; the law of interests. The hero may not be the only soul who sees through the shortcomings of the law to the practical heart of the matter, but he is the only one with the audacity to stand up against it. “Luther did what every man that God has made has not only the right, but lies under the sacred duty, to do: answered a Falsehood when it questioned him, Dost

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9 Ibid., pp. 238-239.
thou believe me?—No!—At what cost soever, without counting of costs, this thing behoved to be done.”

The prophetic persona of the hero as a “Breaker of Idols” is underplayed drastically in Rousseau’s account of the hero as legislator. Carlyle, on the other hand, celebrates this revolutionary aspect of heroism; even as he tries, like Rousseau, to confine its effects within the text. While the Carlylean hero’s silent allegiance lay with the invisible reality of moral order, he may be obliged, precisely on this account, to wrestle with semblances, and speak up against worldly institutions that claim to represent this order falsely. Carlyle commemorates Luther as “a Christian Odin,—a right Thor once more, with his thunder-hammer, to smite asunder ugly enough Jotuns and Giant-monsters [of semblance]!”

Thus, iconoclasm plays an important role in the drama of history as Carlyle conceives it. It is safe to say that Carlyle interprets this drama from a religious point of view. There are two interconnected and recurring conflicts in Carlyle’s history: On the one hand there is a conflict between belief and unbelief; on the other hand, there is a tension between spirit and matter. For Carlyle, an age of belief approximates an ideal condition in which material practices are consonant with spiritual insights. “Material practices”—customs and habit of life—are the same as laws in the broadest sense. In an age of belief, the letter of the law is consonant with its spirit. But how does one know whether everyday practices are in accord with spiritual truth? Although Carlyle steadfastly refuses to express spiritual truth in a dogmatic form, we have seen that he does define this phenomenally, as the state of “unconsciousness.” What Carlyle means by “unconsciousness” is un-self-consciousness, an enmity towards egotism at the level of basic motivations. Its opposite is psychological egotism, self-consciousness, Rousseauean amor-

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10 Ibid., p.136.
11 Ibid., p. 122.
12 Ibid., p. 128.
13 See “Characteristics.”
propre. Carlyle argues that excessive self-consciousness, or egoistic individualism, is a sure sign of disease in both souls and societies. Belief, then, is moral and psychological healthiness.

The Religion of Literature Revisited

Carlyle, like Rousseau, criticizes modern political thought for its failure to resolve the moral problems engendered by enlightenment rationalism. Where rationalism fails, Carlyle turns to religion for the moral adhesive necessary to bind individuals together in a community. However, following Rousseau and more especially Goethe, Carlyle’s religion is not traditional religion, but the so-called religion of literature. The central “sacraments” of the religion of literature are the habits of private reading and personal interpretation. Hence, from the beginning, the religion of literature faces an insurmountable obstacle. As we shall see, Carlyle is not oblivious to this problem but demonstrates sensitivity to the tragic flaws of the text as a moral institution, and the inherent shortcomings of writing as a type of action. Nevertheless, in spite of these shortcomings, Carlyle takes up the vocation of author in response to his insight into “the practical heart of the matter.” The world of private readers is and will remain a world of individuals; and the highest aspiration of this world is the seemingly paradoxical goal of a heroic individualism: “not abolition of Hero-Worship, but rather what I would call a whole World of Heroes. If Hero mean {sincere man}, why may not every one of us be a Hero?”

The modern virtue of sincerity is Carlyle’s inheritance from Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau identifies the moral corruption of civilization as the result of mankind’s increasing dependence on artifice. Sincerity means faithfulness to one’s nature over and against the demand of conformity to convention. Significantly, Carlyle’s and Rousseau’s renovation of civil religion is motivated by much the same concerns. Rousseau, like Carlyle, claims that the moral resources of modern philosophy are inadequate to the most comprehensive aim of politics—building the

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14 On Heroes, p. 127.
character of good citizens. We have lost sight of the demands and rewards of good character in our feverish modern pursuit of commodious living: the main objective of modern political philosophy, and its offspring, political economy.

Thus Rousseau attempts to correct the deficiency of political economy by renovating the ancient institution of civil religion. Earlier we saw that the figure of the “great legislator” and the institution of the civil religion form one half of Rousseau’s science of politics. Although Carlyle is ambivalent in his estimation of the ultimate worth of Rousseau’s political philosophy, he refuses to dismiss Rousseau’s achievement entirely. The undeniable achievement of Rousseau’s revolutionary “gospel” lay in its recognition that a gospel is necessary at all. If Carlyle cannot approve of Rousseau’s theory of government in its specifics, he can applaud Rousseau for unmasking the moral failing of rationalism.

Rousseau discovered that modern rationalism, proceeding unrelentingly by the analytical method, fails to give a compelling basis to moral or political authority but instead constantly undercut its own conclusions. As Rousseau’s contemporary Hume had discovered (albeit in a different way) the analytical method finally yields to radical epistemological skepticism regarding all sorts of causes and first principles. The eventual result of modern rationalism, which takes as its foundation the doubting mind of the individual, is total collapse the world of meaning into the groundlessness of the individual mind. The cases of Rousseau and Hume demonstrate two alternative reactions to this discovery. For Hume meaning is externalized as pure syntax. And Rousseau, as Carlyle, and more recently, Jean Starobinski, describe him, is “intense.” As Rousseau himself claims, each individual is a world unto himself. All meaning is personal and the translation of personal languages may be impossible. In another context we saw that Carlyle demonstrates Rousseau’s intensity in terms of his constitutional inability to live with

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others. Starobinski offers a more succinct diagnosis of Rousseau’s intensity, explaining how it relates to his religion of self-identity and his practice of authorship:

Jean-Jacques decides to write and to hide. But he writes only in anticipation of the miraculous moment when words will cease to be necessary, and he hides only in the hope that there will come a time when he will only have to show himself in order to be recognized. In Rousseau’s mind ‘the detour of words’ is in fact a circular route, ending in a moment that resembles the primordial one before any words were uttered. Ideally the return ends all misunderstandings…. It is a rebirth…a new beginning, a reawakening. Under Rousseau’s pen, language denied the world of others: I am not like you, I do not recognize your values. But the moment of return denies this negative language. The writer’s absence, his exile in literature, is converted into a mute presence…. Words are abolished, leaving behind, in a pure state, what language was intended to prove, namely, Jean-Jacques’s innocence, truthfulness and uniqueness.16

Clearly Rousseau’s religion of self-intensity—and consequently Carlyle’s—bears the lasting impression of modern philosophy. Although the two thinkers take quite different approaches to religion, both of them seek to preserve a residue of the doubt and ambiguity regarding ultimate things that reflects the uniqueness of individual experience.

What differentiates Carlyle’s approach to the religion of literature from Rousseau’s? The answer to this question is implicit in the “clothes-philosophy,” which is primarily a philosophy of language, custom and habit. (Carlyle intentionally plays on the double meaning of “habit,” as both garment and custom.) Carlyle demonstrates a different understanding of the limits of language. Instead of harboring Rousseau’s “Adamitic” illusion that transparent communication is possible, or even desirable, Carlyle likens language to clothing, and characterizes clothing as a sort of second skin.

In the guise of his alter-ego, the German Idealist Teufelsdrockh, Carlyle flirts with Rousseau’s Adamism, but in the guise of the English Editor, Carlyle qualifies this radical view:

What, have we got not only a Sanscullotist, but an enemy of Clothes in the abstract? A new Adamite, in this century, which flatters itself that it is the Nineteenth, and destructive both to Superstition and Enthusiasm?

Consider, thou foolish Teufelsdrockh, what benfits unspeakable all ages and sexes derive from clothes. For example, when thou thyself, a watery, pulpy, slobbery newcomer in this Planet, sattest muling and puking in thy nurse’s arms...what hadst thou been, without thy blankets, and bibs, and other nameless hulls? A terror to thyself and mankind! ...Nay, now when the reign of folly is over, or altered, and thy clothes are not for triumph but for defence, hast thou always worn them perforce, and as a consequence of Man’s Fall; never rejoiced in them as in a warm moveable House, a Body round thy Body, wherein that strange THEE of thine sat snug, defying all variations of climate?

...the truth is, Teufelsdrockh, though a Sanscullotist, is no Adamite: and much perhaps as he might wish to go forth before this degenerate age “as a Sign,” would nowise wish to do it, as those old Adamites did, in a state of Nakedness. The utility of clothes is altogether apparent to him: nay perhaps he has an insight into their more recondite, and almost mystic qualities, what we might call the omnipotent virtue of Clothes, such as was never before vouchsafed to any man. 17

It is important to take note that what Carlyle says of textiles applies equally, if not primarily, to texts. In contrast to Carlyle’s equanimity, Rousseau makes paradoxical demands of his texts. For example, in the Social Contract, Rousseau burdens his civil religion with the task of reconciling the true religion of the individual with the indispensable necessity of a public dogma. The civil religion itself takes the form of a number of articles of basic law, to which citizens must assent in public or face severe penalty. Rousseau does not endorse coercive force lightly, but his willingness to do so here, reflects his confidence that close adherence to the text will supply the excesses of self-preference, leading to the worthy result of ethically autonomous individuality.

At the same time as Rousseau discovers the inadequacy of modern political philosophy—in the essay on Political Economy—he expresses a belief that the Law as the exclusive voice of the authority of the community:

How can it happen that men obey without having anyone above them to issue commands, that they serve without having a master, that they are all the freer when each of them,

acting under an apparent compulsion, loses only that part of his freedom with which he can injure others? These wonders are the work of the Law. It is to Law alone that men owe justice and liberty; it is this salutary organ of the will of all that makes obligatory the natural equality between men; it is this heavenly voice that dictates to each citizen the precepts of public reason, and teaches him to act in accordance with the maxims of his own judgment, and not to be in contradiction to himself.\(^\text{18}\)

For Carlyle, by contrast, the appeal to the law stands in need of supplement, namely, by an appeal to judgment. Accordingly, Carlyle recognizes a perennial difference between the law and the legislator-as-judge. This is not to say that Carlyle rejects the rule of law; yet, he recognizes an excess in a Rousseauean appeal to the authoritative text. “Thus unreliable as a means of contact between the mind and externality, words are not to be unduly revered: ‘Be not the slave of Words.’”\(^\text{19}\) Carlyle’s revelation of great souls aims to correct the appeal to authoritative words. For men make language, even as language makes men.

Reverence as a Corrective to Titanism

Hence, it is safe to say that, when Carlyle praises the character of Mohammad he has no intention of converting his audience to Islam. What, then, was his purpose? What in the voice of Mohammad so resonated with Carlyle that it emboldened him to proclaim the founder of a (potentially rival) religion, nation and empire, as a hero? Carlyle does not want to turn out Islamists, Catholics, Bardolaters, Protestants, Presbyterians, Puritans, Encyclopedists, Neo-Adamists, or anything else—including of course “Carlyleans.” But who can doubt that Carlyle sees himself as a public evangelical, intent on proselytizing individual souls that they might become heroic, “sincere men, believing men”? This leads us to a question of pressing significance: what is the nature of Carlyle’s belief in belief?


To comprehend the sensationalism of Carlyle’s defense of Mohammad, it helps to recall that the prevailing image of Mohammad at the time was one of a quack and a charlatan. Carlyle’s effort to correct this image of the Prophet resembles his similar efforts on behalf of Cromwell, the protector; he undertakes to renovate a monumental historical figure, for no evident purpose but to return the figure to its due place in History’s pantheon, repaired of the distortions, gross magnifications and corrosive diminutions that come along with human tradition. Beneath all the disfigurement, Carlyle discovers that the heroism of Mohammad consists not in his adherence to “Mohammadenism” but in his character as a devout man. Of course Carlyle does not hide from his audience his own misgivings about the Islamic faith. Yet, he implores his listeners: “Call it not false; look not at the falsehood of it, look at the truth of it.” The truth that Carlyle invokes in this context is neither esoteric nor mystical, nor scriptural, but pragmatic: “For these twelve centuries, it has been the religion and life-guidance of the fifth part of the whole kindred of Mankind. Above all things, it has been a religion heartily believed.”

The prevailing attitude of the learned towards the pragmatic “belief in belief,” endorsed by thinkers of such questionable philosophical credentials as Carlyle and Emerson, is marked by anxiety and regarding its possible abuse, unintended or undesirable consequences. On the one hand, there is concern that a vague belief in belief conduces to loose discipline in the regime of religious discipline. On the other hand, belief in belief threatens to undermine the philosophic discipline of critical thinking in such a way that it may induce backsliding towards pernicious provincialism, or whole-hog fundamentalism. Such concerns are not without foundation. The postulate of a “will to believe” appears to some as covert way to bring in theological dogma through the back-door; to others, as an invitation to irrational fanaticism. To a few, the belief in

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20 On Heroes, p. 76.

21 Ibid.

22 This is William James’s term. I take the relationship between Carlyle, Emerson and James as self-evident, at least as regards the belief in belief.
belief may subtend chilling images of twentieth-century ideological nightmares; German Fascism perhaps the first among a host of movements that abused the philosophy of volition in quasi-religious ways.

These movements built on the fragments of the culture that allegedly was dissected by the Enlightenment, “aesthetic” political religions, as a mechanism for mobilizing the masses behind their self-destructive agendas. But the singular moral failure lurking behind all these atrocities is the failure of judgment; that weakness, incapacity or shallowness of character which, amputating the moral legs from the rational being, makes it impossible to take an ethical stand when it is necessary. For two difficulties already inhere in any moral judgment. The first is that one has to be free to judge. That this is an impossible demand—that no one is free from sin—is clear from the familiar proverb “judge not, lest ye be judged.” Yet, on the practical scene befalls a multitude of moments that call for our judgment, and often demand it. There is no way to exit this arena of decision without abdicating one’s freedom. This, then, adumbrates the second difficulty; that being free means making judgments. Hence, when first we judge we begin to err.

Carlyle is sensitive both to the impossibility and the necessity of passing judgment upon others. Being a moralist at heart, the fact is that Carlyle’s turn to the heroic is not motivated by sinister intentions or reactionary fears; but by his confidence in the individual person, grounded in the personal religious experience of God as the true aim of “transcendent admiration.” At first this claim may seem too bold. Once correct the Great Misperception—that Carlyle, despairing anarchy, collapsed before the idols of authority and force, and mistakenly finding the divine essence embodied in Great Men, fell prostrate in “hero-worship”—and the plausibility of this claim increases. First, then, let us secure an antidote to the Great Misperception that Carlyle believes in the saving power of Titanic Men. The antidote is this: It is not that Carlyle desires Titanic Men; rather, he diagnoses the whole condition of modern humanity as Titanic. Without abandoning the belief in human nature, indeed, by relying on it as a guide to interpretation, Carlyle divines the following:
The truth is, men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe, and hope, and work only in the Visible; or, to speak it in other words: this is not a Religious age…. The infinite, absolute character of Virtue has passed into a finite, conditional one… a calculation of the Profitable. Worship…is not recognized among us, or is mechanically explained into Fear of pain, or Hope of pleasure. Our true Deity is Mechanism. It has subdued external nature for us, and we think it will do all other things. We are Giants in physical power: in a deeper than metaphorical sense, we are Titans, that strive, by heaping mountain on mountain, to conquer Heaven also.23

With certain grief, the modern prophet confirms the arrival of the mechanistic dispensation: Titanic man, wielding the ersatz-divine thunderbolt of Natural Science, now dominates and controls physical nature. What is more, Titanic man’s newfound power—like the indifferent laws of mechanism that lay behind it—is unrestricted by consideration of mere humanity. Titanic man may dispose of his thunderbolt at will; he has only to extend his limbs.

From this it follows that “freedom,” understood as independence from physical nature, is another of the signs of the times. In his philosophy/rhetoric of freedom, Carlyle follows Rousseau and Kant (and lays some rhetorical ground for Marx), when he predicts that the aim of this “boundless grinding collision of the New with the Old,” of which the French Revolution “was not the parent…but its offspring,” portends a “higher freedom” than mere “Political freedom…freedom from oppression.” However, instead of sketching a formal theory of moral freedom akin to Rousseau’s account of the General Will, Carlyle vaguely defines this “higher, heavenly freedom” at which the world “dimly aims” as “man’s reasonable service”24—a goal he restates in Heroes in terms of Napoleon’s Revolutionary faith, la carrière aux les talents.

The philosophical rationale behind Carlyle’s dismissal of eighteenth-century “theory” in favor of figurative language lay in his sense that the theoretical—literally, “spectatorial”—mode of viewing nature does not accord with the social reality of life as active participation in a community of meaning, of shared meaning, more or less. To be sure, Titanic man’s incredible

23 “Signs of the Times,” in A Carlyle Reader, p. 46.

24 Ibid. p. 53.
sway over the physical world results precisely from exploiting the Archimedean perspective of theory to the limit. However, in this Archimedean aspect, the theoretical perspective is blind to pragmatic differences: it scrutinizes, criticizes, schematizes, generalizes, universalizes and quantifies everything, at the by now well-known cost of atomizing a reality that is given to experience as a whole. Moreover, spectator-consciousness abstracts the rational from the moral in life.

Few can doubt that our physical life has become safer and more pleasant on account of “mechanism,” and practically no one will deny that it is good to feel safe and pleasant. But the application of mechanical technique to the life of the person in a community portends not commodious but reductive consequences. Carlyle foresees and criticizes the temptation, arising from physical success, to apply the methods of mechanism to the moral world, to man’s soul.

On the whole, as this wondrous planet, Earth, is journeying with its fellows through infinite Space, so are the wondrous destinies embarked on it journeying through infinite Time, under a higher guidance than ours. For the present, as our astronomy informs us, its path lies towards Hercules, the constellation of Physical Power: but that is not our most pressing concern. Go where it will, the deep Heaven will be around it. Therein let us have hope and sure faith. To reform a world, to reform a nation, no wise man will undertake; and all but foolish men know, that the only solid, though a far slower reformation, is what each begins and perfects on himself:

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25 It ought to be said that, on the whole, Carlyle’s politics reflect what we would consider moderate views. His favorite politician was Robert Peel, whose greatest contributions to England are 1) the repeal of the Corn Laws; and 2) the institution of the London police (accounting for the moniker, “Bobbies”). It is well known that Carlyle approved the first, free-trade, measure because he objected to the protectionist tariffs that artificially inflated the price of grain; furthermore, he admired Peel for taking a stand against his own Conservatives (a practical “minority of one”) and risking his career to pass the measure. One can only guess Carlyle’s opinion of the police; his zeal for order inclines to approval, but his general view of human nature suggests he would be wary of overextending their power. Heffer distinguished two Carlylean policies from Chartism, in particular. “Carlyle claims to have provided the ways out of misery, but they need a man resolute enough to execute them. ‘Universal Education is the first great thing we mean; general Emigration is the second.’...The education must be religious; not, as he had written years before, in the mechanistic sense, but by finding men with faith to impart faith to others” The emigration policy, as Heffer goes on to say, reflects Carlyle’s objection to “the Malthusian view that human nature could be tempered to reduce the population by other means: ‘Smart Sally in our alley proves all too fascinating to brisk Tom in yours: can Tom be called on to make pause, and calculate the demand for labour in the British Empire first?’” (All quotes from Heffer, p. 198)

26 “Signs of the Times,” p. 55.
Personal Integrity as a Corrective to “Mechanism”

For Carlyle the success of the scientific and industrial revolutions, and more especially that of the print revolution, render impossible any return to the tribal condition in which community meant collective identity. In other words, Carlyle recognizes individualism as a social fact. Carlyle’s defense of monumental figures like Mohammad and Cromwell amounts to a defense of their integrity. This should remind us that the overwhelming purpose of the “great man theory” of history is to correct the misperceptions of the “fanatic-hypocrite” theory. For the fanatic-hypocrite hypothesis explains human action in mechanical rather than moral terms. Under the influence of this skeptical point of view, it becomes impossible to answer a question that nevertheless confronts the person at all times in this mortal life: “In whom do I place my trust?” Carlyle never wavers in the conviction that the true answer to this question is “God.” The substance of freedom lay in divine trust. Carlyle’s aim, then, is to defend the God of history and nature against the idols of natural science and vulgar scientism. In practice this results in an opposition to the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and adherence to a hermeneutics of trust.

Equally important, however, is that Carlyle does not reject the empirical truth of science. To the contrary, he proposes an alternative “universal history” based on what he sees as an empirically self-evident human capacity for “transcendent admiration” or practically limitless love. The follies of the history of religion result from misunderstanding the transcendent object of this love, specifically, frommistaking men for gods. Whereas the fanatic-hypocrite theory explains hero-worship from the outside, transcendent admiration explains it from the inside, on the basis of dives and emotions that are familiar to experience. These include the desire to have one’s wishes fulfilled, to overcome the fear of others, and to feel secure in one’s sense of moral reality, of duty. A historical science that reduces all human motives to self-preservation cannot

account for the evident fact that human beings actually experience self-transcending passion. Denying this possibility at the outset, historical “materialism” begs the question, and tacitly commits itself to the view that phenomena of courage, self-sacrifice and saintly discipline are so many quaint “absurdities.” Carlyle rejects this view on empirical grounds. The religious impulse is not absurd, nor is it inaccessible to the reasonable mind. To the contrary, he suggests that the religious impulse expresses itself first through the natural feeling of wonder at a nature that is both beautiful and terrible. Secondly, recognition of the man’s moral nature is the culmination of religious insight. To the eye of analysis nature may be an infinitely divisible thing. But our ability to experience creation as creation, to love and revere physical and moral nature as no other creature can, is a datum of our participation in the very highest level of reality. This innate capacity to recognize nature as creation and God as its Creator and designer evinces the divine spark in man’s soul.

Thus the fanatic-hypocrite theory deserves ridicule not because it is demonstrably false, or true—after all, it is non-falsifiable—but because it flies in the face of common experience, rendering the greatest things the smallest. Moreover, it valorizes the pursuit of convenience and wont of conviction characteristic of self-seeking “valet-souls.” Is there really no difference between the satisfaction of a den-dwelling animal and that of a philosopher? Were men really so benighted in the past, to have preferred immortal virtue or eternal grace over the interminable quest for creature comfort? Carlyle does not reject, but rather agrees that in the perspective of history great men shrink down to merely human proportions. Nevertheless, he rejects the implication that great men are merely acquisitive egoists, “valet-souls,” instruments of their circumstances at best, at worst, merely more clever than the rest of us at securing the ultimate goods of secular life. This reinforces the view that the root of “universal human nature” is psychological egoism, the biological imperative of self-preservation and its inescapable corollary, the unending pursuit of convenience. It reinforces Voltaire’s mundane definition of universal humanity; namely, that we all have the same vital organs, sensibility, and movement.
Carlyle denies this egoistic materialism not because he wants to dethrone the principle of “individualism” it claims to represent; for, he is no collectivist. He means to defend the dignity of persons against any shallow interpretation of individualism that would reduce man to his boorish appetites. Any reader of Heroes who can see past the anachronistic bogeyman of “proto-fascism” hardly can doubt that Carlyle neither regards nor recommends Cromwell and Napoleon as terrestrial gods before whom we ought to fall prostrate in “transcendent admiration.” Indeed, that would be closer to Hegel’s view.\(^28\)

Despite that, often, Carlyle’s best critics fall prey the tendency to view him through Hegelian spectacles, Carlyle is no Hegelian; his character Teufelsdrockh was to write a refutation of Hegel. The tendency to see Carlyle as a Hegelian informs two misunderstandings of the “universal history” the Carlyle essays in Heroes, both of which contradict the sense of his text. The first overemphasizes the role of historical progress, while the second reinforces the deification of Carlyle’s “great men.” With respect to the first tendency, critics assume that Carlyle’s opinions on matters of immediate relevance will be found in his final lectures, “The Hero as Man of Letters” and “The Hero as King.” We saw one example of this tendency in Vanden Bosshe’s view, surveyed earlier, that Carlyle’s final two lectures externalize his inner dialogue on the pressing question of authority; and that his final note, “The Hero as King,” signals Carlyle’s ultimate choice for armed prophecy over the power of persuasion. Another critic, Richard Brantley, objects to this bias, asserting that in fact “The Hero as Man of Letters” is the “most pertinent” of Carlyle’s six lectures: “While he admired much of the literature of his

\(^{28}\) The Hegelian “world-historic individual,” unlike the Carlylean hero, is a “product” of his time as well as an indubitable “premise” from which (whom?) ensues the intellectual faith of his temporal dispensation. The world historic individual is a pure instrument of the Idea in history; least of all can he be aware of his fundamental role, lest Reason be tainted by individual prejudice. Carlyle’s view of history is closer to Burke’s in that Carlylean history is nothing but a parade of “prejudices”—habits, customs, laws, beliefs, and so on—that are never more than approximations of truth. Carlyle’s historical sense is anti-historicist, so to speak, because he sees 1) that truth itself is not historically relative; and 2) the apparent relativity of truth is the result of a human fallibility that cuts to the core of the human logos. The fallacy of modern scientific materialism derives from the misplaced concreteness it attributes to the abstractions (e.g. “motives,” “material interests”) it employs to “theorize” history. If history is part of the field of irreducible particularity that, as Aristotle supposes, characterizes human affairs, then no (abstract systematic) “knowledge” of history such as Hegel desires is possible.
day, he found little other promise of heroes in Victorian Britain.”

But Brantley reveals a similar historicist tendency when he isolates “The Hero as Man of Letters” because it is “closest to its historical context,” and proceeds to write off the rest of Heroes because it “addresses itself primarily to the nature of greatness in the far past.” In fact the lectures form a whole and, in particular, the last two lectures ought to be read together: “The Hero as Man of Letters” and “The Hero as King” point up the tension between writing-as-action and revolution-as-action, in an attempt to show the limits of both.

Most importantly, the great man theory is a refutation of Hegel’s mechanistic historicism and a reflection on man’s most enigmatic ability to make his own world. The great man theory is always maligned and grossly misunderstood when this philosophical aim is kept out of sight. Then Carlyle comes off as a sort of fanatic-hypocrite himself, who, in the enthusiasm of his youth, replaces his native Calvinism with a secularized superstition in great men as the saviors of mankind, and then in old age tries to reinforce this withering faith by worshipping at the altar of power and writing the histories of state-builders like Frederick the Great. While no one doubts that Carlyle has his shortcomings, the proto-fascist caricature unduly obscures the legacy of a brilliant political author whom we ignore at our peril. Even if one thinks of Carlyle and his legacy—that is, a great deal of our own “Victorian” heritage—as something to be overcome, it is folly to presume that dismissing it as authoritarian pathology will suffice. It will not. A more serious confrontation with Carlyle reveals a philosophy that is less anachronistic or reactionary than the caricatures would lead us to believe. We may even find that the Victorian prophet has something yet to say to our time.

29 Brantley, p. 65.
30 Ibid.
The popular opinion of Carlyle as nothing but a naïve precursor of fascism stems from a misunderstanding of Carlyle’s motivation for pitting belief against doubt or skepticism. Carlyle is not the enemy of doubt, nor does he wish to overcome it. Carlyle regards doubt as natural. In no way does he recommend the “negation” of doubt through some kind of “irrational” leap. In fact, few know better of the horrendous outcome of this kind of revolutionary psychology than the author of *The French Revolution*. Carlyle merely defends belief *qua* belief. That he does nothing more—and nothing less—leads to the ambiguous consequence that he asserting our need for a quite specific thing, yet in very general terms.

A heavy dose of irony, quite foreign to conventional piety, attaches to Carlyle’s moniker as the Victorian “prophet.” No one would dare to compare him, or for that matter any mere writer, to the founder of a religion. Yet one cannot deny the importance, to Carlyle, of the religious dimension of life. More specifically, one cannot doubt Carlyle’s faith in the sovereignty of moral virtue, which he takes for the crowning aspect of religion. If Carlyle finally abandons institutional Christianity, it is not because he fails to appreciate the role of religion or believes that religion is obsolete, but because he sees traces of the religious experience in too many places to define faith as one particular creed or institution. As we have suggested, Carlyle’s view of religion is pragmatic, not dogmatic. The point of overwhelming importance here is that, primarily, Religion is not one’schurch-creed…. We see men of all kinds of professed creeds attain to almost all degrees of worth or worthlessness under each or any of them. This is not what I call religion, this profession and assertion; which is often only…from the mere argumentative [or logical] region of him, if even so deep as that. But the thing a man does practically believe…lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest.\(^\text{31}\)

\(^{31}\) *On Heroes*, pp. 2-3.
For Carlyle, then, the question of religion is inseparable from that of value, of “worth or worthlessness.” Creeds, just like some ministers, are mere paper currency. However useful and indispensable are professions of faith, the gold standard of value is moral action. For at bottom, words, like all images or signs are *eidola*, mere visible husks by means of which an unutterable personal meaning excites the moral imagination. In the flowering of time and culture, these seeds, actions in the highest sense, grow into the forms of human life—not more words, not primarily; but particular habits, institutions, customs, usages. In this belief Carlyle follows his “spiritual godfather,” Goethe: In the beginning was not the Word, but the Act. This Goethean axiom is a guiding principle of reflection for Carlyle, also. This principle leads away from the outer sense to the inner meaning; from word to thought. More specifically, it points toward a bottomless generative activity of thinking, a commotion at the limits of consciousness that lay underneath the apparent order of language. Constantly, Carlyle returns to the scene of the origin of language, to remind the reader that language is a human creation with mysterious, perhaps divine, origins.

All of this is another way of acknowledging that Carlyle is not a “metaphysician.” Carlyle “never tried to give more than a ‘Life-Philosophy,’ and he never meant to separate this philosophy from his personal experience. In metaphysics as such, as a general system, he could see no more than a perennial disease.”  

Carlyle does not deny that metaphysical questions are important, nor does he take up a hostile stance towards metaphysical questioning, as if it is an obstacle to revolutionary action. Only he insists on the impossibility of achieving metaphysical certainty.

What [man] can do and what he ought to do is to understand himself, his destiny and his duties. He stands as in the center of nature: ‘his fraction of time encircled by eternity, his handbreadth of space encircled by infinitude: how shall he forbear asking himself, What am I; and Whence; and Whither?’

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33 Ibid., pp. 198-9.
Psychologically, it is impossible that a person should act without revealing some indemonstrable belief answering to these ultimate questions of the meaning of action. Whether I decide that it is for me to fear and avoid pain, accordingly to pursue and hope for pleasure; or alternatively, if I regard considerations of both pleasure and pain, profit and loss, as of relative insignificance in the light of a good that transcends my mortal body, say, hope of eternal life, in either case I cannot escape belief in the practical sense of having settled upon an idea of the good that will inform my active character. Moreover, my capacity to respond to these questions reveals my character as a free being. Choosing what one believes—fixing oneself on a notion of goodness, or greatness—is the most sovereign capacity of moral being; but note well that the “act” of belief is sovereign and free precisely because it “creatively determines all the rest” of one’s character. Carlylean “belief” just is the moral foundation upon which persons can produce their own unique destinies; not, of course, by subduing human nature, but by establishing the manner in which one relates to it. This is the primary sense of “belief,” in this sense Carlyle claims that every person is by nature a “believer,” regardless of whether one knowingly chooses to believe at all. “It is well said, in every sense, that a man’s [practical] religion is the chief fact with regard to him…(and this is often enough without asserting it even to himself, much less to others)…”

For Carlyle belief is the chief fact of a person’s life insofar as human life, moral life, necessarily orients itself in an invisible realm of meanings. Carlyle derides modern skepticism as “no-belief,” yet it is clear that in this context he does not mean the transcendence or positive overcoming of belief, but rather a sort of false consciousness and positive disbelief of the invisible. He is critiquing scientism: the skeptical or empirical attitude elevated to the status of religious truth. Unlike science, scientism is positively intolerant of the notion of invisible meaning; scientism opts for the stomach rather than the soul, the worldly facts of appetite and ambition eclipse the spiritual facts that support discipline under the moral law.

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34 On Heroes, p. 2.
This does not exhaust the question, as if doubt or skepticism is mere dupery, however. That would be too simple; for, Carlyle knows the reality of doubt, not only from his own experience but from his observation of contemporary circumstances. He saw the reflection of Victorian urbanity as in a moral cesspool. Skepticism as a social force, Carlylean laissez-faire, was delivering a fatal blow to traditional religion, and increasingly demanding the rebuilding of social relations on its own foundations, a process that still is incomplete. The revelation of man, as the maker of his own history, was a fact no thinking mind could ignore, and a value that Carlyle the “prophet” undertook to proclaim.

Carlyle’s critical insight boils down to this: In history we do not wait for the facts to come in. In the nature of history, unlike physical nature, it is man who creates the facts. This is not to suggest that man “controls” historical destiny, nor can he; only that, so far as history is a humanly intelligible whole and not just a brute succession of events, it reflects a human nature that is meaningful. In history as in all fields of moral action, the best judge of how to act is the most scrupulous observer of other people’s actions. A certain capacity for disinterested observation characterizes all kinds of wisdom: this is what the ancients meant by science. But what makes a good observer of history? Is it the actively engaged person or the methodical, disinterested spectator? Much hangs on this question. For, if it is true that what happens in history is contingent—that there is an irreducible particularity about human pragma—then there can be no historical knowledge of a theoretically demonstrable kind. Rather, what we know of specifically human affairs, we know from experience, and that means being out and about: participating. Since the only such experience we have is our own, then it is fair to say with Carlyle that history is biography. This is another way of saying that the nature of history is human: moral, not physical.

Metaphorically, the creative fact of belief has been portrayed here in terms of the ability to found one’s own psychic or moral regime. Classical philosophy, similarly, discovered in this the most authentic form of human freedom. In its sovereign capacity to choose virtue, the
reasonable moral soul reveals a power that outshines empires and a liberty that defies imprisonment. But, for the classical philosophers, reason means more than mere calculation; it also includes insight, the ability to see through the ephemera and grasp at the eternal underlying truths.

Before going any farther with our discussion of Carlyle’s moral philosophy, let us pause to recall some of the main points of what we have said so far. We took up the question of heroism from the perspective of democratic morality. How is it possible to reconcile the imperatives of individual freedom and equality, the twin bulwarks of democratic morality, with the classical insistence on sovereign virtue? Is it possible at all? Today, spurred on by fear or disbelief in such an enterprise, democratic culture has all but abandoned the notion of sovereign virtue. The whimsical suggestion of Plato’s *Republic*, that justice shall be obtained in this world only under the benign despotism of philosopher-kings (“the best at philosophy and the best at war”), not only is dismissed as an impractical ideal—that has always been the case—but is condemned as a blueprint for tyranny of the gravest sort. Plato has been held responsible for modern “totalitarianism,” as anachronistic as this may be. Parallel to the growing estrangement of modern democratic theory from classical political philosophy is the development of democratic ethics in a direction that is ever more hostile to the claims of what it calls moral perfectionism. Moral perfectionism is what we mean by “sovereign virtue.” When Carlyle characterizes great men as the “revealed texts” of human history, he is endorsing a classical preference for virtuous spirits over pedantic adherents to the letter. But how does Carlyle’s *On Heroes* demonstrate this relationship between the spirit and the letter? This is the question to which we now turn.

**Text and Voice in *On Heroes*: The Tragedy of Texts**

It has been said that the theme of Carlyle’s epic history, *The French Revolution*, is “Tools and the man.” We can say in a similar vein, that the theme of *Heroes* is: “Words and the man.” The
tragedy of the text is the driving theme of Carlyle’s lectures *On Heroes*. This may sound strange, since we have developed a habit of associating the lectures *On Heroes* with the highly politicized “great man” theory of history. One presumes that his theme is the relationship between the “great” man and the “small” man, the leader and the follower. Of course I do not want to suggest that Carlyle’s intent is not “political,” that is to say, that he does not intend to address in some way at the question of authority, of ruling and being ruled. But despite this political intent, the content of Carlyle’s vision of a “world of heroes” remains unclear. The thesis we shall take up here is that Carlyle’s reflection on words and the man is more profitably read in terms of democratic moral perfectionism than as an endorsement of authoritarianism. Carlylean sincerity is an expression, above all, of the virtue of being true to oneself.

One good place to start our inquiry into the meaning of *On Heroes* is with the controversial phrase, “hero-worship,” itself. The phrase “hero-worship” first appeared in David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*, in the context of a discussion of the origins of religion. Doubtless, Carlyle was familiar with Hume, and it is very likely that the term is a direct borrowing from the latter’s book. What is more, before he ever wrote *On Heroes*, Carlyle criticized Hume’s natural history in such a way as to reveal the outlines of his own rival project. The general context of this remark is a familiar Carlylean criticism of cultural malaise brought about by the “logic-chopping,” analytical, point of view. In modern times, Carlyle complains,

We enjoy, we see nothing by direct vision; but only by reflection and in anatomical dismemberment…. We have our little theory on all human and divine things. Poetry, the workings of genius itself, which in all times, with one or the other meaning, has been called Inspiration, and held to be mysterious and inscrutable, is no longer without its scientific exposition…. Hume has written a ‘Natural History of Religion’ in which one Natural History all the rest are included. Strangely too does the general feeling coincide with Hume’s in this wonderful problem; for whether his ‘Natural History’ be the right one or not, that Religion must have a Natural History, all of us, cleric and laic, seem to be agreed. He indeed regards it as a Disease, we again as Health; so far there is a difference; but in our first principle we are at one.

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Here is, in his own words, a brief instructive statement as to the motivations that Carlyle probably had for publishing *On Heroes*; which, if it is not billed as a natural history of religion, is the closest Carlyle gets to such a project. And indeed, in the lectures we find Carlyle affirming religion as health, while acknowledging simultaneously—and without trying to veil it from anyone—that religion, too, has a natural history. Carlyle goes on through six lectures to try to sketch that history, and he never offers us a theory. What Carlyle does offer is a sustained reflection on the relationship between the Text and the Voice that evinces the authors’ sensitivity to the way that man comports with divine and human reality through language, and expresses Carlyle’s view that, “there is, one would say, and must ever remain while man has a tongue, a distinct province for Speech as well as for Writing and Printing.”\(^{36}\)

Carlyle’s hero is a pontiff of culture; literally, a bridge-builder between the general and particular, social and personal identity, heaven and earth. The primary power of the Carlylean hero is spiritual or moral power. This principle derives from Carlyle’s intellectualized adherence to Christianity as the highest revelation that all force is moral, and that the primary reality for man is moral or human reality, not physical reality. Thus any exercise of physical force is secondary for Carlyle, is meaningful only as allied to moral force. This, in brief gives sense to Carlyle’s dictum: “Right makes Might.”

In this bridge-building function Carlyle’s hero very much resembles Rousseau’s legislator. There has been little comment on this affinity except that of Bertrand Russell, who dismisses Carlyle as a continuator of Rousseau’s “cult of the hero.” It would be more accurate to say “hero of culture,” but then Russell would have to account for himself as another continuator of the tradition of secular prophecy. Instead it is left for us to inquire: how does Carlyle conceive of the hero of culture?

\(^{36}\) *On Heroes*, p. 162.
The beginning of an answer may be found in Carlyle’s fictitious (speculative) “clothes-philosophy,” which proposes that human nature is never accessible in its naked state, but only as clothed in convention. A philosophy of textiles, the clothes-philosophy is also a philosophy of language, and specifically of texts. Ideas, too, come clothed in names, and never are seen as naked universal abstractions. As clothed thoughts, ideas assume differing aspects in various times and places. Since man’s soul is always embodied, it follows that the effusions of man’s spirit will assume differing sensible forms. Thus the clothes-philosopher is not averse to cultural change, but accepts it as part of what is necessary. With more or less precision, the pontiff of culture aims at a proper balance between appearance and reality.

With regard to secular history Carlyle’s imaginative alter-ego, the clothes-philosopher, sympathizes with the revolutionary sansculottist. However, the clothes-philosopher cannot make common cause with “Adamism,” the quasi-Rousseauean view that a basically good human nature has been corrupted by social convention, and that, somehow, a return to nature (either back, or more likely “forward” by way of radically transfigured convention) will be necessary to restore “humanity” (a naked universal) to its pre-civilized goodness. The barbarity of the French Revolution reveals the utter inadequacy of this view of human nature; while its farcical scenes reveal that, by nature, men habitually observe “irrational” conventions, even under the most chaotic, unconventional, conditions. In short, modern revolution transforms everything but human nature. This transformation of the outside does not alter the inner facts of moral existence. Thus man acquires incredible power without necessarily advancing in the moral capacity to dispose of power well. Man liberates himself only to be enslaved by his own products. As we said, for Carlyle, Modern man is not disenchanted but self-enchanted: “Man has become titanic, in a more than metaphorical sense.”

It is clear that Carlyle conceives his own occupation as a political evangelist in opposition to Rousseau, whom he called the “evangelist” of the French Revolution. By characterizing Rousseau as an evangelist Carlyle downplays Rousseau’s reputation as a theorist, although
Carlyle is aware of this reputation. As we have seen, Rousseau claims to base his theory of politics on theoretical science. But Carlyle associates “theory” with mere visuality (a word he introduces in *On Heroes*) and insists that the basis of society is not entirely visible, but in many ways is invisible, mysterious, a matter of nescience rather than science. Carlyle rejects Rousseau’s claim to have devised on the basis of science a suitable account of man’s moral and social life.

In reaction to, or more particularly, with the aim of correcting Rousseau, Carlyle becomes the evangelist of literature and of one type of literature in particular: history. Carlyle’s notion of history is ironic, not at all progressive, it gestures again and again towards the significance of what is unknown, unseen and unheard in man’s past; that is to say, Carlylean history reminds the reader of all that the documents, which are the only things we really have, refuse to tell us. Carlyle deploys his notion of “history” with the intention of correcting the abstractions of “political philosophy” (political economy and “theories of government”).

How is this view of history manifested in *On Heroes*? The simple way to get at this question is to follow the text—and the voice—throughout Carlyle’s lectures. This simple procedure yields a synoptic understanding of what Carlyle is trying to do in his religious history of nature. The unifying theme of *On Heroes* is the presence of language to man. Carlyle explicitly connects every one of his heroic figures with a text, from Odin, with his runes, to Napoleon, “false as a bulletin.” Accordingly the hero-as-author is the subject of every one of Carlyle’s lectures, not only the fifth and sixth. Accordingly, heroic readers are the sort of citizens Carlyle wishes to educate:

If we think of it, all that a University or final highest School can do for us, is still but what the first school began doing,—teach us to read. We learn to read, in various languages, in various sciences; we learn the alphabet and letters of all manner of books. But the place where we are to get knowledge, even theoretic knowledge, is the Books
themselves! It depends on what we read, after all manner of Professors have done their best for us. The true University of these days is a Collection of Books.\textsuperscript{37}

Odin, Carlyle’s first hero, is the founder of a civilization (and a religion) and the creator of “runes.” This emphasis on Odin as a writer in “the hero as divinity” seems strained, but is necessary. The role of the heroic intellect is to give names to things, but the hero does not discover the essence of things themselves. It is the power of naming that interests Carlyle here. According to Carlyle, the untutored intellect is a “Hyper-Brobdingnagian business! Untamed Thought, great, giantlike, enormous;—to be tamed in due time into the compact greatness, not giantlike but godlike and stronger than gianthood, of the Shakespeares, the Goethes!”

Carlyle is not an “irrationalist” exactly, but he takes little solace in the notions of theoretical/scientific certainty or clear and distinct ideas, especially when it comes to politics or the human things. Modern skepticism he claims is more superstitious and irrational than ancient paganism; the pagans at least could see that “nature is…what to the Thinker and Prophet it for ever is, preternatural.”\textsuperscript{38}

To the primeval intellect:

All was Godlike or God…but there then were no hearsays. Canopus shining down over the desert…would pierce into the heart of the wild Ishmaelitish man, whom it was guiding through the solitary waste there. To his wild heart, with all feelings in it, with no \textit{speech} for any feeling, it might seem a little eye, that Canopus, glancing down on him from the great deep Eternity; revealing the inner Splendour to him. Cannot we understand how these men worshipped Canopus…? Such to me is the secret of all forms of Paganism. Worship is transcendent wonder; wonder for which there is now no limit or measure; that is worship.\textsuperscript{39}

Nothing is as preternatural as the power of human nature to give names to things. History, or tradition, begins with language, and the media of tradition are, first, memory and then, writing. Speech and Writing bear an ironic relationship to each other. Speech unsettles

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 8.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 9.
writing, while writing makes little of speech. In oral cultures, for example, the hero is more easily elevated into a god, but in literate cultures, debunking is the norm:

What an enormous *camera-obscura* magnifier is Tradition! How a thing grows in the human Memory, in the human Imagination, when love, worship, and all that lies in the human Heart, is there to encourage it. And in the darkness, in the entire ignorance; without date or document, no book, no Arundel-marble; only here and there some dumb monumental cairn. Why, in thirty or forty years, were there no books, any great man would grow *mythic*, the contemporaries who had seen him, being once all dead. And in three-hundred years, and in three thousand years—!—To attempt *theorising* on such matters would profit little: they are matters which refuels to be *theoremed* and diagrammed; which Logic ought to know that she cannot speak of.40

Both speech and writing are inferior by comparison to the divine silence that reveals the “inner Splendour” of Eternity. Nevertheless, for Carlyle human silence is the worst sort of idleness and folly: To remain without language is to stay in the primeval state of humanity. Carlyle’s ideal, then, would seem to involve a balance between the excesses of writing and speech. The remainder of *On Heroes* sees Carlyle trying to find the way to this balance.

In “The Hero as Prophet,” Carlyle justifies his selection of Mohammad because he is the prophet we are most free to speak of. However, Carlyle must have been impressed by the oral-aural character of Islam. Carlyle’s emphasis on the rough-hewn language of the Koran reflects the view that the power of this particular book derives from its oral quality. The Koran is written not for private reading, but for recitation. Mohammad, also, was illiterate, as Carlyle points out.

The art of writing was but just introduced into Arabia; it seems to be the true opinion that Mahomet never could write! Life in the Desert, with its experiences, was all his education…. Curious, if we will reflect on it, this of having no books. Except by what he could see for himself, or hear by uncertain rumour of speech in the obscure Arabian Desert, he could know nothing. The wisdom that had been before him or at a distance from him in the world, was in a manner as good as not there for him. Of the great brother souls, flame-beacons through so many lands and times, no one directly communicates with this great soul. He is alone there, deep in the bosom of the Wilderness; has to grow up so;—alone with Nature and his own Thoughts.41

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40 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

41 Ibid., p. 52.
For Carlyle, man’s speech at its best has a prayerful quality that cannot fail to impress the earnest observer. Mohammad’s ‘companions named him ‘Al Amin, The Faithful.’… They noted that he always meant something. A man rather taciturn in speech; silent when there was nothing to be said; but pertinent, wise, sincere, when he did speak…” The prayerful, insightful and considered qualities of a man’s speech later will serve as Carlyle’s justification for defending the character of Oliver Cromwell.

Finally, there is another sense in which Carlyle’s wrestling with Mohammad (and Islam) epitomizes the problem in the West of an emerging secular culture, one that holds out the possibility of uniting the two swords of secular and spiritual authority under the aegis of the modern democratic state. Carlyle’s uses his lecture on Mohammad as a vehicle for advancing, more or less, protestant individualism. Carlyle illustrates this personal religion with the Psalms of David. The Psalms portray the personal conversation between an individual man—in this case, a king—and God. It is the relationship between the Prophet and his God, then, rather than the Prophet and his Disciples, which is meant to instruct us here. Mohammad is instructive as a man, perhaps to be emulated in his piety, but not to be followed or imitated as the creator of a political religion.

In “The Hero as Poet,” Carlyle suggests a potential identity between writers and readers: “At bottom, clearly enough, there is no perfect Poet! A vein of Poetry exists in the heart of all men; no man is made altogether of Poetry. We are all poets when we read a poem well.”

This position is crucial to Carlyle’s broader characterization of the hero as reader. Shelley had claimed that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Carlyle attempts to give the poets their due by adumbrating how it is that such poets “legislate.” The great poets, too, are name-givers, nomothetes. As such, they neither devise nor discover anything new, but rather cast

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42 Ibid., p. 53.
43 Ibid., p. 82.
familiar truths in a new light so that the reader appreciates them once more in an original way. Like all other heroes, the poet “read[s] the world and its laws; the world with its laws will be there to be read. What the world, on this matter, shall permit and bid is, as we said, the most important fact about the world.”

Thus the originality of poets, like all originality, lay in the ability to penetrate appearances to apprehend the “open secret” of reality. Poetic insight assists the reader toward penetrating to this meaning for oneself. Poetry for Carlyle is “musical Thought.” The virtue of poetry lay in its proximity to spoken language:

Nay, all speech, even the commonest speech, as something of song in it: Not a parish in the world but has its parish-accent;—the rhythm or tune to which the people there sing what they have to say! Accent is a king of chanting; all men have accent of their own,—though they only notice that of others. Observe too how all passionate language does of itself become musical,—with a finer music than the mere accent; the speech of a man even in zealous anger becomes a chant, a song. All deep things are Song.

The great poem, like ancient epic, can be seen as a sort of dialect; as a moral dictionary or encyclopedia of a sort. But the poet makes no pretense to “clear and distinct” communication. Carlyle suggests that the distinction between poetry and history (understood as a social science) may be chimerical in an important sense. If history is similar to poetry in this way, then it is evident that no science of history is possible.

Finally, in this lecture Carlyle introduces a distinction here between depth and breadth. Dante is “deep” while Shakespeare is “broad.” Depth reflects a certain parochialism, Dante makes real the spiritual world of medieval Catholicism; Shakespeare, by contrast a broad mind, gives us an early glimpse into the realm of world-history. If there is a difference between history and poetry properly speaking, it may be related to the difference between depth and breadth; for

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44 Ibid., p. 80.
46 Ibid.
example, the depth of the voice associated with the parochial parish-accent contrasts with the cosmopolitan breadth of the text, a breadth that gives rise to the imagination of universal history.

In “the Hero as Priest,” Carlyle delves more deeply into modern themes. As we have seen, Carlyle regards Luther and Protestantism as the initial stage of a culture of print that continues to characterize modern society. Knox and Scotland illustrate the connection between Protestantism and political self-determination. Here Carlyle reiterates his view of modern history as a drama in three acts: first Protestantism, then Puritanism and the English Civil War, and finally, the French Revolution, are the three signal moments in the historical unfolding of modernity. In terms of logical possibilities, at least, the French Revolution marks the end of “modern revolutionism,” not its beginning. Protestants and Puritans evince the twin phenomena of print and privacy that is the center of gravity of modern revolutionism. The French Revolution finally lays bare the structure of the revolutionary mind and its tragic shortcoming: The revolutionary reformer fancies that he is not an idolater, but in reality the reformer is an idolater of texts—the first modern reformers are idolaters of the Bible, and the next, idolaters of “theory.” The French Revolutionaries merely supplant the Bible with a theory of politics. “All worship whatsoever must proceed by Symbols, by Idols:—we may say, all idolatry is comparative, and the worst idolatry is only more idolatrous.”

In light of this interpretation, Carlyle identifies the most immediate threat of revolutionary disorder in the ideologies of progress, and in what we call “scientism.” Progressivism and scientism are most apt to suborn the illusion that intellectual representations are identical to the moral reality they seek to represent. It is to correct this tendency that Carlyle

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47 See On Heroes, p. 123, especially: “Now I need not deny that Protestantism was a revolt against spiritual sovereignties, Popes and much else. Nay I will grant that English Puritanism, revolt against earthly sovereignties, was the second act of it; that the enormous French Revolution itself was the third act, whereby all sovereignties earthly and spiritual were, as it might seem, abolished or made sure of abolition.”

48 Ibid., p. 121.
puts forward the notion that a devout imagination is the driving force behind reformism, and that “[all] true Reformers…are by the nature of them Priests, and strive for a Theocracy.”’

Carlyle’s aim is not to discourage reform, but to keep it from devolving into revolution. In particular, Carlyle wishes to dash the dangerous belief that evil is the result of unfair social conditions and that a wholesale destruction of the existing order will of necessity result in an order that is more just. Again, this is how Carlyle understands the motivations of the French Revolutionaries, and for Carlyle, the French Revolution represents a point lower than which human affairs cannot possibly sink.

The two concluding lectures On Heroes—“The Hero as Man of Letters,” and “The Hero as King”—deserve to be read as one, if it is true that Carlyle’s portrayal of modernity is circumscribed by the (unresolved) tension between the Text and Voice. It is true that Carlyle describes the hero-as-king as “practically the summary for us of all the various figures of Heroism.” Nevertheless, there is no reason to assume that this characterization of heroism in terms of ideal kingship does not apply backwards to all of Carlyle’s other “figures of Heroism.” In fact Carlyle reiterates the theme of ideal kingship throughout On Heroes; and there is another significant irony in the fact that both of Carlyle’s hero-kings in fact are hero-regicides. More specifically, just as he portrays the man of letters as homo politcus—“with his copy-rights and copy-wrongs, in his squalid garret, in his rusty coat; ruling (for this is what he does), from his grave, after death, whole nations and generations who would, or would not, give him bread while living”—Carlyle portrays the king as a contemplative man—witness Cromwell’s prayerful speech, or Napoleon’s critique of the skeptical savans.

Kings or chieftains we have had always; but Carlyle recognizes the uniqueness of men of letters as peculiarly modern figures of Heroism. In “The Hero as Man of Letters,” Carlyle makes

49 Ibid., p. 152.
50 Ibid., p. 196.
51 Ibid., p. 154.
two related observations about the contemporary scene. The first regards the uniqueness of the
man of letters as a product of print culture, while the second regards the role of the man of letters
in history. Historical “progress,” for Carlyle, is the “ordeal” of literary men:

This ordeal; this wild welter of a chaos which is called Literary Life: this too is a kind of
ordeal! There is clear truth in the idea that a struggle from the lower classes of society,
towards the upper regions and rewards of society, must ever continue. Strong men are
born there, who ought to stand elsewhere than there. The manifold, inextricably complex,
universal struggle of these constitutes, and must constitute, what is called the progress of
society. For Men of Letters, as for all other sorts of men. How to regulate this struggle?
There is the whole question. To leave is as it is, at the mercy of blind Chance; a whirl of
distracted atoms…your royal Johnson languishing inactive in garrets, or harnessed to the
yoke of Printer Cave; your Burns dying broken-hearted as a Gauger; your Rousseau
driven into mad exasperations, kindling French Revolutions by his paradoxes: this, as we
said, is clearly enough the worst regulation. The best, alas, is far from us!52

Johnson, Burns and Rousseau are fallen giants for Carlyle, literary titans. Goethe is
Carlyle’s best candidate for the true literary hero. “Alas, these men did not conquer like
[Goethe]; they fought bravely, and fell. They were not heroic bringers of light, but heroic seekers
of it.”53

Carlyle is reluctant to discuss Goethe because, he says, the English audience is too
ignorant of Goethe’s achievement to appreciate it. However, another reason for choosing not to
focus on Goethe is that Carlyle’s aim as an author is more political than Goethe’s: for Carlyle the
Good and the Beautiful are one and the same. Carlyle, more than Goethe, occupies himself with
the problem of writing as action. Accordingly he puts forth the fallen heroes, Johnson, Burns and
Rousseau as object-lessons illustrating the social significance of the literary “ordeal.” Carlyle
considers each of these literary men to be failures, I think, because they fail to understand the
limits of the text.

52 Ibid., pp. 167-168.
53 Ibid., p. 158.
“Johnson’s opinions are fast becoming obsolete: but his style of thinking and of living, we may hope, will never become obsolete.”\(^{54}\) Similarly, earnest Rousseau expects too much from his scientific theories of government and only winds up “kindling French Revolutions by his paradoxes.”\(^{55}\) Finally, Burns succumbs to another extreme, attempting to recreate the “parish accent” in his poetry.

Ironically Burns, who tries to make the voice present in his texts, dies beneath the hot gaze of literary “lion-hunters.” “Burns’s gifts, expressed in conversation, are the theme of all that ever heard him.”\(^{56}\) For Burns’s speech “was a speech distinguished by always having something in it…. The waiters and ostlers of Scotch inns, prying about the door, eager to catch any word that fell from Burns, were doing unconscious reverence to the heroic.”\(^{57}\)

And yet…Lion-hunters were the ruin and death of Burns. It was they that rendered it impossible for him to live! They gathered round him in his Farm; hindered his industry; no place as remote enough from them. He could not get his Lionism forgotten, honestly as he was disposed to do so…. These men came to see him; it was out of no sympathy with him, nor no hatred to him. They came to get a little amusement: they got their amusement;—and the Hero’s life went for it!\(^{58}\)

Carlyle’s own contribution to man-of-letters heroism, manifest in \textit{On Heroes}, consists in his recognition of the need to “regulate” the distinction between speech and writing, coupled with his conspicuous (perhaps intentional) failure to offer any programmatic answer to this regulatory need. Evidently, for Carlyle, the ironic relationship between speech and writing that gives structure to the whole of \textit{On Heroes} has to suffice for this purpose. It is possible that Carlyle takes his cue here from Goethe. Goethe’s ironic novels, similarly, set up expectations of

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 182.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., pp. 167-168.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 190.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 193.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 195.
the reader that the author never meets, with the intent of drawing the reader to reflect on the author-reader relationship, and the activity of private reading itself.

In light of this interpretation, it seems fair to challenge the view that Carlyle’s positioning of “The Hero as King” as the final installment of On Heroes signals his departure from literature and towards a new faith in coercive force as the mechanism of social regulation that he found so desperately wanting. I suggest that On Heroes makes more sense if we understand it as a whole, whose theme is the tension between the voice and the text. Carlyle’s two closing lectures, in particular, point to the mutual limits of the text and the voice.

That Carlyle sustains this theme in “The Hero as King” is evident from the way he situates Cromwell and Napoleon with respect to language. For Carlyle, the sincerity of Cromwell comes through in Cromwell’s prayers and speeches:

Cromwell’s prayers were likely to be ‘eloquent,’ and much more than that. His was the heart of a man who could pray…. But indeed, his actual speeches, I apprehend, were not nearly so ineloquent, incondite, as they look…. With that rude passionate voice of his, he was always understood to mean something, and men wished to know what…. The Reporters, too, in those days seem to have been singularly candid; and to have given the Printer precisely what they found on their notepaper. And withal, what a strange proof is it of Cromwell’s being the premeditative ever calculating hypocrite, acting a play before the world, That to the last he took no more charge of his Speeches?59

In contrast to Cromwell and his speeches, Carlyle illustrates the duplicity of Napoleon by pointing out Napoleon’s habit of exorcizing his vanity through counterfeit texts. With his democratic faith in careers open to talent, Napoleon started off as a hero. But not long after his success in bring order to France, Napoleon fell prey to egoism, “blameable ambition.”

[there] are two kinds of ambition; one wholly blamable, the other laudable and inevitable. Nature has provided that the great silent Samuel shall not be silent too long. The selfish wish to shine over others, let it be accounted altogether poor and miserable…. The meaning of life here on earth might be defined as consisting in this: To unfold your self, to work what thing you have the faculty for. It is a necessity for the human being, the first

59 Ibid., p. 219.
law of our existence. Coleridge remarks beautifully that the infant learns to *speak* by this necessity it feels.\(^{60}\)

Selfish ambition, the desire “to shine over others” leads to Napoleon’s ultimate downfall. But Carlyle uses Napoleon to illustrate the folly of vanity more generally. For, according to Carlyle, before Napoleon could believe that it is so easy to dupe others, he had to make a dupe of himself. Carlyle suggests that integrity, rather than duplicity, ought to inform political action. Action is inevitable; and accordingly, so are errors. But sincere moral strength will produce lasting results while duplicity is more likely to suborn the fleeting appearance of a false justice:

‘False as a bulletin’ became a proverb in Napoleon’s time. He makes what excuse he could for it: that it was necessary to mislead the enemy, to keep-up his own men’s courage, and so forth. On the whole there are no excuses. A man in no case has liberty to tell lies.\(^{61}\)

“The Hero as King” brings the reader back from the ethereal world of texts to the world of bodily reality. Fanatic-hypocrite theories are attractive on paper, but in the final analysis the attempt to reduce or explain away the phenomena of human greatness merely circumvents the reality of the heroic. “Multitudes of Great Men figure in History as false selfish men; but if we will consider it they are but *figures* for us, unintelligible shadows; we do no see into them as men that could have existed at all.”\(^{62}\) The intent of *On Heroes* is to awaken the reader’s sympathy to the heroic, to encourage the reader to lift his eyes from the text, and listen to heroic voices. Such voices need not be that of a Napoleon or a Cromwell, but the still small voice of one’s own conscience, or the voice of a true friend. “To men who believe in no reality at all, how shall a *real* human soul, the intensest of all realities, as it were the voice of this world’s Maker still speaking to *us*,—be intelligible?”\(^{63}\)

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\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 225.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 238.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p 211.

\(^{63}\) Ibid.

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Chapter Eight: Carlyle’s Heroic Individualism

Doubtless there is still peculiar virtue in Speech; even writers of Books may still, in some circumstances, find it convenient to speak also,—witness our present meeting here! There is, one would say, and must ever remain while man has a tongue, a distinct province for Speech as well as for Writing and Printing. In regard to all things this must remain; to Universities among others. But the limits of the two have nowhere yet been pointed out, ascertained; much less put into practice…

Thomas Carlyle, “The Hero as Man of Letters”

One aim of my study has been to contextualize the so-called “great-man” theory of history, in terms of the politics of literature. It must be stressed that the view I take is quite opposite from the currently prevailing tendency to reduce literature to politics, or to political economy. If anything, the politics-of-literature tradition tends to the opposite extreme, portraying life as literature. This study has focused on the historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle, the thinker most often associated with the modern version of the great-man theory. This final chapter revisits the relationship between Carlyle and Nietzsche, with an eye to their status as democratic moralists or, as I have called them, ambitious authors. In my view, great men are ambitious authors and the great-man theory is part of the life-as-literature tradition.

The great-man theory lays stress on the significance of unique human beings in the drama of history. It is familiar to political scientists. Yet most scholars educated in political science probably think of the great man theory as unsophisticated, dated, and unworthy of scientific attention. Such “individual-level” theories defy quantification, or if they can be “verified” quantitatively, it is only by the use of questionable methods. Moreover, they seem to downplay the importance of those environmental or contextual causes that captivate modern social scientists. After all, the social sciences bear the imprint of minds such as Comte and Marx. These thinkers interpreted history from a “scientific” perspective that they adopted expressly to counteract the old-fashioned histories of great men and great institutions.
When one delves deeper into the modern variants of monumental history, however, one finds a reality quite different from what educated common opinion might lead one to expect. As it turns out, modern adherents of this view are not ignorant but are keenly aware of, and concerned about, the implicit determinism of modern science. To varying degrees the great man theorists accept the implications of modern scientific discoveries. Nevertheless, they retain in some form or other the conviction that individuals affect history uniquely. Modern variants of the great-man view include literary and philosophical giants like Carlyle and Nietzsche, Emerson, Rousseau and a host of others whose importance for the modern mind is obvious, despite their allegedly outmoded views about the role of great human beings in shaping culture.

Carlyle, in particular, is dismissed as a throwback, but in reality he epitomizes the strange combination of ancient and modern that goes into the perspective of monumental history. To be sure, upon its publication Carlyle’s great man thesis already seemed obsolete to some. That “Carlyle” is identical with the bite-sized formula, “the great-man theory of history,” partly explains why Carlyle’s work suffers even more neglect today. We tend to forget that Carlyle was also the first writer to use the word “environment” in its specifically modern sense, meaning the totality of circumstances that—dare we say it—determines or at least, conditions, one’s development. Perhaps the “contextualist” owes an unrecognized debt to the great-man theorist!

For the moment, we shall take this anecdotal evidence as sufficient cause for a serious reexamination of Carlyle’s philosophy. As this discussion unfolds, perhaps we shall uncover more evidence to vindicate our decision. Here, again, we return to Carlyle and Nietzsche. We want to inquire: What have Carlyle and Nietzsche in common? About what do they disagree? What is Nietzsche’s critique of Carlyle? How might Carlyle reply?
Carlyle and Nietzsche

It is fair to say that learned opinion leans toward Nietzsche’s diagnosis of Carlyle: “Carlyle” is an “unwitting and involuntary farce, [a] heroical-moralistical interpretation of dyspepsia.”\(^1\) Carlyle’s belief-in-belief betrays a tragic absurdity: the titanic intellect bringing to bear all its might in an attempt to conceal from itself its own nature. “A continual passionate dishonesty towards himself—that is his *proprium*, because of that,” Nietzsche declares, “[Carlyle] is and will remain interesting.”\(^2\) Interesting? Perhaps Carlyle could have made an early candidate for psychoanalysis.

Nietzsche himself does some psychoanalyzing here. Carlyle’s “desire for a strong faith,” Nietzsche remarks, “is not the proof of a strong faith, rather the opposite. If one has it one may permit oneself the beautiful luxury of skepticism: one is secure enough, fixed enough for it.”\(^3\)

Thus insecure, drowning in a chaotic sea of skepticism, and too weak to swim, Carlyle mistakes for the substance of faith the sound of his own voice, crying out for God’s aid. One might say that Nietzsche portrays the tragedy of Carlyle’s life in terms of a classically English parody on that classically German virtue, self-annihilation. “Carlyle deafens something within him by the *fortissimo* of his reverence for men of strong faith and by his rage against the less single-minded: he *requires* noise.”\(^4\)

This analysis typifies Nietzsche’s own brand of the fanatic-hypocrite theory. A self-appointed Physician of Culture, Nietzsche’s bill of health might read thus: “Adrift on the rapturous currents of his own voice, the subject, Carlyle by name, floats unwittingly out of reality and into make-believe, until finally and inexorably ‘something in him’ (evidently the

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\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 86.

\(^4\) Ibid.
authentic self) is pulled in by the undertow created by a ‘strong faith’ in ‘men of strong faith.’ Thus, the real Carlyle, having succumbed to the ocean of unconsciousness, never will swim again in daylight, or breathe the fresh air of sanity.” A post-script reads: “Still, the case interests us not least because the English so admire this mystical dervish—and that, for his honesty!” 

Nietzsche’s judgment of Carlyle might have differed—though probably not by much—had the occasion for this analysis been Carlyle’s writings, instead of Froude’s biography of Carlyle. The “life of Thomas Carlyle,” about which Nietzsche formulates these views, is renowned for the liberty it took with Carlyle’s liberal bequest to his biographer to strive for honesty in representation. The result was a book that, “while none of [it] shocks today,” was “seismic” in its impact on Victorian England. “The public, led by some of Carlyle’s family, were plunged into moral outrage. Even disciples, reading the innermost thoughts of their master in the letters and journal extracts Froude included in his work, found themselves repelled by aspects of Carlyle.”

Carlyle’s latest biographer, Simon Heffer, agrees that Froude overstepped the bounds of decency, but with the qualification that, probably, Froude “wrote the book he felt the sham-hating Carlyle would have wanted.” To support this claim Heffer points out that, after all, Froude “justified himself by quoting Carlyle’s own precepts.” Froude cited Carlyle’s censure of Walter Scott’s biographer, in his own defense: “The poor biographer, having the fear not of God before his eyes, was obliged to retire as it were into a vacuum; and write in the most melancholy,

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5 Curiously, Nietzsche does not specify whether this self-deceptive pathology belongs properly to Carlyle, the self-avowed mortal enemy of “cant,” or the English whom Nietzsche describes here as “the nation of consummate cant.” All Nietzsche says is that it is “appropriate and even understandable” that (the Scottish, not English) Carlyle and the English should have found each other (Idols, pp. 85-86).


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.
straitened manner, with only vacuum for a result...there was no biography, but some vague ghost of a biography.”¹⁰

One of Nietzsche’s latest biographers, Rudiger Safranski, exercises poetic justice against Nietzsche on Carlyle’s behalf. As if to reply to Nietzsche’s putative diagnosis of Carlyle, Safranski puts forward a Carlylean diagnosis of the catatonic Nietzsche:

A metaphysical endgame was being enacted before “Europe’s top putrescence” in the Villa Silberblick [where Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth, had put the philosopher’s somnolent body on public display]. Half a century earlier, Thomas Carlyle, who was esteemed in these circles (although Nietzsche did not think very highly of him), had described what was at stake in endgames of this sort: “[Man] enlarges somewhat, by fresh discovery, his view of the universe, and consequently his Theorem of the Universe,—which is an infinite Universe, and can never be embraced wholly or finally by any view or Theorem, in any conceivable enlargement.” Carlyle warned against attempting to embrace the universe. Any individual who employed the powers of logic in this quest would be devoured in the process. Nietzsche dared to conceive of the inconceivable, and was ultimately undone by his efforts to do so. He fell victim to the colossal dimensions of life.¹¹

Since we do not wish to let biographers intervene unduly on the row between Carlyle and Nietzsche, let us put them aside for the time being. Instead, let us follow Carlyle and Nietzsche as they cast their nets over the phenomenon of biography itself. Biography is the genuine subject at the heart of the great man theory of history. For, as Carlyle famously claimed, history is biography. Moreover, from his earliest independent writings Carlyle explicitly connects biography and belief. In the article “On History,” Carlyle maintains that history is “the root of all science [and]...the first distinct product of man’s spiritual nature; his earliest expression of what can be called Thought.”¹² History, expression, intellect and man’s spiritual nature appear here as one, suggesting that, for Carlyle, the common nature of humanity lay in the

¹⁰ Quoted in Heffer, p. 10.


¹² in A Carlyle Reader, p. 57.
human condition. Man is a being unknown apart from language; man’s intelligible life is significant, then, always and already. Moreover, since Carlyle defines “History [as] the essence of innumerable biographies”\textsuperscript{13} and Universal History, “all things we see standing accomplished in the world [as]…the outer material result…of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world,” it is evident that any account of Carlyle’s “heroic” view of history will have to account for the internal matters of biography and belief. These are matters of the first importance for all human beings, not just the so-called “great.”

In addition to the biographies, there is a significant amount of scholarly writing on Carlyle and Nietzsche. The scholarly literature on Carlyle and Nietzsche displays an interesting pattern. Actually, what is interesting is that it exhibits two patterns. Among scholars of literature, comparisons of Carlyle and Nietzsche are commonplace. By contrast, the Carlyle-Nietzsche connection has not captured the attention of most political theorists, in spite of the current interest in Nietzsche.

Among students of literature, the most astute interpreter of Carlyle in relation to Nietzsche is probably Albert LaValley. In his \textit{Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern},\textsuperscript{14} LaValley argues that Carlyle and Nietzsche understood themselves as the first of a new type of social prophet. Their social views cannot be understood if one fails to acknowledge this prophetic self-understanding. LaValley\textsuperscript{15} warrants a lengthy examination of the Carlyle-Nietzsche relationship with the following observation:

that none of the social proposals of the later Carlyle or Nietzsche can be understood without understanding their own sense of playing a unique prophetic role totally without precedent in religion or literature, their own peculiar social alienation, and their extraordinary reaction to disinheritance, the loss of tradition and social confusion.

\textsuperscript{13} Carlyle, “On History” in \textit{A Carlyle Reader} p. 57.

\textsuperscript{14} (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968)

\textsuperscript{15} p. 298
LaValley goes on to claim that “Nietzsche...sheds more light on Carlyle than any author in the nineteenth century,” because he acts out the alienation and disinheritance that he and Carlyle share “to the futile end.”  

Certainly, Nietzsche’s radicalism is one reason for his being established as a “philosopher,” in marked contrast to the confusion that exists over whether Carlyle is “really” a philosopher, historian, or man of letters. What the two clearly have in common, however, is that Carlyle and Nietzsche both are prophets, or at least paradigmatic representatives, of a peculiar new social and moral experience: namely, radical individualism, total alienation from the community. Having this in common, they are sure to have much else in common.

LaValley concludes his analysis by observing a significant difference between Carlyle and Nietzsche, to which we shall later return: That Carlyle lacks Nietzsche’s radicalism means that his philosophy leaves open a way of communication (albeit imperfect) that is lacking in Nietzsche.

Carlyle’s version of Ecce Homo is the reversal of Nietzsche’s; though marred occasionally by sentimentality and maudlin moments, it is a crucifixion with others, through memory, and through a realistic assessment of the century’s disinheritance, not through the lonely and exalted acting out of impossible heroic roles that lead into madness and irremediable futility.

Turning to political science—where studies of Nietzsche abound but Carlyle remains off the map—one rarely finds LaValley’s sensitivity to the problem of communication. On occasions when Carlyle does come up, typically political scientists put off any discussion of the apparent similarity between Carlyle’s and Nietzsche’s views. To this end, typically authors cite Nietzsche himself—the passage cited above for example, or the following, in which Nietzsche rebukes “the insipid muddlehead Carlyle, who tried to conceal behind passionate grimaces what he knew of

\[16\] Ibid., p. 299.

\[17\] Ibid., p. 300.
himself—namely what was lacking in Carlyle: real power of spirituality, real profundity of expression; in brief, philosophy.”

18 In spite of the fact that heroism is a signature Carlylean theme (arguably, the Carlylean theme), Leslie Paul Thiele, in his otherwise excellent study of Nietzsche’s “heroic individualism,” diminishes any connection between Nietzsche and Carlyle. Thiele declares tersely that “Nietzsche was most anxious to distance himself from those coarse relatives who also were concerned with the heroic. He repudiated all forms of ‘hero-worship,’ specifically Carlyle’s.” Thiele’s case is only the most outstanding example of political theorists’ Carlyle anxiety.

In the passage just cited, Thiele refers the reader to Ecce Homo, 261, where Nietzsche puts down Carlyle as an “English atheist who held it as a point of honor not to be one.” If Thiele means to point out the one obvious disagreement between Carlyle and Nietzsche, he has chosen the right passage. For, here Nietzsche himself articulates exactly what separates him from Carlyle, namely, that Carlyle “believes,” while Nietzsche does not. More specifically: On the one hand, Nietzsche is an unbeliever and he knows it; on the other hand, Carlyle is (really) an atheist but refuses, or lacks the strength, to admit it. This is, at least, Nietzsche’s say in the matter. It should be noted, however, that Nietzsche opens this same passage with qualified praise of Carlyle—whom, he says, of all English minds, comes closest to the truth.

To be frank, it is rare that Nietzsche mentions any other thinker without disparaging that thinker to some extent. It is not too much to say that Nietzsche was “anxious to distance himself” from everybody. For example in one book alone Nietzsche says or implies of his most celebrated

18 Beyond Good and Evil, 252.


20 Incidentally, this seems to be Nietzsche’s criterion for discriminating between philosophers and non-philosophers.
influence, Schopenhauer, that he is superstitious, prejudiced by public opinion, and trapped “under the spell and delusion of morality.”

However, Nietzsche observes elsewhere (with Schopenhauer in mind) that “the errors of great men are venerable because they are more fruitful than the truths of little men.” That great men often are wrong, then, does not mean that we cannot learn anything from them.

This is not to say that Nietzsche thinks of Carlyle as a great man. Indeed, Nietzsche is more sympathetic to Emerson than he is to Carlyle (Emerson being the most apt emissary between he and Carlyle); and even quotes Emerson now and then. Ultimately, though, Nietzsche laments of Emerson:

I do not know how much I would give if only I could bring it about, ex post facto, that such a glorious, great nature, rich in soul and spirit, might have gone through some strict discipline, a really scientific education. As it is, in Emerson we have lost a philosopher...

One suspects that, in Carlyle, Nietzsche doubts we ever had a philosopher to begin with. But perhaps Carlyle deserves credit for being more honest in his role as “prophet.” In any case, if we put aside these curiosities about Nietzsche’s appraisal of Carlyle, the preponderance of evidence will suggest to us, as observers, that a comparison between Nietzsche’s and Carlyle’s ideas is not futile, after all. Although Nietzsche and Carlyle disagree about a matter of such obvious importance as belief, closer investigation turns up considerable agreements that shed light on what Nietzsche thinks Carlyle was right about. Moreover, the disagreement between Nietzsche and Carlyle forces us to reconsider the equivocal meanings of both Carlyle’s “belief” and Nietzsche’s “atheism.”

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21 Beyond Good and Evil, 16, 19 and 56.
Before moving on we ought to mention one final study of the Carlyle-Nietzsche relationship. In *A Century of Hero-Worship* 24 Eric R. Bentley links Carlyle and Nietzsche as twin progenitors of a diabolical ideology Bentley dubs “heroic vitalism.” Bentley hangs on heroic vitalism much of the intellectual responsibility for the fascist political experiments of the twentieth century, especially Nazism. Now, Bentley approaches this problem as a student of art (theater, in particular) interested in politics. We, on the other hand, approach the problem as students of politics interested in art and literature. The student of politics is too aware of the particularity of political things to issue a too-universal judgment on these complicated questions. Nevertheless, Bentley has seen the potentially dangerous aspect of agreement between Carlyle’s and Nietzsche’s politics and he properly designates the ideological category into which both, considered as “ideologues,” properly belong; namely, right radicalism.

Unfortunately, there are as many varieties of “right-ism” as writers politically so inclined. Therefore the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to offering a more detailed assessment of the Carlyle-Nietzsche relationship. We shall begin with Nietzsche’s evaluation of Carlyle, culled from Nietzsche’s scanty remarks about Carlyle, as well as his own subscription to the heroic attitude as described in *Schopenhauer as Educator*. Following this, we shall imagine a likely Carlylean rejoinder to Nietzsche (since Carlyle obviously could not reply for himself). We conclude by considering Carlyle’s and Nietzsche’s alternative politics of heroism.

**Heroism: What Carlyle got Right**

We have already indicated the main line of disagreement between Nietzsche and Carlyle. Before going on, let us specify their main point of agreement, which lay in the importance of the heroic attitude. Nietzsche and Carlyle both agree that the heroic attitude is the highest moral stance one can adopt—under modern conditions, at least.

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24 (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1944)
For all of his contempt Nietzsche seems genuinely to rate Carlyle among of the best of English thinkers. But even this is dubious praise, since Nietzsche claims that the English are congenitally incapable of philosophy. The problem we encounter is that Nietzsche says nothing more specific about Carlyle than that he was “most aware” of what the English lacked; or that he came “closest” of all British thinkers to the truth. In order to get a more certain grasp of what Nietzsche thought Carlyle was right about, then, we have to draw inferences from Nietzsche’s other writings. One in particular, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, stands out for its long discussion of the heroic disposition. In *Schopenhauer*, Nietzsche portrays the moral philosopher’s role as creator of an “image of man.” Nietzsche then surveys three modern images of man—Rousseau’s, Goethe’s and Schopenhauer’s. He finally confirms a preference for Schopenhauer’s “heroic” image.

Nietzsche’s delineation of the three images of man occurs in section four of *Schopenhauer*. The purpose of section four is “to explain how through Schopenhauer we are able to educate ourselves against our age—because through him we possess the advantage of really knowing this age.”25 Being the third *Untimely Meditation*, “Schopenhauer” is one part of a sweeping Nietzschean philippic against modernity. Throughout the *Meditations*, all things seem tainted by modernity; even the heroic education bequeathed by Schopenhauer is dubious: “Supposing, that is, that [the advantage of really knowing this age] is an advantage!”26

Schopenhauer’s image is the last to appear of Nietzsche’s “three images of man which our modern age has set up one after the other and which will no doubt long inspire mortals to a transfiguration of their own lives.”27 Rousseau’s is the first image, and Goethe’s, the second, of, what turns out to be, *transfigured* man. According to Nietzsche, Rousseau’s image of man

25 *Untimely Meditations*, p. 147.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.
“produces the greatest fire and is sure of producing the greatest popular effect”; Goethe’s image is for the few, contemplative men, but does not appeal to the many; finally, of Schopenhauer’s image Nietzsche concludes that it “demands contemplation only by the most active men; only they can regard it without harm to themselves, for it debilitates the contemplative and frightens away the crowd.”

Rousseau’s image of man, with its deceptively simple appeal to “‘holy nature’” against ossified, oppressive tradition, manages to polarize the discontented masses, which in turn become violent forces of nature themselves. “In every socialist earthquake and upheaval it has always been the man of Rousseau who, like Typhon under Etna, is the cause of the commotion.” Nietzsche, like Carlyle, sees Rousseau’s gospel of nature and its calamitous consequences as a historical inevitability (and in some ways even salutary). But both of them also disparage the excesses of Rousseauean men.

When Rousseauean man replies to the call of nature, he genuinely is stirred by its appeal, and aspires to something higher than himself. “He despises himself and longs to go beyond himself: a mood in which the soul is ready for fearful decisions but which also calls up from its depths what is noblest and rarest in it.” However, danger lurks in the ambivalence of Rousseau’s “nature” which, as it turns out, does not necessarily aim at any telos. The capacity to make “fearful decisions” in pursuit of one-knows-not-what is, of course, not necessarily beneficent. “The man of Rousseau can easily become a Catalinist,” wrote Nietzsche. (Carlyle represents the scheming “Catalinism” of Rousseauean men more bluntly, as cannibalism.)

28 Ibid., p. 151.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 152.
32 On Carlyle’s interpretation, the French Revolution did not confirm the benevolence of human nature elicited by Rousseau, but reminded us of the “primitive” fact: “That I can devour Thee.”
Next Nietzsche surveys Goethe’s image of man, a partial “corrective and sedative for precisely those excitations of which the man of Rousseau is the victim.” Goethean man is keenly aware of the dubiety of Rousseau’s gospel of nature; he knows that the appeal to nature may only be an appeal to sheer violence and, therefore—although he, too, fixes on nature—Goethean man refuses to act. With disillusionment, Goethean man realizes the aimlessness and futility of activism. “The man of Goethe here turns away from the man of Rousseau; for he hates all violence, all sudden transition—but that means: all action; and thus the world-liberator becomes as it were only a world-traveller.” Ultimately Goethean man descends into dilettantism, into philistinism. For Goethean man the real is reduced to a smattering of appearances seemingly intended for epicurean consumption. He finds solace in these pleasures, and proceeds rapidly to feast, given a relatively short lifetime—remarkably, “even Helen does not detain him long.”

Nietzsche detects a bit of this philistinism in “Goethe’s own enthusiastic participation in the world of the theater” but graciously acknowledges Goethe’s awareness of his own excesses.

Goethe seems to have realized where the danger and weakness of his type of man lay, and he indicates it in the words of Jarno to Wilhelm Meister: ‘You are vexed and bitter, that is very good; if only you would get really angry for once it would be even better.’

Before moving on from Goethe’s to Schopenhauer’s image of man, we must return for a moment to Carlyle. The reason, as anyone familiar with Carlyle will know, is that Carlyle takes himself to be a disciple of Goethe’s. Carlyle called Goethe his “spiritual godfather.”

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33 *Meditations*, p. 151

34 Ibid, p. 152.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.
Thus we may be tempted to take a detour here; to stop, and let Nietzsche’s critique of Goethean man stand in for a Nietzschean critique of Carlyle. But there is a problem with this approach. For, Carlyle obviously shares Nietzsche’s reservations about Goethean man’s proclivity for inaction. The Carlylean “hero” is, precisely, an action-man; he is “the infinite conjugation of the verb To do.”

Carlyle’s relentless stress on action sets him apart most clearly from Romanticism in general, and from certain latent tendencies of Goethe’s, in particular. Carlyle’s interest in German idealism is mitigated farther by his staunch puritan background. “One of the paradoxes of modern literature,” notes Cassirer, “is that this Puritan became the interpreter and defender of Goethe’s moral character.”

Like Nietzsche, Carlyle is attracted to another side of Goethe, one that Carlyle captured in a favorite maxim (translated in the following form by Carlyle’s own hand, in his version of Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship), that “doubt, of whatever kind, can be ended by action alone.”

Thus it would seem that Carlyle approaches more closely to Nietzsche’s position, being duly aware of the flaws of Goethean men. Accordingly, allowing Goethe to stand in for Carlyle would be of limited use. For the time being, then, let us observe instead the similarity between Carlyle and Nietzsche manifest in Nietzsche’s praise of the “heroic disposition” that characterizes Schopenhauer’s image of man.

Nietzsche praises Schopenhauer for being the first modern “philosophical teacher” to instruct man in how to resolve human nature’s “mighty longing for sanctification and salvation.” Schopenhauer’s teaching may be described as the lesson of heroic truthfulness. The only meaningful activity for modern man is to be truthful. This seems to entail denying every illusion that has the effect of consoling man in the face of violent nature, or for the deficiency of human

39 Carlyle, Past and Present III.xi (Works, 10:198).
nature. Schopenhauer’s teaching, briefly, is this: “‘A happy life is impossible: the highest that
man can attain to is a heroic one.’”40

Schopenhauerean man transforms reality by choosing to accept the truth even though it
involves suffering. This is not as easy as it sounds; recall that Nietzsche recommends this image
of man for “contemplation only by the most active of men.” Schopenhauerean truthfulness
requires one to adopt the most militant and thoroughgoing skepticism:

All that exists that can be denied deserves to be denied; and being truthful means: to
believe in an existence that can in no way be denied and which is itself true without
falsehood. That is why the truthful man feels that the meaning of his activity is
metaphysical, explicable through the laws of another and higher life, and in the
profoundest sense affirmative.41

Nietzsche elaborates here, that radical truthfulness affects reality in such a way that action is not
given up, but transfigured and made “metaphysical.” By denying everything that can be denied,
Schopenhauerean man necessarily repudiates the possibility of his own happiness.42 But this
courage somehow clears the way for metaphysical action. Nietzsche portrays this act in dramatic
terms as a total renunciation or sacrifice of oneself: “He too wants to know everything, but
not...to preserve himself and to take delight in the multiplicity of things; he himself is his first
sacrifice to himself…. His strength lies in forgetting himself.”43

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40 Meditations, p. 153. Nietzsche is quoting Shopenhauer here, and this passage continues onto the
following page: “‘He leads [a heroic life] who, in whatever shape or form, struggles against great difficulties for
something that is to the benefit of all and in the end is victorious, but who is ill-rewarded for it or not rewarded at
all. Then, when he has done, he is turned to stone, like the prince in Gozzi’s Re corvo, but stands in a noble posture
and with generous gestures. He is remembered and celebrated as a her; his will, mortified a whole life long by effort
and labour, ill success and the world’s ingratitude, is extinguished in Nirvana.’” Note the emphasis on solitude, on
being unrecognized by anyone but oneself.

41 Meditations, p. 153

42 The sacrifice of one’s happiness appears to be a necessary condition of epic heroism.

43 Ibid., p. 155.
There can be no solace in nature, and specifically human nature must be accepted as a perpetual source of discomfort, or unhappiness. As Nietzsche later explains, the ambivalence of nature flows from the specific quality of human nature, as a force that presses perpetually against terrestrial nature:

and if all nature presses towards man, it thereby intimates that man is somehow necessary for the redemption of nature from the curse of the life of the animal, and that in him existence at last holds up before itself a mirror in which life appears no longer senseless but in its metaphysical significance. Yet let us reflect: where does the animal cease, where does man begin—man, who is nature’s sole concern!44

On principle, this reflection never comes to an end. Yet, upon recognizing this, one is not necessarily bound to the bloodless sullenness or satiated torpor of the alienated dilettante. Schopenhauer’s heroic example shows how radical truthfulness can open up the possibility of infinite transfiguration:

for him who seeks untruth in everything and voluntarily allies himself with unhappiness a miracle of disappointment of a different sort has perhaps been prepared; something inexpressible of which happiness and truth are only idolatrous counterfeits approaches him, the earth loses its gravity, the events and powers of the earth become dreamlike, transfiguration spreads itself about him as on summer evenings.

The knowledge of eternal becoming is dreadful to accept. However, once fully internalized, Nietzsche speculates that it is the precondition of genius. For the knowledge of eternal becoming does not annihilate the specifically human aspect of nature, rather, it is here that man’s humanity properly speaking—human nature as the creative source of order—comes to self-awareness. All other men are duped by becoming. “To the question: ‘To what end do you live?’ they would all quickly reply with pride: ‘To become a good citizen, or scholar, or statesman.’” But Nietzsche insists that every human being is something “that can never become something else.”45

44 Ibid., p. 157.

Nietzsche singles out three superlative types of men, the Philosopher, the Artist and the Saint, as representatives of the heroic disposition. These types exhibit the courage to resist eternal becoming, despite knowing it for what it is. Overcoming the animal self, they achieve the highest potential of humanity and, therefore, they also fulfill nature. “They are those true men, those who are no longer animal...nature, which never makes a leap, has made its one leap in creating them, and a leap of joy moreover, for nature then feels that for the first time it has reached its goal.”46 Through the autonomous creation of order, the man of heroic disposition is able to redeem both mankind, and nature.

Belief: The Matter of Disagreement

Thomas Carlyle also conceives of human nature as resistance to ephemeral disorder; his heroes, like Nietzsche’s, appear at least partly as creators of order; and Carlyle’s unorthodox theology, like Nietzsche’s unconventional atheism, threatens to put man in the place of the creator God of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious traditions. But in spite of all this, Carlyle never conceives his heroes as solely responsible for the redemption of mankind. The fact is that one cannot be sure what Carlyle believes about God. He avoids dogmatic controversy as a matter of principle. It is certain that he rejects the Scottish Calvinism of his upbringing, although it is still popular to dub Carlyle a Calvinist without theology. Two biographical facts appear to be significant to Carlyle’s religious thinking: On the one hand, Carlyle’s belief was shaken by the skepticism of Hume, Gibbon, and even Voltaire; on the other, he found in German literature and philosophy a new avenue for faith.47

46 Ibid., p. 159.

47 Carlyle was among the first to communicate German thought to the English-speaking world. Hence, many of the similarities between Carlyle and Nietzsche can also be traced to an overlapping intellectual heritage.
In certain respects Carlyle’s thought is essentially religious, if it is not theological. Certainly he would have been concerned with the matter of salvation, although he rarely speaks of the niceties regarding how salvation is to be achieved. Rather, Carlyle makes an effort to observe “sacred silence” regarding such questions. Be that as it may, Carlyle also thinks of (religious) “belief” as the mark of a healthy soul or society, and of “unbelief,” as the inevitable symptom of decline. Carlyle applies this diagnostic principle in his interpretation of history. Here following Goethe, Carlyle interprets history as oscillating between periods of belief and skepticism. The eighteenth century was one such period of skepticism, which manifested in the wholesale destruction of society during the French Revolution. Rousseau was the evangelist of this orgy of practical “unbelief,” and Carlyle, by exposing the situation and its unhealthiness, hopes to promote the renewal of order without resorting to the futile proposition of a wholesale return to “tradition.”

This is one reason why Carlyle’s notion of belief is so sketchy. Like Nietzsche, Carlyle tries to approach the historical-social problem as a “physician of culture,” not as an adherent of one or another contending belief. The familiar conclusion that Carlyle winds up being just a Calvinist without the theology, implies that he did not quite succeed in this. However, laying aside the questionable results of Carlyle’s enterprise, one cannot ignore the significance of his novel approach to belief. Carlyle’s view of belief is what we might call functional, or even pragmatic. The sign of belief is “unconsciousness,” or the non-reflective identity of idea and action. Describing Mohammad, Carlyle elaborates on his notion of unconsciousness:

Not the sincerity that calls itself sincere…that is a very poor matter indeed;—a shallow braggart conscious sincerity; oftenest self-conceit mainly. The Great Man’s sincerity is of the kind he cannot speak of, is not conscious of: nay, I suppose, he is conscious rather of insincerity; for what man can walk accurately by the law of truth for one day? No, the Great Man does not boast himself sincere…perhaps does not ask himself if he is so: I would say rather, his sincerity does not depend on himself; he cannot help being sincere! The great Fact of Existence is great to him…. Fearful and wonderful, real as Life, real as Death, is this Universe to him. Though all men should forget its truth, and walk in a vain
show, he cannot…. A little man may have this, it is competent to all men that God has made: but a Great Man cannot be without it.⁴⁸

Carlyle’s use of unconsciousness prefigures later philosophers, though he often equivocates on the term, which has for him always a moral bearing.

Carlyle now champions, now fears the unconscious. He heralds the capacity of the dynamic unconscious to destroy false social and religious forms...and to connect man with his ultimate nature, but then he quickly withdraws...fearing the groundlessness of the unconscious...and the psychological and social chaos it may prelude.⁵⁰

It is his notion of the unconscious that underlay Carlyle’s belief in the inescapability of belief: even skepticism is a belief (or anti-belief) with practical consequences. This equivocation is written large in his cyclical sense of history, and is reflected also in Carlyle’s ambivalence towards his own historical situation.

Explaining to Emerson his sense of the historical moment, its relation to belief and skepticism, (and describing Emerson’s transcendentalism as a “symptom” of the time) Carlyle writes the following:

The Visible becomes the Bestial when it rests not on the Invisible. Innumerable tumults of Metaphysic must be struggled thro’ (whole generations perishing by the way), and at last Transcendentalism evolve itself (if I construe aright) as the Euthanasia of Metaphysic altogether. May it be sure, may it be speedy! Thou shalt open thy eyes, O son of Adam; thou shalt look, and not forever jargon about the laws of Optics and the making of spectacles! For myself, I rejoice very much that I seem to be flinging aside innumerable sets of spectacles (could I but lay them aside—with gentleness!) and hope one day actually to see a thing or two. Man lives by Belief (as it was well written of old); by logic he can only at best long to live. Oh, I am dreadfully afflicted with Logic here, and wish often (in my haste) that I had the besom of destruction to lay to it for a little!

“WHY, and WHEREFORE?—God wot simply THEREFORE! Ask not WHY; ‘tis SITH thou hast to care for.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ On Heroes, p. 45.
⁴⁹ LaValley, p. 6.
⁵⁰ Correspondence of Carlyle and Emerson, ed. Joseph Slater (New York: Columbia UP, 1964) p. 130.
The remarkably candid self examination in this passage provides an excellent point of contact with Nietzsche’s criticism of Carlyle. It appears that, to a considerable degree, Nietzsche is correct to say that Carlyle’s crusade on behalf of “Belief” is halfhearted, and that, at bottom Carlyle’s own belief is dubious. Carlyle here includes himself in an indictment of enlightenment culture, as “dreadfully afflicted with Logic.” Yet another puzzle presents itself: If, in 1835, Carlyle acknowledged Nietzsche’s critique and even agreed with it, why did he not give up Belief altogether and admit the dreadful truth of Logic?

There can be no definitive answer here. And since we are already at one speculative remove from our principals, it may not pay to press the matter any farther. But there is something here worth considering for a moment; namely that Carlyle is not merely an “insipid muddlehead.” While his views may have come off as logically “muddleheaded,” Carlyle clearly knew what he was doing. He sides with belief rather than logic because belief seems to him the more substantial element of the two. The instrumentalism and mechanism that Carlyle abhors in modern philosophy, is directly the result of mistaking this relationship, trying to let belief subsist on logic. Ultimately Carlyle traces this modern prejudice to the dominance of the visible and demonstrable, a prejudice that he further associates with the privileged position of texts over voices. With this in mind, Carlyle’s aversion to dogmatic disputes becomes a little more understandable.

Spectacles are unavailing without an object to see. As Nietzsche also recognizes, logic can calculate, but it can never evaluate. Carlyle takes “belief” in a universal sense as the substance of value: “Worship is Worth-ship,” he surmises, in On Heroes. Upon reflection, then, Carlyle’s pursuit of belief proves to be on the same track as Nietzsche’s celebrated revaluation of values, even if it “derails” in a different way.
The heart of Carlyle and Nietzsche’s disagreement is also easier to see: Nietzsche predicates a revaluation of values in the individual self, specifically in the heroic self typified by Artists, Philosophers and Saints. Nietzsche describes these men as individuals in the most profound sense, having sacrificed themselves to themselves to attain to the substance of genius. This, perhaps, explains how for Nietzsche they alone are responsible for the redemption of nature and mankind, why “mankind” has “nothing else [as] its task,” but to “work continually at the production of individual great men,” and so on. They are plenum-men. By contrast, Carlyle’s great man significantly lacks this intense, dialectical, self-awareness—as his view of “unconsciousness” would seem to require.

Carlyle’s characterization of the hero is more along the lines of Plato’s depiction of the poet in *Ion*; he is the medium, not the maker, of revealed truth. In “The Hero as Poet,” Carlyle identifies Shakespeare as “the...melodious priest of a true Catholicism,” that will keep a hold on mankind long after some religions die out. “Is he not an eye to us all; a blessed heaven-sent Bringer of Light?—And, at bottom, was it not perhaps far better that this Shakespeare, everyway an unconscious man, was conscious of no Heavenly message?”

Both Carlyle and Nietzsche turn to nature in their quest to renovate value, and each has to come to terms with the ambivalent concept of nature/self handed down by Rousseau. But Carlyle and Nietzsche overcome the ambivalence of nature in divergent ways. The Nietzschean hero gives birth to his authentic self by rejecting aggressively all inherited beliefs. Nietzsche claims: “Almost every genius knows, as one stage of his development, the ‘Catalinarian existence’—a

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51 See also *Republic*, X (605c-607b).

52 *On Heroes*, p. 103.

53 Ibid., p. 102.
feeling of hatred, revenge, and rebellion against everything which already *is*, which no longer *becomes*. Cataline—the form of pre-existence of every Caesar.”

The scheming character of a Cataline is a long way from Carlyle’s humble “Stratford peasant” who by mere sincerity gives England its voice, and still rules a great portion of the world from his grave. It is not by aiming to conquer that Carlyle’s Shakespeare is so victorious. In contrast to Nietzsche, Carlyle at least portrays the hero as an utterly sincere and humble man.

In the end, Nietzsche embraces radically his sense of alienation, holding that the absolute substance of individual genius can replace the corroded substance of traditional metaphysics. That Carlyle’s thinking tends in a similar direction can be seen in his rejection of metaphysics and his similar turn to the self as a new source of value. But the Catalinarian individualism of Nietzsche’s great man implies conscious scheming, while Carlyle’s heroes act on unconscious, moral, intuition. Carlyle’s remarks to Emerson also show how Carlyle despised even his own self-consciousness, holding it to be a symptom of his personal disease. “Carlyle never fully confuses himself with his heroes...but Zarathustra returns as Nietzsche in Ecce Homo.”

If the two were ever to meet—and it is unfortunate that there are no conferences for “physicians of culture”—Carlyle and Nietzsche would reprove each other with the same adage: “Physician, heal thyself.” For, both, in their way, conceived projects of self-redemption that, from our vantage point seem more and more to be ill-conceived. These two physicians easily could have recognized the other’s symptoms. But, sadly, they possessed a blind spot for their

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55 It should be noted, however, that Carlyle’s fictionalized account of his own “conversion” experience—I am thinking of the virulent “Everlasting No,” and the joyfully felt, albeit mystical and amorphous “Everlasting Yea”—in *Sartor Resartus* more closely resembles Nietzsche’s violent portrayal of the birth of genius. Yet none of this intellectual violence surfaces in *Heroes*—perhaps, because the theme of *Heroes* is not the rebirth of individuals but of communities which are populated by many types of men, not just men of genius.

56 LaValley, 299.
own, because they failed to see that self-redemption is everywhere impossible. The later Carlyle seems to tilt the balance, abandoning the individual “self” and monumentalizing state-builders (i.e. Cromwell, Frederick) like terrestrial gods. Nietzsche takes another path, pursuing the self into dark abysses into which he finally loses his own consciousness. Carlyle’s and Nietzsche’s images of man both suffer from this radicalism: Carlyle’s hero threatens to become the whole object of belief, eclipsing the transcendent truth of which he ought to be the representative; while Nietzsche’s genius stands as an authority for himself alone, and cannot make available authority or value that is communicable to others.

Perfectionism, Belief and the Pathos of Distance: The Question of Democracy

Let us acknowledge at the outset Carlyle and Nietzsche’s political common ground: they both detest democracy. However, in spite of Carlyle’s conviction that leadership is the one needful thing in politics (which underwrites his trust in social hierarchy), Carlylean “belief” is a great social equalizer. True belief makes all men free, false belief is the stuff of slavery. Nietzsche, on the other hand, making individualism into a religion, fervently approves of aristocracy. He even proposes the physical separation of “noble” and “base” orders of society. In the remainder of this chapter we shall think over a final puzzle: How does philosophy relate to politics, in Carlyle and Nietzsche? We shall approach this problem by comparing Nietzsche’s moral and political perfectionism to Carlyle’s theory of (authentic) belief as the end of political community.

“Perfectionism” describes the political doctrine articulated by Nietzsche in *Schopenhauer as Educator*: that “Mankind must work continually at the production of individual great men—that and nothing else is its task.” Importantly, perfectionism is not a Nietzschean invention, but a teaching shared by many of the greatest Western philosophers. Stanley Cavell attributes it to Emerson, especially; who was a longtime companion of Carlyle’s and, as we now know, had a pointed influence on Nietzsche. Cavell associates Plato and Aristotle, also, with perfectionism,
along with Emerson, Nietzsche, and at least forty other philosophers and artists. Carlyle is conspicuously absent in Cavell’s list.

Despite that it is demanding perfectionism is basically optimistic. It is “the dimension of moral thought directed less to restraining the bad than to releasing the good, as from a despair of good (of good and bad in each of us).” 57 Perfectionism carries strenuous burdens only because it reflects the absolute claim of the good, and so it cannot stand (the inevitable) compromise. Cavell renders the political side of perfectionism as “the sense of compromise done to my life by the society to which I give my consent.” 58

This sense can be particularly acute in a democracy, which is, after all, the quintessential regime of uncertainty and compromise. Yet, Cavell attests that perfectionism and democracy are not incompatible. It is possible to consent to a society, and still feel continually compromised by that consent. Indeed, perfectionism has a significant political role to play in the life of a democracy precisely because it awakens us to the personal drama of consent and recalls our mutual ownership of the community with all its hopes and miseries. Here Cavell depicts Emersonian perfectionism:

The idea is that the mode of character formed under the invitation to the next self, entering the next state of society, is one capable of withstanding the inevitable compromise of democracy without cynicism, and it is the way that reaffirms not only consent to a given society but reaffirms the idea of consent as a responsiveness to society, an extension of the consent that founds it…. The [unexplained misery of a society] compromises my happiness, but it does not falsify it nor its show of consent. 59

Now, the democratic perfectionism that Cavell here describes is not specifically Nietzsche’s (or Carlyle’s), but Emerson’s. We have too little room here to sort out all of the differences between


58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., p. 28
Emersonian and Nietzschean perfectionism. Let it suffice to say that Nietzsche’s credentials as a “democrat” are rather more dubious than Emerson’s. Neither are Emerson’s democratic credentials indisputable. Indeed, at least one prominent scholar links together Emerson and Nietzsche as representatives of “aristocratic radicalism,” opposed to any manner of democracy.\(^6^0\) However, Cavell binds Nietzsche to Emerson loosely to democracy, through their shared appeal to the (next) self.

Both Nietzsche and Emerson champion the moral perfection of the individual as of teleological value. In this respect, Cavell finds both of their teachings to be invaluable instruments of democratic education, since without the premise of the moral value of the individual democracy comes off as an intolerably deficient form of government. But both Emerson and Nietzsche press moral perfectionism to such an extent that the value of the one seems to eclipse that of the many. Emerson’s and Nietzsche’s sovereign individualism, as a rule, is hostile to the “mob,” or the “herd.” This is where the ambiguity enters, where their teachings bring sovereign individualism into conflict with popular sovereignty. Emerson, however, makes a compromise with democracy by endorsing “natural aristocracy,” in the manner of Jefferson or Adams. Cavell does not address this point, but Nietzsche refuses to make any compromise with democracy, and often castigates it for underwriting mediocrity, even elevating mediocrity to the position of greatness. So, how is Nietzsche’s teaching compatible with democracy?

In an attempt to clear up this oversight, Daniel Conway has proposed that Cavell’s (partial) endorsement of Nietzsche relies on an implicit distinction between his \textit{moral} and \textit{political} perfectionism. While the latter is incompatible with democracy, the former is compatible, perhaps even beneficent to it. “Following Cavell’s cue,” Conway brings out the distinction between these two categories: “Political perfectionism...provides for the rigid stratification and hierarchical organization of society and its resources, with the aim of


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producing, as a matter of design, those exemplary human beings whose exploits alone warrant the future of humankind.”\textsuperscript{61}

Strict aristocracies are requisite to the attainment of political perfectionism—“as a matter of design”—because, according to Nietzsche, social stratification engenders the \textit{pathos} of distance that is essential to initiating within the self a desire for (moral?) perfection. Nietzsche adumbrates the connection between stratification, the pathos of distance and moral perfection:

Without that \textit{pathos of distance} which grows out of the ingrained difference between strata...that other, more mysterious \textit{pathos} could not have grown up, either—the craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself...in brief, simply the enhancement of the type “man,” the continual “self-overcoming of man,” to use a moral formula in a supra-moral sense.\textsuperscript{62}

Conway insists that Nietzsche’s endorsement of aristocracy is separable from his moral perfectionism, and that “the essential element of his political thinking lies not in his yearning for an institutionally reinforced hierarchy, but in his perfectionism.”\textsuperscript{63} Conway goes on to say that Nietzsche’s moral perfectionism is not incompatible with democracy or with modern decadence.

Although one may be inclined to agree with Conway on this point, Nietzsche’s own words alert us to two important difficulties. The first is that Nietzsche’s perfectionism is not moral, but as he says, supra-moral. For Nietzsche, the authentically great individuals just are those supra-moral souls who as lawgivers create values: To be morally valuable is to put oneself beyond morality. Secondly, Nietzsche suggests that aristocratic structures create aristocratic souls, not the other way around. Therefore he cannot endorse democracy as a bridge to natural aristocracy (which he, too, holds as the ideal government). Only conventional aristocracy can sustain natural aristocracy. To be sure, there is a lot of nuance to Nietzsche’s claims. But in the

\textsuperscript{61} Nietzsche and the Political, (New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 54.

\textsuperscript{62} Beyond Good and Evil, 257 (also qtd. in Conway, p. 40).

\textsuperscript{63} Conway, p. 54.
end, Nietzsche still regards the lot of the many as accidental, or better, as instrumental to the fate of the one. For Nietzsche, the essential thing is the majesty of the individual. It is not clear on the basis of Nietzsche’s texts that this (supra) moral perfectionism is possible without of political perfectionism.

Nietzsche’s suspicion of democracy, as it turns out, furnishes another point of contact with Carlyle. Carlyle despised democracy as the social projection of laissez-faire. Democracy is neglect of leadership, “anarchy” and “no-government.” Carlyle suspects it will not last long as a social form and he often views it as a transitional phase between the ancien regime and a future hierarchy.

By contrast, Carlyle’s view of democracy’s future as a political form is ambiguous. To be sure, Carlyle rejects the notion that democratic procedures (“the ballot-box”) alone will produce just outcomes, as if government can be conducted by mechanical expedients. But Carlyle is no mere reactionary, traditionalist or throwback. He hopes to see a new, more natural hierarchy flourish. He calls on “captains of industry” to seize responsibility for moral leadership of society (granted, without much success). Sometimes Carlyle expresses a hopeful vision of a future “world of heroes.” Surely political democracy could sustain good enough justice, if its citizens were “heroic” citizens.

Carlyle, too, endorses an “aristocracy of natural talent” as the ideal regime. He sees this as the implicit goal of the human drive towards freedom. But for Carlyle this future is not necessarily heralded by the creation of democratic states. The future is portended, rather, by the appearance of heroic authors like Rousseau and Burns, and heroic kings like Cromwell, Frederick and Napoleon—men who pick up the tools, and use them—the builders of modern nations. These men often fulfill the promise of natural aristocracy by refusing to let the strictures of democratic procedure get in their way. These images are fearsome, no doubt. They also describe accurately the genesis of democratic culture in the West.
With respect to the question of democracy, Carlyle and Nietzsche share a tendency to abandon the law to venture after a destiny, or an identity. Nietzsche prizes the individual’s identity, whereas Carlyle focuses on the identity of a people, or nation, as manifest in its heroes. (Among other places, Nietzsche excoriates Carlyle in the section of *Beyond Good and Evil* entitled “Peoples and Fatherlands.”) Both of these alternative ways of figuring authority have their shortcomings. Both also meet the need to figure personal authority over and against the parchment authority of statutes.

Earlier in this study I attempted to show that Carlyle’s concept of the hero-king has an archetype in Rousseau’s figure of the “great legislator.” Both Carlyle and Rousseau exhibit the persistence of ideal kingship in democratic literature. Like the great legislator, Carlyle’s attempt to associate the hero and the king personifies Rousseau’s political venture of synthesizing civil society (or the nation/national identity) with the state, (or sovereignty/coercive power). Carlyle criticizes Rousseau for attempting to solve this dilemma on the level of theory, however. Rousseau does not take the same approach as Carlyle; he merely suppresses the challenge that heroic (personal) authority presents to kingly (sovereign) authority. Rousseau confines heroic authority to his great legislator, who impresses his personality onto the regime with the result that citizenship in Rousseau’s republic winds up being the mimesis of the heroic legislator.

Nietzsche also conceives of the great man as a great legislator. However, following Emerson (and, arguably, Carlyle), Nietzsche abandons Rousseau’s theoretical aspiration to a perfected democratic republicanism. Instead Nietzsche focuses his attention on the moral perfection of the individual. As we have seen, this quest for moral perfectionism leads to a discovery that democracy and perfectionism may be incompatible, at the radical extreme.
Conclusion

Insofar as Carlyle, also, presupposes a conflict between democratic procedure and moral perfectionism, his theory of the hero anticipates Nietzsche’s. Carlyle plays up the moral authority of the great man while neglecting the question of legal limits, or, what is more likely, taking their existence for granted. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Carlyle believes that his subordination of the law to belief serves a more authentic equality.

Carlyle sees law as the garment of belief, as “habit” in a double-sense. As a political prophet Carlyle rebukes those who would make idols of democratic formalities, imploring them to attend only to the substance of a just society, which is the same regardless of form. Social hierarchy notwithstanding, Carlyle suggests that, in a good society, leaders and followers are equal to each other by way of a common pathos. Pathos just is experience, or suffering. Carlyle suggests that the germ of belief is a shared pathos regarding one’s condition, and that pathos is given concrete expression by heroes. Heroic leaders merely discover and articulate this common pathos; they may lend it a certain complexion, but strictly speaking they do not create it. LaValley describes Carlyle’s alternative to the pathos of distance when he asserts that “Carlyle’s Ecce Homo...is a crucifixion with others...through memory [and realism]...not through the lonely and exalted acting out of impossible heroic roles.”

Recall that Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo is a sacrifice of oneself to oneself. Nietzsche, like Rousseau, is an egoist. From this perspective, the pathos of distance is the only authentic pathos. From the perspective of egoism, all homonoia is artificial. Moreover, it is impossible for one’s own pathos to reflect a morally binding claim on another’s soul. Of course, this presents a strange dilemma for political theory because it reduces all ties between men to legal obligations upheld by coercive force.

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64 p. 300.
Rousseau tries to get around this problem by drawing clear boundaries between the constituted government and the legislator—“an extraordinary man in the State in all respects.”

According to Rousseau the same man who “legislates,” or constitutes a republic, should not also rule; in fact, the legislator cannot play any role within the republic. But this makes of the legislator a prophet. Rousseau’s legislator is isolated from the ordinary citizen/subject not only “by genius,” but also “by his function. It is not magistracy, it is not sovereignty. This function, which constitutes the republic, does not enter into its constitution. It is a particular and superior activity that has nothing to do with human dominion.”

The uncertainty of personal authority requires Rousseau’s legislator to be cordoned off into a mystified background space, and protected (and protected against) by the rigid legal edifice of the state.

Nietzsche also characterizes great men as “lawgivers.” But Nietzsche rejects Rousseau’s tenuous distinctions and admits that anyone may be a lawgiver to oneself, so long as one has the psychic wherewithal. Nietzsche’s turn has the same effect as Carlyle’s insofar as legal authority is shoved aside in favor of personal authority. Yet it differs from Carlyle’s to the extent that personal authority is morally meaningful to oneself alone. The effect of this is what LaValley described as Nietzsche’s “lonely and exalted acting out of impossible heroic roles.”

Seen in this light, the notion of a community of pathos that underlies Carlyle’s theory of belief may be attractive, but it, too, is open to serious criticism. With respect to democracy and the rule of law, Carlyle winds up on the “wrong side of history.” Carlyle and Nietzsche both have been castigated for promoting “fascist” political views, and their attachment to personal authority is not a little to blame for this. In addition, although there is a clear difference between Carlylean “belief” and Nietzschean “pathos of distance,” both of these key moral concepts suffer

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65 Social Contract II.vii (Collected Writings 4:155).

66 Ibid.
from a lack of clarity. Doubtless, this is partly intentional, since both philosophers mean to leave their concepts open to possible future content.

To interpret kindly (and not unfairly), this openness shows that Nietzsche and Carlyle share a tendency towards pluralism, if they do not care for democracy. They both suggest that there are many more valid conduits of moral authority than one might imagine. But they may be criticized for preferring to reject inauthentic claims to authority, rather than identifying authentic ones. Then again, it is no small benefit to a free people to have been taught to assess moral claims of authority for themselves.
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