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Carlyle's *Illudo Chartis* as a Prophetic Exercise
in the Manner of Swift and Sterne

In 1954, Marjorie King discovered in Carlyle's garret in Chelsea a fragmentary manuscript hitherto unknown to critics.¹ The work is entitled *Illudo Chartis* and consists of one chapter and a fragment of a second; from both internal and external evidence King dates its composition at 1825-26, no later than the early days of Carlyle's marriage in 1826. The date is important for my purposes in that it is an early work revealing Carlyle's taste for fiction and, further, demonstrating the influence the eighteenth century writers, particularly Swift and Sterne, had on him. The entire fragment is written in the playful and satiric vein characteristic of Swift and Sterne. G. B. Tennyson posits that Carlyle discontinued the work because it was too frivolous.² The later work of 1831, *Sartor Resartus*, for which *Illudo* was in part, along with *Wotton Reinfred*, an analogue, did not relinquish altogether this frivolity; rather it tempered it. Carlyle, asserts King, combined the ludicrous and "insignificant detail" of *Illudo* with the solemn and "large generalizations" of *Wotton* to arrive at the balance — *Sartor*. In part, this accounts for the fact that *Sartor* is at times humorously trivial, and at the next moment deadly serious: at one moment it discusses in detail the six paper bags containing Teufelsdröckh's manuscript, employing the technique of *Illudo*, and at another it explains Kant's distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, an abstract pursuit characteristic of *Wotton*. *Illudo* itself contains not one serious generalization which later marked Carlyle's works, but rather presents only the levity that also figures later throughout Carlyle's canon, though, admittedly, in decreasing frequency, especially after *Sartor*. Tennyson holds that "of the two fragments, 'Illudo Chartis' is closer to Carlyle's proper direction than 'Wotton'." In *Wotton*, characters are merely personified abstractions of general ideas, German in flavor; there is little action, less humor, and far too much discussion.

That *Illudo* is in a similar tradition with Swift and Sterne is un-

¹ Marjorie P. King, "Illudo Chartis: An Initial Study in Carlyle's Mode of Composition," *Modern Language Review*, XLIX (1954), 164-175.

² George B. Tennyson, *Sartor Called Resartus* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 51-54.

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mistakable. The title itself could be taken as Sterne's own, appropriate to all the playfulness in *Tristram Shandy*, "one of [Carlyle's] first books," says his friend and correspondent, Ralph Waldo Emerson.³ Carlyle took the title from one of Horace's *Satires*:

ubi quid datur oti
illudo chartis, hoc est mediocribus illis
ex vitiis unum.⁴

Roughly translated: "Whenever I have leisure I play on paper. This is one of the mediocre things that take one from life."

Not only does this playful attitude characterize *Tristram Shandy* and *Gulliver* (another work Carlyle lauded early in life as his letters reveal to no small extent), but Swift and Sterne are everywhere echoed in *Illudo*. One of the characters, Uncle Isaac, is at times Carlyle, at other times not; the case is similar with the hero of the story, Stephen Corry. Sterne, says John Traugott, "had himself (in some mask) to be present in every action,"⁵ either as Yorick, Parson Yorick, Tristram, and so on; and similarly King observes that in *Illudo* "Carlyle infuses part of himself into each character." The story is told by a narrator (Carlyle), who relates that Stephen Corry (also Carlyle) was born in the village of Duckdubs (Ecclefechan, which became *Entepfuhl* in *Sartor*). Here Carlyle is working in the tradition of name-humor he had seen in so many former models—More, Scott, Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, though perhaps not yet Richter; Carlyle's essays on Richter did not appear until 1827 and 1830. That Carlyle would choose to imitate or follow in a tradition raises no question; he had no aversion to eclecticism—in fact, he sought it, announcing emphatically, "The young must learn to speak by imitation of the older who already have done it."⁶ And he wrote his brother John in 1821 after suggesting some books for his reading, of which one was *Tale of a Tub*: "if you attend to the style—and imitate it judiciously, they will profit you not a little."⁷

One way in which *Illudo* is humorous, as Carlyle continues to exer-

³ *Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-1872*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London, 1883), I, 8.

⁴ King, p. 168.

⁵ John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954), p. 134.

⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. James A. Froude (London, 1881), I, 120.

⁷ *Early Letters of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London, 1886), I, 342.

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cise a comic temperament parallel to Swift's and Sterne's, is in the inversion of the truth. Carlyle, for example, describes his father's cottages as being structurally unsound, when in fact Carlyle later came to say in *Reminiscences* that his father was the best of builders. "Could I write my Books," he once said in a letter, "as he built his Houses . . . it were more than all my hopes." Like Sterne, Carlyle indulges in the private joke.

One passage appears which is characteristically in the vein of Swift — both his humor and his satirical irony (neither of which Carlyle ever relinquished):

The men [of Duckdubs] were mostly poor, and all uncultivated; no Mechanics' Institute, no Edin, [*sic*] Quarterly, or even British Review had yet visited them; but they lived in peaceful toil, with little curiosity and less knowledge, chiefly on the resources of their five senses, or rather the additional sixth that of hunger; the prose of their life, seasoned by hard labour, being bacon and corned beef; and the poetry fermented of spiritous liquor.⁸

Carlyle's observation here that the villagers were "all uncultivated" because "no Mechanics' Institute, no Edin, Quarterly, or even British Review had yet visited them" is really a compliment to their lack of institutional corruption, written in the manner of Swift's satirical irony. Swift, furthermore, would concur with Carlyle's reproof of institutions, having extended little sympathy toward them in book three of *Gulliver*. King adds in regard to the above passage that the "sixth" sense, "that of hunger," "owes something to Swift and Burton." Carlyle later adopted this sixth sense in *Sartor*, referring to his hero's "Sixth Sense of Hunger."⁹

This Swiftian irony continues to operate throughout Carlyle's canon in, as but one example, the sardonic "Pig Philosophy" in his late essay of 1850, "Jesuitism," (Carlyle substituting "Pig" for Yahoo") and of course throughout *Sartor*. The characteristic way in which Swift's irony and satire functions is through his method of working on two levels simultaneously: joining innocent, often naive observation with ironic intent. Swift, for example, has Gulliver describe objectively and innocently the Lilliputians as they are curiously examining the articles he carries on him, yet underneath this superficial description of Gulliver's is Swift's implied irony. Or elsewhere, the narrator (who is not Swift) in *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* advocates a "nominal Christianity," listing its merits, while Swift's own sardonic position

⁸ King, p. 166. Miss King's essay includes the whole text of *Illudo Chartis*, unavailable in any other publication.

⁹ *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York, 1937), p. 88.

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is implied through the ironic statements of that narrator. Carlyle makes use of this very technique often, as demonstrated in the passage cited above from *Illudo* on institutions. The following passage in *Sartor*, in which Carlyle ridicules "rich men," reveals this Swiftian play between observation and intention, objectivity and irony, and further demonstrates the translation technique Swift humorously employed in *Gulliver* (where he translates from the Lilliputian and Brobdingnagian into English):

Rich men, I find, have *Teusinke* (a perhaps untranslatable article); also a silver girdle, whereat hang little bells; so that when a man walks, it is with continual jingling. Some few, of musical turn, have a whole chime of bells (*Glockenspiel*) fastened; which, especially in sudden whirls, and the other accidents of walking, has a grateful effect. Observe too how fond they are of peaks, and Gothic-arch intersections. The male world wears peaked caps, an ell long, which hang bobbing over the side (*schief*); their shoes are peaked in front; . . . even the wooden shoes have their ell-long noses: some also clap bells on the peak. Further, according to my authority, the men have breeches without seat (*ohne Gesäss*): these they fasten peakwise to their shirts. (Book one, chapter seven)

The *Teusinke* here is a bell-shaped girdle, quite befitting the gluttony of the rich dandies.

In *Illudo*, one passage strikes us as another of Carlyle's prophetic exercises in the comic manner of Sterne. Narrating the history of Corry's Uncle Isaac, the storyteller observes (note also the self-parody, in part, of Carlyle's own life):

But the flower of that eloq race was Isaac the uncle of Elshender, a man who had been at the College of Edinburgh, and become a licentiate (alas! never a pastor) of the Church: he taught for many years the parish school of Croudieburn; could decipher all manner of Latin inscriptions; wrote a Glossary of Corderius, for which he could find no publisher, and in his old days, a Prophetic Poem on Napoleon Bonaparte, the manuscript of which, for this also is still unprinted, I have seen, tho' at this distance of time, I can only recollect from it that the first stanza was:

"I will not sing of that mighty Beast
Whom the river Siene that stays
Who proudly raiseth up his crest
And many men he often slays."

There is much here that is Sterne. The general playfulness of the passage reflects the title of the work and reminds us that Sterne, too, "played on paper"; all of *Tristram Shandy* seems to serve as a delightful pastime for its author.

More particularly, the humorous and ironic turns in the passage

above recall Sterne: there is the comic irony in the fact that Uncle Isaac was a college student at Edinburgh and a teacher who "taught for many years the parish school," and one who therefore, presumably, should have been educated, yet he makes spelling errors in writing his poem on Napoleon: spelling "who on" as "whon," misspelling the river Seine as "Siene." He was one who "could decipher all manner of Latin inscriptions" and yet could not spell properly his own tongue; he was the "flower" of an eloquent race, yet his learned glossary "could find no publisher." In his older days of wisdom, he wrote a "Prophetic" poem, but the narrator can barely recollect only the first stanza.

There is further the humorous irony in the fact that his poem "will not sing of that mighty Beast [Napoleon]" who slays many, when in fact the poem, we presume, proceeds to do just that singing—being, as Carlyle would have us recall, a "Prophetic Poem on Napoleon Bonaparte." In the tradition of name-humor, which Sterne (and Swift) employed plentifully, Carlyle names Uncle Isaac appropriately: Isaac meaning "laughter" in Hebrew. Furthermore, as G. B. Tennyson noticed, just as Dr. Slop in *Tristram Shandy* writes a useless history on midwifery, Uncle Isaac writes an equally useless "Glossary of Corderius," a sixteenth century Belgian Jesuit.

Both Sterne and Carlyle employ trivia—Dr. Slop's worthless book and Uncle Isaac's worthless glossary—for purposes of humor or satire; and it seems to me that F. R. Leavis overlooked or under-estimated these purposes when, assigning only a passing footnote to Sterne in *The Great Tradition*, he labelled Sterne's manner (and, by implication, Carlyle's in *Illudo*) as "irresponsible . . . trifling." This trifling has a very sound purpose: either to entertain the reader, a worthy enough thing, or to satirize or parody. Swift's utilization of *bagatelles* found recurrence in Sterne and Carlyle for two responsible reasons: one, for satiric parody, Swift having used it, for example in book three of *Gulliver* to ridicule the impractical methods and outcomes of science; two, for the reader's pleasure—human enjoyment being a respectable end in itself. With regard to this last point, much of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Carlyle's *Illudo*, and even parts of *Sartor Resartus* come to us, in Walter Pater's famous words, "proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to [our] moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."¹⁰ Wilbur Cross maintains: "With Swift, Sterne said *vive la bagatelle*, but he added—what Swift could never say—*vive la joie*, declaring the

¹⁰ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (London, 1910), p. 239.

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joy of life to be 'the first of human possessions'.¹¹ Carlyle because of his depressing era and his wretched physical condition could never come to give himself fully to Sterne's *vive la joie*, but I surmise that he would indeed have liked to. He once said, "I have under all my gloom a genuine feeling of the ludicrous; and could have been the merriest of men, *had I not* been the sickliest and saddest."¹²

How *Illudo* fits into this confession becomes quite clear: *vive la bagatelle* and *vive la joie* were finding roots in this early work of 1826 and in a work of a few years later, *Sartor*; but his decadent era of the Industrial Revolution became a most violent gardener, tearing them out. He was forced, because of the philanthropist that he was, to take up a more serious occupation, feeling he could no longer afford to write in the tradition of levity or joy which had found germinal expression in *Illudo*. His potential in this direction was never permitted to blossom fully, though he did retain much of the humor for satirical intentions. He moved, in other words, from Sterne closer to Swift.

In *Sartor Resartus* the echoes of Swift and Sterne reach full force—a topic much too large to be dealt with here. Carlyle admired the two eighteenth century figures early in life before the commencement of his German study, as his letters reveal. Even with his later study of the Germans the places of Swift and Sterne were not to be neglected. Yet today the German influence on Carlyle continues to be over-estimated, Swift and Sterne's relevance, among others, being eclipsed in the critics' oversimplified views by the shadow from the continent. Charles Frederick Harrold, whose *Carlyle and German Thought* (1934) is undeniably the definitive treatment of Carlyle's German influence, uniquely proclaimed then in defiance of widely-held views:

There is no evidence that [Carlyle] went to the Germans for any artistic purposes. That his description of Richter's style happens also to describe his own does not necessarily imply that he chose Richter as a model; his acknowledgments of the influence of his father's speech, and the echoes in his own works of the styles [and, we must add, themes] of Sterne, Swift, and Rabelais, make his formal debt to German literature of secondary significance.¹³

Carlyle's later contact with Richter may well have served to recall similar methods witnessed earlier in English models. Richter in fact,

¹¹ Wilbur Cross, *The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne* (New Haven, 1929), p. 554.

¹² *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to Mill, Sterling, and Browning*, ed. Alexander Carlyle (London, 1923), p. 74.

¹³ C. F. Harrold, *Carlyle and German Thought 1819-1834* (London, 1963), p. 6.

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as his own words reveal, derived elements of his technique, namely his playful but sympathetic frivolity, from Swift and Sterne and followed himself in the same tradition of compassionate humor that Carlyle had. Carlyle found revelation in Richter's then current example of that tradition. (Richter died in 1825 when Carlyle was twenty-nine years of age, Carlyle having commenced his study of German in 1819.) Richter had actually confessed that "Swift and Sterne . . . first showed him 'die rechten Wege des Scherzes'."¹⁴ Carlyle, interestingly enough, suggests the genesis and order of influence from Sterne to Carlyle and from Sterne to Carlyle via Richter in his essay on "Jean Paul Friedrich Richter" (1827): defining Sterne's humor as a "playful sympathy" issuing from the heart, Carlyle labels the eighteenth century figure as England's "best, our finest, if not our strongest"¹⁵ humorist—beyond even "Shakespeare," "Jonson," or "Swift." The laudations of Swift, however, were in no way few or slight. Carlyle, as but one example, professed in his *Lectures on the History of Literature* (1838) that Swift was "by far the greatest man of that time."¹⁶

My "Echoes of Swift and Sterne in the Works of Thomas Carlyle"¹⁷ illustrates with voluminous examples the unmistakable influence of Swift and Sterne on Carlyle—a consideration heretofore virtually neglected by independent study. (Harrold merely suggests the matter, then moves on to other considerations, though his annotated edition of *Sartor* does cite many of the echoes of Swift and Sterne.) Carlyle's acknowledgements of Swift and Sterne in his early and late letters, notebooks, and early works, and those recorded by his own contemporary biographers speaking from first-hand accounts are surprisingly numerous. Indeed, there is little doubt that any thorough understanding of Carlyle's formation must include the places of Swift and Sterne, who form certainly no less than fragments of Carlyle's incredibly profuse mind, but who are as necessary as salt for the success of the cuisine. To explain the eclecticism of Carlyle's philosophic and artistic fashioning without including the two eighteenth century models is to leave him partially undressed; and Carlyle, more than anyone I know, needs his clothes—befitting both the moral Victorian and one obsessed with the

¹⁴ Lawrence Marsden Price, *English Literature in Germany*, University of California publications in Modern Philology, XXXVII (1953), p. 203.

¹⁵ Thomas Carlyle, "Jean Paul Friedrich Richter," *Miscellaneous Essays* (New York, 1872), I, 15.

¹⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Lectures on the History of Literature*, ed. J. Reay Greene (London, 1892), p. 168.

¹⁷ Unpublished dissertation, University of Michigan, 1967.

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sartorial image: a celestial hieroglyph of the highest order (the latter being, incidentally, the seminal preoccupation of *The Tailor Retailored* which Carlyle in no small degree drew from Swift's *Tale of a Tub*). In *Ilhudo*, Carlyle had not yet adopted the clothes analogue from Swift, suggesting that the 1826 fragment was but the beginning of his debt to Swift rather than the end.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the article "David Crawford: A Forgotten Man of Scottish Letters," *SSL*, V (July 1967), 28-45, acknowledgement was omitted of biographical information on David Crawford supplied by Lady Edith Haden-Guest, archivist of Glasgow University. This aid is now acknowledged with apologies to Lady Haden-Guest and the Senate of the University for any difficulties caused by its omission.

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