

1-1-1969

Pattern and Paradox in Heroes and Hero-Worship

Robert W. Kusch
University of Michigan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kusch, Robert W. (2013) "Pattern and Paradox in Heroes and Hero-Worship," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, 146–155.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol6/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

ROBERT W. KUSCH

Pattern and Paradox in
Heroes and Hero-Worship

Not Carlyle's most ambitious work nor his favorite, *Heroes and Hero-Worship* still prefigures the shape his imagination will take in later works, especially *Past and Present*, *Cromwell*, and *Frederick*. Most scholarship has concentrated on the philosophic refinement of the work—the definition of the hero, the exposure of certain inconsistencies, the placement of the hero theory inside a continuing tradition.¹ By the late eighteen thirties, however, Carlyle was more prophet than philosopher, well aware that he must create “not the ideas and the sentiments, but the symbols and mood of mind.”² Certainly *Heroes* is not a construct of ideas alone; it evokes a much wider experience. The “symbols and mood of mind,” the patterns of choice, the structure and especially the metaphor of the Tree Igdrasil tell us as much about *Heroes* as the isolation of the theory. And one major artistic problem that Carlyle fails to solve—the artistic dislocation of the “eighteenth century” from the “heroes” it supposedly restrains—intimates that he has not fully grown into the maturity of his later works; he still has fragments of himself to integrate.

After *The French Revolution*, where he recorded the destruction of an entire way of life, and *Chartism*, where he saw certain incipient stages of the French Revolution repeating themselves in England, his readers might well have thought he would predict inevitable ruin for his time and country. His solution of unquestioning trust in the hero did not, of itself, engender heroes and none others had offered themselves. Like the German Romantics, he saw the eighteenth century and the early part of his own age as feckless and formula-ridden, dominated by a scepticism that influenced its most promising representatives toward irony, despair, or misconceived sentiment. Though he was able to

¹ Cf. Louis Cazamian, *Carlyle*, trans. E. K. Brown (New York, 1932), pp. 167-181; C. F. Harrold, *Carlyle and German Thought: 1819-1834* (Hamden, 1963), pp. 184-196; Benjamin H. Lehman, *Carlyle's Theory of the Hero*, Durham, 1928; Emery Neff, *Carlyle* (New York, 1932), pp. 193-195; Rene Wellek, *Confrontations* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 82-113; and Louise M. Young, *Carlyle and the Art of History* (Philadelphia, 1939), pp. 82-86.

² Carlyle, *Two Note-Books*, ed. C. E. Norton (New York, 1898), p. 215.

PATTERN AND PARADOX IN CARLYLE'S HEROES

create a viable hero in *Sartor*, he could not, when he faced the French Revolution, find a man who could master its serpentine and divisive courses. Mirabeau died too soon and Danton did not have the right chemistry to transmute chaos into order. Not even Napoleon, whose actions near the close of the book form a "small visible" where we can see the emperor in the lieutenant, represents the ultimate in heroism. Though Carlyle once contemplated writing Napoleon's life instead of *The French Revolution*, he saw from the first a certain unbounded arrogance that predicted a fall.³ Among Carlyle's contemporaries, only Robert Peel appeared to have the makings of a hero—"the one statesman we had"⁴ Carlyle said of him on his death in 1850—but when Carlyle wrote *Heroes*, he knew little of Peel or his work.

He was still an optimist, however, the fires rising deep from reflections of the last five years. That change would occur seemed inevitable since he interpreted three commentators—Goethe, St. Simon, and Novalis—as saying that history flows in cycles, a "critical" or unbelieving age followed by an "organic" or believing one. Furthermore, at the close of the second book of *Sartor*, he recorded his faith in the "Everlasting Yea," a faith that, as Carlisle Moore has pointed out, quickly became a social gospel.⁵ His conviction that the call for heroism still sounded, that all men were united in a mystical bond, and that truth is pyramidal because no truth ever dies, led him to hope a new society might be forming. He was now persuaded that the phoenix metaphorically interpreted the turns of history and that the French Revolution prefigured a birth as well as a death. Moreover, he saw himself as a prophet—one whose generic *raison d'être* is hope, even if he must ground himself in the absolute to look beyond the dregs of the present. Thus, in the spring of 1840, when Carlyle wrote *Heroes*, he buoyed himself up with a view of the future, believed in the necessity of the hero, and projected a model of heroism from eleven chosen lives of the past.

He possessed the one necessary filament for creation. He usually fashioned a book, or a book fashioned itself in him, when he could edge his thought along the contours of an intricate metaphor. Certainly the clothes and phoenix metaphors guide the design of *Sartor*, and the "spontaneous combustion" of the eighteenth century is one of

³ Carlyle, *Early Letters*, ed. C. E. Norton (London, 1886), p. 3.

⁴ J. A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle, A History of His Life in London: 1834-1881* (London, 1884), p. 48.

⁵ Carlisle Moore, "The Persistence of Carlyle's 'Everlasting Yea,'" *MP*, LIV (1957), 189.

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

the controlling perspectives of *The French Revolution*. In *Heroes*, the metaphor emerges early:

I like, too, the representation they have of the Tree Igdrasil. All Life is figured by them as a Tree. Igdrasil, the Ash-Tree of Existence, has its roots deep down in the kingdoms of Hela or Death; its trunk reaches up heaven-high, spreads its boughs over the whole Universe: it is the Tree of Existence. At the foot of it, in the Death Kingdom, sit Three *Nornas*, Fates, — the Past, Present, Future; watering its roots from the Sacred Well. Its "boughs" with their buddings and dis-leafings, — events, things suffered, things done, catastrophes, — stretch through all lands and times. Is not every leaf of it a biography, every fibre there an act or word? Its boughs are Histories of Nations. The rustle of it is the noise of Human Existence, onwards from of old. It grows there, the breath of Human Passion rustling through it . . .⁹

If the "Life-Tree" appeared only once in *Heroes*, it might simply have the force of an epic simile, but its influence is so pervasive that it deserves to be explored further. In one sense, it is the triple image of existence itself, since it spatially embraces all mankind, temporally brings together past, present, and future; and metaphysically involves life and death. In another sense, its interrelatedness specifically suggests the organic bond of contraries: one nation with another; the future and present as inheritors of the past; and death as the other half of life. For Carlyle, however, the "Tree" has other meanings consistent with his own way of seeing, but probably foreign to the Norse Sagas. He has already applied the rhythms of life and death to the growth and decay of spiritual response in various ages, and the "Tree" now becomes a natural image for his view of history. In the following quotations, the "Tree" retains few suggestions of the "Tree of Existence." It is the primordial rhythmic force of life and death in history, mysterious in its specific workings, but sure in its turns. The first quotation is from "The Hero as Poet," the second from "The Hero as Man-of-Letters":

Curious enough how, as it were by mere accident, this man came to us. I think always, so great, quiet, complete and self-sufficing is this Shakspeare, had the Warwickshire Squire not prosecuted him for deer-stealing, we had perhaps never heard of him as a Poet! The woods and skies, the rustic Life of Man in Stratford there, had been enough for this man! But indeed that strange outbudding of our whole English Existence, which we call the Elizabethan Era, did not it too come as of its own accord? The "Tree Igdrasil" buds and withers by its own laws, — too deep

⁹ Carlyle, *Lectures on Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Centenary Edition of the *Works*, ed. H. D. Traill, XXIV (London, 1899), 253. Henceforth *Heroes*.

PATTERN AND PARADOX IN CARLYLE'S HEROES

for our scanning. Yet it does bud and wither, and every bough and leaf of it is there, by fixed eternal laws; not a Sir Thomas Lucy but comes at the hour fit for him.⁷

How mean, dwarfish are their ways of thinking, in this time, — compared not with the Christian Shakspeares and Miltons, but with the old Pagan Skalds, with any species of believing men! The living TREE Igdrasil, with the melodious prophetic waving of its world-wide boughs, deep-rooted as Heia, has died out into the clanking of a World-MACHINE. "Tree" and "Machine:" contrast these two things. I, for my share, declare the world to be no machine! I say that it does not go by wheel-and-pinion "motives," self-interests, checks, balances; that there is something far other in it than the clank of spinning-jennies, and parliamentary majorities; and, on the whole, that it is not a machine at all!—The old Norse Heathen had a truer notion of God's world than these poor Machine-Sceptics: the old Heathen Norse were sincere men.⁸

There is one other sense in which the "Tree" suggests a series of meanings and even an essential structure for *Heroes and Hero Worship*. In the first paragraph of his opening lecture, Carlyle says, "all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world."⁹ The principle of growth in the "Tree" may very well suggest a principle of growth in this world,¹⁰ and, for Carlyle, the germ of that earthly principle is in the achievements of the great man. In its particular aspect of development, then, the "Tree Igdrasil" is also a natural image for the historical vitality of heroes, and in charting the nature of that vitality, Carlyle is simultaneously recording much of what he sees as the world's significant history.

One of the artistic complexities of *Heroes* lies in the occurrence of several structural patterns, and ultimately in the union of image and theme. Of course Carlyle ostensibly divides his heroes by class ("Prophet" from "Poet" and "Divinity" from "King"), but every class of hero has fundamental analogies with others, so that one emerging pattern is cyclical. What *is* the generic difference between the "Hero as Poet" and the "Hero as Man of Letters," between Shakespeare and Burns? Or between Mahomet and Luther, "Prophet"

⁷ *Heroes*, p. 329.

⁸ *Heroes*, p. 393.

⁹ *Heroes*, p. 393.

¹⁰ The ceaseless activity of the "Tree Igdrasil" is expressed in Carlyle's first description of it: "It is Igdrasil, the Tree of Existence. It is the past, the present, and the future; what was done, what is doing, what will be done; 'the infinite conjugation of the verb *To do*.'" *Heroes*, p. 254.

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

and "Priest"? Carlyle says that the soul of the hero is the same in every age, "the Hero can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest, or what you will,"¹¹ but, apparently, the subtle connections between circumstance, character, and vocation force certain heroes to be more like others. Cromwell is more like Odin than he is like Napoleon, with whom he is so dissimilarly yoked. Knox and Mahomet are of a piece. By repetition of analogous classes, Carlyle seems to be saying that certain ages call for a special kind of hero (and certainly Carlyle sees his own age calling for the "Hero as King," which he treats as a contemporary problem).

A chronological pattern informs the book also. Excepting Cromwell, who is treated in the last lecture, and Shakespeare, who is only slightly out of the series, the personalities are ordered here as they appear in time. Even Jesus and Goethe, whom Carlyle mentions but does not portray, are in sequence: the "one whom we do not name here"¹² is first noted in "The Hero as Divinity" and Goethe is used as a preface to "The Hero as Man of Letters." As an informal structural device, Carlyle also suggests that human consciousness, through continual exploration of its surroundings, evolves towards a more intelligent conception of psychological "reality." Each lecture may be read as a chapter in the history of man's mind. Though he disparages "the progress of the species," by which he means the Encyclopedists' suggestion that mankind is traveling on a straight and simple path towards the perfection of wisdom, he recognizes also that there may have been some ancient subliminal chicanery in elevating the hero to divinity or prophet. "The Hero as Divinity, the Hero as Prophet, are productions of old ages; not to be repeated in the new," he says at the opening of his third lecture, "They presuppose a certain rudeness of conception, which the progress of mere scientific knowledge put an end to. . . . We are now to see our Hero in the less ambitious, but also less questionable, character of Poet."¹³ And, at the beginning of the fifth lecture, he suggests further that, in their pure form, the recurrence of several previous classes of heroism is unlikely because of an irreversible change in the human mind. "Hero-Gods, Prophets, Poets, Priests are forms of Heroism that belong to the old ages, make their appearance in the remotest times; some of them have ceased to be possible long since, and cannot show themselves in the world."¹⁴ The implicit

¹¹ *Heroes*, p. 307.

¹² *Heroes*, p. 307.

¹³ *Heroes*, p. 307.

¹⁴ *Heroes*, p. 377.

PATTERN AND PARADOX IN CARLYLE'S HEROES

conclusion here is that, if the hero is to appear in the nineteenth century, he will probably appear as man-of-letters or king, classes an evolving humanity has prepared itself to honor.

No contradiction exists in reading *Heroes* in all of these ways. There may be no generic differences between "Divinity" and "King" (both charismatic leaders), "Prophet" and "Priest" (both religious revolutionaries), or "Poet" and "Man-of-Letters" (both verbal dramatists), but there are enough differences in degree—differences, that is, between the scope and intensity of the individual's vision, the ultimate response he awakens in humanity and the reception given by his contemporaries—to justify a significant titular variation. Thus, Carlyle sees the "Hero as Man-of-Letters" as the "Poet" in modern dress, a "Singer and Speaker,"¹⁵ but with all of the possibilities for broad and instant communication through the device of printing. "The Priest, too, as I understand it, is a kind of Prophet. . . . He is the spiritual Captain of the people . . . (but) He is the Prophet shorn of his more awful splendor."¹⁶ Humanity's change does not preclude recurrence of types, then, and Carlyle brings a very complex perspective to the movement of *Heroes*.

No one of these patterns holds the essential design of the book, however, for Carlyle is not primarily concerned with chronology, evolution, or recurrence. His title is *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* and his intent is to write both of heroes and of "their reception and performance"¹⁷—the man and his acts, namely, in concert with the response of his contemporaries, his reciprocal response to them, and, ultimately, on those human qualities that will stand in critical times. Much more than a personal sketch is involved. Very often, Carlyle has to detail the *milieu* if he is to justify the hero's sources of action, and, just as often, he has to portray the hero's reception by the people if he is to show how first acts generate others. Since the hero's life encircles other lives and interrupts many cultural economies, these too must be delineated. Through all the mire of circumstance, heroism itself emerges as no simple thing. Whether in poetry or religion or war, all of Carlyle's heroes are distinguished by some concrete achievement—there are no mute inglorious Miltons among them—and most bring to their time some spiritual quality it would have lacked otherwise. Carlyle variously names this quality "intensity" or "breadth," but his recurrent term is "sincerity" and every one of his

¹⁵ *Heroes*, p. 400.

¹⁶ *Heroes*, pp. 341-342.

¹⁷ *Heroes*, p. 235.

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

examples possesses it in some form. The most complete definition of sincerity occurs in "The Hero as Prophet":

No, the Great Man does not boast himself sincere, far from that; perhaps does not ask himself if he is: 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. Fly as he will, he cannot get out of the awful presence of this Reality. His mind is so made; he is great by that, first of all. Fearful and wonderful, real as Life, real as Death in this Universe to him. Though all men should forget its truth, and walk in a vain show, he cannot. At all moments the flame image glares in upon him; undeniable, there, there! — I wish you to take this as my primary definition of a Great Man. A little man may have this, it is competent to all men God has made: but a Great Man cannot be without it.¹⁸

The definition seems vague, but it does describe with fidelity what sustains Carlyle's heroes. The "Fact of Existence" is before them, and in a dual sense. Spiritually, they are possessed by a view of the awful immediacy of the universe and, simultaneously, by a desire to express their deepest response to it. Odin's glorification of nature, Mahomet's "Allah Akhbar,"¹⁹ Dante's Catholic vision, Shakespeare's cohesive dramatic expression, Luther's theme of salvation by faith, Cromwell's commitment to purity, even Napoleon's humility before the unknown—all, for Carlyle, are sculpted from the same profound reverence for spiritual fact. Practically, they are overwhelmed by the "Fact of Existence" also. Excepting the specifically literary heroes (where production for necessity is not always a virtue), Carlyle's great men are decisive and sure, with a developed sensitivity to the needs of a situation. Carlyle does not dissect Knox's meetings with Queen Mary or Napoleon's maneuvers through his scores of battles, but, in every sketch, he gives enough of the pragmatic man through anecdote and dialogue to show that greatness is not simply visionary. The high moments in Heroes—Mahomet's refusal to stop preaching "even if the sun stood on his right hand and the moon on his left, ordering him to hold his peace";²⁰ Luther's "Here stand I; I can do no other"²¹ at the Diet of Worms; Cromwell's "God be the judge between you and me"²² before the second Parliament—are charged with spiritual energy, but just as well with the concrete polemic rightness that elevates them above the com-

¹⁸ *Heroes*, p. 276.

¹⁹ *Heroes*, p. 286.

²⁰ *Heroes*, p. 289.

²¹ *Heroes*, p. 360.

²² *Heroes*, p. 452.

PATTERN AND PARADOX IN CARLYLE'S HEROES

mon to priests and prophets and kings. *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, then, is about the substance and unqualified importance of heroism in this world; for Carlyle is implicitly saying that history turns a corner only when the unique individual directs its course. In at least one of its senses, then, the "Tree" is a natural metaphor for the book itself, because, as the "Tree" develops, so Carlyle sees the significant life of man developing, with direction and point, from the center of great men.

Carlyle's lecture on the hero in the eighteenth century, "The Hero as Man-of-Letters," is the least successful of the series, because it is caught in logical and aesthetic difficulties. Until this lecture, Carlyle has presented his heroes as figures who have mastered their time, replacing doubt with faith, or blindness with vision, and he has added, at the beginning of the first lecture, that "no Time need have gone to ruin, could it have *found* a man great enough, a man wise and good enough: wisdom to discern truly what the Time wanted, valor to lead it on the right road thither."²³ In this lecture, however, Johnson, Rousseau, and Burns are not "heroic bringers of light," but merely "heroic seekers of it"²⁴ men who "could not unfold themselves into clearness, or victorious interpretation of that 'Divine Idea.'"²⁵ The reasons for their failure are close at hand. As in so many of his previous lectures (Mahomet, Luther, Shakespeare, and Cromwell particularly), Carlyle prepares the way of the hero by unfolding the spirit of the time, and he does it in this lecture also, but with a difference. Previously, he conceived the time as either life-giving or destructive, but if destructive, he selected those details that showed the hero's indomitable "sincerity" in conquering his element. And his heroes achieved. Here, however, the destructive element of the eighteenth century is grounded so completely in the natural cycle of events that its magic cannot be broken—or, conversely, the hero's strength is not great enough to conquer, which, according to the thematic logic of the book, makes him less than a hero. The design of the lecture shows how the dilemma arises. Using the "Tree Igdrasil" as a metaphor for the rhythms of life and death, Carlyle begins by evoking the turn of history and the immalleable constraints of the eighteenth century. To repeat a few lines quoted:

How mean, dwarfish are their ways of thinking, in this time —
compared not with the Christian Shakspeares and Miltons, but
with the old Pagan Skalds, with any species of believing men!
The living TREE Igdrasil, with the melodious prophetic waving

²³ *Heroes*, p. 246.

²⁴ *Heroes*, p. 381.

²⁵ *Heroes*, p. 381.

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

of its world-wide boughs, deep-rooted as Hela, has died out into the clanking of a World-MACHINE.²⁶

That our Hero as Man-of-Letters had to travel without highway, companion-less, through an inorganic chaos, — and to leave his own life and faculty lying there, as a partial contribution toward *pushing* some highway through it: this, had not his faculty itself been so perverted and paralyzed, he might have put up with, might have considered to be the common lot of Heroes. His fatal misery was the *spiritual paralysis*, so we may name it, of the Age in which his life lay; whereby his life too, do what he might, was half paralyzed.²⁷

The time reduces the universe to its own measure. The three representative heroes struggle, by "originality," "sincerity," and "genius" to express their vision; but they do not succeed, for Carlyle's concluding image of each man (Johnson standing with his single worshiper, "Bozzy"; Rousseau in the chains of his own delirium; Burns, like a firefly, carried on a spit to serve as a tiny public light) leave the impression that the skeptical temper of the century is the real victor. Something has happened along the way, as it has not happened to Luther or Napoleon or Cromwell.

The difficulty lies in locating the point of failure. If the highest doctrine Johnson can preach is only a kind of moral prudence, and if the cause of his failure is in the mechanical extravagance of the age, then where are those subtle interconnections, those responses in nerves and will, that show how Johnson is shaped by the age? With Rousseau, the problem is only slightly different. If the final cause of Rousseau's failure is the spiritual paralysis of the time, and if Carlyle details only Rousseau's egoism and operatic talent, then what are the bonds that show how an age bodies forth into a Rousseau? The relation between man and age is more convincing with Burns because the age is focused through the image of Edinburgh society; but even here, the sources of Burns' failure and their relation to Edinburgh are so little detailed that the two hemispheres of man and society seem to be separate worlds. Professor Frederic E. Faverty has said that one of the faults of *Heroes* is the lack of criteria by which we can recognize a hero,²⁸ and another is the lack of an articulate analysis showing how a potential hero falls before the opinion in his time. Both of these *lacunae* are failures in "pragmatic imagination," and the second is particularly grave, because, in failing to trace the internal relations of his statements, Carlyle im-

²⁶ *Heroes*, p. 393.

²⁷ *Heroes*, p. 392.

²⁸ Frederic E. Faverty, *Your Literary Heritage* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 102.

PATTERN AND PARADOX IN CARLYLE'S HEROES

explicitly raises the larger question: Is the hero as man of letters a hero at all?

Carlyle's use of the eighteenth century in *Heroes* is that of scapegoat. Without evidence or study of the reciprocal relations between man and time, he transfers the century into the receptacle for all the confusions that prevent his men of promise from being fathers of change. Simply the reappearance of terms—"sceptical," "insincere," "doubtful," "sick"—shows how one insistently narrow perspective is stressed. And the ultimate difficulty of *Heroes* is centered here: what begins as the disarray of one lecture becomes the problem of the book. If the three representative men do not succeed in replacing blindness with vision, or doubt with faith (either through the victory of the time or the lack of personal effort—the causes are not artistically distinguished) and if the theme is the importance and unambiguous necessity of individual heroism in this world, then their heroism is questionable and their contribution to the heroic in history negligible. The theme of the book is severely deflected from its course. One of the mysteries of *Heroes* is Carlyle's choice of Johnson, Rousseau, and Burns as subjects for this lecture. Originally, Goethe was very seriously considered. "Our chosen specimen of the Hero as Literary Man would be this Goethe," he writes at the beginning, "but at present such is the general state of knowledge about Goethe, it were worse than useless to attempt speaking of him in this case."²⁹ Paradoxically, it is Goethe who would have been Carlyle's ideal subject, for in providing the details that would have clarified his life, Carlyle would probably have avoided the gross generalizations on the eighteenth century and the critical vacuum between consciousness and circumstance.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

²⁹ *Heroes*, p. 381.