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CARLYLE AND CALVINISM

Joanna Malecka

One of the most insulting comments Thomas Babington Macaulay made about his near-contemporary, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), was to compare him to the charismatic Scottish Presbyterian preacher Edward Irving, originally a close friend of both Carlyles, and subsequently founder of the Catholic Apostolic Church. In 1832, Macaulay wrote: “as to Carlyle, or Carlisle, or whatever his name may be, he might as well write in Irving’s unknown tongue at once.”¹ At one level, Macaulay’s gibe was simply ridiculing Carlyle’s already notorious stylistic obscurity, but it also hinted at a deeper theological self-distancing, mocking Carlyle’s culturally conservative Scottish Presbyterian agenda as apocalyptic scaremongering and marking its difference from Macaulay’s own English whig progressivist outlook. In turn, Carlyle famously depicted Macaulay as a “spiritual Hippopotamus,” and “*valde mediocris homo*,” a truly mediocre man, awkward and clumsy in the spiritual realm.² The clash reveals the central role that Carlyle’s Calvinism played in the disagreement between the two Victorian thinkers. It suggests that, rather like Matthew Arnold later, Macaulay saw Carlyle’s religion as an expression of an anachronistic Scottish cultural outlook, largely illegible and unusable in nineteenth century Britain.

Arguably the most original aspect of his intellectual and literary ideas, Carlyle’s religion was seen in the twentieth century as a “redundancy which we can well afford to ignore,” as duplicitous and artificial, or as a

¹ Thomas Pinney, ed., *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay*, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974-81), 5:182.

² C.R. Sanders, K.J. Fielding, et al., eds, *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, 47 vols. to date (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1970-), 26: 273-275.

“failure to have anything more substantial to offer.”³ In mid-century, only slightly more evenhandedly, though Hill Shine paid attention to Carlyle’s Calvinist heritage, he nonetheless saw it as a negative influence on Carlyle’s social creed, which he suggested stages “a conflict between romantic tolerance and Puritanic intolerance.”⁴ Most of the more influential critiques of Carlyle’s Calvinist traits hark back to critical interpretations that were already in circulation, in the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, from such an eminent array of early critics of Carlyle’s thought as (among others) Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Anthony Froude, and Charles Frederick Harrold.

It was Emerson, one of Carlyle’s earliest admirers, who introduced Carlyle’s thought to the United States. It was thanks to Emerson that Carlyle’s major early work, *Sartor Resartus*, serialized in 1833-1834, was first published in book form in America in 1836, before its first London book publication in 1838. Emerson’s admiration for Carlyle was linked to his perception of the latter as a major translator of the German romantic philosophy to the English-speaking world, and *Sartor Resartus* has continued to attract American critics and readers. Emerson had hoped Carlyle might move to the States and become a leader of American transcendental thought, and like Carlyle he embraced the essay form (Carlyle’s collected periodical essays were also soon reprinted in Boston), but he parted ways when Carlyle dedicated himself to the study of history. Emerson was unimpressed by Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* (1837), registering his disappointment in his private notebooks, where he sees Carlyle as ultimately unphilosophical, even unoriginal: “Carlyle’s talent, I think, lies more in his beautiful criticism, in seizing the idea of the man or the time, than in original speculation.”⁵

Emerson’s preface to the American edition of *Sartor Resartus* (1836) reflects both his hopes for Carlyle to become the founder of

³ Philip Rosenberg, *The Seventh Hero: Thomas Carlyle and the Theory of Radical Activism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 48; David Daiches, *Carlyle: The Paradox Reconsidered* [*Thomas Green Lectures*, 6] (Edinburgh: The Carlyle Society, 1981), 7; Rosenberg, 7. But see also the published scholarship by Ian Campbell and others, in n. 16 below.

⁴ Hill Shine, *Carlyle’s Fusion of Poetry, History, and Religion by 1834* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 85.

⁵ William H. Gilman, et al., eds, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960-1982), 5:111, (December 7, 1838).

transcendentalism in America and his annoyance at Carlyle's eccentric humour, ill-suited, we are told, to the seriousness required in approaching German philosophy: 'It is his humour to advance the gravest speculations upon the gravest topics in a quaint and burlesque style.'⁶ Emerson goes on to predict the unpopularity of the book in the States, only to finish by praising Carlyle's "philanthropy and the purity of moral sentiment," his "genuine Saxon heart" and "earnest meaning." If we ignore Carlyle's British humour, Emerson says, we will be able to focus on the serious religious and social subjects discussed in *Sartor*.⁷

Whereas Emerson was right to read Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* as a piece of religious fiction (it is indeed Carlyle's first major examination of Calvinism), ironically Carlyle satirizes two pillars of romantic idealism, philanthropy and moral purity, linking these to hypocrisy and the devilish machinations in general. The two (anti)heroes of *Sartor*, Professor Teufelsdröckh ("devil's dung") and Heuschrecke ("grasshopper") bear non-human demonic imagery and profess equally misanthropic creeds, those of Hobbes and Malthus respectively. Carlyle was writing *Sartor* in a well-established Scottish tradition reexamining Calvinism (Robert Burns, James Hogg, John Galt, not to mention Walter Scott's reimagining of the covenanting tradition); but the work is often treated out of this context, and read in Emerson's critical vein as a (failed) British attempt at (German) transcendentalism.

If Emerson wanted to see Carlyle as a transcendental philosopher, Carlyle's early biographer, James Anthony Froude, envisioned him as a great romantic prophet and religious reformer of Calvinism, modelled on such heroic figures as Luther or even Christ. Froude's disappointment at Carlyle's inability to rise to the task is registered in his famous depiction of Carlyle as a "Calvinist without the theology."⁸ The phrase encapsulates the leading idea of Froude's biography, that Carlyle ultimately failed to rise above his inherited Scottish creed to a more broadminded religious stance. Froude's surprisingly long-lasting portrayal caught the public and critical imaginations alike, thanks to Froude's excellent story-telling skills and his ability to build up the suspense around the supposed "mystery" of

⁶ "Testimonies of the Authors," in Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Mark Engel and Rodger L. Tarr [*The Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*] (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 226.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795-1835*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), II: 12.

Carlyle's life which only his closest friend (that is Froude) was able to solve for the reader. One explanation of Froude's unjustly claustrophobic examination of Carlyle's private marital life is that it was based on their acquaintance in the last twenty years of Carlyle's life. Froude's portrayal, mirroring Carlyle's depressive thoughts and self-accusatory tone in his *Reminiscences of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, written after the death of his wife in 1866, contrasts sharply with Emerson's depiction of Carlyle's youthful verve.

Froude's melodramatic portrayal of Carlyle's life follows the spirit of Greek tragedy with Calvinism playing the role of the Greek fate, from which Carlyle cannot escape hard as he repeatedly tries; indeed, Froude presents his own role as that of a "Greek chorus," lamenting Carlyle's life as predestined to damnation. Writing before Freud, Froude suggests that Carlyle's dark secret or tragic flaw (his sexual impotence) must be blamed on his life-denying (and yet romantically enticing) religious creed. Under the thin veneer of Goethe's more creative and life-accepting philosophy, we are told, Carlyle remained a disgruntled old Calvinist.

But the affect of Froude's biography does not match his own experience of Carlyle's writing, when Carlyle had been a liberating force from stifling respectability. Like many 19th century Carlyleans, Froude himself was a fugitive from a traditionalist religious upbringing, the story he recounts in his fictionalized religious semi-autobiography, *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849). In that novel, Froude's *alter ego*, Markham Sutherland, sceptical of the established church, is torn between two iconoclasts, Newman and Carlyle. Newman, he writes, was one of two "greatly gifted" men living in England: "Another eye, deep-piercing as his was looking out across the same perplexed scene and asking his heart, too, what God would tell him of it."⁹ The other eye was of course Carlyle, and Froude/Markham links Carlyle's prophetic significance to him not being an Oxonian, like Newman, but a product of "the Scotch Highlands [sic], and the poetry of Goethe" (*ibid.*). Exclaiming "Carlyle only raises questions he cannot answer, and seems best contented if he can make the rest of us as discontented as himself" (*Nemesis*, 35), Markham also acknowledges the force of Carlyle's example: "The men that write books, Carlyle says, are now the world's priests, the spiritual directors of mankind" (43). Dimitting his clerical status and starting a new life in Italy as an author, finding and then renouncing an intense, idealized platonic relationship with an

⁹ J.A. Froude, *The Nemesis of Faith*, second edition (London: John Chapman, 1849), 156..

unhappily married woman, Markham is persuaded by a Newman-like convert priest to join the Catholic church, but Carlyle, not Newman, won out: “doubt soon sapped” Markham’s “new faith fabric,” and his story ends in Carlylean, or Calvinist, bleakness, seeing “the wasted ruins of his life... strewn with wrecked purposes and shattered creeds” (226).

That was not Froude’s own story: helped through his spiritual crisis by another Carlylean, his future brother-in-law, the Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley, he built himself a new life as a man of letters, an historian, like Carlyle, and in due course Carlyle’s biographer. Along with the sense of Carlyle’s personal tragedy, Froude asserted the strength of Carlyle’s core beliefs: “he desired to tell the modern world that ... God or justice was still in the middle of it, sternly inexorable as ever.”¹⁰

Froude’s biography of Carlyle, though scandalously unhagiographic to many Victorians, spoke to an intellectual rebel of the next generation. Friedrich Nietzsche, probably relying on Froude, indicted Carlyle as a hypocrite and a religious fraud characterised by “constant passionate dishonesty” against himself. Carlyle, Nietzsche asserted, “is an English [*sic*] atheist who makes it a point of honour not to be one.”¹¹

Among many attempts to redeem Carlyle from the clutches of Calvinism in the wake of Froude, none was more influential, at least in literary studies, than Charles Frederick Harrold’s *Carlyle and German thought: 1819-1834* (1934).¹² Like Froude, Harrold sees Carlyle as “from first to last ... the born Calvinist,” which Harrold glosses as “seeking to reconstruct, largely from German thought, a belief in the transcendent sovereignty of Right and in a world of immanent divine law.”¹³ By focusing on Carlyle’s early career, and structuring his account around the dichotomy in Carlyle’s thought between German philosophy and Scottish Calvinism, Harrold marked a trail for later critics to follow. Yet, in Harrold’s interpretation, Calvinism is not so much responsible for

¹⁰ J.A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1884), I: 77; quoted by Hill Shine, in *Studies in Philology*, 34 (1937): 466, n. 102.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, tr. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin, 1982), 521.

¹² This paragraph draws on my discussion of Harrold in “Thomas Carlyle’s Calvinist dialogue with the nineteenth-century periodical press,” *History of European Ideas*, 45.1 (2019): 15-32 (15-17).

¹³ Charles Frederick Harrold, *Carlyle and German Thought: 1819-1834* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934), 235.

Carlyle's personal tragedy but rather for his ultimate inability to grasp German romantic thought, because he mostly sought in it confirmation of his own deeply Calvinist understanding of mankind and human history. While depicting eloquently the intellectual dialogues between Carlyle and the German thinkers, Harrold also deplores Carlyle's resistance to anything that does not resemble his native Calvinism.

In one of Harrold's more revealing passages we are told that Carlyle "oscillated between his Calvinistic conviction of 'original sin,' and his desire to adopt the Goethean optimism toward human nature" (Harrold, 111). Harrold's scare quotes for original sin give away his rhetorical distancing from Carlyle's religious imagination and his privileging of German philosophy over Carlyle's inherited Scottish attitude of mind. Carlyle, Harrold says, was "too theistic" to grasp Schiller's more secularised and relative view of morality, an assessment that is presented both as a criticism of Carlyle's thought and an example of his alluring rough Calvinism. Somewhat paradoxically, having dedicated his research to the examination of Carlyle's Calvinist dialogue with German thought, Harrold would have us believe that it was also Calvinism which impeded such dialogue due to Carlyle's "gloom" and because he was "too theistic, even in this early period" to understand the supposedly more progressive German thought (*ibid.*). Harrold's approach was paralleled in the writing of a second American scholar, Hill Shine, who also saw in Carlyle "a conflict between romantic tolerance and Puritanic intolerance."¹⁴

After World War II, the landmark literary study is G. B. Tennyson's *Sartor Called Resartus* (1965), which drew attention to Carlyle's humour and so linked the biblical imagery and the Germanic parody-scholarship in *Sartor Resartus* to the political satires of *Blackwood's Magazine*. Tennyson argues that Carlyle was less influenced by Scottish Calvinist culture than by the lively periodical culture in nineteenth-century Edinburgh, and he invokes as a major precursor of Carlyle's prose style the notorious "Chaldee Manuscript" (1817), a scurrilous attack on the whigs parodying biblical language. Yet, by severing Carlyle from Calvinism, Tennyson reduces Carlyle's religion to a type of generic romantic prophetism, which, like Harrold and Shine, he links to Matthew Arnold's agenda that religion must be replaced by literature as a new basis of the British culture. Tennyson defines Carlyle's "Natural Supernaturalism,"

¹⁴ Hill Shine, *Carlyle's Fusion of Poetry, History, and Religion by 1834* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 85.

somewhat disappointingly, as a romantic belief in the privileged insight gained by poets into the divine idea of the universe:

we are supposed to see that Natural Supernaturalism boldly asserts that society, mankind, is involved in a divine plan, the full details of which can never be known, but revelations of which are vouchsafed to poets and prophets.¹⁵

Despite Tennyson's linking of Carlyle's humour to the *Blackwoodian* anti-whig masquerade, Carlyle's humour is for Tennyson primarily an expression of his romantic (German) irony, used not so much to ridicule as to convert the reader to Carlyle's mystical creed which precludes any definition.

Despite the availability of more sympathetic and nuanced discussion in recent decades, for Carlylean studies to progress much beyond Shine's German-Calvinist dualism, a less melodramatic picture of Carlyle's Calvinism still needs to be drawn.¹⁶ For Carlyle, like for many other Scottish writers working in the wake of the Reformation, Calvinism becomes a creative field of imaginative exploration which inspires deep artistic questions reaching far beyond the borders of Scotland, and ultimately addressing human nature as such. This creative impetus challenges the Enlightenment vision of humanity's rationality and our supposed immunity to superstitious and idolatrous thinking resulting from human progress. In Carlyle's famous and timely revisiting of the history of

¹⁵ G. B. Tennyson, *Sartor Called Resartus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 319.

¹⁶ Among more sympathetic studies have been Ian Campbell's introduction to Carlyle's *Reminiscences* (London: Dent, 1972); Campbell, *Thomas Carlyle* (London: Hamilton, 1974; New York: Scribner, 1974); Campbell, "Carlyle's Religion: the Scottish Background," in John Clubbe, ed., *Carlyle and his Contemporaries: Essays in Honor of Charles Richard Sanders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976): 3-20; Campbell, "The Carlyles and the Church," *Carlyle Studies Annual*, 32 (2017), 133-154; Barton Swaim, "'Our own periodical pulpit': Thomas Carlyle's Sermons," *Christianity and Literature*, 52.2 (2003): 137-158; and discussions of Carlyle's religion, by Campbell and many others, from various perspectives, in Paul E. Kerry and Jesse S. Crisler, eds, *Thomas Carlyle* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005). Other recent, less negative assessments of Calvinist influence include: Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: the Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew, eds, *Scotland and the 19th-century world* [SCROLL 18] (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012); and Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

the French Revolution in 1837, progress itself becomes the focus of humanity's idolatrous and often demonic pursuit (a dark foresight into twentieth-century European history). Carlyle's own experience attending some of the meetings of the Irvingite congregation where he witnessed speaking in tongues (which quite possibly led to Irving's own mental breakdown) attended by the London's intelligentsia and artistic elites influences his depiction of the progressive fall into insanity of the French revolutionaries. Working in the Calvinist tradition, Carlyle sees such dark forces working permanently in human nature. Rather than being exempt from Carlyle's narrative, the reader and the narrator participate actively in the French confusion, bewilderment and enthusiasm, leading to the narrative becoming, as Mill famously named it, an "epic poem" of human nature. Humanity's fickleness and our ridiculous pretensions to the divine omniscience are some of the chief themes of Carlyle's gothic fiction.

Crucial in Carlyle's interpretation of the French Revolution (1789) is his depiction of France as the biblical Job of all nations, with Britain and other European countries compared to the good-for-nothing friends of Job who misrepresent his (unmerited) suffering as a form of divine punishment. This imagery nicely summarises Carlyle's opinion of the bulk of British historiography after 1789 which tried to helpfully explain the recent French history to the French (whether from the conservative, whig, or radical standpoints). Britain would do better to examine some of its own (un)imaginative narratives before demonizing the French. The imagery from Job also expresses Carlyle's vision of humanity as prone to overstep the bounds of rational enquiry and common humanity and indulge in bombastic preaching masquerading as divine speech.

Prominent themes of Scottish Presbyterian providence such as religious hypocrisy, irrationality, idolatry, predestination and the 'justified sinner' image feature large in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841), as well as in *Signs of the Times* (1829) and his early essays. In *Signs of the Times*, Carlyle masterfully inhabits the moderate whig rhetoric in order to qualify the whig vision of human progress by insisting on the endurance and pertinence of religion to the nineteenth-century political and social debates. In what follows though, he also satirises the conservative apocalyptic idiom by arguing (from a conservative perspective) that crisis is a permanent state in which religion encounters itself on earth, and should therefore be embraced rather than resisted. Disregarding the political divisions of the nineteenth-century Britain, he insightfully posits biblical millenarianism alongside Bentham's utilitarianism as two equally dangerous ideologies seeking to circumvent

the messy texture of human history by providing equally “purified” and unproblematic narratives of life. Here as elsewhere, Carlyle rejects such sanitised accounts and instead rejoices in the muddled, dark and complex residue of human history, through which Christian providence acts in mysterious and unexpected ways that do not allow for any simple, de-mythologised reading.

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