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BOOK REVIEWS


Undertaking any study of Carlyle’s influence on his contemporaries is a Scylla-Charybdis affair at best. George Eliot’s 1855 statement that “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”1 states at once and very accurately his impact—and any critic’s problem who would probe his influence. On the one side there is the temptation to hear Carlyle’s voice and ideas everywhere, and to reduce any writer’s use of him to happy parroting. On the other is the feeling that, since Victorians shared so many ideas and feelings, any real influence is well-nigh certainly a doubtful thing.

Michael Goldberg’s and William Oddie’s studies provide perfect illustrations of these dangers. Theirs are the first published book-length examinations of what has been since the Victorian period an axiom of literary history: that Dickens’ works, in style and idea, mirror the personal veneration he felt for Carlyle. Each author has adopted the same organizational pattern for his discussion: biographical details; then close examination of specific novels (Hard Times and Tale of Two Cities for Oddie, these plus Bleak House, Dombey and Son, and the first Christmas books for Goldberg); then an investigation of ideas and stylistic techniques shared by the two authors. The results are so fascinatingly dissimilar that I often wondered if these critics could possibly be treating the same subject.

Both authors seem to take for their starting point George Ford’s

1 Leader, 6 (27 October 1855), 1034-35.
1955 remark that Carlyle's "influence upon Dickens was profound," "easily seen" in the style and ideas of the later novels. That "easily" has been a spur to amazingly vigorous influence searching by Goldberg, who quotes from Ford on page 8, and by page 12 is announcing:

As Dickens imported the main tenets of Carlyle's criticism into the content of his fiction the form and style of his novels had to be altered to accommodate it... Carlyle's influence further accounts for Dickens' revival of two generic forms—the historical and the industrial novel—at a time when both had fallen into desuetude, and Dickens' increasingly symbolic method in the late novels undoubtedly owes something to Carlyle's discussion of symbols in *Sartor Resartus*.

These statements are followed by so many appearances of "undoubtedly," "obviously," "clearly," "plainly derived," "direct inspiration," and such that the reader begins to suspect Carlyle WROTE the novels. Especially after something like the following:

If, as Douglas Bush has wittily suggested, Wordsworth was Coleridge's finest poem, *Hard Times* must rank as Carlyle's finest novel. There is nothing indeterminate about his influence on it. Dickens himself thought the book a Carlylean novel... Even the peculiarities of its form... may be attributed to Dickens' desire to appease Carlyle. Dickens' unusually stark presentation of his material is surely determined by an awareness of the serious and philosophical nature of his subject. (pp. 78-79)

That slide from "may" to "surely" is telling. It speaks of enthusiasm run rampant over sense. Surely *Bleak House*, or *Dombey*, is "serious" in the same way? And can we forget so easily the influence of weekly serial publication on *Hard Times*' structure? And why that "appease"? Carlyle wanted fiction to be "an expository illustrative garment of fact," as he wrote in the *Frederick*, but he hardly urged anyone to write novels, nor did Dickens show much concern about Carlyle's dislike of fiction. Goldberg's way is vigor, not rigor, *in excelsum*.

If Professor Ford's "easily" has driven Goldberg towards Charybdis, it has served as a "caveat emptor" to Oddie. Indeed, from page 2 onward, Ford's words provide the impetus to counter-arguments against "too easily discerning the influence of one mind over another" (p. 136). What Oddie offers instead is a very skeptical reading of even Dickens' statements of allegiance, and a very rigorous

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sifting of the novels in order to see "how" any influence there might be "operates."

How much of Carlyle's influence over Dickens, even when Dickens clearly saw himself as writing under the Prophet's shadow, rested on a complete understanding of the intellectual and spiritual bases of Carlyle's oeuvre, and how much on an unconscious moulding of the sage in Dickens's own image? . . . To attempt an answer . . . we need . . . to show that Carlylean thought in Dickens's novels, where it is alleged, is distinctively so, and was unlikely to come from other sources. (p. 5)

Nowhere is this care, and its rewards, better seen than in Oddie's investigation of Hard Times. He carefully notes that Sleary's horseriding would be anathema to Carlyle as an alternative to the world of Gradgrind-Bounderby; he stresses that Dickensian "fancy" here is not Carlylean "wonder," though there are affinities; and he demonstrates, with ample quotation, that the "contemporary pervasiveness" of Hard Times' themes hardly made Carlyle necessary to the novel. But in spite of all this, the novel's matrix is assertively Carlyean. Carefully examining the "two nations figure," Stephen Blackpool, Oddie shows that the combination of ideas he expresses is "undoubtedly" Carlylean, especially when coming in conjunction with "a distinctively Carlylean demonology," the "Hard Fact philosophies of Bounderby, the Captain of Industry, and Gradgrind, the Logic-Chopper and Motive-Grinder," and with the "Dilettantism and loss of faith" of Harthouse. This, and the author's discussion of Teufelsdröckh's history as a source for Louisa Gradgrind's characterization, convince that Hard Times indeed presents "a Carlylean conceptual framework."

Oddie's work here, and on Tale of Two Cities, carries such conviction because he is always so careful to make discriminations. Even in the midst of what would seem overwhelming evidence, we find him saying "it seems tentatively worthwhile to hazard" (p. 56); and whenever an "undoubtedly" appears, the reader himself has already long before been quite convinced. It is obviously a method very different from Goldberg's, and it is a salutary one. In studies of Carlyle's influence, we need to remember that there are non-Carlylean backgrounds to an author's ideas and opinions. Oddie's investigation of this background (Goldberg presents similar materials), particularly concerning Dickens' feelings about blacks, public hangings, and Governor Eyre, shows that "Dickens' illiberality here
is his own" (p. 137), even though Carlyle might be saying the same thing.

Yet, impressive as this work is, it does not satisfy. Often Oddie's rigor seems prohibitively narrow and limiting. If Dickens' well-known letter to Carlyle about Hard Times constitutes a "positive profession of belief," how can Oddie so readily dismiss the 1863 letter in which Dickens notes that "I am always reading you and trying to go your way"? Yet Oddie asserts, with no discussion, that Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend show no "compelling reason why Carlyle's influence should be invoked as a significant part of their ideological background" (p. 150). But isn't the later novel in many ways a recapitulation of Hard Times' ideas and themes? And aren't its characters Wrayburn, Podsnap, Headstone, and Charley Hexam, as distinctively a "Carlylean demonology" as we are likely to find? Finally, isn't Pip's autobiography a presentation of one nineteenth-century man's Mammon-related compulsion to be a Cain, to cut off natural ties with fellow human beings in pursuit of rank? It is a Carlylean theme, and one Dickens used more and more.

What's wrong here—and what redeems Goldberg's study—is that Oddie doesn't want to see influence, doesn't indeed want to believe that Carlyle much influenced anyone. "If Carlyle had not existed, it would have been necessary—for Dickens as for his age—to invent him," Oddie concludes (p. 154). "Perhaps, partly, they did." Perhaps, but too often I sense here that Oddie's split between Dickens' "unconscious moulding of the sage in his own image" and his "complete understanding" of Carlyle is an effort to define the influence out of existence. "Unconscious" influence, or misreadings, or misconceptions are still influence. Perhaps if Oddie could take Carlyle more seriously—could indeed share some of Goldberg's enthusiasm—he could SEE a bit more beyond facts. And he would be saved from some embarrassing statements and judgments along the way. To tell us, in answering his question "What did Carlyle supply that Dickens needed?" (p. 94), that "Dickens was often lonely and confused, and badly needed a girl... and that until he had found one and broken the imprisonment of his marriage, Carlyle's personal prophetic aura made a stronger appeal than it would normally have done" (p. 95) is to reason with the Motive-Grinders. And how are we to evaluate such judgments as that which Oddie renders on Teufelsdröckh's defiance of the Everlasting No?:

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... it is one of the first and most notable examples in modern civilisation of that vague but potent phenomenon, The Power of Positive Thinking.

... The intellectual content, function, and adaptability of this famous passage, despite its lofty tone, are about the same as can be observed in that old war-time favourite 'Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile.' ... It is Carlyle's own character and personality (which somehow, indefensibly, convey themselves in this passage as in all his works) that gives Teufelsdrockh's defiance its authority. (pp. 96-97)

" Somehow"? "Indefinably"? Perhaps. But this kind of discussion, especially after Georg Tennyson, George Levine, or Albert LaValley on Carlyle, is decidedly unprofitable. And such distaste for Carlyle can lead to generalization that astonishes by its immensity more than any "obviously" in Goldberg: "In a way, a certain kind of Victorian woman performed a more delicate, but nevertheless (despite obvious reservations) an analogous function to that fulfilled for his age by Carlyle himself" (p. 91). This, and its relationship to nineteenth-century imperialism (see p. 92), is not yet a truism of Victorian scholarship. And after coming upon this kind of thing, any reader is more than justified to wonder if Oddie really believes his topic so "vitaly important" as in his preface asserts.

In spite of these reservations, both books do have much to offer. Oddie's methods and his rigor are examples of procedure for any critic venturing out on influence waters. His "History and Society" chapter is especially stimulating in its discriminations between the two writers' views. And if Goldberg fails in his enthusiasm to exercise due caution, his chapter on the "Romantic Inheritance"—which presents Carlyle as the "link" between Blake and Dickens—is illuminating. So is his treatment of the Pamphlets, which are almost completely neglected by Oddie. Goldberg shows that from Bleak House onward Carlyle's image of England as "a nightmare wilderness" full of bipeds-of-prey enters into the texture of Dickens' fiction. Beside this, Oddie's "Cautionary Note" on stylistic influence is entirely too limited; style is much more than apostrophes to game-preserving aristocracies.

But one more reservation about Goldberg's book needs voicing. Where Oddie, in the instances when he relies on other critics, gives their names in his text (and provides footnotes on the same page), Goldberg not only gives no names, but so overuses quotation that the reader sometimes wonders if he has any ideas, or any expressions, of his own. Critics are his fatal Cleopatras. A worthy Northrop
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Frye comment on Quilp is hurried into a paragraph discussing characters in the later novels (p. 217); a C. F. Harrold list of Carlyle's early articles is submitted as much more useful than one's own list (p. 21); any phrase or sentence that conceivably fits the topic at hand is dropped into the text willy-nilly. And, as George Ford has noted in his review of Goldberg, any reader with Goldberg's sources at hand will discover some very "casual scholarship," exact borrowings (without quotation marks) or a failure to acknowledge close paraphrase from Peter Coveney's splendid The Image of Childhood.3 The same problem is evident in the use of Leo Marx, Earle Davis, Arthur Clayborough, and Donald Fanger. And it is all the more embarrassing because, in so sumptuous a job of book-making (large margins, gold leafing on cover and jacket), the reader must constantly search at the book's end for precisely who is being used, or quoted. Goldberg's paragraphs are such pastiches of quotation and paraphrase that I kept remembering Carlyle's description of the States-General in France: "so many serried rows sit perched there; like winged creatures, alighted out of Heaven."

These two studies may not satisfy, but they deserve reading because they clear ground about a "vitally important" subject. Q. D. Leavis has noted that Victorian novelists, who "read and used each other's work quite as freely as Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists did theirs," "richly profited" from the "characterization of his age that Carlyle made available": "The contemporary parts of Past and Present seem to me to have been second only to Shakespeare in influencing Dickens."4 Hers is a strong statement, and it is true. Goldberg and Oddie have given the factual evidence, even if they have had of necessity to preoccupy themselves so much with the minutiae of the influence that they rarely glance towards the larger issues, those which can take us to the heart of Dickens' response to Carlyle. And here Bleak House must stand as the pivotal novel. It is the first one after the Pamphlets, and it not only embodies their images of England, but its very insistence on the "organic filaments" that at once unite society's classes and the Past with the Present is the central thesis; and this thesis is worked out in terms of Carlyle's central question in Past and Present, "What is Justice?" Bleak House has too a Carlylean dramatis personae, from Jo to the game-

3 Studies in the Novel, 6 (Spring 1974), 116-17.
preserving Dedlocks to the Ironmaster. This last figure, not mentioned by Goldberg, is cited by Oddie as a Carlylean “ideal” (p. 145). If he is, it is an ideal of the “Bucanier” sort. Mr Rouncewell’s statement that, if he could, he would “sever this strong bond”—“of love, and attachment, and fidelity” (ch. 28)—which unites his mother to the Dedlocks is language which qualifies him for one of Carlyle’s Gehennas. The very reason Dickens has Trooper George return to Chesney Wold, where “there’s more room for a Weed,” is to render his (Carlylean) sense that the new world does not offer everything in its machinery. This is a striking and subtle portrait of the threat to natural feeling that the Machine—as metaphor—poses, and an idea which Carlyle had been discussing since 1829.

There are other issues too. What about style? Since Dickens reread the French Revolution—“for the 500th time”—the summer before he began writing Bleak House, isn’t it more than possible that he registered Carlyle’s use and discussion of his present-tense narrative stance? Not in the Past Tense, Carlyle wrote, “does Fear dwell, nor Uncertainty, nor Anxiety; but it dwells here,” in the Present Tense. Dickens’ division of his narrative into two voices, one speaking in the past tense, one in the present, could well be studied from the perspective of Carlyle’s method in his history. Then there are questions about the influence of Carlyle’s view of human psychology (LaValley’s book is particularly interesting here) and its place in Dickens’ characterizations. And Georg Tennyson has urged critics to remember the conversion pattern in Sartor when approaching Dickens’ protagonists (study Pip or Wrayburn from this viewpoint). And what about the heroes? Dr Leavis has made much of Daniel Doyle; the “strong and intransigent creativity” of this inventor suggests to Leavis the supreme intelligence of Dickens’ art. It suggests too, I think, what of Carlyle lies behind Dickens’ conception of his “good” people, from their childlike simplicity to their quiet work and resignation. Doyle emphasizes man’s Duty on earth: “You hold your life on the condition that to the last you shall struggle hard for it” (Little Dorrit, Bk. 1, ch. 16). The idea

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8 *Dickens the Novelist*, p. 239.
may have been in the nineteenth-century's air. But it found expres-
sion and impetus from Carlyle.

There is more to be said on this subject, then. The extensive
similarities, ranging from matters of minute detail to essential and
preoccupying concerns, testify convincingly, as by converging prob-
abilities, to Dickens' deep indebtedness to Carlyle. In their literary
relationship there is no better illustration of Arnold's idea that the
great works of literary genius are works "of synthesis and exposition,
not of analysis and discovery." It should be no embarrassment, but
rather a testimony to Dickens' creative intelligence, that he made so
much use of Carlyle.

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