Studies in Victorian Life
and Literature
Thomas Carlyle. Watercolor by Simeon Solomon. Courtesy of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Santa Cruz.
Carlyle and the Search for Authority

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"PLEASE GOD WE shall begin ere long to love art for art's sake," Thackeray wrote in 1839. "It is Carlyle who has worked more than any other to give it its independence" (1:396). It is easy to forget that Carlyle was the contemporary of Shelley and Keats—Thackeray was reviewing the *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, which had just recently been published but contained material dating back to 1827—that he belonged to the generation of Romantic artists who attempted to make art a religion, a discourse with a visionary and transcendental status. They did so, as Raymond Williams argued, because they hoped to find in art an authority for "certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or destroying" (*Culture and Society*, 36; see Lentricchia, 5–8; Graff, 28–34, 90–96). They claimed that art alone could provide the values they felt were absent from or even destroyed by newly dominant discourses like political economy. The problem with this view, as Williams and others have argued, is that, by elevating art, by attempting to give it its "independence," these writers tended to separate it from everyday social life. Because artists insisted that literary discourse was of a different order than the discourse of political economy (or science, or sociology, and so on), they undermined artistic authority; the public turned to political economy and its cognates when it wanted a representation of how society really works.

None of this would be of much concern to us if these writers had merely wanted to advocate a rigorous aestheticism, but the art for art's sake they promoted was meant to have social effects. Their intention in advocating art for art's sake was to insist that art did not exist merely for the sake of entertainment or pleasure, but had a more profound role to play; rather than removing art from society, they were arguing that society could not exist without it. In the process, they raised art above other forms of discourse because they felt that only a transcendental discourse could author(ize) a just social order superior to that constructed in competing discourses. Nonetheless, this Romantic tran-
scendentalism, and the literary formalism that evolved from it, are, as has often been noted, at odds with the Romantic desire to intervene in the political world because it removes art and the artist from the historical processes of social formation. By raising the artist above society, this view of art brought into question the artist's ability to act in society.

Thomas Carlyle occupies a unique position among nineteenth-century artists and critics because he was early drawn to transcendental aestheticism and then was among the first to recognize its dangers. Indeed, by the time Thackeray was depicting him as the leading spokesman of the aesthetic school, he had already abandoned it and was advising poets to take up some other line of work. Yet, as he turned to history and politics, Carlyle did not leave behind his transcendentalism. Like his contemporaries, he felt that the discourses to which he was opposed led to an ethical relativism that could only be cured by recourse to transcendental authority. This insistence on a transcendental source of authority is crucial to understanding why the artists who mounted the most powerful critiques of emerging industrial capitalism were nonetheless much more politically conservative than those writing in other modes of discourse. Instead of abandoning the transcendentalism of his early writings and seeking to discover how communal values might be constructed through the sociohistorical processes of cultural formation, Carlyle transformed his aesthetic transcendentalism into a political authoritarianism that he regarded as the sole means of counteracting the destruction of values and social cohesion by the emerging industrial order. In order to understand Carlyle and his contemporaries, we must understand why their discourse seemed to allow only two alternatives: the anarchy of a value-free society, on the one hand, or the social order and justice of an authoritarian state, on the other.

These questions have two implications for the study of Carlyle and his writings. First, if we are going to understand the relationship between his early faith in art and his later faith in political authority, it will be necessary to examine his entire literary career. Although it is often rightly asserted that all of the later Carlyle can be found in the earlier Carlyle, it is nonetheless the fact that the later, more disturbing, Carlyle has received relatively scant attention. Consequently, because we are unable to see exactly what the relationship between early and late is, we fail to understand the precise nature of the prob-
lems in the early Carlyle or what really happens in the later works. Second, because this study is concerned with the danger of treating art as something that exists outside of history and society, it examines Carlyle's writings in relation to the development of his career as a writer and to the audiences for which he wrote. It was once necessary to rescue Victorian writers from a treatment that considered their ideas in isolation from their art, but if we go too far in the other direction we are in danger of treating them only as artists, not as social thinkers. Of course, it is the distinction between art and ideas itself that is pernicious, and Carlyle's best critics have always recognized that his writings are the work of a master rhetorician. This study attempts to extend their insights by combining an analysis of his rhetorical technique with an understanding of the rhetorical contexts in which he wrote, the immediate concerns, both private and public, to which his works were addressed.

I will begin with a discussion, in chapter 1, of the historical development of what Carlyle and his contemporaries regarded as a crisis of authority. I will then proceed, in chapter 2, to examine how Carlyle constructed his literary career as an attempt to establish a new mode of authority that would replace the religious vocation prescribed by his father. The following chapters (3 through 6) will investigate the history of his struggles to discover authority in the succeeding phases of his career: his exploration of the dialectic of revolution and authority, his failed attempt to author a new social order, the return of the theme of paternal authority, and, finally, the end of writing that brought him no closer to solving the dilemma of literature. This analysis assumes that in our own era, in which the advocates of literature continue to assert its unique value in the face of much public indifference, we can still learn a good deal about this predicament by studying how it took shape in the writings of authors like Carlyle. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that if Carlyle helped create this dilemma, he did so in earnest; he recognized a problem—a problem that still seems very real to us—and thought he saw in art the best means of addressing it. It is to be hoped that by examining his failures, we can better understand our own failures and perhaps begin to find our own solutions.

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