PURITAN TEMPER AND TRANSCENDENTAL FAITH

Carlyle’s Literary Vision

By A. Abbott Ikeler

Over the years, students of Victorian literature have remarked in the writings of Thomas Carlyle a certain bewildering ambivalence in his attitude toward the value of literature in life and, by extension, toward aesthetic experience in general.

Readers who have been drawn to Carlyle by *Sartor Resartus* and the early essays have found no more effective antidote to their enthusiasm for his work than the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Whereas in the earlier work, the hero’s struggles are subjects for poetic rhapsody and outrageous humor, the political problems of Sir Robert Peel recounted in the *Pamphlets* inspire Carlyle only to a tedious invective. In 1831, Carlyle’s landscape was fabulous and obscure, his style “jeanpaulian,” his irony playful. In 1850, he cauterized the prosaic with a merely moral heat and uttered redundancies in a voice grown shrill.

Various explanations of this contrariety have been proposed. Professor Ikeler, who begins by weighing each, ends by discarding all. Carlyle’s attitudes, he argues, were profoundly affected by—indeed inseparable from—his religious thought. If Carlyle’s veneration of literature and its creators sprang from his transcendental faith on the one hand, his distrust and outright rejection of literary art were the result of his being the son of strict Scottish Calvinists on the other.

For the first time in the critical literature, Mr. Ikeler gives serious consideration and systematic attention to this Calvinist background, which has been so much referred to and so little explored. He finds that those antithetical forces that characterize Carlyle’s moral and religious thought remain unreconciled in his aesthetic.

Through an exhaustive analysis of the expressed opinions on art of Calvin, Knox, and the chief German Romantics, Professor Ikeler

(continued on back flap)
Puritan Temper
and Transcendental Faith
PURITAN TEMPER AND TRANSCENDENTAL FAITH

Carlyle’s Literary Vision

A. Abbott Ikeler

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
for MY FATHER AND MOTHER