Chapter Two

Tracing the Conflict to Its Source

Carlyle was one of those who cannot conceive of life without a religion which should provide him with a faith by which he could live.
—L. Cazamian

Over the years, Carlyle contradicts himself on a variety of issues—social as well as literary. He dismisses the English aristocracy, like that of eighteenth-century France, as a self-indulgent anachronism, yet he sees in its cultivated “sweetness” the “seedfield” for great men. Radicalism and the Reform Bill of 1832 are needed to extend suffrage, to correct political injustice, but majority rule brings only “blockheadism,” and despots like Dr. Francia are an excusable expedient. Carlyle decries Robespierre and Fouquier as heartless executioners, but he tells Jane he would have felt no pity whatever “if Eyre had shot the whole Nigger population, and flung them into the sea.” His theory of heroism is especially illogical: on the one hand, great men are inviolate, and the eras in which they are born must adapt to them; on the other hand, heroes manifest their leadership in an idiom appropriate to the particular age. Ordinary men, though honest and obedient, lack the insight needed to propose reform, yet it is they who must recognize and promote the true hero when he comes. The whole idea of a vast political readjustment, which Carlyle advocates so warmly in *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, seems to
him, at an earlier date, to be a mistaken one: "To reform a world, to reform a nation, no wise man will undertake: and all but foolish men know that the only solid, though a far slower, reformation is what each begins and perfects on himself." His political views are thus as much at cross-purposes as his literary opinions.

Some of Carlyle's disciples, in an effort to excuse this "crankiness" and perversity in his view of art and the world, have fastened on a physical cause. Wilson, Froude, and others argue that a man who so vigorously "denies his own acts and purposes" and vilifies the very craft he practices, must have suffered some chronic torment of the body. Carlyle himself offered such an explanation for his moodiness as early as 1819. At that time, and at regular intervals over the next sixty-two years, he complained, in private, of "dyspepsia" and aggravated "biliousness":

I declare solemnly without exaggeration that I impute nine-tenths of my present wretchedness, and rather more than nine-tenths of all my faults, to this infernal disorder in the stomach. If it were once away I think I could snap my fingers in the face of all the world.

Though friends, wife, and parents sympathized, and physicians examined and advised, none of their palliatives relieved his intestinal discomforts. Carlyle's letters often read like an informal medical history: "rats gnaw" at his stomach, an "excess of bile" puts an end to work for the day, "gastric disorders" interrupt his sleep at two o'clock in the morning; doctors recommend "grey powder" and horse-riding, they forbid him pipe-smoking and ginger-bread—to no avail. The whole range of stomach troubles was compounded by insomnia: according to his own testimony, Carlyle seldom slept more than four hours a night. Street noises, howling dogs, pet birds, and early-morning workmen disturbed his dreams wherever he went. A soundproof study, outfitted with a lounging couch, provided some respite from the "noisy inanity" of London, but no contrivances, it seems, mitigated the pains in his upper abdomen. Carlyle's dyspeptic personality apparently
made even his least critical admirers chary of repeated encounters with him. Margaret Fuller, impressed on a first meeting by his good-humored repartee, was dismayed, on a second visit, by his intolerance of "the highest kinds of poetry." Is it then reasonable to consider Carlyle's ill-tempered responses—to contemporary politics, to literature, and to the friends of literature—solely as he suggests, in the light of this physical disability? Carlyle's impatience, his "crabbed" persuasions and his stridency might thus be waved off as temporary "excesses of bile," much as Marley's ghost was thought an "undigested bit of beef," or Matthew Bramble's "peevishness" the effect of "consturpation." Certainly it is a teasing possibility.

Yet notwithstanding his anguished complaints, there is a curious vagueness in Carlyle's description of the disease and a tendency to dismiss medical aid as "useless Quackery." None of the doctors of his day could locate the precise area of his discomfort, and none could determine an organic cause. Although no remedies had any effect on Carlyle's illness, his condition did not measurably deteriorate, and he lived eighty-six years in spite of it. Even his friends privately discounted the importance of these rumored complaints: "We heard of the dyspepsia, and knew it was there; but which of us, in Carlyle's company . . . ever thought of the dyspepsia or ever regarded it as one hundredth of the actual man before us?" No one doubts that he suffered actual pain, but most modern critics feel that the evidence points to a psychosomatic disturbance. Dr. J. L. Halliday, in his medical biography of Carlyle, evaluates the symptoms as "largely functional" and concludes that the patient should have been "seen by a psychiatrist." The subsequent Freudian analysis, which occupies most of Halliday's attention, is the purest fancy, but his first conclusion, at least, is not groundless. As a doctor he reviews the medical evidence and concurs with contemporary physicians in finding no physical basis for Carlyle's complaint. Thus, in reaching for an organic answer to Carlyle's contrariety, we are thrown back on some emotional or intellectual tension behind it.
The conflict in his attitude toward literature cannot, of course, be divorced from the physical circumstances in which he lived and wrote. There are a number of elements in the conditions of Carlyle's life which militated against consistency, and which may have contributed to his more irrational antagonisms. Froude, for example, wastes much of his energy attempting to prove Carlyle's sexual impotence with Jane; Wilson and others have as vehemently—and as foolishly—defended his manliness. Neither argument is conclusive, but out of the gossip and often profound absurdities emerges the picture of an unquiet marriage. Both the Carlyles complained of chronic mysterious pains, often vying with one another for sympathy, like sickly antiphonal choirs. Jane was no intellectual lightweight, and could be as caustically incisive in her criticisms as Carlyle was orotund. As Froude admits, Mrs. Carlyle "never flattered anyone, least of all her husband; and when she saw cause for it the sarcasms flashed out from her as the sparks fly from lacerated steel." Mutual resentment forced them to take frequent "vacations" from each other, to Templand, or Scotsbrig, or Germany. During these separations—which lasted for months at a time—they exchanged affectionate, anxious letters, but made no move to reunite. Evidently, the pressures of their highly charged, competitive, and childless relationship could not be met without long intervals for recuperation. There is nothing in Carlyle's private writings to indicate that marital dissonance was a fundamental cause of divisive tensions in his world-view, but such squabbles certainly exacerbated his "rail mental awgony."

It may also be argued that Carlyle's intense work routine inflamed and distorted his opinions. As a student and writer, he applied himself with compulsive zeal, drawing "blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil." The self-imposed exile of Craigenputtock, the long hours in the soundproof room in Chelsea and a life of almost exclusively sedentary habits did indeed bring on occasional fits of exasperation and melancholy. But, even if we allow, as Burton does, that self-recrimination is one of the fruits of scholarship, we must also admit that Carlyle's situation was not radically
different from that of any highly productive writer. To excuse, on such general grounds, an ambivalence as thoroughgoing as that which Carlyle displays toward literature is to pardon the conflict without regard to its gravity.

In despair of a ready solution to the dilemma, a few critics have settled on an implicitly cynical answer. According to Symons and Harrold, Carlyle never really trusted in literary values; in fact, he only exploited "Art" and the canons of German aesthetics to advance himself and his opinions. The ideas expressed in scores of articles should be discounted as "merely profitable by-products of what he truly wished to say." In other words, he wrote in defense of literature not out of principle but out of economic necessity. Once his translations, reviews, and biographies had bought him financial security, Carlyle was free to operate according to his own convictions. And since fame and moderate fortune came with the publication of *The French Revolution* in 1837, it is only after this date that Carlyle's true character emerges in his writing. Released from external pressures (so their economic interpretation runs), he naturally assumed the position of moral zealot and political critic; he lost, in the process, the literary affectations of his youth. Put in harsher, more colloquial language, they assert that in middle life, untempted by the bribe of bread, Carlyle dropped the mask of artist and revealed his essential philistinism. It should be said to the credit of those who suggest Carlyle "used" literature that they do so without self-righteousness and in apparent sympathy with the difficulties Carlyle faced. Moreover, their indictment appears to be impartially arrived at, since they demonstrate no preference for Carlyle either as artist or as moral utilitarian.

Nonetheless, the formulation and grounds of the argument are severely limited: Symons discusses the conflict as a minor critical sidelight to an anecdotal biography, and Harrold, whose investigation is more elaborate, treats only the period 1819–1834. Neither approach is definitive, nor without a wider perspective can it hope to be. In fact, at close range Carlyle's opinions run counter to the tendencies one would expect in an exploitative handling of litera-
British reading tastes in the 1820s did not favor an exposition of German poetry and fiction: what little work was known or translated circulated within a fairly narrow group of intellectuals. In these early days, as J. V. Morley declares, "the European movement . . . was little studied in England by even the leading men, much less by the average." Froude also recalls the unpopularity of Carlyle’s German criticism: "Neither the Meister nor the Schiller were selling. . . . The booksellers hung back and they judged rightly, perhaps, for their own interests. Carlyle, like all really original writers, had to create the taste which could appreciate him"; "German Romance was financially a failure also, and the Edinburgh publishers would make no further ventures." Carlyle would have reaped far greater profits if he had satisfied the public demand for articles on Scott and Gray and Byron. For that matter, nothing prevented him from making his fortune in a reiteration of moral orthodoxy; essays on Milton and Pope would have sold as well as reviews of Schiller and Novalis. Instead, Carlyle chose a vehicle both unfamiliar to his public and philosophically ill-suited to the advancement of Christian evangelism. In doing so he frequently endorsed ideas antithetical to those of which his “true nature” approved. Many of these statements are curiously enthusiastic: “Art is to be loved, not because of its effects, but because of itself; not because it is useful for spiritual pleasure, or even for moral culture, but because it is Art, and the highest in man, and the soul of all Beauty.”

Furthermore, if Carlyle’s literary recommendations were indeed sheer pretense, one might justifiably expect to find a hint of the ruse or at least some greater consistency in his private writings. Here, with conviction undistorted by necessity, he might have maintained his antipathy toward the arts. Yet in his notebooks Carlyle repeatedly praises the poetic impulse:

Here, even here [in this world], is the Revelation of the Infinite in the Finite; a majestic Poem (tragic, comic, or epic), couldst thou but read it and recite it! Watch it then;
At the same time, he is contemptuous of those who see life unmusically. Even Jeffrey, his early mentor, draws criticism for his dullness and partial vision: "The prose spirit of the world—to which world his kindliness draws him so strongly and so closely—has choked and all but withered the better poetic spirit he derives from nature. . . . Literature! poetry! . . . He knows not what they mean."  

Not only was Carlyle an apologist for literature; he also emphatically opposed an economic interpretation of life. No sign of the times distressed him more than the cynicism of contemporaries who preached "cash payment" as "the sole nexus of man to man." As an artist, Carlyle thought himself aloof from the materialism of his age: "Authors are martyrs—witnesses for the truth—or else nothing. Money cannot make or unmake them. They are made or unmade, commanded and held back by God Almighty alone, whose inspiration it is that giveth them understanding. . . . Money cannot hire the writing of a good book."  

Carlyle lived frugally all his life, and in later years Jane often complained that their circumstances had not improved with the improvement in their fortunes. A pension was refused when it was offered, and a number of lucrative literary adventures were declined as well. Fame and money came or went, but they were always to Carlyle only subordinate considerations—what he scornfully called the "goose goddesses" of ordinary men.  

Furthermore, success did not bring anything like consistency to his opinions of literature. As we have seen in the last chapter, Carlyle's late essays and letters continued to reflect an uneasy tension between poetic vision and moral activism. The subjects discussed may have been political, but his treatment of them was stubbornly impressionistic. More than one critic has suggested that The French Revolution, for example, ought to be subtitled "A Drama." Carlyle's accounts of the surrender of the Bastille,
Louis's flight from Paris, the howling menace of the mobs in the Place de la Révolution, Charlotte Corday's vendetta, and Napoleon's "whiff of grapeshot" have about them the exaggerated immediacy and conscious shaping of theater pieces.\textsuperscript{31} Mill, in a review of the first edition, classed the history as a kind of modern prose epic: a work of scholarship transmuted by genius into art.\textsuperscript{32} Whether \textit{The French Revolution} succeeds as document or as drama, there is no question that Carlyle was continuously intrigued by the powers of the creative imagination. He wrote in his journal in July, 1832: "To imagine: \textit{bilden!} That is an unfathomable thing. . . . As yet I have never risen into the region of creation. Am I approaching it? \textit{Ach Gott! sich nähern dem unausprechlichen},"\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Sartor Resartus} and \textit{The French Revolution} were, largely, attempts to articulate that unspeakable, "unfathomable" sense of life.

Years later, in the writing of \textit{Past and Present}, Carlyle tried again to illuminate history with the lamps of imagination. Much of the work's didacticism is relieved, in Book Two, by an inspired portrayal of thirteenth-century monastic life. There Carlyle evokes, as sensitively as in his tribute to Sterling, the strangeness and wonder of a lost time:

\begin{quote}
Behold, therefore, this England of the year 1200 was no chimerical vacuity or dreamland, peopled with mere vaporous Fantasms . . . but a green solid place, that grew corn and several other things. The Sun shone on it; the vicissitudes of seasons and human fortunes . . . King Lackland \textit{was} there, verily he; and did leave these \textit{tredecim sterlings}, if nothing more, and did live and look in one way or the other, and a whole world was living and looking along with him!\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

His history of St. Edmundsbury does, ultimately, have a moral purpose, but Carlyle's immediate concern is with the evanescence and vitality of the past. He reworks Jocelin's narrative into a series of lively scenes, and none is more poignant than the descrip-
tion of Samson unearthing the Abbey’s patron saint: “What a scene . . . John of Dice, with vestry men, clambering on the roof to look through; the Convent all asleep, and the Earth all asleep,—and since then, Seven Centuries of Time mostly gone to sleep!”

The drama closes with the kind of contrast that comes hard to the historian, but easily to the poet: “Jocelin’s Boswellian Narrative . . . ends . . . impenetrable Time-Curtains rush down . . . and there is nothing left but a mutilated black Ruin amid green botanic expanses, and oxen, sheep and dilettanti pasturing in their places.”

Carlyle’s stylistic revisions, as much as any explicit declaration, betray the conflict in his literary attitudes after 1837. At times he professes suspicion of the self-conscious artist, admonishing himself to write plainly: “Learn to do it honestly . . . perfectly thou wilt never do it. Time flies; while thou balancest a sentence, thou art nearer the final Period.” Yet he spent months recasting the proofs of his works, embellishing purple passages, complicating syntax, heightening prose rhythms. In a close study of the manuscript changes in Past and Present, Grace Calder concludes:

Carlyle’s style was always his own, but the First Draft is much less brilliant Carlylean prose than the Printer’s Copy. The manuscripts serve to show the strokes by which this brilliance was achieved.... They will ever belie his professions that he cared “little for phrases,” for they throw open the doors of his workshop and show the artist absorbed in his art.

Thus, in later years, Carlyle did more than borrow the language and spirit of poetry: he shared, as well, the poet’s pride in verbal craftsmanship. Those critics who have dismissed the influence of literary considerations on the older Carlyle have ignored not only much of what he said, but also the way in which he said it.

Finally, to make of Carlyle’s early writings a purely mercenary venture is to call in question the sincerity of all his literary efforts. If he wrote, in the 1820s and early 1830s, only to gain freedom to
pursue a more practical course, then why did he not desert the craft of literature when he had won financial independence? In other words, why did he write at all, in the second half of his life, if the methods and aims of literary men were totally abhorrent to him? Two answers suggest themselves: either the early dishonesty of his motives had become habitual, or the assertion of his essential philistinism is simply invalid. The first possibility attracts, in particular, those flamboyant skeptics of the Strachey school who would write off their Victorian fathers as self-seeking dissemblers. In the case of Carlyle, however, the evidence points away from disguise and equivocation. His journals, letters and notebooks reveal a frequency of self-examination that is both earnest and unrestrained. *Sartor Resartus* and *Reminiscences* demonstrate his willingness to put personal trials and shortcomings before the public. Froude, equipped with an intimate knowledge of Carlyle's foibles, affirmed the honesty of his intentions: "He never wrote or spoke any single sentence which he did not with his whole heart believe to be true." No allowance for Froude's extravagance can alter the obvious conclusion: Carlyle was continually at pains to assure his own integrity. If we accept, as the testimony dictates, that his ambivalence toward literature was sincere, then the very fact that he continued to write, in the face of strong misgivings, only serves to enlarge the significance of the conflict.

Froude's treatment of the problem is not radically different from that of many twentieth-century critics. He, too, concentrates on Carlyle's moral pragmatism and virtually ignores any commitment to imaginative literature. Zealot, reformer, political enthusiast—these, for Froude, make up the essential Carlyle: whatever artistic pretensions run through his work are merely eccentricities aggravated by "biliousness." Unfortunately, though he is kinder than modern biographers in attaching the inconsistency to an involuntary cause, Froude does not argue the question impartially. As practical historian and rigid moralist, he has little respect for the "nebulosities" of romantic art. The only extracts he chooses from Carlyle's writing are those that underline his own bias against the
ultimate efficacy of literature. After a personal encounter with both men, Leslie Stephen speaks of the difference between Carlyle, and Carlyle as interpreted by Froude: "The wonderful force and vitality of the old man have enabled him completely to conquer Froude, who repeats his doctrines and makes them worse in the repetition." For example, Froude quotes from Carlyle's journal of 1838:

> It often strikes me as a question whether there ought to be any such thing as a literary man at all. He is surely the wretchedest of all sorts of men. I wish with the heart occasionally I had never been one. I cannot say I have seen a member of the guild whose life seems to me enviable. . . . Canst thou alter it? Then act it. Endure it. On with it in silence.

Froude then analyzes the passage in the following pedagogical fashion:

> Let young men who are dreaming of literary eminence as the laurel wreath of their existence reflect on these words. Let them win a place for themselves as high as Carlyle won, they will find that he was speaking no more than the truth, and will wish, when it is too late, that they had been wise in time. Literature—were it even poetry—is but the shadow of action: the action the reality, the poetry an echo.

A more disinterested approach might have led Froude to consider not only Carlyle's contrary moods of self-affirmation, but also the qualifications (such as "often" and "occasionally") in this pessimistic view of literature. For despite recriminations, Carlyle went "on with it," and frequently derived spiritual satisfaction and a strong sense of purpose from his writing. With the exception of a brief public defense of Governor Eyre, Carlyle seldom indulged in that political activism which Froude asserts was his proper domain:

> I have had no concern whatever in their Puseyisms, ritualisms . . . and cobwebberies . . . and no feeling of my own
Carlyle evidently found greater comfort in his literary habits than most of his biographers admit.

An alternative source of Carlyle's self-contradiction may lie in some comic perversity of character. Perhaps he enjoyed the shock value of voicing precisely those views which were not expected of him. Margaret Fuller remarks that on one occasion he broke into laughter at the "gorgeous" absurdity of his own opinions. Certainly the author of *Sartor Resartus*, who could weave fanciful digressions and ironies into the fabric of a metaphysical creed, might have treated other subjects just as playfully. He loved anyone whose laugh was "manful," and he often condemned the solemn attitudinizing of Coleridge and Emerson. Yet the element of humor is noticeably muted in most of Carlyle's prose after 1831. Only in *Sartor* and "The Diamond Necklace" does he create anything like the modern idea of comic personae. In general he attacks his material frontally and with conspicuous seriousness: Carlyle thought life and writing were a terribly earnest business in which comedy played a minor role. The headlong "pursuit of happiness" or mere entertainment always struck him as a mindless egotism: "The only happiness a brave man ever troubled asking much about was, happiness enough to get his work done." "We shall be, if not happy, blessed which is better." There is very little wryness or light satire in *Heroes, Cromwell*, or *Frederick* and no levity whatever in the shrill rhetoric of *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. As an ironist, Carlyle was incapable of maintaining the good-humored detachment of an Austen or a Thackeray, and his sarcasms are consistently bitter. This very baldness in the tone of his opinions often exposed him to exquisitely wrought insults from reviewers and "town wits." For his own part, Carlyle felt only pity for the deviousness and superficiality of these "word-juggling"
“half-men”: “[The fashionable wit’s] poor fraction of sense has to be perked into some epigrammatic shape. . . . Such grinning inanity is very sad to the soul of man.”50 They lacked sincerity—to Carlyle the *sine qua non* of ordinary men and heroes, of poets and soldier-kings. He never deviated from his belief that man cannot begin to justify his existence—or perfect it—until he thinks and acts with wholehearted honesty. Like Goethe, he encouraged men to be reverent:

There is one common word of Carlyle’s which continues to express his essential quality: the word reverence, not for him, but in him: the governing seriousness of a living effort, against which every cynicism, every kind of half-belief, every satisfaction in indifference, may be seen and placed, in an ultimate human contrast.51

If the conflict in Carlyle’s view of literature cannot be traced to an economic or a physical cause, what other possibilities are left to us? He does not appear to contradict himself out of mere willfulness or caprice. Julian Symons has suggested another source of tension in his character—one that does not depend so much upon those physical influences Carlyle professed to scorn. At an early age, Symons argues, he refused to take clerical orders because he could not accept the belief-propositions of the church: “For the rest of Carlyle’s life a war was to be waged, with varying intensity at different times, between the keen iconoclasm of his intellect and his emotional need for a faith.”52 Thus began “his lifelong struggle to expel with the magic of dogma the hydra-headed monster of doubt.”53 Although the argument is left as a generalization and never applied to the peculiar difficulties of Carlyle’s writing, let us assume, for the moment, its potential validity. Quite simply, the problem becomes an antagonism between belief and unbelief, between emotional orthodoxy and intellectual heresy. Carlyle’s literary and political inconsistencies, even his psychosomatic disturbances, may then be symptoms of a “life-long” vacillation be-
tween the security of dogmatic faith and the uncertainty of enlightened skepticism. Since Symons does not offer direct testimony to the wider significances of the tension, it remains for us to explore the influence, if any, of agnosticism on Carlyle's view of literature.

Perhaps the self-doubt he felt from time to time was a manifestation of his inability to accept a divinely ordered universe. That is, since Carlyle chose literature as a career and found some measure of emotional security in writing, it may be that his distaste for the "vocables" was provoked by religious disillusionment. If so, in advocating more active pursuits, Carlyle ought to have spoken as a skeptic or at least in the secular tones of a pragmatist. The truth is far otherwise. As an opponent of the arts, Carlyle was seldom irreligious. He writes in *Latter-Day Pamphlets*:

> Of Literature, in all ways, be shy rather than otherwise, at present! There where thou art, work, work; whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it,—with the hand of a man, not of a phantasm; be that thy unnoticed blessedness and exceeding great reward. Thy words let them be few, and well-ordered. Love silence rather than speech. . . . Learn to be something and to do something, instead of eloquently talking about what has been and was done and may be! . . . May future generations, acquainted again with the silences, and once more cognisant of what is noble and faithful and divine, look back on us with pity and incredulous astonishment!54

Carlyle's opposition to literature is, after all profoundly moral; he condemns the eloquence of the artist in a context of spiritual affirmation. The foregoing passage employs not only religious diction—"blessedness," "faithful," and "divine"—but at least two biblical paraphrases to reinforce the orthodoxy of his indignation. If anything, the strength of Carlyle's piety increases in proportion to his disenchantment with the value or power of the written word: the silent "Man of Practice . . . has in him what transcends all
logic-utterance: a Congruity with the Unuttered”; Cromwell is a “Poet” of “belief, without words”; “Altars” should “be raised to silence for universal worship.” For Carlyle, the “Gospel of Work” and the “Doctrine of Silence” are inextricably tied to his faith in God:

The Practical Labour of England is not a chimerical Triviality: it is a fact acknowledged by all the Worlds; which no man and no demon will contradict. It is, very audibly, though very inarticulately as yet, the one God’s Voice we have heard in these two atheistic centuries.  

Whatever it is that causes him to doubt the efficacy of literature surely does not have its origin in the “keen iconoclasm” of unbelief. He criticizes “the jingle of maudlin persons” from a position of unquestioned conviction and moral assurance.

There is yet another possibility: he may have derided poets and men of letters precisely because they represented the heterodoxy of an intellectual culture. Conversely, if we attribute the tension to a conflict between belief and doubt, perhaps Carlyle’s artistic bias is an assertion of his independence from religious commitment. In that case, his defense of literature should reflect a secular turn of mind, just as his strident philistinism appears to signal a retreat into dogma. Again, Carlyle’s words belie such a view. He does not endorse poetry as a refuge from religion, or as a sanctuary for the unbeliever. The world of the poet is, for him, as godlike as that of the practical man. He speaks in praise of Goethe:

To that man, too, in a strange way, there was given what we may call a life in the Divine mystery: and strangely, out of his Books, the world rises imaged once more as godlike, the workmanship and temple of a God. Illuminated . . . in mild celestial radiance;—really a Prophecy in these most unprophetic times; to my mind, by far the greatest, though one of the quietest, among all the great things that have come to pass in them.
Carlyle supports an aesthetic that is compatible with, even dependent upon, a “Divine Idea of the World.” He observes, on one occasion, that “the taste for Religion and for Poetry go together”; on another that “Art . . . Virtue, and Religion” are the highest expressions of man’s soul. The interdependence of beauty and truth, of literature and belief in God, are cornerstones of Carlyle’s poetic advocacy:

He who, in any way, shows us better than we knew before that a lily of the fields is beautiful, does he not show it us as an effluence of the Fountain of all Beauty; as the handwriting, made visible there, of the great Maker of the Universe? He has sung for us, made us sing with him, a little verse of a sacred Psalm . . . He has verily touched our hearts as with a live coal from the altar. Perhaps there is no worship more authentic.

The best works of the imagination, rightly understood, reveal the spiritual foundation of our being. There is nothing decadent or cynical or iconoclastic in Carlyle’s admiration of literary genius; his aestheticism bears no resemblance to the artificiality of the 1880s and 90s. On the contrary, he informs his appreciation of the arts with as much moral force and religious certainty as he displays in his disavowals of the poetic method.

In the area of specific literary criticism, Carlyle recoils just as strongly from positions of theological doubt. In fact, he vilifies those artists who have lost their faith: Voltaire and his retinue of skeptics seem to him to have sunk themselves in “the bottomless abysses of Atheism and Fatalism.” Carlyle has no patience with the barren writers of his own century who hold that “Thought . . . is still secreted by the brain” and “Poetry and Religion . . . are a product of the small intestine!” Those epochs in which the emphasis in literature has shifted from inspiration to analysis shape themselves, to Carlyle, as dark interludes in the history of art. Cerebral poetry is an “unhealthy” sign of the amorality and godlessness of a culture. Seasons of belief and unbelief do alternate
with each other, in art as in politics, but Carlyle’s sympathies always lie with the ages of faith. He commits himself to a time “full of the richest prospects for all; namely a period of New Spirituality and Belief . . . wherein Reverence is again rendered compatible with knowledge, and Art and Religion are one.”

There is then no crisis of faith and denial behind Carlyle’s contradictions. He argues for and against literature from a deeply religious point of view. Whatever doubts he had, in 1820, of the existence of God, did not affect his later criticisms of poetry and fiction. The “Everlasting Yea” he achieved in these early years is, for all material purposes, maintained in his literary opinions. Not only did maturity convince him “there’s a divinity that shapes our ends”; he also lost his fondness for intellectual gymnastics and systematic thought. Perhaps his most vehement excoriation of “logic-chopping” (which had once briefly intrigued him) occurs at the end of the lecture on “Hero as Prophet”:

Mahomet . . . does not, like a Bentham, a Paley, take Right and Wrong, and calculate the profit and loss, ultimate pleasure of the one and of the other; and summing up all by addition and subtraction into a net result, ask you Whether on the whole the Right does not preponderate considerably? No; it is not better to do the one than the other; the one is to the other as life is to death—as Heaven is to Hell. The one must in nowise be done, the other in nowise left undone. You shall not measure them; they are incommensurable; the one is death eternal to a man, the other is life eternal. Benthamee Utility, virtue by Profit and Loss; reducing this God’s-World to a dead brute Steam-engine, the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains on;—if you ask me which gives, Mahomet or they, the beggarlier and falser view of Man and his Destinies in this Universe, I will answer, It is not Mahomet!

Clearly he denies the primacy of the intellect; at the same time he affirms his faith in a divine will. There can be no antagonism be-
tween reason and belief because Carlyle's whole nature rejects the "Steam-engine" mechanics of empirical thought. He strenuously opposes the "persuasion . . . that, except the external, there are no true sciences; that to the inward world (if there be any) our only conceivable road is through the outward; that, in short, what cannot be investigated and understood mechanically, cannot be investigated and understood at all." The conclusions he reaches about art, history and contemporary politics have little to do with a ratiocinative process; they are intuitions, insights, products of the "Dynamical" forces in man. Carlyle is far more interested in the impulses of conscience and emotion than in the dictates of formal logic. This strong intuitive bias underlies his view of literature: when he is convinced of its worth, poetry originates in the "mystic deeps of man's soul"; imagination is a "burning light" that lays bare "the boundless Invisible world." When he is disillusioned with art he "senses" the ultimate inadequacy of language; or he "is struck" by the superior valor and nobility of active men. Carlyle's attitude is thus determined by temperament and enforced by religious conviction.

Lastly, a number of inherent errors are involved in crediting Carlyle's inconsistency to the oscillations of faith and disbelief in God. The most salient of these is a too strict dichotomy between the alternatives. According to Symons, the only choices available for Carlyle were formal, dogmatic religion and intellectual iconoclasm. It never occurs to him that the rejection of the tenets and liturgy of the church might not have included the denial of a divinely ordered universe. Perhaps such a view is rooted in the clinical analytics of twentieth-century criticism—the very angle of vision that makes it as difficult for us to understand Arnold's untraditional commitment to spiritual values as it is for us to comprehend Carlyle's. The unpredictable element of a spasmodic temperament further complicates the "untidiness" of Carlyle's religion. There is no question, however, that the conflict in his literary opinions takes place in a religious context and is linked to the structuring of that faith. We have arrived at the chief
source of the tension, and must ask what contradictory beliefs Carlyle held about man's place in a universe ruled by God. What, after all, was his religion?

1. Certainly these antinomies are more difficult to reconcile from a twentieth-century perspective that presupposes a political "radical" will exhibit the modern, liberal package of views. Like Dickens, Carlyle's sentiments often conformed to those of an extinct species, the Tory Radical, whose defense of authoritarianism often went cheek-by-jowl with his plea for social reforms. Carlyle, like Ruskin, Morris, and others after him, turned to medieval paternalism as the best alternative to the excesses of laissez-faire. For a thorough discussion of the type, see A. V. Dicey, *Lectures on the Relation between Law and Opinion in England during the 19th Century*.


4. *Froude, First Forty Years*, I, 78-79.

5. Extract from *Journal*, 31 December 1823, quoted in Wilson I, p. 313. All references to Carlyle's journals and diaries are necessarily secondhand. After the controversy over Froude's biography, the Carlyle family reclaimed his personal papers and have forbidden scholars to study them. The only fragments extant are gleanings from the originals that passed through Froude's hands ninety years ago. Carlyle's executors have consistently refused to duplicate or microfilm the journals. (Information courtesy of the Keeper of the Manuscript Room of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh).


7. Built in 1853 atop his Chelsea home.

8. Symons, *Thomas Carlyle*, p. 176. Among those who record similar unpleasant experiences with Carlyle are Browning, Dean Stanley, Geraldine Jewsbury, and, of course, Emerson.


12. The argument rests on two assumptions: first, that all thought and action have a sexual basis; second, that Carlyle's language must be traced to the only vocabulary that has any meaning in and for itself—namely, that which deals with the genito-urinary system. Thus apparently neutral words are actually disguised allusions to the lower torso regions: "coins" and "money" should be read ipso facto as "feces"; "pistols," "lamp-posts," and so on denote phalli; dark colors are excremental emblems; references to "horses" and "water" demonstrate the subject's preoccupation with sexual potency. Although no direct psychoanalysis is possible, Halliday refuses to be deterred by the paucity of evidence or the ambiguity of those few incidents that he can examine. On one occasion he puts two facts—a vague complaint of Carlyle about constipation and a river journey during which he asked his father about the
dirt on his hands—through the formulaic machinery of Freudianism. After a preposterous discussion of Carlyle as “good-mother-child” and Carlyle’s faeces as “equivalent to an interiorised penis,” Halliday refreshingly concludes that “further speculation is unprofitable in view of our lack of exact knowledge of all the circumstances” (p. 44).

13. See J. A. Froude, My Relations with Carlyle, especially pp. 29-25.

14. Carlyle’s impugners quote ambiguous conversations between Jane and Miss Jessbury, while his supporters point to baby clothes that Jane was thought to have knitted at Craigenputtock.

15. First Forty Years, I, 379.

16. Without question, the ubiquitous Lady Ashburton also undermined the Carlyles’ rapport, particularly in the 1850s.

17. Symons, Thomas Carlyle, p. 123; and Harrold, Carlyle and German Thought, pp. 69-85. Albert LaValley, in a recent study, Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern, also distrusts the sincerity and persistence of Carlyle’s received aesthetic, though from a different perspective. Like some critical Merlin, LaValley insists that all his works—from the early essays and Wotton Reinred through Frederick—must be interpreted in the light of modern derivatives (these include, he assures us, Dr. Strangelove). Unfortunately, this typifies much modern Carlyle criticism that, in promoting the man’s originality and emphasizing his “relevance” to twentieth-century readers, ignores the derivative nature of most of his own beliefs.


19. See above, chapter 1, footnote 32.

20. Recollections, I, 68. According to Morley, the English were particularly slow to appreciate Goethe, and “serious men” spoke slightingly of him “so late as 1854” (p. 68). There was, of course, some general increase in British attention to things German after the 1815 publication of Madame de Staël’s Germany, particularly among Coleridge’s disciples. See Carlyle’s Unfinished History of German Literature, ed. Hill Shine, pp. xvi-xviii.

21. First Forty Years, I, 392, 401.

22. He did, finally, write an essay on Scott, but not until 1838 and with considerable condescension (see Essays, IV, 22-87).


24. Note Books, p. 211.


26. Essays, IV, 162.

27. Journal extract (July 1832) in Froude, First Forty Years, II, 294-95.

28. On the subject of Carlyle’s indifference to wealth, Max Muller wrote to his son in May 1881: “‘Becoming independent’ is one thing, ‘becoming rich’ another. Everybody ought to try hard to make himself independent, but then a man must learn to be independent with little, such as Carlyle was—one of the most independent and honest men I have ever known” (The Life and Letters of Frederich Max Müller, ed. G. Müller, II, 99).

29. These included a lecture series in New England that Emerson repeatedly held out to him.

31. "All those wonderful pictures are so poetical that we can only marvel why the man who painted them could not express himself through the usual vehicle of poetry" (H. Walker, "The German Influence: Thomas Carlyle," in *The Literature of the Victorian Era*, p. 69).

32. He went so far as to call it a "Poem" (Symons, *Thomas Carlyle*, p. 156).

33. In Froude, *First Forty Years*, II, 293–94.

34. PP, pp. 44, 46.

35. Ibid., p. 123.

36. Ibid., p. 125.


41. Letter to Holmes, 24 January 1873, in *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, ed. F. W. Maitland, p. 231. Murray Baumgarten agrees that Froude edited Carlyle's utterances in order to present him always as a "sage preaching wisdom" ("Carlyle and 'Spiritual Optics,'" p. 503). Whenever possible in publishing Carlyle's commentaries, Froude "omits the reflexive turning of the narrator to his own speaking activity... As is to be expected this is the portion in which the message is not phrased in bugle notes" (ibid., p. 511). Hugh Walker says that Froude was simply insensitive to poetry: "Carlyle, though he could not write verse, was a poet, and, superb artist as Froude was in prose, he had little or no poetic gift" ("The German Influence: Thomas Carlyle," p. 33).


45. On Coleridge, see Sterling, pp. 52–62; on Emerson, see letters and conversations after the latter's second visit to England, especially letter to Mrs. Baring, 3 November 1847.

46. "Sauerteig," a fictional German observer of the English scene, is often employed to reinforce Carlyle's opinions in later works. His ideas and manner do not, however, differ appreciably from the author's.

47. PP, p. 156.


49. Louis Cazamian speaks of Carlyle's humor as "crude and brutal"; it "is akin to Swift's, setting force above sweetness, subtilty or delicacy. . . . So intense . . . is Carlyle's humor that it is not amusing so often . . . as it is . . . dominating" (Carlyle, pp. 243–44).

50. PP, p. 151.


52. Because it is a dilemma that plagues many modern English prose writers (Hardy, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, and others), Symons probably found
it a ready, plausible answer to Carlyle's querulous disposition. Like LaValley, he consistently superimposes his own Zeitgeist on the early Victorian world.

57. Note Books, p. 189.
58. Essays, I, 56.
59. Heroes, p. 163.
60. Essays, II, 65.
61. Ibid.
63. As Carlyle finished, Mill rose to his feet and shouted, "No!"
64. Heroes, pp. 75–76.
66. H. D. Traill, in his introduction to Sartor Resartus, agrees that Carlyle is primarily concerned with the "didactic purpose" of literature, especially when that purpose assumes religious or prophetic significance. Traill goes on to disparage Carlyle's insensitivity to "literature pure and simple,—literature as literature," by which Traill seems to imply the existence of a literature dissociated from its meaning (SR, pp. vi-viii). It is true that Carlyle had little patience with such academic distinctions, but it is certainly not true that he was incapable of enjoying the manner in which art presented its truths. As he says in the 1828 essay on Goethe's Helena: "The grand point is to have a meaning, a genuine, deep and noble one; the proper form for embodying this . . . will gather round it almost of its own accord. We profess ourselves unfriendly to no mode of communicating Truth; which we rejoice to meet with in all shapes, from that of the child's Catechism to the deepest poetical Allegory" (Essays, I, 149). And certainly, if we consider Past and Present as didactic art, affinities between Carlyle's aesthetic and medieval theories of the value of literature (derived from St. Paul and St. Augustine) are germane.