Chapter Six

The Faltering Victorian Vision

Life without industry is guilt, and industry without art is brutality.—John Ruskin

Unquestionably, the transcendental-Puritan tension revealed in Carlyle's literary attitudes often resolves itself into a conflict between contemplation and action, vision and conduct. Bearing in mind such considerations, one may be tempted to uncomplicate the terminology by reducing the elements of the antagonism to the lowest common denominators; that is, to a struggle in Carlyle between Hellenic and Hebraic impulses. There are certainly compelling arguments for doing so, especially if we agree to define Hellenism and Hebraism as Arnold does in *Culture and Anarchy*. Understood thus, German idealism and Hellenism share a respect for intelligence, "spontaneity of consciousness," sensitivity "to things in their essence and beauty," and spiritual calm; by the same token, Puritanism and Hebraism mutually promote common sense, "strictness of conscience," obedience, awareness of evil, and spiritual unrest. Arnold himself makes the connection between the instincts of the Hebrew tribes and those of the Reformation sects: "All which Protestantism was to itself clearly conscious of, all which it succeeded in clearly setting forth in words, had the character of Hebraism rather than Hellen-
ism." More specifically, Arnold links the British Puritan to the Old Testament Jew through their identical preference for “doing to thinking.” The action principle “knits in some special sort the genius and history of us English, and our American descendents across the Atlantic, to the genius and history of the Hebrew people. Puritanism . . . was originally a reaction of Hebraism against Hellenism.”

Certainly it is upon this exact point of “cultivated inaction” that Carlyle most frequently attacks those spiritual descendents of Hellenism—the modern aesthetic writers. He even attempts, at one point, to place the contemporary polarities in Arnold’s classical perspective: “Socrates,” Carlyle observes, “is terribly at ease in Zion.”

There are, as well, infrequent occasions when Carlyle not only suffers from the tension between these primitive instincts but recognizes their hostility. In a letter to Forster in 1845, he writes that the contemplation of nature is “all very ‘beautiful,’ but amounting to the most perfect state of Do-nothingism the mind of man could well conceive! That is the drawback of it: alas, you cannot do hard work and be quite beautiful; labour, says the apostle, is not joyous, it is grievous!”

A few years earlier, in an account to Sterling of his visit to Ely Cathedral, Carlyle acknowledges the same conflict, and claims, unconvincingly, to have resolved it within himself:

Tonight, as the heaving bellows blew, and the yellow sunshine streamed in thro’ those high windows, and my footsteps and the poor country lad’s were the only sounds from below, I looked aloft, and my eyes filled with very tears to look at all this, and remember beside it (wedded to it now and reconciled with it for me) Oliver Cromwell’s “Cease your fooling, and come out, Sir!” In these two antagonisms lie what volumes of meaning!

“Volumes of meaning” indeed, especially if the antagonism should be invoked as an answer to the contrariety in Carlyle’s literary attitude. Yet Hebraism is ultimately a more limiting, not a wider, concept than Puritan temper when applied to Carlyle.
His dissatisfaction with the arts depends as much upon a respect for humility and factual truth as it does upon the impulse for action. Without the terminology derived in these pages, the critic would be compelled to trace Carlyle's negative views, as Harrold did thirty-five years ago, to "a curious blend of stoicism, Hebraism, Calvinism." The "Puritan temper" has the distinct advantage of encompassing all three of these strains. "Transcendental faith," on the other hand, serves better than Hellenism to characterize Carlyle's sympathy for literature: first of all, because, through the aesthetics of Kant and Fichte, that philosophy recommended to Carlyle a particular reverence for the artist, and second, because it suggests moral and metaphysical doctrines without which Carlyle believed all cultural movements nugatory. Moreover, to label the poles of Carlyle's thought "Hellenic" and "Hebraic" is, in fact, to reduce the conflict to a strict Kierkegaardian struggle between the aesthetic and ethical faculties in man. The question for Carlyle is not "either-or," but a choice between the affirmation of an equilibrium (transcendental faith), on the one hand, and a thorough-going rejection of beauty in favor of "grievous" duty on the other. At no point in Carlyle's life or writing does he embrace the amorality of a "pure" aesthetic.

Other, minor, adjustments in the terms of the equation prove equally unsatisfactory. For example, if one changes "transcendental faith" to Kantian idealism or simply to transcendentalism proper, Carlyle then immediately becomes responsible for a philosophical exactitude that he never maintained in his thinking. By the same token, if one substitutes the pejorative term "mysticism" for "transcendental faith," one loses both critical impartiality and historical specificity in the process. Except those upon which we have already determined, no connotative or denotative phrases will be found to indicate, so precisely, the special nature of the case. "Transcendental faith" and "Puritan temper" suggest at once the deeply religious aspects of Carlyle's struggle and the decided tension in him between German and Scottish authorities.

Finally, I should like to point up the importance of these dis-
coveries within the pattern of nineteenth-century aesthetics. In recent years, it has become common critical practice to trace the decadence or fragmentation of romanticism among the later Victorians—most notably in studies by J. H. Buckley, Graham Hough, John Holloway, D. G. James, and David DeLaura. I do not wish to wash out Carlyle’s unique literary ambivalence in the murky light of “Romantic vs. Victorian,” for we have sharply underlined those elements of his experience which were singular, yet it would be equally unjust to isolate his aesthetic dilemma from the dynamics of his age.

Though born nearly a generation before most of the writers whom he knew and influenced, Carlyle was no more impervious than they to the political and religious contretemps of mid-century England. “Signs of the Times,” “Chartism,” Past and Present, On Heroes and Hero-Worship, “Shooting Niagara—and After?” all evidence the man of letters’ eagerness to reach beyond his writing desk and join battle with the Philistines and scientific Liberals. The impulse of his era was, initially at least, toward optimistic prescription and social activism. That earnest, sanguine engagement of Tennyson in Locksley Hall and “The Palace of Art,” of Dickens in Household Words, the early novels and Hard Times, of Ruskin in Unto this Last, “Nature of the Gothic,” and “Traffic,” of Morris in News from Nowhere and his lectures on medieval craftsmanship, and of Newman and Arnold as well, parallels Carlyle’s compulsion to close the gap between the artist and his times.

In most cases, what we witness is a brave attempt at applied romanticism: Ruskin and Morris mediate between the naturalism of Pre-Raphaelite painting or Gothic architecture and the mindless vulgarity of middle- and working-class tastes; Arnold and Newman promote Goethe’s aesthetic of a “harmonious balance of the faculties” under the banner of liberal education for the sons of “Utilitaria”; and Carlyle, long before the others have begun to preach, is busy “Germanizing the public,” transplanting the bloodless, academic categories of Kant into the popular mind in phrases like
“mechanics and dynamics,” “organic filaments,” and “natural supernaturalism.” In fact, it is Carlyle, as we have seen in chapter three, whose early example pointed the direction for, and infused the thinking of, so many Victorian men of letters. Ruskin, for example, though he had no firsthand acquaintance with German idealism, knew enough Carlyle to paraphrase Fichte in defining great art as “the revelation of immaterial values hidden behind the veil of material beauty.” And, like Carlyle, he carried his Weltanschauung beyond the realm of aesthetics in his middle years.

Predictably, it is also Carlyle who first retreats from the general assault on the anaesthetic man or, more properly, exhibits those self-contradictory tensions which we associate with the decline of romanticism. Until now, he has been viewed chiefly as some inviolate, early Victorian monolith, the polar opposite to Newman in religion or to Mill in economics. Or perhaps too many critics have taken their cue from Arnold who, in later life, wrote off the Sage of Chelsea as an overindulged Hebraic “desperado.” Yet Carlyle, too, had often wished to make the Goethean ideal prevail and had cajoled the “Mud-gods of this present Epoch” as hopefully as Arnold lectured the “Barbarians.” True, the manner of his retreat took its own peculiar, injudicious form: there is nothing in his rude militarism or strident Calvinist harangues so pleasing as the lyric escapism of Morris’s verse, nothing so forgivable as Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, nothing so poignant as Ruskin’s decline after the Whistler trial, nothing so eloquent in its despair as Empedocles on Etna, “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse,” or “Dover Beach,” nothing so sombre and moving as the last novels of Dickens, nothing so exquisite as the attenuated utterances of the fin-de-siècle. Whenever Carlyle believes himself embattled by ignorant, uneducable “armies of the night,” he reverts not to dreaming medievalism or Hellenic isolation but to the fierce misanthropy of his father’s clan. Such apprehensions of man’s depravity seem to accord, after all, with the intimations of his childhood and thus excite righteous anger rather than fine melan-
choly in his prose. For Carlyle, born in eighteenth-century Scotland, the Kantian Aesthetic could never be more than an acquired property of the mind: under threat from an unregenerate populace, it is entirely unnatural for him to cling, as later generations of Victorian writers did, to “the supreme theme of Art and Song.” Nonetheless, Carlyle’s divided consciousness, his inability to resolve the tension between art and the exigencies of the contemporary world, presage the schizophrenic temper of mid-Victorian romanticism. And much as he would resist the devolution, Carlyle’s fluctuating literary vision may, in fact, represent the first signal of disintegration in the unified moral aesthetic of Wordsworth and Goethe—a disintegration that is arrested only by the proud parochialism of the nineties.

Last of all, one may be tempted to consider the effect of Carlyle’s religious contrariety on his nonliterary pronouncements—especially his attitude toward history, politics, and culture. A number of critics have looked into these areas, but always at the Calvinist side of Carlyle’s temperament and with a tendency to dismiss as irrelevant, or unintelligible, the “mystical elements” in his personality. Even in a more balanced approach, one would have to proceed with caution. As we have already seen, there are points at which Puritanism and transcendentalism become confused in Carlyle’s mind: Goethe’s Entsagen mergers with Calvin’s doctrine of asceticism; James Carlyle’s “gospel of silence” appears to be complemented by the quietism of the pantheist. If we should expand our discussion to include Carlyle’s historical ideas, we would face further ambiguities, such as the hero-theory—the exact derivation of which remains unclear. It is probable that Carlyle took the germ of his doctrine from Fichte or Hegel and narrowed it over the years to fit the Calvinist concept of divinely elected political rulers. This, and other features of Carlyle’s world-view—the phoenix theory, the individual’s “cosmic knowingness,” the growing sense of historical determinism—would demand close attention and a willingness on the critic’s part to incorporate variables and thus to dilute his largely valid argument. To work with
Carlyle, after all, is to study a man of immense eccentricity and to accustom oneself to a prose style that bristles with crotchets. Our hypotheses may illuminate facets of his writing, but he never quite surrenders his humanity to the efforts of the "logic-chopper."

1. P. 140.
2. Ibid., p. 142.
3. Quoted in ibid., p. 135.
4. This excerpt, from an unpublished letter in the Forster Collection, III, no. 142, has been printed in Wilson's biography of Carlyle, III, 307.
6. See above, p. 000 n. 00.
8. At the opposite pole, among the scientists and political economists, the urge to reach beyond the traditional sphere of a single discipline was equally strong. Thus Darwin incorporates Spencerian sociology in later editions of The Origin of Species or descants on the "moral sense" in The Descent of Man; thus Mill invokes Goethe's dictum "the Beautiful is greater than the Good" in On Education or attempts to humanize Utilitarianism with a paean to the "exalted feelings" of Socrates, Plato, and Demosthenes.
9. On Ruskin's amateurism as philosopher and sociologist, see Frederick Harrison's report in John Ruskin, pp. 97, 103.
10. Notably, Holloway in The Victorian Sage, Harrold in a brief article "The Nature of Carlyle's Calvinism," and S. Gwilliam in a longer, more recent study "Thomas Carlyle, Reluctant Calvinist." Froude, Frederick Harrison, Matthew Arnold, and even Harrold in Carlyle and German Thought make the same mistake of de-emphasizing transcendentalism either because Carlyle's brand is too "popular" a form for their purist sentiments or because they would prefer to avoid the "hazy infinitudes" of Kantism. Even Basil Willey, who condemns conventional Christian analyses of Carlyle's religion, can offer only indefinite labels in their place, such as "escaped Puritan" or "religious Romantic" (see Nineteenth Century Studies, especially pp. 105-25).
12. For an appraisal of Carlyle's "flirtation" with the Saint-Simonians in the early 1830s, see Neff, Carlyle and Mill, pp. 210-15; and for his correspondence with the society, see New Quarterly (London, 1909), II, 277-88.
13. See R. Sharrock, "Carlyle and the Sense of History," p. 91. This essay includes an interesting discussion of changes in Carlyle's historical method between the writing of The French Revolution and Cromwell.