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Carlyle, Thackeray, and Victorian Heroism

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I

In the course of that rich and richly opinionated work, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, Mario Praz writes: 'And so, in contrast to Carlyle who exalts the hero, whom he puts forward as a combined reproof and pattern to an anti-heroic, bourgeois age, Thackeray sets himself up as deliberately anti-heroic, even to the title of his most famous novel — *Vanity Fair, a Novel without a Hero*'.¹ Like the rest of the book where it appears, this judgement rests on the belief that the 'bourgeois' is unalterably opposed to the 'heroic' and that Victorian England witnessed the triumph of bourgeois over heroic values. The large generalization is illustrated by a convenient contrast between Carlyle and Thackeray. By his attachment to an outmoded ideal of the heroic Carlyle consigned himself to the role of a Jeremiah bewailing the dominant temper of his age, while Thackeray, by his abandonment of heroism for the small sentimentalities of domestic life, identified himself as typically Victorian.

I begin with Professor Praz because I find his view of the matter at once representative and inadequate. My purpose here is to offer a modest corrective to the neat antithesis between Carlyle and Thackeray and so, at least implicitly, to question the free use of the terms 'heroic' and 'bourgeois' on which it depends. The Victorians, did, of course, abandon much of the traditional concept of heroism, but not in a spirit of violent rebellion; as in all their other acts of iconoclasm, they show themselves to be tentative and sometimes reluctant. They do not set out to destroy the old ideals with the confidence of men who have a ready-made alternative in their pockets. Rather, they begin from the uneasy realization that social and cultural changes are estranging them from an ideal that served their forefathers long and faithfully, and they present their solutions to the dilemma as acts of repair or adaptation. As they see it, they are not rejecting heroism but redefining it; instead of dropping the word from their vocabulary, they use it with an almost obsessive frequency that no other age in English culture has

¹ Mario Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, translated by Angus Davidson (London, 1956), p. 213. For a similar antithesis between Carlyle and Thackeray, see Gordon N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom: 1847–1863* (reprinted New York, 1972), p. 144, where the *Lectures on the English Humourists* are characterized as 'pointedly anti-Carlylean'.

ever come close to rivalling. They make heroism over to their own needs, with mixed feelings of complacency and disappointment. On the one hand they are at last establishing heroism on a basis of enlightened good sense; on the other they are reducing it to fit the restricted scope that modern life affords.

In this process Carlyle and Thackeray seem more like partners than antagonists, however temperamentally ill-suited and querulous they may be in their collaborative effort.² Neither writer approaches the subject from a position of unassailable dogmatism: both, indeed, have the air of slightly bewildered explorers undergoing the uncertainties, backtrackings, and sudden plunges into discovery to which their breed is commonly subject. And, rather than setting off from opposite points of the compass, they begin from a common ground of shared assumptions and shared concerns.

II

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one.³

Neither Carlyle nor Thackeray respected Byron: their writings use him as a favourite example of the Romantic self-indulgence they were united in despising. Yet the opening of *Don Juan* gives a succinct, though characteristically flippant, summary of the point from which their investigation of heroism begins. People need heroes and neither nineteenth-century society at large nor the nineteenth-century intellectual in particular is immune from the need; but the age offers the potential hero-worshipper a poverty of real heroes and a surplus of false ones. The task of writers like Carlyle and Thackeray thus becomes a double one, both destructive and creative: they must first attack false heroes and hero-worship and then, an infinitely more difficult undertaking, they must define a true heroism to proffer for their audience's admiration.

The belief that hero-worship is an innate tendency (perhaps, indeed, the most quintessentially human of all human attributes) pervades the writings

² Although my argument entails only passing reference to the personal relations between the two men, it receives considerable support from Charles Richard Sanders's thorough biographical essay, 'The Carlyles and Thackeray', in *Carlyle's Friendship and Other Studies* (Durham, North Carolina, 1977), pp. 226–66. Professor Sanders traces the history of a friendship, often strained but never broken, which was nourished by intermittent agreement on the subject of heroism. We find Carlyle praising *Catherine* (p. 233), which even its author came to regard as too cynical a book, and Thackeray praising the *French Revolution* (p. 230) for a lofty nobility that restored history and its actors to their proper heroic stature. Even their disagreements can frustrate the attempt to categorize Carlyle simply as the proponent of the heroic and Thackeray simply as its opponent: as Professor Sanders shrewdly points out (p. 254), Thackeray's savage review of the *Life of John Sterling* is rooted in the objection that Carlyle had written a biography without a hero.

³ Byron, *Poetical Works*, edited by Frederick Page and corrected by John Jump, third edition (London, 1970), p. 637.

of both men, but it is Carlyle who spells the point out most explicitly and most frequently. 'Reverence', together with Justice, is 'the everlasting central Law of this Universe' (x, 110), he insists in *Past and Present*, while at the beginning of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* he proclaims: 'No nobler feeling than this of admiration for one higher than himself dwells in the breast of man. It is to this hour, at all hours, the vivifying influence in man's life' (v, 11).⁴ Our capacity for reverence is the basis of religion and social order, as well as that private self-discipline whose necessity he everywhere urges on the reader. It is only by learning to admire something greater than ourselves that we can escape the despair and inactivity bred by isolated self-absorption.

Precisely because the capacity is so fundamental and so urgent it easily lends itself to misdirection, and when Carlyle looks at modern society, in particular, he finds hero-worship in its perverted, not its healthy, forms. He sees idols and idolaters, Sham-Heroes and Flunkeys. True hero-worship, like all the noble acts of which man is capable in Carlyle's philosophy, stems from the ability to distinguish 'eternal Substance' from 'temporary Semblances' (x, 13), 'Nature's Fact' from 'inane Chimera' (x, 29). The England of *Past and Present* and *Latter-Day Pamphlets* is enslaved by semblances and chimeras. It worships Bobus Higgins, Sir Jabesh Windbag, the Joe-Manton Aristocracy, and Hudson, the Railway King who swindled his investors; its most fitting emblems are the amphibious Pope and the seven-foot perambulating hat. To adopt Carlyle's customary language, the early Victorians mistook play-acting for sincerity and counterfeit coins for real ones; in their search for heroes they bewildered themselves with statues to false idols.

Carlyle's pungent attacks on these signs of the times, probably the most consistently vital aspect of his writing, are tempered by the belief that they abuse an instinct which could still become healthy again. He treats modern misdirected hero-worship with the same ultimate sympathy he shows to the modern misdirected work of his Captains of Industry. 'One monster there is in the world', he wrote in *Past and Present*, 'the idle man' (x, 202), but he might have added another monster to his list: the man incapable of reverence. It is better to worship false heroes than to give up the search for heroes altogether, as modern democracy might eventually have us do. So he extends a tolerance to the savage idolater that he withholds from the civilized cynic: 'The rudest Heathen that worshipped Canopus, or the Caabah Black-Stone, he . . . was superior to the horse that worshipped nothing at all!' (v, 121).

Thackeray can be tolerant in the same way and for the same reason. In *Pendennis*, after drawing an entirely Carlylean comparison between the Major's worship of high society and the idolatry of primitive tribes, he turns

⁴ All quotations from Carlyle are taken from the Centenary Edition of his *Works*, edited by H. D. Traill, 30 vols (London, 1896–99). Parenthetical references are to volume and page numbers.

on the reader with a characteristic warning: 'You who can smash the idols, do so with a good courage; but do not be too fierce with the idolaters, — they worship the best thing they know' (xii, 579).⁵ Along with this Carlylean tolerance towards idolatry he found, like Carlyle, rich opportunity for satirizing its contemporary manifestations.

Though apparently devoid of heroes, Thackeray's novels are everywhere alive with misdirected hero-worship. The social order whose intricate absurdities he delights to explore is held together by the false imitation of false heroes. At the bottom of the social scale is the servant aping his master. Thackeray's first popular success, the Yellowplush *Memoirs*, exploits this simple, mildly snobbish joke to the full and he never tired of elaborating it in his mature fiction. For their part, the middle classes imitate the aristocracy. The *Parish Sketch-Book*, again an early work that blazes a crude trail for Thackeray's later more subtle observations, describes Pogson, a travelling salesman with aspirations to being a fashionable gambler and a beau, and adds this apostrophe: 'O ye Barons and Baronesses of England! if ye knew what a number of small commoners are daily occupied in studying your lives, and imitating your aristocratic ways, how careful would ye be of your morals, manners and conversation!' (ii, 27). When we finally encounter the barons and baronesses themselves, or at least their near relatives, we find that they are copying some distant historical figure. In *Henry Esmond* Frank Castlewood proudly exaggerates his resemblance to the Old Pretender, while Major Pendennis, after meeting the Duke of Wellington in St James's Street, 'began to imitate him unconsciously, . . . speaking with curt sentences, after the manner of the great man' (xii, 462). Inevitably the spectacle tempts Thackeray into a lengthy aside about people who thought they looked like George IV, Canning, or Byron, and about 'poor Tom Bickerstaff' whose fancied resemblance to Shakespeare led him to shave his forehead, write bad tragedies, and die insane. 'These or similar freaks of vanity', he concludes, 'most people who have frequented the world must have seen in their experience' (xii, 462).

Idolatry is not just confined to the formal relationships that make up society; it invades love and the family as well. Thackeray, whose grasp of female psychology is often acute enough to discomfort even himself, readily sees that women, with their restricted sphere of power, their sense of their own weakness, and their dependence on men, are natural candidates for the role of passive hero-worshipper. When they are not manipulative flirts like Becky Sharp or Beatrix Esmond, his female characters are usually star-struck admirers of their unworthy lovers, husbands, or sons. 'Tis strange what a man may do, and a woman yet think him an angel' (xiii, 77), he exclaims with guilty wonder in *Henry Esmond*. Amelia's hero-worship of

⁵ All quotations from Thackeray are taken from *The Oxford Thackeray*, edited by George Saintsbury, 17 vols (London, 1909). Parenthetical references are to volume and page numbers.

George Osborne in *Vanity Fair* provides an obvious and particularly damaging example. Inspired largely by George's whiskers, military uniform, and engaging manners as glimpsed across a drawing-room on formal occasions, her admiration survives first his brutally careless treatment of her and then the long years of her widowhood, until it is finally cured by Becky Sharp, a woman singularly well equipped to strip other people of their delusions. Mrs Pendennis regards her son with the same 'unfortunate superstition and idol-worship' (xii, 19), stubbornly ignoring his faults and exaggerating his virtues. For both worshipper and worshipped the result is disastrous:

What had made Pen at home such a dandy and a despot? The women had spoiled him, as we like them and they like to do. They had cloyed him with obedience, and surfeited him with sweet respect and submission, until he grew weary of the slaves who waited upon him, and their caresses and cajoleries excited him no more. (xii, 677)

One could not ask for a more succinct account of how false hero-worship demeans the admirer and corrupts the supposed hero, nor could one ask for an account with which Carlyle would have been in a fuller agreement. His own label for the phenomenon is, of course, 'Flunkeyism': 'We have got out of the Ages of Heroism', he laments in *Past and Present*, 'deep into the Ages of Flunkeyism' (x, 255). Although Thackeray is familiar with the term and adopts it himself on occasion, he prefers the word 'snob'.⁶ The snob, as he defines it near the beginning of his book devoted to the type, is '*He who meanly admires mean things*' (ix, 269).

III

As satirists of their own age and country Carlyle and Thackeray are in essential agreement: people need heroes but the need continually betrays nineteenth-century man into absurd mistakes. Carlyle's age of Flunkeyism is Thackeray's age of Snobbery. Yet neither writer is content just to be a destructive satirist; each feels impelled to offer some alternative to the values he has just demolished. What, then, do their alternatives have in common?

The customary answer to this question is: very little, if anything. Carlyle, it is commonly assumed, merely advocates the strong authoritarian leader and hero, and proceeds to trace his lineage in an unpleasant historical roster from Odin to Mahomet to Abbot Samson to Cromwell to Frederick the Great.⁷ Thackeray, it is again assumed, merely retreats from his perception that people need heroes into the humble virtues of domestic life, that

⁶ For Thackeray's use of the term 'flunkey' in its Carlylean sense, see, for example, this thoroughly Carlylean sentence from the *Book of Snobs*: 'If Gorgius *must* have a statue in the new Palace which the Brentford nation is building, it ought to be set up in the Flunkeys' Hall' (ix, 270).

⁷ I should mention here Philip Rosenberg's spirited protest against the conventional view of Carlyle in *The Seventh Hero: Thomas Carlyle and the Theory of Radical Activism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974).

customary refuge of disillusioned men. He becomes the embodiment of that tendency in modern democracy which Carlyle had denounced in *Past and Present*, 'despair of finding any Heroes to govern you, and contented putting-up with the want of them' (x, 215).

Both answers neglect the flexibility — indeed, the vacillation — of Carlyle's and Thackeray's attitude to heroism. Taken together, they amount to a serious misrepresentation of the intellectual bonds that link the two men. I would propose in their stead that Carlyle is often forced reluctantly to modify his original concept of the hero as strong public leader and that Thackeray, accepting the modification without any reluctance, goes on to modify it yet further. This process, whereby the hero is progressively diminished to fit the requirements of Victorian culture, can best be traced by looking first at *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History and Past and Present*, where Carlyle wrestles most energetically with the problem of heroism, and then at the *Lectures on the English Humourists*, where Thackeray is most sharply conscious of his older contemporary's example.

Carlyle's lectures on heroism begin as an elaboration of a crucial passage in *Sartor Resartus*:

For great Men I have ever had the warmest predilection; and can perhaps boast that few such in this era have wholly escaped me. Great Men are the inspired (speaking and acting) Texts of that divine BOOK OF REVELATIONS, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some named HISTORY; to which inspired Texts your numerous talented men, and your innumerable untalented men, are the better or worse exegetic Commentaries, and wagon-load of too-stupid, heretical or orthodox, weekly Sermons. For my study, the inspired Texts themselves! (I, 142).

Heroes and Hero-Worship sets out to study the inspired texts. Its subjects, according to the opening lecture of the series, are 'the leaders of men': 'the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain' (v, 1). The hero, then, is an exceptional man, so different in degree from the rest of us that he seems almost different in type. His distinction is expressed in public leadership, whether in religion, literature, or politics. He leaves behind him a permanent mark on history and a permanent claim on public memory.

Having defined heroism in these terms, Carlyle proceeds to show the personal characteristics of the hero.⁸ None of his great men wears the robes of the *grand monarque*: they are usually men of humble origins (he takes particular pleasure in the peasant ancestry of Luther and Burns) and, when they have achieved eminence, they still remain simple and austere. They are combative, for they know that life is an earnest battle, and silent, for Carlyle firmly aligns himself with the Protestant tradition that associates rhetorical fluency with hypocrisy and impracticality. Luther's inarticulacy and

⁸ Compare my list of the hero's attributes with the one offered by David J. DeLaura, 'Ishmael as Prophet: *Heroes and Hero-Worship* and the Self-Expressive Basis of Carlyle's Art', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, II (Spring 1969), 705–32 (pp. 719–20).

Cromwell's incoherence are treated not as faults but as signs that they have the root of the matter in them. Above all, the hero is sincere. 'Sincerity' is, of course, a complex and central word in Carlyle's lexicon, but when he applies it to heroes he is thinking mainly of the ability to distinguish the phantasmal from the real and so to apply oneself earnestly to the real task at hand.⁹

At the same time Carlyle is ready to acknowledge superficial dissimilarities between his heroes, for they did not exist in a void. They lived in different places, times, and conditions. The realization that history moves and so in some way changes men is built into the structure of the series, with its chronological sequence (broken only by the last lecture) and its division into 'The Hero as Divinity', 'The Hero as Prophet', 'The Hero as Poet', 'The Hero as Priest', and so forth.¹⁰ These, Carlyle's lecture-titles imply, are the successive manifestations of an ideal that remains essentially the same. When complete, *Heroes and Hero-Worship* will be at once ahistorical and historical, presenting both a changeless ideal and a genealogy.

Such at least is Carlyle's obvious intention, but by admitting history into his discussion of heroism he creates unforeseen problems with which he skirmishes in an unhappy and increasingly urgent manner. By the end of the series the connexions between, say, Odin and Rousseau or Mahomet and Robert Burns are tenuous at best, even by his own confession. History refuses to be a series of costume-changes worn by the same hero and, to his credit, Carlyle does not attempt to persist in such a simplification for long. The hero himself changes in fundamental ways as the times change.

Only Odin and Mahomet accord at all satisfactorily to his original definition of heroism. As Carlyle's argument approaches the nineteenth century, the hero is shorn of the qualities of leadership and achievement that had initially been pronounced essential. The process begins with the account of Dante in the third lecture, 'The Hero as Poet'. Dante, clearly, was not a public leader in his own time nor were his achievements recognized by contemporaries; the argument for his heroism, according to Carlyle's earlier definition, would have to be based on his posthumous influence. But, doubting that such a case could honestly be made, Carlyle suddenly separates heroism from tangible leadership or achievement:

It is not by what is called their effect on the world, by what *we* can judge of their effect there, that a man and his work are measured. Effect? Influence? Utility? Let a man *do* his work; the fruit of it is the care of Another than he. It will grow its own fruit; and whether embodied in Caliph Thrones and Arabian Conquests, so that it 'fills all Morning and Evening Newspapers', and all Histories, which are a kind of distilled Newspapers; or not embodied so at all; — what matters that? That is not the real fruit of it! The Arabian Caliph, in so far only as he did something, was something. (v, 100)

⁹ See Patricia M. Ball, 'Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term', *MLR*, 59 (January 1964), 1–11, for a useful account of Carlyle's use of 'sincerity' and its place in the development of the concept from Romantic to modern thought.

¹⁰ Robert W. Kusch, 'Pattern and Paradox in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 6 (January 1969), 146–55, comments: 'Each lecture may be read as a chapter in the history of man's mind' (p. 150).

Particularly in its context, this is a startling and startled passage. Carlyle's sudden association of heroic achievement with 'Utility', the hated Benthamite term he always delighted in ridiculing, smacks of uneasy evasion.

The underlying problem cannot be evaded. Dante's sincerity makes him a hero, albeit a hero who led nobody and whose achievement was private. His immediate successors Luther and Knox are both leaders but leaders only in a restricted way, for the priest is 'the enlightener of Daily life' (v, 115) rather than of the larger realms an earlier figure like Mahomet had illumined. By the time Carlyle arrives at the eighteenth century and the hero as man of letters the notion of achievement, even in limited or private forms, has been abandoned altogether. Rousseau, Dr Johnson, and Burns, he announces sadly, 'were not heroic bringers of the light, but heroic seekers of it. . . . It is rather the *Tombs* of three Literary Heroes that I have to show you. There are the monumental heaps, under which three spiritual giants lie buried. Very mournful, but also great and full of interest for us' (v, 158). Heroism is now merely a matter of sincere effort.

Of course, it is the age that is to blame. No longer pliant wax to be moulded into its proper shape by the hero, the spirit of the times has become a confining force: it can restrict, thwart, and flaw the Hero-Soul. So Carlyle obligingly rages at eighteenth-century scepticism, democratic thought, and the sorry conditions in which men of letters have to labour. His anger extends into the final lecture, 'The Hero as King', where he breaks with chronological sequence, reaches back into history, and offers Cromwell and Napoleon to his audience in a spirit of simultaneous rebuke and prophecy. Just because modern life is so very bad, his argument implicitly runs, our need for such men is all the greater. Yet even here history's movement frustrates him: although he is willing to defend Cromwell against all his many detractors, he has to admit that Napoleon, the more recent Hero-King, was a flawed and even insincere man.

Invocation of the Hero-King, however, is not Carlyle's only response to the diminution of heroism in modern times. His lecture on 'The Hero as Man of Letters' begins by excluding Goethe, even though he freely admits that the German author comes far closer to his original definition of the hero than the three men he does discuss. The explanation that Goethe would still remain 'problematic, vague' (v, 158) to his audience even if he were treated at length is hardly convincing, for Carlyle had not earlier hesitated to talk about alien figures like Odin or Mahomet and he did not usually refuse an opportunity to praise Goethe.¹¹ We are left with the impression that Carlyle, who elsewhere clings so desperately to his original conception of the hero and

¹¹ Between 1828 and 1832 Carlyle wrote five essays on Goethe, all reprinted in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*. DeLaura sees the brief reference to Goethe in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* as 'guardedly optimistic' (p. 705), while Kusch finds Carlyle's refusal to enter into substantial discussion mysterious (p. 155).

proclaims its relevance to the modern world so aggressively, now chooses to put it aside and talk about lesser men.

While one part of Carlyle deplores the diminution of the hero, another part accepts it in a cautious and pragmatic way. Because of his small stature a modern hero like Dr Johnson or Burns is more accessible than his earlier counterparts, and so he can provide a more useful model for both Carlyle and his contemporary audience. Such a consideration would have weighed heavily with a writer who saw himself neither as academic historian nor as abstract theorist but as a moralist with immediate responsibilities to his own needs and the needs of his individual listeners. 'To reform a world, to reform a nation, no wise man will undertake', he had written at the end of 'Signs of the Times' a decade earlier, 'and all but foolish men know that the only solid, though a far slower reformation, is what each begins and perfects on *himself*' (xxvii, 82).

Dr Johnson or Burns can aid this 'far slower reformation' of the individual life in ways that primordial figures like Odin or the Hero-King cannot. Carlyle's older heroes are at best remotely awe-inspiring rather than directly invigorating, and their remoteness can even make them depressing. By contrast, the spectacle of Dante's lonely dedication to his art or Burns's struggle with poverty and the various weaknesses of his make-up has an immediate bearing on the average man's life. It teaches the need for sincerity, resilience, and dedication to the small tasks within our reach. The very proximity of the idol to the worshipper makes this form of hero-worship directly participatory, and so opens up to Carlyle the vision of 'a whole World of Heroes': 'If Hero mean *sincere man*, why may not every one of us be a Hero?' (v, 127).

Where the lecture-series undertakes a broad-ranging examination of heroes, *Past and Present* concentrates on the example of just one man: Samson, the Abbot of Bury St Edmunds in the late twelfth century. He obviously accords to the heroic ideal described at the beginning of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. Samson is a man of humble origins and rugged homespun ways; his manner is earnest, austere, and silent. His faith runs deep but manifests itself in hard work rather than pious show: he is a practical man who willingly applies himself to 'the ways of business' (x, 88). Above all, of course, he is a natural leader and governor. Because he is capable of obedience and worship (his crowning act is to restore St Edmund's tomb), Samson can himself inspire these emotions in others.

In the earlier lectures it was the Hero-King whom Carlyle offered as his ideal specimen of the 'Commander over Men' (v, 196). The portrait of Samson often reads like an expanded version of the praise to Cromwell and Napoleon with which *Heroes and Hero-Worship* concluded. Carlyle again reaches back into history for a Commander over Men whom he can present to his modern audience in a spirit of rebuke and prophecy. We must, Carlyle continuously urges, return to the values of medieval culture and hope for the

reappearance of leaders like Samson if we are to survive. The Abbot is his once and future king.

Yet this is only one aspect of *Past and Present* and of Samson's role in it. Just as the concept of the Hero-King was not Carlyle's only response to the problem of modern heroism in the earlier work, so here we find that Samson is not only or entirely a Hero-King. When we look closely at Carlyle's Abbot we can also find a strong resemblance to the lesser sort of hero Carlyle had discovered in his lecture on the eighteenth century. The resemblance, in fact, is implicit in his choice of Samson in the first place. If Carlyle had been concerned only to offer an example of right leadership we would have expected him to deal with a major historical figure. Cromwell would have been the natural choice, for Carlyle had already used him in this way in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* and was researching his biography at the time he wrote *Past and Present*. But he sets Cromwell aside, making only a handful of passing references to him, and concentrates instead on a medieval monk whose very name was unfamiliar to his readers. Samson is an obscure hero, lost in the mists of time, and Carlyle continually reminds us that it takes all the power of the historical imagination to recover even a glimpse of him.

Even then, Samson still cuts a rather small figure. He is not a major leader whom the history books have unaccountably ignored but the Abbot of a small monastery in East Anglia. His business is with thatching roofs and collecting rents and disciplining only a small number of souls under his care. Carlyle stresses rather than denies the humble nature of these tasks and, in the final passage where the mists of time again descend on Samson, he presents the Abbot on a succession of ordinary, forgotten errands. The results of Samson's endeavours, moreover, are far from permanent. The monastery he worked so hard to preserve and improve has long since receded into grass and ruin. No other book by Carlyle is as preoccupied with time's power to efface and destroy man's achievement as *Past and Present*. Men like Samson labour sincerely for a while, and then they and the fruits of their labour are gone forever: 'not the spoil of victory, only the glorious toil of battle can be theirs' (x, 99).

Viewed in this light Samson seems less an example for the public life of the nation than an inspirational model of how Carlyle and his readers should conduct their daily lives during a difficult historical period. Medieval society is not ideal by any means: it has its Chartists, idlers, dandies, and dishonest men, just like the England of the 1840s. Powerless to affect national events, let alone to leave his imprint on history, Samson applies himself to the small tasks at hand, however humble or apparently trivial they may be. He works so that he should not despair and his example strengthens his admirer Carlyle in the determination to follow suit. 'Work?', Carlyle asks rhetorically: 'The quantity of done and forgotten work that lies silently under my feet in this world . . . escorts me and attends me and keeps me alive, wheresoever I work or stand, whatsoever I think or do' (x, 133). The small

private acts of heroism lying silently under Carlyle's feet may leave enough questions of public and historical destiny unanswered to be less than completely satisfying but, as passages like this bear witness, they also offer a spiritual support that he can cherish and recommend to his audience.

Thackeray lacks Carlyle's interest in the larger processes of history and the larger problems of government. When he praises public leaders he goes about it in a thoroughly unCarlylean way. The casual, vaguely democratic admiration he shows for George Washington in his essay on George IV, for example, has nothing in common with Carlyle's reverence for Odin and Mahomet or his earnest wrestling with the idea of the Hero-King. Yet Thackeray's indifference to such matters helps him apply himself more comfortably to the question of private heroism than his older contemporary ever could. The admirable characters in his novels (the patiently enduring Dobbin in *Vanity Fair*, for example) bear a general resemblance to the Dr Johnson of 'The Hero as Man of Letters' or the Abbot Samson of *Past and Present*. The resemblance, however, is only general: we do not feel the need to invoke Carlyle's name, or that Thackeray ever needed to invoke Carlyle's name, to explain the genesis of such characters. Thackeray's connexion with Carlyle and his awareness of the connexion become most apparent in his writings on the eighteenth century and, particularly, in his *Lectures on the English Humourists*.

At first reading, these lectures serve as a powerful reminder of the temperamental differences that distinguish the two writers. Where Carlyle's lecture manner is earnest and deliberately controversial, Thackeray's is casual and deliberately ingratiating. Where Carlyle bristles with hostility towards the eighteenth century, Thackeray is relaxed, appreciative, and restrained only by the fear that his audience would disapprove if he unbuttoned himself too much. Yet he is, after all, venturing into Carlyle's territory, for his 'humourists' are the 'men of letters' who provoked the most tense and anguished lecture in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, and so Carlyle's shadow inevitably falls across the page.

From the start the *Lectures on the English Humourists* conduct an implied dialogue with the older writer; they are an exercise by which Thackeray marks out the extent of his agreement and disagreement with Carlyle. When he accuses Sterne of insincerity or Swift of flunkeyism towards the public leaders of his time he is invoking central, powerfully-charged concepts in Carlyle's philosophy. When he backs nervously away from the lonely tortured greatness of Swift he is rejecting exactly the qualities that attract Carlyle. In fact, Thackeray's discussion of Swift either emerged from or provoked private argument with Carlyle. In the *Lectures* Thackeray poses a series of rhetorical questions: 'Would we have liked to live with him? That is a question which, in dealing with these people's works, and thinking of their lives and peculiarities, every reader of biographies must put to himself. Would you have liked to be a friend of the great Dean?' (xiii, 472-73).

George Venable later recorded: 'I think it was after a conversation between them on the character of Swift that I heard Carlyle say, "I wish I could persuade Thackeray that the test of greatness in a man is not whether he (Thackeray) would like to meet him at a tea-party!"'¹²

In the passage immediately following his questions about Swift, Thackeray's private colloquy with Carlyle becomes particularly instructive. Casting around for an example of a really great man to set beside the Dean, he settles, inevitably, on Shakespeare: 'I should like to have been Shakespeare's shoeblack — just to have lived in his house, just to have worshipped him — to have run on his errands, and seen that sweet serene face' (XIII, 473). This, obviously, has nothing informative to say about the nature of Shakespeare's greatness: bland genuflections to his memory were almost obligatory by this point in English history, and even Carlyle himself had fallen victim to such blandness in the third lecture of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. It is the form this blandness takes that is revealing. A moment before, Thackeray rejected Swift as a possible friend, but now he revels in the thought of being Shakespeare's servant.

Speculation about what great men seem like to their servants has a long intricate history in the literature of heroism, including Carlyle and Thackeray's own writings. Its origin, at least for the purposes of nineteenth-century thought, lies in Montaigne's essay 'Du Repentir', where he remarks: 'Peu d'hommes ont esté admirez par leur domestiques.' In the eighteenth century Montaigne's saying was organized into an aphorism by Madame Cornuel, as quoted in the letters of Mademoiselle Aissé: 'Il n'y avoit point de héros pour les valets de chambre.' By the nineteenth century the idea that no man was a hero to his valet had achieved proverbial status, though it was still often attributed to Montaigne, and attracted the disagreement of Hegel and Goethe: 'but not because the former is no hero, but because the latter is a valet'.¹³ Carlyle entered the debate in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* predictably on the side of Hegel and Goethe:

We will also take the liberty to deny altogether that of the witty Frenchman, that no man is a Hero to his valet-de-chambre. Or if so, it is not the Hero's blame, but the Valet's: that his soul, namely, is a mean *valet-soul*! He expects his Hero to advance in royal stage-trappings, with measured step, trains borne behind him, trumpets sounding before him. It should stand rather, No man can be a *Grand-Monarque* to his valet-de-chambre. Strip your Louis-Quatorze of his king-gear, and there *is* nothing but a poor, forked radish with a head fantastically carved; — admirable to no valet. The Valet does not know a Hero when he sees him! Alas, no, it requires a kind of *Hero* to do that; — and one of the world's wants, in *this* as in other senses, is for the most part want of such. (v, 183–84)

¹² Quoted by Sanders, p. 245.

¹³ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, edited by Jean Plattard, 3 vols (Paris, 1946), III, 34; *Lettres de Mademoiselle Aissé à Madame Calandrini*, edited by M. J. Ravenel, fifth edition (Paris, 1846), p. 161; Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree (New York, 1956), p. 32. I am indebted to Rosenberg, p. 228, n. 49, for drawing Hegel and Goethe's opinion to my attention.

Clearly, Carlyle's 'valet' is a close relative of his 'flunkey', for both types of men associate heroism with tinsel and glitter, and lack the spiritual capacity to recognize true heroism when they encounter it. As a rebuke to these mean valet-souls Carlyle had already told in *Sartor Resartus* how Teufelsdröckh disguised himself as a tavern waiter to get the chance of serving Schiller and Goethe.

Thackeray knew the French aphorism well. It is one of his favourite pieces of worldly wisdom, turning up in *Pendennis* (xii, 457), *Henry Esmond* (xiii, 4), and the *Four Georges*, where he warns the reader: 'We are not the Historic Muse, but her ladyship's attendant, tale-bearer — valet de chambre — for whom no man is a hero' (xiii, 722). He had, moreover, particular reason to remember the passage I have quoted from *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, since Carlyle's image of Louis XIV stripped of his state clothes appears in his own cartoon from the *Paris Sketch-Book*, 'Meditations at Versailles', which shows the king in various stages of undress.¹⁴ It reappears in *Henry Esmond* (xiii, 13–14) and the *Four Georges*, where George IV is revealed to be 'nothing' (xiii, 783) beneath his splendid tailoring.

Thackeray's exposure of the poor forked radish underneath royal robes agrees with Carlyle's denunciation of Sham-Heroes, but his approving references to the French aphorism are a different matter. They identify him as just the sort of 'mean valet-soul' Carlyle had scorned in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. Thackeray goes beyond suggesting that closeness to the false hero exposes his falsity and suggests that no hero can survive close inspection. There are really no heroes at all, but only men who look like heroes when seen from a distance or through ignorant eyes. 'I have seen great men in my time', he confides in the *Lectures on the English Humourists*, 'but never such a great one as that head-boy of my childhood: we all thought he must be Prime Minister, and I was disappointed on meeting him in after-life to find that he was no more than six feet high' (xiii, 551). The writer who offers a heroic ideal to his audience, if he is not a fool, is a deliberate hypocrite. In *Henry Esmond* Thackeray uses Addison's explanation of his heroic ode on the Duke of Marlborough to make the point:

'We must paint our great Duke', Mr. Addison went on, 'not as a man, which no doubt he is, with weaknesses like the rest of us, but as a hero. . . . We College poets trot, you know, on very easy nags; it hath been, time out of mind, part of the poet's profession to celebrate the actions of heroes in verse, and to sing the deeds which you men of war perform. I must follow the rules of my art, and the composition of such a strain as this must be harmonious and majestic, not familiar, or too near the vulgar truth'. (xiii, 255)

¹⁴ I have not been able to discover whether Carlyle's or Thackeray's reference to Louis XIV came first. Carlyle's lecture on 'The Hero as Man of Letters', where the passage appears, was given on 19 May 1840, while Thackeray's *Paris Sketch-Book* was published in June of that year. Carlyle, however, often departed from his prepared text in giving the lectures and he revised the text considerably for publication.

Thackeray loved to grumble about the conspiracy to write history on fig leaves (as he describes it in 'The Second Funeral of Napoleon') and about the prudish delicacy that made his audience horrified to see the vulgar truth revealed. Scorning such hypocrisy, he gives in *Henry Esmond* a consistently unflattering portrait of Marlborough.

This, of course, is the cynical Thackeray with whom all his readers are familiar. Yet it is not the Thackeray who, reversing his usual attitude to the French aphorism about heroes and valets, dreams of being Shakespeare's shoeblack in the belief that such proximity could only enhance the great man's greatness.¹⁵ Here, surprisingly, is a real hero who stands up to close inspection and here is the usually cynical Thackeray yearning ecstatically to be his humble servant. As I said earlier, his praise of Shakespeare is too brief and too bland to yield any clue to the characteristics of the real hero, but when Thackeray applies the dream of being a great man's intimate to Henry Fielding the result is more revealing:

I should like, as a young man, to have lived on Fielding's staircase in the Temple, and after helping him to bed perhaps, and opening his door with his latch-key, to have shaken hands with him in the morning, and heard him talk and crack jokes over his breakfast and his mug of small beer. (xiii, 473)

The description gives a clearer picture of what the hero may be like in his unguarded moments, and in Thackeray's shift of role from shoeblack to younger intimate it says more about the proper relations between the hero and his worshipper. The nature of Fielding's greatness is later amplified in a passage which, significantly, uses the familiar Thackerayan image of removing formal clothes but to unexpected effect. 'I cannot hope to make a hero of Harry Fielding', he warns, glancing nervously at Carlyle's customary use of the word, and then goes on to portray a heroism with which he feels altogether more comfortable:

Why not show him, like as he is, not robed in a marble toga, and draped and polished in a heroic attitude, but with inked ruffles, and claret stains on his tarnished lace coat, and on his manly face the marks of good fellowship, of illness, of kindness, of care, and wine. Stained, as you see him, and worn by care and dissipation, that man retains some of the most precious and splendid human qualities and endowments. (xiii, 646)

Fielding remains a hero even to his intimates, and is more splendid in his workaday clothes than in the formal garments which heroic art would dress him in.

Although there is no record of Carlyle's reaction to this view of Fielding, one suspects that he would have approved it little more than he did

¹⁵ This is not the only occasion when Thackeray suggests that the valet's cynicism about his master is misplaced. Praising Carlyle's *French Revolution*, he contrasted it favourably with Thiers's history: 'Thiers is the *valet-de-chambre* of this history, he is too familiar with its dishabille and off-scornings: it can never be a hero to him' (quoted by Sanders, p. 230).

Thackeray's view of Swift. It smacks strongly of the casual bonhomie and sentimental forgiveness of error that make up a large part of Thackeray's temperament but have no place in Carlyle's. In praising Fielding, moreover, Thackeray studiously avoids words like 'hero' and 'heroism' and contents himself with the more modest 'man' and 'manly'. Yet for all these differences his description of Fielding seems a natural development of the ideal towards which Carlyle had been moving in his consideration of Dr Johnson, Burns, and Abbot Samson. Like these men, Thackeray's Fielding belongs entirely to a private world remote from history's large events. Like them, too, he is glimpsed in humble familiar poses, surrounded by the evidence of his domestic routines and private worries. In the form of inked ruffles he bears about him the marks of honest inglorious work. He strikes us, above all, as a great spirit struggling against adversity: a sincere, generous man engaged in battles with ill-fortune and his own weaknesses.

The effect of the hero on the worshipper is much the same as in Carlyle's work. The hero's very immersion in the problems everybody must encounter makes him a familiar and approachable figure to his admirer. Thackeray, who ventured to imagine being only Shakespeare's servant, aspires to the role of Fielding's younger friend. Proximity increases the value of the hero's example: he can become a practical inspiration in the handling of daily problems. From the imagined spectacle of Fielding's flawed but very human greatness Thackeray derives his own version of the consolation and encouragement that Carlyle found in the memory of the 'done and forgotten work' of men like Abbot Samson.

We do not have to look very far in the *Lectures on the English Humourists* to find other instances of the same type of hero and the same type of hero-worship. The fantasy of being Shakespeare's servant or Fielding's junior comrade is given concrete historical embodiment in the lives of Addison and Steele. Addison inspires fervent admiration in his junior: Steele, Thackeray assures us, 'ran on Addison's messages: fagged for him and blacked his shoes: to be in Joe's company was Dick's greatest pleasure' (xiii, 551). Addison, a flawed but still noble soul, can thus become a steadying educative influence on the errant Steele. The process of easy admiring friendship extends to include Thackeray himself: Addison is Steele's hero and Steele in turn becomes Thackeray's hero. The continuing chain of heroes and worshippers recalls *Past and Present*, where St Edmund is Samson's hero and Samson becomes Carlyle's.

It appears, too, in an elaborated form in *Henry Esmond*, where Addison is again Steele's hero, Steele is Esmond's hero, and Esmond himself is implicitly Thackeray and the reader's hero. But the most revealing connexion between the *Lectures on the English Humourists* and Thackeray's fiction is suggested by his choice of Fielding for special reverence. Himself a flawed but admirable hero, Fielding was a novelist who created in Tom Jones a flawed but admirable fictional hero. Thackeray identified closely

with his example and strove to imitate it. The famous preface to *Pendennis* is especially pertinent: 'Since the author of *Tom Jones* was buried, no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN. We must drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art' (xii, xxxvi). Thackeray is making his familiar protest against fig leaves in the name of Nature, but not as an incorrigible cynic who wants to strip away the heroic drapery and expose the sordid reality underneath. He makes it in the belief that conventional heroic drapery obscures a humbler, everyday form of heroism which, if properly portrayed, would provide a far sounder example to his readers.

IV

I have so far concentrated rigorously on Carlyle and Thackeray because their approach to heroism is complex enough to deserve attention in its own right, but the preface to *Pendennis*, so richly central to the Victorian discussion of fiction, is a potent reminder of the wider implications of my subject. By their discovery of real heroism amid the small unheroic acts of everyday life Carlyle and Thackeray created rich opportunities for the realistic novelist. Despite the frustrations that Thackeray voices in his preface to *Pendennis* — despite, indeed, the rather disappointing showing of the novel itself — there were other writers who could profit from their legacy.

Middlemarch, to take an obvious example, begins by comparing Dorothea Brooke with St Theresa, a grand heroine in the traditional mould, in a way that makes us acutely aware of Dorothea's personal weaknesses and the limitations imposed by her circumstances. Yet we come to recognize in her a heroism as valid as St Theresa's and more immediately relevant to our own lives. George Eliot ends with a moving epitaph that takes its place in a line of descent from Carlyle's praise of Samson's glorious toil and its attendant vision of a whole world of heroes:

Her finely-touched spirit still had its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.¹⁶

Hardy, not a man whose name we usually associate with either Carlyle or Thackeray, can show the same debt, indirect but profound, to their example. Tess Durbeyfield, like Dorothea Brooke, is compared to noble ancestors and

¹⁶ *The Works of George Eliot*, Cabinet Edition, 20 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1878–80), *Middlemarch*, III, 465.

shown to be more noble than they ever were. Hardy discovers, and so leads his readers to discover, true heroism amid the sad details of an imperfect life. And in the portrait of Angel Clare he provides a damning critique of the error that had previously been made by Carlyle's valet souls and the prudes who shrank from the sight of Thackeray's Fielding without his marble toga: 'In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was, and forgot that the defective can be more than the entire.'¹⁷

¹⁷ *The Works of Thomas Hardy in Verse and Prose*, Wessex Edition, 24 vols (London, 1912-31), 1, 338.