

CARLYLE AND THE CLIMATE OF HERO-WORSHIP

ROBERT A. DONOVAN

On six afternoons in May 1840 the fashionable and literary world of London descended on No. 17 Edward Street, Portman Square, to hear Thomas Carlyle deliver a series of lectures 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in Human History' (so the relentlessly aspirated title of the *Times* notices; the word 'Human' was dropped in the published title). Lady Byron, that eminent bluestocking who, in the words of her late husband, 'looked a lecture,' came and took notes. Mill and Macready came, and the author of *Sordello*, not to mention Edward Fitzgerald, Mrs Gaskell, Frederick Denison Maurice, and such notable dignitaries as Dr Whewell and Samuel Wilberforce. Except possibly for Mill, who protested aloud Carlyle's preference for Mahomet's teaching over 'Benthamee Utility,' the audience was enchanted. Macready, perhaps judging the performance by theatrical standards, professed himself 'charmed, carried away.' Nearly forty years afterward Fitzgerald retained a vivid memory of Carlyle weaving his spell: 'He looked very handsome then, with his black hair, fine Eyes, and a sort of crucified Expression.'¹

The message which emerged from Carlyle's turbulent rhetoric was plain: Worship Great Men. The Great Man, or Hero is 'a messenger ... sent from the Infinite Unknown with tidings to us. ... We must listen before all to him.'² He may appear in various guises at different stages of human history. Primitive man took him for a god; more enlightened man saw him as a prophet or a priest; modern man respects him as poet or man of letters, or more pragmatically still, reveres him as the authentic voice of a temporally conceived authority and calls him king. But 'at bottom the Great Man, as he comes from the hand of Nature, is ever the same kind of thing: Odin, Luther, Johnson, Burns; I hope to make it appear that these are all originally of one stuff; that only by the world's reception of them, and the shapes they assume, are they so immeasurably diverse' (v, 43).

Commentators have been puzzled by Carlyle's choice of heroes, and they have noticed the absence of several types – the scientist, the philosopher, the speculative thinker generally, and even the politician, though given Carlyle's idea of what constitutes heroism, this last deficiency cannot

really be seriously urged.³ Carlyle's previous literary preoccupations had no doubt had something to do with the specific choices of subjects. He had written of Burns in the *Edinburgh Review*, of Johnson in *Fraser's*, of Rousseau and Napoleon, however briefly, in *The French Revolution*. Dante, Shakespeare, Luther, Knox, and Cromwell had all figured more or less prominently in earlier lecture series. Finally, Carlyle still nourished a long-held dream of doing a life of Cromwell; long before the 1840 lectures were planned he wrote to his brother that he was reading 'a great many books, in a languid way, about Cromwell and his time.'⁴ Even so the choice of heroes is often curious, sometimes perverse.

Why, for example, offer Rousseau as a type of the hero? Carlyle cannot really conceal his distaste for Rousseau, 'a morbid, excitable, spasmodic man; at best, intense rather than strong' (v, 184). Carlyle finds even Rousseau's appearance repellent: 'A face full of misery, even ignoble misery, and also of the antagonism against that; something mean, plebeian there, redeemed only by *intensity*: the face of what is called a Fanatic, – a sadly *contracted* Hero!' (v, 185). Of course Carlyle is quick to add that it is Rousseau's sincerity, his earnestness, which entitles him to be named in the present context, but he goes on to condemn the sensuality of Rousseau's literary style, and his 'semi-delirious speculations on the miseries of civilised life, the preferability of the savage to the civilised, and suchlike,' and he cannot wait to dismiss him: 'Enough now of Rousseau' (v, 188).

A more obvious and reasonable choice would seem to be Napoleon, with whom Carlyle closes the lecture series, but the treatment of Napoleon quickly raises doubts. For one thing, the space given to Cromwell is five times that given to Napoleon, and Carlyle does not mince matters when it comes to expressing his own relative valuation: 'Napoleon does by no means seem to me so great a man as Cromwell,' and he dismisses Napoleon's record of military victories as unimportant; his battles are but 'the high *stilts* on which the man is seen standing; the stature of the man is not altered thereby' (v, 237). Napoleon was, it is true, in harmony with the great movement of his time, but Carlyle's respect for him is not high, for Napoleon lacks the intense sincerity of Cromwell; the element of charlatan or quack in him is too strong. Of Napoleon's sense of personal dignity and of his dynastic ambitions Carlyle is properly scornful: 'He did not know true from false now when he looked at them, – the fearfullest penalty a man pays for yielding to untruth of heart. *Self* and false ambition had now become his god: *self*-deception once yielded to, *all* other deceptions follow naturally more and more. What a paltry patch-work of theatrical paper-mantles, tinsel and mummery, had this man wrapt his

own great reality in, thinking to make it more real thereby!' (v, 241). The one quality which Carlyle has insisted on over and over again in the lectures, the pre-eminent and distinguishing attribute of the hero, is sincerity, and yet sincerity is the one quality which Napoleon conspicuously lacks. It is strange that the lectures should culminate here, with a 'tinsel and mummery' hero.

Of Carlyle's eleven heroes, I think it would be true to say that only two, Luther and Cromwell, receive his whole-hearted and unqualified approval, and further, that only three (for I would here want to include Dante) illustrate clearly and incisively Carlyle's idea of heroism. It seems to me pertinent to inquire of the rest why they were included at all, when we know that Carlyle's own private pantheon teems with men whose claims seem higher, often a good deal higher, even allowing for the special demands of the categories of the lectures: divinity, prophet, poet, priest, man of letters, king. Why Odin, instead of Christ? Why Mahomet, instead of Moses or Isaiah or Paul? Why Dante and Shakespeare, instead of Homer and Aeschylus? Why Knox, instead of Calvin or Wesley? Why Johnson, Rousseau, and Burns, instead of Fichte, Voltaire, and Goethe? Why Napoleon, instead of William the Conqueror, or Frederick the Great, or even Mirabeau? Indeed Carlyle seems occasionally uneasy about the choice he has made and offers some explanation; in the fifth lecture, for example, he is aware of Goethe's claims to attention, but turns aside, saying, 'Such is the general state of knowledge about Goethe, it were worse than useless to attempt speaking of him in this case. Speak as I might, Goethe, to the great majority of you, would remain problematic, vague; no impression but a false one could be realised' (v, 158). In spite of this assurance, however, one wonders what the mystery is, what the obstacles to understanding are.

On Heroes and Hero-Worship has generally been rated low among Carlyle's works. Eric Bentley calls it 'one of his least convincing works,' a judgment with which Albert LaValley concurs.⁵ Carlyle himself appears to have had serious doubts about the book: 'Nothing which I have ever written pleases me so ill.'⁶ The trouble is not only the confusion and inconsistency which most critics have noted, but more specifically a failure to make clear the real nature and tendency of the book. It has been read sometimes as a work of history, sometimes as a work of philosophy, most often, perhaps, as both, that is as a book which seeks to establish a metaphysical basis for a particular theory of history. Carlyle's own view seems to be that the lectures constitute a kind of 'Universal History.' The history of the world he declares at the outset, 'is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here,' and to study them intensively pro-

vides a glimpse 'into the very marrow of the world's history' (v, 2). Eric Bentley finds that Carlyle's world view is indeed the historian's rather than the philosopher's and paraphrases his primary tenet bluntly: "The world cannot be understood by the old creeds and philosophies. It can be understood by intuition and history."⁷ In the most ambitious study yet undertaken, B.H. Lehman argues that the lectures have merit only as history, for when Carlyle's theory of the hero is given contemporary application it is 'unsafe and almost valueless. It is the tool of the biographer and historian, not of the social reformer.'⁸ The dangers of contemporary application form the main theme of H.J.C. Grierson and Ernst Cassirer, both of whom see Carlyle as providing ammunition for the apologists of fascism.⁹ Though the emphasis shifts here from history to the metaphysics which supplies a rationale for history, Hitler is seen as the extrapolated result of a historical process which begins with Odin and includes Martin Luther and Oliver Cromwell. Rather refreshingly, Albert LaValley takes precisely the opposite view, seeing Carlyle's theory of the hero as not at all sinister, not even potentially dangerous, but as the index of Carlyle's retreat from reality into a romanticized past. Paradoxically, this withdrawal from present realities is what, in LaValley's view, marks Carlyle as a modern.¹⁰

What is common to most of these views, whether they keep Carlyle's transcendental metaphysic or its practical, historical implications in the foreground, is the assumption that Carlyle conceives the hero as an historical force, what Sidney Hook would call an 'event-making man.'¹¹ Even LaValley's thesis, with its emphasis on Carlyle's retreat from reality, proceeds from the same assumption, for LaValley makes Carlyle's romanticism (what he prefers to call his alienation) neither deliberate nor conscious, in fact an exercise in self-deception.¹² Now the difficulty about this assumption is that it creates expectations which the work as a whole does not satisfy and in effect renders the question 'Why *these* heroes?' unanswerable, for if we are to take *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* as primarily an historical work, it is clear that Carlyle's view of the course of human history is wildly eccentric and altogether arbitrary. On the other hand, if we read the book as primarily a study of the nature of human greatness, the same unanswerable question obtrudes itself, for why would Carlyle choose a lesser man when a greater is ready to hand? Because the question I have posed seems to me unanswerable by either of the two most common interpretations, since, in fact, the question is raised in the first place by misreading the work as either history or metaphysics, I must explore another possibility.

What all the commentators neglect, and most of them ignore, is the

role played in Carlyle's theory by the hero-worshipper, that is by the ambience of ideas, opinions, and values within which the hero must function.¹⁸ It is at least conceivable that the historical character of the hero is to be found as truly in his passive as in his active role, as much in what he takes from his contemporaries as in what he gives to them. Accordingly I should like to propose the hypothesis that Carlyle is neither narrating the world's history through its great men, nor explaining or illustrating what human greatness consists of, but that he is exploring the relation between the transcendental hero and his mundane following in an effort to show why some heroes 'fail' or at best achieve only a qualified, partial success. His aims are in part practical, in that he wants to teach his age to recognize and to value its heroes, and in part speculative, in that he seeks to identify and describe a mythic quality in the unique relation between the hero and his age. On this supposition the choice of heroes becomes somewhat less puzzling, for it is no longer necessary to account for the choice in terms of either the hero's intrinsic qualities or his impact on events. The most important consideration is the extent to which he provides an image of his age's values and beliefs. From such a perspective the lectures begin to take on an altered appearance, and even Carlyle's discussions of Odin and Mahomet reveal an extraordinary topical relevance quite different from that which concerns Grierson and Cassirer.

After his introductory remarks, Carlyle launches into the opening lecture on Odin by affirming resoundingly, though with apparent irrelevance, 'that a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him' (v, 2). Eric Bentley, following Nietzsche, would regard this as a disingenuous attempt to becloud history with spurious religion. 'Carlyle overstressed religion,' Bentley paraphrases Nietzsche, 'in order to hide the shocking fact that he did not believe in religion.'¹⁴ Apart from the palpable untruth of this 'shocking fact,' the remark is questionable because it distorts and simplifies the bearing of Carlyle's work. For Bentley, *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* comes to us plainly labeled 'history,' and any attempt to inject religion can be set down either to Carlyle's bad conscience or to the stupidity of 'text-book editors.' Nevertheless, it might be worth adopting the contrary assumption, that the introduction of religion here is both calculated and pertinent, to see where it leads us.

Religion, as Carlyle uses the word, is not theology. It cannot be expressed by, or contained in, any thirty-nine articles or any denominational creed. It is 'the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe' (v, 2-3). The essence of religion consists not in what really exists, but in

the act of *knowing* what really exists, and therefore to talk about religion is to talk about the origin and nature of belief, and about the believer himself, rather than about his gods. Carlyle is insistent on this point that religion is above all else a way of knowing. 'To *know*; to get into the truth of anything, is ever a mystic act' (v, 57), he says, and somewhat later, 'Man cannot *know* ... unless he can *worship* in some way. His knowledge is a pedantry, and dead thistle, otherwise' (v, 70). Most suggestively of all, 'To know a thing, what we can call knowing, a man must first *love* the thing, sympathise with it: that is, be *virtuously* related to it' (v, 107). The knowledge that can be called religious is characterized not only by its certainty, but also by the fact that it takes place somewhere in the depths of man's being, and not merely in what Carlyle calls his 'argumentative region' (v, 2). For this reason, a man's religion need not be the one he professes, or even one he is conscious of. It is simply the thing that in fact he lives and acts by.

With this premise Carlyle reaches back into 'the great dark vortex of the Norse mind' (v, 26) to seize upon Odin as the type of the hero as divinity. One of the most striking facts about the treatment of Odin is the total absence of historical or archaeological evidence. Carlyle scoffs at Grimm for attempting to disprove Odin's actual existence by etymological evidence (apparently Carlyle reserves to himself the use of etymology as an argumentative device) and asserts the 'flesh and blood' existence of Odin, but he accepts no burden of proof, and his sources are legendary and literary, consisting chiefly of the Eddas. Evidently Carlyle is not much concerned with factual or historical truth; he is altogether intent upon imaginative or religious truth. What is important is not that Odin should be proved to exist or not to exist, but that belief in him should have led men to some vital relation to 'this mysterious universe,' permeated their existence and kindled them to significant moral action. The reality of the hero, and still more of his heroism or divinity, is a question primarily of the vitality of his relation to the ethos which nourishes him, and the qualities attributed to the hero have a prior existence as values in the minds of the worshippers. Carlyle is quite explicit on this point. The quality of the light shed by the hero, he says,

depends not on *it*, so much as on the National Mind recipient of it. The colours and forms of your light will be those of the *cut-glass* it has to shine through. – Curious to think how, for every man, any the truest fact is modelled by the nature of the man! I said, The earnest man, speaking to his brother men, must always have stated what seemed to him a *fact*, a real Appearance of Nature. But the way in which such Appearance or fact shaped itself, –

what sort of *fact* it became for him, – was and is modified by his own laws of thinking; deep, subtle, but universal, ever-operating laws. The world of Nature, for every man, is the Phantasy of Himself; this world is the multiplex “Image of his own Dream.” [v, 26]

Carlyle’s subjectivism is not pure, for although he concedes that facts are modified by one’s ‘own laws of thinking,’ he immediately, and somewhat dogmatically asserts that these are ‘universal, ever-operating laws.’ Still, like Wordsworth, he is ready to go half way and to admit that the mind ‘half creates’ what it perceives. To bring these idealistic assumptions to the study of Odin is to transform him from an exploded myth or dethroned divinity into a ‘Pattern Norseman’ (v, 28), whose attributes accurately reflect the values of his people. In other words, Carlyle seeks to revitalize Odin as a mythic figure. Carlyle’s approach to Odin, incidentally, supplies a perfect illustration of what Mill had called the Coleridgean, as distinct from the Benthamite, mode of inquiry. To Bentham, doubtless, Odin would have appeared simply as fabulous and therefore unworthy of credence or even interest, but to Coleridge the primary and insistent question was ‘what does it mean?’ The reason for widespread belief in Odin’s divinity was a more interesting and useful object of inquiry than the reality of Odin’s existence or the authenticity of his godhead.

In 1832, in an essay on Goethe in the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, Carlyle had formulated a distinction between the great man, properly so called, and the noted man, who is ‘the emblem and living summary of the Ideal which that age has fashioned for itself: show me the noted man of an age, you show me the age that produced him’ (xxvii, 395). This distinction is clearer at first glance than on subsequent examination. Beau Brummel is Carlyle’s example of a noted man, but if Brummel is not a great man, it is not because he was the mere passive reflection of his age. The fact is that he actively set the fashion of his age, and his admirers followed him, not he them. Even conceding that Beau Brummel is accurately represented as the perfect expression of the Regency ideal, there is an important sense in which he helped to create that ideal, to realize and personify what was merely inchoate in the spirit of the time. His ‘heroism,’ therefore appears to be as authentic as his representative character, and in the strict terms of Carlyle’s distinction Brummel ought to have been accorded the status of great man, but of course the real reason for Carlyle’s detestation of Brummel is to be found in his contempt for the ideal of the dandiacal body which Brummel represented. Carlyle could not bring himself to approve of a dandy, who, in Beerbohm’s splendid phrase, mortified his soul that his body might be perfect. The point is

not that Brummel is a hero, by any criterion, but that Carlyle's reason for rejecting him is disingenuous and, more important, that the distinction by which Brummel is excluded would lead Carlyle into a host of inconsistencies and cannot therefore be maintained. The truth of the matter seems to be that the great man is usually also the noted man (though the converse does not follow), for a hero must be in harmony with the spirit of his age in order to have much effect on it. Imagine Cromwell at the Areopagus, or Pericles exhorting the Long Parliament.

It is by no means certain that Carlyle clings to this distinction between the great man and the noted man in the lecture on Odin, but he clearly holds Odin to be more than just a passive reflection of his age, more than just a noted man, for this 'Pattern Norseman' gives the pattern as well as takes it. The main difference between Odin and Beau Brummel, as the very incongruity of the comparison suggests, is not in their relation to their respective worlds, though no doubt there is a difference in the kind and degree of worship they received from their following. The main difference is in the order of values each one represents and the virtues each one displays. For Odin, equally with the Regency dandy, is above all the crystallization of an ethos – what Carlyle calls the national mind – and his virtues are no less real or admirable for being the ones most admired by his contemporaries. It is suggestive that the most notable positive accomplishment that Carlyle attributes to Odin is not any feat of valour or conquest of arms, but the invention of Runes, by which means he articulated the wisdom which was already inarticulate in men's hearts. Carlyle's Odin is in fact a piece of imaginative reconstruction, in which the starting point is the character of the Norse mind, as this is revealed in the legendary and mythic materials of the Eddas. And although Carlyle everywhere insists that Odin is the original, causative agent of Norse attitudes and values, it is the latter which he holds before him as objects of study, and he is perfectly content to acknowledge that the man Odin is and must remain inaccessible: 'If the man Odin himself have vanished utterly, there is this huge Shadow of him which still projects itself over the whole History of his People' (v, 28–9). At the focus of Carlyle's interest in this lecture is the worshipper rather than the hero, and it may be said that the larger subject is the nature and origin of religious belief.

What was this mysterious force we call Paganism? asks Carlyle, 'How was it, what was it?' (v, 6). He is keenly aware of the absurdity of the pagan world view, which to modern man must appear the grossest kind of superstition. 'Surely it seems a very strange-looking thing this Paganism; almost inconceivable to us in these days. A bewildering, inextricable

jungle of delusions, confusions, falsehoods, and absurdities, covering the whole field of life! (v, 3). Yet Paganism was a fact; men did honestly believe in its gods and in its world view, and Carlyle cannot bring himself to dismiss lightly what great numbers of men have sincerely believed and acted by, and he will permit no rationalization to distort what is for him this primary truth. He dismisses contemptuously the suggestion that primitive religion could have been brought about by priestcraft, by deliberate deception. The argument is a pragmatic one, for Carlyle holds that the truth of any religion, including Paganism, is not a question of the absolute and a priori truth of its doctrines, but of the sincerity of its adherents. And because sincerity can respond only to sincerity, it follows that no religion which is honestly believed can be the consequence of deliberate deception.

To the somewhat more plausible rationalization that primitive religions are in fact allegorical systems, in which abstract truths are symbolized by visible objects, Carlyle protests that the intense feeling which authenticates religious belief attaches itself to the visible and tangible object rather than to the abstraction, so that the allegory is the 'product of the certainty, not the producer of it' (v, 6). The principal truth which emerges from this lecture is that religious faith is self-justifying, and that its intellectual basis, if any, is after the fact. Science can produce no substitute for faith, though it can render certain articles of faith untenable, and history can illuminate only the process by which former truths are discredited, the endless stripping off of outworn appearances. One must therefore go beyond science and history to religion, which remains man's central mode of apprehending and understanding his experience.

Carlyle's choice of Mahomet as the subject for his second lecture must have struck his audience as a curious one, and he was well aware of the need for explaining it: 'We have chosen Mahomet not as the most eminent Prophet; but as the one we are freest to speak of. He is by no means the truest of Prophets; but I do esteem him a true one. Further, as there is no danger of our becoming, any of us, Mahometans, I mean to say all the good of him I justly can' (v, 43). Now why should Carlyle not be free to talk of, say, Moses or Paul? His business, as Mill saw, is the poet's or image maker's; here is no voice of arid scepticism to challenge what his hearers hold sacred, so why is he not free? Clearly because he is talking about exploded or outworn faiths, and he wants to be sure that he and his hearers can agree that neither the divinity nor the prophet is, in the ordinary sense, a true one. The point is to demonstrate that belief may be *true* even when its object is false. 'Is not Belief,' Carlyle echoes Novalis, 'the

true god-announcing Miracle?’ (v, 57). Therefore it is important, not only to choose subjects who lie outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also to point out the ways in which they fall short of an ideal of spirituality that modern man might accept. Carlyle’s favourite adjective to describe both Odin and the culture he typified is ‘rude,’ and he must force himself to speak of what in Mahomet’s teaching most revolted him – its sensuality.

But Carlyle also means to say ‘all the good’ he can of Mahomet, and he sums up that good with a rhetorically brilliant peroration: ‘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! –’ (v, 76). Whereupon Mill rose up from his seat and shouted, ‘No!’ But this celebrated outburst merely confirms that Carlyle’s rhetoric works, for Mahomet is the little-known exotic, of whom it is virtually axiomatic to say fraud, while Bentham is the prophet of a new orthodoxy, one that it is heresy to challenge. Yet Mahomet, with all his faults, is the vital and unutterably *sincere* propounder of a real faith, while Bentham elaborates a system which can appeal only to a man’s wits, the ‘mere argumentative region of him.’

Carlyle’s talk about ‘Universal History’ in the first lecture is, I think, misleading if we take it as defining the primary purpose of his discussions of Odin and Mahomet. Neither interests Carlyle because of his impact on events or because of what he can reveal about the evolutionary development of the hero. If there is change and growth at all, it is in the climate of opinion the hero depends on, in the hero-worshipper rather than in the hero, who remains always ‘the same kind of thing.’ The hero, in other words, remains in an important sense *outside* history. The function of these two lectures, then, in the design of the whole is not to establish the historical importance of the hero, but to lay down certain logical or epistemological priorities, the most important of which is the dependence of the hero on the climate of hero-worship. Heroes arise partly in response to events, but still more in response to the desires and aspirations of the men who will be their worshippers, for without worshippers heroes do not exist. Again and again Carlyle speaks of heroes ‘coming’ or ‘being sent’ in response to felt need or demand, but like Hotspur he is doubtful that these spirits from the vasty deep will always come when called. He says, in the opening lecture, ‘Alas, we have known Times *call* loudly enough for their great man; but not find him when they called!’ (v, 13).

Yet Carlyle is not always consistent, for in the last lecture he can speak of the 'certainty of Heroes being sent us' (v, 202). In any case the hero is, as such, the creation of his worshippers, the spirit of a people rendered incarnate, and the kind of hero we shall have depends ultimately upon ourselves.

These first two lectures, taken together, and apart from the rest, comprise Carlyle's grammar of assent, though he would never have used such a phrase to describe them. Man lives by faith, Carlyle asserts, and science and history are incomplete without it. Furthermore, even a dead god or a sensual prophet can be shown to have inspired faith which was genuine and life-giving. We must not assume, however, that Carlyle is here doing what Newman and Arnold in different ways sought to do: to discover new grounds for an old faith when the old grounds had succumbed to doubt. This process is what Carlyle was later to condemn as 'Jesuitism.' Grierson defines it bluntly as 'trying to discover esoteric reasons for believing what had ceased to be believable.'¹⁵ Carlyle is not dusting off and refurbishing his own discarded Christianity; he is merely affirming the necessity of faith, if not in gods, then in men. The necessity operates, it is true, within a historical milieu, but the milieu is not that provided by the hero-worshipping Norsemen or Arabs; it is the milieu of scepticism and materialism which Carlyle finds in modern Europe. Every word that Carlyle speaks about Odin and Mahomet has a direct and cogent bearing upon the world of 1840.

In the third lecture, 'The Hero as Poet,' Carlyle deals concretely for the first time with the attributes of the hero. Here and in the fifth lecture, 'The Hero as a Man of Letters,' Carlyle holds before him Fichte's concept of the *Gelehrte*, the man of letters, or, more comprehensively, the intellectual. In 1827, in 'The State of German Literature,' Carlyle had described this concept in terms which prefigured the discussion of 1840:

According to Fichte, there is a "Divine Idea" pervading the visible Universe; which visible Universe is indeed but its symbol and sensible manifestation, having in itself no meaning, or even true existence independent of it. To the mass of men this Divine Idea of the world lies hidden: yet to discern it, to seize it, and live wholly in it, is the condition of all genuine virtue, knowledge, freedom; and the end, therefore, of all spiritual effort in every age. Literary men are the appointed interpreters of this Divine Idea; a perpetual priesthood, we might say, standing forth, generation after generation, as the dispensers and living types of God's everlasting wisdom. [xxvi, 58]

Conspicuous among the incumbents of this literary priesthood are Dante, the voice of 'ten silent centuries' (v, 98), and English Shakespeare, 'the

noblest product,' as Carlyle curiously but aptly calls him, of Medieval Catholicism (v, 102). Both choices are in a sense unfortunate, for Dante is not really congenial to Carlyle, and Shakespeare will not stand still to have the cassock of priesthood, even literary priesthood, thrust upon him. Still, the choice was virtually forced upon Carlyle by the towering reputations of the two men: 'They dwell apart, in a kind of royal solitude; none equal, none second to them: in the general feeling of the world, a certain transcendentalism, a glory as of complete perfection, invests these two' (v, 85).

To Carlyle the distinction of the poet, as of the man of letters, is intellectual, but in a very special sense, for the poet's intellectual power is not that of the scientist. His distinguishing attribute, Carlyle says, is 'power of intellect; it is a man's sincerity and depth of vision that makes him a Poet' (v, 84). This formulation is perfectly consistent with the generalized view of the hero put forward in the lecture on Mahomet: '*Sincerity*, a deep, great, genuine sincerity, is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic,' insists Carlyle, and adds, a few sentences later, 'Direct from the Inner Fact of things; - he lives, and has to live, in daily communion with that' (v, 45). Such a view of the heroic poet is more closely applicable to Dante than to Shakespeare, and though Carlyle scarcely does justice to Dante's *breadth* of vision, he pays ample tribute to his intensity. Dante renders the inner life of man where Shakespeare renders the outer; Dante is concerned with the soul where Shakespeare is concerned with the body; Dante is deep where Shakespeare is wide. Dante's poetic vision is above all a matter of insight; Shakespeare's of observation. And though Carlyle expressly prefers Shakespeare to Dante, it is clearly Dante who most perfectly exemplifies the hero-poet. Whatever Carlyle can find to say in praise of Shakespeare, and he says a good deal to the point, is given the lie by his attempt to endow Shakespeare with 'a certain transcendentalism.'

'Carlyle has little interest in poets who are not also prophets,' declares Grierson.¹⁶ Certainly Carlyle assimilates the poet to the prophet, and he does so explicitly, following Sidney in drawing upon the etymological hint of *vates*, but it is also true that the prophet is assimilated to the poet. The poet as prophet speaks the truth that is in him, but the prophet as poet performs an even rarer, even more important and valuable, service. He puts into articulate words what we all feel. The defining attribute of poetry, says Carlyle, is *melody*, by which he does not mean a subtle and captivating cadence belonging purely to the *language* of poetry. Better to write in prose (as Carlyle advised Browning to do¹⁷) than cloud your

substantive truth with the jingle of melody, so conceived. By melody Carlyle means 'the inward harmony of coherence' (v, 83), which is a property of the poet's thought or substance. This inner harmony testifies that the poet has seized the 'open secret' (v, 80); secret because it is inward and spiritual, open because it is there to be seen by all who will look, though formulated only in the sublime melody of the poet. The poet is thus a spokesman for ordinary men, and everyone is potentially able to respond to the vision he reveals. 'We are all poets when we *read* a poem well' (v, 82). The poetic, as distinct from the prophetic, role entails speaking for the ordinary man as well as to him, and the hero as poet, even more than the hero as prophet, is the representative, and expression, of his constituency.

It is when that constituency fails in some way that the poet degenerates into the man of letters, whose more prosaic utterances may contain profound enough truths, though without the resonance for which a perfect understanding between the poet and his audience is necessary.¹⁸ Carlyle's lecture on the hero as a man of letters is quite clearly a catalogue of such failed poets, though the onus of failure rests not so much on the men of letters themselves as on the sceptical eighteenth century which would not give them a sympathetic hearing, and even more importantly could not provide them with the spiritual nourishment they required. Johnson is such a figure. Carlyle admires both his stoicism and his impatience with cant: 'I call these two things *joined together*, a great Gospel, the greatest perhaps that was possible at that time' (v, 182). The qualification was necessary, for Carlyle finds that Johnson's genius was hampered by the world he lived in. 'In a kindlier element what might he not have been, – Poet, Priest, sovereign Ruler!' (v, 178). Carlyle has no such admiration for Rousseau, but Rousseau does illustrate how a radically imperfect hero can be still further maimed by the disorganization of the time. If Johnson showed how much good could be accomplished by a man of genius in spite of unfavourable circumstances, 'in Rousseau we are called to look rather at the fearful amount of evil which, under such disorganization, may accompany the good' (v, 187). But Burns is the man of letters whose failure as a poet Carlyle treats with the most bitterness: 'That a Europe, with its French Revolution just breaking out, finds no need of a Burns except for gauging beer, – is a thing I, for one, cannot *rejoice* at!' (v, 192).

Curiously enough Carlyle had ready to hand a heroic man of letters who was perfectly in tune with the eighteenth century, and for whom,

in an earlier essay, Carlyle had found praise, in spite of fundamental differences. In the first lecture Carlyle had noted how accurately Voltaire typified his time and his nation: 'The old man of Ferney comes up to Paris; an old, tottering, infirm man of eighty-four years. They feel that he too is a kind of Hero. ... They feel withal that, if *persiflage* be the great thing, there never was such a *persifleur*. He is the realised ideal of every one of them; the thing they are all wanting to be; of all Frenchmen the most French. *He* is properly their god, – such god as they are fit for' (v, 14). Yet Carlyle passes over Voltaire, as he had also passed over Goethe, a genius of quite a different order, when he comes to discuss the hero as a man of letters, and the reason in both instances is the same; the point to be stressed is failure – not the failure of the man but the failure of his age to supply followers endowed with the spiritual perceptions to respond to his own. All of Carlyle's hatred of the sceptical, hypocritical, essentially frivolous eighteenth century is concentrated in the absurdity – for him – of paying homage to Voltaire while setting Burns to gauging beer.¹⁹

Only in the fourth and sixth lectures, 'The Hero as Priest' and 'The Hero as King,' does Carlyle turn to what might accurately be called history. These two lectures, taken together, recount the history of protestantism, which has three principal episodes: the Reformation, the Civil War, and the French Revolution. If these three events do not in themselves amount to a universal history, they are at least emblematic of man's whole destiny, for they constitute 'a section ... of that great universal war which alone makes-up the true History of the World, – the war of Belief against Unbelief! The struggle of men intent on the real essence of things, against men intent on the semblances and forms of things' (v, 204). Luther and Knox shared the historic mission of rescuing the Church from the semblances and forms of things, of weaning men from idolatry and turning their attention to what was real. Cromwell's 'reformation' was in a sense broader than Luther's, for it embraced both church and state. The French Revolution, finally, marked 'the explosive confused return of Mankind to Reality and Fact, now that they were perishing from Semblance and Sham' (v, 237).

There can be no question that Luther is a hero after Carlyle's own heart. Carlyle pictures him in that memorable confrontation at the Diet of Worms, when Luther, called upon to recant his heresies, answers from the depths of his being, direct from the Inner Fact of things, 'Here stand I; I can do no other: God assist me!' 'The greatest moment,' Carlyle solemnly

intones, 'in the Modern History of Men' (v, 135). John Knox's gesture of flinging the '*pented bredd*,' the wooden image of the Virgin, into the Loire as 'fitter for swimming ... than for being worshipped' (v, 148) reflects a similar hatred of sham and idolatry, but the high drama of Luther's act has degenerated into something much nearer to comedy. The narrow, intolerant, sour figure of Knox is altogether of a lower stature than Luther. Part of Carlyle's interest in Knox can no doubt be attributed to his own puritanical Scottish background, as well as to the special relevance of Knox to the religious history of England, Scotland, and New England, but Knox also functions in this context as a pivotal or transitional figure. Knox's passionate championing of theocracy, of the union of the spiritual with the temporal power, provides the final topic in Carlyle's apologia, and it marks Knox's special role as an intermediate stage between the hero as priest and the hero as king.

Cromwell, like Luther, is one of Carlyle's special heroes; these two occupy the central shrine. Something of Carlyle's partiality, no doubt, may be set down to an affinity of temperament which may have influenced his whole conception of the hero, though it is certainly not in evidence when he has to speak of Rousseau or Napoleon, or even of Shakespeare. Still, it may be said that by the sixth lecture, a composite image of the hero has emerged. He is typically a man of great strength and seriousness of purpose, with no levity about him at all (though quite possibly a vein of earthy humour), nor any marked grace of speech, person, or manner. He tends to be inarticulate, or at least slow and heavy of speech, and his mind is deep, intense, or tenacious, rather than quick, brilliant, or daring. He is a late developer, or at any rate he finds both his true calling and his real constituency relatively late in life. Such a man, Carlyle thinks, was Cromwell. Such a man was Luther. Such a man was Carlyle himself.

But the hero as king refers also to Napoleon, the very antithesis, as Carlyle presents him, of Cromwell, and we must pass beyond the affinity of temperament to examine Carlyle's idea of the kingly role of the hero. Different as they may be in temperament and personality, Cromwell and Napoleon have several striking features in common. Both are revolutionary heroes; both helped to destroy a corrupt old order; both accepted power as champions of the people (Cromwell as 'Protector,' Napoleon as 'Consul'); both were induced to make their power hereditary but produced no heirs comparable to themselves. The destructive or revolutionary role of the hero is one that he assumes so often in history that Carlyle is at pains to remind his audience that the hero's real business is not with disorder but with order:

May we not say, moreover, while so many of our late Heroes have worked rather as revolutionary men, that nevertheless every Great Man, every genuine man, is by the nature of him a son of Order, not of Disorder? It is a tragical position for a true man to work in revolutions. He seems an anarchist; and indeed a painful element of anarchy does encumber him at every step, – him to whose whole soul anarchy is hostile, hateful. His mission is Order; every man's is. He is here to make what was disorderly, chaotic, into a thing ruled, regular. He is the missionary of Order. Is not all work of man in this world a *making of Order*? [v, 203]

That the hero, particularly the hero as king, has so often in the past been committed to the work of revolution is a result of nothing inherent in his own character, but of an accident of history which might accurately be called a failure of the heroic spirit. Heroes are needed periodically to undo the work of valets. If mankind could only assure the unbroken rule of the hero-king there would never be any need for violent revolution. The crucial task for mankind, then, is to discover an efficient method of choosing its rulers. That the hero-king is the product of an act of choice on the part of his subjects is the principal point of Carlyle's final lecture: 'Not a Hero only is needed, but a world fit for him; a world not of *Valets*; – the Hero comes almost in vain to it otherwise! ... In brief, one of two things: We shall either learn to know a Hero, a true Governor and Captain, somewhat better, when we see him; or else go on to be forever governed by the Unheroic; – had we ballot-boxes clattering at every street-corner, there were no remedy in these' (v, 216–17). In spite of the contemptuous reference to the machinery of democracy, Carlyle knows that the days of divine election and divine right are over, and that kingship has become a metaphoric term in a world where men actually do and must choose their rulers. Much as Carlyle admires fierce old absolutists like William the Conqueror or Frederick the Great, he recognizes that modern 'kings,' responding to a summons by their people, are the only kind possible in an age in which the real bases of authority are shifting ineluctably.

Again it appears that Carlyle's interest is not explicitly, or even mainly, historical. It would be truer to say that the main bearing of this lecture is political, for it poses an immediate, practical problem in the management of human affairs that Carlyle wants to put before his audience, a problem which has a special and insistent relevance to the world of 1840, in which the rapidity of the shift in the bases of power threatens a breakdown of public order. That threatened breakdown had been a momentary but terrifying reality in November 1839, just six months before Carlyle addressed the fashionable world of Portman Square, when Chartist-inspired

unrest erupted into violence at Newport with the loss of twenty-two lives. Three days after the Newport rising Carlyle's pamphlet, *Chartism*, appeared, testifying to his own concern with the anarchy of the times and exploring and formulating the problem which in the culminating lecture of *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* was to be refined into a statement of the urgency of identifying and establishing the instruments of an ideal sovereignty.

But if we turn our attention to the lectures as a whole, the interest which is most fundamental and pervasive is less historical and political than mythic. Carlyle's hero, viewed as myth, is neither the event-making man described by the historian, nor the wielder of an ideal sovereignty conceived by the student of politics. He is the hypostatized principle of authority and of the moral order which sanctions and justifies authority. Whether he actually exists or not, he is the answer to the people's need, the image of their deepest desire, and as such the god that they must worship. Such a bearing is most obvious in the lectures on Odin, where Carlyle seems indifferent to the question of Odin's historical existence, or on Mahomet, where he is more interested in wooing his hearers from Benthamism, than in converting them to Islam, but it is present throughout the lectures, not even excluding the 'historical' ones, for Luther, Cromwell, and Napoleon, who mark the principal episodes in the 'war of Belief against Unbelief,' are symbolic as well as real heroes.

It is no doubt worthy of notice that Carlyle thus anticipated a good many later treatments of the hero, but his mythic bent, sometimes at war with his historical or political concerns, has generated some contradiction and more than a little confusion, of a sort from which the post-Frazerian and post-Jungian world is not altogether free. Any study of the hero, in fact, is impeded at the outset by an important and persistent ambiguity in the word *hero*. 'Heroism,' says the British Museum Subject Index, 'See Courage,' and the student is plunged at once into the world of Charles Kingsley, William Bolitho, and Philip Guedalla with its bracing air of moral and physical vigour. But if we persist in exploring the contents of those books with 'hero' prominently in their titles, we discover that the word means many things. Lord Raglan, Sidney Hook, Eric Bentley, and Joseph Campbell use the word in quite different senses,²⁰ though it may be possible to sort them out by placing them under either of two radically opposed but primary meanings.

In the first place, *hero* has a clearly religious sense and refers to man under the aspect of divinity. A hero, in this sense, communicates directly with the absolute, by responding to some inner, intuitive certainty, by

attending to visions or voices, or by participating immediately in godhead. His heroism consists of nothing that he does, but only of what he is or stands for, and what he is in himself is less important than what his admirers or worshippers take him to be. To the vulgar or sceptical he may establish his heroism by some prodigy of strength or nerve, but instead of leading forward to its consequences, the act points backward to its agency. The labours of Hercules are not important, that is, because of the improved hygiene of the Augean Stables (for example), but because they testify to the hero's godlike strength, cunning, and endurance. Arthur pulled the sword from the stone in order to provide Sir Kay with a weapon, but the real importance of the act is to authenticate Arthur's divinity in the eyes of his prospective worshippers. In this sense of the word the actual historical existence of the hero is secondary to the cult which grows up around him, and indeed the cult can exist without a historical figure at all.

In the second place, *hero* means simply a superior man, one with an extraordinary strength of will or intellect or brawn. His importance lies in what he does or effects by virtue of his superiority to other men, and though we may admire him and emulate him, he is less important as a model or as a cult figure than as a decisive force in history. He exists in fact, and not just in the imagination of his worshippers.

Of course a particular figure can be a hero in both senses of the word, but it is important to recognize that the two modes of conceiving him are radically distinct and may lead to the development of quite different images and attitudes. The Jesus who lived and acted in Roman Judea has little in common with the creations of mediaeval mysticism or of mediaeval exegesis (a point which Butler made effectively in *Erewhon Revisited*). The Arthur who fought (if he did) at Badon Hill at the end of the fifth century has little to do with the figure evolved by chivalric sentiments and ideas in the twelfth century. The importance of the hero as, in Hook's sense, a decisive historical force, is entirely distinct from that of his subsequent avatars as the central figure of a cult. Joseph Campbell sees the hero as entirely liberated from history: 'The hero ... is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms.' He is 'eternal man - perfected, unspecific, universal man.'²¹ Between the hero so conceived and the historical reality of a Caesar, a Washington, a Napoleon, there is no connection at all.

Of course reality seldom coincides with appearance, and what a thing objectively is, is by no means the same as what it is subjectively thought to be. The danger arises when we use a single term to designate both

appearance and reality, the hero as he is seen by his worshippers and as he is in himself. The ambiguity is most damaging when it is unconscious, when the hero is regarded as simultaneously an emanation of the divine and an historical force, when the hero's superiority to ordinary men is grounded in metaphysical speculation, but tested by pragmatic means. Such an unconscious division of aim is undoubtedly at the root of Carlyle's confusion and ambiguity.

But the presence of ambiguity and confusion in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* ought not to distract us from the special interest of that work or prevent us from seeing that Carlyle, innocent of the assumptions, methods, or conclusions of modern anthropology or psychoanalytic theory, has provided through his choice of heroes and his formulation of the heroic character a model of the relation between an age's attitudes toward liberty or authority and the heroes it admires.

NOTES

- 1 *The Times*, 24 April 1840, 1; 28 April, 1; 13 May, 6; David Alec Wilson, *Carlyle on Cromwell and Others (1837-48)* (London and New York 1925), 83-92; Frederick Maurice, ed., *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice* (London 1884), I, 282; Michael St John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York 1954), 264-5; William Macready, *Reminiscences*, ed. Sir Frederick Pollock (London 1875), II, 160; *The Letters of Edward Fitzgerald* (New York and London 1894), II, 191
- 2 *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Centenary Edition (London 1896-9), v, 45-6. All references are to this edition.
- 3 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (New York 1968), 4-5
- 4 James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881* (London 1884), I, 157
- 5 Eric Bentley, *A Century of Hero-Worship* (Philadelphia and New York 1944), 31; Albert J. LaValley, *Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern* (New Haven and London 1968), 238
- 6 Froude, I, 195
- 7 Bentley, 31
- 8 Benjamin Harrison Lehman, *Carlyle's Theory of the Hero* (Durham, NC 1928), 187
- 9 Herbert J.C. Grierson, *Carlyle and Hitler* (Cambridge 1933); Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven 1946), 187-223. The original title of Grierson's essay, when it was delivered as the Adamson Lecture at the University of Manchester in 1930, was simply 'Carlyle and the Hero.' Neither Grierson nor Cassirer, of course, resorts to the facile expedient of calling Carlyle a proto-fascist; both, however, see Carlyle's theory as contributing to that 'myth of the state' which has been a useful instrument for the advocates of totalitarian systems.
- 10 LaValley, 1-14, 236-52
- 11 Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History* (New York 1943), 153-4
- 12 LaValley, 252. Cassirer would agree that Carlyle is essentially a romantic: 'Carlyle did not understand his theory as a definite political program. His was a romantic conception of heroism - far different from that of our modern political "realists."' (p. 281)
- 13 Lehman touches on this aspect briefly: 'The hero is but one element in the Carlyle Hero-Theory. Of equal importance and reciprocally related to this element is the quality of loyalty on the part of men.' (p. 41) Unfortunately he does not pursue the point.

- 14 Bentley, 60
- 15 Grierson, 14
- 16 *Ibid.*, 32
- 17 '[Browning] is somewhat uncertain about his career, and I myself have perhaps contributed to the trouble by assuring him that poetry is no longer a field where any true or worthy success can be won or deserved. If a man has anything to say entitled to the attention of rational creatures, all mortals will come to recognise after a little that there is a more effectual way of saying it than in metrical numbers. Poetry used to be regarded as the natural, and even the essential, language of feeling, but it is not at all so; there is not a sentiment in the gamut of human passion which cannot be adequately expressed in prose.' C. Gavan Duffy, *Conversations with Carlyle*, quoted in David Alec Wilson, *Carlyle at His Zenith (1848-53)* (London and New York 1927), 122
- 18 In suggesting that the man of letters is really a hero manqué I find myself in substantial disagreement with David DeLaura, who argues for a 'climactic ordering of the lectures toward the apotheosis of the Man of Letters' and insists that 'Carlyle's ultimate hero is the literary man.' 'Ishmael as Prophet: *Heroes and Hero-Worship* and the Self-Expressive Basis of Carlyle's Art,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, xi (1969/70), 719, 722. But since these contentions are made in behalf of a larger generalization, that *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* is a 'prophetic' book, a series of experiments in the presentation of Carlyle himself in the prophetic role (with which position I have no quarrel), I am inclined to dismiss them as special pleading. Moreover, DeLaura offers a qualification almost amounting to a recantation: 'At bottom Carlyle very likely harbored a contempt for ... the "mere" man of letters; his instinctive sympathies always ... lay with the man of decisive action.' *Ibid.*, 729
- 19 Robert W. Kusch notes this hostility toward the eighteenth century, but attributes it to Carlyle's inability to analyze accurately the causes of failure in its representative men. 'Pattern and Paradox in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*,' *Studies in Scottish Literature*, vi (1969), 146-55
- 20 Fitzroy Richard Somerset, Lord Raglan, *The Hero* (London 1936); Hook, *op. cit.*; Bentley, *op. cit.*; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York 1953) (first published 1949)
- 21 Campbell, 19-20