

Thomas Carlyle's Change and Ambivalence*

Wang Songlin

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ningbo University

818 Fenghua Road, Jiangbei District, Ningbo, Zhejiang 315211, China

Email: wangsonglin@nbu.edu.cn

Abstract This paper discusses the ambivalence behind Carlyle's change from radicalism to conservatism, mainly by exploring the inner contradiction of Teufelsdröckh, Carlyle's semi-autobiographical figure in *Sartor Resartus*, while citing Carlyle's other writings to demonstrate how his early Calvinist family background and his later outstanding years affected his appeals for social order as well as the Gospel of work as a remedy for moral degradation of his time. The paper concludes by suggesting that in the heart of Carlyle's change and ambivalence dwells the agony of a prophet of modernist consciousness who was acutely wary of the potential chaos, contradiction and even the absurdity far beyond his era.

Key words Carlyle; change; ambivalence

Author Wang Songlin is Professor of English at Ningbo University, China. His research interests cover Victorian literature and culture. He is currently a visiting scholar in English Department, Edinburgh University.

Although the first generation of what we call "Victorian" authors were born early in the nineteenth century, and were active in its first two decades, their intellectual roots are traceable back to the eighteenth. Carlyle, Mill, Newman, Macaulay all grew up under the shadow of French Revolution of 1789 and later, as well as the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) which were changing the maps of Europe. They were all of them, in different ways, children of an age of change and revolution, and this was to be crucial in their work.

Many of Carlyle's contemporary writers were quite conscious of the social transition of their age.¹ Bulwer-Lytton perhaps articulated most clearly such a transition, he said:

We live in an age of visible transition — an age of disquietude and doubt,

of the removal of time-worn landmarks and the breaking up of the hereditary elements of society — old opinions, feelings — ancestral customs and institutions are crumbling away, and both the spiritual and temporal worlds are darkened by the shadows of change. The commencement of one of these epochs — periodical in the history of mankind — is hailed by the sanguine as the coming of a new Millennium — a great iconoclastic reformation, by which all false gods shall be overthrown. To me such epochs appear but as the dark passages in the appointed progress of mankind — the times of great unhappiness to our species — passages into which we have reason to rejoice at our entrance, save from the hope of being sooner landed on the opposite side. (318-19)

None was, however, more affected by change than Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), born in a humble working-class environment in South-West Scotland, the product of stern Calvinist Christian parents, who worked his way through school and university, through an early writing career in Edinburgh to his move to Chelsea in 1834, and eventually to world renown as one of the Victorian Age's most significant essayists, historians and social thinkers.

I

Carlyle's early life was spent in this age of tumultuous change, change in Europe, in Britain undergoing the throes of the Industrial Revolution and the social upheaval which accompanied it, and in Scotland where he witnessed a great literary age after the death of Burns and the full popularity of Sir Walter Scott. His early years in Ecclefechan instilled in him a world-view and a work ethic which were to remain with him, in whatever modified form, to the end of his days in London. His village life was still that of farming and small business, his University years introduced him to city life in Edinburgh, and his holiday walks and travels introduced him to the industrial landscape of Scotland and England which were transforming the country. He came to see the working class poverty which was to strike Engels in Manchester and Liverpool,² and which he came to experience in the early years of his marriage when he and his wife lived in their moorland farmhouse with almost no money at all. From very modest beginnings in London he rose to eminence, to mixing with high society as well as a vivid cross-section of the literary and intellectual life of his time and of Europe, but he never lost touch with those early years when (unlike many of his contemporaries) he had not enjoyed the privilege or money, but had shared the basic working conditions of the working class.

Carlyle's attitudes towards change were thus ambivalent, fluctuating paradoxically from the radicalism of his earlier years to conservatism in his later years. In "Characteristics" written in 1831 Carlyle realised that change was a painful "necessary evil":

In Change, therefore, there is nothing terrible, nothing supernatural: on the contrary, it lies in the very essence of our lot and life in this world. Today is not yesterday: we ourselves change; how can our Works and Thoughts, if they are always to be the fittest, continue always the same? Change, indeed, is painful; yet ever needful; and if Memory have its force and worth, so also has Hope. Nay, if we look well to it, what is all Derangement, and necessity of great Change, in itself such an evil, but the product simply of increased resources which the old methods can no longer administer; of new wealth which the old coffers will no longer contain? What is it, for example, that in our own day bursts asunder the bonds of ancient Political Systems, and perplexes all Europe with the fear of Change, but even this: the increase of social resources, which the old social methods will no longer sufficiently administer? (*Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* 79)

Carlyle's novel *Sartor Resartus* (first published in 1833 in *Fraser's Magazine* in serialization form), is at a very important level a Bildungsroman, a hidden autobiography through which Carlyle (in the guise of Teufelsdröckh) recounts his youthful struggles to come to terms with existence. Book II of *Sartor Resartus* is in a way an exhibition of Carlyle's own existential uncertainty and his strong aspiration for radical change. Like Carlyle, whose childhood was spent in reverence for and obedience to his father and whose higher education left him susceptible to the infection of religious doubt, and desolate after the failure of his first romance, the central personage Teufelsdröckh feels sorrowful and dark in his youthful years. Unable to "escape from his own Shadow" (121), Teufelsdröckh experiences a spiritual nadir in the "Everlasting No" chapter, desperately feeling the universe has become "all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, Even of hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me from limb to limb" (127). Like Carlyle himself, Teufelsdröckh suffers "an eclipse of faith which precipitate in him the abject psychic torment" (P. Rosenberg 58). It is not until he comes to Paris where he is shifted to the big world outside him, to cities and towns, to the battlefield of Wagram that Teufelsdröckh feels he has broadened his vision, stepped out of his own shadow and changed to be a "Child

of Freedom” and could meet and defy anything:

And as I so thought, there rushed like a stream of fire over my whole soul; and I shook base Fear away from me for ever. I was strong, of unknown strength, a spirit, almost a god. Ever from that time, the temper of my misery was changed: no Fear or whining Sorrow was it, but Indignation and grim fire-eyed Defiance. (129)

Professor Teufelsdröckh's raging voice is that of Carlyle himself. The repetition of the word “fire” indicates the fury and strong desire of a radical young man for change as well as for spiritual purification. Immediately after his awakening from self-doubt, Teufelsdröckh, in the “Everlasting Yea” chapter, realizes his heavy dreams “rolled gradually away,” and he awakes “to a new Heaven and a New Earth” (142).

Teufelsdröckh's radicalism also finds expression in his attitude towards transforming the old society and old customs. In Teufelsdröckh's writings on the philosophy and history of clothes, Carlyle uses clothing as a metaphor for the empty forms of old custom and institutionalized society. Teufelsdröckh's philosophy is “but a continual battle against Custom; an ever-renewed effort to transcend the sphere of blind custom and so become Transcendental”(196). Teufelsdröckh cynically treats the old world as a “huge Ragfair” where he is suffocated by the raining of “rags and tatters of old Symbols” (179). Teufelsdröckh, clearly aware of the “critical condition” in which he is situated, strongly advocates the Garment of the old society shall be “mostly burned”:

[We] are at this hour in a most critical condition; beleaguered by that boundless “Armament of Mechanizers” and Unbelievers, threatening to strip us bare! “The World,” says he, “as it needs must, is under a process of devastation and waste, which, whether by silent assiduous corrosion, or open quicker combustion, as the case chances, will effectually enough annihilate the past Forms of Society; replace them with what it may. For the present, it is contemplated that when man's whole Spiritual Interests are once divested, these innumerable stript-off Garments shall mostly be burnt; but the sounder Rags among them be quilted together into one huge Irish watch-coat for the defence of the Body only!” — This, we think, is but Job's-news to the humane reader. (178)

The radicalism of Thomas Carlyle's early years is best exemplified in his *Reminiscences* posthumously published in 1881. Carlyle was quite well aware of his own radicalism as he recalled his youth. In his recollection of the approaching George Fourth visit to Edinburgh, he expressed his disgust with the "fulsome loyalty" of all classes in Edinburgh and claimed himself a man of "private radicalism of mind" (*Reminiscences* 173). In his reminiscence essay on Edward Irving (1866), Carlyle records his tenacious opposition to Irving in terms of his notion of Reform Bill and Christianity:

He[Irving] objected clearly to my Reform- Bill notions; found Democracy a thing forbidden, leading down to outer darkness; I, a thing inevitable, and obliged to lead whithersoever it could. We had several colloquies on that subject; on which, though my own poor convictions are widened, not altered, I should now have more sympathy with his than was then the case. We also talked on Religion and Christianity "Evidences," — our notions, of course, more divergent than ever. "It is sacred, my friend; we can call it sacred: such a *Civitas Dei* as was never built before; wholly the grandest series of work ever hitherto done by the Human Soul, — the Highest God (doubt it not) assenting and inspiring all along!" This I remember once saying plainly; Which was not an encouragement to prosecute the topic. We were in fact, hopelessly divided, to what tragical extent both of us might well feel! (*Reminiscences* 309-310)

Campbell notes that the above passage shows Carlyle's "sharp-focused moments of insight into his own character and a sense of the moments of turning which influenced him" (Campbell 2012: 9). The passage also clearly records Carlyle's willingness to accept what he understood as "Democracy" and his doubts of Christianity, in contrast to Irving's reserved Annandale world view. Clearly, as Campbell points out, this is "the moment of change" for Carlyle, who "takes the strong structure he grew up with in Scotland — one based on powerful personalities, financial stringency, and an omnipresent protestant theology — and sees its inevitable transformation into the *Civitas Dei* he met in early Victorian London" (Campbell 2012: 9-10).

It is worth noticing that while Carlyle was recalling the past he would not forget to bring himself back to the present reality by saying that "I should now have more sympathy with his than was then the case." In fact, Carlyle was not as radical as we imagine and his view of change assumes a form of ambivalence in *Sartor Resartus*. Teufelsdröckh holds a dialectic view of change by comparing it

to the Nevada of Phoenix, which he thinks, quite contrary to common senses, is a paradoxical mixture of “melodious Death-song and Birth-song”:

[Change] is wont to be gradual: thus, while the serpent sheds its old skin, the new is already formed beneath. Little knowest thou of the burning of a World-Phoenix, who fanciest that she must first burn out, and lie as a dead cinereous heap; and therefrom the young one start up by miracle, and fly heavenward. Far otherwise! In that Fire-whirlwind, Creation and Destruction proceed together; ever as the ashes of the Old are blown about, do organic filaments of the New mysteriously spin themselves: and amid the rushing and the waving of the Whirlwind element come tones of a melodious Death-song, which end not but in tones of a more melodious Birthsong. Nay, look into the Fire-whirlwind with your own eyes and thou wilt see. (185)

The image of fire as a reviving and purifying power is frequently employed by Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*. Towards the end of the Everlasting No chapter *Teufelsdröckh*, after a hard inner struggle against the Devil Universe, comes to the realization that “it is from this hour that I incline to date my Spiritual New-birth, or Baphometric Fire-baptism; perhaps I directly thereupon began to be a Man” (129). Later in the Old Clothes chapter, the Clothes-Professor proclaims: “ ‘Ghosts of Life, come to Judgment!’ Reck not, ye fluttering Ghosts: he will purify you in his Purgatory, with fire and with water; and, one day, new-created ye shall reappear” (183). *Sun Newspaper* (1st April, 1834) cited commentary of an “ old Dennis”, calling *Sartor Resartus* “a heap of clotted nonsense, mixed however, here and there, with passages marked by thought and striking poetic vigor,” while questioning Carlyle’s intelligibility in using the phrase “Baphometric fire-baptism ” (qtd.in APPENDIX V to *SR* 237).

Carlyle’s “Baphometric fire-baptism” is, to my understanding, a paradoxical allusion of the binary elements representing the sum total of the universe, a union of opposites, a mixture of good and evil, life and death. *Teufelsdröckh*’s fire resembles the fire of Dante’s *Commedia* which is more of a reviving and purifying power than a fatally destructive agent. The so-called Old and Sick Society, according to *Teufelsdröckh*, is “but her mortal coil which she has shuffled off, to assume a nobler; she herself, through perpetual metamorphoses, in fairer and fairer development, has to live till Time also merge in Eternity”(179). *Teufelsdröckh* is content that “old sick Society should be deliberately burnt”, and he believes that like phoenix “a new heaven-born young one will rise out of her ashes!”(180)

The recurrent fire-image as a simultaneous power of “Creation and Destruction” and a catalyst of the union of “melodious Death-song and melodious Birthsong” indicates Carlyle’s restrained view of change. Therefore, it deserves special notice that Carlyle’s radicalism through the mouthpiece of Teufelsdröckh was a moderate one and rarely developed into extremism, even in his early years. His view of change, both personal and social, was that of a gradual reconstruction instead of an entire destruction. This explains Carlyle’s own conservatism as he grew older and became increasingly distinguished in social position. As Teufelsdröckh suggests, change should be something like “organic filaments” spinning themselves in gradual process and in organic and unified form instead of a bloody and stormy revolution. It is for this reason that Teufelsdröckh’s change is humorously dubbed by the editor-narrator as “glorious revolution” (141).

II

The label of “glorious revolution” attributed to Teufelsdröckh is in a sense Carlyle’s self-mockery which anticipates his own stronger ambivalence and conservatism later in his writing. The most visible evidence of Carlyle’s ambivalence is exhibited in his unpopular *Latter-Day Pamphlets* where he attempts to balance sympathy for the social problems of his age with an over-arching desire for order in his society.

Without question, *Latter-Day Pamphlets* shows that Carlyle had shifted to the right in politics, and had little time for the parliamentary democracy of his age which he saw as ineffective and class-ridden. Yet there is a keen common sense among the overblown rhetoric of a chapter like Model Prisons. *Latter-Day Pamphlets* is a good illustration of why Carlyle “may seem at first sight illiberal and fascist, yet on a more sensitive reading he may be seen to adhere to a different logic” (Campbell 1993:120). Carlyle may scoff at the philanthropy which tried to rescue prisoners’ souls, but he points out emphatically that such attempts are paid for by taxing the hard-working poor all around. What about their welfare? Carlyle actually went (in 1849) himself to Ireland to see the plight of the poor before writing on the question. Therefore, in his later writings or speeches, Carlyle believed the urgency of his message: “poverty is a reality, just outside the walls of model prison; and anarchy, religious weakness and realities are near every home” (Campbell 1993:124). If in later life he was to write about the emancipated negro slaves (in *The Nigger Question*) or the Civil War in the USA, it was regrettably without actually going there to see for himself — and his views are all the more intemperate and unbalanced as a result. The older Carlyle saw things in black and white, and the nuanced sympathy for individuals gives way to an overwhelming

urge to keep society ordered, hard working and ethically sound.

That the universe should be a natural, orderly and authorised world is a concept firmly rooted in Carlyle's mind. Carlyle believed there should be a controlling great presence governing the order of the universe, even if he did not link it to the Christian "God" explicitly. His world-view was one where human beings were of limited authority, and there were more powerful forces at work. In his earlier years he had been interested in the forces represented by NATURE in the works of writers like Goethe; in later years, he was interested in the forces of ORDER AND AUTHORITY which, in his view, were necessary to prevent society slipping into anarchy. Carlyle really saw the world as having an authority-figure, however little he defined that figure. This is behind the hardening and authoritarian writing of his later years: the fear that the disorder he had witnessed in his youth (social change, Napoleonic wars, and Industrial upheaval) would overwhelm his society. It was due to this fear that Carlyle turned himself to a determined conservative. He remained, therefore, paradoxically a writer of critical duality: a very conservative critic in his older years as well as a radical critic in his youth.

Walt Whitman sharply observed the duality of Carlyle's personality in his "Death of Thomas Carlyle" (Obituary, Critic, 12 February, 1881):

Two conflicting agonistic elements seem to have contended in the man, sometimes pulling him different ways, like wild horses. He was a cautious, conservative Scotchman, fully aware what a foetid gas-bag much of modern radicalism is; but then his great heart demanded reform, demanded change — an always sympathetic, always human heart — often terribly at odds with his scornful brain.(qtd.in Seigel 457)

Fred Kaplan also notes that "it was as if there were two Carlyles: on the one hand, the angry, uncontrollable prophet; on the other, the gentle, contained and incisive artist, concerned more with vivid depiction than with strong-voiced persuasion" (Kaplan 373). In "Discriminating Idolatry," Ian Campbell aptly cites John D. Rosenberg's argument on the duality of Carlyle: "Radical and authoritarian, compassionate and bigoted, prophetic and blind, Carlyle the man is as difficult to categorize as his works" (qtd.in Campbell 2012: 3).³ Carlyle's embodiment of these dualities indicates that he is imbued with modern anxiety, as Albert J. LaValley rightly points out: " He celebrates the dynamics of change, the possibilities of the new society, but he laments the loss of roots and fears the mechanization of man and a world governed by self-interest and greed" (3).

The duality of Carlyle's personality is a combination of the philosophy he had absorbed from his father in Ecclefechan and the philosophy he had drawn from Goethe and other romantic writers.⁴ Carlyle's conservatism starts in his early writings. *Sartor Resartus*, although regarded as a young man's splendidly radical critique of his society, has already somewhat shown the writer's moderate conservatism and his fear of the threats that enormous social changes might have caused to the people, and such fear is closely related with Carlyle's family background and his early life experience.

Carlyle's family, as we know, was a poor working one, and while he gave up his ambition for the Church he had no desire to return to a working-class environment on the countryside, preferring the difficult life of private tutor or schoolmaster in the city. There, he had ample opportunity to see poverty and social unrest during the difficult years following the Napoleonic Wars, the radical risings in Manchester (1819) and Glasgow (1820) and the periodic hard times which affected the working classes of both Scotland and England. His first introduction to urban life, seeing Manchester and Liverpool and London, sharpened his awareness of the changes convulsing his society.

Carlyle's early writings have already shown signs of paradoxical attitudes towards changes and social advancement brought about by industrialization: on one hand he saw in his travels the convenience of life produced by industrialization; on the other hand he felt more worried about the poverty, class conflicts, loss of faith and the alienation of workers which resulted from rapid social transformation. Bulwer-Lytton's "iconoclastic" new Millennium was to Carlyle the "Mechanical Age" (*Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* 20). In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle adopts a mild sarcasm of Swift-style in attacking the so-called human progress of the "Mechanical Age." The opening paragraph of *Sartor Resartus* is a controlled sardonic scorch on the "progress" of human civilization and the "Torch of Science":

Considering the present advancement state of culture, and how the Torch of Science has now been brandished and borne about, with more or less effect, for fine thousand years and upwards; how in these times especially, not only still the Torch burns, and perhaps more fiercely than ever, but innumerable Rush-lights and Sulphur-matches, kindled thereat, are also glancing in every direction, so that not the smallest cranny or doghole in Nature or Art can remain unilluminated.... (3)

The ironic image of the "Torch of Science" and the ironic play on the word

“progress” or “advancement” are later echoed in many writers, especially in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Outpost of Progress*. The narrator's voice is itself a sort of garment in style, wrapping underneath a sting on the omnipresence of mechanism in Victorian age. In *Signs of the Times* (1829) Carlyle makes an apocalyptic analysis of the “mighty changes” of the manner of existence of human being in a Mechanical Age:

These things, which we state lightly enough here, are yet of deep import, and indicate a mighty change in our whole manner of existence. For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions, for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character. (*Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* 22)

Carlyle fears that mechanical furtherance will reduce to nothing men's innate power of wonder for nature and men's natural capability of work, two fundamental elements that he thinks are indispensable for a spiritually and physically healthy man possessing individual faith and internal perfection. The former, as Teufelsdröckh acknowledges, is “the basis of Worship, something “perennial, indestructible in Man” (53), while the latter a creative instinct or “schaffenden Trieb” (71) which is “the whole duty and necessity of man”(100).

In their insightful Introduction to the World Classic edition of *Sartor Resartus*, Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor precisely point out that “the fundamental premises of Teufelsdröckh's thought is the epistemological distinction between understanding (*Verstand*) and Reason”(xxv). Teufelsdröckh borrows Kant's term “pure reason” to illustrate his philosophy of clothes: pure reason (the intuitive faculty of human epistemological power) which is imaginative and spiritual and thus transcendently reveals to us the things-in-themselves) as opposed to what he calls the “vulgar Logic” (51) or empirical knowledge derived from sense experience, or, in Teufelsdröckh's words, the “Garments of flesh” or “of Senses” (51). Apparently, through Teufelsdröckh's philosophy of transcendentalism, Carlyle severely critiques utilitarianism and scientism prevalent at his times. Walt Whitman went so far as to introduce Carlyle to the American like this: “All that is comprehended under the terms republicanism and democracy were

distasteful to [Carlyle] from the first, and as he grew older they became hateful and contemptible” (qtd.in Seigel 461).

III

Teufelsdröckh is quite uneasy with the progress of Science, which he concludes “is to destroy Wonder ”(53). He asserts that “the man who cannot wonder, who does not habitually wonder (and worship)...is but a pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye” (54). Teufelsdröckh’s logic is clear-cut, pure and thought-provoking: if there is no wonder, there will be no worship and faith, and without faith and worship the society will be in chaos.

Teufelsdröckh’s remedy for the social ailment is Work, because he regards work as “the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments”(126). He cites Goethe’s *Faust* to show how the Earth-Spirit works for the living visible Garment of God:

In Being’s floods, in Action’s s storm,
I walk and work, above, beneath,
Work and weave in endless motion!
Birth and Death,
An infinite ocean;
A seizing and giving
'Tis thus at the roaring Loom of Time I ply,
And weave for God the Garment thou seest Him by. (44)

In the Idyllic chapter Teufelsdröckh suggests that man’s “vocation is to work. The choicest present you can make him is a Tool; be it knife or pen-gun, for construction or for destruction; either way it is for Work, for Change ”(71).The Everlasting Yea chapter ends with a very passionate urging for work:

I too could now say to myself: Be no longer a Chaos, but a World, or even Worldkin. Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it, in God’s name! ’Tis the utmost thou hast in thee: out with it, then. Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work. (149)

Here between the lines of biblical language, we find a strong Christian resignation

to the Gospel of Work, signifying, although not quite convincingly, Teufelsdröckh's inner transformation. Taking *Sartor Resartus* as a sort of life writing, Teufelsdröckh's appeal is recognizably that of Carlyle's, as Peltason rightly notes that the Victorian writing of biography is "one of the chief means by which the Victorians presented their accomplishments and their ideals — the complex image both of what they were and what they aspired to be — to themselves"(Peltason in Tucker 357). Carlyle's idealization of the Gospel of Work was further developed and elucidated in *Past and Present*:

FOR there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair. Work, never so Mam-monish, mean is in communication with Nature; the real desire to get Work done will itself lead one more and more to truth, to Nature's appointments and regulations, which are truth.

The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it. 'Know thyself:' long enough has that poor 'self' of thine tormented thee; thou wilt never get to 'know' it, I believe! Think it not thy business, this of knowing thyself; thou art an unknowable individual: know what thou canst work at; and work at it, like a Hercules! That will be thy better plan.

It has been written, 'an endless significance lies in Work;' a man perfects himself by working. (168)

Here Carlyle replaces the classical dictum of "Know thyself" with "Know thy work" and he conceptualizes work as a mirror wherein "one objectifies and reifies oneself" (P. Rosenberg 60). The similar ideology later finds echo in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1898), in which the character-narrator Marlow recognizes the Gospel of Work in his self-reflections on the steamboat: "No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work — no man does — but I like what is in the work — the chance to find yourself. Your own reality — for yourself — not for others — what other man can ever know. The can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means" (Conrad 31). In his commentary on Michael John DiSanto's monograph *Under Conrad's Eyes* Hugh Epstein points out paradoxically that Conrad realizes Carlyle's idea that "work is the most important expression of being and the most important avoidance of being" (1).

Essentially, Carlyle's work ethics was a precious spiritual treasure he inherited

from his Calvinist parents. In *Reminiscences* he calls his diligent working father James Carlyle “a natural man” and “a noble inspiring example”:

I call him a natural man, singularly free from all manner of affectation ; he was among the last of the true men which Scotland on the old system produced or can produce ; a man healthy in body and mind, fearing God, and diligently working on God’s earth with contentment, hope, and unwearied resolution. He was never visited with doubt....This great maxim of philosophy he had gathered by the teaching of nature alone — that man was created to work — not to speculate, or feel, or dream. (8-9; 10)

Obviously, as Campbell suggests, this passage shows an unmistakable “note of envy in his recollection of his father’s theocentric view of the world” (Campbell 2012: 5) This could be a helpless envy for the lost paradise of simplicity, piety and stability of country life. But more importantly, Carlyle recognised that behind his father’s motivation for work was “his acceptance of a world-order in which the Gospel of Work played a prominent part”(Campbell 1993:179). Here Carlyle wished to use his father not only as a personal moral idol but also as an example of the “Gospel of Work ” for his generation to recover from their moral degradation.

Carlyle witnessed the decline of religion since the beginning of the Victorian age when the clergy had lost some of its prestige and power, and as the century progressed, Victorian religion was repeatedly challenged by evolutionary science and other emerging fields of specialized knowledge. Carlyle’s life experience was very different from his parents who were noted for “more than loyalty and piety” (Campbell 1993: 6) and against the expectation of his parents he ceased to be a practising churchgoer. In spite of all that, he paradoxically never quite left the early influence of his parents’ Christianity and its bearing on his social analysis. His earlier works show he was struggling to articulate the place of the individual in a chaotic world.

Carlyle might have at first a sharp awareness of the change of religious belief when he initiated himself into society, as he himself argued somewhat prophetically in his seminal essay “Characteristics”(1831): “[the] ancient ‘ground — plan of All’ belies itself when brought contact with reality; Mother Church has , to the most, become a superannuated Stepmother, whose lessons go disregarded ; or are spurned at, and scornfully gainsaid ” (*Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* 71). To his desperation the young Carlyle found himself situated in a world without God:

Whiter has Religion now fled? Of churches and their establishments we here say nothing; nor of the unhappy domains of Unbelief, and how innumerable men, blinded in their minds, have grown to "live without God in the world".... (*Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* 66)

Carlyle acknowledges that the past world of his father's generation is irrecoverable, that his father's world has vanished. In *Reminiscences* he recalls with grief those venerable clergy of the old days who have left "ineffaceable" impression on him as well as on Irving:

Very venerable are those old Seceder clergy to me now when I look back on them. Most of the chief figures among them in Irving's time and mine were hoary old men; men so like what one might call antique Evangelists in ruder vesture, and 6 poor scholars and gentlemen of Christ,' I have nowhere met with in monasteries or churches, among Protestant or Papal clergy, in any country of the world. All this is altered utterly at present, I grieve to say, and gone to as good as nothing or worse. It began to alter just about that very period, on the death of those old hoary heads, and has gone on with increasing velocity ever since. Irving and I were probably among the last products it delivered before gliding off, and then rushing off into self-consciousness, arrogance, insincerity, jangle, and vulgarity, which I fear are now very much the definition of it. Irving's concern with the matter had been as follows, brief, but, I believe, ineffaceable through life. (83)

Long after his own religious views had changed, in this moving memoir, written over a single weekend after learning of his father's death, Carlyle wrote:

He was never visited with Doubt; the old Theorem of the Universe was sufficient for him.... Let me write my books as he built his houses... I have a sacred pride in my peasant father, and would not exchange him, even now, for any king known to me...I seem to myself only the continuation and second volume of my father. (*Reminiscences* 9)

Carlyle's admiration for the spiritual security of his father's time was no more apparent than his reminiscence of the stability of his father's rural life — although he also acknowledges in *Chartism* that change is not a necessary EVIL for society as long as it is good for the benefits of the people, Carlyle always shows

anxiety over disorder which he regards as “insane by the nature of it” and “is the hatefullest of things to man” (*Chartism* 30). Consequently, the paradox of Carlyle's changing beliefs is underpinned by the fact he is always distantly in touch with his father's set of values — and he also sees in change, painful as it is, a force potentially for good.

Hence, Carlyle's early life is one where he struggled with several incompatible ideals. First of all, the Calvinist and ordered small-town life he grew up in, never quite left him, though he acknowledged as early as 1832 (writing on the death of his father) that the values that life exemplified were rapidly going out of date, and not suited to the urban environment even a decade or two into the troubled early Victorian years. Another strong influence on him in his early years was his emergence from a working-class background without the privileges of birth or education many Victorian writers might have had — or aspired to. At the time of his settling in London (1834) Carlyle was thus torn between several influences and sharply aware of the change sweeping over his country. Working on *The French Revolution* (1837), on *Chartism*, *Heroes* and the later histories kept his focus firmly on the mechanism by which a society lives and changes, and the occasional bursts of violence and tumultuous upset inevitable at a time like the Victorian age. Perhaps Carlyle's desire for order and peace was nowhere more evident and fervent in his *French Revolution*, in which he eloquently articulated: “Let there be order, were it under the Soldier's Sword; let there be peace, that the bounty of Heavens be not split; that what of Wisdom they do send us bring fruit to its season!” (*French Revolution* 250)

It is therefore no surprise to find that, as the decades passed, Carlyle's view itself changed. The radicalism of his early years (exemplified in his essay on Edward Irving in the *Reminiscences*) gives way to the measured writing of someone who has become an established Literary Giant in London, someone who has emerged firmly into the professional middle class, who is the guest of nobility and a member of the Athenaeum Club and the London Library.

Carlyle's reputation suffered from a lapse in the first half of the 20th century due to the disputed immediate publication of his biography as well as his own hardened views on Africans, Jews and Irish Catholics and particularly his defence of the Governor John Eyre's brutal suppression of Jamaica revolt in 1866. It was not until the 1960s that his international reputation was successfully rehabilitated. In *Culture and Society* (1958), Raymond Williams qualifies him as “the most important social thinker of his century” (76). However, students of literature today might be either not quite familiar with him or tend to associate him unfairly with the “authoritarian

and totalitarian personality cults that brought European civilization to the brink of destruction in World War II" (Sorensen, Introduction 1). For this reason, the course of change of Carlyle's thoughts deserves clarification and re-assessment. We should always remember in our appraisal of Carlyle that he was the offspring of an age of great social change and turbulence, an age in itself full of contradiction and confusion and therefore any evaluation of this great man should be based on a historically dialectical standpoint. Deep in the heart of Carlyle's change and ambivalence dwells the agony of a prophet of modernist consciousness⁵ who was acutely wary of the potential chaos, contradiction and even the absurdity far beyond his era.

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Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of the awareness of the historical transition, see Lawrence Poston: "1832" in H. F. Tucker, in which the 1830s has often been described in paradoxical terms of "the striking contrast between the richness of the political history—Reform, the growth of political and labour union, and at the end of the decade the movement for the redress of working-class grievance, Chartism, the first stirrings of Anti-corn law League, the beginning of systematic government intervention in prison conditions, education, welfare, working hours and public order—and the apparent barrenness of cultural scene" (5). Lawrence Poston also quotes Bulwer-Lytton to show the visible historical transition (See Tucker 14). In fact, two years before Bulwer-Lytton's articulation, Carlyle in his *Characteristics* (1831) had detected the pulse of the change but his expression was more passionate: "How changed in these new days! Truly may it be said, the Divinity has withdrawn from the Earth; or veils himself in that Whirlwind of departing Era, wherein the fewest can discern his goings. Not Godhead, but an iron, ignoble circle of Necessity embraces all things; binds the youth of these times into a sluggish thrall, or else exasperate him into rebel" (*Criticism of Thomas Carlyle* 72).

2. Engels was so appalled by the living condition of the Manchester workers that he concluded in *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* (1845) that this population has "sunk to the

lowest level of humanity ” (Engels, 1958:71). According to A.H. Harrison, Engels presents “the first major study of the effects of industrialization on workers” (See Antony H. Harrison: 1848 in Tucker 21). Typical are his description of the working-class district of north-eastern Manchester. Carlyle also opens his *Chartism* (1840) with the chapter on the Condition of England Questions. Ian Campbell re-dramatizes in detail the “the vacated properties [of the old town]” that “suffered a swift decline, first in social status, then in condition” (Campbell, 1993:15).

3. See John D. Rosenberg vii.

4. In his still important monograph *Carlyle and German Thought* (1934), C. F. Harrold investigates how Carlyle’s early thoughts shows his understanding, amplification or distortion of German thoughts in favour of his own belief. See Charles Frederic Harrold, *Carlyle and German Thought 1819-1834* (New Haven, 1934).

5. Philip Rosenberg argues that Carlyle is “a very much twentieth century figure”(54).

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