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Victorian Perspectives

Six Essays

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‘Hieroglyphical Truth’ in *Sartor Resartus*: Carlyle and the Language of Parable

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In gesture, rather than in speech

Ralph Waldo Emerson made his second visit to England in 1847–8. One of the high points of his year there was his excursion with Thomas Carlyle in July of 1848 to see Stonehenge, Wilton, Salisbury and Winchester. In *English Traits* Emerson recounts the episode and tells the reader a bit of their conversation on the way to Amesbury by train and carriage. Carlyle attacked art generally and ornament in particular:

Art and ‘high art’ is a favorite target for his wit. ‘Yes, Kunst is a great delusion, and Goethe and Schiller wasted a great deal of good time on it:’ – and he thinks he discovers that old Goethe found this out, and, in his later writings, changed his tone. As soon as men begin to talk of art, architecture and antiquities, nothing good comes of it. He wishes to go through the British Museum in silence, and thinks a sincere man will see something and say nothing. In these days, he thought, it would become an architect to consult only the grim necessity, and say, ‘I can build you a coffin for such dead persons as you are, and for such dead purposes as you have, but you shall have no ornament.’

I take this as a parable of a fundamental paradox about Carlyle. The man who rejects ornament, who praises sincere seeing and knowing above all, and who associates sincere knowing and seeing with silence, is at the same time far from silent, even in his praise of silence to Emerson. He publishes works that add up to thirty closely
printed volumes in the collected edition, and, far from composing in a style like a plain coffin, enwreathes everything he writes with fantastic and ostentatious ornament.

In the case of Sartor Resartus, which I take here as my main focus and as the locus classicus in Carlyle’s writing of ‘ornament’, the ornament takes two forms. One is the local form of the openly elaborated style, ‘Carlylese’. Carlylese is mostly metaphor or other figure which displays itself, which calls attention to itself as figure, by its hyperbolic elaboration. Examples are legion, but would include these several not wholly compatible metaphors for the book as a whole: the image of a chaos of documents fitfully illuminated by intermittent flashes of light; or the image of Palingenesis, the image both of society and of Teufelsdröckh as a phoenix about to arise again from the flames of its own self-consuming; or the image of Teufelsdröckh’s life as like a stream plunging over a waterfall and dispersing in vapour, to reform itself here and there in visible splashes and puddles; or the image of nature and the human heart as hieroglyphic writing to be deciphered; or, finally, the image, drawn ironically from Milton, of the Editor’s reconstruction of Teufelsdröckh’s life and opinions as the making of a bridge over chaos:

Daily and nightly does the Editor sit (with green spectacles) deciphering these unimaginable Documents from their perplexed cursie-schrift; collating them with the almost equally unimaginable Volume, which stands in legible print. Over such a universal medley of high and low, of hot, cold, moist and dry, is he here struggling (by union of like with like, which is Method) to build a firm Bridge for British travellers. Never perhaps since our first Bridge-builders, Sin and Death, built that stupendous Arch from Hell-gate to the Earth, did any Pontifex, or Pontiff, undertake such a task as the present Editor. For in this Arch too, leading, as we humbly presume, far otherwards than that grand primeval one, the materials are to be fished-up from the weltering deep, and down from the simmering air, here one mass, there another, and cunningly cemented, while the elements boil beneath: nor is there any supernatural force to do it with; but simply the Diligence and feeble thinking Faculty of an English Editor, endeavouring to evolve printed Creation out of a German printed and written Chaos, wherein, as he shoots to and fro in it, gathering, clutching, piecing the Why to the far-distant

Wherefore, his whole Faculty and Self are like to be swallowed up.2

The other mode of ornament in Sartor Resartus is the more comprehensive, large-scale, all-encompassing form of the complex narrative machinery which makes Sartor Resartus of great interest, among Victorian works, for contemporary narrative theory. Sartor Resartus is as complex and involved a form of storytelling as, say, William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! or Conrad’s Nostromo, Lord Jim or Unner Western Eyes. In Carlyle’s Sartor, as in novels by Conrad or Faulkner, the act of narration, in which someone retrospectively reconstructs the past from ambiguous evidence and ambiguous documents, is foregrounded as a problematic and uncertain enterprise. In all these cases the book becomes in part about the act of narration, about the act of achieving knowledge by a process of remiscient retelling, retailoring the tailor, repatching the patcher, sartor resartus. Both in local style and in overall narrative conception Carlyle, in Sartor Resartus, does the thing that takes the most doing. The book, Sartor Resartus, about the book, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh’s Die Kleider, ihr Werden und Wirkung, which purports to have been published by Stiliswegen and Co.[Keep Still and Company], is one of the noisiest books among the classics of English literature. I shall concentrate here on an attempt to answer the question: Why is this? What is the function of all that ‘ornament’ and indirectness in Carlyle? Why does this sincere man not keep silent or say the truth that is in him directly and plainly, like a coffin made of six flat slabs of wood, fit for his dead English readers, and have done with it? It will not do to say he could not help writing the way he wrote. The question is why he could not help it, given the circumambient condition he was in and the purposes he had in writing.

A clue to an answer or at least to a clearer definition of the question may be given by a passage from Chapter Ten of Book Second of Sartor Resartus entitled ‘Pause’. It is the chapter which follows the grand climax of Sartor Resartus, ‘The Everlasting Yea’:

Here, indeed, at length, must the Editor give utterance to a painful suspicion, which, through late Chapters, has begun to haunt him; paralysing any little enthusiasm that might still have rendered his thorny Biographical task a labor of love. It is a suspicion grounded perhaps on trifles, yet confirmed almost into
certainty by the more and more discernible humoristico-satirical tendency of Teufelsdröckh, in whom under-ground humours and intricate sardonic rougeries, wheel within wheel, defy all reckoning; a suspicion, in one word, that these Autobiographical Documents are partly a mystification! What if many a so-called Fact were little better than a Fiction; if here we had no direct Camera-obscura Picture of the Professor’s History; but only some more or less fantastic Adumbration, symbolically, perhaps significantly enough, shadowing-forth the same! Our theory begins to be that, in receiving as literally authentic what was but hieroglyphically so, Hofrath Heuschrecke, whom in that case we scruple not to name Hofrath Nose-of-Wax [it means literally, of course, ‘grasshopper’] was made a fool of, and set adrift to make fools of others. (p. 202)

This passage functions simultaneously as a real statement demystifying another set of statements as fictional and at the same time as a fictional statement working obliquely and ironically to give the reader directions for how to read the whole of Sartor Resartus, including the passage itself we are reading. The reader is invited to read the whole as hieroglyphical rather than as literal truth, as a ‘more or less fantastic Adumbration’ or indirect ‘shadowing-forth’ of the truth. It is the effect of the application to the passage itself which is hardest to see. It is able to be glimpsed only in the blink of an eye or out of the corner of the eye. This glimpse most concerns me here. In the following paragraph another purported deciphering, quotation and translation from a small slip of paper in one of those notorious paper-bags pins down in a few phrases as good a guide as the reader is ever given to the right way to try and read Sartor Resartus: ‘What are your historical Facts; still more your biographical? Wilt thou know a Man, above all a Mankind, by stringing-together beadrolls of what thou namest Facts? The Man is the spirit he worked in; not what he did, but what he became. Facts are engraved Hierograms, for which the fewest have the key’ (p. 203).

The problem, the reader will see immediately, in a blink of the eye, is that though Sartor Resartus may indeed be engraved Hierograms shadowing-forth a transcendent meaning, those Hierograms, in this case, are not facts at all but outrageous and hyperbolic fictions. Sartor Resartus differs in this radically in its mode of language from most of Carlyle’s other works, The French Revolution, The Life of John Sterling, The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the History of Frederick the Great. The latter have a solid historical or biographical base, however much they make that base the hieroglyphic vehicle of an otherwise invisible spiritual truth. That base is missing in Sartor, except by way of the exceedingly oblique and indirect presence of the facts of Carlyle’s own life story behind the life of Teufelsdröckh. No one who did not already know those facts, however, for example the story of Carlyle’s conversion experience in Leith Walk, could possibly extract them as such from Sartor. My questions here are the following: What, exactly, is the mode of language of Sartor Resartus? Why did Carlyle find it necessary to use such a fantastic mode of indirectness to say the truth that was in him? What does it say about the nature of that truth that it needed to be said in such a roundabout and parabolic fashion?

That Carlyle’s goal was to say that truth and convey it to his readers there can be no doubt. In his letter to Fraser’s offering them the manuscript of Sartor he roundly affirms that, ‘The Creed promulgated on all these things [Art, Politics, Religion, and the rest], as you may judge, is mine, and firmly believed.’ In his letter of 12 August 1834 to Emerson about Sartor he says, apologising for the extravagancies of style, ‘My Transoceanic brothers, read this earnestly, for it was earnestly meant and written, and contains no voluntary falsehood of mine’, and then adds, ‘Since I saw you, I have been trying, am still trying, other methods, and shall surely get nearer the truth, as I honestly strive for it. Meanwhile, I know no method of much consequence, except that of believing, of being sincere: from Homer and the Bible down to the poorest Burns’s Song I find no other Art that promises to be perennial.’ The question is why being sincere, speaking and writing sincerely, in Carlyle’s case, requires such indirection, such recourse to fictions, to figures, to ironies and to rhetorical extravagancies of all kinds.

It is this element of sincerity, as of a man speaking directly to other men and women the truth that is substantially in him and makes up his substance as a person, since it is based on his God-given intrinsic nature, which Emerson emphasises in his memorial address or brief character sketch of Carlyle presented in Boston in Emerson’s old age, in February 1881. This was written just after Carlyle’s death, but was primarily based on a letter written in 1848, after Emerson’s second visit to Carlyle. ‘Great is his reverence for realities,’ says Emerson of Carlyle,
for all such traits as spring from the intrinsic nature of the actor. . . . He preaches, as by cannonade, the doctrine that every noble nature was made by God, and contains, if savage passions, also fit checks and grand impulses, and, however extravagant, will keep its orbit and return from far. . . . His guiding genius is his moral sense, his perception of the sole importance of truth and justice; but that is a truth of character, not of catechisms.5

Friedrich Nietzsche's view of Carlyle was very different, so different as to raise the question of whether they could have been speaking of the same person. Nietzsche, as is well known, greatly admired Emerson's work, carried a copy of Emerson's Essays in his knapsack, and when he lost it, went to some trouble to acquire another. In Twilight of the Idols (Die Götterdämmerung), Nietzsche praises Emerson for having that spiritual agility and gaiety, in the sense of Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, gay science or joyful wisdom, a power of constant self-renewal or self-transcendence, which Nietzsche most prized in himself and in others. Emerson, says Nietzsche, is

one who instinctively nourishes himself only on ambrosia, leaving behind what is indigestible in things. . . . Emerson has that gracious and clever cheerfulness which discourages all seriousness; he simply does not know how old he is already and how young he is still going to be; he could say of himself, quoting Lope de Vega: 'Yo me sucedo a mi mismo [I am my own heir]'.6

Nietzsche's judgement of Carlyle, which just precedes his comments on Emerson in Twilight of the Idols, is strikingly different. It too uses the figure of eating and of digestion, certainly a maliciously appropriate figure for Carlyle:

I have been reading the life of Thomas Carlyle [presumably he means Froude's Life], this unconscious and involuntary farce, this heroic-moralistic interpretation of dyspeptic states. Carlyle: a man of strong words and attitudes, a rhetor from need, constantly lured by the craving for a strong faith and the feeling of his incapacity for it (in this respect, a typical romantic). The craving for a strong faith is no proof of a strong faith, but quite the contrary. If one has such a faith, then one can afford the beautiful luxury of scepticism: one is sure enough, firm enough, has ties enough for that. Carlyle drugs something in himself with the fortissimo of his veneration of men of strong faith and with his rage against the less simple-minded: he requires noise. A constant passionate dishonesty against himself – that is his proprium [i.e. his propriety, what is proper to him]; in this respect he is and remains interesting. . . . At bottom, Carlyle is an English atheist who makes it a point of honor not to be one. (ibid., p. 521)

Which judgement is the correct one: Emerson's, which sees Carlyle as the type of the honest or sincere man, speaking from the heart, or Nietzsche's, which sees Carlyle's propriety as the impropriety of a constant passionate dishonesty against himself? My argument will be that Carlyle is both, or neither, that it is in principle impossible to tell which he is, for reasons which are essential to his situation as a human being, to his strategy as a writer, and to the meaning of the doctrine he preached. The reasons are the same as those which make it necessary for this admirer of sincerity and silence to write works which are so indirect in rhetorical strategy and so stylistically noisy.

In a letter to John Sterling Carlyle defends himself from the 'awful charge' that he does not believe in a 'Personal' God by imagining Teufesdöckh replying to such a charge by laying his hand on his heart and making a gesture of 'solemnest denial'. 'In gesture, rather than in speech: for 'the Highest cannot be spoken of in words'. . . . Wer darf ihn NENNEN? I dare not, and do not.' If, for Carlyle, the highest cannot be spoken of in words, and if the aim of Sartor Resartus, which is precisely words, words on the page to be read, and by no means simply gestures, is to speak of the highest, which clearly is its aim, then that speaking must necessarily be of the most oblique and roundabout sort. It must be a speaking which, in one way or another, discounts itself in its act of being proffered.

Symbols, for Carlyle, are words or other signs, hieroglyphical emblems, which are used to name the highest, the unnamable. Wer darf ihn nennen? This infinite reality lies hidden behind the garment of nature, of words or other signs, and of human consciousness, all three. It might be said that for Carlyle the almost wholly metaphorical character of ordinary language loosens that language up. Ostentatious metaphor prevents language from being caught in a short-circuit of empirical naming of physical objects. The metaphorical nature of language makes it apt as an ingredient of symbol, but a symbol is not an ordinary metaphor. It is an oblique
characterised by the distance and non-correspondence between the embodiment and what it stands for or expresses.

In a somewhat similar way, Teufelsdrockh, Carlyle's spokesman in Sartor, distinguishes between two forms of symbol, those with an extrinsic and those with an intrinsic value, 'oftenest the former only'. Extrinsic symbols may be the glimmering expression of some divine idea of duty or daring, but there is no necessary correspondence between the symbol and what it symbolises. Carlyle gives as examples the clouted shoe the peasants rallied round in the Bauernkrieg or the Wallet-and-staff which was the ensign of the Netherland Gueux, coats of arms and military banners generally, 'national or other sectarian Costumes and Customs': 'Intrinsic significance these had none; only extrinsic' (p. 223). Even the Cross itself, the highest symbol of Christianity, is, amazingly enough, said by Carlyle to have 'had no meaning save an accidental extrinsic one' (p. 223). Examples of intrinsic symbols are 'all true works of Art', 'the Lives of heroic God-inspired Men', the body of a loved-one in death, and, highest of all, 'those [Symbols] wherein the Artist or Poet has risen into Prophet, and all men can recognise a present God, and worship the same: I mean religious Symbols', of which 'our divinest Symbol' is

Jesus of Nazareth, and his Life, and his Biography, and what followed therefrom. Higher has the human Thought not yet reached: this is Christianity and Christendom; a Symbol of quite perennial, infinite character; whose significance will ever demand to be anew inquired into, and anew made manifest. (pp. 223-4)

Intrinsic symbols embody the infinite in the finite. The impetus for the conjunction comes from above not from below, and so the similarity between the above and the below, their intrinsic participation in one another, is guaranteed from above.

This seems clear enough and unequivocal enough, but is it? For one thing, it appears that in his highest example, Carlyle is talking not about Jesus himself, but about his biography, that is, I take it, the Gospels and the other books of the New Testament, and he is speaking of these books as human accomplishments: 'Higher has the human Thought not yet reached'. The Gospels are simply the highest form of the work of art generally, in which 'Eternity look[s] through Time' and the 'Godlike' (Carlyle's word, my emphasis) is 'rendered visible' (p. 223). Moreover, it will be noted that Carlyle
does not speak of the intrinsic symbolic validity of anything Jesus said, for example in those parables which were a main mode of his teaching. It is Jesus himself, the man and his life, what he did, his wordless gestures, so to speak, which make him 'our divinest Symbol'. What aspect of that life, the reader might ask parenthetically, is intrinsically symbolic, if even the Cross itself, as he had said a moment before, is an extrinsic symbol? This displacement of symbolism from what a man said to what he did is reinforced by the inclusion of 'the Lives of heroic God-inspired Men' in the hierarchy of intrinsic symbols, 'for what other Work of Art', asks Teufelsdröckh, 'is so divine?' (p. 224). Most of Carlyle's writing in his long career after Sartor was, as any reader of his knows, devoted to exploring various examples of 'heroic God-inspired Men'. Carlyle is primarily a biographical writer, even in The French Revolution.

Finally, though Carlyle (through Teufelsdröckh), speaks of Jesus as a symbol of quite perennial, infinite character, nevertheless the significance of the life of Jesus will ever demand to be anew inquired into and anew made manifest. I take it this means that, perennial and infinite though it is, Jesus as symbol will fade and become inefficacious if it is left solely as embodied in the lives of Jesus written by Matthew, Mark and Luke. New Gospel-makers are constantly required to make even this symbol manifest for a new time. The new Gospel will, of course, to some degree at least be a new garment for the infinite. It will therefore be a transformation of the symbol depending absolutely for its efficacy upon the existence of what Teufelsdröckh calls a new 'Poet and inspired Maker; who, Prometheus-like, can shape new Symbols, and bring new Fire from Heaven to fix it there' (p. 223). It is difficult to discern the difference between an old symbol made new (old wine in new bottles) and an altogether new symbol (new wine in new bottles), since in both cases a new insight through the finite into the infinite is required.

This becomes especially evident when the reader confronts Teufelsdröckh's affirmation of a subdivision with the category of intrinsic symbols which complicates the apparently firm opposition between intrinsic and extrinsic symbols. There are perennial intrinsic symbols and others only 'with a transient intrinsic worth' (p. 224) even in that highest category of religious symbols. Moreover, the two categories of symbol will not stay neatly divided. The extrinsic is constantly superimposing itself on the intrinsic and contaminating it. Many even of religious symbols have 'only an extrinsic' worth, for example the Cross, while to many works of art which have a genuine intrinsic value extrinsic meanings come in time 'to be added, man-made interpolations which cover over the original shining-through of infinity in time. 'Here too,' says Teufelsdröckh, 'may an extrinsic value gradually supercede itself: thus certain Iliads, and the like, have, in three-thousand years, obtained quite new significance' (pp. 223–4).

The reader will see the problem here. Carlyle, or his spokesman Teufelsdröckh, is not confused. The difficulties are intrinsic, if I may use that word, to what he is trying to say. They arise from what is distinctive about Carlyle's theory of symbol. This distinctiveness is shared, of course, with others in the period called Romanticism. It even appears perennially in one way or another throughout the centuries in our tradition. One such distinctive feature is the introduction of the dimension of fleeting time or transiency. The other is the presentation of symbol as a form of catachresis, that is, as neither figurative nor literal, since, as I have said, it is the only possible expression of what it says and therefore may not be compared to any alternative form of expression, either figurative or literal. The difficulties might be defined by saying that on the one hand the distinction between arbitrary and motivated symbols, between extrinsic and intrinsic, is altogether clear and evidently necessary, while on the other hand the more carefully the distinction is analysed the more difficult, even impossible, it becomes to make it. It becomes harder and harder to discern clearly between one kind of symbol and another. They merge into one another, or each turns out to be a version of the other, not its opposite. As soon as Carlyle allows for the notion of a symbol, with 'a transient intrinsic worth', and it is the essence of his doctrine to do so, then he is granting a particular place in time, a particular man, writer, hero or prophet, an essential role in determining the efficacy of the symbol. It is impossible, in principle, to distinguish this from the notion that the symbols are created or projected, by a kind of performative fiat, through the man himself who proffers the new symbol. This is especially true because there is, as I have said, nothing outside the symbols against which to test their authenticity. They must speak for themselves and carry on their own faces the testimonies or witnesses of their validity. For Carlyle no symbol retains its efficacy beyond its own time. It must be replaced by new ones or by a revalidation, a reinterpretation of the old which makes the old effectively new. Carlyle's vision of human history is of the
constant appearance through the medium of particular men of
transient new symbols, symbols which stand for a moment or a day.
They then fade and vanish, to be replaced with new ones. These are
brought into the world by new ‘Hierarchs’, ‘Pontiffs’, new ‘Poets
and inspired Makers’. Teufelsdrockh’s image of the Phoenix,
constantly reborn from its own immolation, expresses well enough
this vision of human history as a perpetually renewed process of
death and rebirth, as does the projected title of the second volume
of his clothes philosophy: On the Palingenesia, or Newbirth of Society.
Essential to this picture of human history is what Teufelsdrockh
calls, in a phrase the Editor hesitantly quotes from one of the
Professor’s ‘nebulous disquisitions on religion’, the ‘perennial
continuance of Inspiration’ (p. 193).

It is all very well for Teufelsdrockh to distinguish between
intrinsically and extrinsically symbols, but if no symbol can be counted on
to remain permanently valid, then no symbol has the kind of
permanent and logical relation to the kingdom of heaven ascribed to
them, for example, in medieval Christian allegorical interpretations
of the Bible. This both defines the Infinite as something
incompatible with fixed symbols and breaks down the division
between intrinsic and extrinsic symbols by indicating an arbitrary,
impermanent and not wholly adequate quality even to an intrinsic
symbol. If it were wholly adequate, would it not go on being
adequate? How could one tell, for sure, in a given case, whether a
given symbol is intrinsic or extrinsic, since there is no conceivable
yardstick or criterion outside their own force to distinguish them by
and since the permanence of the intrinsic symbol has been
abandoned as its distinguishing feature? Might makes right here,9
as in Carlyle’s later theory of the political leader, and the new right
displaces the old right. The Professor may preserve the nominally
Christian character of his speculations by distinguishing between
transient intrinsic symbols and those of quite perennial, infinite
character, of which the only example he gives is the life of Christ as
recorded by the Gospel-makers. Nevertheless, if even Christ has to
be ‘anew inquired into, and anew made manifest’, presumably by
new Gospels, then it is hard to see how Christ as symbol is not liable to
transience like the rest. Without the new Gospel, product of the
perennial continuance of inspiration, he would fade like the rest.

The centre of Carlyle’s chapter on symbols is an eloquent
paragraph on the fundamentally temporal and temporary character
of symbols. The paragraph rises to a hyperbolic climax in which all
things, even the manifestations of the infinite and the finite, are said
to be conditioned by time, valid only for a time. It is difficult to see
how Christ as symbol would be exempt, any more than ‘many an
African Mumbo-Jumbo and Indian Pawaw’ from the sweeping
inclusiveness from this ‘all’:

But, on the whole [writes Teufelsdrockh], as Time adds much to
the sacredness of Symbols, so likewise in his progress he at length
defaces, or even desecrates them; and Symbols, like all terrestrial
Garments, wax old. Homer’s Epos has not ceased to be true; yet it
is no longer our Epos, but shines in the distance, if cleaner and
clearer, yet also smaller and smaller, like a receding Star. It needs
a scientific telescope, it needs to be reinterpreted and artificially
brought near us, before we can so much as known that it was a
Sun. So likewise a day comes when the Runic Thor, with his
Eddas, must withdraw into dimness; and many an African
Mumbo-Jumbo and Indian Pawaw be utterly abolished. For all
things, even Celestial Luminaries, much more atmospheric
meteors, have their rise, their culmination, their decline.

(pp. 224–5)

One final, or at least penultimate, question remains to be briefly
asked and briefly answered. What of Sartor Resartus itself, which is
one of those works that is obliquely about its own nature and
efficacy? Is Sartor an example of extrinsic or of intrinsic symbol,
transient or intrinsic? Or, if those distinctions indeed do not hold,
what, exactly, is the result of this fact for our reading of Sartor? Any
interpretation of Sartor Resartus must centre or culminate in a
reading of the ‘Everlasting Yea’, and to an explication of that chapter
I turn before concluding.

It would seem that the answer to my question would be easy to
give decisively. The conversion experience in the rue de l’Enfer,
echo of Thomas Carlyle’s own experience in Leith Walk and echo
in turn of all those conversion experiences going back through
Augustine to Saul of Tarsus, is followed by the Centre of
Indifference and then by the ringing affirmations of the ‘Everlasting
Yea’. In that ‘Yea’-saying, Teufelsdrockh asserts his divine vocation
as a writer. He testifies that he is one of those God-inspired men
through whom Eternity enters into Time. He is another ‘Poet and
inspired Maker, who, Prometheus-like, can shape new Symbols,
and bring new Fire from Heaven to fix it there [in the world]’. Feel it
in thy heart and then say whether it is of God!’ cries Teufelsdröckh. ‘This is Belief; all else is Opinion’ (p. 194).

The examples that Teufelsdröckh gives of God-inspired men are all of real historical personages, Jesus for example. What difference does it make that Teufelsdröckh is a fictive character in a work of fiction, someone who never existed as such on land or sea, but in Weissnichtwo? Does that not make him rather a model or simulacrum of such men, proffered for the reader's better understanding of what they might be like when encountered in real life, though not really one himself, only the cunning image of one? Does that not discount, ironize or hollow out Teufelsdröckh’s claim to present genuine Promethean Hieroglyphs or to be such a one in himself? He is not a real God-inspired man but a diabolical image of one, or worse, the mere detritus of such an image, its remnant written down on the pages of a work of fiction, in short, Teufelsdröckh, ‘devil’s dung’. On the other hand, Teufelsdröckh (and presumably Carlyle behind him) names the true work of Art, the lliad, for example, as an example of intrinsic symbol, and I have suggested that in speaking of Jesus as an intrinsic symbol, it is impossible to know whether Carlyle means that life as such, in itself, or that life as written down by Matthew, Mark or Luke, with whatever fictive additions and ornamentations. Might not Sartor Resartus obliquely claim to be another such divinely inspired work of art, even though from the point of view of historical reality it is fictive through and through? On the other hand again, insofar as Sartor Resartus is, in one way or another, Thoms Carlyle's own disguised or indirect autobiography, the story of his conversion and his saying yes to his vocation as a writer transmuted, redressed, as hieroglyphic myth, can the reader not see it as, in fact, historically based and having as much ground in reality as even the Gospels? Back and forth among these various possibilities the reader alternates, without being able by the utmost interpretative efforts to find evidence allowing a decisive choice among them. It is of the nature of ironic fictions like Sartor to be in this particular way undecidable.

Even if this oscillation is momentarily suspended and the ‘Everlasting Yea’ taken 'straight', a further undecidability emerges in the nature of that ‘Everlasting Yea’ itself. Here the interpreter is aided by a now familiar modern distinction which is showing itself to be of great, but perhaps of dangerous or enigmatic, power for the interpretation of literature. I mean the distinction between performative and constative utterances. The distinction was introduced by Austin, developed by Searle, and has been criticised and appropriated for literary studies by, among others, Derrida, de Man and Fish. The distinction between performative and constative language in turn echoes Nietzsche's distinction between er setzen and erkennen, to posit and to know. A constative utterance expresses, accurately or inaccurately, a prior state of affairs, a state of affairs which exists independently of the language which names it. Such a statement records an act of knowledge and is to be judged by its truth of correspondence. A performative utterance makes something happen. It is a way of doing things with words. A performative utterance brings something new into the world, something which did not exist a moment before, as when the minister says, 'I pronounce you man and wife', or when the proper person in the proper circumstances says, 'I christen thee the Queen Mary'. A performative utterance does not correspond to anything already there. It is not the result of an act of knowledge, but is a groundless positing, an Ersetzung, thrown out by the words themselves to change the world. A performative creates rather than discovers. Or rather, it should be said that whether or not performatives are groundless is just the point of most controversy about them. Into the intricacies of this controversy there is not enough space to enter here, but for me a grounded performative is an oxymoron, not in fact a true performative positing, but a species of constative utterance, based on a prior act of knowing, as in the case of God the Father's fiat lux. God already knows before he names.

In any case, which form of utterance is Teufelsdröckh's 'yea'? My argument is that it appears to be a constative statement but is in fact performative, or, to be more precise, that on the basis of Carlyle's own language about it, ascribed of course to Teufelsdröckh, it is impossible to tell for sure which it is, in a systematic ambiguity which is, once more, not Carlyle's fault, but an essential feature of what he is trying to say.

At first Teufelsdröckh's 'Yea' seems unequivocally constative, another version of Isaiah's answer to God's 'Whom shall I send?': 'Here am I, Lord. Send me.' Has not Teufelsdröckh heard God's call in his own heart, and is not his 'Yea' in answer to that a knowledge of his vocation which justifies what he is, what he does and what he says? His speech is in answer to speech of the Eternal, and it is this which justifies his claim to express unconditioned truth hieroglyphically or environed with earthly conditions, to name the
unnamable in symbols which are intrinsically valid rather than extrinsic or arbitrary. Teufelsdröckh’s answer of ‘Yea’ to the divine call makes him one of those working ‘to embody the divine Spirit of [the antiquated Christian Religion] in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live’ (p. 194).

On the other hand, Teufelsdröckh makes it clear that his ‘Yea’ is not to be a knowledge but an action, a gesture, if you will, a form of conduct not the result of speculation, in short, a performativistic. ‘But indeed Conviction,’ affirms Teufelsdröckh,

were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into Conduct. Nay properly conviction is not possible till then; inasmuch as all Speculation is by nature endless, formless, a vortex amid vortices: only by a felt indubitable certainty of Experience does it find any centre to revolve round, and so fashions itself into a System. Most true it is, as a wise man teaches us, that ‘Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action’. (pp. 195-6)

Action or conduct precedes conviction and the knowledge (or conviction of knowledge) conviction brings, not the other way around. One must do before one can know. Performance precedes knowledge. What sort of conduct, action or performance does Teufelsdröckh (or Carlyle) have in mind?

The famous paragraph immediately following about doing the duty that lies nearest you in the actual is given the widest applicability to constructive action of any kind:

Yes here, in this poor, miserable, hampered, despicable Actual, wherein thou even now standest, here or nowhere is thy Ideal: work it out therefrom; and working, believe, live, be free.

(p. 196)

The terms Teufelsdröckh uses, however, his basic hieroglyphical figure here for conduct or action, as well as his account in the next chapter of his acceptance of ‘Authorship as his divine calling’ (p. 198), indicate that what is especially in question here is the proffering of language as gesture, action or conduct, in fact a form of action like Carlyle’s in writing Sartor Resartus. Carlyle’s basic figure for this, or the figure he attributes to Teufelsdröckh, is the analogy between a man’s act of taking up the pen and writing a work like Teufelsdröckh’s clothes philosophy or like Sartor Resartus, and God’s act of creating the world through the divine fiat, ‘Let there be light’. ‘Hast thou not a Brain’, asks Teufelsdröckh in the chapter following ‘The Everlasting Yea’,

furnished, furnishable with some glimmerings of Light; and three fingers to hold a Pen withal? Never since Aaron’s rod went out of practice, or even before it, was there such a wonder-working Tool: greater than all recorded miracles have been performed by Pens. . . . The word is said to be omnipotent in this world; man, thereby divine, can create as by a Fiat. Awake, arise! Speak forth what is in thee; what God has given thee, what the Devil shall not take away. (p. 199)

Teufelsdröckh’s use of this same figure in the next to last paragraph of ‘The Everlasting Yea’ shows what is problematic about it. In spite of the phrase ‘what God has given thee’, it is impossible to tell whether the fiat of the man who holds the pen and wields it as a magic wand is a response to God’s call or whether it is an autonomous act, a performance which on its own turns chaos into an organised world spinning round a centre and making a coherent system. The ambiguity, or, more properly, undecidability, turns on the uncertain reference of the ‘it’ in Carlyle’s formulation ‘it is spoken’. Is the ‘it’ speech of God or is it speech of man the performative penwielder? If ‘it’ is the first, then conduct for Carlyle is based on a prior knowledge, and it is God who brings light, intellectual illumination and order. If ‘it’ is the second then man’s own autonomous act as a producing writer creates the order, posits it as a manbegotten fiction, along with the conviction that the conviction is Godbegotten. It is, I argue, altogether impossible to tell which it is. This impossibility is the essential meaning of the ‘Everlasting Yea’, therefore of Carlyle’s book or indeed of his work as a whole. ‘Divine moment’, writes Teufelsdröckh,

when over the tempest-tossed Soul, as once over the wild-wellerling Chaos, it is spoken [my emphasis]: Let there be Light! Ever to the greatest that has felt such a moment, is it not miraculous and God-announcing; even as, under simpler figures, to the simplest and least. The mad primeval Discord is hushed; the rudely-jumbled conflicting elements bind themselves into
separate Firmaments: deep silent rock-foundations are built beneath; and the skyey vault with its everlasting Luminaries above: instead of a dark wasteful Chaos, we have a blooming, fertile, heaven-encompassed World. (p. 197)

The figure here is a good example of Teufelsdörr[ö]ck's 'Hierograms'. The august figure of God's creation of the world out of chaos is applied to the ordering of man's inner world when he abandons speculation and acts, doing the duty that is nearest him, to make something, for example a book. This is then followed by the famous affirmation or self-exhortation of the last paragraph of the chapter. This, in the light of what has preceded it, would seem to tip the balance in the direction of saying it is man's unaided power of production, plunging blindly ahead to create something, which makes a world out of chaos, were it not for the phrase at the end, 'in God's name'. This could be no more than a strong expletive, or it could mean man's production of order out of chaos is valid only if it is sanctioned and justified by God's election of the writer. This returns the reader once more to that impossibility of deciding which I am trying to identify. '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!' (p. 197).

It will be seen now what I meant by saying that it is impossible to tell whether Emerson or Nietzsche is right about Carlyle. Both and neither are right. Surely no one has ever spoken more sincerely or more from the heart than Carlyle here in the guise of Teufelsdörr[ö]ck, nor has anyone more persuasively praised the productive chaos-taming power of sincere speaking and writing. On the other hand, Nietzsche, with his astute and disquieting psychological insight, is right too. What Nietzsche names as Carlyle's passionate dishonesty against himself, his need to be a rhetor and speak in ostentatious ironic figures, we can see as an inescapable necessity of the position that Carlyle was affirming through Teufelsdörr[ö]ck. Once any symbol of the infinite is seen as transient and as having that sort of inadequacy which is intrinsic to any catachresis, or name for the unnamable, then there is no way in which Carlyle can affirm one version of his doctrine of hieroglyphic truth without at the same time affirming the counter version. What Nietzsche calls Carlyle's passionate dishonesty against himself, I am calling the intrinsic, undecidability of his doctrine.

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Notes

4. CL, vii, 266.
5. Emerson, Works, x, 494, 495.
7. *Twilight of the Idols* was written in 1888. Froude’s *Life* was published in two sections of two volumes each in 1882 and 1884, but probably Nietzsche was reading a German translation, *Das Leben Thomas Carlyles…* Übersetzt, bearbeitet und mit Anmerkungen versehen von T. A. Fischer, 3 vols (Gotha, 1887).

8. CL, viii, 136.


10. For a penetrating discussion of what is problematic about applying the notion of performative utterance to literature, see Rodolphe Gasché, ‘“Setzung” and “Übersetzung”: Notes on Paul de Man’, *Diacritics*, xi (Winter 1981) 36-57.

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Elegant Jeremias: The Genre of the Victorian Sage

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In the introduction to *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold wryly complained that a newspaper had labelled him ‘an elegant Jeremiah’. Although Arnold may not have been pleased by the *Daily Telegraph*’s placement of him in the company of the Old Testament prophet, its remark does indicate that Arnold’s Victorian readers perceived his obvious relation to an ancient literary tradition – one, to be sure, whose zealous and self-proclamation made the urban, gentlemanly Arnold feel more than a little ill at ease however much he drew upon it. Readers of Carlyle and Ruskin similarly perceived their obvious indebtedness to Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel and other Old Testament prophets. Walt Whitman, we remember, commented that ‘Carlyle was indeed, as Froude terms him, one of those far-off Hebraic utterers, a new Micah or Habbukak. His words bubble forth with abysmic inspiration’, and he approvingly quotes Froude’s description of him as ‘a prophet, in the Jewish sense of the word’, one of those, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, who have ‘interpreted correctly the signs of their own times’. All three Victorians in fact owed more than just their tone and their willingness to castigate their contemporaries to Old Testament prophecy, a scriptural genre that devotes itself as much to diagnosing the spiritual condition of an age as to predicting the future.

Recognising the specific elements of Old Testament prophecy that the Victorian sages drew upon not only reveals the nineteenth-century intonation of this ancient tradition but also helps define the genre they created. Indeed, one of the most useful approaches to the Victorian sage begins in the recognition that his writings form a clearly identifiable genre, the definition of which offers readers crucial assistance since genre determines the rules by which one reads, interprets and experiences individual works of literature. As