

The Hero as Seer: Character, Perception and Cultural Health in Carlyle

Gavin Budge

University of Hertfordshire

Abstract

A rhetoric of spectrality pervades Thomas Carlyle's writings, in a way which is intimately related to his characteristic position of "natural supernaturalism." This essay argues that Carlyle's rhetorical emphasis on spectral hallucinations in his descriptions of social upheavals such as those of revolutionary France reflects the influence on his work of physiological theories of perception stemming from the medical thought of Erasmus Darwin, theories which are frequently invoked in early nineteenth-century theories of ghosts and apparitions. Carlyle's preoccupation in his historical writing with the figure of the "Great Man" also reflects this medical context, in that the Great Man's superior ability to perceive the reality of his historical moment is understood by Carlyle as indicative of a superior cultural "health" that he manages to convey to the society of his time, contrasted by Carlyle with the state of feverish delirium characteristic of revolutionary situations. The essay suggests that this relationship to theories of perception aligns the Carlylean "Great Man" to the figures of the Wordsworthian poet and the Romantic genius more generally, and also helps to explain the Victorian emphasis on "character," of which the Carlylean historiography of "Great Men" is an example. The placing of individual character at the centre of accounts of perception by nineteenth-century thinkers such as Carlyle and Ruskin reacts against the determinism associated with Enlightenment thought's assumption that in perception the mind is passively imprinted with sense-data, and reflects the influence of the alternative account of perception as a process of interpretation of signs put forward by Thomas Reid and other Common Sense philosophers.

1

Thomas Carlyle's climactic chapter on "Natural Supernaturalism" in *Sartor Resartus* celebrates the moment when the novel's philosopher hero, Professor Teufelsdröckh, "first becomes a Seer" (191). Having freed himself from "two quite mysterious, world-embracing Phantasms, TIME and SPACE," the philosopher is able to look fixedly on "Existence, till, one after the other, its earthly hulls and garnitures have all melted away" (191). The ultimate reality which Teufelsdröckh sees, however, turns out, rather unexpectedly, to be "Ghosts ... nigh a thousand-million walking the Earth openly at noontide" (199). The professor comments:

Are we not Spirits, that are shaped into a body, into an Appearance; and that fade-away again into air and Invisibility? This is no metaphor, it is a simple scientific *fact*: we start out

of Nothingness, take figure, and are Apparitions; round us, as round the veriest spectre, is Eternity; and to Eternity minutes are as years and aeons.

199

The ghosts are living human beings, seen from the perspective of a mind that has freed itself from the “Illusion of Time” (198).

2

This disconcerting rhetorical switch, whereby apparently solid realities are revealed as essentially spectral, frequently recurs in Carlyle’s writings, and is, as we shall see, absolutely central to his account of the French Revolution. In an article published in 2003, Srdjan Smajic has drawn attention to the way in which this passage from “Natural Supernaturalism” is “permeated with visual terminology and optical references” (1119), relating it to recent work on Victorian visuality by Jonathan Crary, Elizabeth Ermarth and others (1108). Smajic situates Carlyle’s references to ghosts within a larger account of the Victorian ghost story which characterizes it as attempting to destabilize an increasingly hegemonic “physiological model of vision” (1128). Within Smajic’s historical narrative of “the displacement of intuitive, faith-centered forms of human knowledge by the inflexible logic of Enlightenment rationalism and skeptical empiricism” (1118), Carlyle’s insistence on a kind of vision that transcends the materiality of sense perception is made to represent an “energetic ... affirmation of Christian faith” (1118–19), which can be seen to be essentially nostalgic and backward looking (1110) when contrasted with the naturalistic perspective on ghost-seeing in terms of “physiological optics” (1115) that Smajic identifies with David Brewster’s 1832 *Letters on Natural Magic*. For Smajic, Brewster’s emphasis on the role played in the seeing of ghosts by actual nervous stimulation of the retina through reactivated past impressions, in contrast to more psychological kinds of explanation of ghost-seeing, makes his work representative of a scientific rationalism that is essentially opposed to Carlyle’s mystical intuitionism (1115–16).

3

Smajic’s article uses nineteenth-century arguments about the perceptual basis of ghost-seeing to support an account of inexorably advancing secularization, but its description of the agnostic Carlyle as an unequivocal affirmer of “Christian faith” is highly questionable, something which is indicative of the oversimplified nature of its account of nineteenth-century intellectual history. In particular, Smajic’s claim that characterization of vision as, in Ruskin’s phrase, an “absolutely spiritual phenomenon” (Smajic 1120) represented a nostalgic harking back to “a metaphysical, theological model of vision that no longer seem[ed] plausible and believable” (1110) ignores the important role played in nineteenth-century discussions of perception by the philosophy of Thomas Reid and the Common Sense school, whose account of perception as an essentially hermeneutic process, rather

than a mechanical imprinting of perceptual information, was frequently invoked by Brewster's great scientific opponent Charles Wheatstone, inventor of the stereoscope.^[1] This is not to deny that the Reidian account of perception had both metaphysical and theological implications, and that these implications were important to Victorian exponents of the Reidian position such as Ruskin,^[2] but to question the assumption, shared by Smajic with many other critics, that there was no intellectually viable alternative to a naturalistic perspective in the nineteenth century.^[3]

4

Smajic's characterization of Carlyle as a backward-looking proponent of a "theological model of vision" overlooks the significance of Carlyle's oxymoronic "natural supernaturalism," which grounded its claims about the role of intuition in transcending perceptual data in precisely that tradition of "physiological optics" to which Smajic suggests it is intrinsically opposed: in this connection, it is relevant to note that Carlyle moved in exactly the same Edinburgh circles as David Brewster, and contributed to some of his publication projects. In this essay, I will approach the basis of Carlyle's thought in theories of perception through his notorious "Great Men" theory of history, in which it is assumed that crucial historical figures such as Luther and Cromwell are responsible for shaping the course of historical development to such an extent that important indications of the nature of historical change can be deduced from minute biographical scrutiny of their lives. The "Great Men" theory of history is not usually regarded in terms of theories of perception, but I would like to argue that what makes Carlyle's historiography of "Great Men" characteristically Romantic is the extent to which it relies on a notion of perception as the mind's projection of its ideas onto the external world. Carlyle takes the Wordsworthian theme that the mind "half creates what it perceives" and makes it the basis of his theory of history.

5

Looking at the basis of Carlyle's preoccupation with "Great Men" in theories of perception helps to illuminate the Victorian emphasis on the importance of "character," which is often attributed to the influence of Carlyle. Character is a key concept for Carlyle and other Victorians, I will suggest, because it places the individual human subject at the centre of the perceptual process, opposing the Enlightenment assumption that perception simply furnishes the mind with impersonal data. The quality of an individual's perceptions is seen as a function of their moral character, a position which underwrites, for example, Ruskin's interpretations of works of art as reflective of artists' moral development. A similar assumption about the interrelationship between character and the individual's ability to perceive truth can be found in Victorian scientific biography, which, as Elizabeth Green Musselman has recently argued (4–11), consistently links scientific discoveries to scientists' moral achievement in attaining mastery over their own nervous systems through the

practice of self-control. What links Carlyle's and the Victorians' epistemological concern with the "real" with moral questions, I will suggest, is a medical context in which "man's power over himself to prevent or control insanity," to quote the title of a popular Victorian medical tract (Barlow), is regarded as central to the attainment of bodily and mental wellbeing. Perception and its accuracy becomes a barometer of the health both of individuals and the wider culture that has formed them, a connection that helps to explain the frequency with which hallucination is invoked in Carlyle's writings as indicative of the cultural upheaval of periods such as pre-revolutionary France, or indeed of mid nineteenth-century England.

6

There is no disguising the fact that Carlyle's Great Man historiography is emphatically male-orientated, something which reflects a nineteenth-century assumption that women's bodies afford them less scope for intensity of mental engagement than men (Shuttleworth 78), and have intrinsically less reliable health (Oppenheim 32–33). At an early point in his *Lectures on Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle himself describes the Great Man as "the *original* man, the Seer" (258), a characterization that clearly has in view an etymology from the verb "to see." Ruskin's well-known claim that "to see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion,—all in one" (5:333) is an expansion of this Carlylean topos, which indicates its Romantic heritage, recalling the argument of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* that all cultural forms, including social structures, can be seen as the products of poetry. This emphasis on the fundamentally creative nature of an authentic act of original perception can be paralleled in Hazlitt's definition of poetry as existing "wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower that 'spreads its sweet leaves to the air, and dedicates its beauty to the sun'" ("Poetry in General" 1). For Hazlitt, the perceptual act whereby order is realized in the world *is* a poetic act, and this theme of the creativity of perception is invoked by Carlyle to justify his methodological assumption that the biography of a Great Man furnishes an indispensable guide to the meaning of a historical epoch. The individuality of a Great Man is all-important for Carlyle because of its role in shaping perception:

Curious to think how, for every man, any the truest fact is modeled 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."

The Great Man, Carlyle argues, sees the world in his own image, or through the particular set of associations which he has acquired, and can communicate this way of seeing things to his contemporaries, so that his vision of the world becomes the basis of an entire social order. The way the world was viewed by Odin, for example, who Carlyle suggests was a man whose historical circumstances have been lost in the mists of time, has become an entire system of Norse mythology, which Carlyle characterizes as “this huge Shadow of him which still projects itself over the whole History of his People” (*Heroes* 265). For Carlyle, it is simply the foreignness of the Odinic world-view to our present perceptual frame that makes it and other mythologies appear “a distracted chaos of hallucinations” (*Heroes* 241). As we shall see, Carlyle’s assumption that it is only the Great Man who perceives the world afresh, and that most people’s perceptions of the world arise out of an inherited cultural tradition, leads to the concept of hallucination assuming a very prominent role in his writings, particularly about the social upheavals of the French Revolution.

7

Carlyle’s equation of the biography of the Great Man with a particular way of seeing the world reflects widely held assumptions about the importance of “character,” which we tend to associate with the Victorians, but which in fact predate the Victorian period by some time. As Deirdre Lynch has suggested in her 1998 study *The Economy of Character*, eighteenth-century conceptions of “character” as a distinguishing mark in a taxonomic scheme (48), or a providentially ordained physiognomic signature (30), invoke a scopic régime in which the intelligibility of the world is guaranteed by a philosophical or divine superintending gaze. On the other hand, the Romantic approach to character, in which literary figures become endowed with an “inner life” (6) reflects a distancing of the reader from this democratic presumption of universal intelligibility, enabling the preservation of an “élite culture” which is threatened by mass circulation (6) through a tactic of “market stratification” (27).

8

The terms of Lynch’s analysis are highly relevant to Carlyle’s emphasis on the need for an interpretative engagement with the character of the Great Man in order to escape the epistemological problem of determinism posed by eighteenth-century associationist psychology. Coleridge illustrates the nature of the problem in the *Biographia Literaria*, when he accuses Hartley’s associationism of reducing the human subject to “the mere quick-silver plating behind a looking-glass,” (219) in that its deterministic mode of explanation has no way of acknowledging the notion of moral responsibility for one’s own actions. A similar epistemological critique underlies Carlyle’s typically acerbic dissent from a deterministic Enlightenment historiography that invokes social or cultural environment, rather than individual character, as an explanatory category:

Show our critics a great man, a Luther for example, they begin to what they call “account” for him; not to worship him, but take the dimensions of him,—and bring him out to be a little kind of man! He was the “creature of the Time” they say; the Time called him forth, the Time did everything, he nothing—but what we the little critic could have done too! This seems to me but melancholy work.

Heroes 250

The problem with Enlightenment historical determinism for Carlyle is that it begs the question by arrogantly presuming the obviousness of the historical significance that it seeks to explain. A particular historical conjuncture is regarded as determining the meaning of the Great Man’s life, whereas the authentic historical view is the reverse: the way in which the Great Man has perceived his situation is what shapes our sense of his historical moment. In fact, the Great Man’s vision of his time is the only thing that makes it count as “historical” at all, in the sense of possessing a continued significance for the present (Carlyle, “History Again” 218), hence Carlyle’s claim that history is “the Biography of Great Men” (*Heroes 251*).

9

Carlyle’s essay “On History” helps explain why he dismisses the Enlightenment approach to history as presumptuous. Carlyle argues that whereas Enlightenment historical narrative is an essentially linear chain of causes and effects, in reality “actual events are nowise so simply related to each other as parent and offspring are; every single event is the offspring not of one, but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements” (257). Given the complex and rhizomatic nature of historical process, the Enlightenment claim to be able to survey the historical field in order to disentangle philosophical explanations of events looks risibly self-aggrandizing, since it could only be justified by the possession of omniscience (Carlyle, “History” 258). From this point of view, the biography of Great Men represents the historian’s best chance of making sense of history. The life of a Great Man allows the multidimensional complex of events which constitutes biography to take on a symbolic relationship to the unfathomable historical complexity of a period, in that the Great Man, by definition, has already perceived the significance of his historical situation in a way that has been shaped by his life-experience.

10

Carlyle’s quarrel with the Enlightenment assumption that the significance of historical “experience” is immediately evident (Carlyle, “History” 255), rather than being the product of an act of interpretation requiring mediation through the viewpoint of historical actors, reflects wider epistemological controversies in the early nineteenth century about the nature of

perception itself.^[4] Carlyle's Scottish educational background would have familiarized him with the work of Common Sense philosophers such as Dugald Stewart and Thomas Reid (Jessop), who challenged the view, associated with the philosophy of Locke and Hume, that sense-perception furnished the mind with immediately intelligible "ideas," which could be compared to pictures (Reid 256). Following Berkeley, Reid and Stewart proposed an alternative account of perception modeled on the interpretation of a language (Reid 135), thus according the mind a much more central and active role in the perceptual process. Carlyle's insistence that historical experience cannot be assumed to be intelligible to the historian in isolation from its interpretation by important historical actors, or Great Men, applies this epistemological debate about perception to questions about the nature of historical evidence by positioning individual human subjects at the centre of historical argument.

11

Carlyle's view of historical events as being in themselves essentially chaotic poses the same epistemological problem as Coleridge's critique of associationism, that of how the moral category of intentionality can emerge from a randomly impinging flux of sense-experience. The active role in perception attributed to the mind by the Common Sense philosophers helps to resolve this problem, because it suggests that what is perceived is not just a function of the physical environment, but also of the individual's prior history. Both Reid and Stewart emphasize the important role played by acts of willed attention in developing the mind's capacity to interpret the perceptual signs presented by senses: a ship's lookout, Reid comments, can detect the approach of land from signs that would be imperceptible to a landsman (185). Carlyle's insistence that apparent "facts" are always modified by an individual's "own laws of thinking" (*Heroes* 263) reflects the Common Sense school's inclusion of a biographical and intentional component into the process of perception itself.

12

From this perspective, the issue of character becomes epistemologically as well as morally significant, in a way which may be illustrated by the very popular essay on autobiography written by Carlyle's contemporary, John Foster. Foster poses the question of how anyone emerges with a definite moral character, given that an "infinity of miscellaneous impressions" impinges on all of us (34). If the process of character formation were a random one, then a "blank neutrality" (34) would be the most likely outcome, and Foster notes that "in fact, a great number of nearly such neutralities are found every where; persons, who, unless their sharing of the general properties of human nature, a little modified by the insignificant distinction of some large class, can be called character, have no character" (34). This makes, however, the emergence of individuals "with moral features of a strongly marked and consistently combined cast" (34) all the more remarkable, something which

Foster explains by the presence of “some one capital determination” (34) that he describes as “the great secret in the history of character” (35). Foster suggests this individualizing habit of mind acts to filter out any perceptual experience that is not compatible with it:

When a determining principle is become predominant, it not only produces a partial insensibility to all impressions that would counteract it, but also continually augments its own ascendancy, by means of a faculty or fatality of finding out every thing, and attracting and meeting every impression, that is adapted to coalesce with it and strengthen it; like the instinct of animals which instantly selects from the greatest variety of substances those which are fit for their nutriment.

35

Foster’s biological analogy emphasizes his organic conception of character as an associative complex that structures the way the mind sees the world. Character in a sense creates the mind’s historical environment, in that it selects out from the randomly impinging stream of impressions only those that will reinforce the associative nexus of which it consists.

13

Perception for Foster is mediated by the associative consistency which constitutes character, and this notion of perception as being, in the last analysis, subordinate to individual habit and collective custom, I would suggest underlies Carlyle’s claim that a man’s perceptions are “the Phantasy of Himself,” (*Heroes* 263), reflecting the influence of the Common Sense philosophers’ reconceptualization of the perceptual process on both Foster and Carlyle. Carlyle’s own working methods as a historian correspond to Foster’s model of character as an organic associative complex that develops itself by selecting out and assimilating incidental impressions, in a way which helps illuminate Carlyle’s claim that history is “the Biography of Great Men” (Carlyle, *Heroes* 251).

14

In attempting to get under the skin of his subjects, Carlyle read a large number of sources voraciously, but appears not to have kept very extensive notes, relying on an impressive memory for the telling details that are a prominent feature of his historical writing; he also attached considerable importance to obtaining portraits of those about whom he was writing, and to meet this need was instrumental in founding National Portrait Galleries in London and Edinburgh (Morrow 162–63). In the context of the conception of character as associative complex that we have been examining, Carlyle’s Romantic approach to historical research can be seen as more systematic than it might at first appear. The very fact that a historical detail was memorable seems for Carlyle to have testified to its status as part of an associative complex that formed the character of an epoch or an individual, whilst unmemorable details could safely be forgotten as inessential to the historian’s purpose,

which was to present that character (Morrow 164–65). In plowing through the sources, the task of the Carlylean historian was to reconstruct in his own imagination the associative complex which the character of the Great Man represents, and through his writing to transmit that associative complex to readers. The character of the Great Man, following Foster's biological metaphor, thus becomes something like a historical virus assimilating the raw material of historical circumstance to itself, of which the historian's writings are the vector.

15

Carlyle's Victorian readers testified to the quasi-pictorial vividness of his representation of history (Morrow 259n13); given the significance Carlyle attached to portraits, we may compare the process of associative reconstruction which I am suggesting is fundamental to Carlyle's Romantic historical method to William Hazlitt's account of portrait painting. In his essay "On a Portrait of an English Lady," Hazlitt draws attention to the sheer variability of the aspects in which a face may appear, recalling Carlyle's emphasis on the incomprehensible multidimensional welter of historical events. Hazlitt argues that the only thing which can rescue the painter from "this medley of successive, teasing, contradictory impressions" (268) is "an effort of imagination, or a strong feeling of character" (268), much as for Carlyle the effort to imaginatively reconstruct the character of a Great Man liberates the historian from enmeshment in inchoate chronological series. Portrait-painting, Hazlitt comments, must be described as "painting from recollection and from a conception of character, with the object before us to assist the memory and understanding" (268), a remark whose emphasis on the way memory shapes the painter's perception even of a portrait subject who is physically present reflects Common Sense philosophy's account of perceptual acuity as resulting from previous acts of attention.^[5] For Hazlitt, the object painted is essentially constituted by memory, in a way that may be compared to the formative role I have suggested the Carlylean historical method assigns to the individual historian's memory of sources in reconstructing that "character" which it is the purpose of historical writing to portray.

16

The treatment of "ocular spectra," or afterimages, in Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* supplies a parallel in the field of medicine for the emphasis on memory as constitutive of perception that we have identified in Carlyle and Hazlitt. Darwin describes at some length the visual experiment of staring intently at a "circular piece of red silk about an inch in diameter on a sheet of white paper in a strong light" and then gazing away so as to view the similarly shaped afterimage in a complementary green color (1: 14–18). The significance of the experiment for Darwin was that it demonstrated the active role played by bodily muscles in the process of perception. He interpreted the phenomenon of afterimages as indicative of the tiredness of the muscles responsible for visual perception, which led to the production of

the opposite vibratory motion to that corresponding to the perception of red, visible as the green “spectrum,” as a reaction against sustained muscular effort in one direction, in much the same way as one’s arms might shake after carrying a heavy object for a long period (1: 14–18). Perception for Darwin is intimately related to the phenomenon of muscular memory, in a way that supplies a physiological basis for the Common Sense philosophers’ claim that previous acts of attention can improve perceptual acuteness and suggests that the emphasis on the role of memory in perception, which I have suggested is characteristic of Carlyle and Hazlitt, reflects a radical monism in which the spiritual and material are unified, a perspective that Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* described as “natural supernaturalism” (191).

17

Darwin generalized from the example of “ocular spectra” to argue for a materialist conception of thought itself, as made up of a vibration of nervous fibers (Alan Barnes 257) similar to that in which, Darwin argued, spectra showed that perception consisted. Contemporary medical writing supported this claim that thought was essentially a species of muscular action, in that it conceptualized mental hallucinations as produced by a similar kind of muscular or nervous strain as that which Darwin had claimed was responsible for the visual hallucinations of “ocular spectra.” The prominent medical psychologist Alexander Crichton, for example, suggested that intense study of a particular topic was likely to induce hallucinations as it over-fatigued a limited area of the brain (Crichton 2: 29–39).

18

Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan have drawn attention to the paradoxical duality of nineteenth-century visual culture, where “the predominance of realist modes of representation” is accompanied by “a break with realism, an increasingly subjective organization of vision leading to modernism,” drawing attention to the way in which prominent Victorian writers such as Ruskin and George Eliot combine both tendencies (Christ and Jordan xix-xxii). The duality Christ and Jordan describe is highly characteristic of Carlyle’s writings, where an emphasis on the superior insight into reality afforded by the character of the Great Man is accompanied by an overwhelming proliferation of references to hallucinatory “specters.” In light of the medical context represented by Darwin and Crichton, and which is invoked by Carlylean references to “fever-dreams” (Carlyle, *French Revolution* 124, 426) and indigestion, the ghosts and apparitions that populate Carlyle’s writings can be seen as symptomatic of a breakdown of customary order, which makes the Great Man historically necessary.

19

References to specters, phantasms and apparitions can be found on virtually every page of the more heated passages of Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*. The status of these references in Carlyle is often unclear, in that they are poised ambiguously between

metaphorical illustration and substantive narrative content. For example, when Carlyle refers to the September Massacres as “this dim Phantasmagory of the Pit” (418), the status of language, which at first glance seems merely rhetorical, or even hysterical, is problematized a few pages later by Carlyle’s summary of his historical theme:

For man, as was remarked, has transcendentalisms in him; standing, as he does, poor creature, every way “in the confluence of Infinitudes;” a mystery to himself and others: in the centre of two Eternities, of three Immensities,—in the intersection of primeval Light with the everlasting dark!... For though it is not Satan's world this that we live in, Satan always has his place in it (underground properly); and from time to time bursts up. Well may mankind shriek, inarticulately anathematizing as they can. There are actions of such emphasis that no shrieking can be too emphatic for them. Shriek ye; acted have they.

428

Although Carlyle’s religious allusions cannot be easily situated within a doctrinal system, it is nevertheless clear that he regards notions such as Satan as having an existential validity, in a way that makes his earlier reference to hellish apparitions represent more than just a conventional gesture. Carlyle seems to comment obliquely on his own choice of language: in the face of horrors such as those of the September Massacres, he suggests, hysterical “shrieking” may be the only appropriate response.

20

Carlyle, however, has already complained at the beginning of his account of the September Massacres about the fact that “the history of this Period has so generally been written in hysterics” (402), and closes his account of events in Paris with the relativistic reflection that “fell slaughter, one of the most authentic products of the Pit you would say, once give it Customs, becomes War, with Laws of War; and is Customary and Moral enough” (431), something that he suggests ought to prompt his “shrieking beloved blockheads of Mankind” to “cease shrieking, and begin considering!” (431). The hysterical language of devilish apparitions, “proper and unavoidable” (430) as it may have been at the time, should be replaced either by “articulate speech” (430) or at least “silence... in this forty-fourth year of the business” (431). The writing’s self-referential commentary on its own narrative tone makes Carlylean hysteria, like the ghosts and apparitions themselves, curiously unlocatable, in that it is impossible to determine whether it is an expression of the authorial voice or more properly belongs to the memoirs of the period that Carlyle is paraphrasing. This slippery quality of Carlyle’s historical prose gives it an unstable irony closely akin to that which theorists of the novel have identified in Flaubertian free indirect discourse, where the lack of formal demarcation between the discourse of the narrator and discourse focalized through the character leads to the same kind of blurring between viewpoints.

21

Carlyle not only exploits the ambiguities of metaphor and focalization to allow his specters to hover ironically between reality and hallucination, but also insists thematically on their dual status as both illusory and real. Marat, answering accusations before the National Convention after the September Massacres, is described as a “Bodily Spectrum ... no phantasm of the brain, or mere lying impress of Printer’s Types; but a thing material, in his blackness, in his dingy squalor, a living fraction of Chaos and Old Night, visibly incarnate, desirous to speak” (*French Revolution* 448). Carlyle’s allusion to print suggests that his characterization of Marat as a specter is intended to convey the Convention’s established perception of Marat as an instigator of the massacres. The dread with which Marat is regarded makes the real take on a hallucinatory vividness, but at other points in *The French Revolution* the boundary between mind and reality is transgressed in the opposite direction. Earlier, when the National Assembly is dissolved, Carlyle describes it as “a Phantasm-Reality born of Time, as the rest of us are,” (327) and also invokes his existential theme by commenting that its members “worked, as we all do, in the confluence of Two Eternities” (328). In a radically destabilizing gesture, Carlyle characterizes all human life as essentially insubstantial and spectral, whilst his amalgamation of the spectral and the real here seems designed to emphasize the ideological significance of the new constitution formulated by the Assembly, although by Carlyle’s account it had little concrete impact. More sinisterly, Carlyle describes the guillotine as a “Realised Idea,” (*French Revolution* 406), a phrase that seems designed to recall the Coleridgean account of Ideas as formative intuitions that are embodied in constitutional entities such as the Church and State (*Church and State* 15). Carlyle’s later description of “the clanking of its huge axe, rising and falling there, in horrid systole-diastole, in portion of the whole enormous Life-movement and pulsation of the Sansculottic System” (*French Revolution* 525) suggests that the Idea that has been embodied in the guillotine is that of the leveling and anarchic dictatorship of the majority against which Carlyle regarded his history as a warning.

22

The Carlylean specter is ambiguously poised between being and non-being in much the same way as the new forms of government that are struggling to emerge in the France of the 1790s, which Carlyle describes at one point as “spectral Apparitions that cannot so much as appear” (*French Revolution* 372). This spectral ambiguity is closely akin to the dual status accorded to social custom in Carlyle’s thought. In his conclusion to the description of the Parisian September Massacres, Carlyle contrasts the hysteria represented by the “Phantasmagory of the Pit” to the “Customary and Moral” nature of war, suggesting that custom itself is what empowers the mind to arrive at a steady perception of phenomena that in themselves may be horrific. Carlyle comments in relationship to the political improvisations of the Paris Commune, “happily human brains have such a talent of taking up simply what they can carry, and ignoring all the rest; leaving all the rest as if it were not

there!" (*French Revolution* 404), a remark implying that habituation plays a neurological role in enabling the mind to construct a comprehensible perceptual whole out of sensory experience, which is in itself chaotic.

23

In this context, Carlyle's response to the revolutionary claim that France will be "free of formulas" takes on an epistemological as well as a political significance: "man lives not except with formulas; with customs, *ways* of doing and living" (*French Revolution* 444), because otherwise a coherent orientation towards the world, such as is implied in undertaking any action, is not possible. The hallucinatory state that Carlyle associates with revolution is thus expressive of the mind's inability to assimilate its surroundings. But although Carlyle emphasizes the dependence of mental and social health upon habituation, he also draws attention to the need to break with habitual responses where they are no longer productive of health, a condition signaled by mechanical imagery. In an account of French refugees, for example, Carlyle describes Goethe observing "high in honour, at the head of the table ... not a Seigneur, but the automaton of a Seigneur, fallen into dotage; still worshipped, reverently waited on, and fed" (*French Revolution* 441). Here, the characterization of the French aristocrat as a mechanical simulacrum of himself implies that the social relationships that sustained aristocracy have now become inauthentic and dead.

24

In Carlyle's vitalist history, the ideological power of customary worldviews consists in their capacity to assimilate essentially random historical events to themselves and so make them meaningful, a process that repeats on the level of social ethos the way in which definite moral character for Foster elicits an emergent order out of the flux of an individual's impressions. This parallel between social order and individual character helps explain the historical significance that Carlyle attaches to the lives of Great Men, who are able to communicate their associations so forcefully that they become the basis for a new form of social order. In Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, this role is fulfilled by Napoleon, whose decisive "Whiff of Grapeshot" enables the Sieyes Constitution to be established. Carlyle describes Napoleon as "a man of head" in whose hands "the whole matter gets vital," identifying Napoleon's ruthlessness in firing live ammunition into the crowd as the factor which makes the new constitution into a living reality, as opposed to the spectral unreality of previous constitutional proposals (606–07).

25

Carlyle's emphasis on a quasi-biological assimilation through custom as the mark of healthy societies can be seen to reflect the influential physiological reinterpretation of associationism that underlies the medical thought of Erasmus Darwin. Darwin's interest in the periodical recurrence of symptoms such as fever led him to regard bodily health as

dependent on association (2: 423), which, in keeping with his materialist characterization of perception and thought as species of muscular action, on which I commented above, he conceptualized as a sympathetic alignment of nervous fibers (1: 30–35). Diseases for Darwin were morbid associative patterns that the physician could cure through the disrupting effects of “stimulants” such as opium, alcohol and travel, allowing a healthy associative state to re-establish itself (1: 96–100). Given Carlyle’s reference to vitality, it is not fanciful to suggest that in *The French Revolution* he is assigning Napoleon the role of a doctor in relation to the sick body politic of France: just like a Darwinian stimulant, the “Whiff of Grapeshot” disrupts the unhealthy pattern of “Sansculottism,” or mob rule, in favor of constitutional order.

26

Carlyle’s many references to “specters” illustrate the intimate connection between the role of the Carlylean Great Man as a bringer of social health and the projective account of perception that I have suggested underlies Carlyle’s account of the Great Man as actively constituting his historical situation, rather than being passively determined by it. Carlyle frequently emphasizes that a healthy society is one in tune with the eternal and divine nature of reality (Carlyle, *Past and Present* 119–21). In contrast, social sickness is manifested by a preoccupation with keeping up appearances that become increasingly divorced from any basis in reality, which Carlyle thematizes as “Shams” (Carlyle, *Past and Present* 141). In *Past and Present*, for example, Carlyle makes the monstrous hat paraded through the streets of London in order to advertise a particular hatter emblematic of this tendency to value surface over substance, since it illustrates that success in business has come to depend upon self-promotion rather than bestowing effort on actual work (146–47). The culture of spin represented by advertising turns social relationships into a phantasmagorical procession of images that are strongly associated in Carlyle’s writing with the hallucinatory specters of feverish delirium (Carlyle, *Past and Present* 145), a theme of which Carlyle’s most sustained exploration is his essay on the activities of the fraudster Cagliostro in pre-revolutionary France (Carlyle, “Cagliostro”).

27

Carlyle’s medical rhetoric reflects the view, to be found in Alexander Crichton and many other medical writers of the period, that spectral hallucinations were caused by an overstimulated state of the brain (Crichton 2: 29–39), and a similar medical perspective can be identified in much of the proto-sociological writing of the early nineteenth century, where the effects of capitalism in promoting consumerism and exploiting workers are critiqued in terms of the nervous overstrain they induce both in those who are engaged in competitive display and those employed in factories.^[6] Carlyle’s claim that the Great Man has a privileged insight into reality that is capable of correcting this state of affairs, however, also

has a medical basis in the physiological associationism of Erasmus Darwin, in that this suggested that the quality of an individual's perceptions might be indicative of his or her state of bodily health. In the fragmentary writings of Darwin's protégé Tom Wedgwood, for example, who was a significant influence on Coleridge,^[7] perception of the external world is described as an evolving process whereby fleeting and chaotic impressions coalesce into a stable idea that is capable of integrating further impressions organically into itself (8–11). This characterization of perception as a quasi-biological process of assimilation implies that the most adequate perception of the world will be arrived at by those possessed of the most robust bodily constitution, since if health, as Darwin claimed, consists in a stable pattern of association, eminently healthy individuals will be able associatively to digest the greatest amount of experience. This conception of the relationship between health and perception, as I have suggested elsewhere, underlies Wordsworth's poetics (Budge, "Erasmus Darwin"), and in this respect the Carlylean Great Man can be regarded as the Wordsworthian poet writ large.

28

Wedgwood's claim that associative complexes are what make a stable perception of the world possible, which can also be found in other late eighteenth-century writers,^[8] helps to explain why Carlyle articulates his accounts of the breakdown of customary social order in the language of spectral hallucination. In the absence of customary associations, perception itself in this view becomes a kind of delirium in which there is no way of discriminating between momentary impressions and what is of lasting significance, until a Great Man communicates a fresh set of associations that stabilize perception and so make social cooperation possible. Carlyle offers no explanation of how the Great Man himself manages to attain this stable set of perceptual associations when customary order is lacking, but his emphasis on the directness of the Great Man's contact with an eternal and divine reality (Carlyle, *Past and Present* 91) suggests that this aspect of his thought is indebted to Common Sense philosophy's emphasis on inexplicable and transcendent intuitions as the ultimate source of human knowledge.^[9]

29

In this respect, Carlyle can be compared to the popular early nineteenth-century medical writer John Abercrombie, who similarly combines an associationist account of mental processes conceived in physiological terms with an appeal to the role of immaterial intuition in grounding knowledge in an ultimate reality. At the conclusion of a book on educational psychology, which repeatedly emphasizes the importance of inculcating methodical habits of association at an early stage in education, Abercrombie draws a religious parallel. Noting that it is hard to see how disorderly associative habits can be rectified once they have been established, Abercrombie suggests that this state of associative disorder can be compared to a state of sin, from which the intervention of divine grace is required to rescue the individual (341). In a similar fashion, Abercrombie hints, the mind can be restored to an

orderly state of association through directing attention to the divinely implanted intuitive mental principles on which all knowledge is based (342–43) in the Common Sense philosophical perspective within which he situates his work (19–29).

30

Whereas Abercrombie and Common Sense philosophers such as Thomas Reid assume that these divinely guaranteed intuitions are available to all, Carlyle, by contrast, assumes that this intuitive sense of reality is restricted to the Great Man, who thus becomes the mediator between the divine and human society. In this, Carlyle's conception of the Great Man can be seen to be closely akin to the Romantic notion of the genius, who similarly conveys truths originating in superior perceptual abilities to an audience incapable of perceiving them at first hand. A model of this kind of diffusion can be found in a revealing footnote in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, which significantly redefines the notion of "common sense" itself. Coleridge argues that "common sense ... differs in different ages" because it is embodied in linguistic distinctions originally arrived at by "men of research" capable of reverting to "the things themselves," which then pass into general linguistic currency so that "the language itself does as it were think for us" (Coleridge, *Biographia* 205n). For Coleridge, the linguistic creativity of perceptually gifted individuals redefines language for the rest of society, just as for Carlyle the healthy perceptions of the Great Man reshape the perceptions of the community.

31

Carlyle's rejection of the "democratic intellect" represented by Common Sense philosophy^[10] is linked to the question of the religious implications of his transcendentalism, which I raised earlier in this essay. Despite his repudiation of the naturalistic determinism of eighteenth-century philosophy, it is impossible to assimilate Carlyle to nineteenth-century religious orthodoxy, because his emphasis on the way in which the Great Man *creates* the world in which his fellows live brings him closer to Romantic Satanism than to any conventional doctrinal position. In this context, it is worth pondering the implications of Carlyle's well-known claim in *Sartor Resartus* that the invention of "*Movable Types*" led to "a whole new Democratic world" (29).

32

Commentators have frequently drawn attention to the allusion to religious typology implicit in this remark, but its full subversiveness in the context of the psychologization of religious belief characteristic of the nineteenth century has perhaps not been adequately appreciated. The Tractarian theory of typology articulated by Carlyle's contemporary John Keble, stresses the way in which typological correspondences represent a developing set of associative relationships in the mind (169-70), in very much the same way as we have seen that for Carlyle the Great Man's distinctive vision of the world is the product of a unique set of associative complexes into which he inducts those around him. The key difference, of

course, is that in Keble's account these associative relationships must ultimately be grounded in the inspired word of the Bible, as opposed to Carlyle's dismissive allusions to the Hebrew revelation as "old clothes" (*Sartor* 181). The politically conservative Romanticism of the 1830s and 1840s represented by Wordsworth and De Quincey is characterized by a similar religious perspective. The case for a typological reading of Wordsworth's poetry had already been advanced by Keble in his 1816 review, and was endorsed by Wordsworth's flirtation with Tractarianism under the influence of F W Faber,^[11] whilst the symbolism of De Quincey's 1845 *Suspiria de Profundis* is not only personal but leans heavily on Biblical typology.

33

Carlyle's contemptuous dismissal in *Past and Present* of Tractarian "Puseyism" as a "galvanized Dilettantism" (120) makes clear his distance from this conservative Romantic project of a revival of the Church of England. For Carlyle, such religious orthodoxy is just as stereotyped as the "Cant" of Victorian democracy which he mocks in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (63). Carlyle's invocation of the "new Democratic world" inaugurated by "*Movable Types*" suggests that his cult of the Great Man as a kind of divinity should be regarded as a Romantic cult of self-fashioning through reading, in the way that Deirdre Lynch has suggested is typical of Romantic approaches to character (126). Print culture makes possible for Carlyle a conception of democracy as a condition of perpetual revolution which supersedes all kinds of fixity, in which writers, as he comments in *Sartor Resartus*, represent an iconoclastic "Clergy of the Mendicant Orders" (190) whose celebration of Great Men constitutes an ever-evolving cult of the individual.

Biographical notice

Dr. Gavin Budge is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Hertfordshire. Recent publications include a monograph, *Charlotte M. Yonge: Religion, Feminism and Realism in the Victorian Novel* (Lang 2007), an edited collection of essays, *Romantic Empiricism: Poetics and the Philosophy of Common Sense* (Bucknell UP, 2007), and a special issue of the *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30:2 (2007) on "Science and the Midlands Enlightenment." He is the Executive Secretary of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Notes

[1]

See Wade 87.

[2]

The influence of the Common Sense school on Ruskin is noted by Landow 154.

[3]

This issue is explored at greater length in Budge, *Charlotte M. Yonge*.

[4]

The significance of Common Sense philosophy for an understanding of the intellectual context of British Romanticism is explored at greater length in Budge, "Introduction: Empiricism, Romanticism and the Politics of Common Sense."

[5]

For a more extended discussion of this aspect of Hazlitt's art theory, see Budge, "Art's Neurosis."

[6]

See Thackrah, 293–94.

[7]

See Alan Barnes; Budge, "Indigestion and Imagination."

[8]

See Thomas Barnes.

[9]

See Jessop.

[10]

See Davie.

[11]

See Gill.

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