

Carlyle, Tennyson, and "Sincere" Literary Justice

To the Editor:

One of the most spurious judgments made against the social philosophy of Carlyle's *Past and Present* is that it is an expression of personal decay, the insincere product of a mind "not very intelligent, nor unduly honest." This critical posture has been advanced by D. R. M. Wilkinson, who in apparent seriousness claims, "From whatever position we approach Carlyle we cannot but see some kind of Jeremiah or prophet of doom in him."¹ Characterizing *Past and Present* as "vehement pulpit oratory" that represents "degeneration rather than renewal" (p. 228), Wilkinson summarily dismisses Carlyle as "second rate" (p. 233), and chastises scholars in general and David DeLaura in particular for presuming to take him seriously, especially within the context of Matthew Arnold's intellectual development. Indeed, Wilkinson sees something perverse in suggesting that Carlyle might have had a constructive influence upon any of his contemporaries, when it seems obvious to him that works, such as *Past and Present*, are "preposterously crude," being made up of "intense exclamatory jargon" that is distinguished by "insincerity" (p. 230). So sweeping are the number and nature of Wilkinson's strictures of Carlyle and his works that it is impossible within the confines of one paper to answer them all justly, but fortunately in the case of *Past and Present* we need only turn to the text itself in which Carlyle anticipates and answers, a priori, the basic charge of insincerity.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Book 1 of *Past and Present* is not the essentially accountable invective against utilitarianism and its proponents (which Wilkinson seems to deplore), but rather the point-counterpoint balance of the Proem, which begins with a scathing indictment of societal injustices and ends with the familiar Victorian theme of hope.² This contrapuntal structure is vital to the focus and movement of Book 1, but especially to the final chapter entitled "Hero-Worship" in which Carlyle turns directly to Tennyson's *Ulysses* to gain support for his optimism and to lend force to his conclusions. Exhorting his readers with the Tennysonian expletive to have "Courage," which Wilkinson construes as "anarchic protestantism" (p. 231), Carlyle comments on the need to strive for a "whole world of heroes," who he feels will then provide the guidance necessary to overcome social anomalies. "There lies the port and happy haven," he says, "towards which . . . the Supreme Powers are driving us. . . . Let all true men . . . bend valiantly, incessantly, with thousandfold endeavour, thither, thither!"³

The explicit sincerity of conviction displayed here seems beyond question and thus need not be dwelled

upon; but, what is of greater importance, the inherent optimism in statement (which Wilkinson would have us believe is mere bombastic rhetoric) is confirmed by Carlyle's liberal use of *Ulysses*, which had just appeared in the *Poems* (1842), and which supports his call for action. Apart from quoting verbatim from line 44 of the poem, Carlyle restates with little disguise Tennyson's famous challenge, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."⁴ By echoing this call for action in his crucial chapter on "Hero-Worship," Carlyle is able to reinforce the optimism that is integral to the structure of Book 1 of *Past and Present*, while at the same time to provide his readers with a contemporary reference in support of his conclusions. Further, Tennyson's archetypal metaphor of the sea becomes the end-symbol for both Chapter vi and the Proem, which has the effect of strengthening Carlyle's previous and subsequent arguments for palingenesis. Finally, his belief that man must confront the world of action finds immediate example in the character of Ulysses, who says, "How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!"

Supported directly, then, by Tennysonian metaphor and statement, Carlyle assures his readers that "the present Editor's purpose is . . . full of hope," a position that openly confronts those, like Wilkinson, who claim pessimism and insincerity. Returning to *Ulysses* to find the hero-leader who is necessary to his concept of palingenesis, Carlyle addresses the question of man's duty, even "though fierce travails, though wide seas and roaring gulfs lie before us," to seek the "Heroic Promised Land," for "There dwells the great Achilles whom we knew." Here again the Tennysonian language of Carlyle's entreaty, with the emphasis clearly on hope rather than despair, is unmistakable, and is hardly the "polemical thunder" that Wilkinson insists is a "trick of demagoguery" (p. 226). In fact, the language gives the Proem of *Past and Present* a dramatic conclusion that confirms Carlyle's sincerity, even in the face of the most hostile reader. And to reinforce his opinions he quotes nearly verbatim from line 64 of *Ulysses*.⁵ The "Happy Isles" that Carlyle refers to is the "heroic land" of Achilles where heroes like Ulysses and those envisioned by Carlyle will find fulfillment. Of greater importance, however, to both Carlyle and Tennyson is the journey itself, which is filled with hope and constructive in action. As Ulysses tells his mariners, "'T is not too late to seek a newer world" where "Some work of noble note may yet be done." Similarly, Carlyle concludes that if man does "his work in the ship . . . with undying hope," then "all things [will] be fronted, all [will] be conquered."

What seems amply clear is that Carlyle consciously used *Ulysses* to gain support for his hero-concept, to emphasize the need for constructive action, and to

amplify the optimism basic to the social context of *Past and Present*, all of which must surely remove him from the “prophet of doom” category that Wilkinson suggests. That he should turn to Tennyson is only fitting, for as Charles Richard Sanders has pointed out the poem expresses “eloquently . . . his [Carlyle’s] own dynamic spirit,” and “when the subject of heroes and hero-worship was discussed, Tennyson . . . was generally inclined to agree with Carlyle.”⁶

Therefore, the support that Carlyle gains from Tennyson seems vital to any study that purports to deal in any manner with the sincerity, or lack of it, of *Past and Present*. To claim, as Wilkinson does, that the work is an expression of “degeneration rather than renewal” is, I submit, a blatant misreading of the text that has no basis whatsoever in fact. More important, however, Wilkinson’s non sequitur remarks on *Past and Present* open to serious question anything and everything that he has to say about Carlyle. How can he, for example, claim that Arnold looked rather negatively upon Carlyle, and justifiably so, when he fails to mention, much less account for, Arnold’s open (and we must assume sincere) acknowledgment in *Culture and Anarchy* of his debt to Carlyle, however qualified?⁷ Further, how can he presume to question DeLaura’s scholarly integrity, or anyone’s, when his own arguments are based upon quicksand?⁸ And finally, and what is the heart of the matter, who shall sit atop Mount Olympus and judge what writers are, in Wilkinson’s words, “second rate, third rate, and so on”?⁹

In conclusion, as I mentioned earlier, this particular reply to Wilkinson is limited by specific illustration to *Past and Present*, for to argue in greater detail the whole of his case against Carlyle would be to indulge in the critical diffuseness that marks his essay.¹⁰ This is not meant to imply, however, that Wilkinson does not have the right in open forum to criticize Carlyle, or what he sees as the “muddled efforts” of scholars “to raise Carlyle’s status” (p. 234, n. 1). But surely this right carries with it the “responsibility of being just to the past” (p. 225), which he carefully reminds us is essential to meaningful scholarship. To quote out of context, to ignore contemporary judgments contrary to one’s own opinions, and to let emotion sway the critical faculties is exactly what Wilkinson asks scholars not to do, yet does himself. To be critical of Carlyle (or, for that matter, Arnold) is one’s prerogative after he has done his homework thoroughly, but to do so in the guise of advancing scholarship in general and reminding us in particular not to elevate “minor authors . . . at the expense of major” (p. 225) is the worst form of ad hominem. Insofar as *Past and Present* is concerned, perhaps Emerson’s judgment is relevant here and, rather ironically, is the type of true “Literary Justice” that Wilkinson desires. It is, said Emerson, the

“Iliad of English woes” in which Carlyle “grapples honestly with the facts lying before all men,” and notably it gives “sincerity where it is due.”¹¹

RODGER L. TARR
Illinois State University

Notes

¹ See D. R. M. Wilkinson, “Carlyle, Arnold, and Literary Justice,” *PMLA*, 86 (March 1971), 230, 227. In taking the position that Carlyle was a purveyor of “gloom,” Wilkinson uses Clough’s statement, “Carlyle led us out into the wilderness and left us there,” but fails to consider any contemporary opinion to the contrary. Even Trollope, who satirizes Carlyle as “Dr. Pessimist Anticant” in Ch. xv of *The Warden*, admits with direct reference to *Past and Present*, “We all of us could, and many of us did, learn much from the doctor,” who “gave us some hope.”

² Although she does not comment on Carlyle’s use of *Ulysses*, Grace Calder, *The Writing of Past and Present* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 106–97, examines the dualism in structure in Books III and IV, which is an expansion of the Proem.

³ References are from *Past and Present*, ed. Richard Altick (Boston: Houghton, 1965), pp. 40–42.

⁴ References are from *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Jerome Buckley (Boston: Houghton, 1958), pp. 66–67.

⁵ Although he slightly misquotes the line, Carlyle footnotes it in the text to draw attention to its significance. This and the preceding two lines of *Ulysses* were favorites of his. In a letter to Tennyson on 7 Dec. 1842, he writes, “These lines do not make me weep, but there is in me what would fill whole Lachrymatories as I read.” See Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), I, 214.

⁶ See Charles Richard Sanders, “Carlyle and Tennyson,” *PMLA*, 76 (March 1961), 83, 97.

⁷ It is true that Arnold attempts to discredit Carlyle’s concept of the ruling aristocracy, but he does at the same time admit that Carlyle is “a man of genius to whom we have all at one time or other been indebted for refreshment and stimulus.” See *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, Eng.: The University Press, 1963), p. 83.

⁸ In disputing DeLaura’s point that Carlyle exerted a “pervasive influence” over Arnold in the 1860’s, Wilkinson says, “This is not just an overstatement: it is simply not true, and Mr. DeLaura knows it is not true, which is what is so puzzling” (p. 232). The absoluteness of this position is at best singularly unpropitious, particularly in the light of Arnold’s own testimony to the contrary.

⁹ In pronouncing Carlyle “second rate” Wilkinson uses the British Council publication as the authority to refute (p. 235, n. 16). With due respect to David Gascoyne, it is apparent that Wilkinson is not aware that the pamphlet is intended for general rather than scholarly consumption, and thus hardly worthy of the authoritativeness that he conveniently places upon it.

¹⁰ Although not within the province of this response, other specific comments by Wilkinson bear noting. He feels *Sartor Resartus* “dull[s] one’s responses,” is an “exhibition

of solemn unaccommodating egotism," and is "colored by a snarl of indulged anger" (p. 227); he objects to the "emptiness of the message" in *The French Revolution*, which "does not really challenge at all, which is probably why it was so popular (pp. 229–30); he finds much of *Heroes and Hero-Worship* "dramatic nonsense," as well as "platitudinous and oracular—not to mention vulgar" (pp. 227, 231); and he credits Carlyle as being "one of the prime agents in training the nineteenth century to absorb and applaud crude rhetoric and sentimental profundities without flinching" and in doing so "succeeded in passing himself off as a national sage" (p. 230). What place these outrageous remarks, and others like them, have in an essay that has as its expressed purpose "the interests of literary justice" (p. 234) is certainly not made clear.

¹¹ See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Past and Present," *The Dial*, 4 (July 1843), 96, 101.

Mr. Wilkinson replies:

Let me begin by saying that it was never my purpose to "chastise" David DeLaura—and certainly not in the spirit in which Rodger L. Tarr seems out to chastise me—nor did I ever intend to question DeLaura's "scholarly integrity" as Tarr claims. For DeLaura I have nothing but respect, as might be inferred from my article. It was his critical judgment in a particular case that I contested, and I had some hope that he might even come to agree with me. I cannot, on the other hand, see much chance of agreement between Tarr and myself.

Tarr's defense of Carlyle's "sincerity" seems to me to be based on a very curious notion. He seems to suggest that *because* Carlyle made use of Tennyson to support his own standpoint, he was *therefore* for some reason or other sincere. I can make little sense of this, even after having reread Tarr several times with as much willing suspension of disbelief as I can muster. He goes on to say that Carlyle's using of Tennyson showed something still more important, namely that he was optimistic. I can't see why it should. Even if Tennyson had been a profoundly optimistic poet (faintly trusting the larger hope?), why should Carlyle's using of him make Carlyle optimistic? That Carlyle *wanted to convey* a certain sense of optimism may well be true, but if the optimism doesn't come through as genuine, it hardly matters whom he quotes. In other words, we are still left with the question of the literary quality of Carlyle's finished product—a question that Tarr solves very simply. He says that the following expresses Carlyle's "explicit sincerity of conviction": "There lies the port and happy haven towards which . . . the Supreme Powers are driving us . . . Let all true men . . . bend valiantly, incessantly, with thousandfold endeavour, thither, thither!" The sincerity of this, for Tarr, is "beyond question" and so "need not be dwelled upon." Since a large part

of my article was devoted to arguing (in detail) that it is just this sort of language that I find highly questionable (pp. 230–31), little more need be said here. In the above instance I suppose it is especially that emphatic "thither, thither!" that must make one pause—it is so embarrassingly pompous; and pomposity of this kind conveys, I suggest, neither conviction nor sincerity.

Tarr then finds it convenient to believe that I don't know what a British Council pamphlet is, not stopping to consider whether I might have referred to one *because* it was "for general rather than for scholarly consumption," as he puts it. In my article I wrote: "We all know of the growing number of works . . . in which the reading public is pressed to respect unduly the second rate" (p. 233). In a note to this statement I quote from the British Council pamphlet on Carlyle because it is addressed to the reading public and not primarily to scholars. If Tarr thought I had made a mistake, I don't see why he couldn't have been civil about it (see the tone of his ninth note).

Finally, I am accused, among other things, of quoting out of context (though I am not told where). Let me return the compliment, with the civil addition of a specification. The whole of Tarr's eighth note represents a piece of rather unpleasant misreading. He says I dispute DeLaura's point about Carlyle's "pervasive influence" over Arnold in these words: "This is not just an overstatement: it is simply not true, and Mr. DeLaura knows it is not true, which is what is so puzzling" (p. 232). This sentence in my article does not in fact refer to the "pervasive influence," but to a notion of the "total perfection of man," which DeLaura mistakenly said Arnold got from Carlyle. If Tarr had quoted my next sentence it would have been perfectly clear that I was referring to a very particular notion and *not* to the "pervasive influence," and that the "absoluteness" of my position was therefore in no sense "impropitious." My sentence reads: "Earlier in his [DeLaura's] own article he made it clear that Arnold derived this notion elsewhere—that much of his thinking was in fact humanist in origin." This eighth note of Tarr's, let me add, is to illustrate and confirm his contention that my arguments tend to be based upon quicksand. I have a suspicion that I deserve an apology that I won't get.

D. R. M. Wilkinson
University of Groningen

Once Again: Romania

To the Editor:

At the risk of appearing needlessly concerned, I wish to point out to Peter Brooks ("Romania and the Widening Gyre," *PMLA*, 87, Jan. 1972, 7–11) that