

DEFAMILIARIZATION

The French Revolution Now; or, Carlyle's Eternal Return

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IN a fitting synchronicity, the first true scholarly edition of Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* (1837) saw print in 2020. The resonances between the era that Carlyle delineates in his masterwork and the anglosphere of 2020 are bald enough to make even the most assertive strategic presentist blush. Consider the yawning chasm between the privileged and the destitute, the unconscionable abuses of public authority and abject failures of basic governance—and the unanticipated materialization of crowds in the street, whose demands for justice inspired protests around the world. In the United States, 2021 did not feel as if it had truly begun until Joseph Biden's presidential inauguration on January 20; affectively and symbolically, then, 2020 included the invasion of the US Capitol by an insurrectionary mob, an incident that mirrors, as through a glass darkly, similar breaches of the legislature in Paris during the revolutionary maelstrom. Such events are, as Carlyle urges, “the portentous inevitable end of much, the miraculous beginning of much.”¹

Even for readers disinclined to presentism, *The French Revolution* amply rewards revisiting. Published the same year as Victoria's ascension, Carlyle's magnum opus is at once a kinetic history of the revolution—“[t]he crowning Phenomenon of our Modern Time”—and a minority report lodged against the sense of national rejuvenation that accompanied the commencement of the young queen's reign (1:164). By conjuring the phantasmagoria of revolution and imbuing it with unprecedented

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Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 50, No. 1, pp. 203–223.

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doi:10.1017/S1060150321000218

immediacy and pathos, Carlyle warned that the successful navigation of the reform crisis earlier in the decade had not moved Britain beyond the danger of social cataclysm—what T. B. Macaulay had luridly characterized as “the wreck of laws, the confusion of ranks, the spoliation of property, and the dissolution of social order.”² In the British imaginary, the French Revolution was the very type of this catastrophe: an irruption of the masses into public life that precipitated the overthrow of that most haughty and profligate of monarchies—and that, unlike England’s own (notionally) bloodless revolution, spun deliriously out of control.

Notwithstanding its ominousness, *The French Revolution* is a boisterous, even an exuberant, text, electrified by its dramatic subject matter and stylistic temerity alike. Its success established Carlyle as “the first teacher of our generation,” in Harriet Martineau’s phrase, and, despite Carlyle’s own antipathy to fiction, novelists assiduously reverse-engineered its formal and narratological innovations, thereby helping to catalyze the maturation of the Victorian novel.³ Moreover, as I will explore here, the *French Revolution* brims with alternative theorizations of central nineteenth-century concepts (including sympathy, the relationship of the individual to the collective, and utopianism) and employs a singular—and programmatically antinovelistic—mode of narration.

The French Revolution thus seems ripe for recuperation; its author, however, would seem rather the opposite. If the contemporary left (among whom I count myself a humble unit) is characterized by a tendency to draw Manichean moral dichotomies, a figure as spectacularly, ideologically unreliable as Carlyle is unlikely to garner much sympathy.⁴ By midcentury, he had succumbed to despair and his own worst predilections by indulging in vile racist caricature (“On the Negro Question”), authoritarian pining for a strong man to put Britain’s house in order (*The Latter-Day Pamphlets*), and unhinged antidemocratic fulminations (“Shooting Niagara”). While Carlyle thus did plenty to dig his own reputational grave, posterity took to the shovels as well: he was the subject of the first warts-and-all biography in the language (James Anthony Froude’s *Life of Carlyle* [1882, 1884]), and his teutonophilia and lucubrations about “hero-worship” made him an easy target for fascist appropriation. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Carlyle enjoyed periodic resurgences, but his overall trajectory has been one of marked decline. Given his unabashed racism, he might now be at risk of cancellation, as the defacement of Glasgow’s Carlyle monument in the aftermath of a social justice protest intimates.⁵

And yet, so long as understanding the Victorian age remains part of our scholarly brief, some engagement with the Sage of Chelsea is imperative. “Carlyle affected almost everyone positively *and* negatively at one time or other,” G. B. Tennyson observed during one of Carlyle’s reputational upticks; for this reason alone, “he cannot be spared.”⁶ Fortunately, there is an eminently sensible approach to his work that had already taken hold within his lifetime. As the *Blackwood’s* reviewer Will Henry Smith advised, “take, with thanks, from so irregular a genius, what seems to us good, or affords us gratification, and leave the rest alone.”⁷ Why cancel a writer as original, dynamic, and genuinely (if erratically) profound as Carlyle, when we can selectively appropriate him instead?

The French Revolution is the apotheosis of the “good” Carlyle. When the manuscript was in its final stages of preparation, Carlyle confided to his brother Alexander that “[i]t is I think the most radical Book that has been written in these late centuries.”⁸ The simplest version of my argument here is that I think he was right. Whether considered psychologically, stylistically, or politically, *The French Revolution* is a thoroughly radical work, in the best senses of that word: “progressive, unorthodox, or innovative in outlook, conception, design”; “touching upon or affecting what is essential and fundamental.”⁹

1. CONSIDERING MOBS: CONTAGION AND SYMPATHY

In contradistinction to other British commentators, the French Revolution for Carlyle is, paradigmatically, the revolution from below.¹⁰ Its most arresting embodiment, the insurrectionary crowd, is at once the chief object of fascination and the motive force of his history. “[P]erhaps few terrestrial Appearances are better worth considering than mobs,” Carlyle genially announces near the end of his first volume. “Your mob is a genuine outburst of Nature” (1:193). The “dumb dread Forces of Nature” that animate mobs are not extrinsic energies, however; “they are Men’s forces; and yet *we* are part of them” (2:185). Accordingly, we may gain purchase on *The French Revolution* by “considering mobs”—or, more precisely, its depiction of crowds and theorization of sociality. In order to achieve a more refined sense of Carlyle’s vision, I want to distinguish it from a reactionary tradition of crowd psychology to which it has been annexed, on one hand, and the similarly crowd-preoccupied Condition of England novel, on the other. This focus will, in turn, equip us to contend with the history’s formal experiments and the

utopian potential of sociality explored, respectively, in the second and third sections of this essay.

Selecting an example almost at random, let us take the storming of the Tuileries Palace on August 10, 1792, the climactic event of the history's second volume. Carlyle depicts the sudden escalation of the stand-off between militant patriots, intent upon invading the palace and deposing the king, and the phlegmatic Swiss mercenaries who guard the royal family. Attempts at rapprochement are interrupted by artillery fire, and a ferocious gun battle erupts. "[T]here is a sympathy in muskets," Carlyle observes, "in heaped masses of men: nay, are not Mankind, in whole, like tuned strings, and a cunning infinite concordance and unity; you smite one string, and all strings will begin sounding,—in soft sphere-melody, in deafening screech of madness!" (2:223).

Here and throughout the history, Carlyle takes the roiling crowd as a microcosm of humankind "in whole" that, due to its agitation, renders legible constitutive aspects of our species-being. This seemingly innocuous stance rests upon two breathtakingly radical—and fiercely anti-Burkean—suppositions. First, it treats the class makeup of the crowd as, epistemologically speaking, irrelevant. Instead of revealing the debased character of the "swinish multitude," in other words, the plebeian crowd evinces traits that are representative of humanity *tout court*.¹¹ Second, and more subtly, Carlyle presupposes that periods of civic upheaval—the milieu in which insurgent crowds coalesce—differ only in degree and not kind from history-as-usual. Since "[a]ll things are in revolution; in change from moment to moment," revolutionary eras "distinguish themselves from common seasons by their *velocity* mainly" (1:163, 2:77). This quickened tempo discloses otherwise obscured truths (and activates latent, "natural-supernatural" potentialities), but Carlyle heretically insists that there is no qualitative distinction between times of revolution and quotidian history. He thereby jettisons not only the Burkean topos of the "unnatural" French Revolution but the consoling view, shared across Britain's political spectrum, that revolutions are sharply delimited and uniquely disruptive events.

If we return to the above quotation, the figure of the stringed instrument suggests that human beings are mysteriously attuned—complexly yet purposefully interconnected. When one member of the group is strongly worked upon, when a single string is smote, the rest respond in consonance. The revelation of these invisible interconnections is profoundly uncanny, to onlookers (and, by extension, readers) and participants alike. In fact, this passage begins as an explanation of why members

of the French National Guard, who are helping the Swiss mercenaries protect the king, “cannot help their muskets going off, *against* Foreign murderers” (2:223). Spontaneously and instinctively, the National Guardsmen come to defense of their countrymen and women, and thereby discover where their loyalty lies.

Carlyle is trenching on group psychology here, and what Gustave Le Bon would term the “contagion” that sweeps through a crowd and synchronizes its responses.¹² Indeed, on the basis of similar passages John Plotz has influentially—if, as John M. Ulrich has shown, one-sidedly—situated Carlyle within a reactionary tradition stretching “from acknowledged borrowings in Taine and Tarde to the unacknowledged legacy in Le Bon, Sorel, Schmitt, and Mussolini.”¹³ These figures emphasize the irrational vitality and paradoxically inarticulate (that is, nondiscursive) expressivity of crowds. While Carlyle does employ these conventions, he can only be classed with the reactionaries if we ignore essential elements of the sociality that he divines in crowds—not least their genuinely utopian potential.

Before substantiating this point (and in keeping with the triangulating strategy of this section), we should register that Carlyle utilizes “sympathy” to name the recondite affective interconnections that link crowds to one another: “there is a sympathy in muskets, in heaped masses of men.” In the Condition of England literature of the ensuing decades, “sympathy” would, of course, emerge as the go-to solution to the smoldering disaffection that fueled Chartism and other laboring-class initiatives. Carlyle’s emphasis on the utopian valence of group dynamics differentiates him from a reactionary crowd psychology; for all his influence on the Condition of England novel, his conception of sympathy (and, ultimately, sociality) stands in no less pointed contrast to the ways in which the term would be mobilized in these texts—and, arguably, in the Victorian novel more broadly.

In the Condition of England novels, the sympathetic bond that links members of different social classes to one another stands in implicit contrast to the fevered and destructive collective unity exhibited—or threatened—by the laboring class “mob.” By opening a kind of diplomatic channel between the “two nations,” sympathy creates mutual understanding and affection between its participants; it thereby inoculates its working-class representative from the contagious anger of the masses. In Audrey Jaffe’s formulation, sympathy in these texts designates “an individualistic, affective solution to the problem of class alienation.”¹⁴ It pares away working-class individuals from the combustible mass, each excision reducing the detonative power of the remainder.

Far from obeying a logic of individualization, sympathy for Carlyle is a force that reveals occulted networks of affiliation that were already there, thrumming beneath the threshold of consciousness. Moreover, sympathy is the very opposite of a prophylactic against the transmission of destructive, “[d]aemonic” affect (2:185). A passage in “Signs of the Times” (1829) observes:

For there is still a real magic in the action and reaction of minds on one another. . . . It is grievous to think, that this noble omnipotence of Sympathy has been so rarely the Aaron’s-rod of Truth and Virtue, and so often the Enchanter’s-rod of Wickedness and Folly! No solitary miscreant, scarcely any solitary maniac, would venture on such actions and imaginations, as large communities of sane men have, in such circumstances, entertained as sound wisdom. Witness long scenes of the French Revolution, in these late times!¹⁵

Sympathy’s primacy in human affairs is “noble”; it possesses a miraculous, if rarely exercised, capacity to facilitate “Truth and Virtue.” At one and the same time, it is an eldritch, undomesticable energy that fosters delusion and barbarity. Importantly, Carlyle does not map sympathy’s potentiality for “wickedness and folly” onto the lower classes: rather, it afflicts entire communities—and, as his history will insist, nations. Little wonder that the Condition of England writers, who sometimes followed Carlyle to a fault, preferred the less volatile conceptions of sympathy—and, ultimately, sociality—on offer from William Wordsworth and Adam Smith.¹⁶

Yet despite his fascination with the instinct-governed behavior of crowds and daemonic manifestations of sympathy, Carlyle cannot be assimilated to the reactionary company of Le Bon and Mussolini. An irreducibly Janus-faced phenomenon, sympathy retains its underutilized potential to ennoble and improve. Crucially, *The French Revolution* is salted with episodes in which sociality shows its beneficent face. Consider the spate of oath-taking that sweeps through France in late 1789 as citizens, inspired by hope and faith in “the Gospel according to Jean Jacques [Rousseau],” swear vows of brotherhood and fidelity to one another (2:30). Despite his low opinion of Rousseau’s thought and amused condescension to Gallic theatricality, Carlyle writes with warmth of their enthusiasm: “Sweetest days, when (astonishing to say) mortals have actually met together in communion and fellowship; and man, were it only once through long despicable centuries, is for moments verily the brother of man!” (2:35). At the revolution’s epicenter, Parisians behave with a “good-heartedness and brotherly love. . . . as was not

witnessed since the Age of Gold” (2:43–44). In such moments, the utopian potential of sympathy—which I explore in greater depth in my third section—becomes tantalizingly visible.

In his conception of humanity’s “gregarious nature” as in much else, Carlyle “belongs to a sect of his own” (3:88; to Jean Carlyle Aitkin, January 26, 1850, *CLO*). It rests upon a conviction that he had confided in his notebook: “*Man is a Spirit*; invisible influences run thro’ *Society*, and make it a mysterious whole, full of Life and inscrutable activities and capabilities. Our individual existence is mystery; our social still more—.”¹⁷ Our individuality is not merely an epiphenomenon. But the membrane that demarcates our personhood and separates it from the “mysterious whole” of the living social totality is soap-bubble thin and exceedingly porous. Ultimately, scenes of collective action in *The French Revolution* are intended to show that monadic individualism, at once paradigm and ideal of a burgeoning Victorian liberalism, are illusory.

2. THE ART OF INSURRECTION

We are now better positioned to contend with the most audacious formal innovation of *The French Revolution*: its use of collective forces as its principal narrative agents. Rather than writing “great man” history, or mobilizing typifying characters who represent larger sociological entities in the manner of Walter Scott, Carlyle consistently employs synecdochal personification to depict the ideological loyalties and instinctual drives that animate the revolutionary climacteric.¹⁸ “Royalism” and “Patriotism”; “Rumour” and “Hunger”; “Girondism” and “Sansculottism”—these and dozens of other supra-individual forces welter and crash against one another, with the destiny of France, Europe (and, Carlyle implies, humanity) hanging in the balance.

Here, we may profitably return to the siege of the Tuileries Palace, and the Swiss guards’ doomed stand against the enraged Patriots:

Gladly would the Swiss cease firing: but who will bid mad Insurrection cease firing? To Insurrection you cannot speak; neither can it, hydra-headed, hear. The dead are dying, by the hundred lie all around; are borne bleeding through the streets, toward help; the sight of them, like a torch of the Furies, kindling Madness. Patriot Paris roars; as the bear bereaved of her whelps. On, ye Patriots: Vengeance! Victory or death! There are men seen, who rush on, armed only with walking-sticks. Terror and Fury rule the hour. (2:224)

Due to the “ambient atmosphere of Transcendentalism and Delirium” that enshrouds France, collective forces coalesce and spill into the streets

at the slightest provocation (3:92). As impassioned crowds surge toward their object, they supervene individual subjectivities, drawing them into the living cataract.¹⁹ “Volition bursts forth involuntary-voluntary; rapt along,” Carlyle editorializes. “[T]he movement of free human minds becomes a raging tornado of fatalism, blind as the winds” (3:93). Thus in the above passage, “men armed only with walking-sticks” hasten to join the fray, impelled by circumambient “Patriotism” and “Madness” to throw themselves, suicidally, against the Swiss lines.

The French Revolution conveys the imperious gravitational pull of these collective entities through a battery of stylistic techniques, including copious use of the imperative and the first-person plural, its celebrated elemental imagery, and great swaths of unattributed, “polyphonic discourse.”²⁰ Cumulatively, these devices make the experience of reading *The French Revolution* cacophonous and more than a little uncanny. Because the chief actants are collective entities, the narrative is consistently deindividualized; because they are synecdochally personified abstractions, they are frequently *decorporealized* as well. In the crowd scenes, especially, we seem to peer into an abyss of seething elemental forces—“spectral yet real”—that lie just beneath the placid film of the everyday (1:146).²¹ For all his influence on novelists, Carlyle’s rejection of the sovereignty of the individual and the substantiality of the sensuously available world remained fundamentally unassimilable, lest the novel relinquish what are arguably its fundamental constituents: integral characters and empirically knowable settings.

Indeed, *The French Revolution* may be the last significant attempt before the high modernists to develop a narrative alternative to the novel and its conventions.²² Carlyle embraces “fact” rather than “fiction” (or, more supplely, “True Fiction”), even as he takes a prenovelistic mode, the Homeric epos, as the appropriate model for “the Artist in History.”²³ In his bid to restore a sense of *mysterium tremendum* to mundane existence, Carlyle pushes beyond everyday life, the novel’s great subject matter, both thematically and epistemologically. Thematically, his subject is “the most remarkable transaction in these last thousand years”—the annihilation of France’s *ancien régime* and the closing of the feudal epoch in “World-History” (1:164, 1:9). Epistemologically, *The French Revolution* seeks to lay bare humankind’s infinite heights and fathomless depths, which, in pacific times, custom and habit largely succeed in papering over (1:31). As the affective pitch of the nation rises unbearably, the populace is thrust beyond the realm of “visual Appearances”: the

experiential barriers that the novel, in its epistemic commitment to the everyday, treats as coextensive with reality itself (2:119).

But what about “hero-worship” and Carlyle’s lamentable preoccupation with great men? The great Russian revolutionary and populist Alexander Herzen coyly observed that the author of *The French Revolution* possessed a clearer and more profound understanding of social relations than Carlyle himself.²⁴ One of the ways that Herzen’s dictum holds true is that the great men Carlyle’s history extols prove no more capable of steering events than anyone else. While *The French Revolution* alludes to three great men (elsewhere identified as Comte de Mirabeau, George-Jacques Danton, and Napoleon Bonaparte) and makes sporadic gestures to the hero theory, neither the events that Carlyle chronicles nor his own artistic integrity will cooperate with this scheme (2:109).²⁵ Frequently, the roused collectivities that are the primary agents of his narrative simply dragoon a leader as a kind of figurehead. (In one representative case, a veteran of the siege of the Bastille finds himself, in a delicious oxymoron, the “impressed-commandant” of a group of starving women marching upon Versailles [1:205].) Carlyle is reduced to expressing his belief in the shaping agency of heroes in a series of increasingly plaintive counterfactuals. Great men notwithstanding, the revolutionary conflagration will burn “till the *fuel* be all done” (1:178).

3. SANSULOTTISM: UTOPIANISM “TOPSYTURVIED”

Thus far, I have sought to foreground what is distinctive about *The French Revolution*, both thematically and formally. But the key to the larger significance of Carlyle’s masterpiece—and its especial contemporary relevance—is to be found in his letters. Here, Carlyle clarifies that he is not writing a chronicle of the French Revolution per se but a “History of Sansculottism” (to Ralph Waldo Emerson, February 3, 1835, *CLO*). Striking a self-conscious, if self-deprecating, epic note in the history itself, he reiterates this intention: “The ‘destructive wrath’ of Sansculottism: this is what we speak, having unhappily no voice for singing” (1:163).

The sansculottes (“without breeches”) were, of course, plebeian, usually urban, revolutionaries. But, acting the faux-naïf, Carlyle takes the term literally as referring to France’s impoverished “twenty to twenty-five millions” (1:27). Even with this prodigious expansion of its referent, however, “Sansculottism” cannot be equated with the social stratum it designates. Indeed, Sansculottism possesses a surfeit of referents in *The*

French Revolution: it is a popular uprising nurtured by hunger and fear; a visible sign of the existence of a just, if vengeful, God; and an implacable force of negation, incinerating everything that is corrupt or superannuated. Above all, Sansculottism is evidence of hope. Specifically, it is the most concentrated expression of the broader Gallic belief “in the possibility, nay certainty and near advent, of a universal Millennium, or reign of Freedom, Equality, Fraternity,” a “Fraternal Heaven-on-Earth” (3:90, 3:91). As such, Sansculottism is ultimately a manifestation of utopian desire, in the strictest sense of that term: the yearning for an earthly paradise that is achieved by dint of human effort.²⁶

To be sure, Carlyle considers the manifest content of this utopian desire—longing for a Rousseauvian constitutional republic—chimerical. Consequently, he depicts Sansculottism as a form of inverted, or negative, utopianism. This becomes explicit in his analysis of its culmination, the Reign of Terror.²⁷ “Transcendental despair was the purport of it,” he writes, “though not consciously so. False hopes, of Fraternity, Political Millennium, and what not, we have always seen: but the unseen heart of the whole, the transcendental despair, was not false; neither has it been of no effect” (3:157). Unbeknownst to its bearers, Sansculottism is at “heart” an expression of hopelessness and a refusal to remain acquiescent in the “Untruth of an Existence” that is France’s superannuated feudal order. Far from disproving Sansculottism’s utopian essence, however, its mooring in “transcendental despair” confirms it. For “[d]espair, pushed far enough, completes the circle, so to speak; and becomes a kind of genuine productive hope again” (3:157).²⁸ France has been turned upside down by revolution; appropriately, the utopian impulse is itself “Topsy-turvied” and must undergo further development to right itself (2:42).

The reader must wait until *The French Revolution*’s last chapters, and the definitive suppression of the Sansculottic phenomenon, to witness the completion of this figurative circle. “So dies Sansculottism, the *body* of Sansculottism; or is changed,” Carlyle intones after the failed Insurrection of Prairial (1795), and one final breach of the legislative assembly (3:236). However, “[t]he *soul* of it still lives; still works far and wide, through one bodily shape into another less amorphous, as is the way of cunning Time with his New-Births:—till, in some perfected shape, it embrace the whole circuit of the world!” (3:236). The “body” of Sansculottism must expire before its “soul” can undergo dialectical reversal, becoming (productive) hope rather than (destructive) despair. And the object of this utopian hope is for nothing other than the

successful reembodiment of the spirit of Sansculottism “in some perfected shape,” which will enable it to conquer the world pacifically, through fraternal “embrace” rather than genocidal terror at home and military occupation abroad.

The precise content of Sansculottism’s ultimate, world-embracing form cannot be known in advance, but “innumerable inferences” may nonetheless be drawn that confirm its utopian vocation (3:238). Assessing the movement’s legacy, Carlyle avers that “the wise man may now everywhere discern that he must found on his manhood, not on the garnitures of his manhood. He who, in these Epochs of our Europe, founds on garnitures, formulas, culottisms of what sort soever, is founding on old cloth and sheepskin, and cannot endure” (3:237). During its brief incarnation, Sansculottism demonstrated that outward semblance and antiquated symbols of authority are anathema to it; it sought the “Total Destruction of Shams from among men” (2:141). Consequently, we may surmise that when Sansculottism achieves its final embodiment, all human contrivances will rest upon veracity and substance; or, in Carlyle’s distastefully masculinist (and internally dissonant) idiom, on “manhood.”²⁹

Of course, Sansculottism appeared in France in its “primary amorphous shape,” not this culminating, perfected form (3:237). In keeping with its identity as an expression of negative, “topsyturvied” utopianism, Sansculottism realizes itself as apocalypse, instigating a “modern Armageddon.”³⁰ In this despair-driven, annihilative form, Sansculottism proves incapable of inaugurating a new era; it can only destroy. Its apocalyptic cleansing plunges Europe into a “Post-Sansculottic transitional state”—an interstitial age between the demise of a now-obsolete feudalism and the birth of a new social dispensation (3:239). *The French Revolution* thus provides a retroactive genealogy of the influential topos of the “age of transition” that Carlyle and J. S. Mill had promulgated half a decade earlier, which construes the present as a liminal period between the eclipse of a defunct social order and the dawn of a new one. “[I]t is an empty World!” the history’s concluding, “ex-post-facto” prophesy declares, “wo to them that shall be born then!” (3:245).³¹

It is important to note that Carlyle has executed a kind of bait-and-switch here, the identification of which will return us, unexpectedly but inexorably, to the crisis of political legitimacy that menaces America, Britain, and liberal regimes around the world. Throughout *The French Revolution*, Carlyle speaks of the death of feudalism and the birth of democracy in one breath: “the baptism day of Democracy” and

“[t]he extreme-unction day of Feudalism” are one and the same (1:102). But the reader discovers in the text’s culminating pages that democracy, far from being the epochal successor to feudalism, is an interregnum, a “Post-Sansculottic transitional state” likely to last a mere “[t]wo centuries” (1:102). Here Carlyle’s notoriously jaundiced view of democracy, which become ever more pronounced as he aged, rears its head. While his skepticism stems from many sources, *The French Revolution* emphasizes the tendency of parliaments to bog down in intractable debate. Parliamentary representatives “with motion and counter-motion, with jargon and hubbub, *cancel* one another . . . and produce, for net-result, *zero*—” (1:167). Due to this inertia, Carlyle would eventually conclude, democracy is tantamount to “No-government” and can only survive “briefly, as a swift transition towards something other and farther.”³² In short, democracy is the ideologico-institutional correlative of a transitional age devoid of legitimate sources of authority.

Given its interstitial character, this era of democracy might equally be termed the “*Pre-Sansculottic transitional state*,” since it designates the period in which the soul of Sansculottism struggles to achieve perfection, transmigrating from “one bodily shape into another” as it works toward its final, world-embracing form. Although its institutional integuments could only develop historically, Carlyle had no doubt about the principles that would animate a perfected Sansculottism. In *Sartor Resartus* (1836), he had prophesied “Industrialism and the Government of the Wisest” and declared the maxim “*La carrière ouverte aux talen[t]s*,” of which Napoleon was the flawed avatar, “our ultimate Political Evangile, wherein alone can Liberty lie.”³³ Between its evocation of Abbot Sampson’s take-charge leadership of the monastery at Bury St. Edmunds and paeans to the Captains of Industry, the same social ideal is adumbrated, “in a circuitous way,” in *Past and Present* (1843), the work customarily taken as marking the terminus of Carlyle’s progressive period.³⁴ A steam-driven “Aristocracy of Talent,” imbued with a strong social-paternalist ethos, constituted Carlyle’s most palatable vision of the social millennium.³⁵

We are, I trust, too sensitized to the injustices of meritocracy to find Carlyle’s idiosyncratic Tory-radical utopianism seductive.³⁶ Nor is his scorn for democracy likely to strike a chord with readers of this journal, whatever its superficial appeal as a criticism of parliamentary gridlock. Indeed, between his impatience with democratic proceduralism and his history’s euphoric delineation of the comeuppance of a supercilious and out-of-touch governing class, it is not difficult to map Carlyle onto

contemporary manifestations of populist rage at self-dealing elites. Exquisitely attuned to the vitality of symbols, Carlyle would almost certainly view the sacking of the United States Capitol as an indication of “a Symbol well nigh superannuated”—and, consequently, a social order approaching its latter days.³⁷ Yet notwithstanding such affinities to the popular right, it is difficult to imagine that Carlyle would be taken in by such self-evident quacks as Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, or that he would have mistaken the mob that stormed the Capitol for an uprising of the demos, rather than the peculiar combination of militia fever dream and petty-bourgeois temper tantrum that it was.³⁸

What is, I think, ultimately a more productive resonance between *The French Revolution* and our own moment is Carlyle’s conviction that the liberatory promise of Sansculottism is not only unfulfilled, but that in an important sense it has been betrayed. A salutary element of Carlyle’s antipathy to democracy is that it granted him a proto-Marxist insight into the plutocratic ascendancy that its instantiation abetted. The penultimate chapter of *The French Revolution* renders explicit the connection between the liquidation of feudalism and the emergence of an oligarchical capitalism:

Evangel of Jean-Jacques, and most other Evangels, becoming incredible, what is there for it but to return to the old Evangel of Mammon? *Contract-Social* is true or untrue, Brotherhood is Brotherhood or Death; but money always will buy money’s worth: in the wreck of human dubitations, this remains indubitable, that Pleasure is pleasant. Aristocracy of Feudal Parchment has passed away with a mighty rushing; and now, by a natural course, we arrive at Aristocracy of the Moneybag. It is the course through which all European Societies are, at this hour, travelling. Apparently a still baser sort of Aristocracy? An infinitely baser; the basest yet known! (3:239)

Writing a generation after the revolution, Carlyle comes to the sobering conclusion that its sacrifices, outrages, and acts of heroism have abetted a revival of “the old Evangel of Mammon.” With the discrediting of more ambitious “Evangels” and the exhaustion of feudalism’s legitimacy, Europe lapses into the market-mediated pursuit of pleasure.³⁹ In such a dispensation, the wealthy are, ipso facto, the “aristocratic” class, enjoying alike the most resources and the greatest social prestige. Democracy, a self-canceling mode of governance—“producing for net-result, zero”—offers no effective check on their power.⁴⁰ Practically and ideologically, the Aristocracy of the Moneybag reigns triumphant.

Compounding this irony, the reader of *The French Revolution* has seen this show before. In the above-quoted characterization of the state of

“European Societies” in the mid-1830s, Carlyle self-consciously reprises his description of the Girondin phase of the revolution. The Girondins (lauded by Macaulay, J. S. Mill, and other liberals) briefly enjoyed power before being purged by the more militant, demotic, and egalitarian Jacobins. Sneeringly, Carlyle describes the Girondin “formula” as “a respectable Republic for the Middle Classes” (3:87). The Girondins “are as strangers to the People they would govern”—the very people whose uprisings against the *ancien régime* made their faction’s ascent to power possible (3:104). They combine this snobbery with ideological commitment to “free-trade” and economic liberalization (3:108). Accordingly, Carlyle complains that “Feudal Fleur-de-lys had become an insupportably bad marching banner, and needed to be torn and trampled: but Moneybag of Mammon (for that, in these times, is what the respectable Republic for the Middle Classes will signify) is a still worse, while it lasts” (3:88). In a dreary anticlimax, the Europe of the 1830s—and Carlyle is of course thinking of post-Reform Bill Britain as well as post-July Revolution France—finds itself in a social order highly reminiscent of the revolution’s Girondin phase. Superseded during the revolution itself, Girondism nonetheless enjoys its own reembodyment in the bourgeois commercial republic.

One does not have to swallow all of Carlyle’s arguments, nor ignore the manifold differences between the oligarchic republics of the 1830s and contemporary articulations of the same governmental form, to feel a twinge of recognition at this critique. In the United States, the Republican Party’s programmatic efforts to limit the franchise endeavor to keep the republic “respectable”; that is, propertied and white.⁴¹ The normalization of the filibuster in the Senate—effectively meaning that any legislation requires sixty votes, rather than a simple majority, to pass—has done much to diminish Congress’s legislative “net-result.”⁴² But the most resonant similarity between these two dispensations is the untrammelled power of the monied classes.

Indeed, I believe that reading *The French Revolution* as (among much else) a genealogy of oligarchical capitalism compels us to reassess the significance of the January 6 insurrection. To be sure, the feelings of horror, outrage, and sorrow that the Capitol invasion evoked are and were amply warranted. But the pervasive rhetoric of “sacrilege” and “desecration” mobilized in its aftermath demands more scrutiny. The understandably emotional Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, struck the keynote in a speech the very evening of the sixth, lamenting that “[t]his temple to democracy was desecrated, its windows smashed, our offices vandalized.”⁴³ According to this soon-to-be ubiquitous narrative,

the unmistakably juvenile acts of vandalism—petty thievery, graffitiing, smearing of feces—committed by conspiracy-theory-addled rioters profaned the “hallowed halls” of the national civic religion.⁴⁴ If, in a Carlylean vein, we accept that the Capitol is indeed a holy site, this account nonetheless works to efface previous acts of desecration by implying that the “temple of democracy” was undefiled *until* the insurrectionists’ spectacular incursion. In its singularity and its garishness, the sacking of the Capitol provides a doubly misleading foil to the thoroughly routinized buying of legislative influence that is the Aristocracy of Moneybag’s own distinctive mode of profanation.⁴⁵ This systematic corruption is surely a far graver cause of concern than any riot, no matter how symbolically fraught, because it fosters anomie, disaffection, and resentment: the “ambient atmosphere” in which cynical disengagement and demagogic opportunism alike flourish.

To our own sorrow, the ascendancy of oligarchical republics that *The French Revolution* describes remains deeply pertinent to twenty-first-century liberal societies. But then, so too does Carlyle’s conviction that Sansculottism will, in some refined form, eventually carry all before it. “*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, these are the words; enunciative and prophetic. Republic for the respectable washed Middle Classes, how can that be the fulfilment thereof?” (3:87). The French Revolution is over, but the history of Sansculottism most certainly is not.

NOTES

I wish to thank Danny Hack and Rachel Ablow for their contributions to this essay. Thanks as well to Elizabeth Helsinger for introducing me to *The French Revolution*, Ian Duncan for guiding my early work on it, and the community of Carlyle scholars (Jane Welsh as well as Thomas!) for nurturing my development over many years.

1. *The French Revolution: A History in Three Volumes*, edited by Mark Cumming and David R. Sorensen, 1:165. Subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text. A paperback with the same scholarly established text (with a slimmer, but still useful, apparatus) may be found in *The French Revolution*, edited by David R. Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser. The fullest study of Carlyle’s history is Cumming, *Disimprisoned Epic*.
2. Macaulay, “A Speech,” 25.

3. Martineau, *History*, 2:704. Dickens claimed to have read the *French Revolution* five hundred times, yet he conscientiously read it again before assaying *Bleak House*. See Arac, *Commissioned Spirits*, 116–38.
4. Note that this charge of Manicheanism is leveled by stalwarts of the traditional left as well as conservatives. See, for example, Judis, “A Warning.”
5. Morrison, “Kelvingrove Statue.”
6. Tennyson, “Thomas Carlyle,” 33.
7. Smith, review of *Past and Present*, 133. This “good” is traditionally conceived diachronically and mapped onto a distinction between a young (innovative, humane, hopeful) and old (rote, despotic, despairing) Carlyle. But this unevenness may also be understood synchronically, as observable in any one of his texts.
8. Carlyle to Alexander Carlyle, April 23, 1837, in *Carlyle Letters Online [CLO]*. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.
9. *Oxford English Dictionary (Online)*, “Radical, adj. and noun.” www.oed.com.owu/idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/157251 (accessed October 5, 2020).
10. Helpful discussions of *The French Revolution* in the context of contemporaneous historiography include Ben-Israel, *English Historians*, 127–47; Simmons, *Eyes across the Channel*, 63–98.
11. Burke, *Reflections*, 79.
12. Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 33. The topos of “contagion,” made canonical by Le Bon, goes back (at least) to David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), a text that Carlyle knew well.
13. Plotz, *The Crowd*, 150–51. As Ulrich points out, Carlyle was cited, approvingly, by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Marx and Engels (“Carlyle’s *Chartism*,” 83).
14. Jaffe, *Scenes*, 15.
15. Carlyle, “Signs of the Times,” 56–57.
16. As Jaffe, Rae Greiner, and others have argued, the sympathetic paradigm favored by the Victorians is essentially Smithian: it operates via highly cerebral acts of imaginative “fellow-feeling” that inhibit complete affective and intellectual identification (Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism*, 10). Carlyle follows—and, characteristically, radicalizes—Hume rather than Smith, in understanding sympathy as entailing the involuntary and contagious transmission of affect among *groups*.
17. Carlyle, *Two Note Books*, 161. For Carlyle, the spiritual underpinnings of this interconnection are paramount. But his understanding of the

porousness of the self invites other theoretical frames—affect theory and group psychology among them.

18. Gone, too, is Scott's wavering hero, whose very malleability protects him from commitment. Ironically, the great waverer in Carlyle's history is Louis XIV himself, "who wills, and yet wills not," and whose dithering ultimately leads to the guillotine (1:218).
19. In his classic *The Crowd and the Mob*, J. S. McClelland argues that *The French Revolution's* representation of crowds is "pre-psychological," because it depicts collectivities as manifestations of "preternatural" and "providential" vitality (121, 120). But this is to miss Carlyle's more radical insistence that individual psychology itself can be suspended by collective energies.
20. Lodge, "The French Revolution," 130.
21. Carlyle, John Rosenberg perceptively comments, "is the poet of the insubstantiality of the 'real' and reality of the Phantasmagoric" (24).
22. *The French Revolution* thus picks up where *Sartor Resartus*, that parodic deconstruction of the novel, left off. On *Sartor* as a critique of "metonymy-based novelistic realism" (307), see Duncan, *Scott's Shadow*, 306–10.
23. Carlyle, "Biography," 135. In letters to his brother John, Carlyle avowed his intention to write "an Epic Poem of the Revolution" and characterized "The Diamond Necklace" as his trial run at "*True Fiction*" (September 21, 1834, *CLO*; July 22, 1834, *CLO*). Carlyle theorizes "the Artist of History" in "On History" (9).
24. Sorensen, "A Scotch Proudhon," 41.
25. To John Stuart Mill, January 12, 1833, *CLO*. Of course, even Carlyle's mature hero theory is more nuanced than it initially appears; see P. Rosenberg, *The Seventh Hero*, 176–203.
26. On this definition of utopia, see, for example, Williams, "Utopia and Science Fiction." For the most complete theorization of the linkage between hope and utopianism, see Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*.
27. Carlyle's understanding of the Terror is unexpectedly nuanced, joining unflinching candor about the atrocities that were committed with a sense of proportion about its scope: "History, looking back over this France through long times . . . confesses mournfully that there is no period to be met with, in which the general Twenty-five Millions of France suffered *less* than in this period which they name Reign of Terror! But it was not the Dumb Millions that suffered here; it was the Speaking Thousands" (3:237–38).

28. Here Carlyle does Bloch, the philosopher of hope, one better. For Bloch, despair, “the *absolutely negative* expectant emotion,” is the antithesis of hope (1:111). Whereas hope drives toward “the *paradisal*,” despair intends toward “the *infernal*” (1:113). But Carlyle conceives of despair as itself, at bottom, a manifestation of hope, which pursues the paradisal by plunging the corrupt into the infernal.
29. This masculinist formulation is internally dissonant because *The French Revolution* offers admiring portraits of what is absent in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* itself: crudely put, “the hero as woman.” Carlyle depicts Charlotte Corday, the assassin of the unhinged Marat, and Madame Roland, Girondin memorialist, in adulatory terms.
30. J. Rosenberg, *Carlyle*, 29.
31. On Mill, Carlyle, and “the age of transition,” see Culler, *Victorian Mirror*, 39–73.
32. Carlyle, “Chartism,” 159, 158.
33. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 92, 133.
34. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 40.
35. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 30. Given the anglophone world’s riven social safety nets, we should not be too smug in our condescension to Carlyle’s social paternalism. This same paternalism fueled his interest in socialist theoreticians of planned economies, from the Saint-Simonians to Louis Blanc. For social paternalism as a constituent of socialism, see Allison, *Imagining Socialism*.
36. See Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*. It may seem odd to approach Carlyle as a utopian thinker, given his puritanical conviction of human depravity and cyclical understanding of history. However, his sensibility is also profoundly eschatological, informed by what LaValley identifies as “the biblical desire to force the judgment day” (*Carlyle*, 230) and the urge to bring society into congruence with the “eternal Laws” of the universe (*Carlyle, Past and Present*, 36).
37. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 166.
38. Sufficient evidence has emerged that the January 6 Capitol riot was not a popular uprising but a marriage of convenience (officiated, doubtless, by the QAnon Shaman) between an aggrieved segment of the petty bourgeoisie and small paramilitary cadres, acting alike at the urging of a mendacious, soon-to-be-former president. See Beckett, “Arrests of Beverley Hills”; “This Is Our House.”
39. In “The Jewish Question,” Marx characterizes the aftermath of feudalism’s defeat in analogous terms. With the overthrow of the feudal

- order, “man . . . was not freed from property, he received freedom to own property. He was not freed from the egoism of business, he received freedom to engage in business” (167).
40. Carlyle would subsequently add that the tendency of representative governments to stalemate effectively makes their default policy one of laissez-faire, the creed most congenial to the wealthy. See Carlyle, “Chartism,” 155–70.
 41. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, “at least 18 states enacted 30 laws that restrict access to the vote” since January 1, 2021 (“Voting Laws”).
 42. As Tim Lau notes, about half of the filibusters since 1917 have occurred in the last twelve years (“The Filibuster”).
 43. “Chuck Schumer’s Statement.”
 44. “Chuck Schumer’s Statement.”
 45. This is to leave to one side the fact that, in a literal sense, Americans are *governed* by the “Aristocracy of the Moneybag.” The median reported income of the members of the penultimate Congress (the most recent for which data is available) was more than a million dollars (Evers-Hilstrom, “Majority of Lawmakers”).

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