

Goethe: Carlyle's Spiritual Guide

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Thomas Carlyle's study of German thought, history, and literature was the single most decisive influence in his life. Attempts are made from time to time to play this down, as if something must be disputed because it is obvious, or perhaps because it is difficult to accept that Carlyle did indeed publicly favor surging Prussia over pompous France in the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War and duly received his medal from Chancellor Bismarck upon German unification. Or sometimes a strange anachronistic argument is implied: Goebbels read from Carlyle's history of Frederick the Great to a desperate Führer who was hiding out in his Berlin bunker and taking refuge in astrology as the Americans crossed the Rhine, and the Russians were shelling the capital of the Reich; therefore, Carlyle must be protected from too close an association with German thought. Balderdash! Such reasoning confuses political sentiment and scholarship in the worst possible way. It is also strangely myopic, for the greatest influence on Carlyle was no less than one of the greatest thinkers and writers of all time: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. A young, poor, and confused Scot could have done much worse than to have found hope and consolation in the ideas of a spectacularly brilliant man who inherited the legacy of the Enlightenment and weathered

the storms of Romanticism (not to mention French aggression and the Napoleonic Wars, including the occupation of Weimar). In Goethe he found a natural scientist and man of letters to match his own predilections. But, more importantly, as a modern, Goethe stood on the cusp of European secularization with his back to the fanaticism and religious wars of previous ages that had cracked the bedrock of organized religion, and yet Goethe did not experience life as angst but as affirmation. No wonder Goethe is known as an "Olympian." As a spiritual guide, Goethe rescued the beleaguered Carlyle who faced an existential crisis as he turned away from his ministerial training and to the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment whom he read as a student at the University of Edinburgh.

Carlyle's idea of divinity, as can be seen in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), is anthropomorphic: he starts with Odin and progresses through the likes of Mahomet, Luther, and others. In fact, one could argue that he shows how in hero-worship humanity had found a substitute for devotion to God. Jorge Luis Borges comments, "los héroes, para Carlyle, son intratables semidioses" (heroes are to Carlyle intractable demigods) (*Prólogo* xiii). Indeed, Carlyle defined Great Men similarly in *Heroes*: "I say great men are still admirable; I say there is, at bottom, nothing else admirable! No nobler feeling than this of admiration for one higher than himself dwells in the breast of man. It is to this hour, and at all hours, the vivifying influence in man's life" (11). Carlyle implies that heroes are divine because they are worshiped: "Religion I find stand upon it; not Paganism only, but far higher and truer religions,—all religion hitherto known. Hero-worship, heartfelt prostrate admiration, submission, burning, boundless, for a noblest godlike Form of Man" (11).

Some are confused by Carlyle's choice of the literary heroes Shakespeare, Rousseau, Burns, Johnson, Goethe and their connection to prophets and priests such as Mohammed and Luther. E. M. Vida shows that Carlyle's thought is connected to the German Romantics whom he translated. Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Gelehrte* is on the same level as Carlyle's *literary man*. The German philosopher considers the scholar (*Gelehrte*) a person able to unfold the Divine Idea to other

men, one whose only objective in life is to live for this task. Such a man who sacrifices his private life, who renounces his personal pleasure to transmit the Divine Idea to his fellow men, may be considered a real saint (Vida 118).

Similar to Fichte, Novalis supports the admiration of man: "Es gibt nur einen Tempel in der Welt, und das ist der menschliche Körper. Nichts ist heiliger, als diese hohe Gestalt. Das Bücken vor Menschen ist eine Huldigung dieser Offenbarung im Fleisch" (There is just one temple on earth, and that is the human body. Nothing is holier than this high figure. Reverence before humans is a homage of this revelation in the flesh) (200). The association of the human being with a divine being is patent, as Novalis proclaims.¹ Carlyle reiterates literally this idea in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34): "Where else is GOD'S-PRESENCE manifested not to our eyes only, but to our hearts, as in our fellow-man?" (51). The idea of man as a divine manifestation is a repeated topic in Carlyle's novel. Consequently, man is portrayed as "light-sparkles floating in the æther of Deity" but also as "a Soul, a Spirit, and divine Apparition" (43, 50).

Novalis perceives Man as a mediator between God and Nature: "Er ist der Messias der Natur" (He is the Messiah of Nature) (200). But one should not forget Novalis's mystic belief that Nature is a kind of garment of the unseen, of divine power; it is part of the mystery of life that must be clarified. In Novalis's view only the highest form of man is gifted to decipher the so-called Divine Idea, and that form is the Poet.

Carlyle discovers in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) characterization of the nature of a poet and a philosophy similar to Novalis's: "Gleichsam wie einen Gott hat das Schicksal den Dichter über dieses alles hinübersetzt. . . . so ist der Dichter zugleich Lehrer, Wahrsager, Freund der Götter und der Menschen" (Now fate has exalted the poet above all this, as if he were a god. . . . And thus the poet is at once a teacher, a prophet, a friend of gods and men) (82-83).

¹This same idea of man occurs in Goethe's *Faust* (1808, 1832) when its main character identifies himself as "Ebenbild der Gottheit" (in the image of God)

Carlyle accepts this definition, strongly defends his faith in heroes, in masters, and proposes their leadership as “[t]he History of the World [is] the Biography of Great Men” (*Heroes* 1). It was in fact Goethe, whom Carlyle considered such a personal hero and master, who helped him out of the severe spiritual crisis he suffered during his time at university. Goethe’s works opened before Carlyle a multiplicity of possibilities to get on with one’s life, to break out of inactivity and passivity.

After his studies at the University of Edinburgh the most difficult period in Carlyle’s life began. He had to cope with health and vocational problems. Not knowing what to do with his life, he found the only solution to this bitter situation in hard work. Years later, as the Rector of the University of Edinburgh, he would articulate his solution for students there: “work is the grand cure of all maladies and miseries that ever beset mankind” (“Inaugural” 455). As a student, Carlyle began to learn German, in the process discovered German thought, and without realizing it stumbled upon the fountainhead of European ideas at the time, which was attested to by Madame de Staël and others (see *De l’Allemagne* [1810]). Carlyle biographer Fred Kaplan explains the rejuvenating effect of his study on Carlyle: “he had unexpectedly discovered not only that he understood the German books he was reading but that, for the first time in years, he felt especially energized by writers who spoke directly to his needs” (63). From now on Carlyle began to dedicate most of his time and work to studying German literature and thought and to writing reviews of Goethe and the German Romantics, translations of German works such as Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795, 1821), and biographies, such as *The Life of Friedrich Schiller* (1825).

Carlyle found particular direction in Goethe’s late masterpieces, *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister*, which addressed his searching questions at a time of personal crisis. In fact, he established a correspondence with Goethe and always expressed his deep gratitude for the clarity he had gained from Goethe’s writings which had lifted him out of the morass of depression, as a letter to Goethe, dated August 20, 1827, discloses:

your works have been a mirror to me; unasked and unhoped-

for, your wisdom has counselled me; and so peace and health of Soul have visited me from afar. For I was once an Unbeliever, not in Religion only, but in all the Mercy and Beauty of which it is the symbol; storm-tossed in my own imaginations; a man divided from men; exasperated, wretched, driven almost to despair; so that Faust's wild curse seemed the only fit greeting for human life; and his passionate "Fluch vor allen der Geduld" [curse on all patience] was spoken from my very inmost heart. (Oldenberg 181)

This statement expresses Carlyle's cataclysmic emotional situation before reading Goethe. His metaphor of being storm-tossed at sea suggests a man without an anchor, an "Unbeliever" not only in organized religion but in essential spiritual qualities such as mercy. Later on, Carlyle would cast his age as one of chaos of the kind he describes in *The French Revolution* (1837), which needed a leader like Frederick the Great. Carlyle saw in his personal crisis the crisis of his age. In *Sartor Resartus* he considers ages of faith and doubt, the latter being characterized by spiritual anxiety. Carlyle believed that religion had lost its authority in society, and he sought new ideals, including religious scepticism, to respond to doubt. Goethe restored in him a basic faith in the meaning, beauty, and ethical obligations of life. Carlyle became, then, with the publication of *Sartor Resartus*, a distillation of reading in German thought, a source for others amidst the storms of the nineteenth century as "young men looked to its author . . . for help . . . for guidance" (Ashton 103-04). Goethe sensed in Carlyle his strong ethical tendencies: "Carlyle ist eine moralische Macht von großer Bedeutung. Es ist in ihm viel Zukunft vorhanden, und es ist gar nicht abzusehen was er alles leisten und wirken wird" (Carlyle is a moral power of great importance. His future prospects may be immense and we do not know yet what he will be able to do and the effect he may have) (Eckermann 653).

There is a conspicuous change that occurred in Carlyle after reading Goethe, which he freely admitted in the same letter of August 20, 1827:

But now, thank Heaven, all this is altered: without change of external circumstances, solely by the new light which rose upon me, I attained to new thoughts, and a composure which I should once have considered as impossible. And now, under happier omens, though the bodily health which I lost in these struggles has never been and may never be restored to me, I look forward with cheerfulness to a life spent in Literature, with such fortune and such strength as may be granted me; hoping little and fearing little from the world; having learned that what I once called Happiness is not only not to be attained on Earth but not even to be desired. (Oldenberg 181-82)

The ideas Carlyle found in *Faust* and, particularly, in *Wilhelm Meister* became his way of life. Reading Goethe ended his spiritual malaise. It provided new and “true wisdom” (Kaplan 67) that helped him constitute his own *Weltanschauung* based to some degree on the values he discovered in German thought, especially Goethe, as expressed in a letter dated June 10, 1831:

the Man, to whom, more than to any other living, I stand more indebted and united. For it can never be forgotten that to him I owe the all-precious knowledge and experience that Reverence is still possible, nay, Reverence for our fellowman, as a true emblem of the Highest, even in these perturbed, chaotic times. (Oldenberg 239)

In fact, “Reverence” became a leitmotif in Carlyle’s life and work.

Carlyle admitted to losing faith, as his Calvinist upbringing did not offer him solutions to his principal worries. Nevertheless, in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1821) he found a life philosophy based on the notion of three Reverences (*Ehrfurchten*): for what is above; for what is around; and for what is beneath. In some ways, this is portrayed in the novel as a fruitful fusion of the essences of Judaism, Christianity, and other religions. Once again when addressing students many years

later in his "Inaugural Address," Carlyle presents them with what he had learned from Goethe about how to seek all that is praiseworthy in world religions: "Honour done to those who are greater and better than ourselves; honour distinct from fear. *Ehrfurcht*; the soul of all religion that has ever been among men, or ever will be" (474).

Carlyle's obsession with hard work was the way out of his crisis, and he professed from that time on the importance of work. Diligence was one of his maxims and action or activity the outcome of renunciation. He admired Goethe for his assiduousness in his vocation and often quoted a verse from Goethe's *Zahme Xenien II* (1820), for example, on June 10, 1831: "I delight to figure you as still active and serene; busy at your high Task, in the high spirit of old Times—'Wie das Gestirn, Ohne Hast, Aber ohne Rast'" (As the stars, without haste, but without rest), meaning that Goethe was constantly active (Oldenberg 240).

The concept of *Entsagung* or what Carlyle translated as Renunciation is another Goethean idea deriving from *Wilhelm Meister* that takes its place alongside Reverence. That novel, according to Heinrich Kraeger, gave Carlyle's existence an anchor: the storm-tossed Scot had found some kind of center (192ff.). The idea of Renunciation appears, in fact, in the subtitle of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* as *die Entsagenden* (the Renunciants). *Entsagung* implies a renunciation of the past and future in favour of the present; that is, one should not try to change the past nor worry too much about the future but work steadily at current tasks. Wilhelm, the protagonist of Goethe's two eponymous novels, learns to overcome egoism and vanity—he had wanted to become an actor—instead taking up medicine so that he can contribute to society. He also realizes that helping his son, his family, is a crucial part of the meaning of his existence.

Carlyle had considered hitherto either complete abnegation or pleasure as the main aim of existence (Oldenberg 182). *Wilhelm Meister* helped him change his mind. In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle takes up the identical concept: "It is only with Renunciation (*Entsagen*) that Life, properly speaking, can be said to begin" (142).

Tätigkeit (Activity) appears throughout *Wilhelm Meister* but especially in relation to Wilhelm's struggle in choosing a career, which must have

hit very close to home for Carlyle. In the end an active and good life, not so much the specific vocation, is what matters. Interestingly, during this period after translating *Wilhelm Meister*, Carlyle decided on writing as his occupation (Oldenberg 182). *Tätigkeit* is the end of a process of reflection when individuals should consider their abilities and talents to choose an activity and to do work for which they are best suited. In his “Inaugural Address,” Carlyle puts forward this idea: “The most unhappy of all men is the man who cannot tell what he is going to do, who has got no work cut-out for him in the world, and does not go into it” (455). But work should be performed here and now.

The emblem of America plays a central role in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. A band of emigrants decides to leave Europe for America to seek religious freedom and establish a Utopian community. Another group decides to remain in Europe and improve social conditions there, as one of its leaders explains:

In Amerika glaubte ich zu wirken, über dem Meere glaubte ich nützlich und notwendig zu sein; war eine Handlung nicht mit tausend Gefahren umgeben, so schien sie mir nicht bedeutend. Wie anders seh’ ich jetzt die Dinge, und wie ist mir das nächste so wert, so teuer geworden. . . . Ich werde zurückkehren und in meinem Hause, in meinem Baumgarten, mitten unter den Meinen sagen: Hier oder nirgend ist Amerika! (431) (In America, I fancied I might accomplish something; over seas, I hoped to become useful and essential: if any task was not accompanied by a thousand dangers, I considered it trivial, unworthy of me. How differently do matters now appear! How precious, how important seems the duty which is nearest me, whatever it may be! . . . I will return, and in my house, amid my fields, among my people, I will say: America is here or nowhere!) (143)

In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle echoes this sentiment of being anxiously engaged in doing good and improving society wherever one lives: “*Do the Duty which lies nearest thee*”; “America is here or nowhere” (145).

As Faust translates the gospel of St. John, he decides after several per-

mutations to translate “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) as “Im Anfang war die Tat” (In the beginning was the Deed) (v. 1238). This hermeneutic move can lead to many interpretations of which one suggests Action as a starting point. In *Sartor Resartus* Goethe takes on biblical proportions as Carlyle exhorts readers: “Close thy *Byron*; open thy *Goethe*!” (143) This injunction is important for it delineates for Carlyle what kind of action is needed—not revolutionary, volcanic changes of the kind he sketches in *The French Revolution*, but evolutionary, neptunic² changes of the kind that the enlightened Frederick the Great initiated.

Of course, Carlyle was inspired by other German thinkers and writers, but none had as far-reaching an impact on him as Goethe. The ideas Carlyle drew from Goethe’s work made Carlyle consider him “my Teacher and Benefactor” (Oldenberg 182). Goethe was indeed Carlyle’s teacher, and this ancient concept triggered one of Carlyle’s most precise definitions of a key word in the Christian vocabulary: Faith. In *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* Carlyle adumbrates that

[f]aith is loyalty to some inspired Teacher, some spiritual Hero. And what therefore is loyalty proper, the life-breath of all society, but an effluence of Hero-worship, submissive admiration for the truly great? Society is founded on Hero-worship. All dignities of rank, on which human association rests, are what we may call a Heroarchy (Government of Heroes),—or a Hierarchy, for it is “sacred” enough withal! (12)

Goethe served as Carlyle’s “inspired Teacher” and “spiritual Hero.” In Goethe’s writings and in his exemplary life Carlyle found answers to questions pressing upon him at the University of Edinburgh. He was so convinced of the message of salvation he had received from his own secular saint that he embarked on a mission to bring Goethe’s ideas to a British audience, in turn inspiring thinkers in fields farther away, such as Boston, home to American Transcendentalism. Indeed,

²This neologism resonates with the debates during Goethe’s day between vul-

one could say that Carlyle helped to begin a “Cult of Goethe” that would inspire intellectuals throughout the British Isles and the United States, such as George Eliot and Emerson. The exclamation in *Sartor Resartus*, “Möchte es (this remarkable Treatise) auch im Brittischen Boden gediehen” (May [this remarkable treatise] also thrive in British soil) (7), refers not only, of course, to the narrator’s treatise but to German culture—with Goethe at the forefront.

Goethe as secular saint? Carlyle said so in his first letter to the Olympian of Weimar, dated June 24, 1824:

Many saints have been expunged from my literary calendar since I first knew you; but your name still stands there, in characters more bright than ever. That your life may be long, long spared, for the solace and instruction of this and future generations, is the earnest prayer of, Sir, your most devoted servant. (Oldenberg 175–76)

Carlyle cast himself in the role of servant with Goethe as his *master*, and thus recalling his definition of faith as devotion and loyalty to a teacher, Carlyle found his faith.

Carlyle drew consciously on Christian imagery to describe his relationship to Goethe, most strikingly perhaps in a letter to Goethe, dated April 15, 1827, where he described Goethe’s writing as a voice that “came to me from afar, with counsel and help, in my utmost need”:

For I have been delivered from darkness into any measure of light, if I know aught of myself and my duties and destination, it is to the study of your writings more than to any other circumstance that I owe this; it is you more than any other man that I should always thank and reverence with the feeling of a Disciple to his Master, nay of a Son to his spiritual Father. (Oldenberg 176)

Here Carlyle used the New Testament imagery of a disciple following the Lord Jesus Christ, and he employed the discourse of saving grace

for one who was delivered from darkness into light. Paul E. Kerry analyzes Carlyle's sense of being a "son" to Goethe as an act of obtaining a new literary and philosophical birthright as Carlyle reconceptualized his spiritual inheritance.³

To be sure, Carlyle was not blind in his open hero-worship; he knew that Goethe had faults and was not above the vicissitudes of life. Goethe was not a literal Messiah for Carlyle, no matter how much he may have so insisted. Rather, Carlyle found in Goethe a man who had suffered deeply, but who learned to cope with life's problems and overcome them. *Wilhelm Meister* suggested to him certain ethical attitudes that could help one live a harmonious existence despite anxieties unleashed by the advent of modernity.

Carlyle's philosophy of life is deeply embedded in the writings of the German scholars he read, studied, and translated in the 1820s. But more than any other, Goethe and, in particular, his *Wilhelm Meister* served as Carlyle's spiritual guide. The language he used in his letters to Goethe, the way he expressed what Goethe's writings signified in his own life, the quasi-biblical style he employed, suggest a devotion comparable to that of a believer toward his God. *Ehrfurcht*, *Entsagung*, *Tätigkeit* as well as Carlyle's notion of "Hero-Worship" all contributed to his *Weltanschauung*. The fact that all these components of his personal philosophy became recurrent themes and important lines of argument in his later writings, such as his "Inaugural Address" and *Frederick the Great* (1858–65), shows how deeply his early study of other German thinkers had remained with him.

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³Kerry also reminds readers that one part of the Carlyle-Goethe-Religion

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