

Thomas Carlyle

Transcendentalism and Beyond

Sounds of Different Drummers

Susan Frome

Early on, Scottish writer and philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) found himself at odds with the conventional thinking of his day. In a sense, he was a true radical, if you consider the meaning of the word: one who tries to get at the root of things. Carlyle attended the University of Edinburgh, supposedly to enter the ministry, but eventually renounced that choice. He found that there were other options circa 1850, but his personal beliefs then became disconnected from society, as well as from the church. Through his study of German iconoclasts Luther and Goethe, he came to believe in “common sense, simplicity, independence of thought, not to mention a personal faith and morality,” according to Fred Kaplan’s *Thomas Carlyle A Biography* (1983).

Taken with these German writings, he eventually wrote several books and pamphlets explaining his new point of view, and thus found his life’s work as a socio-philosophical-spiritual writer. From Martin Luther, he found that the true authentic spirit came from within instead

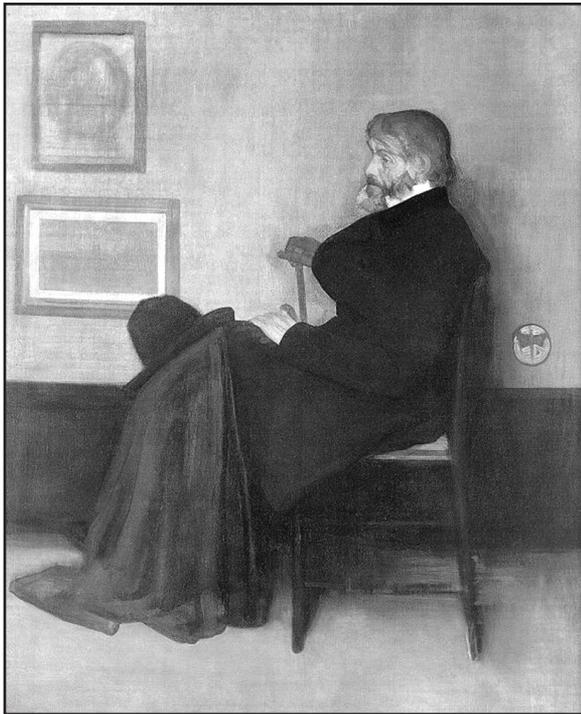
of from church authorities. He revered Luther’s “Teutonic spiritual courage” which also affected English and Scottish reformers of that time.

From Goethe he came upon stories which suggested an even greater spiritual revolution, leading to Carlyle’s own change of consciousness. For instance, in *Faust* we have an old man as a wandering seeker, longing for a youthful world without constraints. *Wilhelm Meisters*

Lehrjahre begins at the opposite end as an apprentice looking forward to a future with infinite hope. Both storylines afforded Carlyle with a view of life as ever-changing in opposition to the customary credos of logic, materialism, and the certainty of progress. Moreover, he discovered that Goethe’s Romanticism emphasized the value of experience, true feelings and a kind of poetic intuition. These are the links to Goethe’s idea of the ever-changing

“life-force,” which most readily can be found in Nature. In fact, Carlyle now felt that in the modern world “the artist is the new priest, the vehicle of this divine force of the universe. The

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Portrait of Thomas Carlyle by James Abbot McNeill Whistler

world needed to seek spiritual gods rather than to worship the marketplace, money and sex.”

Goethe’s ideas were then translated into Carlyle’s own works, namely “the battle between spiritual needs and material temptations in a materialistic society.” Materialism was a main target for Carlyle and, in due course, for the Transcendentalists of New England. As it happens, he became connected with these New England intellectuals in and near Concord, Massachusetts through his new friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was creating a special group which believed in transcending the material world in favor of spirituality inherent in nature and beyond as well as in each individual. Thus by melding German Intellectualism and Carlyle’s ideas with Emerson’s Transcendentalists, the new American belief system began to emerge leading to an exciting and meaningful meeting of trans-Atlantic principles through Carlyle and passed on through Emerson and other Transcendentalists.

Thus and in effect, Emerson, the Concord poet, philosopher, and writer was greatly influenced by the older, Scottish, author. An influence that clearly was received and interwoven into New England innovative thought.

Our understanding of this influence is deepened through Carlyle’s correspondence with

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1833-1842) as compiled by BiblioBazaar in 2006. Given the fact that Carlyle was eight years older and by 1833 had come into his own, it was no wonder that Carlyle showed the way.

In these exchanges, Carlyle kept emphasizing that the only belief system of any consequence was grounded on sincerity and what actually moves a person with wonder and authenticity. Expounding on this further, Carlyle expressed a disdain for any kind of speculating, philosophizing and bandying words about, decreeing that “All things theoretical are inadequate, untrue and unsatisfactory.”

Humbly, Emerson at thirty took this well and admitted that he “would love himself better” if he could emulate Carlyle and find his own words spontaneously from the heart. Pointing to young Henry David Thoreau, Emerson wrote that unlike so many of his contemporaries, Thoreau eschewed timidity and conformity in favor of “writing the truest verses.”

As for society, as if taking a page from Carlyle, Emerson wrote that everyone should quit any dependence on society as much as possible and stand on his own principles. Further, Emerson regarded city dwellers as people who had sold their souls, wearing masks to hide their true natures in order to succeed.

In terms of nature, Carlyle often extolled the virtue of quitting the city and returning to the country to restore himself. Taking it a step further into matters of faith, Emerson praised the fields and woods for holding “proper virtue and holy gifts.”

Later on during this correspondence, as Emerson the minister began to break away from the strictures of Unitarianism, Carlyle wholeheartedly encouraged him to live with whatever faith he can muster: “Find your own Gospel and pay no attention to outcries of pantheism or atheism. Understand only that “you are alive and God [the spiritual force in Nature] is alive.”

In time, Emerson commended Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (the tailor re-tailored) to many of his kindred spirits in Concord. In this particular work, Carlyle pits a highly opinionated German professor against a highly conservative

English editor, to prompt a new kind of free-thinking radicalism. As for the metaphor of the tailor, it's a play on words as society attempts to "tailor" its belief systems, cloaking its citizens' true essence. In contrast, God or the life-force or, if you like, Nature is the supreme tailor of all that is vital.

There's no telling exactly what the results were when fellow Transcendentalists sat down to discuss this provocative satire. However, its challenging themes, especially the need to question the received wisdom of the day and to transcend materialism through the more viable pathways of nature can, by extension, be found in Emerson's and Thoreau's speeches, writings and ways of life.

Emerson and his young friend Henry David Thoreau grew to be the leaders of this Americanized philosophy, going on to write some of the most favored and respected works of American literature that are still honored to this day. Emerson's essays such as *Nature*, and *American Scholar*, and Thoreau's *Walden*, and *A Week on the Merrimac and Concord* as well as his *Journals* are well known for presenting these newfound principles and values in natural and mythical ways.

The young Thoreau was allowed to use and borrow from Emerson's extensive library and read Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, published in Boston in 1836 as edited by Emerson. In Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) for example, on the subject of clothing, he alluded to garments as a symbolic outer layer with no true relation to the person underneath. Moreover, in a letter dated January 21, 1854 to his close friend Harrison Gray Otis Blake, Thoreau put it this way:

"... Now our garments are typical of our conformity to the ways of the world, i.e. of the Devil and to some extent react on us and poison us like that shirt which Hercules put on. We are well nigh smothered under yet more fatal coats which do not fit us our whole life long. Consider the cloak that our employment or station is—how rarely men treat each other for what in their true and naked characters they are..."

Ten years earlier, while at Walden Pond, he gathered materials for a lecture on Carlyle

delivered at the Concord Lyceum in February 1846. He then revised this lecture into the critical essay *Thomas Carlyle and His Works*, a piece Horace Greeley of the New York *Tribune* thought "too solidly good" to be profitable but published it anyway a year later. In the essay, Thoreau lauded Carlyle's style and content, especially in the use of humor to promulgate his serious ideas. In response, after receiving a copy from Emerson, Carlyle wrote, "I like Mr. Thoreau very well."

As exemplified in *Walden*, Nature and one's true nature were a touchstone shared closely by Carlyle, Emerson, Thoreau, et al.

In this way, Carlyle and his newfound New England friends took strength from the "one great Truth...that the Supernatural differs not from the Natural." They found inspiration in Carlyle's premise that people should seek a more genuine spiritual spark on which to base human institutions and conduct. To find that authentic and sustaining ideal was "the essential work of mankind." After all, and doubtless especially to Thoreau's liking, Carlyle encouraged "young, idealistic Radicals, wild, heathen iconoclasts" to come to terms with and use "what was best and purest in oneself."

One could argue that during the U.S. presidential election of 2008, a new spirit seemed to hearken back to the "free thought" of the Transcendental period. A true release, if you will, from the ultra-conservative values of the previous administration. Clearly there is now a greater concern for "green" technology and the preservation of natural resources and, to a large degree, a tolerance for individuation and divergent values and ways of life which the New England forbears would certainly champion. Without going into further detail, we can easily trace this new movement back to the earlier new movement fostered, in turn, by Carlyle and his own mentors and fervent followers.

Susan Frome is an essayist and a film reviewer. Over the years her feature articles have appeared in a number of periodicals including The Humanist, The Iconoclast and The Country and Abroad in the U.S. and Acumen in the U.K. She resides in Litchfield, Connecticut.