Towards Natural Supernaturalism: Carlyle's Dyspepsia and the Germans, 1817-1825

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Towards Natural Supernaturalism: 
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Thomas Lloyd

Thomas Carlyle first read the works of Friedrich Schiller, his first German literary hero, soon after he began to read German in 1819. He exchanged tutoring in French for German lessons with his engineer friend James Jardine, and with considerable enthusiasm pursued all the reading in that language his mind could absorb. He became so proficient that by 1823 he was translating Goethe's Wilhelm Meister into what became the standard English edition for more than a century. His discovery of Schiller, Goethe, and the other German Classical and Romantic writers was providential, or at least he came to believe so. Carlyle’s worst period of religious doubt and mental depression began the year before, and continued well into the 1820s. On top of this, soon after he abandoned teaching in schools to move to Edinburgh in 1818, he was overwhelmed by a digestive ailment, the so-called “dyspepsia” that would afflict him all of his life and, at least in the short term, worsen his despair. We will analyze how Carlyle projected his youthful struggles onto Friedrich Schiller in his first full-length biography, The Life of Friedrich Schiller. But first it is important to review his intellectual development before he sat down to write that work in 1823, including his sometimes pathetic search for non-Christian moral answers to his personal dilemmas.

In 1817 Carlyle abandoned his frustrating teaching job near his home in Annan and took a second one in Kirkcaldy, across the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh, but too removed nevertheless to give him easy access to the Scottish capital. Though it seldom pleased him to be a frustrated intellectual in the provinces, things were not entirely bad: his ostensible rival and personal friend, Edward Irving, gave him the run of his impressive personal library. By now Carlyle’s Christian faith was tenuous at best. His supposed preparation for the ministry in years past had become little more than a pro forma exercise to please his parents. He had given two discourses at Divinity Hall, Edinburgh, in 1814 and 1815.
to fulfill requirements for ordination, one of them a refutation of natural religion. But by 1817 he had long abandoned this endeavor. The truth is, he was not sure what he wanted; hence, like his later hero, Schiller, he was fated to wander from profession to profession before finding his proper niche.

Now, having more or less cast himself free of Christianity, Carlyle was as impressionable as Irving, the future minister, was doctrinaire. Later Carlyle would lament that his friend the celebrated London preacher was too bound to a few verses in the Bible, notably Corinthians 13. But, ironically, his Kirkcaldy library was quite latitudinarian. Carlyle did not finish reading Faust until 1820, but already he found an intellectually mesmerizing “spirit of denial” in the historian Edward Gibbon, who appears to have played Mephistopheles to his own Faust. He later wrote that the historian’s “winged sarcasms, so quiet, and yet so conclusively transpiercing, and killing dead, were often admirable potent and illuminative to me.”

Goethe’s devil vis-a-vis Faust, Gibbon both attracted and repelled the frustrated schoolteacher. In pinpointing Christianity rather than paganism or barbarian invasions as the primary cause of Rome’s fall, he at once confirmed Carlyle’s mistrust of Christian belief and augmented his fear that he might not be able to replace this outmoded fable with anything better. Thus his most immediate reactions to Gibbon were fear and depression, as if he suspected that his own intellectual penetration of Christianity would yield only an abyss of no-meaning. How could Gibbon’s or Voltaire’s demolitions of faith or corrupt political forms lead to the formation of new truths, Carlyle wondered. Thus he wrote his friend James Johnston, “I do not like him—his style is flowery—his sarcasms wicked—his notes oppressive, often beastly.” There is a hint of puritanical anti-intellectualism in such assessments. But strong though his misgivings were, he appropriated from Gibbon what suited him as an overlay to the sarcasm that always had been part of his intellectual make-up. He regarded his own sarcastic irony, which Gibbon seemed to validate, as an effective means of understanding the basic realities of things. But it also seemed wicked, beastly, and oppressive; he would have to resolve this paradox in the coming years.

In 1818 Carlyle quit this second teaching job in frustration and followed Irving to Edinburgh where, like Teufelsdroeckh, he seemed to find no object and no rest. In the “Athens of the North”
he sought his fortune in the next several years as a sometime law student, article writer for Dr. Brewster's encyclopedia, and translator from the French and German. Anything seemed better than teaching in the provinces, but later he realized that "I was beginning my four or five most miserable, dark, sick, and heavy-laden years. . . . I was without friends, experience, or connection in the sphere of human business. . . . and had begun my long curriculum of dyspepsia, which has never ended since!" It struck him that his isolation was more than just a matter of geographical locale. Even in an intellectually stimulating city like Edinburgh he felt restricted to what his contemporary, John Keats, termed the "sole self," unable to achieve happiness or reconcile himself to the world's limitations. It seemed that most of his friends and acquaintances, including Irving, had found their intellectual bearings and were bound for some kind of success. Irving he admired, but it galled him that material success and a sort of bourgeois self-complacency went hand-in-hand. Now even the glimmerings of hope that survived the loss of his Christian faith disappeared, as his health declined and life seemed to pass him by. While Irving was beginning his "seven or eight healthiest and brightest years," Carlyle was on the descent of his fabled repudiation of the "Everlasting No" on Leith Walk. Four years before, in the flush of youth, he had hoped to "steer his little bark thro' all the shoals and hurricanes" that lay before him. As his outlook grew bleaker, he sought around him with some desperation for an acceptable cure for his psychological afflictions. In 1817 Carlyle mocked Spurzheim's belief that "the faculties of the soul are to be ascertained from the figure & size of the abdomen." He never acquired a high opinion of overly rational scientists who denied the importance of the irrational and the mysterious in man, in favor of the "moral arithmetic" he despised in Jeremy Bentham and the other Utilitarians. But experience taught him that, in a perverse way, the crackpot craniologist might have a point after all. It was possible that disease could reduce the soul to being the prisoner of a decaying carcass, generating an excremental disgust of self and little more than a consciousness of death in life. In Schiller he would write that "bodily pain seems less redeemed by good than almost any other kind" of evil, calling it a "diminution" of "our resources and of our capacity to guide them." Carlyle wondered if there might be a philosophical or psychological means of distancing himself from his physical
sufferings, which seemed bound up with his spiritual uncertainties. Stoicism was one solution he briefly considered. In 1818 he wrote Thomas Murray that "a share of evil greater or less . . . is the unalterable doom of mortals: and the mind might be taught to abide it in peace." He proceeded to contrast the "voluptuous" Byron with the "poor but lofty-minded Epictetus," the ancient Stoic philosopher who stressed the importance of psychological independence from external things. But almost immediately Carlyle reversed himself and decided that pure Stoicism was too passive for his taste, however useful it might be as a thoughtful prelude to activity: like Goethe's Faust, who puts a "curse on patience most of all," he had to seek in activity the key to coming to terms with life. Thus, far from encouraging a noble quiescence, his dyspepsia "curriculum" soon convinced him that "I ought not only to suffer but to act" and that "it is impossible to attain the Solitary happiness of the Stoic." To Carlyle, Byron embodied the danger of failing adequately to step back from one's life and impose on it a principle of philosophical unity. He later became the negative portion of Teufelsdroeckh's exhortation to nineteenth-century Britain to "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe." Goethe learned to combine contemplation with action in a "whole Duty of Man." But even in 1818 Carlyle saw Byron as an infantile genius who never achieved his potential, a common attitude among the Victorians. In 1818 he preferred Epictetus to Byron, but later rejected both in favor of ideas about practical conduct he found confirmed in German writers like Goethe, Fichte, and Schiller. Dead too soon, Byron failed to move beyond troubled self-questioning to an affirmation of life, and thus could offer no answers to Carlyle. Upon Byron's death in 1824, Carlyle wrote Jane Welsh: "Poor Byron! And but a young man; still struggling amid the perplexities, and sorrows and aberrations, of a mind not arrived at maturity or settled in its proper place in life." He might as well have been describing his own dilemma.

But in 1819 Carlyle succeeded merely in trading a stoical precept for one based on activity as the cure for mental and physical afflictions. He already knew that (to cite Teufelsdroeckh) "Conviction, were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into Conduct." Yet it struck him that the precepts he was always turning over in his mind could not even be called convictions, much less felt experience. Now he found himself in
much the same position as the stoical philosopher in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, who ruefully discovers that his philosophical precepts wither in the face of experience. All he knows is that his daughter has died and will not be restored; as Imlac says, teachers of morality "discourse like angels, but they live like men." Carla greatly admired Johnson, and was aware of his distinction between precept and action. He sensed a need to distance himself from his problems, and from there work out a means of dealing with them. He took a major step in this direction in 1823, in his first biography, by projecting his illness onto an external character, Schiller. And then, by 1825, he refined his penchant for irony to the point that he could step outside himself and view his situation from what may be called a dual perspective. But in 1819 he was still daunted by the perception that the Biblical precept "whatsoever thy hand findeth [to] do, do it with all thy might..." is more easily assented to than put in practice. It was easy to talk about morally defeating one's digestive demons, just as it was easy to talk about committing oneself to the law or letters. But psychological commitment was much more difficult to come by. Here lay the seeds of Carlyle's mistrust of all philosophical systems, including aesthetics. Even in 1825, on the eve of his "conversion" while in residence at Hoddam Hill farm, Carlyle still thought that his "own practice" continually contradicted his favorite precept that "the end of man is an action, not a thought." While his coming of age at Hoddam Hill by 1826 carried with it the conviction that action in the social sphere must supplant indolence and render aloof contemplations practical, he had intellectually known this for the better part of a decade. Throughout the 1820s Carlyle sought a non-Christian "conversion" that would mark his psychological reintegration and give his life new meaning. He had to do battle with personal demons on his own darkling plain and defeat them through irony, that is, turn the spirit of negation against itself; only then could he bring his knowledge to fruition, to action. Like Teufelsdroeckh, he sought a spiritual rebirth in which the "highest" would come home "to the bosoms of the most Limited." But even his 1826 "conversion" came with the realization that there could be only relative solutions to his dilemmas that would become less relevant with the passage of time. Thus in 1833 he would write John Stuart Mill that conversion only leads to further battles, "wherein all the victory we look for is the heart to fight on."
Natural supernaturalism itself is built on the premise that all symbolic revelations of the spirit are relative stages in the growth of the individual and society, not final formulations. Based as it is on ironic perception, this philosophy is inherently shifting and unstable, as is the organic view of human development Carlyle modeled on Goethe's and Schelling's theories. Carlyle's perception of his search for truth as complex and tentative clarifies his gradually evolving, even hesitant, attempts during the 1820s to account for illness and other apparent evils in the universal scheme of things.

At times during the early 1820s, pain drove Carlyle to wish for oblivion; at times this became a death wish. There were specifically suicidal moments in his development, notably prior to the Leith Walk experience in 1822 and during the bleak winter of 1823-1824, by which time indeed he was developing the capacity dramatically to distance himself from his worst despairs. Like Rasselas in the Happy Valley, he knew a Circean unconsciousness would entail a kind of mental death. Like Johnson's character, or like Faust for that matter, he could never be at "rest" from the need to struggle forward towards new experiences and an ever evasive "choice of life." But all the same he was tempted to this form of damnation, as he wrote Robert Mitchell in 1821: "The most enviable thing, I often think, in all the world, must be the soundest of all the seven sleepers: for he reposest in his corner; and to him the tragi-comedy of life is as painless as it is paltry." The legendary seven sleepers were early Christians who fled Roman persecution, falling asleep in a cave for nearly two hundred years and awakening to an Empire converted to their faith. In invoking them Carlyle underscored the futility he felt living in an age inimical to any sort of genuine spirituality. But like Teufelsdroeckh, he was unable to ignore his psychological divisions and their accompanying pains; he could not sleep through Europe's "winter-seasons of Denial" which had shaken his capacity for belief. Hence in theory Carlyle embraced "the roughest lot that any of us gets below" as a moral challenge and something like the Mephistophelean "lure and thrust" that would enable him to avoid mental and physical sloth. He began to suspect that disease and spiritual doubt could teach him something about himself. Johnson's Rasselas muses in the Happy Valley, "I long again to be hungry that I may again quicken my attention." Carlyle also realized that, if he were not always dissatisfied, he
would become much too fond of “unconditional rest,” to cite the Lord’s estimation of man in the “Prologue in Heaven” of Faust I. Thus he wrote his brother Alexander in 1822 that man tends to “become first quiet, then lazy, and at last be little better than one of the Seven Sleepers... For my own share I am sometimes quite pleased at being discontented; because it seems, if I were not so, nothing would remain but to degenerate into a fat contented Son of Sloth.”

Carlyle always displayed a penchant for dramatic exaggeration and churlish griping. Still, we can detect in his descriptions of physical pain a major influence behind his spiritual despair and his occasional wish for mental oblivion. He repeatedly depicted the battle between his soul and his body as one between light and darkness, imagery he put to practical use in depicting Schiller’s personal struggles. For instance, in an 1821 letter to Alexander Carlyle he lamented the “gloomy overclouding of the soul” brought on by the close relation between his physical and spiritual health, though he appeared only dimly aware of the psychosomatic origin of many of his digestive troubles. Perhaps his most intense “descendental” disgust at his physical condition came in an angry complaint to John Carlyle that “the ethereal spirit of man should be overpowered and hag-ridden by what? by two or three feet of sorry trip full of —.” In 1823 he wrote his friend William Graham that “few know by a blacker experience what it is to have an unquiet mind in a sick body, to have cares within us that require all the resources of our philosophy, and nothing coming from without but the various shapes of pain, which five diseased senses convey to us.”

In large part Carlyle was trying to come to terms with bodily decay and death in a non-Christian context. By the time he wrote Sartor Resartus years later, Carlyle determined that even excrement and other forms of rot could be viewed as inverse growth. Everything in nature is organic “and lives through perpetual metamorphosis.” Thus Teufelsdrockh’s excremental disgusts towards the descendental “Charnel-house of Nature” in “The World of our Clothes,” are similar in tone to Carlyle’s perpetual disgust towards his digestive ailments in the early 1820s. But the Professor’s are modified by the realization that everyone, whether “Dread Potentate” or “meanest Tinker,” has both “a more or less incompetent Digestive-apparatus” and a spirit. Both visions are legitimate and, in fact, related: the descendental vision
leads to the belief that "the Universe is not dead and demoniacal, a charnel-house with spectres; but godlike, and my Father's!"\textsuperscript{33} The danger to the individual is that he will become immured in the first. At times this was Carlyle's experience during the early 1820s. But by the end of the decade he would see in his dyspepsia something like what Goethe does in his friend's skull in "Schillers Schaed": a charnel-house remnant, but also a symbol of the spirit.\textsuperscript{34}

Meanwhile, Carlyle was reading widely among the German writers.\textsuperscript{35} By December 1820 he felt confident enough about his German to propose to Longmans a translation of Schiller's History of the Thirty Years War. Nothing came of this, but his enthusiasm continued to grow. In March of the following year, he declared to his friend Mitchell that the Germans were teaching him to sound "all the depths of our nature." He was lowering his estimation of Hume, Reid, and Stewart. Not long ago he had regarded Dugald Stewart as unsurpassed in "moral dignity of mind"; he also admired his "taste" and "variety of acquirements."\textsuperscript{36} But once he discovered German literature as his "new heaven and new earth," Carlyle turned away from his philosopher heroes of university days and from eighteenth-century philosophical categories like "taste," to a heightened interest in what he called the "mysteries" of nature.\textsuperscript{37} But at first the Germans sometimes struck him as too mysterious. Until the mid-1820s Carlyle regarded many of them as "mystics" who confused as much as they enlightened; hence his befuddlement at the "forests" of Kantism in Schiller.\textsuperscript{38} Whether or not they struck him as mystical, Fichte, Schelling, the Shlegels, Jean Paul, Novalis, Kant, Goethe, and Schiller were especially attractive to an aspiring but tormented writer who tended to be repelled by the "actual vulgar stupid world of realities." He realized he had discovered a new and radical idealism that could replace his lost Christianity.

From 1823 to 1825 Goethe slowly supplanted Schiller as the writer most relevant to Carlyle's own needs. But in Schiller he appears still to prefer Schiller to Goethe, writing for instance that "Faust is but a careless effusion compared with Wallenstein."\textsuperscript{39} His letters reveal a less decisive frame of mind about Goethe, whose Wilhelm Meister he began translating at Kinnaird in the autumn of 1823, while he was still composing Schiller. From the first, his impulse was to be put off by the apparent immorality of Goethe's art. Still, he recognized in Meister a kindred soul who must pursue
both personal development and self-limitation, and in Faust a hero even closer to his heart, who would rather suffer than patiently limit his alternatives to a comfortable norm. In 1823, Jane Welsh's opinion that Goethe "has fire enough but it is not the celestial fire of Schiller" reflected Carlyle's own. He was still uncomfortable with the "spirit of denial" embodied in Mephistopheles, and in Meister with the "players and libidinous actresses and their sorry pasteboard apparatus for beautifying and enlivening the 'moral world.'" All the same, Carlyle admired the fact that Goethe "does not yield himself to his emotions, but uses them rather as things for his judgement to scrutinize and apply to purpose." This seemed preferable to stoical self-distancing, for it suggested an activity whereby one's emotions could be rendered objective and thence neutral through art. Goethe possessed an "indifference" (something like Keats's negative capability) which enabled him to be "of no sect or caste," but simply "a man." Carlyle wrote in 1826. He was able to distance himself from his emotions when necessary, turning even base ones to good effect in his characterizations. Man profits even from his mistakes as long as he continues to strive, the Lord tells Mephistopheles in Faust. Carlyle wondered if this might not be applicable to his own situation. His dogged efforts to write Schiller had their arena at Kinnaird, the country residence of the wealthy Buller family, whose sons Arthur and Charles he tutored to earn his room and board. For once Carlyle found teaching rewarding. He saw himself as fortunate to be instructing the bright, ambitious children of an influential family, not the dull offspring of exasperating parents in Annan and Kirkcaldy. He thought this was "such 'teaching' as I never did, in any sphere before or since!" But once more he was isolated from his family and Edinburgh; ease of mind and spiritual conviction eluded him.

Carlyle's 1823-1824 work on Schiller and the Meister translation was accompanied by a particularly debilitating pain that probably owed more to an ill-advised mercury treatment than to the dyspepsia itself. He projected the ensuing state of mind onto his characterization of Schiller, looking into him for the victory over adversity that still eluded him despite the hopes aroused by the Germans. Thus his impassioned analysis in Part III of the depressing effects of pain on the individual is but thinly disguised autobiography:
It is a cruel fate for the poet to have the sunny land of his imagination, often the sole territory he is lord of, disfigured and darkened by the shades of pain; for one whose highest happiness is the exertion of his mental faculties, to have them chained and paralysed in the imprisonment of a distempered frame.\textsuperscript{45}

This sustained lament, which goes on for two pages, is clearly the product of Carlyle's own agony, which left him "scarcely the consciousness of existence" and led him to exclaim in his journal: "My time! my time! My peace and activity! My hopes and purposes! Where are they? . . . What will become of me? Happiness! Tophet must be happier than this. . . . It is no use talking. Let me get on with Schiller; then with Goethe."\textsuperscript{46}

Carlyle thus tried to come to terms with himself by identifying with an exemplary and constitutionally stoical literary man who, though thwarted by disease and other material impediments, rose to the occasion and wrote until he died, his face reflecting "fiery ardour shining through the clouds of suffering and disappointment, deep but patiently endured."\textsuperscript{47} Carlyle did not accept the permanence of pain until the end of the 1820s, and only after he turned to Goethe and embraced his own Faustian impatience as potentially beneficial. But in writing \textit{Schiller} he at least was able to step back, contemplate himself through his subject, and analyze the power of illness to wreck his morale and his ambitions: "Alas! the bondage of Algiers is freedom compared with this of the sick man of genius, whose heart has fainted and sunk beneath its load. His clay dwelling is changed into a gloomy prison; every nerve is become an avenue of disgust or anguish."\textsuperscript{48} As in many of his depictions of illness in his letters, images of the prison and darkness are prominent; perhaps not coincidentally, they are equally important in \textit{Faust I}, where he bemoans his imprisonment in the self. In the same play Mephistopheles misreads man as he typically does, stating that he would be better off had the Lord not given him "a gleam of Heaven's light": "He calls it Reason and only uses it / To be more beastly than any beast." It struck Carlyle that disease, a spirit of denial that threatened his reason and imagination, could make a travesty of his aspirations.

In 1903 Frohwalt Kuechler called \textit{Schiller} a "subjective-moral" work that reveals as much about its author as it does about his
The idea would not have struck Carlyle as strange, for he recognized that his work was partly autobiographical. For instance, he wrote his mother in 1825 that, unlike Meister, it communicated "the sentiments of my good true-hearted mother, expressed in the language and similitudes that my situation suggests." As he often did, he wanted to reassure her that he had not entirely lost his faith, and in fact the biography seldom alludes to questions of religious doubt. He admires the "noble enthusiasm" and the triumph of "human volition over material necessity" of Schiller's Joan of Arc, thus presenting her as a moral heroine and sidestepping the question of her Christianity. Carlyle does state that in the Philosophic Letters Schiller "has surveyed the dark Serbonian bog of Infidelity: but he has made no causeway through it." In the fuller context of his search for belief this image is significant: in Sartor the Editor insists that no permanent bridge can ever be constructed over chaos, but at best only a "most insufficient, unheard-of Bridge" (Sartor as artifact, for example) that the reader must build on by interpreting the text and applying it to his own situation: "new laborers will arrive; new Bridges be built." This reflects Carlyle's belief by 1829 that belief is relative and evolutionary. Schiller did not complete his "causeway" because no person can.

Carlyle did not regard the autobiographical content of Schiller as a loss of artistic control, but as a legitimate way of reaching into and communicating the essence of his subject matter. He believed that the biographer or historian (he connects the two) should not dispassionately separate himself from the subject matter and merely communicate "dryasdust" facts. Thus in Schiller Carlyle argues that the historical writer must bring to his task a philosophy of human life and morality, which inevitably will grow out of his experiences. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, he must transcend the prejudices of education and culture, imaginatively projecting himself into another point of vision and uniting the observer with the observed. About this method in depicting Schiller, Carlyle writes: "it would at once instruct and gratify us if we could understand him thoroughly, could transport ourselves into his circumstances outward and inward, could see as he saw, and feel as he felt." This foreshadows his more fully refined argument in "State of German Literature" (1827) that the writer must penetrate his customary world view in a spirit of toleration and sympathy, yet bring with
him a morality which helps organize the chaos of interpretable facts and sources with which he must work. In Schiller this method produces a subjective closeness to the subject with which many twentieth-century readers are uncomfortable.

Carlyle brings to his interpretation of Schiller an almost obsessive interest in human existence as a Manichean struggle between the Kingdom of Light and the King of Darkness, typically characterized by social repression and disease. Thus in his Schiller there rages a life-long battle between the spirit and the clay, light and darkness, which the German in turn projected into his writings. Even as a child Schiller displayed "a habit of constraint and shyness," and his spirit was repressed by an overly rigorous upbringing that prevented him from giving vent to his "disappointment" in his lot. So he suffered rather than complained, Carlyle reports, until he was old enough to strike out into the world and establish himself as a writer. Upon fleeing the Duke's Gradgrindian model school and the medical career dictated to him, he refused to "whine" about his prospects:

with him, strong feeling was constantly a call to vigorous action: he possessed in a high degree the faculty of conquering his afflictions, by directing his thoughts, not to maxims for enduring them, but to plan for getting rid of them. 56

Though this basic conflict between the spirit and material necessity patterned his entire life, he was able to channel his energies into creative activities whose products replicated this pattern. Carlyle implies that art became a therapy for Schiller's internal paradoxes. Still, the lifelong effort to exert his will wasted him physically. This leads Carlyle to suggest a psychosomatic origin for the German's lung disease that may reflect some understanding of his own dyspepsia: "The cause of his severe affliction seemed to be the unceasing toil and anxiety of mind . . . his frame . . . was too weak for the vehement and sleepless soul that dwelt within it."57

Thus Schiller died for his art, turning adversity to victory and leaving behind works that "will rise afar off like a towering landmark in the solitude of the Past."58 In 1823-1825 Carlyle still thought that human free will has to defeat the material necessity, whether social or internal, that threatens it, even if this entails a moral victory that leads to physical death. 59 Whatever influences
Goethe had on him until 1825, and they were considerable, he still clung to an essentially Schillerian perception of renunciation and tragical sublimity, at least theoretically. That is, though he rejected passive stoicism as a workable solution to doubt and pain, he continued to adhere to an essentially passive credo (for all the talk about the need for action). Only later did Carlyle replace this with a commitment to a different, Goethean renunciation that leads to social activism. As yet Carlyle was unable to figure out how to accept his mental or physical anguish as a felix culpa, the means of creating order out of chaos in his life.

Throughout his critical evaluations of Schiller’s principal dramatic characters, Carlyle emphasizes how they reflect the conflict between the spirit and matter in their creator, who found himself (like Carlyle) hovering between “the empyrean of his fancy and the squalid desert of reality.” Therefore, just as Schiller mirrored Carlyle’s experience and his wish to understand a kindred personality, the German’s art, like all art that works, had to reflect the psychology of its creator. This makes inevitable Carlyle’s emphasis on character psychology instead of dramatic interplay and conflict. He writes Schiller created for himself the coherence of character that every legitimate writer must bring to his task: his “crowning principle of conduct” brought “a firm coherence into his character, which the changeful condition of his history rendered of peculiar importance.” His dramatic heroes and heroines succeed to varying extents in emulating the victory of their creator in asserting the claims of his spirit over the dark forces of material repression. To cite one representative illustration, Carlyle depicts Schiller’s Hamlet-like hero Don Carlos in these terms:

his soul seems once to have been rich and glorious, like the garden of Eden; but the desert-wind has passed over it, and smitten it with perpetual blight. Despair has overshadowed all the fair visions of his youth; or if he hopes, it is but the gleam of delirium, which something sterner even than duty extinguishes in the cold darkness of death.

In 1820, at Drumclog, Carlyle declared to Edward Irving that “I did not think as he of Christian Religion, and that it was vain for me to expect I ever could or should.” The following year he wrote him that he “stood alone in the universe-alone, and as it were a circle of burning iron enveloped the soul—excluding from it
every feeling but a stony-hearted, dead obduracy."66 In confronting
a "spirit of denial" that led him to an abyss of no-meaning,
Carlyle at least discovered the modern analogue to the devil for
which Teufelsdroeckh yearns when he says, "some comfort it
would have been, could I, like Faust, have found myself tempted
and tormented by the Devil."67 His dejection gave way to
something like Teufelsdroeckh's "indignation and defiance" in 1822.
But in 1825 he still needed to figure out how to reconcile his
warring sides so that apparent evil might be made to "procure
good." The composition of Schiller in 1823-1824 gave Carlyle a
good opportunity to think through his dilemmas by projecting
them onto his biographical subject. By 1825, on the eve of his first
trip to London, he was psychologically prepared to take that self-
distancing yet another step, using irony to achieve a more
comprehensive view of his situation.

NOTES

1 The most complete and authoritative study of German influence on
Carlyle remains Charles Frederick Harrold's Carlyle and German Thought:
discussion, in Sartor Called Resartus: The Genesis, Structure, and Style of
Carlyle's First Major Work (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965),
of Carlyle's transmission of German ideas into Britain is also useful, and
Hill Shine's Carlyle's Fusion of Poetry, History, and Religion by 1834
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937) analyzes German
influences on Carlyle's considerations of toleration and sympathy in
formulating an aesthetic of his own. For the German Romantic influences
on his concepts of irony, see Janice L. Haney, "'Shadow-Hunting':
Romantic Irony, Sartor Resartus, and Victorian Romanticism," Studies in
Romanticism 17 (1978): 307-33; Lee C. R. Baker, "The Open Secret of
Sartor Resartus: Carlyle's Method of Converting his Reader," Studies in
Philology 83 (1986): 218-35; and Tom Lloyd, "Towards Natural
Supernaturalism: Carlyle and Dual Vision, 1823-1829," Philological

2 Carlyle wrote the Schiller essays between March 1823 and January
1824. With some revisions, they were published as The Life of Friedrich
Schiller in 1825.


4 The Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, ed. Charles Richard


6 Reminiscences, 206.
The question of Carlyle’s “conversion” has generated much discussion over the years. Carlisle Moore presents the most persuasive analysis and dating of this event in “Sartor Resartus and the Problem of Carlyle’s ‘Conversion,’” PMLA 70 (1955): 662-81. In the same article he writes that “when dyspepsia tormented him, he suffered like Prometheus, for all mankind” (662), and that “Schiller encouraged Carlyle to dramatize his own experience” (667). See also Moore’s “Faith, Doubt, and Mystical Experience in In Memoriam,” Victorian Studies 7 (1963): 155-79.

Letters, 1: 33.
Letters, 1: 97.
Letters 1: 136.
Sartor Resartus, 192.
Sartor Resartus, 195.
Samuel Johnson, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia; A Tale, 103.
Janice Haney writes that, in Sartor, a central idea is that “only with double vision and struggle can the organicist imperative be fulfilled” (321). She analyzes how Carlyle adapted Friederich Schlegel’s belief that man “must be aware of his limited knowledge in any one moment of time and aware of his ability to transcend these limits through self-conscious acknowledgement of them” (313).
Letters, 1: 193.
Sartor Resartus, 198.
See The Two Note Books of Thomas Carlyle, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (New York: The Grolier Club, 1898), 56, for Carlyle’s self-dramatization of his suicidal feelings in the figure of a scorned “Satanus.”
Letters 1: 344.
Sartor Resartus, 112.
Johnson, Rasselas, 76.
Letters, 2: 171-72.
For an imaginative reconstruction of the progress of Carlyle’s illness, see James L. Halliday’s Mr. Carlyle—My Patient: A Psychosomatic Biography (New York: Greene & Stratton, 1950).
Letters, 2: 325.
Sartor Resartus, 72.
Sartor Resartus, 56, 57.
Sartor Resartus, 188.

34See also Sartor Resartus, 45, 210, and 226, where Teufelsdroeckh points to the “Rags or Clothes-rubbish,” the “straps, tatters, and tagrags” (with reference to George Fox), and the “tatters and rags of superannuated worn-out Symbols” that threaten to bury the individual and blind him to the “universal Spiritual Electricity” (132) of the universe. Ironical “armed eyesight” is Teufelsdroeckh’s potent laxative, which enables him to penetrate “old rags” and thus help free society’s movement. Little wonder that the smell of aleotic drugs lingers over Heuschrecke’s flatulent Institute for the Repression of Population, to which Teufelsdroeckh has added ironical marginalia (226).

35See Hill Shine’s Carlyle’s Early Reading, to 1834 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953) for a comprehensive list of Carlyle’s readings among the Germans.

Letters 1: 133.
Letters 1: 343.

37Much of “State of German Literature” (1827) is devoted to disabusing the British reading public of what had been some of his own initial misperceptions about the Germans.

Works 25: 10.
Letters 2: 294.
Letters 2: 437.
Letters 2: 326.
Letters 4: 245.
Reminiscences, 235.
Works 25: 106.
Two Note Books, 59, 51.

40Frohwalt Kuechler writes that Carlyle “hat es in diesem Jugendwerk ueber Schiller im allgemeinen noch nicht vermocht, sich zu dem standpunkte der objektiven Kritik, d.h. zu dem des Dichters zu erheben” in “Carlyle Und Schiller,” Anglia 26 (1903): 47. (Translation of Karl-Heinz Boewe: Carlyle ‘generally was not able in this early work about Schiller to elevate himself to a view of objective criticism, i.e., the view of the poet.’”

Letters 3: 274.
Works 25: 52.
Sartor Resartus, 269.
Works 25: 2.
Works 25: 10.
Works 25: 30.
Works 15: 105.
Works 25: 203.

Compare Sartor Resartus 167, where Teufelsdroeckh defies physical
death, and 186, where he embraces “the first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self (Selbst-toedtung)”; this gives way to a Goethean renunciation (Entsagen), which leads to social commitment (191-92).

60See Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry and On the Sublime*, trans. Julias A. Elias (New York: Ungar, 1980), 193-212. Schiller writes that “the morally cultivated man, and only he, is wholly free. Either he is superior to nature as a force, or he is at one with her. Nothing that she can do to him is violence because before it reaches him it has already become his own action, and dynamic nature never reaches him, because he has by his own free act separated himself from everything that she can reach” (195).

61As early as 1823 he speculated that this was possible, but did not know how to bring it about. Schiller enabled him to objectify his inconsistencies, but by 1826 it seemed as critically aloof and even solipsistic as its subject.

62Works 25: 42.
63Works 25: 45.
64Works 25: 64.
65Reminiscences, 225.
66Letters 1: 378.
67Sartor Resartus, 164.