

## Carlyle and Leadership

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### Abstract

*Influenced by German thought, Carlyle proposes that man is naturally conditioned towards hero-worship, and there are certain men in the world appointed by God to guide mankind, and the best societies are those led by these men. These heroes can appear in various roles such as prophet, priest, king, and poet. Most of Carlyle's works are concerned with the examination of the development, duties, and effect of heroes. Carlyle's views have been influenced by Hegel concerning the relationship between master and slave. From Hegel's point of view the personality of the master is selfish, and his physical and emotional independence is satisfied through the use of the slave. This relationship functions because the essence of the slave's personality is essentially completed through servitude. By assigning the role of the master to God, Carlyle neutralizes the negative associations of this relationship. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, one of these heroes was Robert Browning, the famous English poet.*

Keywords: Hero, hero-worship, society, Hegel, master.

### کارلایل و رهبری

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### چکیده

کارلایل تحت تأثیر تفکر آلمانی، تمایل طبیعی انسان را به طرف قهرمان پرستی می‌بیند، و به نظر او مردانی در دنیا وجود دارند که از طرف خدا به منظور هدایت و راهنمایی انسان انتخاب شده‌اند. بهترین اجتماعات آن‌هایی هستند که به وسیله این اشخاص هدایت می‌شوند. این قهرمانان می‌توانند در نقش‌های مختلف مانند پیغمبر، کشیش، شاه و ادیب ظاهر شوند. بیشتر آثار کارلایل بررسی تحول، وظایف و تأثیر این قهرمانان می‌باشد. دیدگاه کارلایل تحت تأثیر عقاید هگل در مورد رابطه بین سرور و برده می‌باشد که از دیدگاه هگل شخصیت سرور خودخواه است و خودکفایی مادی و معنوی خود را از راه استفاده از برده به دست می‌آورد. این رابطه عملی است چون ماهیت شخصیت برده اصولاً از راه خدمت کامل می‌شود. کارلایل با محول کردن نقش سرور به خدا جنبه منفی این رابطه را خنثی می‌کند. در اواخر قرن نوزدهم یکی از قهرمان‌ها رابرت براونینگ شاعر معروف انگلیسی بود. کلیدواژه‌ها: قهرمان، قهرمان پرستی، اجتماع، هگل، سرور.

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## Introduction

With the presidential elections imminent, the need for proper leadership appears to be as necessary as ever—if not more so. It therefore, I think, would not be inappropriate to remind readers of the views of Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), one of the most important historians and social critics of the nineteenth century, whose influence on the literature and the religious, social, and political thought of his time was immense. Carlyle believed the only hope for society is for specific persons possessing specific God-given qualities to assume leadership and guide society in the best and most efficient manner, which only they are qualified to do. He called these men heroes.

Carlyle gave a series of public lectures on this subject in 1840. The resultant work, entitled *On Heroes and Hero-worship and the Heroic in History*, is a collection of six essays in which the nature of the hero is discussed and projected in the moulds of the Divinity, the prophet, the poet, the priest, the man of letters, and the king. These essays deal in detail with a subject that is not only inherent to, but can be seen as the unifying element of Carlyle's output. His essays, biographies, histories, and social criticism all function in relation to the concept of the hero. Carlyle saw history as the sum of the biographies of great men, the state of society as dependant on the availability of heroes and the level and quality of hero-worship. *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle's spiritual autobiography, depicts the trials a great man has to go through to achieve the awareness necessary to the hero. *The French Revolution* is a series of brilliantly meticulous, if imaginative, portraits of the important men of the time, and implies how the lack of proper heroes not only created the diseased society of the ancient regime, but also brought about its destruction. In *Past and Present*—which contains the essence of his social criticism and his account of the type of hero needed for his age—Carlyle contrasts the effects of the order resulting from the efforts and influence of an imaginary medieval hero, Abbot Samson, with the chaos and waste caused by the actions of (equally imaginary) modern philistines such as Plugson of Undershot and Sir Jabesh Windbag. His huge history of Frederick the Great shows how a hero can maintain leadership and order in one of the most chaotic and Godless ages of human history.

The concept of the hero is one of the most archetypal themes in human culture. From ancient myths, to medieval legends, to fairy tales, to screen and sports stars, our inherent psychological need and pleasure in the hero has been evident. Carlyle has capitalized on this human trait and built a whole philosophy upon it. (A set of theories may be a more accurate description, since he seldom tries to justify his statements; but he would have seen it as a philosophy, and I maintain the term.) A philosophy then, that states worship is part of human nature, deals with the career of great men and the qualities necessary to the fulfillment of the office of the hero, and stipulates that the union of the two—a hero and a worshipping society—will greatly benefit society and mankind.

In the traditional steps in the hero's growth, he departs from the community to a place where he is faced with challenges and struggles. The forest has been quite popular (Dante, most fairy tales), but the spiritual realm (most prophets) and the years of political struggle and danger (many rulers) are also quite applicable. If the hero is successful, he will emerge from the struggle with a valuable possession (knowledge, insight, power, experience, or even a talisman) which he will then use for the benefit of his community. This is the framework on which *Sartor Resartus* is based on. The hero has to pass through doubt, despair, and disbelief towards a period of crisis in which his spirit is purified. He has to annihilate his old self, and in the process emerge with an understanding of the true order of God's universe which is spiritual:

Here, then, as I lay in that Centre of Indifference, cast, doubtless by benignant upper Influence; into a new Heaven and a new Earth. The first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self...had been happily accomplished; and my mind's eyes were now unsealed. (Carlyle 1924: 141)

The hero is now on the path of understanding, after which he will be ready to return to the community with his prize which is spiritual awareness.

*Sartor Resartus* is important to Carlyle's philosophy of the hero because it sets the pattern for the transformation of the man to the hero—the renunciation of the self and the merging with the divine order. Furthermore, it expresses the metaphor of clothes (the title in Latin means the tailor re-clothed), which becomes emblematic of the spirituality of the visible world: "All visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken, is not there at all: Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and *body* it forth" [54]. Carlyle believes in a divinely ordered universe which is by definition spiritual; clothes become the signs of the spiritual in material form. It follows from the analogy that when society becomes materialistic, the spiritual source is forgotten in favour of clothes for clothes, sake: ostentation in the material things of the world signifies a decay in the spiritual, and therefore a departure from order into chaos. That is the reason for the emphasis on the renunciation of self, which associates with the material. The hero is the only one who is able to see through the visible emblems and direct society towards the ordered spiritual state of the universe. Or to put it more simply, the hero has to dispose of society's old (materialistic) clothes that have become unsuitable and re-clothe society in new, proper (spiritual) clothes.

The ability to transcend the visible and the material is the property of a few men only. The rest of mankind, the worshippers, are imbued with a natural propensity towards homage to ones they feel to be higher than themselves. The only justification that is given for this view follows from Carlyle's premise that the world is divinely ordered, and we are divine creations with an inherent sense of religiosity and worship. It is important to note that the hero's crisis in

*Sartor Resartus* does not conclude with a reaffirmation of his original Christian faith, but by an affirmation of a personal one. It is man's natural capacity for reverence of that which is spiritual that is stressed.

Know that there is in man a quite indestructible Reverence for whatsoever holds of Heaven, or even plausibly counterfeits such holding. Show the dullest clodpole, show the haughtiest featherhead, that a soul higher than himself is actually here; were his knees stiffened into brass, he must down and worship. (Carlyle 1924: 189)

Carlyle counters any objections to the validity of this "indestructible Reverence" by attributing its source to nature; in case there were some doubts as to the divine origins of man.

Meanwhile, observe with joy, so cunningly has Nature ordered it, that whatsoever man ought to obey, he cannot but obey. Before no faintest revelation of the Godlike did he ever stand irreverent; least of all, when the Godlike showed itself revealed in his fellow man. Thus is there a true religious Loyalty forever rooted in his heart; nay in all ages, even in ours, it manifests itself as a more or less orthodox *Hero-worship*. In which fact, that Hero-worship exists, has existed, and will forever exist, universally among Mankind, mayest thou discern the corner-stone of living-rock, whereon all polities for the remotest time may stand secure. (Carlyle 1924: 188–89)

Carlyle's power of rhetoric is designed not so much to counter objections to his views, as actually to refute the possibility of objections. The sense of authority that surrounds him is achieved by the confidence with which he employs imperatives such as "know" and "observe"; and by using nature and God as his authorities.

Hero-worship, heartfelt prostrate admiration, submission, burning, boundless, for a noblest godlike Form of Man—is not that the germ of Christianity itself? The greatest of all Heroes is One—whom we do not name here! (Carlyle 1924: 249)

Repetition and emphasis are the tools of the preacher; but once an objection is raised, a pause created, the momentum is lost and will have to be regained with more repetition for an even greater effect.

Yes, from Norse Odin to English Samuel Johnson, from the divine founder of Christianity to the withered Pontiff of Encyclopedism, in all times and places, the Hero has been worshipped. It will ever be so. We all love great men; love, venerate, bow down submissive before great men: nay can we honestly bow down to anything else? Ah, does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him? No nobler or more blessed feeling dwells in man's heart. And to me it is very cheering to consider that no skeptical logic, or general triviality, insincerity and aridity of any Time and its influences can destroy this noble inborn loyalty and worship that is in man. (Carlyle 1924: 252)

Carlyle's logic, that constancy in worship makes a virtue out of obeisance, is clearly faulty (a classic may be proven by the test of time, but not the flatness of the earth). But that is forgotten by the time the listener is asked (told) what else could he possibly bow down to. However, the crucial and problematic sentence in this passage, so artfully expressed, is "Ah, does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him?" "True man", "made higher", and "above" can only be defined within the framework of Carlyle's own philosophy if the point is to be accepted—he is using terms that need to be defined within their own definitions. But the most problematic word is "feel". Is the *feeling* of being made higher the same as actually *being* made higher? All the effort of the passage is to prevent the listener from thinking whether or not the happiness *felt* from pure reverence is the happiness that sheep may feel as they are led to the pasture. Therefore the passage states that hero-worship has always existed, always will, is inevitable, and has no substitute; it is the noblest quality of man, and any disagreements are due to "triviality", "insincerity", "aridity", and not being a "true man". To be fair to Carlyle, however, given his opinion of the "worshippers", it is doubtful whether he would have objected to the analogy of the sheep and its implications. The image is rightly Christian because in the background lies the strong influence of Carlyle's Calvinistic training. The sense of duality is very strong in Carlyle: work and order are good, other alternatives are evil; Cromwell was completely right, Charles completely wrong; the hero is the chosen and the "master", the rest are the "masterless", the worshippers. The "true man" and "what is really above him" are components of this duality—the feeling of elevation is a bonus.

In the background of Carlyle's philosophy of Hero-worship stands Hegel's essay, "Lordship and Bondage", in *Phenomenology of Mind*, where he discusses the nature of the relationship of the master and slave. "The one is independent whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is dependent whose essence is life or existence for another. The former is the Master, or Lord, the latter the Bondsman." (Hegel 1910:182) According to Hegel, the aim of the master is to achieve complete and independent self-consciousness (synonymous here with self-identity, self-existence, and self-awareness) through the exertion of the ego, which is the essential nature and absolute object of consciousness. Success is dependent on self-sufficiency which allows the exclusion of every other form which can be distracting to the process. Hence the need for a slave. The master aims towards a state of independent consciousness because he believes that that is the only state in which he would be existing for himself. He does this by qualifying the slave as a dependent consciousness by making him work out of fear—to the satisfaction of the ego.

Hegel shows that this is an illusion:

In all this, the unessential consciousness is for the master, the object which embodies the truth of his certainty of himself. But it is evident that this

object does not correspond to its notion; for, just where the master has effectively achieved lordship, he really finds that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved. (Hegel 1910:184)

Hegel is not refuting the state of lordship, but the inherent paradox in the relationship between lord and servant, master and slave—the same paradox which Marx later claimed would guarantee the inevitable empowerment of the proletariat in fully industrialized societies. Lordship provides the master with enjoyment and the pleasure of having his desires satisfied and his will obeyed; but this interaction also shows the dependence of the master on the slave. The term “master” can only exist in apposition to the term “slave”, and the master comes to be defined, in concept and action, in terms of the slave, the “unessential consciousness”. “He is thus not assured of self-existence as his truth; he finds that his truth is rather the unessential consciousness and the fortuitous unessential action of that consciousness” (Hegel 1910: 184).

The “truth” of the slave is similarly reversed. Bondage “being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will never enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence” (Hegel 1910: 184). This dependence not from slavery, but of consciousness. Through fear of his master, the slave has to work; and through labour, he will achieve a growing understanding of himself and of his abilities. Self awareness will lead to self discovery and an independent self.

What has made Hegel’s essay particularly haunting to later generations is its justification for the process of slavery. More generally, it is a philosophical inquiry into human nature and relations which plausibly shows the need for one consciousness to try to fulfill itself in another; and, despite the paradox, the lord and bondsman relationship will remain intact on the physical level. The lord will remain the one whose desires have to be satisfied; the bondsman, the one who will oblige. Slavery is the extreme form of this relationship, but the rules remain the same. In friendship, there is a leader and a follower; in love, a beloved and a lover. Hegel’s great authority is also behind Carlyle. “That he himself is made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him” is very similar to “the positive significance that the bondsman becomes thereby aware of himself as factually and objectively self-existent” (Hegel 1910:186). Carlyle was much influenced by German thought, and it would not be unreasonable to imagine that he could have used Hegel’s essay as a starting point for his views. The changes he makes show why he attracts while Hegel disturbs.

Carlyle accomplishes this transformation by elevating the roles of the master and slave to extreme significance, and making their relationship the key to the well-being of society. In the process, he maintains what is useful to him and dispenses with anything that has undesirable and unfavourable associations. The master is changed into the hero. He is no longer one who

wants to exert his ego and consciousness on another for his own satisfaction. He is one who is appointed and chosen, not of his own free will, but by the Divine; and he is worshipped not out of fear, but because of the great qualities that he possesses. The most crucial of these qualities—attained through trials and great suffering, as shown in *Sartor Resartus*—are “insight” and “sincerity”.

Man’s spiritual nature, the vital Force which dwells in him, is essentially one and indivisible; that what we call imagination, fancy, understanding, and so forth, are but different figures of the same Power of Insight. (Hegel 1910: 338)

Which in the hero has reached its highest level. The power of insight allows the hero to understand the workings of the forces that represent the universe, and to isolate and interpret the spiritual from the material:

The gifted man is he who sees the essential point, and leaves all the rest aside as surplusage: it is his faculty too...that he discerns the true *likeness*, not the false superficial one, of the thing he has got to work in. (Hegel 1910: 326)

The hero can see the truth better than anyone else, and he may use his power of insight because he also possesses the power of sincerity: “Whosoever may live in the show of things, it is for him a necessity of nature to live in the very fact of things. A man once more in earnest with the Universe...in virtue of being sincere” (Hegel 1910: 314). Sincerity allows the hero to be one with the universe because it makes him selfless and completely devoted to his aim. At the same time it qualifies him for his role as leader and teacher by removing the possibility of deception.

The disturbing elements in Hegel’s view of the master were the master’s egotism, his use of fear, and the satisfaction he gained from the oppressive relationship. Carlyle retains the idea that man possesses a dependent consciousness—the need to worship—but makes the process desirable by changing the master into the hero. The hero himself is but a tool of the Divine.

He is a man sent hither to make [the divine mystery] more impressively known to us. That always is his message; he is to reveal it to us,—that sacred mystery which he more than others lives ever present with. While others forget it, he knows it; without consent asked of *him*, he finds himself living in it, bound to live in it. (Hegel 1910: 314)

Gone is the egotism and the need for fear. In fact, all the work has to be done by the hero. Carlyle has also altered the paradox inherent in the master/slave relationship. In Hegel, the roles of the dependent and independent consciousnesses are reversed, though the state of physical slavery is maintained—that is because, ironically and sadly, that state is

necessary for the slave mentality to achieve independence. In Carlyle, both sides of the relationship achieve independence. The hero, by virtue of attaining the level of heroship has achieved independent consciousness; the worshippers, by their act of obeisance, in the Hegelian manner, but this time out of reverence, not fear. The image of the sheep seems all but forgotten.

To improve the level and quality of their worship is the worshippers' only responsibility. The process is not explained, but one would imagine that it entails improving the faculty of insight—which all possess to a lesser degree than the hero—to be better able to identify and understand the message of the hero. In *Past and Present*:

Hero-worship...is the soul of all social business among men; that the doing of it well, or the doing of it ill, measures accurately what degree of well-being or of ill-being there is in the world's affairs...that we must learn to do our hero-worship better; that to do it better and better, means the awakening of the nation's soul from its asphyxia, and the return of blessed life to us. (Carlyle 1966: 33-4)

If this sounds like an easy way of distancing oneself from all problems by blaming the poor quality of hero-worship as their source—it is. As with much of Carlyle's writing, the message is seldom practically applicable. In retrospect, the lasting influence of hero-worship in the West has been its quality of secularized religiosity, especially in time of religious decline. Like Christianity, for example, it creates a one-to-many relationship where all become equal in relation to the one. ("The greatest of all Heroes is One—whom we do not name here!") Religion exists because it can claim an infallible hero. Hero-worship is attractive because it comes closest to that state. But the question will always remain of how one is to identify the hero. Carlyle fails to answer this question, and it remains the weakest link in his chain of exposition.

### Conclusion

I would like to end by saying a few words about Carlyle's influence on Victorian poets. The third lecture of the series he gave in 1840 was on "The Hero as Poet". As the titles of the lectures imply, the emphasis is always on heroship. Carlyle is careful to reiterate that the qualities that enable the hero to interpret the "realized Thought of God" are more important than the source of the communication:

I will remark again, however, as a fact not unimportant to be understood, that the different *sphere* constitutes the grand origin of such distinction; that the Hero can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will, according to the kind of world he finds himself born into. I confess I have no notion of a truly great man that could not be *all* sorts of men. (Carlyle 1966: 312)



The “sphere” in which Victorian poets found themselves was one where the nature of the roles of poetry and the poet was in upheaval. English society seemed to reflect the validity of Macaulay’s view that as civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines, implying that the representational needs that a scientific/industrial society looks for in its literature cannot be satisfied by poetry. Macaulay’s statement has a further implication: that an “advanced” civilization not only has an unreceptive audience for poetry, but that the sphere is unhealthy for the growth of great poetic sensibility. Carlyle’s lecture is in some ways a direct answer to Macaulay, by stressing the role of the poet as “Vates”. The poet as vates—a mixture of prophet, soothsayer, seer, inspired singer, bard—shifts the assumed (by Macaulay) role of the poet from that of representing the advancement of civilization in his poetry, to issues of morality and spirituality, the true representatives of the health of society. Macaulay praised the materialism of the age, which for Carlyle was evil and a decline towards a Godless and chaotic society, and one which the hero had to prevent. Therefore not only is the need for poetry essential for such a society, but the sphere is ripe for the cultivation of the poetic mind, which functions best in diversity and upheaval. In *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett warns against excessive materialism, and sees hope only in the vatic quality of the poet:

I write so  
 Of the only truth-tellers, now left to God,-  
 The only speakers of essential truth,  
 Posed to relative, comparative,  
 And temporal truths; the only holders by  
 His sun-skirts, through conventional grey glooms;  
 The only teachers who instruct mankind...  
 Ay, and while your common men  
 Build pyramids, gauge railroads, reign, reap, dine,  
 And dust the flaunty carpets of the world  
 For kings to walk on, or our senators,  
 The poet suddenly will catch them up  
 With his voice like a thunder,—“This is soul,  
 This is life, this word is being said in heaven,  
 Here’s God down on us! what are you about?” (Carlyle 1966: I. 858-76)

Another poet who was influenced by Carlyle, and was later to become a poetic hero to most of the English speaking world was Elizabeth Barrett’s husband, Robert Browning. Browning was among the audience at Carlyle’s lectures, having just finished *Sordello*, a long and difficult poem on the theme of poetic disillusionment. One can only imagine with what mixed feelings he responded to Carlyle’s confident tone concerning the role of the poet in society. In Book II, *Sordello* poses the question of the actual ability of the poet to influence his world:

The Body, the Machine for Acting Will,  
 Had been at the commencement proved unfit;  
 That for Demonstrating, Reflecting it,  
 Mankind—no fitter: was the Will Itself  
 In fault? (Carlyle 1966: 994–98)

By Book III, however, Sordello maintains that aiming towards a higher, a transcendence beyond the visible and material, will produce the greatest poetry, and should be the aim of the poet:

From true works (to wit  
 Sordello's dream-performance that will  
 Never be more than dreamed) escapes there. Still  
 Some proof, the singer's proper life was 'neath  
 The life his song exhibits, this a sheath  
 To that; a passion and a knowledge far  
 Transcending these, majestic as they are,  
 Smouldered; his lay was but an episode  
 In the bard's life. (Carlyle 1966: 622–30)

The material life is compared to a sheath that can contain and eventually express the heroic message. This is the hero as poet in the initial stages of growth, but in the making.

Sordello never becomes the hero and his aim never "more than dreamed", and the emphasis of the poem remains the trials and tribulations of the poet's life. To the Victorian poets these were what to write, how to write, and for whom to write. Among the greats, Arnold gave up poetry early in his career and became a critic; Browning unsuccessfully tried his hand at drama and eventually left England and was not to find his audience for many years; Tennyson suffered from the conflict between his aesthetic sensibility and his social duties as poet laureate. These poets lacked coherent relationship between poet and poetry that had united the poets of the previous generations. The reference of the Romantic "I" was very clear; the Victorian's was anything but. The early deaths of Keats, Shelley, and Byron (Keats was born the same year as Carlyle!), who would have been the Victorians' teachers and poetic fathers, had deprived them of the critical knowledge which the older generation bequeaths, especially in regard to their own works. The other factor related to the Victorians' instability was that the void left by these early deaths forbade them from criticizing their poetic fathers—a process important to a poet's development and sense of historical position. The Victorian poets often had to invent or resort to poetic modes and structures such as the romance or the dramatic monologue which allowed them to hide their insecurity and to distance themselves from their poetic persona, to separate the poet from the poetic voice, which had been one of the unifying characteristics of the romantic poets.

Of the major Victorian poets, Browning came closest to fulfilling the role of the hero. While the poetry of Tennyson and Arnold is filled with doubt and despair, much of his vision is optimistic and his message direct. In the "Epilogue" of his last book of poems he summed up his attitude to life as

One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake. (Carlyle 1966:11-5)

By the last decade of his life, many Browning Societies had sprung up in England and America the members of which regarded Browning as the great teacher and were dedicated to the study of his poems in search of life lessons (whether Browning liked it or not).

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