Reality, Artifice, and the Politics of Evolution: Watts and Carlyle in the Earnest Age

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The beauties of formal perfection were all but empty for Thomas Carlyle and G. F. Watts. For them, word and image were inextricably linked with power. Just as today questions of power lie at the heart of many of our literary analyses, questions of power lay at the heart of these two figures. Like so many of us who read and write about the Victorian era, Watts and Carlyle were people of political and social rhetoric who found the myth of empty style to be empty indeed. Not surprisingly, they regarded as sham artists who devoted themselves to the artful stanza or to the flashy painting as ends in themselves. For Watts and Carlyle, formal emptiness stood as proof of a political world gone badly wrong. At the other extreme they found dry prose—politics to be inadequate. To painter and writer every allusion, rhythm, cadence, metaphor, and evocative image is crucial, for each served higher political ends. For example, in a published speech of 1889, Watts called on artists “to speak in stirring language or to stand among the leaders of thought as one of them. . . . We want more intellectual demand made upon artists. Art is a language both spiritual and intellectual; if it lives now at all, it must live chiefly by its claim to this” (W, 3:271). In a letter dated June 18, 1891, he asserted, “The poetic gift is really of infinite value too often exercised in the direction of abstract generalities. I should like to see it brought to bear like an Armstrong gun against our mammon worship especially.”

With the erosion of Clement Greenberg’s view of modernism and with the collapse of the new criticism, we can begin to see that Watts and Carlyle are not so alien. Not so long ago we attacked Victorian didacticism in the arts, but today, as we turn to the Victorian scene, we can begin to see an era that is not so much our “other.” Now we can perceive our own image reflected—although we may still regard ourselves, a century later, as far less flawed in many real ways.

Today it is a near commonplace in criticism to find discussions of

signs and simulacra that stem from Jean Baudrillard, as critics expose the artificially constructed hierarchies of the present in an attempt to lead us into a less contemptible future. Yet one of the surprising things we can discover as we look into the history of nineteenth-century culture is that it was Thomas Carlyle in Sartor Resartus who discussed a theory of signs and simulacra, not as his original theory, but as the theory of his age. As the late Morse Peckham argued, “Carlyle sees symbol-making as an activity common to all men. Everyone, from the lowliest ditch digger to Goethe is, in this sense, alike.” In other words, we are ensnared in texts, unable to grasp the world or transcend our texts: “Who printed thee, for example, this unpretending Volume on the Philosophy of Clothes? Not Herren Stilischweigen and Company; but Cadmus of Thebes, Faust of Mentz, and innumerable others who thou knowest not” (C, 1:186). A virtual postmodern theory of signs and simulacra was, in fact, the foundation of Carlyle’s outlook and for Watts’s art.

For Carlyle, artifice is the key to understanding meaning in everyday life. All truths, morals, and certainties are artificial. There are no received truths, no real truths at all, only artificial ones that stand, in very real ways, as real truths, morals, and certainties: “Are not all dialects ‘artificial’? Artificial things are not all false . . . we may say all artificial things are, at the starting of them, true” (C, 5:180). Carlyle states here the key to meaning. Meaning, based on language, is artificial; at its base it creates what is true and what is false. For Carlyle, artifice never equals falsehood. Language itself is at once artificial and the source of truth and falsity in all practical matters. What is more, meaning is brought into being through artificial dialects; yet the fact that our world is not real certainly does not make it any less meaningful for Carlyle. This dream-world of Carlyle is no world to take lightly, for questions of truth and falsity affect life and death. He understands that we live in a world of artifice, a world that we would call a world of signifiers. In Sartor Resartus he analyzes clothes to show the power that signifiers wield. Clothes, as signifiers, wield absolute power in absolutely artificial ways:

You see two individuals . . . one dressed in fine Red, the other in coarse threadbare Blue; Red says to Blue, “Be hanged and anatomized!” Blue heart with a shudder, and (O wonder of wonders!) marches sorrowfully to the gallows; is there noosed-up, vibrates his hour, and the surgeons dissect him, and fits his bones into a skeleton for medical purposes . . . Has not your Red hanging individual a horsehair wig, squirrel-skins and a plush-gown; whereby all morals know that he is a Judge! (C, 1:45-48)

Culture is an artificial construct, a culture of signs. For Carlyle, understanding the arbitrary conventions that form culture is the only way to understand the meaning of social conventions: “All Symbols are properly Clothes; that all Forms . . . are Clothes; and thus not
only the parchment Magna Charta . . . but the Pomp and Authority of Law . . . must it not be admitted that this science of Clothes is a high one . . . that it takes scientific rank” (C, 1:215). Carlyle documents political and social truths, not as matters of human nature, but rather as evidence of man’s endless artifice. He discusses the arbitrary and brutal nature of cultural signs, “the stupidest heraldic Coats-of-Arms; military Banners everywhere; and generally all national or other sectarian Costumes and Customs: they have no intrinsic, necessary divineness, or even worth; but have acquired an extrinsic one” (C, 1:177). Artifice, not the divine, creates social worth. Carlyle understands the moral and political ramifications of meaning that is extrinsic, not intrinsic, and so the moral ramifications of deconstructing the presumed link between the signifier and the signified. He writes that this view, “tailorises and demoralises us, fill[s] me with a certain horror at myself and mankind” (C, 1:45). The postmodern notion of deconstructing the link between the signifier and the signified is fundamental to Carlyle’s nineteenth-century outlook.

Watts also points to the difficulty in attaining any absolute judgment: “One never can arrive at any true conclusion on religion, politics or anything else, unless one divests his mind of the desire to think in one particular way—Yes, that’s the trouble—who can have a quite unbiased mind.” Moreover, humankind cannot exist without constructing and creating: “The lower animals make no objects in their lives, these are supplied by the necessities of their existence. Man creates the necessities, he cannot help doing so, they are themselves the real necessities of his existence. They are natural in their artificiality.” For both Watts and Carlyle—and for postmodern theorists—artifice is both the key to meaning and the undoing of conventional views of reality.

Watts came to Carlyle’s ideas, not by any accident, but because they were widely known in his day. When Watts at twenty exhibited his first painting at the Royal Academy, Carlyle had already published The French Revolution, which followed Sartor Resartus of 1833-34. In short, Watts began painting in a culture rife with Carlylean ideas that would shortly spread into Victorian middle-class culture at large. Yet Watts was not simply affected by the zeitgeist of the Victorian era, he was consciously affected by Carlyle. Beyond documenting Watts’s reverence for Carlyle’s principles, this essay will argue that Carlyle’s words led Watts to paint Carlylean paintings. In his studies, Watts read Carlyle, came to know Carlyle, and painted three portraits of him. In 1880, Watts published an article in the journal Nineteenth Century which defended the greatness of Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus and asked that Watts’s critics might use the example of that work in judging the difficult aspects of his art. Watts writes:

Sartor Resartus was so unpopular that many subscribers to the magazine in which it was published withdrew their names. The critic might be right; all that is asked is that he should have the good sense, good taste, and good feeling to admit, while disapproving, that there are difficulties in the way of judgment, and that possibly a longer acquaintance might induce some change of opinion (W, 3:177).

Watts argued that his indefinite, allegorical paintings should be judged by the model of Carlyle and asserted the mission of this art: “It is of the spirit of Carlyle & of Ruskin! I want to identify art with such feeling—great principles.” On another occasion, he showed a nearly religious admiration for Carlyle: “We want enthusiasm that alone can be kindled by the belief in a divine principle—talking of the Hebrews of whom we were reading—we shall never get it back I am afraid—it is the loss of this which Carlyle & Ruskin felt which made them lift their voices as if they were of the prophets.” In short, Carlyle was the linchpin of Watts’s moral outlook, giving him a way to maintain the notion of moral principle in a world that capitalized on producing shams, after the collapse of old world politics. “Who thinks ‘he was a destructor rather than constructor.’ He taught all the earnest minded people of today that they must do serious work & take up life seriously—that there is a yea & a nay & he must choose in this world one or the other of ways” (Mary Seton Watts Papers, April 3, 1893).

In addition to his enthusiasm for Carlyle’s printed words, Watts had direct contact with the man. In June 1867, or just before, Carlyle began his sessions for a portrait that would require repeated sittings for well over two years. Watts refused to let this sitter go. Carlyle was acutely conscious of the investment in time spent on this project, and one year after his first sittings he wrote, “I am to give Watts his ‘first sittings’ (sorrow on it).” Nevertheless, since Carlyle was an outspoken advocate of the importance of the historical portrait, he accepted these seemingly unending sittings with a man he did not particularly like.

In 1853 Carlyle had called for the formation of a National Portrait Gallery for England, a “home of all the National Divinities . . . where unconsciously [my italics] but very veritably, the better parts of the souls of all men might worship.” National portrait galleries were something of an obsession for Carlyle, who not only advocated them vigorously in England and Scotland, but also “in every country, as among the most popular and cherished of National Possessions.” In 1854, in “Project of a National Exhibition of Scottish Portraits,” he argued for the creation of National Portrait Galleries in every country: “It has always struck me that Historical Portrait Galleries far transcend in worth all other kinds of National Collections of Pictures.
whatever; that in fact they ought to exist (for many reasons, of all
degrees of weight) in every country, as among the most popular and
cherished of National possessions" (C, 29:406). While Carlyle was
busy promoting national portrait galleries, Watts was busy creating
his own Pantheon of National Divinities; on May 25, 1861 the
Athenæum stated:

Mr. Watts has expressed his intention to leave to the nation, at his death, the
valuable and interesting collection of contemporary portraits he has been for some
years, and still is, forming. Among the persons who have sat to him from time to time
may be named Mr. Tennyson, Sir John Lawrence, Mr. Layard, Mr. Holman Hunt, the
Duke of Argyll, Mr. Gladstone, and the Lord Chancellor.16

By June 1867, it was Carlyle’s turn to sit for Watts’s pantheon and he
took this sitting seriously. In July 1868 Carlyle wrote to Watts, “I am
anxious to neglect nothing for perfecting our mutual enterprise, in
which I see in you such excellent desire after excellence, and shall be
ready within the prescribed limits and times, any time at a day’s
notice” (Ormond [1975], pp. 168-169). Watts and Carlyle were indeed
working on a “mutual enterprise.”

Watts had before him one of his heroes, a man whose word, in
great measure, ruled his style; but he could not convince Carlyle of
the worth of any art beyond the historical portrait. He tried to
persuade Carlyle of the worth of Phidias and the Elgin Marbles, but he
failed. He tried to convince Carlyle that Tennyson’s poetry could not be
translated to prose, but he failed.10 When the conversation shifted
from art to physiognomy, they were at odds again. Carlyle insisted
that physical features, such as the color of an eye or the line of the
jaw, could be trusted to indicate intellectual and moral character; but
Watts disagreed and quoted exceptions to Carlyle. Watts, who called
himself time and again ‘a painter of ideas,’ would not sit passively be-
fore even Carlyle as he derided the Elgin Marbles, nor would he ac-
cept Carlyle’s notion that bone structure and eye color made the
man. When it came to art, Watts and Carlyle were anything but kin-
dred spirits; yet despite their differences in profession and tempera-
ment, of which many anecdotes are told, “the relation between
Watts and Carlyle was an engaged one indeed and a serious matter for
both.

Critical recognition of the connection between Watts and
Carlyle was slow to come, in large part, for the simple fact that criti-
cal recognition was slow to come to Watts. Watts was sixteen years
older than Manet,16 but he did not achieve fame until the 1880s.
Since the late 1840s he had been an artist admired by John Ruskin
and the Pre-Raphaelite circle, but he received little public recogni-
tion beyond notices for a handful of fresco paintings and a reputation
for being a fine portraitist.13 This perception changed radically after

Watts’s article in The Nineteenth Century of February 1880 and his
one-man show at the Grosvenor Gallery of 1881-82, in which 205
works were shown, including a portrait of The Late Thomas Carlyle
from Watts’s Little Holland House Gallery. From this point, critics
saw the Symbolist side of Watts and began to make sense of it
through Carlyle. In February of 1882, Harry Quilter was the first to
make the link between Watts and Carlyle. To build his argument he
begins with an explanation of Watts’s powerful yet elusive style, re-
lating it to “the pregnant hints of Carlyle.”14 Quilter sees Watts as
ruled by the inexplicable, the unfathomable, and he defends Watts’s
figure drawing, in his works as a whole, as constructed from Sator
Resartus:

It is quite certain, I think, that the body of man is regarded by the artist much after
the fashion of Carlyle in Sator Resartus—it is only “the garment thou seest in him by,”
and this method of thought affects the method of the hand, and gives a certain
amount of subtle generalisation to the artist’s compositions. (p. 260)

Watts’s own article of February 1880 had directed critics to come to
just this conclusion. When Quilter republished his 1882 article ten
years later he added the following footnote:

It must be remembered that this essay was written in 1882, when the majority of
critics (proper critics, I mean) were still in the habit of sneering at Mr. Watts’ painting,
and especially of deriding his imaginative work. To-day my defence of that phase of
his art may appear unnecessarily timid and hesitating, but in the year in which it was
written I was alone in the height of my estimate, and I was very proud to receive then
a letter from this great artist which told me I alone had understood his aims and
appreciated his genius.15

Watts’s attempt to link his art to Carlyle in the critical press had suc-
ceeded; eventually John Ruskin and dozens of lesser known critics
were to acknowledge the connection.16 After Watts’s death, critics
continued to link Watts and Carlyle, although, for some, to be
Carlylean had become grounds for scorn rather than praise:
As an artist we can only feel his colossal arrogance. But this arrogance was the great
fact of the time. When I see a Watts picture — it seems to conjure up, not so much
the noble reflections that appear to rise in some other men, but odd memories of all
sorts of Victorian things. I think of ... Carlyle hurling thunderbolts everywhere who
did not feel like a Scotch peasant or think like a German philosopher.17

Watts painted Carlyle’s words, and his most obvious monument
to Carlyle’s place in the Victorian pantheon of ideas is his portrait
of him of 1867-77 (Fig. 1). It was a public monument to a Victorian
hero which Watts exhibited in London, New York, Birmingham,
Nottingham, Manchester, Rugby, Southwark, and Tottenham, as well
as in his own public gallery in Holland Park. Then, in 1895, he pre-
sented it to the National Portrait Gallery where it became part of a
group of portraits of great Victorians painted and donated by Watts,
known in his time as “The People’s Gallery.”

Watts and Carlyle had high expectations for this portrait, but
Countering the well-known “mad labourer” story, however, is the penetrating contemporary analysis by G. K. Chesterton:

One of the most perfect of Mr. Watts’ literary portraits is the portrait of Carlyle. It is interesting to notice that he does not paint the great author as Millais paints him, as a shaggy and magnificent old man, at peace with himself. It would seem as if Mr. Watts saw deeper; there is a touch of something meagre and exhausted about the figure; upon every line of it is written what pathos that is worth a thousand excuses. The stroke of genius in the picture is the square and emphatic treatment of the slant forward of the beard and chin; it is worth pages of psychological discussion on Carlyle’s only basic fault, the almost pitiful turgidity of sound, the lack of patience and a reverence for weakness which made the greatest of modern prophets unable, apparently, to read any further in the Bible than the Book of Malachi. Mr. Watts sees all this uglier side, but it does not destroy his admiration; he paints the fearless and mournful figure of a man to whom ironic destiny had given the first requirement of a great teacher, a belief in his message, but denied the second, a belief in its universal acceptability. He gives the only quiet and perfect answer to Carlyle’s lack of reverence for the weak; he paints Carlyle’s weakness and ponts it reverently.15

Chesterton found Watts not simply an able recorder of Carlyle’s facial features but also a profound student of the man, and one whose reverence goes to the very depths of Carlyle’s weakness. For Chesterton, Watts does not glorify a sham Carlyle; Watts’s painting is artificial, but it is no misrepresentation. This difficult distinction between what is artificial and what is a sham lies at the heart of the relation between word and image in Watts’s paintings. The difference between an artifice and a misrepresentation is that a misrepresentation is consciously constructed signifiers are consciously manipulated to produce meaning. Carlyle puts it this way: “How true also, once more, is it that no Man or Nation of men, conscious of doing a great thing, was ever, in that thing, doing other than a small one!” (C, 3:48). Signifiers that we use unconsciously are true in their artifice, while signifiers manipulated consciously produce shams. Another way to translate this idea into today’s language is to say that the world of shams is a world of simulacra passed off as truth. The key difference between what is real and what is not does not turn on the question of artifice, for both are artificial. What distinguishes the two is that truths arise unconsciously through contact with the world; while shams are produced by manipulating signifiers, or consciously creating systems based on theories, which are based on signifiers. The question for Watts and Carlyle is not which is free of artifice, but rather a political question: which should rule? For Watts and Carlyle the answer is clear: unconscious truth should rule and all systems of signs, whether they be old-world hierarchies, laissez-faire platitudes, natural rights doctrines, or socialist theories must be exposed as shams when they become conscious misrepresentations.16 For Watts and Carlyle, conscious artifice was the death of true meaning, for it is so self-consciously removed from...
what is real: unconscious artifice.

Yet there is a second crucial difference between shams and truths. The relation of an artificial truth to reality is not perfect. Carlyle writes of "this Beautiful and Awful, which we name Nature, Universe and suchlike, the essence of which remains for ever Unnameable" (C, 10:131). David Loshak sees the key to Watts's universal ideas in the "Unknown." For Carlyle and Watts the artificial truths contain two sides. One is the moral side: "This is what I must do." The other is the metaphysical side: "There is much that I do not understand." Here we find the sharpest contrast between self-conscious artifice and truth: self-conscious artifice is self-satisfied; and Watts and Carlyle believed self-conscious self-satisfaction to be the most volatile of mixtures. The sham reality is seamless artifice, and it fails to recognize or admit its inadequacy as an explanation of reality. It contains no sense of wonder, no sense of chaos at the borders of artifice. This self-satisfied reality not only fails to give any hint that it is artificial, but it also fails to give any warning that its system of signifiers may produce the most alarming chaos as it encounters its opposite: unconscious, artificial, social truth. In other words, Watts and Carlyle were social conservatives, arguing the dangers of new social theories, while anticipating postmodern theorists. Carlyle writes: "All great Peoples are conservative; slow to believe in novelties; patient of much error in actualities. . . True, O Radical Reformer, there is no Custom that can, properly speaking, be final; none, And yet thou seest Customs which in all civilised countries, are accounted as final" (C, 10:163).

Watts's work reflects the principles of Carlyle: he begins with paintings that express simple concepts such as hero-worship, and he ends his career painting images that express metaphysical concerns such as the artificial nature of reality. In his fresco, Justice: Hemicycle of the Lawgivers (Fig. 2), Watts lays bare the supreme, yet arbitrary and inconsistent nature of Justice. Yet this fact did not keep Watts or Carlyle from recognizing that artificial justice is no less real for being artificial, as sword and gallows have testified often enough. Truth, Mercy, and Justice appear dimly at the top of the painting, and they are washed out and nearly absorbed into the wall that spreads out around them. Watts paints Truth, Mercy, and Justice as indistinct and virtually unfathomable, and in doing so he expresses visually Carlyle's notion of Truth as the signified that remains unknown. Watts explained his ideas to Sir Charles Newton at the time he began this fresco: "Beauty and Truth I do not forget, but they are too distant & too much obscured by human conditions to be profanely thought of even in fact they are deities of the superior order." Watts expresses both visually and literally Carlyle's concept of Truth; it is ob-

Fig. 2 A Hemicycle of the Lawgivers, fresco in P. C. Hardwicke's Lincoln Inn, 1852-59. Illustrated London News, February 4, 1860.

secured not profane, and is of the superior order.

Below Truth, Mercy, and Justice, Watts painted an eclectic monument to hero-worship, which depicts the actual sources of truth, mercy, and justice: Lawgivers. His Lawgivers included Attila the Hun, Minos King of Crete, Confucius, Theodora, Charlemagne, Alfred, and others. Each is dressed in the clothes of radically different cultures and many are presented with sword conspicuously in hand, ready to defend their quite real, yet artificially formed laws. For Watts and Carlyle, such is the sublime nature of the Lawgivers. Watts's promotion of a harmony of world cultures over the closure and fanaticism of any one system is the key to the iconography of this painting, and this harmony is achieved through the common postmodern practice of eliminating time by bringing all times and locations together at once. Yet Watts does not cast off notions of social progress, nor does he allow the fact that many justices existed in the past keep him from the notion that justice should exist in the present. Watts, like Carlyle, fuses the concepts of justice and social progress. In this scheme Justinian and Theodora stand at the center with Moses mas-
sively rendered above and with Mahomet prominently off to the right. Christian law stands at the center, with Muslim law at its side. The visual importance placed on Mahomet, here, can be explained by Carlyle, whose Heroes and Hero-worship is the key text for Watts's monument to the heroes of law. In Heroes and Hero-Worship, Carlyle gave Mahomet a place of real prominence and, in this respect, the oddest part of the composition owes a debt to Carlyle's words.

Although Confucius converses with Pythagoras and some other Lawgivers interact, the composition is not one of homogeneity but of contrast. Attila, for instance, is slumped between the graceful Alfred and the columnar Charlemagne. What is distant is both foreign and lies in the past. The extreme foreground is strictly English and populated by figures associated with Magna Carta and its immediate aftermath. This mural, set in the Law School of Lincoln's Inn, identifies English Justice with Magna Carta and implies that present English justice, although it is analogous to the justice of other cultures in its relationship to Truth, Mercy, and Justice, is nonetheless Justice in England. The bared English swords in the extreme foreground make that clear enough, as harmony becomes closure.

Nonetheless, such pro-English attitudes did not keep Watts or Carlyle from attacking what was sometimes practiced as English justice. Carlyle condemned English justice in dealing with the Irish, as did Watts. Carlyle wrote:

The Irish Sans-potato, had he not senses, then, say a soul? In his frozen darkness, it was bitter for him to die famishing; bitter to see his children famish. It was bitter for him to be a beggar, a liar, and a knave. Nay, if that dreary Greenland-wind of benighted Wane, perennial from sire to son, had frozen him into a kind of torpor and numb callousness, so that he saw not, felt not, — was this, for a creature with a soul in it, some assuagement; or the cruellest wretchedness of all?

Such things were; such things are; and they go on in silence peacefully; — and Sanguinolentia follow them. (C, 4:313)

Carlyle condemns English indifference to the Irish, who are are transformed into numb, callous, wretched, and dangerous souls. An even more potent image of Irish wretchedness follows in 1843 in Past and Present:

An incident worth linger ing on; the depravity, savagery and degraded Irishness being never so well admitted. In the British land, a human Mother and Father, of white skin and professing the Christian religion, had done this thing; they, with their Irishness and necessity and savagery, had been driven to do it. ... A human Mother and Father had said to themselves: What shall we do to escape starvation? We are deep sunk here, in our dark cellar; and help is far. Yes, in the Ugolino Hunger-tower stern things happen. ... What a committee of ways and means. (C, 10:4)

Here Carlyle describes an Irish mother and father driven to cannibalism in "the British land," and dramatizes the account with an image of Dante's Count Ugolino, who was driven to eat his sons.

Watts's Irish Famine (Fig. 3) was begun roughly six years after Past and Present at the time of Carlyle's Latter Day Pamphlets and about two years before Watts began his fresco at Lincoln's Inn (Errington, pp. 198-202). He attacks English injustice by exposing English cruelty and indifference to the Irish. Watts made this painting a bitter, ironic reversal of the Holy Family: it shows individuals well on their way to anonymous, inevitable death with no sign of salvation. The sky is nearly blackened and there is no light from above, and certainly no host of accompanying angels. The child is positioned on the mother's lap, as the Christ child is so often positioned on Mary's, with its arm dropped at its side in a conventional attitude of death, but this child's death will redeem nothing. From this brutal scene the father looks out directly to the viewer, with the unmistakable glare of Joshua Reynolds' Ugolino, which Watts had used once before when he painted Caractus in 1843. The death of this child will redeem nothing, unless the unthinkable is considered and it serves as Ugolino's supper. Carlyle's anti-government rhetoric served as the direct visual source for Watts's image—at least the connection is close enough to make Carlyle a highly plausible source. In an undated note, Watts shows a parallel opinion of English justice with respect to Ireland: "Idiotic and culpable indifference to Irish opinions and necessi-
ties which have resulted in the development of the worst qualities of National character.""18 Watts's admiration of Carlyle would by itself probably not have brought about such a strong anti-government view, but the two certainly agree on this issue.

In his metaphysical paintings, Watts expressed Carlyle's belief that we form reality, that "the world of Nature, for every man, is the Phantasy of Himself" (C, 5:26)."" Watts's The Genius of Greek Poetry (Fig. 4), completed just one year after Thomas Carlyle (Fig. 1), shows the world as Carlyle said man forms it. The distinction between what

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**Fig. 4 The Genius of Greek Poetry (1878), Watts Gallery, Compton, Guildford, Surrey.**

is human and what is material is obliterated as rocks, humans, sea, air, and clouds dissolve into an unarticulated haze of color. The active force of the human mind in bringing meaning to the world is made explicit as artifice produces meaning. Greek anthropomorphic thought is represented by the figure at the center of the composition which is drawn from the Elgin Marbles. This painting is probably a rebuttal of Carlyle's opinion of the Elgin Marbles, for in it Watts creates parallels between Carlyle's words, Greek anthropomorphism, and the Elgin Marbles. Watts and Carlyle had a sharp disagreement on the value of the Elgin Marbles, with Carlyle suggesting that there was not a man of intellect among them because "the jaw was not sufficiently prominent enough" and that they should be cast into space (W, 1:249). In The Genius of Greek Poetry, Watts uses the Elgin Marbles to express Carlyle's metaphysics and explicitly calls the Greeks geniuses; then covers the jaw not sufficiently prominent with a hand, in intellectual contemplation. This painting is simultaneously an attack on Carlyle's private words and an homage to his printed words.""

For Watts and Carlyle the world is an extension of the self, not separate. Eve Tempted is part one of a three part series on Eve. Watts shows Eve about to eat the apple as she is tempted by the world of matter. Her face dissolving as she presses it into a mass of flowers and vegetation, Eve is literally consumed by matter. Watts obscures her face and washes out her breasts. He takes what another Victorian might have made titillating flesh and, instead, covers Eve's body with features that look like small tumors, undercutting any physical, material, or sensual appeal. In Eve Repentant (Fig. 5) his attitude is again consistent with traditional treatments of the Fall, just as Carlyle so often is consistent with the Old Testament: "Of all acts, is not, for a man, repentance the most divine? The deadliest sin, I say, were that same supercilious consciousness of no sin;—that is death; the heart so conscious is divorced from sincerity, humility and fact; is dead: it is 'pure' as dead dry sand is pure" (C, 5:46-47). This rather conventional theme is crucial to this series. Here Eve shows her shame for having fallen to the "dry sand" of materialism.

The culmination of the series is She Shall Be Called Woman (Fig. 6). Here is no Eve of the Old Testament or even a creation of Eve; Eve is instead herself creating. Against all traditional expectations, this painting is the middle painting of the series. It was exhibited in this position at the New Gallery show of 1896-97 and as well in the Watts Room of the Tate Gallery before Watts's death. It is a remarkable expression of the Carlylean side of Watts, for the material
world is shown as a human emanation. Watts said it represents the "mind of modern times"; it "is not so much, or rather not at all, the Eve of Genesis, nor Milton either. It is an incarnation of the spirit of our time" (W, 2:202). It is a "figure not so much to stand in light as to emit light" (W, 2:139). "Eve," in the majesty of unconsciousness, typifies what might be hoped for humanity, "for every human soul has in the way of nature beheld true being" (New Gallery Winter Exhibition, p. 7). This image of the modern mind unconsciously emitting its own light is deeply indebted to Carlyle's notions of the unconscious, artificial creation of true being. Light explodes from Eve's head, while flowers, bird, and clouds explode from her body. What is more, the objects that are formed from her are only partially defined as lines, break down, and fuse into color. The moment of the creation of meaning is captured. As Carlyle says, "Are not both Heaven and Hell made out of him [man], made by him, everlasting Miracle and Mystery as he is?" (C, 4:26). Watts fuses Carlyle's Biblical morality with his German metaphysics.

On November 13, 1894, two years after he exhibited She Shall Be Called Woman at the Royal Academy, Watts discussed his painting style:

There you see Nature has no outline, but I cannot do without one & that is just what happens in the spiritual worlds. To give anything form you must have bounding lines which do not really exist—Without the definite personal idea, one cannot well grasp it, do what you will the idea slips. (Mary Seton Watts Papers, November 13, 1894)

In this painting Watts shows both the bounding lines that produce meaning and the fact that these bounding lines do not really exist. Line dissolves into color and color coalesces into line. Rooted in Carlyle, Watts's symbolist art expressed his belief that "all artificial things are, at the starting of them true." Watts and Carlyle stand common-sense, nineteenth-century materialism on its head, as they create a world in which what is artificial is real, and in which what appears to be real is "no real thing."

The key to change, growth, and evolution lies in this three-part series. The central Eve does not stand at all as Eve of the Old Testament, it stands for modern thought. Perhaps the best way to see this series is in terms of the German philosophy that formed Carlyle. Eve Tempted stands as thesis, satisfied and consciously feeding herself, Eve Repentant stands as antithesis, seeing the split between soul and matter, while "Eve Creating," of She Shall Be Called Woman, unconsciously synthesizes the world. In a distant and metaphorical way, perhaps the reader can see a connection with the following passage from Carlyle: "Nay in our poor distracted Europe itself, in these newest times, have there not religious voices risen... A French Revolution is one phenomenon; as complement and spiritual exponent thereof, a poet Goethe and German Literature is to me another. The old Secular or Practical World, so to speak, having gone up in fire, is not here the prophecy and dawn of a new Spiritual World, parent of a far nobler, wider, new Practical World" (C, 10:236). The dilemma of Eve is Carlyle's dilemma: she can create only when the blinders of unconsciousness are intact. In The French Revolution he stated this startling problem with clarity and ease: "The Convention, seeing clearly before and after, were a paralysed Convention. Seeing clearly to the length of its own nose, it is not paralysed" (C, 4:68). Carlyle sees unconsciousness as the key to action, while consciousness produces shame and paralysis.

In a world of artificially formed truths, Watts and Carlyle advocated progress; they glorified the march of history and promoted "modern thought" (see C, 2:211). For Watts this took form in his plan for the "House of Life," which would have been a monument to
cultural progress. It was to include the beginnings of mankind—Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, and Africa—with sections devoted to Mahomet and to the Popes, and with the “Founding of the Christian era treated simply as a matter of history setting up the cross.” Between 1888-1904 he painted Progress and in 1902 he painted Evolution.

Watts’s completed monument to progress, The Hemicycle (Fig. 2), is notable for its omissions. Where is Napoleon among the Law-givers, or Robespierre, where are the Chartists? Completely absent, as it goes without saying. Where are radical thinkers among Watts’s People’s Gallery of eminent Victorians? Where they are represented they are aestheticized out of existence.4 Watts attacks capitalists, but he simply dismisses socialists out of hand. Thinking by formula was anathema to Watts—he berates a friend’s painting in the following terms: “cho’ [sic] imagination is not his strong point, he possesses it, & this painting by recipe, is the negation of it” (Mary Seton Watts Papers, May 3, 1893). Intellectual satisfaction is, to both Carlyle and Watts, extremely dangerous. In the political realm, formulas presented two kinds of horrors: one was that of Louis XVI, whose satisfaction with worn-out artifice led to collapse; and the other, Robespierre, whose satisfaction with conscious artifice led to pointless conflagration (C, 4:267, 268).

For Watts and Carlyle, the road to progress was conservative. Watts and Carlyle developed a rhetoric that extolled social evolution, but their commitment to awe before artificial hierarchies served to dampen social change. All their talk of social evolution, in fact, amounted to a desperate plea for an alternative to social revolution. Both had a profound fear of democratic socialism, Carlyle anticipating some of the horrors of the Nazi regime (C, 4:247). It is a chilling possibility, worth considering, that today’s talk of change serves our class to dampen social change, as we, like Eve (Fig. 6), unconsciously bask in the glory of our artifice. Carlyle states his warning this way: “Man, as is well said, lives by faith; each generation has its own faith, more or less; and laughs at the faith of its predecessor,—most unwisely” (C, 3:38).

In 1901, Watts, in one of his most powerful works, captures something of the dilemma we might share with Carlyle. It is appropriately entitled The Slumber of the Ages (Fig. 7). In 1954, at the height of modernism and well ahead of his time, David Loshak described it as follows:

[I]t evokes in a compelling way the ideas and moods that may at the time have passed through his mind: agnosticism, fear of the unknown, a belief in some vague evolutionary destiny which is nevertheless continually tortured with doubts; horror at the blindness and tragedy and loneliness of life. In one dimension, the mother bears the child and comforts it, but in another the child is alone, its mother having turned away to anguish, leaving it in naked inadequacy to cope with the mystery of its being and destiny. (p. 10)

Fig. 7 Slumber of the Ages (1901), The Watts Gallery, Compton, Guildford, Surrey.
Notes

1 I would like to thank Richard Jefferies and the Trustees of the Watts Gallery for making this work possible and the late Morse Peckham for introducing me to Carlyle. Thanks also to Linda Zatlin, Timothy Lundy, and my family for assisting me.


4 G. F. Watts, letter to James Allan, Tate Gallery, microfiche 34 B2.

5 For a sensitive and thorough handling of this relationship, see Marilyn Anacker Board, "G. F. Watts: A Soldier in the Battle for an Art of Ideas" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1983). She traces connections between Carlyle and Watts in their attempts to bring moral meaning into the world, and to fight Mammon and poverty; and in highlighting a Carlylean passage on musical thought, she moves on to discuss Watts's relation to the aesthetic movement.


8 Mary Seton Watts, m.s., Mary Seton Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton. This entry is dated March 19, 1891.


11 Watts's portraits of Carlyle are to be found in the National Portrait Gallery, the Victorian and Albert Museum, and the Ashmolean Museum. All three were begun about 1867.

12 Mary Seton Watts Papers; entry dated May 4, 1893.

13 Mary Seton Watts Papers; entry dated January 5, 1897.

14 Watts knew Carlyle prior to beginning sittings in 1867: "I [Mrs. Carlyle] had to stay home to nurse 'a chill'—and Mr. C. was made too late out, by an infirmit of Mrs. Cameron and Mr. Watts (the Artist), the former hardly to be restrained from forcing her way into Mr. C's bedroom while he was changing his trousers!!" (David Alec Wilson, Carlyle to Threecrose-and-Ten (1853-1869) (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1929), p. 368).

15 Richard Ormond records that John Forster commissioned a portrait of Carlyle from Watts. The first letter about the commission is dated May 7, 1868; after a few more sittings in autumn 1869, the painting was delivered to Forster on November 7, 1869 (Richard Ormond, Early Victorian Portraits [London: National Portrait Gallery, 1973], 1:89).

16 David Alec Wilson and David Wilson MacArthur, Carlyle in Old Age (1865-1881), 6 vols. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1934), 6:168. Perhaps, as Ormond believes, Mary Watts was mistaken in reading or writing down the date of an early letter from Carlyle to Watts concerning the portrait which the author records as "T. Carlyle, Chelsea, June 18th, 1867" (Early Victorian Portraits, 1:89; W, 1:250). A more convincing interpretation takes Carlyle's statement on "first sittings" as a sign of weariness of Watts as well as an instance of Carlyle's well-known brand of sarcasm.

17 In fact, Carlyle said of Watts, "He is to me a very wearisome, 'washed-out', dilettante man,—though an innocent well-intending and ingenious wight!" (Wilson and MacArthur, 6:168). Carlyle found art wearisome and, no doubt, he found it even more wearisome to be in the presence of a man who would not let the point drop.


collecting portraits in 1847. These may initially have been intended as studio props to incite further commissions. He became engrossed in his "Hall of Fame" in the mid to late 1850s at the time of Carlyle's active involvement in creating the National Portrait Gallery.

20 Carlyle argued that Tennyson "was a great man but nothing he had said could not have been done better in prose!" while Watts did not "go so far!" (Mary Seton Watts, ms., December 4, 1887).

21 Whistler, for instance, told of Carlyle's reaction to Watts's portrait: "One day he told me of others who had painted his portrait. There was Mr. Watts, a man of note. And I went to his studio, and there was much meiosis on the easel, and curtains were drawn, and I was not allowed to see anything. And then, at last, the screens were put aside and there I was. And I looked. And Mr. Watts, a great man, he said to me, 'Mon, I would have ye know I am in the habit of wurrin' clean lunto!'" (E. R. and J. Pennell, The Life of James McNeill Whistler [London: William Heinemann, 1912], p. 139).

22 John Ernest Phythian, Fifty Years of Modern Painting (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1908), p. 296. This is one of those plain facts that it is easy to overlook; but it helps to put Watts in context and to see how his art bridges Romanticism and Symbolism.

23 Notable exceptions include one article by J. Beavington Atkinson in 1870 and another by Wilfrid Meynell in 1878.


26 In 1883, John Ruskin wrote that "Mr. Rossetti, Mr. Hunt, Mr. Jones and Mr. Watts ... are in the most solemn sense, Hero-worshippers" (The Works of John Ruskin, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn [London: Allen, 1903-1912], 33:304). For Ruskin, Watts was not alone in his ties to Carlyle. The following quotations are from "Manchester Institution," The Critic, undated in press cutting notebook, George Frederic Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, p. 76: "There is about this picture [Life and Death] a sense of incompleteness—a sort of inarticulateness," as Mr. Carlyle would say—which always accompanies the very highest efforts of human genius. You can always discern the great and noble thought painfully struggling to find adequate utterance. "If you are fond of sharp contrasts, s.t., and particularly contrasts between realities and shams [Watts and Grinshaw respectively], you can get plenty at the Institution."

27 Albert Kinross's c. 1890 conflation of Watts and Carlyle is typical of late 1890s press cuttings: "Felt, after an hour spent in the New Gallery (where the bulk of the work of the same "Watts" is at present exhibited), where Thomas Carlyle afforded a like opportunity with myself, perchance would this Chelsea sage return homeward and add yet another lecture to the series once so effectively delivered at Willis's rooms. 'The Hero as Painter,' would he entitle this outburst, and possibly, this same "Watts," the passionate pursuer of strength, might play no small part in the deliverance."


28 The Watts papers record a conversation between George Meredith, who in turn was sitting for Watts, and Watts about the Carlyle portrait: "He had the look of Lear encountering a storm upon the Cornish coast, wh you have given." Mr. Meredith said to Signor [Watts]—S. replied that the portrait was a failure, Carlyle was submissive as a sitter, but he was conscious that it was wearisome to him—"I ask, I would sit so & so I will do so"—he replied when Signor apologised" (Mary Seton Watts, ms., Mary Seton Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, entry dated April 3, 1893).


32 G. F. Watts, letter to Sir Charles Newton, 1852, Tate Gallery, microfiche 13, F4.

33 Attila plays a significant role in Carlyle's The French Revolution; this may have encouraged Watts's choice here and later when he considered a list of names for his sculpture, Physical Energy: "I should like to write the roll of great names on the pedestal: Genghis Khan, Timon the Tartar [Timur], Attila and Mahomet" (Board, p. 378 from W, 2/171). Carlyle writes, "Very Sons of Fire, the adroitest, haughtiest, hottest ever seen perhaps since Attila's time. They may conquer and overrun amazingly, much as that same Attila did;— whose Attila's-Camp and Battlefield thou now seest, on this very ground" (C, 4:54). See also (C, 4:3) for another reference to Attila.

34 Later, after the fresco was completed, Mahomet was the subject of a letter from Carlyle to Watts in June of 1867 (W, 4:250), during the period of Carlyle's sessions with Watts.

35 Other connections are made between Carlyle and Watts's social realist painting (Board, p. 113). Here Board links Past and Present to Watts's Under a Dry Arch. Lindsay Errington makes a similar connection between Watts and Carlyle suggesting that Carlyle's Latter-Day Pamphlets might have influenced Watts's paintings Found Drowned, The Song of the Shirt, and Under a Dry Arch (Lindsay Errington, "Social and Religious Themes in English Art 1840-1860" [Ph.D. diss., Univ. of London, 1973], pp. 198-203). Whether or not these are cases of actual influence, they are cases of parallel views that were widespread at the time.


For whatever reason, Watts waited to exhibit this painting until just after Carlyle's death.


Mary Seton Watts, ms., Mary Seton Watts Papers, Watts Gallery, Compton, July 3, 1891.
