

THE HERO AS WOMAN OF VOCATION: THOMAS CARLYLE'S TRANSATLANTIC  
INFLUENCE ON NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN WRITERS

by

BILLIE E. BENNETT

(Under the direction of Tricia Lootens and Kristin Boudreau)

ABSTRACT

The Hero as Woman of Vocation examines the ways in which Carlyle's development of the notion of the Romantic individual (or hero) in *Sartor Resartus* influenced Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Jane Evans (Wilson), Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward) in their versions of the female *Bildungsroman*: *Aurora Leigh*, *St. Elmo*, *Little Women*, and *The Story of Avis*. I contend that Carlyle's definition of the individual and his vocation becomes—perhaps unexpectedly—liberatory and useful for these women, and that Diogenes Teufelsdröckh serves as a model for the exceptional female characters they develop. Aurora Leigh, Beulah Benton, Edna Earl, Jo March, and Avis Dobell are ideal visionaries, and though the authors rely on their own experiences to depict them, their status as characters in their own right offers much in the way of theorizing about the position of the woman intellectual/artist. This study provides a better understanding of the impact of Carlylean thought and offers a new approach to reading the figure of the woman artist and her vocation.

INDEX WORDS: Thomas Carlyle, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Jane Evans (Wilson), Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward), Women writers, Transatlantic studies

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## DEDICATION

For my father, Bob Bennett, who taught me what true heroism is.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In “Carlyle in America,” a story that remained unpublished in her lifetime, Sarah Orne Jewett imagines the Victorian Sage secretly visiting New England in the mid-1840’s. Two “literary gentlemen” who were the last alive to know the secret of Carlyle’s American trip tell Jewett’s narrator, a great admirer of both Emerson and Carlyle, the story of his visit. The situation and the story are both humorous, but beyond their comic effect they serve to reveal a view of Carlyle as iconoclast that may prove useful in considering his impact on his British and American contemporaries. For example, upon visiting Thoreau, “Mr. Thomas” chides him for leaving his cabin at Walden Pond to have dinner with the Emersons, calling his experiment “a sham way of going into retreat” (Tarr and Clayton 109). This episode reveals the man who is Jewett’s Carlyle: an individual who tells the truth at any cost, who is “irascible, excitable, fiery, and brilliant” (McIntosh 78). Moreover, in addition to the importance of integrity, this fictionalized Carlyle reveals one of the central beliefs of the historical one: the sacredness of one’s responsibility to his vocation, whatever it may be. “Mr. Thomas,” even more strongly in his physical manifestation than in his writerly persona, shows his hosts that one should not shirk one’s duty because of difficulties and should not refrain from seeking or telling the truth because it is ugly.

The American public, however, does not welcome this individual. When the narrator asks how long “Mr. Thomas” was in this country, he learns that the visit lasted less than two months. Hoping that the American audience who embraced his written ideas would welcome a personal appearance, the writer instead met with rejection. The literary gentleman explains, “He

expected too much of us—[. . .]—He thought at least that we should listen freely and gladly to the simple truth but he was disappointed; it was quite as dangerous to tell the truth here as anywhere else, if people were not ready for it. What a thankless task it is to be in advance of one's time!" (109). This imaginary Carlyle possesses a gift for truth so profound that it actually endangers him, and Jewett's depiction demonstrates one of the important disadvantages of Carlylean individualism: the individual's sense of truth will separate him from others. While the hero can elevate himself above others, he will often occupy a troubled position. It is difficult not to think how such a portrait may have pleased Carlyle, who took such an interest in his own role as truth-teller and prophet. The New Englanders of Jewett's tale do not share her enthusiasm for this forwardness, however. They find Carlylean thought threatening when it takes the form of an anonymous (and present) individual rather than a distant writer, and ultimately "Mr. Thomas's" visit abroad ends with him being hurried to a boat under the cover of darkness.

This fictional tale reveals much about the real impact of Thomas Carlyle on the nineteenth-century literary imagination. The fact that Jewett chooses to render him as a literal, physical presence on American soil suggests the immediacy of his philosophy for thinkers and writers of the time. Largely thanks to the efforts of his friend and advocate, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carlyle *Sartor Resartus* enjoyed a broad American audience, eliciting a much more enthusiastic response than it did in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Jewett's imagined response to the *person* of Thomas Carlyle is revealing as well. The nature of the character of "Mr. Thomas," who is a dangerous rebel figure, shows the difficulty of taking on the position of Romantic individual or prophet. The fact that Mr. Thomas the writer is perceived differently than Mr. Thomas the man

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<sup>1</sup> William Silas Vance argues that American readers embraced Carlylean thoughts earlier and more enthusiastically than traditional accounts suggests. Although many critics date Carlyle's American influence from the publication of *Sartor Resartus*, he asserts that "Americans had been reading him with lively interest for nearly ten years when *Sartor* was published" (363-64). K.J. Fielding suggests that Americans responded so positively because they "generously misread" it, "deaf to its ironies and mocking echoes" (61).

reveals issues of (auto)biography that complicate our reading of texts like *Sartor Resartus*.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, by emphasizing the rancor Carlyle's imaginary visit inspired, Jewett reveals an important contrast between the philosophical and moral beliefs of Carlyle and those of his New England counterparts. In fact, as Jewett's fictional account suggests, Carlyle may have been in some ways the more attractive (or at least more interesting) figure for some real American thinkers.<sup>3</sup> As Sheila McIntosh argues, "Although the imaginary Carlyle may not have been able to cope with America, Jewett makes it clear that part of the problem was that America was not ready for Carlyle. Jewett loved New England, and much of her writing is a celebration of it, but she clearly thought a dose of Carlyle would be no bad thing" (79). One might speculate that the controversy his thought provokes is, especially for Jewett and other American women writers, part of the appeal. Indeed, many of the women who dared to write in the nineteenth century would likely have welcomed a little Carlylean revolution.

Finally, the public response Jewett imagines demonstrates that even those who were troubled by Carlyle's thinking would be influenced by it. Though his impact is far-reaching, his writing often made readers uneasy. George Eliot contended that "[t]he character of his influence is best seen in the fact that many of the men who have the least agreement with his opinions are those to whom the reading of *Sartor Resartus* was an epoch in the history of their minds" (214).<sup>4</sup>

And herein lies the paradox for many writers of the time: while many of Carlyle's ideas may be

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<sup>2</sup> Sheila McIntosh suggests that Jewett's depiction of Carlyle's somewhat tactless and unappealing personality reflects his more mature persona. She particularly cites descriptions of his German trip of 1852 (78). "Her [Jewett's] hero," McIntosh declares, "is the writer not just of *Sartor Resartus* but also of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*" (79).

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Sacks suggests that Carlyle may have at times been "blamed" for Emerson's more radical ideas, but that even in these cases Americans may have recognized him as a pale imitation. He cites the reaction of the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary to Emerson's Divinity School Address, which "they described [. . .] as 'a rhapsody, obviously in imitation of Thomas Carlyle, and possessing as much of the vice of his mannerisms as the author could borrow, but without his genius'" (43). Sharon Gravett similarly claims that Thoreau may have actually found Carlyle to be a more attractive influence mentor than Emerson.

<sup>4</sup> For example, one of Carlyle's most famous American detractors was Edgar Allan Poe, but Richard Fusco argues that "[d]espite the rancor of his open opposition, Poe did borrow from Carlyle from time to time, especially in the works he published during the last two years of his life" (52).

unattractive or even repugnant at times, their power seems to have been inescapable.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that Jewett likely wrote this story in the 1880's, after Carlyle's death, shows his continuing immediacy and importance nearly five decades after his work first appeared in America.<sup>5</sup>

Carlyle's importance in the thinking of the nineteenth century has not been in dispute, though at times the nature of his influence has been questioned.<sup>6</sup> However, the breadth of that influence has yet to be fully examined. While numerous critical studies have explored the impact of Carlyle's ideas on writers of the nineteenth century, there has been no extended systematic study of the importance of his thought on women writers of the time.<sup>7</sup> Such an omission may not initially seem surprising given the fact that Carlyle almost never explicitly wrote about women and did not publicly address "The Woman Question," as one may have expected of a political thinker in his time. One tendency has been to read this as exclusionary and potentially sexist, to claim that Carlyle does not "offer much comfort to a feminist critic searching for roots" (Skabarnicki 34). For example, Tom Lloyd suggests that Carlyle excluded women from his aesthetic vision because of a profound distrust "arising from a Miltonic perception of the feminine that accorded with his never fully repressed Calvinism" (173). Rainer Emig similarly suggests that "[w]omen are the second most noticeably excluded in his thought"

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<sup>5</sup> According to Tarr and Clayton, there is no date on the recovered manuscript, "but from internal reference some time between 1884 and 1890 seems possible" (103).

<sup>6</sup> Simon Heffer's introduction in *Moral Desperado* provides a good overview of the extent to which Carlyle's twentieth-century legacy has been compromised by the belief that he influenced Nietzsche and Hitler. Clyde Ryals sees his influence as essentially confined to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, arguing that "Thomas Carlyle lost his influence quickly and has had comparatively little literary influence in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—in fact, practically negligible" (9).

<sup>7</sup> Individual articles have considered the influence of Carlyle on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Virginia Woolf, Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Margaret Oliphant, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Willa Cather, but there has been no book-length study of his particular influence on women. See Amigoni, Arbuckle, Carroll, Fielding, Ingram, Jay, Laird, Loucks, Mason, Morris, Recchio, and Trela ("Margaret Oliphant's 'Bravest Words Yet Spoken'" and "Margaret Oliphant, James Anthony Froude and the Carlyles' Reputations").

(388).<sup>8</sup> He supports this contention specifically by referring to Carlyle's exclusion of Britain's queens from his political and historical discussions: "While it is probably understandable that he was reluctant to include a still juvenile Queen Victorian in his list of heroes, the absence of Elizabeth I in his vision of British history is more striking" (388). Ultimately Emig generalizes that Carlyle is "a writer who has little space for women and colonials in his visions of cultural and individual greatness" (388), suggesting that George Eliot's famous reference to Carlyle's writings as a *Suttee* was a conscious response to this exclusion.<sup>9</sup>

Other explanations for this omission in Carlyle's work may be more revealing, however. James Eli Adams suggests that Carlyle's exclusion of women stems from anxieties about masculinity rather than his attitude toward women. He argues that the questionable "manliness" of intellectual labor in the nineteenth century required men like Carlyle (as well as Charles Kingsley, Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater) to justify their work as intellectuals by creating an exclusively masculine writerly ideal. Hence Carlyle's exclusion of women is both purposeful and self-serving: "Carlyle's 'hero as man of letters' is charged with the energies and anxieties of masculine self-legitimation; it represents one especially vehement effort to claim for those engaged in the work of Coleridge's 'clerisy' the status of normative manhood" (1). Adams suggests, then, that Carlyle's exclusion of women is actually not even *about* women—it is about that status of intellectual *men*. In any case, these exclusions appear to have been less bothersome to Carlyle's contemporary female readers than Emig's argument

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<sup>8</sup> Presumably, they are second to "colonials" (Emig 388).

<sup>9</sup> In Eliot's review quoted earlier, she asserts about Carlyle's influence: "It is an idle question to ask whether his books will be read a century hence: if they were all burnt as the grandest of *Suttees* on his funeral pile, it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest. For there is hardly a superior or active mind of his generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book of the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived" (214). This may be read as a largely positive assessment, but Emig reads it more ironically, suggesting that the feminine figure of the *Suttee* "turns Carlyle's books into women, into mistreated women at that, but also into the 'colonial' that Carlyle regarded with such distrust" (389).

suggests. After all, these women were still *reading* Carlyle, and though his work does not explicitly include them and may seem to valorize masculine ideals, in many ways his heroes are too broad and universal to be bound by the confines of gender. And even when this masculine model did effectively conflate masculinity with intellectual labor, the emphasis on the hero as an exceptional figure actually provided an opening for women who saw themselves as unique in their talent or vocation. Those who believed themselves to have the characteristics of the Carlylean “hero” were willing to take on the masculine role that such heroism would suggest; their femaleness did not preclude them from playing the part of the writer/intellectual. The figure of the Carlylean hero may have been even more appealing because of this vastness, and perhaps the fact that he *didn’t* explicitly respond to the woman question made Carlyle more attractive.

And while no one would accuse Carlyle of feminist leanings, his assessments of women writers further suggest that he did not necessarily see femaleness as prohibitive to intellectual development and expression. He often criticized fiction (sentimental fiction in particular), but this can likely be attributed to his general dislike of the genre as much as to a sexist tendency.<sup>10</sup> Instead of simply dismissing the possibility of their writing effectively, it seems that he judged women writers and thinkers whom he considered exceptional in much the same way that he did exceptional men. First and foremost stands the example of his fiancée, Jane Welsh, whose intellectual pursuits he guided early in their relationship. In fact, their courtship essentially began with Carlyle sending her “a reading list mainly of French and German history” (Heffer 57). He sought to encourage her to study Goethe, Gibbon, and Sismondi, suggesting that she should

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<sup>10</sup> Froude writes specifically of Carlyle’s dislike for the novels of George Sand and Geraldine Jewsbury, noting that “for all sentimental, indecent literature whatsoever, Carlyle’s dislike amounted to loathing” (Clubbe 396-98). He did not only criticize women’s fiction, however. Hilary Schor’s article considers Carlyle’s generally dismissive attitude toward fiction by male writers like Dickens and Thackeray, suggesting that he responded negatively to genre rather than gender (117-18). Carlyle’s attitude toward fiction will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

“use her genius to write a novel” or “either an essay on Byron (in whom they had a shared interest) or Madame de Staël” (Heffer 62, 66). Certainly after their marriage, though, the Carlyles’ relationship offers a glimpse of the complicated and seemingly contradictory nature of Carlyle’s beliefs about the possibilities of women’s intellectual work; his encouragement of Jane’s intellectual pursuits during their courtship did not appear to continue after they were married.<sup>11</sup> Exploring intellectual pursuits appears to have been less appropriate for Carlyle’s wife than for his fiancée, but this is not because his wife lacked the intellectual capacity to do such work.

Another well-documented example of Carlyle’s relationship with an intellectual woman is his friendship with Harriet Martineau, who famously arranged for his lecture series in London in 1837. His reactions to her writing were mixed—perhaps in large part because of the differences in their political beliefs—but he never doubted the power of her intellect. In a letter to Emerson dated June 1, 1837, he writes of her, after reading *Society in America*: “She is one of the strangest phenomena to me. A genuine little Poetess, buck-ramed, swathed like a mummy, into Socinean and Political-Economy formulas, and yet verily alive in the inside of that! [. . .] I admire this good lady’s integrity, sincerity; her quick sharp discernment to the depth it goes” (Slater 165). Though not unqualified *literary* praise, the qualities which he describes in her—genuineness, vitality, sincerity—are terms of high Carlylean praise indeed. Rosemary Ashton

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<sup>11</sup> Rosemary Ashton speculates that while Thomas Carlyle’s solitary work habits should have afforded Jane time to pursue intellectual interests, “Probably she got little encouragement from him now that she was his wife and set in *her* claypit with the duty of ministering to him” (104). Carlyle’s brother Jack, a medical doctor, suggested on more than one occasion that Jane’s health would improve if she could find greater occupation for her mind (Ashton 140), and neither Thomas nor Jane Carlyle seemed to disagree, but Carlyle did not appear to encourage Jane to serious scholarly work despite this. In her study of femininity in Carlyle and Dickens, Anne M. Skabarnicki offers a close reading of the change in tone of the Carlyles’ correspondence as they move from courtship to marriage (“Dear Little Women” 34-37). She argues that “We can see Jane shrinking in Carlyle’s prose from a literary equal to a dear little woman as if gradually seen through the wrong end of the telescope” (“Dear Little Women” 36). She does not portray Jane as simply a victim, however, as she argues that Jane perpetuated the myth of the “tragic waste” of her talent in the service of her husband (“Two Faces of Eve” 16). Simon Heffer and Virginia Surtees also trace the development of the Carlyles’ intellectual relationship.

goes so far as to suggest that Jane Carlyle may have been jealous of Martineau, “an independent writer to whom Carlyle talked as he would to a man” (192). This claim suggests that Martineau’s intellect interested Carlyle more than did the fact of her sex. Martineau was even able to evoke Carlyle’s “imaginative sympathy” in her depiction of the black Haitian Leader Toussaint L’Ouverture in *The Hour and the Man* (Arbuckle 30).<sup>12</sup> Given Carlyle’s view of “colonials,” this too speaks highly of his assessment of Martineau’s intellect and the persuasiveness of her writing.

Most remarkable is Carlyle’s response to Margaret Fuller, both as a person and as a writer; his letters to Emerson offer much evidence of the high regard in which he held her. After their first meeting, in a letter of December 18, 1846, he called her “[a] high-soaring, clear, enthusiast soul; in whose speech there is much of all that one wants to find in speech,” remarking further her “sharp subtle intellect” (Slater 410). This respect for Fuller’s intellect seems to temper the skepticism he had expressed regarding her writing; perhaps he, like the characters in Jewett’s story, recognizes the difference between a writer’s personal presence and that on the page.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, after a visit the following year, he strongly praises her writing: “I have been reading some of her Papers in a new Book we have got: greatly superior to all I knew before; in fact the undeniable utterances (now first undeniable to me) of a *true heroic mind*; – altogether unique, so far as I know, among the Writing Women of this generation; rare enough too, God knows, among the Writing Men” (Slater 418—emphasis mine). The language of heroism here is particularly revelatory; certainly this is a term (and an idea) Carlyle values highly

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<sup>12</sup> Arbuckle’s article examines specifically Carlyle’s marginalia as well as his other written responses to Martineau’s book.

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Emerson dated 17 November 1842 (prior to their meeting), Carlyle refers to one of Fuller’s *Dial* articles (titled “Bettine Brentano and Her Friend Günderode”) as “a decided weariness!” (Slater 335). Later, in a letter dated 18 December 1846, he contrasts her writerly persona with her person, saying that on meeting her he found “less of that shoreless Asiatic dreaminess that I have sometimes met with in her writings” (Slater 410).



and thus, one can assume, he would use it with care.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, he not only sets her apart from the women writers of her time but also appraises her writing above that of most male writers of the time as well.

All of these examples suggest that to read Carlyle as simply dismissive of women is overly simplistic. My intention is not to claim Carlyle as a feminist, however, but to suggest that a reevaluation of why and how certain women writers read his work is a worthwhile enterprise. Evidence shows that women writers and intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic read and were influenced by Carlyle; an examination of this influence will provide the opportunity to read both Carlyle and women's literature in a broader, more inclusive way. To this end, this study recasts the problem of Thomas Carlyle's influence by examining how his ideas influenced women writers, focusing specifically on *Sartor Resartus*, his sole book-length work of fiction and a text that encapsulates many of his central beliefs. In the character of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, the book's hero, Carlyle would show the development of the exceptional individual, one who would interpret and seek to reshape his time through his unique insight and intellect. This character would embody various elements of the Carlylean hero—the poet, the thinking believer, the pilgrim/worker, and the prophet—and he would adopt these personae to fulfill his vocation. The breadth of Carlyle's definition of the individual and his vocation, as it is realized in the character of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, becomes (perhaps unexpectedly) liberatory and useful for the women writers discussed in the following chapters. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), August Jane Evans' *St. Elmo* (1866), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69), and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877) respond to Carlyle—both explicitly through

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<sup>14</sup> There are at least two other instances in his letters in which he uses the same language. In a letter to Emerson dated August 13, 1849, he calls her "heroic Margaret" (Slater 457). After her death, in a letter of May 7, 1852, he laments: "Poor Margaret, that is a strange tragedy that history of hers; and has many traits of the Heroic in it, tho' it is wild as the prophecy of a sybil" (Slater 478).

direct reference and more obliquely through examination of his ideas. Each of these novels presents characters who struggle with their artistic vocation, and each of them will, in various ways, call upon Carlyle's concept of the vocation of the Romantic individual in order to understand and explain their position. These women did not always agree with Carlyle (though they often did), but elements of the exceptional individual that he created in Teufelsdröckh would be realized in each of their heroines. Carlylean thought did not resolve the conflicts the woman artist faced, but it did afford them new ways to look at the world around them.

Chapter 2, "'A quite new human individuality': Re-creation and Reconciliation in *Sartor Resartus*," presents a close reading that demonstrates how the character and ideas Carlyle develops would have been compelling for a woman who felt she was called to do work that her society deemed unsuitable for her. Approaching *Sartor* as a blending of biography and *Bildungsroman*, this chapter reads the book as a novel in order not only to explain the important elements of Carlylean thought that subsequent chapters will explore in novels by women writers, but also to examine the development of Teufelsdröckh as a literary character who serves as a model for the heroines that appear in these texts. Carlyle's belief in re-creation, revolution, and reconciliation of opposites will be fundamental to the ways in which Barrett Browning, Evans, Alcott, and Phelps would respond to his work. The fact that he develops these beliefs through the biography of a fictional character makes the book ripe for imitation in other fictions, and the type of character he creates may have held a particular attraction for women seeking to understand how to fulfill their vocation. Rather than excluding women, I contend, the breadth and complexity of the hero he creates invited a response from women who could identify with the exceptional and original nature of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh.

Chapter 3, “‘The only truth-tellers now left to God’: *Aurora Leigh* and the Carlylean True Poet,” contends that in creating the heroine of her verse-novel, Barrett Browning responded both directly and indirectly to the poet-hero as characterized in the figure of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. While Carlyle stated his theory of the poet as hero most directly in his lecture from *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), in *Sartor Resartus* he exploits the possibilities of narrative to explore the origins and development of this heroic type. Barrett Browning’s definition of the true poet as an exceptionally insightful, socially responsible, and sympathetic individual derives from Carlyle’s ideal. Moreover, *Aurora Leigh* also depicts the poet as one who works to improve the condition of the human soul in her own time. Barrett Browning also, like Carlyle, experiments with form and genre in her depiction of a unique heroine. *Aurora Leigh* will become a foundational text for the American women writers who follow, and Augusta Jane Evans and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps will respond directly to Carlylean ideas as they are developed in Barrett Browning as well as in *Sartor Resartus*.

In Chapter 4, “‘The vigour and originality of her restless intellect’: *St. Elmo* and the Thinking Believer,” I begin to consider Carlyle’s influence on nineteenth-century American women writers. Augusta Jane Evans presents a unique set of complications for the feminist scholar: she was a conservative Southerner who openly opposed the cause of women’s rights but nevertheless created female characters who possessed many of the hallmarks of the typical feminist heroine. Rather than focus on sexual politics, however, this chapter considers the novel’s stance on religious belief and intellectualism. Edna Earl, the protagonist of *St. Elmo*, is an exceptionally intelligent and insightful woman whose individuality and fierce independence place her in the tradition of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. Beyond these character traits lies an even more complex idea that connects the novel with *Sartor Resartus*: the belief in a necessary

connection between intellect and faith. Edna, like Teufelsdröckh, insists that her intellect does not contradict her religious faith and that one actually informs the other. Our perceptive and intellectual faculties, both Carlyle and Evans ultimately argue, should strengthen our faith by allowing us to see the presence of God in the world around us.

Chapter 5, “‘Find some useful, happy work to do’: Diogenes Teufelsdröckh and ‘Pilgriming’ in *Little Women*,” diverges from traditional critical approaches, examining the context of the novel’s ideas rather than reading it as an autobiographical or domestic tale. The structure and themes of Louisa May Alcott’s novel directly echo John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, but the novel’s work ethic also derives from Carlylean thought. The story of the March family expands the narrative of Teufelsdröckh, recounting the development not simply of one exceptional individual (though Jo March certainly is an exceptional woman), but actually depicting multiple journeys and the conversions of several characters, both male and female. Each of the March sisters and some of their male counterparts must learn the value of meaningful work not only for material benefit but to improve the soul.

Chapter 6, “‘But every one is not so ready to see what is right’: Carlylean Prophecy in *The Story of Avis*” looks forward by evoking an Old Testament tradition. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and her heroine, Avis Dobell, adopt the stance of the prophet to examine the condition of women in their time and to predict a future where conditions will change. Like Teufelsdröckh, the prophet-hero, Avis is called to exert a critical vision and to speak for others. However, she is the only character in this study who marries before fulfilling her vocation, and her story takes quite a different turn because of this difference. For this reason, Phelps’s novel ultimately seems less optimistic. At the same time, she is the only character who has a daughter, and therein lies her

hope for the future of womanhood. Just as Teufelsdröckh leaves behind his clothes-philosophy as a legacy, Avis hopes that her work will continue in the next generation of women.

Despite the problematic history and effects of Carlylean thought, his vision of the poet, the thinking believer, the pilgrim/worker, and the prophet in the character of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh opened up new possibilities for the women in this study. At the same time, reading women writers through this lens offers critics the opportunities to understand them in a broader intellectual context. Ultimately, then, this study invites a consideration of how women writers might be integrated into the literary canon in a context that extends beyond the fact of their gender and recognizes their engagement with *all* of the important ideas of their time. Furthermore, it encourages feminist scholars and critics to consider more broadly the ways in which women may have seen themselves entering an intellectual conversation that appears to have excluded them.

## CHAPTER 2

### “A QUITE NEW HUMAN INDIVIDUALITY”: RE-CREATION AND RECONCILIATION IN *SARTOR RESARTUS*

In a letter to James Fraser in 1833, Thomas Carlyle anticipates some of the formal difficulties that continue to complicate critical readings of *Sartor Resartus*. He tells the Editor that his book is “put together in the fashion of a Didactic Novel; but indeed properly *like* nothing yet extant” (227). This description reveals much about the intended purpose and construction of the sage’s only published book-length work of fiction: *Sartor* will begin with forms that already exist and critique those forms to create something new and to teach its audience. Of course, we could not expect a typical novel from a writer who, in his essay titled “Biography” (1832), denounced fiction, claiming that “while the feigner of it [fiction] knows that he is feigning, partakes, more than we suspect, of the nature of *lying*; and has ever an, in some degree, unsatisfactory character” (56). Instead of writing a traditional novel, then, he seeks to re-create the form in a way that will seek to tell the truth by using the techniques of fiction. He envisions accomplishing this goal by combining fiction with the form that he believes holds the greatest potential to teach: the biography. George Levine argues that the Victorian fascinations with the novel and with biography are connected, and that both are concerned with moral character. He asserts, “The nineteenth-century novel tended to place character at the center of meaning [...] And the great preoccupation with character, which is largely, I think, a moral preoccupation, is paralleled by the voracity of the Victorian reading public for biographies and autobiographies” (8). And while G. B. Tennyson argues that “If we isolate Teufelsdröckh’s story [...] and hang the rest of *Sartor* onto it, we have in fact violated the form and spirit of Carlyle’s work” (159),

reading the book in the context of Carlyle's theory of biography demonstrates that it is in fact Teufelsdröckh the character who unites the entire text. In essence, *Sartor* blends the genres of the didactic novel and the bildungsroman to articulate Carlyle's theory that history is composed of the biography of great and exceptional men. Rather than tell the story of a historical figure, however, in Diogenes Teufelsdröckh he creates a hero who is a truly original man, a "quite new human individuality" (8).

The uniqueness of this new man and his story results in an extraordinarily complex text that invites a wide variety of readings. In attempting to understand the place of *Sartor* in literary history, critics have read it as a transitional text, suggesting that it inaugurates Victorianism while continuing to adhere to many Romantic ideals and generic conventions.<sup>1</sup> Alternately, the novel has been read as a spiritual autobiography or conversion narrative<sup>2</sup> or a political or moral treatise.<sup>3</sup> But the fact is that Carlyle saw himself working within the novel genre in *Sartor Resartus*, despite his repudiation of fiction. He may have despised the Victorian novel, but some critics claim that he also helped to create it. Barry Qualls asserts that Carlyle wrote one of the first English *Bildungsromane*, arguing that "*Sartor Resartus*, with its German orphan's life and

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<sup>1</sup> Critics typically see *Sartor* as one of Carlyle's more Romantic texts. Trevor Hogan, for example, argues that "If Carlyle had died in 1834 after the publication of *Sartor Resartus*, he could conceivably be remembered today as another of the British romantics, to be listed along with the big six: Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Keats" (70). Janice L. Haney argues that *Sartor* "functions in two ways: as a transitional text that helps us navigate the passage between those literary historical periods we call Romantic and Victorian and as a founding text that initiates us into a Victorian frame of mind" (307). Schatz-Jakobsen presents a useful overview of the scholarship that considers the relationship between Romanticism and Victorianism in Carlyle studies (183-86).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Rosenberg suggests that *Sartor* is both autobiographical and purposefully unrevealing about its author: "The impulse behind it often seems to be one of concealment rather than one of revelation" (47). Walter L. Reed argues that "The central pattern, or rather the main symbolic action, of *Sartor Resartus* is a process of conversion" that is expressed "in the book's imaginative form" (411-12).

<sup>3</sup> John Holloway argues that Carlyle's goal in his writing in general, and *Sartor Resartus* in particular, is to "veritably transform men's outlook" and in so doing to teach them how to live (21). Chris Vanden Bossche reads the novel in the context of Carlyle's political anxieties, specifically the difficulty of establishing legitimate transcendental authority in a revolutionary age. He argues that Carlyle's political authoritarianism, which is still in the developing stages as he writes *Sartor*, represents an attempt to avert social dissolution and the destruction of values (viii-ix, 41-51). More recently, John Morrow focuses on Carlyle's sense of "mission," especially in his early career, arguing that "It was his special role in life to help his contemporaries confront their collective inner demons and make the most of the opportunities for individual and collective endeavour present in the modern world" (29).

its English Editor's meditation on that life [...] constitutes the prototypical Victorian fiction" (11). Even novelists in Carlyle's own time recognized his influence on the genre, as Hilary Schor notes: "Victorian novelists across a wide spectrum attempted to draft a reluctant Carlyle as their progenitor" (117). The form of the book may be one of the reasons that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Jane Evans, Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps responded to it in their own variations on the *Bildungsroman*; like Carlyle, they are re-envisioning a well-established genre as they seek to create a new kind of heroine, the "great woman" whose story will also shape history. All of these women seek to teach their audiences, and they do so by creating unique and exceptional individuals whose biographies form the core of their novels.

*Sartor* shows how the artist is re-created through the telling of his life's story in the form of biography. By creating a fictional biographical hero, Carlyle also reconsiders biography as a form.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Waterston argues, "Both biography and autobiography experienced a 'generic jump' through *Sartor Resartus*. After years of practise in conventional biography, Carlyle flung into the story of Teufelsdröckh such intensities of anguish and affirmation that only a very rash biographer would dare return thereafter to peaceful prose chronicles of visible struggle and accomplishment" (111). Referring perhaps to the "earth-quaky style" that so suited Louisa May Alcott (*Journals of Louisa May Alcott* 105), this description suggests that Carlyle's creativity runs deeper than issues of genre, for he seeks to reshape the way his readers think about the history of human beings, which in his view will change the way they think about history in a broader sense as well. In Carlyle's view the life of the great man serves as a text itself, so that his actions as well as his biography are indeed Works of Art. Echoing Goethe, Teufelsdröckh

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<sup>4</sup> Vanessa L. Ryan attributes Carlyle's critical consideration of the form of biography to the publication of John Wilson Croker's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in 1831, arguing that "Croker's grand claims to have surpassed all previous editors of the *Life* inspired a periodical debate about the nature of biography: is it a branch of history recording the life of its subject, or is it a constructive effort, a literary creation on the part of the biographer? And what role does the editor of biography play in either of these possibilities?" (288).



reflects on the divine nature of all great Art, arguing that “nobler than all in this kind are the Lives of heroic, god-inspired Men; for what other Work of Art is so divine?” (169). The life of a great man, then, is itself a text, a Work of Art that stands alone. The task falls to the biographer to re-write the life into a new work of art, so in considering the making of Teufelsdröckh’s life, *Sartor* examines the creation and re-creation of a work of art. The Editor also suggests that biography can actually take many forms, privileging the importance of a great man’s life over some texts that may be created to tell the story of his life: “Your Byron publishes his *Sorrows of Lord George*, in verse and in prose, and copiously otherwise: your Bonaparte represents his *Sorrows of Napoleon Opera*, in an all-too stupendous style [...] —Happier is he who, like our Clothes-Philosopher, can write such matter, since it must be written, on the insensible Earth, with his shoe-soles only; and also survive the writing thereof!” (121-22). In this view, a man’s experience is actually the most important form of biography he can construct himself. To create a biography that is equal to that life is the greater challenge.

If the life of a great man is itself a text, then biography is by its very nature an act not only of creation but of re-creation; the biography of a great man is actually a new Work of Art created with the same material. For Carlyle, history was constructed most meaningfully by recounting the biographies of great men; the complicated nature of a hero like Teufelsdröckh and the originality of his ideas, however, make the construction of his biography particularly troublesome for the Editor. Teufelsdröckh is something new as are his ideas, and the two are inextricable. Initially the Editor suggests that in order to understand his ideas, one must understand the man: “to state the Philosophy of Clothes without the Philosopher, the ideas of Teufelsdröckh without something of his personality, was it not to insure both of entire misapprehension?” (9). The thinker and his work are inexorably connected, and understanding

the man is necessary to understanding his ideas. Even the name which the Editor gives the book, a “Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh” (10), suggests the combined purpose of *Sartor Resartus*. In order to understand his ideas, the Editor initially suggests, one must understand their creator, just as in order to understand history, one must understand the men who make it. Hofrath Heuschrecke agrees, writing to the Editor that the clothes-philosophy cannot be truly understood “till a Biography of him [Teufelsdröckh] has been philosophico-poetically written, and philosophico-poetically read” (58). The importance of the writer’s biography is clear here, but it is also important to note that the understanding of the man and his ideas is dependent upon how the biography is written and how it is read; the act of *re*-creation ultimately shapes the interpretation of the originary act (the life).

At the same time, the Editor suggests that while learning about the writer can help a reader to understand his work, the work can also teach its readers about the man. Acknowledging the lack of biographical fact from which he has to work, he writes, “His Life, Fortunes, and Bodily Presence, are as yet hidden from us, or matter only of faint conjecture. But on the other hand, does not his Soul lie enclosed in this remarkable Volume, much more truly than Pedro Garcia’s did in the buried Bag of Doubloons?” He goes on to call the clothes-philosophy “the soul of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh” (21). The equation of the man with his work is clearly part of Carlyle’s gospel of work, but it also suggests the extent to which the artist-thinker reveals himself through the biographical details of his life rather than through his work. Again, the life of the great man is itself a text or a work of art, and that text works together with the re-created text of the biography to demonstrate his true significance. The attempt to understand great heroes, then, represents an attempt to understand something much larger, something more

universal. In this way biography serves a larger purpose; it demonstrates a larger social (as well as a natural and divine) history at the same time that it recounts a personal history.

Of course, the biography of Teufelsdröckh as *Sartor* presents it is severely limited both by a lack of information and the difficulty of understanding the complexities of the man and his philosophy. The Editor suggests that miscommunicating the life of such a man is always a danger, lamenting that “great men are too often unknown, or what is worse, misknown” (13). Instead of simply telling the story of Teufelsdröckh’s life, then, the book will consider larger questions about how a biography is written, what it means to re-construct the life of a great man in literary form, and how one goes about accomplishing such a project. As one might expect given Carlyle’s belief in the gospel of work, his approach to biography emphasizes the labor involved in telling the great man’s story.<sup>5</sup> These concerns mean that the book does not take the form of a traditional biography and is less an example of genre than a consideration of genre; ultimately it will become a reconciliation of multiple forms. The biography of the hero is doubly mediated—first through Hofrath Heuschrecke and then by the Editor. All of the autobiographical information is supplied to the Editor by Hofrath Heuschrecke, the majority of which consists of

[s]ix considerable PAPER-BAGS, carefully sealed, and marked successively, in gilt China-ink, with the symbols of the Six southern Zodiacal Signs, beginning at Libra; in the inside of which sealed Bags, lie miscellaneous masses of Sheets, and oftener Shreds and Snips, written in Professor Teufelsdröckh’s scarce-legible *cursiv-schrift*; and treating of all imaginable things under the Zodiac and above it,

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<sup>5</sup> James Treadwell explores this depiction, arguing that *Sartor Resartus* is the last of his writings in which Carlyle openly reflects on writing as labor (227). He asserts that “Carlyle authenticates his career by reconstructing it, recalling and reproducing the labour of writing—Teufelsdröckh’s apprenticeship—in order to identify that labour with its ‘end,’ the finished text of *Sartor*” (226).

but of his own personal history only at rare intervals, and then in the most enigmatic manner! (60)

The organization of this material (or, rather, the lack of organization) not only demonstrates the difficulty of this biographer's task, but also suggests the complex nature of constructing any biography. Moreover, in order to understand the subject one must carefully interpret the information the bags contain, for the organization and content of the bags do hint at the nature of Teufelsdröckh himself, revealing his speculative rather than introspective point of view. The information that he supplies as biographical material is about "all imaginable things" except himself; his perspective is always focused outward on the universe rather than inward on himself. Indeed the great man is great not because of his sense of himself but because of his understanding of the universe and his place in it. This is characteristic of the Carlylean hero and suggests that the biography of a great man will be difficult to construct and understand in part because so little of his attention is directed to himself. What makes Teufelsdröckh a great man, then, is also in part what makes the construction of his biography so complicated.

In addition to being limited and unorganized, most of the biographical information is mediated by Heuschrecke and the Editor, so the factual truth of the account is always in question. Ultimately, the Editor questions the veracity of the content of the paper bags, suggesting that Teufelsdröckh may actually be perpetrating a joke in an attempt to make a fool of both Hofrath and the Editor himself. Late in the book the Editor declares his suspicion that "these Autobiographical Documents are partly a Mystification!" when he finds on a previously discarded slip of paper "formerly thrown aside as blank" the words of Teufelsdröckh himself: "What are your historical Facts; still more your biographical? Wilt thou know a Man, above all, a Mankind, by stringing together beadrolls of what thou namest Facts? The Man is the spirit he

worked in; not what he did, but what he became” (153). This complicates the notion of biography not only by introducing a potentially mystical element (“the spirit”) but also by further obscuring the relationship between the thinker and his work. This is perfectly appropriate given Teufelsdröckh’s mysterious and ethereal nature, but it also suggests that any man’s life is known not simply by understanding either the facts of his life or his work. One must also recognize how he transformed (or re-created) himself through his work. The problem of how to convey this spirit becomes the real dilemma of the biographer. Hence the nature of biography and its possibilities are questioned not just by the Editor but by Teufelsdröckh himself.

The very presence of the Editor adds another layer to the complications inherent in the act of biography as well. Though biography is the story of a man, it is also shaped by the biographer, who may have his own agenda. Teufelsdröckh’s use of third person to reveal autobiographical details combined with the clearly and necessarily speculative nature of such observations about the young man also remind readers that biography is always complicated by multiple points of view. In this case both the Professor and the Editor have their own agendas, which appear to be fundamentally at odds with one another. In essence, Teufelsdröckh seeks to change the world around him, and the Editor seeks to protect it. Reading his subject as a “speculative Radical, and of the very darkest tinge” (50), the Editor reveals in the chapter titled “Editorial Difficulties” that he “is animated with a true though perhaps a feeble attachment to the Institutions of our Ancestors; and minded to defend these, according to ability, at all hazards; nay, it was partly with a view to such defence that he engaged in this undertaking” (11). Such differing perspectives will necessarily affect the way a biography is constructed, and the presentation of such conflict suggests once again the varied possibilities of biography.

One of the most important possibilities in Carlyle's view is that the life of great men will serve not only artistic but also didactic purposes. In the Editor's words, biography "is by nature the most universally profitable, universally pleasant of all things: especially Biography of distinguished individuals" (59). Here Teufelsdröckh appropriates the language of commercialism ("profit") to describe the spiritual value of the enterprise of the biographer, just as Carlyle appropriates a more commercially "profitable" form. *Sartor* combines elements of biography with elements of fiction to create a text that resembles, though it does not emulate, that most Victorian of forms—the triple-decker novel. The book represents his only attempt to develop in fictional form his theory of the great man as hero and hence to reconcile genres, using fiction in a new way. Certainly the didactic novel was an important and popular form in the early nineteenth century, but the lessons Carlyle seeks to teach are not those typically found in such fiction. Carlyle did not believe in the spiritual usefulness of most of the fiction of his time, and in fact he believed novels to be potentially harmful. For example, in *Sartor* Teufelsdröckh recounts his attempt to read "*Fashionable Novels*" and the extreme visceral response that resulted. He describes the effects as follows:

[A]t the end of some short space, I was uniformly seized with not so much what I can call a drumming in my ears, as a kind of infinite, unsufferable Jew's-harping and scrannel-piping there; to which the frightfullest species of Magnetic Sleep soon supervened. And if I strove to shake this away, and absolutely would not yield, came a hitherto unfelt sensation, as of *Delirium Tremens*, and a melting into total deliquium:--till at last, by order of the Doctor, dreading ruin to my whole intellectual and bodily faculties, and a general breaking-up of the constitution, I reluctantly but determinedly forbore. (210)

The description of Teufelsdröckh's debilitated state not only demonstrates the painful nature of his reaction to this book, but also conveys the primacy of the physical response over the mental one. This fiction does not teach or provoke thought, Carlyle suggests; instead it appears to prevent it. *Sartor* seeks the opposite effect, yielding intellectual and spiritual rewards.

The new approach to didacticism is also necessary because Carlyle is creating a new man. This hero's originality requires a new genre; the old forms are not sufficient to tell his story and the definitions of individuality which already exist cannot accurately describe or contain him. Carlyle's age calls for a priest who is both new and eternal—a man of and for his time whose vision transcends time—and the biography and philosophy of this new man form the center of *Sartor Resartus*. Though he is inevitably connected to the history which preceded him, the originality of this new man must be entire. Using an organic metaphor, the Editor reveals a theory of time that offers a context for the creation and existence of the hero: “thus the Present is not needlessly trammelled with the Past; and only grows out of it, like a Tree, whose roots are not intertangled with its branches, but lie peaceably under ground” (37). The great man grows from a historical context, but he must not be bound to the past. More importantly, he cannot be a copy of any hero who came before because he lives in and for a new era. Teufelsdröckh recognizes his own place in history, claiming, “Always too the new man is in a new time, under new conditions; his course can be the *facsimile* of no prior one, but is by its nature original” (93). His originality, then, does not simply separate him from other men but it actually connects him to his time; he must be new because history requires it. This hero is crucially important to the time in which he lives, and he will bring something new to his time because he *is* something new.

Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh is, of course, this new man, and he fits Carlyle's criteria for originality both literally and figuratively. To start, his biological origins are unknown,

as he is a foundling of sorts. His story begins with a delivery but not a birth, and interestingly, a man, not a woman, ultimately brings him to Andreas and Gretchen Futteral. This man actually appears to the adoptive parents, and Teufelsdröckh describes him as “a Stranger of reverend aspect [...] close-muffled in a wide mantle” (64). The stranger disappears without a trace, leaving the baby in a basket with a baptismal certificate “wherein unfortunately nothing but the Name was decipherable” (65). So the child derives both from unknown parentage and an unknown place. Teufelsdröckh’s originality is further reinforced by the uniqueness of his name: “extraordinary names as we have in Germany, the name Teufelsdröckh, except as appended to my own person, nowhere occurs” (67). He is a man without equal and essentially without family; his only family is the family of man. Moreover, his unique destiny is determined by his name: “In a very plain sense the Proverb says, *Call one a thief and he will steal*; in an almost similar sense, may we not perhaps say, *Call one Diogenes Teufelsdröckh and he will open the Philosophy of Clothes*” (68). The originality of his name, then, corresponds with that of his self and his mission. Teufelsdröckh is named like no other, and he will be like no other.

The mystery of Teufelsdröckh does not end with his questionable origin, as he grows into a shadowy figure that in some ways resembles the Stranger who brings him to the Futterals. In fact part of his uniqueness results from the intensity of his spiritual nature, and even those who have been in his presence seem to question his material existence. Those who know him describe an almost mystical figure: “Wits spoke of him secretly as if he were a kind of Melchizedek, without father or mother or any kind; sometimes, with reference to his great historic and statistic knowledge, and the vivid way he had of expressing himself like an eye-witness or distant transactions and scenes, they called him the *Ewige Jude*, Everlasting, or as we say, Wandering Jew” (14). Teufelsdröckh has not only a mystical presence, then, but mystical



knowledge as well; he seems able to know about things that he should logically not have been able to witness. He is in this way like Melchizedek, a mystical Biblical figure who appeared in both the Old and New Testaments and whose existence as a material being was questionable; he seems, like the Wandering Jew, to be able to transcend logical strictures of time.

Interestingly, also, Melchizedek is a “priest for all time,” an immortal figure who serves as a prototype for Christ. Just like Teufelsdröckh, Melchizedek “has no father, no mother, no lineage; his years have no beginning, his life no end” (Hebrews 7:3). Furthermore, he is a figure of transition just as Christ was; under the old law, priests were only chosen from the tribe of Levi, but Christ was from the tribe of Judah. Hence the rise of Christ required a change of law, and this change is described as follows:

The argument becomes still clearer, if the new priest who arises is one like Melchizedek, owing his priesthood not to a system of earth-bound rules but to the power of a life that cannot be destroyed. For here is the testimony: ‘Thou art a priest for ever, in the succession of Melchizedek.’ The earlier rules are cancelled as impotent and useless, since the Law brought nothing to perfection; and a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. (Hebrews 15-19)

Jesus is described, like Melchizedek, as a priest for all time and one who actually improves the relationship between God and his people. He is also a figure of transition, marking not only a change in law but also a new understanding of the human and the divine. Comparing Teufelsdröckh to such a figure suggests not only his originality but the importance of his presence and his work; he will perform a valuable service for mankind by re-creating their relationship with the universe and with God. Depicting the German professor as a Christ figure reveals much about his calling and his relationship with humanity.

One of the ways in which Christ was uniquely able to perform his service to humankind was through his dual nature: he was both spiritual and material, divine and human. These dual natures are similarly reconciled both in the vision and the figure of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. The name itself, which could literally translate to “born of God devil’s dung,” represents a reconciliation of spirituality (both high and low) with the basest materialism. The Professor sees true human nature as essentially disparate; he is “‘a forked straddling animal with bandy legs;’ yet also a Spirit, and unutterable Mystery of Mysteries” (45). If such duality is the inevitable human condition, so too is the spectrum of potentiality it represents, and Teufelsdröckh sees both extremes of these possibilities. In this way, the Editor suggests, his point of view is unique: “The grand unparalleled peculiarity of Teufelsdröckh is, that with all this Descendentalism, he combines a Transcendentalism no less superlative; whereby if on the one hand he degrade man below most animals, except those jacketed Gouda Cows, he, on the other, exalts him beyond the visible Heavens, almost to an equality with the gods” (51). So along with the contrast between body and spirit, he sees the contrast of man’s capabilities in either form; man may choose to align himself with the spirit or with the flesh. Because he understands both sides of his nature, the Editor suggests, Teufelsdröckh is uniquely capable of understanding man.

This dual nature makes Teufelsdröckh original in another way: he is an individual whose perspective or vision takes him beyond the realm of the ordinary. Here Carlyle builds partly on Romantic ideals of radical individuality, presenting the great man as an exception, one who is profoundly different from the others around him because of his superior insight. Furthermore, the heroic individual recognizes his own exceptionality and superiority and orders his life accordingly. Where the Romantic hero turns his insight upon his own soul and condition, though, the Carlylean hero looks out upon the world around him to assess the condition of mankind.

Teufelsdröckh manifests this characteristic literally as well as figuratively; for example, he separates himself from the masses in his unusual apartment, described as a “speculum or watch-tower” (16). From this position he looks down on the masses and “witness[es] their wax-laying and honey-making, and poison-brewing, and choking by sulphur” (16). The degeneration of the imagery here from descriptions of productive behavior (although the behavior of drones) to a hellish atmosphere suggests the meaninglessness of the work of the masses and the ill effects it has on those who do it. Material production is ultimately empty, this description suggests, yet it is the kind of work in which most men are engaged. Teufelsdröckh, however, feels himself separated: “But I, *mein Werther*, sit above it all; I am alone with the Stars” (18). He is referring, of course, to the physical position of his apartment, but this account also reveals his mental state; the Professor is spiritually above the mass of men. The hero is the only man in his position, both literally and figuratively, and he sees himself surrounded not by other men but by the natural universe, as represented by the stars.

While it would be easy to attribute this evaluation of mankind simply to classism or disdain for the masses, Teufelsdröckh disputes such a reading, using an example of the King and the Carman: “dissect them with scalpels [...] the same viscera, tissues, livers, lights, and other Life-tackle are there: examine their spiritual mechanism; the same great Need, great Greed, and little Faculty; nay ten to one but the Carman, [...] [who] has actually put forth his hand and operated on Nature, is the more cunningly gifted of the two” (50). Ultimately, he suggests, men are the same physically and spiritually; he appears to believe in a kind of inherent equality among men even though he implies that those who work are actually at a kind of advantage because of their hands-on experience with the world around them. This description is part of Teufelsdröckh’s clothes-philosophy; he argues that the only real difference between these two

men is their clothing, simultaneously implying that the material distinctions which are imposed on man are essentially meaningless. But his ability to see man's ultimate equality at the same time that he recognizes his own spiritual and intellectual superiority is crucial to the character and project of Teufelsdröckh.

Later in the book, though, Teufelsdröckh regards men's equality in a more skeptical way, attempting to make sense of the distinctions between men that really matter—the spiritual ones. In doing so he complicates the Transcendentalism that he seems to assert for much of the book. Teufelsdröckh quotes Novalis, who argues that the human body is a Temple and that “We touch Heaven, when we lay our hands on a human Body” (181). Initially he appears to agree: “whereas the English Johnson only bowed to every Clergyman, or man with a shovel-hat, I would bow to every Man with any sort of hat, or with no hat whatever. Is he not a Temple, then; the visible Manifestation and Impersonation of the Divinity?” (181). Certainly this conveys the divinity of all men and the sense that all are equally divine. He disputes this simple equality, though, by purporting the duality of the human spirit: “And yet, alas, such indiscriminate bowing serves not. For there is a Devil dwells in man, as well as a Divinity; and too often the bow is but pocketed by the *former*. It would go to the pocket of Vanity (which is your clearest phases of the Devil, in these times); and therefore must we withhold it” (181-82). Hence men have equal potential but in reality only some will indulge their capacity for divinity. Men are spiritually (if not materially) equal in their capacity for housing both the Divine and the Evil; they will distinguish themselves by choosing one over the other.

Most revealing in all of these observations and evaluations is the fact that Teufelsdröckh, though separated from the mass of men, is able to empathize with their situation. He is able to use his apparent disconnection from others in order to see the condition of mankind more clearly.

The Editor suggests that it is actually because of his distinction that he can “look in men’s faces with a strange impartiality, a strange scientific freedom; like a man unversed in the higher circles, like a man dropped thither from the Moon” (23). He is a part of humanity, so he can understand the lives of men with particular depth; at the same time, though, he is detached enough from the material realities of the human condition to be able to adopt an outsider’s unbiased view. In addition to his insight into human beings, he is uniquely capable of productively observing the natural world: “Many a deep glance, and often with unspeakable precision, has he cast into mysterious Nature” (23). The depth and accuracy of Teufelsdröckh’s vision are broader than his insights into the lives of men and functions in a larger and more important realm as well. Indeed he feels a connection to nature that is as important as his connection to other men; in fact it seems almost to replace it when he is most alone. As he begins his wanderings, his flight is “into the wilds of Nature; as if in her mother-bosom he would seek healing” (116). In observing and communing with nature, he learns about himself and his own position in the universe: “He gazed over those stupendous masses [of mountains] with wonder, almost with longing desire; never till this hour had he known Nature, that she was One, that she was his Mother and divine” (117). Because he is able to feel wonder, he can understand the universe, and through his closeness to nature he develops a sense of a familial connection.

This is important because one of the ways in which a man can realize Divinity is through his perspective on the universe; most people do not truly see the wonders of the universe, and those who do so are exceptional indeed. Hence Teufelsdröckh’s spiritual superiority is directly related to his ability not only to see work and people from a new point of view but also to his ability and willingness to feel wonder: “Strange enough how creatures of the human-kind shut their eyes to plainest facts; and, by the mere inertia of Oblivion and Stupidity, live at ease in the

midst of Wonders and Terrors” (45). The senses of most people are dulled by the world around them where Teufelsdröckh’s are receptive to the extreme possibilities of nature and the universe, and his perspective is unique because of this. He goes on to attribute others’ lack of awareness to a lack of inquisitiveness, tellingly using a metaphor of consumption; he suggests that “man is, and was always, a blockhead and dullard; much readier to feel and digest, than to think and consider. Prejudice, which he pretends to hate, is his absolute lawgiver; mere use-and-wont everywhere leads him by the nose” (45). Most people simply follow their instincts or “natural” tendencies rather than basing their behavior on thought. Or, through the influence of science, they seek to replace Wonder with impersonal, inhumane logic that is based strictly on material evidence; in removing this Wonder they also lose their sense of Worship. Such thinking is insufficient for the truly great man: “Thought without Reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous” (53). In order for thought to be truly productive, it must be spiritual as well as logical, and those who can think in this way are great men.

The experience and insight of Teufelsdröckh will reveal, then, not that all men are equal, but that most are; the distinctions that matter between men are not the ones that are visible to most (i.e., clothing). As the exception and the visionary, the Professor will be able to regard men critically and shed light on the meaningful differences between himself and most of mankind. One point at which such distinctions will become clear appears in his dealings with professional men. In recounting Teufelsdröckh’s experiences in law, he describes the men he encounters not as men but simply as defined by their professional status. Where his exceptional nature has determined his course in life, so too has their choice of profession: “‘My fellow Auscultators,’ he says, ‘were Auscultators: they dressed, and digested, and talked articulate words; other vitality shewed they almost none. Small speculation in those eyes, that they did glare withal!’

Sense neither for the high nor for the deep, nor for aught human or divine, save only for the faintest scent of coming Preferment’” (95). This depiction not only reveals Teufelsdröckh’s difference from his fellow man, but also suggests that even most men who are nominally educated, such as his fellow student lawyers, have no real insight into the universe. Their senses, despite (or perhaps because of) their education, are dulled to the wonders around them. They are, actually, not men—they are Auscultators. And while a profession may traditionally be considered a calling, this description suggests that a calling such as the law works to the detriment of the humanity of those who answer it. In this regard, then, a lawyer is not that different from the tailor of the book’s title; both are denied their manhood by the work they do.

In contrast, the work Teufelsdröckh is destined to do actually enhances his own humanity as well as that of those who would hear his message, and because of this higher calling he does not succeed in more practical pursuits. At a young age, he did not appear to know his calling, but he did recognize his estrangement from his fellows, particularly those who were called to a career in law: “Friendly communion, in any case, there could not be: already has the young Teufelsdröckh left the other young geese; and swims apart, though as yet uncertain whether he himself is cygnet or gosling” (95). Even when he has not discerned the direction of his own course, he knows it will not be that of those around him. His colleagues and his professional superiors not only recognize that he is different but believe that his exceptionality makes him unsuited for the work of a lawyer: “By degrees, those same established men, once partially inclined to patronize him, seem to withdraw their countenance, and give him up as ‘a man of genius’” (96). His genius distinguishes him from professional men, and even the unenlightened recognize that it effectively prohibits him from working in law. Teufelsdröckh initially argues that he could be both a spiritual and a practical man, protesting, “as if he who can fly into heaven,

could not also walk post if he resolved on it!” (96). He believes he can inhabit both the spiritually and materially productive realms, but his experience does not bear out this belief.

This inability, then, suggests an even greater distinction between the ordinary man and the exceptional man or hero; the hero is created not simply through his experience but by his nature. The great man is not simply made, but he is born with the potential and the responsibility to be great. Indeed the young Teufelsdröckh was born with this capacity, and he is shaped into greatness by the universe (not the people) around him. The language that describes his growth reinforces this notion: “To breed a fresh Soul, is it not like brooding a fresh (celestial) Egg; wherein as yet all is formless, powerless; yet by degrees organic elements and fibres shoot through the watery albumen; and out of vague Sensation, grows Thought, grows Fantasy and Force, and we have Philosophies, Dynasties, nay Poetries and Religions!” (68). The growth and shaping of a spiritual nature, such a description suggests, is akin to the development of a physical body. The process occurs without intentionality except insofar as it is driven by natural forces. Although he will later attribute his moral training to his adoptive parents, Teufelsdröckh’s spiritual development is effected by the universe itself. Implicit in this description, also, is the sense that souls develop differently. After all, not all men will produce philosophies, poetries, or religions—only the exceptional man will do so. This theory further asserts that even exceptional men do not cultivate these systems of thought themselves but rather that they develop *in* exceptional men. Hence those who are born to be great cannot help but mature into their heroism with the potential they are granted.

Teufelsdröckh’s biography shows that the vocation to greatness actually complicates the individual’s course in life; he is unable to be “normal” in many ways. The Editor uses rather strong language to suggest the difficulties of the hero’s calling: “His so unlimited Wanderings,



toilsome enough, are without assigned or perhaps assignable aim; internal Unrest seems his sole guidance; he wanders, wanders, as if that curse of the Prophet had fallen on him, and he were ‘made like unto a wheel’” (115). The Professor is guided by the restlessness within him, which directly results from his calling to Prophecy, here called a curse. He will be made to wander because of this curse, and the wheel here serves partly as a metaphor of travel. However, the use of the term wheel coupled with the use of the term Prophet almost may be an allusion to Ezekiel, whose calling to prophecy occurs with a vision of a wheel. The language of the passage is even reminiscent of that of the King James Version of Ezekiel 1:16, which in the description of the vision describes that “The appearance of the wheels and their work *was like unto* the color of a beryl.” This allusion suggests the importance and larger purpose of Teufelsdröckh’s calling; he is a prophet called by God to deliver a holy message. Moreover, it demonstrates the difficulty of his work, as his destiny hinges on the sacrifice of himself and his own life for the sake of his mission. Ezekiel, too, was reluctant to answer God’s call, but he was unable to escape it.

Obviously a sense of determinism is inherent in such a credo; those who become great are destined to be so and their calling is apparent both to themselves and to those around them. Although this process of creation is organic and driven by the natural forces of the universe, his biography also reveals that from infancy Teufelsdröckh possessed both a sense of his mission and his own self-determination: “I have heard him noted as a still infant, that kept his mind much to himself; above all, that seldom or never cried. He already felt that Time was precious; that he had other work cut out for him than whimpering” (68-9). He seems to know that his destiny is not to whimper as an infant but to cry out as a prophet; from the beginning, the hero realizes his exceptionality and acts upon it. The meditation on silence later in the chapter titled “Symbols” suggests that his “still” infancy also had a greater purpose, as silence is necessary to

the formation of important ideas. The Professor writes, “Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule [...] all the considerable men I have known, and the most undiplomatic and unstrategic of these, forbore to babble of what they were creating and projecting” (165). Silence is a necessary part of the act of creation of ideas, and young Teufelsdröckh appears already to realize that. Within the silent infant, this implies, may already be gestating the ideas that will become the clothes-philosophy. This suggests an inherent wisdom and sense of destiny motivating the hero’s behavior from the beginning. As the Editor speculates, “Already, when we dreamed not of it, the warp of thy remarkable Volume lay on the loom; and silently, mysterious shuttles were putting in the woof!” (13). The universe is fitting Teufelsdröckh to write the clothes-philosophy from his infancy.

While the infant Diogenes understood his potential and his calling, the schoolboy demonstrated his receptive and perceptive nature as well. The Editor sees this potential in looking at the biographical material recounting Teufelsdröckh’s childhood: “Indeed, already in the youthful Gneschen, with all his outward stillness, there may have been manifest an inward vivacity that promised much; symptoms of a spirit singularly open, thoughtful, almost poetical” (79). Once again appearance or outwardness is contrasted with a deeper interiority, anticipating already the insights that will be developed within the clothes-philosophy. This description also foreshadows the “passive” nature of the adult Teufelsdröckh, whom many would believe to be “oftenest a man without Activity of any kind” (78), suggesting that this nature was formed from the time of his youth and that it makes him both unique and hard to understand. His inherent openness will also enable his expansive and insightful vision to develop. The youngster’s experiences in school confirm his sense of difference and separation from those around him. His

schoolmates treated him ill, and at school he felt “for the first time, quite orphaned and alone” (80). This sense of exceptionality was further perpetuated by his discovery that the Futterals were not his biological parents, a discovery that would provoke feelings of ambivalence in the young student. He describes “A certain poetic elevation, yet also a corresponding civic depression, [that] it naturally imparted: *I was like no other*; in which fixed-idea, leading sometimes to highest, and oftener to frightfullest results, may there not lie the first spring of Tendencies, that in my Life have become remarkable enough? As in birth, in action, speculation, and social position, my fellows are perhaps not numerous” (84). Here Teufelsdröckh delineates the multiplicity of ways in which he is separated from his fellow men and also recognizes the potential, both positive and negative, of such a position. He recognizes the superior nature that his biological originality represents while he fears the larger implications of his difference from other people. At the same time, he implies that he believes the discovery explains much about his behavior and his sense of himself.

One of the first challenges Teufelsdröckh faces, then, is to nurture his superiority and at the same time maintain a connection to his fellow man. What will ultimately prevent him from succumbing to utter solipsism and isolation is his talent for speculation, which, he learns, must be balanced with introspection. The Editor suggests that wisdom is a product of looking outward rather than looking inward: “Wise man was he who counselled that Speculation should have free course, and look fearlessly towards all the thirty-two points of the compass, whithersoever and howsoever it listed” (5). Hence, Teufelsdröckh’s speculative nature is praiseworthy; when he turns his gaze outward upon the universe, he is able to see more than most men. Moreover, he is able to interpret what he sees: “Nothing that he sees but has more than a common meaning, but has two meanings” (52). This, the Editor suggests, is part of the reason why he is so well suited

to write the philosophy of clothes; he sees beyond outward appearance to inward reality. The gift of vision, then, is most productive when it is focused outside himself. Because of his exceptional receptiveness, “The secrets of man’s Life were laid open to [him]; [he] saw into the mystery of the Universe, farther than another” (13). He sees what other men don’t because he has a depth of understanding and vision that they do not.

Introspection, though, is less productive for the hero. As he is mired in the Everlasting No, Teufelsdröckh is able only to see his own misery, and this estranges him even farther from his fellow man. He recalls, “A feeble unit in the middle of a threatening Infinitude, I seemed to have nothing given me but eyes, whereby to discern my own wretchedness” (126-27). Where his unusually speculative nature distinguishes him from his fellow men in ways that are ultimately creative and productive, turning his perception inward becomes stifling. He even considers suicide at one point. As he progresses through this crisis, however, and begins to move beyond solipsism, he re-develops the ability to look productively at the world around him. His wanderings as recounted in the chapter on “The Centre of Indifference” reveal the value of combining internal and external knowledge. He begins to learn when he can “at least in lucid intervals, look away from his own sorrows, over the many-coloured world, and pertinently enough note what is passing there” (134). When he learns to balance his introspection with speculation, he begins to make progress; in understanding himself he learns to understand the world around him and vice versa. In a sense this seems to represent a different kind of re-centering; he is moving beyond a worldview that places self at its center and adopting a broader vision. As a result of beginning to learn this balance, “for the matter of spiritual culture, if for nothing else, perhaps few periods of his life were richer than this” (134). The growth of his spirit is perpetuated when he is able to seek knowledge both within and outside himself.

Through his vision and the wisdom he gains from it, the Professor connects his struggle with that of others, echoing the Editor's declaration that "not this man and that man, but all men make up mankind, and their united tasks the task of mankind" (5). Even though the great man is elevated above his brethren, he is still responsible as a part of the larger human family. Indeed, he is more responsible as he is more capable and more receptive to the wisdom of the universe, and this duty is realized through what he does to contribute to man's knowledge and understanding. He realizes also that all men are united in their need for connection to each other. Teufelsdröckh himself admits that "the first problem" in life is "to unite yourself with some one and with somewhat (*sich anzuschliessen*)" (101). An important means of uniting himself with mankind, though, is to use his native and cultivated genius to create learning for other men. Reflecting on the virtue of true books, Teufelsdröckh compares writers to builders

O thou who art able to write a Book, which once in the two centuries or oftener there is a man gifted to do, envy not him whom they name City-builder, and inexpressibly pity him whom they name Conqueror or City-burner! Thou too art a Conqueror and Victor; but of the true sort, namely over the Devil: thou too hast built what will outlast all marble and metal, and be a wonder-bringing City of the Mind, a temple and Seminary and Prophetic Mount, whereto all kindreds of the Earth will pilgrim. (132)

So the writer's connection and contribution to his fellow man is not personal but moral and didactic. What he produces is much more important and more lasting than material products, and this is his function as a part of humanity.

Though it appears that Teufelsdröckh has recognized his unique destiny from the time of his infancy, not until his larger connection with and responsibility to humanity is realized does he

truly understand himself and his larger purpose. When he initially reflects upon his unknown biological origins, for example, he despairs. In retrospect, though, he sees himself as connected to mankind in spite of his apparent lack of a genetic family. He exclaims, “And yet, O Man born of Woman, wherein is my case peculiar? [...] thy true Beginning and Father is in Heaven, whom with the bodily eye thou shalt never behold, but only with the spiritual” (67). This consideration echoes Job 14:1, which states that “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.” As already discussed the “birth” story of Teufelsdröckh questions whether or not he is actually born of a woman, but it is important that he sees himself connected to his fellow man through his spirituality and through the shared experience of suffering (as implied by the allusion to Job).

In fact, one can read Teufelsdröckh’s passage from the Everlasting No to the Everlasting Yea as the story of the development of this sense of spiritual union with suffering humanity. Indeed it is when he is living in “The Everlasting No” that he feels the most estranged: “Invisible yet impenetrable walls, as of Enchantment, divided me from all living: was there, in the wide world, any true bosom I could press trustfully to mine? O Heaven, No, there was none! [...] Now when I look back, it was a strange isolation I then lived in” (127). This isolation is strange because it is mystical (with “enchanted” walls) and complete, but also because it is imposed upon the hero by his own nature and his own purpose. Hence it is almost paradoxical: his ultimate mission is to contribute to the well-being of humanity, yet his nature separates him from his fellow human beings. Teufelsdröckh must learn how to recognize his exceptionality but not let it separate him from his humanity.

As the Professor passes through the “Centre of Indifference,” he begins to recognize that he is united to his fellow human beings through their common struggles, but he continues to

question the meaning of such a connection. He asks, “Which highest mortal, in this inane Existence, had I not found a Shadow-hunter, or Shadow-hunted; and, when I looked through his brave garnitures, miserable enough?” (139). Here instead of placing himself above others, he places himself alongside them, but it is only through misery that he seems connected to his fellow man. At the same time, of course, it is only through his exceptional insight that he is able to see the misery of others, to see through their “garnitures” to the truth; this is a moment of revelatory speculation. By the end of this chapter, though, he is at a clear low point: “Thou art still Nothing, Nobody: true; but who then is Something, Somebody? For thee the Family of Man has no use; it rejects thee; thou art wholly as a dissevered limb: so be it; perhaps it is better so!” (139). Here he wrestles not only with a sense of isolation but of ineffectiveness; his native talents cannot be put to use if they are not working for the greater good of others. This is another moment of introspection that leads to self-pity; again he shows that when his vision is turned inward and he focuses too closely on himself, he sees only misery and separation.

The hero must use his keen insight to fulfill his social responsibility, then, in order to move beyond the Centre of Indifference. Only when Teufelsdröckh loses his sense of self-importance is he able to pass into the Everlasting Yea: “Here, then, as I lay in that CENTRE OF INDIFFERENCE; cast, doubtless, by benignant upper Influence, into a healing sleep, the heavy dreams rolled gradually away, and I awoke to a new Heaven and a new Earth. The first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self (*Selbst-tödtung*), had been happily accomplished, and my mind’s eyes were now unsealed, and its hands ungyved” (142). While Teufelsdröckh is an exceptional and transcendent figure, he is able to produce only when he is healthily engaged with a larger humanity and moves beyond self-absorption. He must annihilate the self in order to discover and fulfill his destiny. Ultimately, this allows him to nurture a sense of communion

with his fellow man at the same time that he recognizes his exceptional insight; he is able to feel superior without feeling isolated. The Everlasting Yea is, as he states it, “Love not Pleasure; love God,” and this insight appears at the end of a long passage meditating on the “Godlike that is in man” (146). So the most important lesson he learns from his wanderings is the inevitability and necessity of being a part of humanity. This represents his great triumph and the true realization of his destiny as well as an important reconciliation of inward and outward vision.

This reconciliation represents one of the larger thematic concerns of the book from its very beginning; how does the hero reconcile his exceptional individuality with his responsibility to his fellow man? This combination of individual ability and social circumstance forms an important conflict for all men: “To each is given a certain inward Talent, a certain outward Environment of Fortune; to each, by wisest combination of these two, a certain maximum of Capability. But the hardest problem were ever this first: To find by study of yourself, and of the ground you stand on, what your combined inward and outward Capability specially is” (93). This suggests that it is always difficult for anyone to find his talent and then to use that talent in the world beyond the self, and one must develop self-knowledge in order to accomplish this task. But introspection should be used for the singular purpose of discovering one’s place in the universe and is truly meaningful only in combination with an outward vision. The need for a balance between introspection and speculation suggests the transitional nature of the character of Teufelsdröckh. Through his depiction, the question of what it means to be an enlightened individual shifts: Carlyle does not just ask what it means to function as an individual in society, but he also suggests that definitions of individuality are fluid, considering what the great man for a new time will be. Ultimately the great man will focus on others rather than the self.



In reconsidering individuality and individual responsibility Teufelsdröckh learns a new sense of connection and sympathy for his fellow man as well. After passing through the Everlasting Yea, he remembers,

With other eyes too could I now look upon my fellow man; with an infinite Love, an infinite Pity. Poor, wandering, wayward man! Art thou not tried, and beaten with stripes, even as I am? [...] O my Brother, my Brother! why cannot I shelter thee in my bosom, and wipe away all tears from thy eyes.—Truly, the din of many-voiced Life, which, in this solitude, with the mind's organ, I could hear, was no longer a maddening discord, but a melting one: like inarticulate cries, and sobbings of a dumb creature, which in the ear of Heaven are prayers. (143-44)

Whereas he arrived at the realization of shared misery before, he did so only through recognizing his own suffering. This passage still acknowledges his own suffering but focuses on the condition of other men and connects his suffering to theirs rather than the other way around. Now Teufelsdröckh continues to believe that men are united by their misery, but he expresses a stronger sense of responsibility; he no longer feels that there is nothing he can do for his fellow men but realizes that he is uniquely aware of man's suffering and can put this awareness to use. With this new vision, he recognizes that each man has his own unique part to play in the working of society: "If the poor and humble toil that we may have Food, must not the high and glorious toil for him in return that he have Light and Guidance; Freedom, Immortality?" (173). Again he shows a belief in the inherent responsibility of all men, particularly that of the exceptional man. Furthermore, he clarifies his pity for the poor by arguing that true poverty lies not in physical labor or its necessity but in the fact that his Soul is "blinded, dwarfed, stupefied, almost annihilated!" (174). He does not pity the poor because they must work but because they lack

knowledge. Ignorance is the true poverty, and fighting this ignorance is where the hero's obligation to all of humanity lies.

The hero of this time, then, is a man of socially informed ideas, and by defining him thus Carlyle redefines meaningful, productive activity, once again privileging the spiritual over the material. To work only for material gain in fact hinders human progress, turning men into blind beasts: "Here, circling like the gin-horse, for whom partial or total blindness is no evil, the Bread-artist can travel contentedly round and round, still fancying that it is forward and forward, and realise much: for himself victual; for the world an additional horse's power in the grand corn-mill or hemp-mill of Economic Society" (94). To realize material gain for one's work may be immediately gratifying and recognizable, but ultimately the contribution such gain makes to the individual or to his society is negligible at best. For Teufelsdröckh such work "proved a neck-halter, and had nigh throttled me, till I broke it off" (94). Hence Carlyle redefines Work to mean that which yields spiritual rather than material products or rewards; he also suggests that meaningful Work yields profits that are reaped not only by he who produces the work but by the society within which he works as well. Carlyle's Editor acknowledges the unusual nature of his hero, suggesting that only those who are particularly attuned to his possibilities can recognize this brand of heroism: "For the shallow-sighted, Teufelsdröckh is oftenest a man without Activity of any kind, a No-man; for the deep-sighted, again, a man with Activity almost superabundant, yet so spiritual, close-hidden, enigmatic, that no mortal can foresee its explosions, or even when it has exploded, so much as ascertain its significance" (78). Here Carlyle suggests that in order to rethink heroism one must first rethink the definition of work.

By creating this new definition, the depiction of Teufelsdröckh also represents a new sense of duty or vocation, arguing that the creation of new ideas is not only a worthwhile

undertaking but indeed a calling. A great man (or “hero” in Carlyle’s lexicon) must be one who not only expresses his own intellect, but who also serves his society by doing so. Hence duty is closely tied to the value of work for its own sake with the understanding that important work will serve an important purpose. The Carlylean vision of duty is not necessarily a conventional one; the hero does not serve his society through traditional philanthropy but through seeing the world in new ways and communicating this vision to others. Indeed part of Teufelsdröckh’s task is to teach men to see their duty, for vision is the beginning of the enlightenment and education of the soul. He describes such education as a kind of re-creation: “But it is with man’s Soul as it was with Nature: the beginning of Creation is—Light. Till the eye have vision, the whole members are in bonds” (149). The vision of the whole people is important here, for the ignorance of one man regarding his duty affects all his peers. The simplicity of Teufelsdröckh’s message lies in the fact that one’s duty is always nearby; one does not have to search. Quoting Goethe, Teufelsdröckh entreats, “*“Do the duty which lies nearest thee,”* which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already become clearer [...] The Situation that has not its Duty, its Ideal, was never yet occupied by Man” (148-49). Here he recommends that one must seek to fulfill his duty wherever it may lie; duty or work is never lacking, but the vision to see it is.

Recognition of this duty begins with vision and self-knowledge, but such knowledge is gained not through introspection but through work itself. One cannot know the self without knowing what one is called to do: “A certain inarticulate Self-consciousness dwells dimly in us; which only our Works can render articulate and decisively discernible. Our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, *Know thyself*; till it be translated into this partially possible one, *Know what thou canst work at*” (126). Rather than learning to work, Teufelsdröckh suggests, one should work to learn.

Furthermore, the desire to work and to create is inherent in all people from the time of childhood, Teufelsdröckh suggests. In fact, we are all destined to work, each in different ways:

In all the sports of Children, were it only in their wanton breakages and defacements, you shall discern a creative instinct (*schaffenden Trieb*): the Mankin feels that he is a born Man, that his vocation is to Work. The choicest present you can make him is a Tool; be it knife or penguin, for construction or for destruction; either way it is for Work, for Change. In gregarious sports of skill or strength, the Boy trains himself to Cooperation, for war or peace, as governor or governed: the little Maid again, provident of her domestic destiny, takes with preference to Dolls. (71)

Carlyle's conservative social agenda becomes clear here, as he sets up differences between male and female, the governor and the governed. Everyone, though, is destined and responsible to do some work which will change the world around him. No one is without some kind of talent: "every being that can live can do something; this let him *do*" (150). However, the exceptionality of a man like Teufelsdröckh suggests that destiny is highly individualized. This suggests, then, a kind of hierarchy of work wherein all work is valued for what it offers to the worker himself, but there are some kinds of work which are inherently more valuable than others.

The value of the work of the exceptional man, especially the writer, is ultimately of the highest importance. The Editor asks, "And what work nobler than transplanting foreign Thought into the barren domestic soil; except indeed planting Thought of your own, which the fewest are privileged to do?" (62). Once again the uniqueness of Teufelsdröckh and his work are asserted here, as is their importance. To produce original thought that affects the lives of other men is the highest calling. Later the Editor compares the work of the writer to that of the priest: "The

WORD is well said to be omnipotent in this world; man, thereby divine, can create as by a *Fiat* [...] Higher task than that of Priesthood was allotted to no man: wert thou but the meanest in that sacred Hierarchy, is it not honour enough therein to spend and be spent?" (151). The capitalization of WORD may be a subtle allusion to the first chapter of the Gospel of John, where the word is equated with God himself, hence its omnipotence and creative power: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Here he suggests that it is through the use of the Word that man realizes his godly potential; hence the man who can use the word effectively is the most divine among men.

Such a reconsideration of work also redefines knowledge by suggesting that work and experience are better teachers than systematic education. In presenting these new definitions, *Sartor* further questions the meaning of what we know. The opening paragraph of the book considers the preponderance of "knowledge" in "our present advanced state of culture" (3), remarking with surprise that a systematic philosophy of clothes has yet to be written. He goes on to list various existing theories, including "Philosophies of Language, of History, of Pottery, of Apparitions, of Intoxicating Liquors" (3). This demonstrates Carlyle's sense of humor, as he is implying that much of the "knowledge" his culture has produced is in fact trivial or meaningless. In addition, though, he suggests that despite its seeming vastness, our understanding remains incomplete because it is so fundamentally based on the material and the logical. Referring specifically to two famous geologists, he laments that "what with the labours of our Werners and Huttons, what with the ardent genius of their disciples, it has come about that that now, to many a Royal Society, the Creation of a World is little more mysterious than the cooking of a Dumpling" (3). Here he contrasts the function of science with the function of knowledge; science seeks to explain the mysteries of the universe and hence eliminates wonder.

True knowledge, however, enhances wonder. This is once again a matter of vision; Teufelsdröckh will represent the distinction between those who look with wonder and those who do not. He says: “The man who cannot wonder, who does not habitually wonder (and worship), were he President of innumerable Royal Societies, and carried the whole *Mécanique Céleste* and *Hegel’s Philosophy*, and the epitome of all Laboratories and Observatories with their results, in his single head,—is but a Pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye. Let those who have Eyes look through him, then he may be useful” (54). Again, he redefines usefulness here, most importantly by suggesting that science, which is often considered a most productive discipline, in fact offers little to man unless he can continue to be mystified by the universe. The formal education that books and philosophies can provide is meaningless unless one has the ability to see beyond their “Arithmetical understanding” to a higher truth (170). In order to do this, one must move beyond the mechanical nature of systematic knowledge, and the method of construction of Teufelsdröckh’s book enacts this transition. The Editor describes the structure as natural or organic: “Our Professor’s method is not, in any case, that of common school Logic, where the truths all stand in a row, each holding by the skirts of the other; but at best that of practical Reason, proceeding by large Intuition over whole systematic groups and kingdoms; whereby we might say, a noble complexity, almost like that of Nature, reigns in his Philosophy, or spiritual picture of Nature: a mighty maze, yet, as faith whispers, not without a plan” (41). The knowledge the book holds must be derived by moving beyond traditional methods of intellectual comprehension; part of the challenge is for the reader to discern the plan or method behind the apparent chaos. The truest knowledge derives not from books themselves, but from what their readers create from them. Man’s experiences are as important to his education as traditional sources of knowledge are.

Indeed the education of Teufelsdröckh suggests that the acquisition of true knowledge is often perpetuated by man's own means rather than through the traditional mode of education. His real education comes not from his schooling but from his wanderings and sorrows, so that "it were not Argument that had taught him, but Experience" (42). This belief is in part what makes the biography such an important part of the educational purpose of the book itself; in order to understand the clothes-philosophy, one must understand the experiences, rather than the logical thought, which led to its development. Logic is concerned with the external, the material (i.e., clothing); true knowledge looks beyond such appearances to the essence of man. Herein lies the importance of Teufelsdröckh's vision. He asks, "To the eye of vulgar Logic [...] what is man? An omnivorous Biped that wears Breeches. To the eye of Pure Reason what is he? A Soul, a Spirit, and divine Apparition. [...] He feels; power has been given him to Know, to Believe; nay does not the spirit of Love, free in its celestial primeval brightness, even here, though but for moments, look through?" (51). While educated, logical thinkers may look at men and see their material circumstances, Teufelsdröckh sees their spiritual potential. This potential, interestingly, does not include the language of thinking or reasoning but of "knowing" and "believing." Indeed, in Carlyle's hierarchy this is the higher order of thought: "not our Logical, Mensurative faculty, but our Imaginative one is King over us" (167-68). The imagination produces true knowledge.

Teufelsdröckh's capacity to see such truths appears not to result from his formal education but to have flourished despite it; he develops true knowledge only when he indulges his own inherent curiosity. This too makes him unique among men. In explaining the hero's intellectual and spiritual superiority, he suggests that "[i]n our wild Seer, shaggy, unkempt, like a Baptist living on locusts and wild honey, there is an untutored energy, a silent as it were

unconscious strength, which, except in the higher walks of Literature, must be rare” (23). This inherent energy thrives in spite of being “untutored” or undirected, hence it is not distorted. He does not believe that he learned from his formal schooling, defining this experience as “the insignificant portion of my Education” of which “there need almost no notice be taken. I learned what others learn; and kept it stored by in a corner of my head, seeing as yet no manner of use in it” (79). From Gymnasium to University, his experience is uniformly lacking, and he criticizes the formal educational system for gulling the public with its presentation of false knowledge. When he begins to indulge his native instinct for learning, however, he is able to use the resources of the University to begin growing in knowledge and understanding. Distinguishing himself both from his fellow students and from the teachers of the University, he recalls that “from the chaos of that Library, I succeeded in fishing up more books perhaps than had been known to the very keepers thereof. The foundation of a Literary Life was hereby laid: I learned, on my own strength, to read fluently in almost all cultivated languages, on almost all subjects, and sciences” (88). This auto-didacticism represents a kind of turning point in Teufelsdröckh’s relationship with the universe and understanding of his place within it; at this point he begins to move beyond a mechanical view of the universe and develop the vision which will serve to shape his own philosophy.

Even more importantly, this experience teaches him the lesson which will be most valuable in his wanderings—he learns to rely on his own understanding rather than the perspectives of others. Describing even his school experiences as wanderings, the Editor declares, “thus in the destitution of the wild desert, does our young Ishmael acquire for himself the highest of all possessions, that of Self-help” (88). He has discovered that he cannot rely on a machine like the educational system to teach him. This lesson is reinforced by Herr Towgood,



Teufelsdröckh's only friend, who criticizes the system as it stands and encourages the hero to continue developing his own interpretation of the universe. He says, "But as for our Miseducation, make not bad worse; waste not the time yet ours, in trampling on thistles because they have yielded us no figs. *Frisch zu, Bruder!* Here are Books, and we have brains to read them; here is a whole Earth and a whole Heaven and we have eyes to look on them" (90). This suggests that part of the problem with formal education is that it relies on old knowledge that is no longer meaningful; what the new man must do is use his vision to re-interpret this old knowledge and reconcile it with his own original understanding of the universe to create a new and meaningful point of view.

With this new definition of knowledge, then, the hero is set to perform his primary function: not only to re-interpret his society but to change it. In fact, the Editor suggests that Teufelsdröckh's clothes-philosophy can enact the same change in its readers that his biography has shown occurring in himself. For its German readers, "the Book had in a high degree excited [them] to self-activity, which is the best effect of any book; that it had even operated changes in [their] way of thought; nay, that it promised to prove, as it were, the opening of a new mine-shaft, wherein the whole world of Speculation might henceforth dig to unknown depths" (22). This philosophy does something much more fundamental than teach its readers facts; it does not simplify or remove mystery from their world. Instead it opens their eyes to the universe by teaching new and more profound ways of thinking. Most importantly, it attempts to teach the same lesson that Teufelsdröckh learned about the value of self-reliance and autodidacticism. By enacting such a change in his readers Teufelsdröckh is fulfilling a kind of historical imperative, for Carlyle suggests that history is driven by change. The Professor avers, "For not Mankind only, but all that Mankind does or beholds, is in continual growth, re-gensis and self-perfecting

vitality. Cast forth thy Act, thy Word, into the ever-living, ever-working Universe: it is a seed-grain that cannot die; unnoticed to-day (says one) it will be found flourishing as a Banyan-grove (perhaps, alas, as a Hemlock-forest!) after a thousand years” (31). Change is the natural state of the universe, and knowledge is central to these acts of change. The transition is not always entirely positive, but it is necessary for the perpetuation of the universe.

Teufelsdröckh is himself a figure of change and hence his life becomes a kind of representative or example. The changes that are enacted within are emblematic of changes that will occur in the society around him. From his very beginning, he is described as a being in transition; the Editor asserts that “this Genesis of his can properly be nothing but an Exodus (or transit out of Invisibility into Visibility)” (63). Of course this implies mystical possibilities, that the infant Teufelsdröckh materialized from spirit, and the reference to Exodus foreshadows his physical and spiritual wanderings. But more importantly it suggests that he is a being without a discernible beginning, like the earlier referenced Melchizedek. Instead he appears to be in a constant state of flux; the very center of the book (both literally and figuratively) is his spiritual transition from the Everlasting No to the Everlasting Yea. Such a transition is inherently painful, as it requires a painful loss so that the old may be replaced with the new. The Editor describes the beginning of Teufelsdröckh’s most important transformation as a time not simply of potential but of crisis. He writes, “We behold him, through those dim years, in a state of crisis, of transition: his new Pilgrimings, and general solution into aimless Discontinuity, what is all this but a mad Fermentation; wherefrom, the fiercer it is, the clearer product will one day evolve itself? Such transitions are ever full of pain: thus the Eagle, when he moults, is sickly; and, to attain his new beak, must harshly dash off the old one upon rocks” (123). Not only must the old be lost, but the period of transition itself may seem to be useless at the time; when one is between

the old and the new, a unifying direction is not always apparent. The benefits of such change, however, become apparent even to Teufelsdröckh after he has passed through them. He must pass through spiritual destruction in order to learn the truth: “The Everlasting No had said: ‘Behold, thou art fatherless, outcast, and the Universe is mine (the Devil’s);’ to which my whole Me now made answer: ‘*I am not thine, but Free, and for ever hate thee! It is from this hour that I incline to date my Spiritual New-birth, or Baphometric Fire-baptism; perhaps I directly thereupon began to be a Man*’” (129). The passage to manhood or humanity is not a creation but a re-creation founded upon destruction, and Teufelsdröckh’s personal journey represents that of his society and history as well.

In fact, the hero is not only a representative of change but a catalyst for the enactment of this organic process. While the metaphor of the eagle moulting is used to describe Teufelsdröckh’s personal transformation, that of his society is represented by another bird: “Thus is Teufelsdröckh content that old sick Society should be deliberately burnt (alas! With quite another fuel than spicewood); in the faith that she is a Phoenix; and that a new heavenborn young one will rise out of her ashes!” (180). The old institutions must be destroyed in order for this rebirth to take place; society cannot be fixed any other way; such destruction is not the desire of the hero but is a historical imperative which he must help enact. The most important role of the great man in this process is not the destruction, however, but the re-creation of society. The outward signs by which man interprets the universe, what Teufelsdröckh calls “symbols,” eventually outgrow their temporal context even as men grow increasingly attached to them. Teufelsdröckh writes that “on the whole, as Time adds much to the sacredness of Symbols, so likewise in his progress he at length defaces, or even desecrates them; and Symbols, like all terrestrial Garments, wax old” (170). The apparently contradictory process by which these

symbols outgrow their appearance is a historical inevitability, hence their destruction becomes necessary. The hero (or “Poet”) is the man “who, Prometheus-like, can shape new Symbols, and bring new Fire from Heaven to fix it there” (170). The hero’s role, then, is to ensure that history’s course runs in the right direction; he helps re-create his society by re-creating the way man interprets the universe.

Finally, *Sartor Resartus* is a text of reconciliation and re-creation, both thematic and formal; the book addresses the oppositions inherent in Romanticism and Victorianism, radical individuality and collective humanity, individual biography and social history, the divinity of man (spirituality) and his ultimate human nature (materialism), and even perhaps masculinity and femininity. These contradictions are represented in part by the structure and themes of the book itself (and Carlyle’s attempt to reconcile them) and in part by the heroic and complicated central figure of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. Most importantly, though, the book reconsiders the definition of individuality by presenting the great man as a figure whose ultimate goal is a kind of service to mankind. The Carlylean hero serves not himself or even art; instead he serves humanity through the creation and teaching of new ideas and the perpetuation of the historical imperative for change.

This new individuality makes Carlylean thought of interest to the women writers who would follow him in the later nineteenth century. For, after all, most women’s roles have traditionally been defined by duty to others. But what about women who see themselves as exceptional, who believe that their calling is to a greater or broader duty than that which home and family demands? Many women who see themselves as exceptional recognize that their duty lies not simply to those closest to them but to the universe. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for example, does not suggest that any woman can be a poet like Aurora Leigh—in fact, the text is

filled with women who are specifically unfit for this role. Similarly, Edna Earl in *St. Elmo*, Jo March in *Little Women*, and Avis Dobell in *The Story of Avis* stand apart from their fellow women in their belief that they serve a calling which takes them beyond the realm of the domestic and into a broader sphere. For these women—these exceptional individuals whose vocation differs from that of their peers—Carlyle’s definition of the individual and the hero would resonate strongly, and the subsequent chapters will show that Barrett Browning, Evans, Alcott, and Phelps may be consciously or unconsciously responding to this definition. While Carlyle worked to create the new man, these later writers also sought to create something new, an original species of womanhood. If the life of a fictional “great man” can teach us new truths, these women ask, why can’t the lives of “great women” do the same?

## CHAPTER 3

“THE ONLY TRUTH-TELLERS NOW LEFT TO GOD”: *AURORA LEIGH* AND THE  
CARLYLEAN TRUE POET

Thomas Carlyle and Elizabeth Barrett Browning described *Sartor Resartus* and *Aurora Leigh*, respectively, as works that were expansive as well as philosophically and personally revelatory. In her dedication to John Kenyon, Barrett Browning wrote that *Aurora Leigh* is “the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered” (4). Barrett Browning also suggested that she has revealed herself through the novel-poem, as she writes in a letter to Anna Jameson: “I mean that when you have read my new book, you put away all my other poems or most of them, and know me only by the new [. . .] I have put much of myself into it—I mean to say, of my soul, my thoughts, emotions, opinions; in other respects, there is not a personal line, of course” (*Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 2: 228). Here Barrett Browning seems to suggest that *Aurora Leigh* is a highly personal text at the same that that she seeks to resist a strict autobiographical reading of it. The broad characterization of the text, which she calls “a sort of poetic art-novel” speaks to the issue of genre but also to a sense of thematic universality and echoes Carlyle’s description of *Sartor Resartus*. In his letter to James Fraser of 27 May 1833, Carlyle writes: “I used to characterize it briefly as a kind of ‘Satirical Extravaganza on Things in General’; it contains more of my opinions on Art, Politics, Religion, Heaven Earth and Air, than all the things I have yet written” (*Sartor Resartus* 227-28). Both of these descriptions reveal a desire to create universal art from individual ideas and suggest that the poet/artist can use his or her ideas to speak to something broader. Both writers claim that the opinions therein are their own, but they simultaneously suggest that their work

transcends the simply personal. Most importantly, both writers—Carlyle near the beginning of his career and Barrett Browning near the end of hers—recognize that they are venturing into uncharted literary territory. For Barrett Browning, that territory will be closely connected to her gender identity.

In 1965, Alethea Hayter observed: “[I]t was never possible for critics to disentangle Mrs. [Elizabeth Barrett] Browning from her sex” (5). This assessment of the critical complications inherent in locating Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry within a tradition that accounts for both her gender and talent anticipates the debates that would follow the recovery of *Aurora Leigh* in the late 1970’s. Clearly both the poet and the protagonist of her 1856 novel-poem were aware of the limitations imposed upon a woman who wrote, but at the same time evidence exists to raise significant doubts as to whether Barrett Browning or her text can be labeled a “feminist” by even the broadest modern definition.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, most of the critical attention to the poem has come from feminist critics, and their discussions have frequently considered the extent to which Elizabeth Barrett Browning considered herself to be part of any poetic or literary tradition and whether she perceived the tradition she sought to enter as predominantly masculine or feminine.

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<sup>1</sup> Critics have debated this question at great length and have been able to support arguments that read Barrett Browning as both sympathetic to feminism and hostile to it. Ellen Moers (1977) is perhaps the most emphatic, asserting that *Aurora Leigh* is “the feminist poem” (40). Cora Kaplan (1978) reads the novel-poem largely in the terms of the second-wave feminism of her own time, arguing that the novel’s “modern preoccupation is whether marriage itself is a good thing, especially for women with a vocation” (6). Similarly, the Marxist Feminist Literature Collective (1978) recognizes the “fiery Romantic individualism” evident in *Aurora Leigh* “through a mode of discourse which is only intermittently homologous with the political feminism of the day, but consistently hostile to existing patriarchal discourses and institutions” (201). Angela Leighton (1986) sees Barrett Browning’s feminism in her method rather than her politics, arguing that her “‘feminist’ purpose is rooted, not so much in her actual social message, as in her commitment to *write*, as a woman, against the odds of tradition and of continuing male prejudice” (8-9). Deborah Byrd (1990) traces Barrett Browning’s career to show that she grew into a feminism, arguing that by the time she was writing *Aurora Leigh* she had evolved into a feminist poet less in an overtly political sense than in an identification with and concern for women, part of a tradition “in which authors attempt to define the rights and duties of the Christian woman, portray the struggles and accomplishments of women artists, evaluate heterosexual relationships, depict the benefits of sisterhood, examine the process of female socialization, and ponder the degree to which women do and should participate in the economic and political life of the country” (209). The scholar most critical of such views is Deirdre David (1987), who argues that “despite the thematic boldness, the daring brutality, and the dauntless references to female sexuality, *Aurora Leigh* is a strongly conservative poem” (*Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* 114).

I do not mean to suggest that gender should be ignored in reading Barrett Browning's work, but instead to recommend that we examine how the poet herself saw her work and where she sought to place *Aurora Leigh* in literary history. For though the tradition of women writers was important and influential for Barrett Browning, she also, it seems, consciously sought to "disentangle herself from her sex," as she recognized the limitations it necessarily imposed (Hayter 5). She also, however, realized that masculine literary tradition was, by definition, closed to her. What ultimately was left for her—and she realizes this most fully in *Aurora Leigh*—was effectively to imagine a broader poetic tradition, one in which the poet is not constrained by the limitations of gender. She would develop this ideal figure in part by responding to Thomas Carlyle's idea of the true poet, as imagined in the figure of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, and by considering what would happen should a woman be called to this role.

While any reading that places Barrett Browning in conversation with Thomas Carlyle will inevitably turn its attention away from a discussion of feminist literary tradition, I want to begin this discussion by acknowledging the work that emphasizes the vocation of the female poet specifically; this critical history makes my reading both possible and necessary. Barrett Browning was struck by the idea that no woman had yet been called to fulfill the role of true poet, and she lamented the lack of a poetic tradition that would make room for this figure. As part of an epistolary debate regarding one of his reviews of her work, she famously wrote to Henry F. Chorley in 1845:

The divine breath which seemed to come and go, and, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists—why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is



not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers! (*Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1:232)

These words appear to express the lament of a woman who sees herself as unfortunately alone in a poetic world that has been traditionally and continues to be overwhelmingly male-dominated and male-oriented. Virginia Blain argues that literary history, which has been written from a staunchly masculinist perspective, deprives women of the knowledge of their literary forebears by mis-representing the truth. She claims that “Barrett Browning had more access than she knew or could recognize, to her literary foremothers. Her perception that she was alone was a mis-perception, merely a mistaken effect combined of foreshortened perspective, ignorance of her female heritage and a patriarchal viewpoint derived, ironically, from her privileged education” (2). The distinction Blain suggests is an important one, as it suggests that the problem is not that women did not write, but that literary tradition did not recognize them and hence perpetuated the belief that women were not important to the history of letters. Furthermore, the better a woman’s traditional education, the more separated she would likely feel from any historically feminine influence. In part as a result of this education, then, Barrett Browning sought inspiration from many male-authored texts in writing *Aurora Leigh*, as several critics have noted.<sup>2</sup>

The extent to which a male literary tradition was the central influence on *Aurora Leigh*—and the ways in which she responded to that influence—have been productive subjects of scholarly debate. Indeed, some critics have suggested that Barrett Browning may have consciously adopted a masculinist perspective even as she was aware of its inherent biases against her sex. For example, Dorothy Mermin argues that the poet’s perspective on gender

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Sarah Annes Brown traces thematic and structural echoes of *Paradise Lost* in *Aurora Leigh*. Chris VandenBossche and Laura Haigwood read *Aurora Leigh* as a Victorian revision of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. Kathleen Blake also argues that Barrett Browning rewrites *The Prelude* with an eye to regendering the poem, exploring the different ways in which the male and female poet experience love. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor examine Barrett Browning’s response to Tennyson’s *The Princess*.

developed over time and that “in her most ambitious early writing she assumed the position of a man among men, while female voices and issues pressed to the fore in small, unfinished, or unpublished works. Then she began covertly to inspect and dismantle the barriers set in her path by gender” (3). Barbara Gelpi similarly notes the ambivalence with which both Aurora Leigh and her creator view their own womanhood, arguing that Barrett Browning “saw women’s central problem as the antifeminine biases they had themselves internalized” (36). She asserts that the poem’s metaphorical language reveals a subplot of the poem whereby Barrett Browning “is also describing the process by which she herself threw off those ‘mind-forg’d manacles” (36). Alice Falk also believes that Barrett Browning’s education is central to her relationship with patriarchy, but she contends that she is able to manipulate her knowledge of classical tradition for her own ends. Her continuing interest in Greek and the classical legacy—and that of her heroine, Falk argues—shows that Barrett Browning associates the authority to write with male tradition. Having mastered this tradition, she has then attained the authority to use it to her own ends and speak with her own voice; hence “even as she turns to the present as the proper sphere of her poetry, she continues to draw on the authority gained by having both mastered this male tradition so important to the forefathers of nineteenth-century poetry and reshaped it to her own satisfaction” (85). So by affording Aurora Leigh a classical education, Barrett Browning also grants her the authority to change that tradition. Deirdre David has made the strongest claim for Barrett Browning’s investment in a masculinist intellectual and literary tradition. She argues that the poet does not manipulate the tradition but instead that her work serves it. She claims that Barrett Browning “feeling the absence of a sustaining female literary tradition [...] affiliated herself with a corpus of male poets” (*Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* 97-98). Furthermore, she asserts that “in *Aurora Leigh* female imagery is employed to show that the ‘art’

of the woman poet performs a ‘service’ for a patriarchal vision of the apocalypse. Woman’s talent is made the attendance of conservative male ideals” (*Intellectual Women* 97).

That *Aurora Leigh* was inspired by and responded to the works of male poets who preceded her is indisputable, but this does not mean that Barrett Browning was unaware of women who wrote. It is important to recognize the difference between the absence of women writers and the absence of a *tradition* of women’s poetry. For Barrett Browning, though she did not believe that she was preceded by a tradition of women’s poetry, did have access to the work of many women writers. An earlier passage in her letter to Chorley reveals the poet’s admiration for some of the poems of Joanna Baillie, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, and Felicia Hemans, and critics have noted the influence of these poets on her work.<sup>3</sup> The poet was also a voracious reader of novels from a young age, many of which were written by women.<sup>4</sup> The problem for Barrett Browning, then, is not the absence of women’s writing; she knows that other women have preceded her. The problem is that she does not wish to see herself as a typical “woman” writer; a shared gender identity does not provide enough common ground for her to feel a part of their legacy even as—or perhaps because—she realizes that she is, as a woman, doomed to work within a tradition of writing that is overly and overtly feminine and that is continuously being erased by a masculinist tradition. As Blain has noted, “Women writers had constantly to reinvent not only themselves but their place in the flow of time” (2). This suggests that women’s writing was necessarily always concerned with originality, for their access to a history in which

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<sup>3</sup> Linda H. Peterson reads *Aurora Leigh* as modeled in part on the life of Letitia Landon and the first four books as a rewriting of *A History of the Lyre* (“Rewriting *A History of the Lyre*” and *Traditions of Victorian Women’s Autobiography* 109-45). Margot K. Louis similarly argues that Barrett Browning responds to the sentimental tradition of Landon and Hemans by critiquing the doctrine of separate spheres and the concept of privacy, depicting poetry as both work and vocation, and essentially combining the sentimental and epic traditions.

<sup>4</sup> Numerous critics have noted *Aurora Leigh*’s debt to the works of women novelists, most notably Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne*, George Sand’s *Consuelo*, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. See Ellen Moers (200-07), Cora Kaplan (17-24), Ellen Peel and Nanora Sweet, Linda M. Lewis (*Germaine de Staël, George Sand, and the Victorian Woman Artist* 99-133), and Julia Bolton Holloway.

they could participate was constantly being denied. What results is the kind of ambivalence toward women's literary history that Barrett Browning expresses about the writers who have preceded her. Margot Louis describes this conflict using a familial metaphor:

Such poets as Felicia Hemans and L. E. L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) stand in a relation to Barrett Browning which resembles the unsentimental aunt's relation to Aurora in Book 1 of *Aurora Leigh*: there is more conflict than sympathy in the relationship; the older woman represents a version of femininity which the younger must at all costs resist; and yet the older woman leaves the younger a legacy which is both narrow and enabling, an essential basis for the young poet's future achievement. (1)

While she feels compelled to honor the feminine legacy that precedes her, she finds that she does not seek to be a part of it. Hence both Barrett Browning and her protagonist, Aurora Leigh, must grapple with a history that seems essentially contradictory: the fact that women have dared to write poetry at all must inspire them, but they find themselves questioning whether a woman has yet to fulfill the role of the true poet.

This distinction of the "true poet" is in many ways the crux of the argument this chapter will present, as it is through this ideal that Aurora Leigh will ultimately lay claim to new literary territory. This concept represents the distinction for Barrett Browning between women who have written before her and the ideal (though apparently non-existent) women whose legacy she would seek to inherit. The grandmother that she lacks is not simply a woman who writes but one who could be called a true poet. In *Aurora Leigh* she will develop her idea of the true poet as a woman, but she does not suggest that *any* woman—or any man, for that matter—can be a true poet. Only an exceptional woman (like Aurora Leigh) is called to such a duty. While many

critics have quoted her protest about the lack of “grandmothers,” few have considered a later passage in the same letter to Mr. Chorley which reveals Barrett Browning’s definition of the “true poet.” She writes:

[I]s not the poet a different man from the cleverest versifier, and is not well for the world to be taught the difference? The divineness of poetry is far more to me than either pride of sex or personal pride, and, though willing to acknowledge the lowest breath of the inspiration, I cannot the ‘powder and patch.’ As powder and patch I may, but not as poetry. And though I in turn may suffer for this myself—though I too (*anch’ io*) may be turned out of ‘Arcadia,’ and told that I am not a poet, still, I should be content, I hope, that the divineness of poetry be proved in my humanness, rather than lowered to my uses. (*Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1:232)

This reveals that Barrett Browning considers the true poet a kind of transcendental figure: he or she is a teacher who is both human and divinely inspired. More importantly, the true poet is a figure who, though she calls him a man, transcends the external limitations of gender, for ultimately the poet’s humanness is ultimately more important than gender. It is, after all, the poet’s voice and not manhood that will prove the “divineness of poetry.” Finally, the poet is not simply one who writes but one who has a calling and a sense of the divinity of poetry. If poetry is a divine vocation, she seems to ask, why can’t women—as human beings within whom the divine dwells—be among the called?

The truth of literary history, as Barrett Browning knows, is that even men who seek to declare themselves as true poets must struggle to establish a legitimate claim to that title, while women who write will face greater scrutiny, even questioning themselves. Her letter reveals her

fear that because she is a woman she will not be considered a poet, even as she recognizes that poetry is greater than distinctions of sex or personality. This fear is one that Aurora Leigh will have to face as well. Early in the book Aurora asks:

Am I such indeed? The name  
Is royal, and to sign it like a queen,  
Is what I dare not, -though some royal blood  
Would seem to tingle in me now and then,  
With sense of power and ache, - with imposthumes  
And manias usual to the race. Howbeit  
I dare not: 'tis too easy to go mad  
And ape a Bourbon in a crowd of straws;  
The thing's too common. (I, 933-41)

The metaphor of bloodline and familial relation as Aurora Leigh perceives her poetic heritage seems actually to anticipate the argument Harold Bloom would make in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Aurora sees “intra-poetic relationships as parallels of family romance” (8), but unlike male poets she has to question her very place within the bloodline. She suggests that the lineage of poets is a royal one, and hence that the true poet is born, not made. In her philosophy, those who are called to poetry possess an innate ability to see the world as a poet; what must be crafted are the development and expression of these insights. Moreover, as Barrett Browning had done in her letter to Chorley, Aurora distinguishes between those who simply make rhymes and the true poet, lamenting the fact that many have pretended to fulfill the role. She reflects that basically anyone can “sow [his] wild oats in tame verse” but that the exceptions are those who ultimately come closer to the truth. She muses, “Alas, near all the birds / Will sing at dawn, - and yet we do not

take / The chaffering swallow for the holy lark” (I, 951-53). This metaphor suggests that the voice of the true poet is not only distinct but is also holy; it is closest to the heavens and hence to the truth as well. Moreover, the voice of the true poet is unmistakable; it cannot be confused with that of the simple versifier. The test will be whether a woman can sing with that voice.

The proof of the true poet, then, will be in her verses. If Barrett Browning can create in *Aurora Leigh* a poem that speaks truth—as well as creating a truth-teller in the female protagonist—she will have succeeded in fulfilling this role. While both Barrett Browning and her protagonist recognize that their relationship to literary tradition is complicated by the fact of their gender, they seek to answer the vocation of the true poet. In order to do so they cannot just engage in a tradition that already exists, but they have to create a tradition that will make a place for them. Blain recognizes that Barrett Browning is aware of her unique role, noting her “consciousness of being part of the formation of a new tradition” (2). The creation of this tradition is a conscious effort, and it is a challenge which Aurora accepts as the burden not just of being a woman but of being the true poet. At the same time, all poets, she believes, must contend with the voices of the past in their own ways—in constructing a new legacy she is making a place not just for the woman who writes but for the true woman poet. Aurora describes some of her early experiments with poetry as false copies:

And so, like most young poets, in a flush  
Of individual life I poured myself  
Along the veins of others, and achieved  
Mere lifeless imitations of live verse,  
And made the living answer for the dead,  
Profaning nature. (I, 971-76)

Again Aurora is in the position of not just women poets but of all poets. The temptation is to imitate the past because it is so highly revered, but this is not telling the truth. While the past contains the truth, true poetry makes that truth new, original, and individual. She cannot create living (or true) poetry by imitating what has gone before; as the rest of the poem shows, she will have to experience life in order to write verse that is vital.

The question that has remained unanswered for Aurora—and the question that ultimately drives the book—is whether or not a woman can actually create this kind of poetry. Can a woman speak the truth? Herein lies what Gilbert and Gubar famously refer to as “‘anxiety of authorship’—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (49). Certainly Aurora’s fears about whether the royal blood of poetic lineage courses through her veins reveal this anxiety, but she responds to that anxiety not with silence but by showing that the poetic vocation may actually be heard by a woman and by telling the story of a woman who chooses to answer that call. Moreover, she answers the call not merely despite but because of the fact that she is alone; her uniqueness is actually central to her success. After all, in the Romantic tradition to be alone is ultimately seen as productive: isolation is the ideal posture of the Romantic poet. The challenge in telling the story of Aurora Leigh, then, is twofold: first, she must dare to imagine the true woman poet, and second, she must demonstrate that the limitations placed on her poetic creativity are external, and that while she will be suspect for daring to be a woman who writes poetry, she also has the capability and the responsibility to honor the divinity of poetry. Ultimately, through *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning will explore the possibility of what a feminine precursor may be. Here is where she begins to carve her niche, as she suggests not merely a sense of disconnection from women’s literary history but more importantly a



recognition of the distinction that could be achieved by the woman who could first fill the role of the “true poet,” a role that she believed would ultimately transcend gender. Indeed, rather than a detriment it seems possible that Barrett Browning sees her detachment from her female literary forebears as an opportunity, as it allows her to see herself doing something new.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter contends that as Barrett Browning’s poetry progressed so too did her idea of the true poet’s gender. Barrett Browning did not develop her definition of the true poet alone but did so largely in response to Thomas Carlyle’s idea of the poet as a new man, which he develops in *Sartor Resartus*. Numerous critics have recognized that Carlylean thought exerted a major influence on Barrett Browning’s work.<sup>6</sup> Indeed a great deal of evidence exists in Barrett Browning’s correspondence to demonstrate the level of her engagement with his ideas. Barrett Browning assigns the name of poet to Carlyle himself (apparently responding to *Past and*

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<sup>5</sup> Several critics have believed not only that her uniqueness afforded the young poet a kind of freedom but that she was aware of this freedom and the possibility that she would usher in a new poetic legacy. Oddly enough, Coventry Patmore may have marked the beginning of this realization, critiquing *Aurora Leigh* because “The development of her powers as a poetess is elaborately depicted; but as Mrs. Browning is herself almost the only modern example of such development, the story is uninteresting from its very singularity” (454). What Patmore did not realize (and likely would not have wished to) is that Mrs. Browning’s “singularity” may actually have marked a genesis in women’s poetry. Though feminists have been bemused by this criticism (and rightly so), Patmore unwittingly offers a valuable insight into the project of the book. In “Genre and Gender,” Dorothy Mermin argues that an apparent lack of tradition may actually place Barrett Browning in a fortunate position: “[F]or women poets there was no lost heroic age to be regretted, no female tradition that could make a modern woman’s poetry look inadequate or out of place” (8-9). In her book-length study of Barrett Browning’s poetry, Mermin expands her discussion to argue that Barrett Browning does in fact create a new poetry and hence becomes the literary “grandmother” figure that she herself lacked (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*). DeLuise and Timko read this as a development that can be traced through Barrett Browning’s poetry, arguing that *Aurora Leigh* as a character represents a culmination of her philosophy of the poet-genius as a woman: “Barrett Browning, who at first cannot conceive of a woman speaker in the role of poet-genius, gradually assigns that role to a female speaker and poet-genius in a number of ways which overlap incrementally, until in *Aurora Leigh* the role is unconditionally given to a woman” (93).

<sup>6</sup> In examining Carlyle’s influence on *Aurora Leigh*, critics have paid particular attention to Barrett Browning’s use of the “Heroes” lectures and her appropriation of the definitions of the modern hero espoused therein. Most notably, Holly Laird has argued that the character of *Aurora Leigh* represents “a revised version of Carlyle’s theory, widely held by others of this period, of the modern hero as a man of letters” (355). Furthermore, she demonstrates how Barrett Browning develops this theory in order to construct a feminist aesthetic that combines epic poetry and philosophy and accepts the “Carlylian vision of the coexistence of antagonistic possibilities,” extending this vision to include gender (356). Cheri Larsen Hoeckley notes *Aurora Leigh*’s ambivalence toward the prospect of writing for financial gain (though she ultimately does acknowledge the financial realities of the writer’s life), suggesting that Barrett Browning responds to Carlyle’s refusal in “The Hero as Man of Letters” to “describe the process [of writing] as an economic exchange” (137). All of these considerations appear within the context of a larger argument; aside from Laird, no critic has yet devoted even the entirety of an article to Carlyle’s influence on *Aurora Leigh*.

*Present*) in her essay prepared for Richard Hengist Horne's *A Spirit of the Age*: "he is so poetical as to be philosophical in essence when treating of things" (399). She goes on to argue that he is a poet in his insight, his mode of argument, and his means of expression. Elsewhere she calls him "a poet unaware of himself; all but the sense of music" (*Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett* 1:25). In her letter to Robert Browning of 27 Feb. 1845, she expands upon this, revealing once again her notion of the true poet and more specifically addressing the ways in which Carlyle fills that role:

the great teacher of the age, Carlyle, who is also yours and mine. He fills the office of a poet—does he not?—by analyzing humanity back into its elements, to the destruction of the conventions of the hour. That is—strictly speaking—the office of the poet, is it not?—and he discharges it fully, and with a wider intelligibility perhaps as far as the contemporary period is concerned, than if he did forthwith "burst into a song." (*Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, 1: 30)

In addition to the profoundly human nature of the poet himself and the didactic purpose with which he is charged, she praises the poet who destroys convention, i.e., who creates something new. The ideal Carlyle established, then, becomes a kind of invitation for Barrett Browning to destroy convention as well.

*Sartor Resartus* both philosophizes about the role of the poet-hero and narrates his development, and in the figure of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh Carlyle creates a character with whom the burgeoning woman poet could identify: the original individual. Teufelsdröckh stands outside tradition in nearly every way, "a quite new human Individuality" (8). The function of his originality is not self-serving, however; his duty is to show the world a new way of living, which

begins with a new way of knowing. Teufelsdröckh's project, the clothes-philosophy, is not itself a poem, but it illuminates a new field of knowledge with a "poetic vigour" (22). The Editor, who narrates the book's opening chapters and frames the revelation of Teufelsdröckh's character and philosophy, demonstrates a skeptical view of the state of learning at the present time. The opening lines of the book suggest that the preponderance of knowledge in the modern age does not always yield benefits; he notes how

our present advanced state of culture, and how the Torch of Science has now been brandished and borne about, with more or less effect, for five thousand years and upwards; how, in these times especially, not only the Torch still burns, and perhaps more fiercely than ever, but innumerable Rush-lights and Sulphur-matches, kindled thereat, are also glancing in every direction, so that not the smallest cranny or doghole in Nature or Art can remain unilluminated. (3)

While at first glance this description may appear to extol the progress of knowledge in the current age, the subtext laments a time in which Science (the term used here to refer to knowledge as a whole) has outpaced understanding and hence has become meaningless. Science may have illuminated all to us, but it has not helped us to make sense of what we see. All of this is a set-up for a kind of Carlylean joke, the punch line being that in spite of all that has been added to human knowledge, nothing important has yet been written about clothes; hence the time is right for the innovative work of Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. While it is a joke, that does not invalidate the Carlylean premise: the artist/thinker's task is to find an intellectual space in which to create something new.

The opening lines of *Aurora Leigh* echo the Editor's words, as the young speaker considers creating something new in a world that has produced so much knowledge. She writes,

“Of writing many books there is no end” (I, 1), which suggests the struggle the writer faces in creating but also may be a reflection upon the infinite possibilities of human knowledge and understanding. Or if we read the word “end” to mean “purpose,” then the Carlylean subtext is even clearer: many of the books that are written ultimately contribute nothing. So while the possibilities are vast, the meaningful contributions to human understanding are few. The poet, then, must not only find the intellectual space for her ideas, but she must also fill that space with something meaningful and—most importantly—something new. Aurora believes that part of her task is to create an entirely new subject for poetry. In Book V, which is a meditation on the role of the poet in her age, she contends:

Nay, if there's room for poets in this world  
 A little overgrown, (I think there is)  
 Their sole work is to represent the age,  
 Their age, not Charlemagne's—this live, throbbing age,  
 That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires [...] (200-04)

She reconceptualizes what comprises the matter of poetry. While most will argue that the heroic can be found only in the past, she contends that the poet is uniquely able to discern the drama of her own age and locate the heroic within it. And in so doing she can teach her readers a new way of understanding the world that is most immediate to them. Fulfilling this vocation requires a unique poetic vision, and the true poet enters the world with this vision and the responsibility to develop it.

Barrett Browning calls this unique perspective “double vision,” and it derives from a Carlylean view of history. This ability to see and to understand the past, present, and future in a way that the ordinary man cannot is one of the keys to the Carlylean poet's exceptionality. The

poet should be able to reconcile distance and closeness and should be able to see the present and the future as clearly as he can see the past. The relationship between the double vision of the poet and history represents one of the most complicated parts of Carlyle's philosophy of art and heroism; the Carlylean poet must have a keen understanding of the past in order to act as a true prophet. Double vision is not simply the ability to see the past, present and future, but it is also characterized by a unique capacity for interpretation. In "On History" (1830), Carlyle reflects on this capacity and the nature of history:

in that complex Manuscript, covered over with formless inextricably-entangled unknown characters,—nay, which is a *Palimpsest*, and had once prophetic writing, still dimly legible there,—some letters, some words, may be deciphered; and if no complete Philosophy, here and there an intelligible precept, available in practice, be gathered: well understanding, in the mean while, that it is only a little portion we have deciphered; that much still remains to be interpreted; that History is a real Prophetic Manuscript, and can be fully interpreted by no man. (89-90)

While no man can fully interpret and understand history, the true poet's vision does offer greater insight that will show him glimpses of the truth. Moreover, this view suggests that history is a process of interactions between the past, present, and future, requiring constant interpretation. In order to understand the present, the poet must look to and understand the past, but he must also break convention and be original and new.

While other human beings look but do not truly see, the poet will be able to use his vision to create understanding because he sees men in the context of history. Echoing the words of *Hamlet*, the Editor in *Sartor Resartus* writes, "we are creatures that look before and after: the more surprising that we do not look round a little, and see what is passing under our very eyes"

(4). Although Carlyle's tongue is most likely firmly planted in cheek as he argues for the importance of a clothes-philosophy (made clear by the fact that much of the philosophy in the book has little to do with clothes in any literal sense), the poet's vision is a serious matter. Teufelsdröckh can see in this way partly because he is more spirit than flesh; he is closer to God than other men are. In fact, he is a mystical figure: "Wits spoke of him as if he were a kind of Melchizedek, without father or mother of any kind; sometimes, with reference to his great historic and statistic knowledge, and the vivid way he had of expressing himself like an eye-witness of distant transactions and scenes, they called him the *Ewige Jude*, or as we say, Wandering Jew" (14). The Melchizedek is a priest figure who appears in both the Old and New Testaments, and it always remains unclear whether he is a man or a spirit though his origin is clearly divine.<sup>7</sup> His supposed ability to move fluidly through boundaries of time and space places Teufelsdröckh in a tradition of spiritual knowers or priests that includes Christ himself. As such he is uniquely able to divine the truth.

The truth is, for Carlyle, a universal and the ideal end of all knowledge, and the poet, as a figure who is close to God, is humanity's key to learning this truth. Teufelsdröckh's biography recounts his journey to the truth (figured as "The Everlasting Yea"), and it demonstrates how he recognizes his unique ability to find this truth and reveal it to men. He is figuratively above other men, and the "speculum or watch-tower" (16) in which he resides makes this hierarchy visible. He says of his apartment, "I see it all; for, except the Schlosskirche weathercock, no biped stands so high" (16). He has physically set himself above and apart from all other men, showing that the true poet is closer to God. At the same time, he is still a part of humanity; Teufelsdröckh's lofty dwelling represents this liminal space because it affords him proximity to

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<sup>7</sup> Carlyle's language directly echoes that of Hebrews 7:3: "Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, not end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually."

the heavens and a clear view of humanity. Its great height affords him to exercise his unique vision; looking down, he asks his listener, “[t]hat living flood, pouring through these streets, of all qualities and ages, knowest thou whence it is coming, whither it is going? Friend, thou seest here a living link in that Tissue of History, which inweaves all Being: watch well, or it will be past thee, and seen no more” (17). When he looks at these men he does not see simply their temporal condition, but he sees them in the broader context of the human condition. As he describes it here, history is elusive precisely because so few can even see the present clearly. And because they cannot truly see, they do not understand how they are connected to a larger humanity and the scheme of historical time. Teufelsdröckh is both a part of and separate from humanity, so he can create something new in a world where knowledge has become meaningless. Only he can see the truth of the past and the present, which is ultimately the same. The truth does not change because it is universal and it comes from God, not man, and the poet’s proximity to both God and man positions him to see this truth.

Aurora Leigh similarly believes in the divinely inspired nature of truth and in the poet’s unique ability to discern it. Upon discovering the poets, she calls them

the only truth-tellers now left to God,  
 The only speakers of essential truth,  
 Opposed to relative, comparative,  
 And temporal truths. (I, 859-62)

The absolute truth, which is given to man from God through the poet, is a spiritual one, and the real work of man is to seek that truth. When “common men” become too engaged with their material labor, the poet reminds them: “This is soul, / This is life, this word is being said in heaven, / Here’s God down on us! what are you about?” (I, 874-76). By reminding them of the

constant presence of God, Aurora believes, she urges them to answer the Carlylean imperative to do meaningful work. She, like Teufelsdröckh, even physically positions herself high above others. Early in her career she lives in a chamber “up three flights of stairs / Not far from being as steep as some larks climb” (III, 158-59). Later, in Italy, she finds a house on the hill, which she describes as “a tower which keeps / A post of double-observation o’er / That valley of Arno” (VII, 516-17). Her tower does not only allow her to look down, but it also brings her closer to God. She can see the beauty of the valley below, but also “No sun could die nor yet be born unseen / By dwellers at my villa: morn and even / Were magnified before us” (VII, 524-26). While the height of her dwelling and its isolation mirror Teufelsdröckh’s and suggests proximity to the heavens, this passage suggests that she is also brought closer to God because she is closer to Nature. She too puts herself in a position between heaven and earth, where she can look to God and to man.

While the relationship between the poet and God offers great possibility, it also confers a great responsibility. Because he is the only one capable of seeing the divine truth, the poet stands in a different relation to God than most men do. Part of her mission, then, is to mediate between God and man and to demonstrate the presence of the divine in the world. Teufelsdröckh describes the figure as a kind of medium “to whom the Highest has descended, and the Lowest has mounted up; who is the equal and kindly brother of all” (52). The poet must elevate men to God while bringing the divine to a human level, showing man the divine within himself, the “godlike that is in Man” (146). Again he must employ his double vision; he must simultaneously be looking up to heaven and down to earth, and he must be able to see the divine and the earthly at the same time. Teufelsdröckh mourns the state of Science which seeks to replace wonder with “mensuration and numeration” (53), not because he does not believe in the practice of Science



but because he fears that reason without wonder endangers the condition of the human soul. Instead his ideal is to combine the two, for “Thought without Reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous” (53). Truth lies somewhere between the extremes of logic and faith, and the poet must negotiate that middle ground. He stands in as a kind of representative figure, and as “sages and martyrs, the Poet and the Priest, in all time, have spoken and suffered” (146), so too must Teufelsdröckh suffer to bring his message to men.

Aurora Leigh also takes on this responsibility, using her vision to demonstrate the closeness of man to God. She particularly focuses on the presence of the divine in nature as a way of seeing the heavenly on earth. She sees that

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,  
And daub their natural faces unaware  
More and more from the first similitude. (VII, 821-26)

As we have moved farther away from the creation of humanity, she believes, most have lost a sense of their closeness to God, becoming less aware that humans were made in His image. The true poet is that exceptional being who recognizes the presence of God in nature and man and expresses that truth to other men; this is how, Aurora believes, human lives are ultimately improved in a meaningful way. If all men could see the world as the poet does, “Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings, / And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree, / And even his very body as a man” (VII, 862-64). Seeing the divine in nature will help men to see the divine in themselves and will teach them the reverence that Teufelsdröckh encourages. The poet,

then, must teach others to look at the world with wonder and hence to understand the divine; ideally she can teach others to make use of their capacity for double vision. The vastness of this task is not lost on Aurora, and she also recognizes that her role comes with suffering. She laments the “sorrowful great gift / Conferred on poets, of a twofold life, / When one life has been found enough for pain!” (V, 380-83). As a representative figure, the poet must take on the pain of both the divine and the human.

The poet is not merely a suffering figure, however; the role also offers freedom. It is a freedom tempered by the burden of the vocation, but it also connects the poet to humanity in a larger sense. In relation to other human beings, as already discussed, the poet acts as a kind of medium. But in a broader historical sense, the poet’s role provides a connection to all the great seers who preceded and follow him. This relationship to history offers an individuality that is much larger than humanity alone allows, and the poet is thereby granted a profound freedom. This is a liberty not to pursue one’s desires or happiness, but to grow closer to the truth through a connection to God, for through “the Godlike that is in Man [...] only has he Strength and Freedom” (146). For Teufelsdröckh this freedom manifests itself in his spiritual nature, which allows him to see and understand much more than just his own age. The editor suggests that his physical disappearance by the end of *Sartor Resartus* means that he has been freed even from the limitations of physicality. Ultimately Teufelsdröckh is not bound even by the logical boundaries of Time and Space, and his ideas are immortalized: “His life, Fortunes, and Bodily Presence, are as yet hidden from us, or matter only of faint conjecture. But on the other hand, does not his Soul lie enclosed in this remarkable Volume” (21). His soul carries on through his ideas.

For Aurora the role of the poet offers freedom as well. First it allows her to escape the confines of femininity, for she realizes that she can see this truth even though she is a woman:

“For the truth itself, / That’s neither man’s nor woman’s, but just God’s” (VII, 752-53). Because the truth is divinely, not humanly, inspired, the poet’s gender identity is inconsequential. More profoundly, though, her vision of the truth also makes her soul a part of humanity in Carlyle’s sweeping historical sense, for the soul is individually as humanity is collectively a product of the history that precedes it. Aurora seizes this notion, describing the human soul as

A palimpsest, a prophet’s holograph  
 Defiled, erased and covered by a monk’s,  
 The apocalypse, by a Longus! poring on  
 Which obscene text, we may discern perhaps  
 Some fair, fine trace of what was written once,  
 Some upstroke of an alpha and omega  
 Expressing the old scripture. (I, 824-32)

The palimpsest, which echoes Carlyle’s usage in “On History,” suggests that the ideas of the past will always shine through in the work of the present, and the role of the poet in every age is the same: make the truth new. The truth itself is unchanging, so the real challenge for the poet-hero is to be able to discern the truth that lies in the old and tell it to the world in a new way. In her essay on Carlyle, Barrett Browning argues that “in a strict sense, he is not an originator [. . .] He tells us what we knew, but had forgotten, or refused to remember; and his reiterations startle and astonish us like informations” (396). What he reminds us is much the same as what Aurora Leigh will seek to remind Romney and her readers: “We ‘have souls’” (396). This is the tightrope that the true poet walks—to balance the past with the present and the future and to recognize the universal truths that honor the human soul.

Aurora takes this notion a step further in her creation of a new poetry—that of the present. She evokes Carlyle’s idea of double vision, but she challenges and extends it as well, suggesting that the true measure of the poet’s vision is her ability to see the heroic in the present time. In this way the poet distinguishes herself from her peers, for “every age / Appears to souls who live in’t (ask Carlyle) / Most unheroic. (V, 155-57). For most people—even perhaps Carlyle himself—considering their own age is a fruitless enterprise, as they do not have the necessary level of understanding. The poet, however, does not need the distance of time to discern the truth. Instead, she should

Exert a double vision; should have eyes  
To see near things as comprehensively  
As if afar [she] took [her] point of sight,  
And distant things as intimately deep  
As if [she] touched them. (V, 183-88)

Because the poet can exert this vision in her own age, she can see the heroic within it where others cannot; she can find the universal truth in her immediate surroundings. And by doing so, she can accomplish an essential Carlylean task: she can show her age how it is part of the larger quest for truth. This is how the poet creates what Aurora calls “living art” (V, 221).

In order to create this art, the poet’s vision must be turned not only outward but also inward. The connection that Aurora makes between the soul’s past and a cultural past is not incidental but is another outgrowth of Carlyle’s take on Romantic individualism. Barrett Browning writes of Carlyle, “No poet yearns more earnestly to make the inner life shine out, than does Carlyle” (397). As Teufelsdröckh recognizes the greater connection of humanity when he watches the people below his “watch-Tower” apartment, he must also make sense of where he

as an individual is woven into that “Tissue of History” (*Sartor* 17). The poet must achieve a keen understanding of the self, and he/she must use that understanding to make his vision meaningful. The poet’s vision must at the same time be sympathetic and extend beyond the self—introspection is important, but it is not enough. The challenge is to strike a balance between looking inward and looking outward, and to balance objectivity or discernment with human sympathy. The Editor marvels at how Teufelsdröckh can “look in men’s faces with a strange impartiality, a strange scientific freedom; like a man unversed in the higher circles, like a man dropped thither from the Moon” (23). He can examine his fellow man as an outsider, and in doing so he can see truths that others cannot. He also looks beyond surfaces to the truth beneath: “Many a deep glance, and often with unspeakable precision, has he cast into mysterious Nature, and the still more mysterious Life of Man” (23). Although initially it may seem that his precise insight grows from his distance, later the circumstances of Teufelsdröckh’s personal history reveal that he actually understands men because he sympathizes with them. After passing into the Everlasting Yea, Teufelsdröckh says, “With other eyes too could I now look upon my fellow man; with an infinite Love, an infinite Pity. Poor, wandering, wayward man!” (143). Part of the heroic vision, then, is the ability to recognize a kinship with one’s fellow human beings, and that kinship strengthens his vision.

Aurora Leigh shares Teufelsdröckh’s ability both to examine herself and to understand others, and she reveals this in the opening lines of her book. She claims that “I who have written much in prose and verse / For others’ uses, will write now for mine,- / Will write my story for my better self” (I, 2-4). Here she reveals her notion of the Victorian ideal of art with a dual purpose: the artist works both to improve others and to improve the self. This sense of duality is further explored in the lines that follow, which reflect upon the importance of reconciling past

and present selves and suggest that a fragmented personal identity can be unified through art. She wishes her story to be

As when you paint your portrait for a friend,

Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it

Long after he has ceased to love you, just

To hold together what he was and is. (I, 5-9)

The speaker seems to be distancing herself from her own story here, as the Editor distances Teufelsdröckh from the reader, reflecting upon the position of the viewer or reader of a work of art. The viewer's identity, both suggest, ultimately becomes intertwined with the art. So Aurora suggests here that she is writing for herself as a reader and that she is seeking to create a unified self that she can observe from that distance. She demonstrates this sense once again in the opening of Book Two, saying "I stood upon the brink of twenty years, / And looked before and after, as I stood / Woman and artist" (2-4). This introspective side of the speaker represents the Romantic ideal as well as the problem facing women writers of which Romney consistently reminds Aurora in the earlier books of the poem: the belief that they can speak only the personal, that they can "generalize / Oh, nothing" (II, 183-84).

Romney's criticisms are not entirely unfounded early in the book, for Aurora must learn to turn her vision outward in a sympathetic way. While his conversion is more dramatic, she too must learn to balance her exceptionality with her humanity and to understand those whom she observes. Unsympathetic eyes can do great damage, as Aurora's aunt demonstrates. Her earliest descriptions of Aunt Leigh depict "two grey-steel naked-bladed eyes / [which] Searched through my [Aurora's] face, - ay, stabbed it through and through" (I, 327-28). The imagery of the eyes as knives suggests the cruelty of the look, but even more important is the perspective that directs

the look. The stabbing is an attempt not simply to see but to seek evidence of the evil in Aurora, “as if to find / A wicked murderer in my innocent face, / If not here, there perhaps” (I, 329-31). Her aunt does not look for the good or the divine in Aurora; she looks only for the evil, and this makes her gaze an inherently violent one. After she has refused Romney’s initial proposal, Aurora feels the unsympathetic gaze of her aunt even more deeply. She recalls: “I felt her looks / Still cleaving to me, like the sucking asp / To Cleopatra’s breast, persistently” (II, 863-65). Again the imagery suggests violence; she goes on to suggest that “Being observed, / When observation is not sympathy / Is just being tortured” (II, 865-67). This kind of look stands in contrast to the poetic vision which Aurora possesses and seeks to cultivate.

Initially Aurora recognizes the need for sympathy but seems unable to feel close enough to the rest of humanity to exercise it. She spends her early career separated from others, “unafraid of solitude” (III, 169). She places herself at such a remove from the experience of other people that her art becomes too detached from life. One of the most striking examples of this is her view of the lower classes as she observes them entering the church for the impending marriage of Romney and Marian. The language of taint and disease pervades Aurora’s description; instead of sympathizing with the people, she pities them. Ultimately they are completely dehumanized; she denies that she can even recognize their faces. Instead, she says “We’ll call them vices, festering to despairs, / Or sorrows, petrifying to vices: not / A finger-touch of God left whole on them” (IV, 580-82). She is so horrified by the sight of the masses that she cannot see them as a true poet should: she cannot see the innate divinity which she claims to see in all humanity. Through her interaction with Marian, though, she begins to observe with greater sympathy. Marian, the other character who seems to understand the power and importance of true vision (though Aurora suggests that she does not possess the ability

herself), tells Aurora, “do not look at me, / But understand” (VI, 1204-05).<sup>8</sup> Herein lies the real task of the poet: to create sympathy from vision.

Though she possesses the double vision of the poet, Aurora must learn to achieve sympathy through her experience with an individual human soul. The impoverished “masses” in Book IV do not move her, but as she begins to “understand” Marian, she learns to expand her vision and her sympathy. When she initially discovers that Marian has borne a child out of wedlock, she responds with judgment; looking down at the infant, she sees it only in terms of sin and guilt: “[O]h, that it should take such innocence / To prove just guilt, I thought” (VI, 582-83). After she hears the story of Marian’s rape, however, and heeds her admonition to “understand,” Marian responds with an invitation:

“Come with me, sweetest sister,” I returned,  
 “And sit within my house and do me good  
 From henceforth, thou and thine! ye are my own  
 [.....]  
 We two may live on toward the true life.” (VII, 117-20, 132)

The beginning of Aurora’s conversion to true poetic sympathy validates her ideal of the ability of the human soul to foster change; she enacts social change by embracing the fallen woman, and though it is initially a small change it nonetheless leads to a broader vision of the human condition and her place within it.<sup>9</sup> While walking the streets of Florence, she watches the

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<sup>8</sup> Stacey Gottlieb contends that it is not Aurora Leigh but Marian Erle who “‘though she fits none of his (male) categories of greatness [...] functions very much like a Carlylean hero within the moral dynamics of *Aurora Leigh*” (65), attributing to her the original insight and idealism of that ideal figure (66).

<sup>9</sup> Several critics have noted the importance of Marian’s character as a sympathetic fallen woman who helps to change Aurora’s point of view about class and social change. Bing Shao argues that “While her relationship with Marian Erle becomes closer [...] the former gap between Romney the social reformer and Aurora the pure artist narrows drastically” (113). Maureen Thum similarly acknowledges the class dynamics at work, asserting that instead of a typical fallen woman, Marian is “depicted through the eyes of the upper middle-class protagonist, Aurora Leigh, as a positive image of idealized motherhood” (88). Susanna Egan similarly suggests that Marian is



people—mostly women—coming out of a church and she sees their sorrows. This parallels the earlier scene, in Book IV, in which she watches the poor people enter a church; now in watching them exit she sees them as humans with souls. Instead of “vices,” she recognizes “faces” and “souls” of people who are much closer to herself than she realized before (VII, 1258). She realizes that she is “Like other creatures, craving offal-food” (VII, 1268). Here she finally understands her position as the poet: if she only places herself above others, she will never be able to speak the truth to them. She must first sympathize with the condition of the human soul in order to move it. At first this realization is paralyzing to Aurora. For a time following this epiphany, she feels invisible and disempowered:

I did not write, nor read, nor even think,  
 But sate absorbed amid the quickening glooms,  
 Most like some passive broken lump of salt  
 Dropt in by chance to a bowl of oenome,  
 To spoil the drink a little and lose itself  
 Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost. (VII, 1306-1311)

Instead of finding solace in her connection to humanity, she begins to feel lost in it. She has temporarily forgotten, it seems, the presence of the divine in the human, and in doing so has lost sight of her vocation.

Even more importantly, she has failed to balance her sympathy with the welfare of her own soul. Carlylean sympathy does not mean selflessness; instead it requires a profound knowledge of the self. Teufelsdröckh’s sympathy for his fellow man grows out of a new

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“sanctified by life and becomes the alter ego whom the poet quests to find” (71). Amanda Anderson argues that Barrett Browning does not idealize Marian but that she takes on the Carlylean task of making her a human being rather than a type: “she insists on particularizing the fallen women, on rescuing her from a set of conventions that obscure the perception of her as an individual” (177).

understanding of himself, and Aurora also learns to rethink the relationship between her poetry and her own life. After they have reunited, she tells Romney:

But I who saw the human nature broad  
 At both sides, comprehending too the soul's,  
 And all the high necessities of Art,  
 Betrayed the thing I saw, and wronged my own life  
 For which I pleaded. (IX, 641-45)

She possessed vision to see humanity, but she did not know where to place herself within it and hence became lost. This re-envisioning becomes possible with the reappearance of her cousin, Romney Leigh, who has faced his own lesson about vision and humanity. Initially he is placed in contract with Aurora: Aurora, as a true poet, looks for the spiritual where Romney recognizes only the material. His vision is ultimately too narrow: his philanthropy seeks to help people in the wrong way. This key difference in their points of view is made clear early in the book when she observes: “Always Romney Leigh / Was looking for the worms, I for the gods” (I, 551-52). Romney is consistently looking down whereas Aurora is consistently looking up toward God and ultimately the truth. Romney is so completely earthly that he “sympathise[s] with man, not God” (II, 294). However, Aurora, like Teufelsdröckh, sees man’s inherent divine potential and believes that the poet can help lift man to a more godly state. She, like Carlyle, believes that “It takes a soul, / To move a body” (II, 479-80). Romney seeks to improve the lives of men through improving their material conditions, but Aurora believes that she can best improve the human condition by expressing her vision and by ideally teaching others to see. Where Romney sees human beings as far removed from God, Aurora suggests that the divine is an inherent part of humanity.

*Sartor Resartus* shows that the way to improve man is by improving the condition of his soul, not just his material condition. Aurora will echo this sentiment but complicates the binary that this philosophy rests upon. Teufelsdröckh argues that the best the poet can do for man is to teach him to exercise his own capacity for double vision and to recognize the presence of God all around (and within) him. So when the Editor imagines the British reader asking about the clothes-philosophy, “[W]hat use is in it?” he answers: “[T]hou lookest, even for moments, into the region of the Wonderful, and seest and feelest that thy daily life is girt with Wonder, and based on Wonder, and thy very blankets and breeches are Miracles,--then art thou profited beyond money’s worth, and hast a thankfulness towards our Professor” (204-05). Teufelsdröckh seeks to teach his readers to look at the world in a new way, to open their minds to the possibilities of wonder in the everyday world. By doing so, he has improved the lives of his readers in a profound way. The great lesson of the clothes-philosophy is ultimately to de-emphasize clothes, to shift our attention from such material objects toward the Wonders of the universe.

Romney Leigh must learn this way to self-improvement, and his conversion comes, ironically, after he has been physically blinded. He admits that he was wrong in the beginning, that he privileged material over spiritual health: “The body’s satisfaction and no more, / Is used for argument against the soul’s” (VIII, 416-17). He realizes that he focused too narrowly on the material conditions of those whose lives he sought to improve, and he pays for this error with the loss of his physical sight. He gains, of course, a greater spiritual *insight*, as does Aurora, who also had to be converted:

We both were wrong that June-day, --both as wrong  
As an east wind had been. I who talked of art,

And you who grieved for all men's griefs . . what then?

We surely made too small a part for God

In these things. (VIII, 552-56)

Neither of them, she suggests, recognized the true presence of the divine in art or in humanity. Their marriage, then, instead of simply fulfilling the typical romance plot, becomes a necessary part of the book's philosophical claim, which echoes the Everlasting Yea: "Love not pleasure, love God" (*Sartor Resartus* 146). Though both Aurora and Romney undergo a change, Aurora's view is ultimately validated, for her conversion is not a change in ideals but a move toward realizing them more fully. Romney's attempt at philanthropy, though inspired by a kind of sympathy, fails because it does not look deeply enough into the souls of men.

The individual conversions that Teufelsdröckh, Aurora, and Romney experience are portrayed as part of much larger historical shifts. Both Carlyle and Barrett Browning describe a theory of history that depends upon both personal and social revolution, most often through violent destruction and rebirth. Diogenes Teufelsdröckh's personal destruction and rebirth take place as he moves from "The Everlasting No" to "The Everlasting Yea." As he passes into this new spiritual state, he describes "a healing sleep [in which] the heavy dreams rolled gradually away, and I awoke to a new Heaven and a new Earth" (142). He describes his conversion as truly revolutionary, and he is awake to an entirely new reality. His experience alludes to the opening lines of the description of the New Jerusalem in The Book of Revelation: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (21:1). With his allusion, Teufelsdröckh connects his personal revolution to a societal one; Carlyle believes that such revolutions are necessary to prevent the demise of humanity. The New Jerusalem follows the destruction of the old earth by fire, and

Teufelsdröckh similarly envisions a rebirth that follows fire, whereby “old sick Society should be deliberately burnt (alas! with quite other fuel than spice-wood); in the faith that she is a Phoenix; and that a new heavenborn young one will rise out of her ashes” (180). Carlyle believes that we must allow—even perpetuate—the destruction of material society in order to make room for the birth of a new, more heavenly one.

Romney’s blinding and conversion enact this idea of the phoenix in an individual way, as he is injured in a fire. He initially believes that the incident marks an end; he tells Aurora:

When the fever’s heat  
Dropped from me, as the flame did from my house,  
And left me ruined like it, stripped of all  
The hues and shapes of aspectable life  
[.....]

Why that seemed hard. (IX, 566-69, 573)

He compares his loss to a kind of death, with the ensuing darkness likened to that of the grave. He comes to realize, however, that this destruction led to his rebirth; in losing his sight, he has gained his soul. He tells Aurora: “The Spirit, from behind this dethroned sense, / Sees, waits in patience till the walls break up / From which the bas-relief and fresco have dropt” (IX, 582-84). Romney has learned to hope and to value his spirit over his body, and though he is not a true poet, he has gained a more poetic vision because he understands the value of the human soul.

From these personal revolutions grow the beginnings of a new social order. Both Romney and Aurora see the signs of the new world as the poem concludes. The destruction by fire of Leigh Hall and the ensuing spiritual redemption of Romney, the closing lines of the poem suggest, will lead to the same kind of “heavenborn Society” that Teufelsdröckh envisions. Also

alluding to Revelations 21, the final lines of the poem envision this new earth and the foundations of the New Jerusalem. Aurora prophesies:

Along the tingling desert of the sky,  
 Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,  
 Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass  
 The first foundations of the new, near Day  
 Which should be builded out of heaven to God.  
 [.....]

and when

I saw his soul saw,--“Jasper first,” I said,  
 “And second, sapphire, third, chalcedony;  
 The rest in order,--last, an amethyst.” (IX, 953-57, 962-64)

Though the New Jerusalem lies in the future, both Aurora and Romney can see it: though only Aurora can experience the physical vision, both can see it with their souls. The destruction of the current society, as figured in the destruction of Leigh Hall and the redemption of Romney’s soul, has made this new world possible.

Despite her laments regarding a lack of grandmothers, Barrett Browning was clearly at no loss for literary and intellectual forebears. And though her writing differed a great deal from that of Carlyle—in genre and aesthetic purpose—his influence on her work remains important. Drawing on a common Christian heritage, both writers envisioned the true poet as a divine figure who could save humanity in their own troubled age. Carlyle’s poet, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, seeks to save men’s souls by making them reconsider how they clothe their bodies. Barrett

Browning similarly shows that in order to save men's and women's bodies, we must first save their souls.

## CHAPTER 4

“THE VIGOUR AND ORIGINALITY OF HER RESTLESS INTELLECT”: *ST. ELMO* AND  
THE THINKING BELIEVER

In his 1951 biography of Augusta Jane Evans<sup>1</sup>, William Perry Fidler writes, “She [Evans] knew her Carlyle, Wordsworth, and Emerson so well that she could cite the texts of German Transcendentalism from which they took their arguments” (6). This contention offers a possible direction for scholarship on Evans’ work—one which is warranted by a close reading of her novels—, yet this intellectual heritage remains unexplored territory.<sup>2</sup> As Mary Kelley argues generally of the group of women writers she calls “literary domestics,” a group in which she includes Evans, “historians and literary critics have not known what to do with them” (viii). While none deny the breadth of Evans’ erudition, for the most part any consideration of her engagement with the important intellectual ideas of her time has been deferred by discussions of her politics and regional affiliation. A staunch supporter of the Confederacy, she supported slavery, opposed women’s suffrage, and believed strongly in patriarchal values and the moral superiority of women. Despite these views, however, many critics have noted a kind of doubling in the novel’s messages, suggesting that Evans subverts the message of traditional domestic fiction even as she seems to defend these traditional beliefs. For example, Nancy Alder seeks to reclaim Evans’ message as a more subversive and feminist one, arguing that “while trying to defend parts of the restrictive social system, she identified hypocritical assumptions to a growing

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<sup>1</sup> Because *St. Elmo* was published prior to her marriage and the addition of Wilson to her surname, I will refer to the writer as Augusta Jane Evans throughout this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Fidler provides a good survey of contemporary responses to the novel.



group of women during the last part of the nineteenth century. Evans provided women with inspiration to fight overt sex discrimination with language and attitudes seemingly in conformity with the existing system” (77). Beidler, whose discussion of Evans focuses on *Beulah*, argues that Evans rewrites the novel of female education in ways that “make the practice of women’s writing itself a curricular experiment” (115). Karen Tracey places *St. Elmo* in the tradition of the double-proposal plot (which she traces back to *Aurora Leigh*), arguing that the novel “seeks to accommodate both an ambitious vision of women’s intellectual capabilities and a conservative, even reactionary, model of their social and political roles” (78). Susan Harris’s discussion in “Responding to the Text(s)” focuses on the novel’s exploration of the issue of women’s education in the Nineteenth century; she argues that “Edna’s story perfectly illustrates nineteenth-century women’s conflicts about gender, learning, and power” (268). All of these readings suggest that even Evans’ politics are more complicated than a simple categorization can describe.

In order to understand these complexities better, we must consider where they developed. Evans’ conflicted conservatism and her desire for a return to the values of the past connect her politically to Thomas Carlyle; her novels suggest that he was a profound intellectual influence on her work as well. None of the contemporary critics who have written of *St. Elmo* (1866), though, acknowledge Evans’ debt to Carlyle, even though the novel quotes from and echoes his work.<sup>3</sup> As with the other writers in this study, modern-day critics have been more concerned—and understandably so—with establishing and placing Evans within a women’s historical and literary

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<sup>3</sup> Both Anne Goodwyn Jones and Philip Beidler make passing reference to Carlyle in discussing the readership of Evans’ earlier novel *Beulah*, a novel that responds more explicitly to Emerson. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese compares *Beulah* explicitly to *Sartor Resartus*, arguing that both “simultaneously explor[e] the myriad intellectual temptations of the age and elaborate[e] a pattern of conversion” (xxix).

tradition and with examining her anti-feminist attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Alternately, Evans has been read as a regional writer, which is certainly valid given her identification with the South, but this seems to confine her in much the same way that the distinction “local color” would confine women writers later in the nineteenth century and necessarily relies a great deal on biographical reading.<sup>5</sup> With this chapter I would like to recommend that we begin regarding Evans’ work as part of a broader intellectual tradition as well, not to ignore her social context but to expand it. As Nina Baym argues, “Augusta Evans’ heroines are the strongest, most brilliant, and most accomplished in the long line of women’s heroines” (278). In order to examine and appreciate their brilliance fully, however, we must seriously consider the foundations of their ideas and recognize the type of individuality they represent. This chapter will examine one of these heroines, Edna Earl, by specifically considering the ways in which her story enters a conversation not with other domestic novelists but with Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. *St. Elmo*, Evans’ most famous novel, responds to Carlyle both through textual echoes and direct references to his work and through considering his ideas regarding individuality, vocation, faith, and intellect as they are manifested in the figure of the thinking believer.

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<sup>4</sup> Kelley’s book examines the conflict between Evans’ domesticity and participation in the public sphere by writing. Helen Waite Papashvily places *St. Elmo* firmly within the tradition of the domestic women’s novel and analyzes it strictly from that perspective (noting Evans’ Southern sympathies as well). Nina Baym reads *St. Elmo* as one of the last examples of “woman’s fiction” in the Nineteenth Century.

<sup>5</sup> Fidler’s biography essentially inaugurates this school of criticism in the Twentieth Century. More recently, readings of Evans as a Southern writer have also, inevitably, addressed the problems of gender politics in the ante- and post-bellum South. Amy Thompson McCandless examines Evans’ defense of patriarchy as a means of defending Southern culture in the wake of changes taking place after the Civil War. She argues that “Patriarchal imagery justified the sexual and racial hierarchy of the antebellum South” (13). Elizabeth Fekete Trubey reads *St. Elmo* as a simultaneous examination of gender politics and the racial politics of the Civil War-era South, arguing that Edna is alternately enslaved by her writing and by her husband. Bradley Johnson considers Evans’ use of the Southern tradition of the duel as an extended metaphor throughout the novel, relating this to Evans’ critique of patriarchy and masculine coercion. David Russell reads the novel as “a political recalculation. At a time when Southern men needed reassurance of their continued honor and position, and when unrepentant secessionists like Evans were looking for a political counterbalance to the Radical Republicans, Evans wrote a primer for the reconstruction of patriarchal gender relations” (48). Anne Sophie Riepma synthesizes many of these readings, seeking to “demonstrate the ways in which Evans’s fiction represents the cultural experience of Southern women” (3).

*St. Elmo*, though titled for its hero, also tells the story of Edna Earl, an exceptional young woman who sets out at the age of twelve to make her own way in the world. In the opening chapters of the novel, she loses her grandparents, who have raised her since the death of her parents in her infancy. After she is orphaned for the second time, she leaves her home on Lookout Mountain in Tennessee, boarding a train to Columbus, Georgia, where she hopes to work in a factory and earn her keep. On the first night of her journey, the train derails and Edna is injured; she is effectively adopted by Mrs. Murray, who takes her to live at her family home, Le Bocage. Here Edna has access to an extensive library and a proper Christian education; she becomes a scholar/writer, eventually submitting several articles for publication. Despite these successes, her passionate attraction to Mrs. Murray's son, St. Elmo, is a continual source of distress for Edna. St. Elmo is a morally degraded man who scorns religion but boasts a superior intellect; herein lies Edna's attraction to him. Her literary ambition coupled with her desire to escape from St. Elmo eventually lead her to New York, where she becomes a celebrated author of books and receives multiple marriage proposals (including one from her publisher, Mr. Manning). She refuses them all, however, and while she seeks to deny it, the course of the novel makes it clear that her destiny is inescapably entangled with that of St. Elmo. Throughout the novel, Edna remains intensely dedicated to her intellectual work, driving herself beyond what her body can handle. She periodically meets St. Elmo and continues to resist his advances until she is convinced that he has fully repented for the deeds of his past and converted back to the Christianity of his youth. Once this has happened and he travels to New York to rescue her from her toil and ambition, she accepts his proposal, and they marry in the final pages of the novel.

The protagonists of both *Sartor Resartus* and *St. Elmo* represent a very specific type of individual whose main responsibility is to develop both the intellect and the spirit. *Sartor*

*Resartus* clearly elucidates this idea in the development of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh as a thinking believer: “truly, a thinking man is the worst enemy the prince of darkness can have, and every time such a one announces himself there runs a shudder through the nether empire, where new emissaries are trained with new tactics, to hoodwink and handcuff him” (92). This passage, which refers specifically to Teufelsdröckh’s early education, interconnects the two central concerns of both texts: intellect and belief.<sup>6</sup> Regarded in this light, an education becomes a responsibility that believers must take seriously in order to fulfill the will of God and to fight the power of the devil in the world. This passage is directly quoted in *St. Elmo* (58) as a justification for women’s education and as praise for Edna’s teacher, Mr. Hammond.<sup>7</sup> Evans’ particular use of Carlyle here is important because this chapter of the novel describes not only Edna’s esteem for her teacher, but also her own future course and the sense of vocation that she will ultimately follow. As with all Carlylean heroes, her ultimate calling will be to do her duty: primarily to work but also to think and to believe. This duty manifests itself in interrelated ways for this particular heroine; she seeks “To do some good for her race, and to assist in saving a darkened soul almost as dear to her as her own” (284). She will enact this salvation through her intellectual work, the first project of which is a book that will serve as “a vindication of the unity of mythologies” (107). In addition to proposing unity, she seeks to use knowledge to prove the reality and validity of religion. Her spiritual project, which initially appears to be a rather typical nineteenth-century heroine’s vocation, is to aid (though not to perform) the salvation of St. Elmo

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<sup>6</sup> Jones argues that “*St. Elmo* traces the development of the heroine through thought to religion, reinforcing once again the suspicion that Evans herself enjoyed a freedom of thought that she publicly condemned in her novels” (59). In the novel, however, freedom of thought and religion are not contradictory. Mr. Hammond is praised for his “noble catholicity of spirit” and his belief that “all bigotry springs from narrow minds and partial knowledge” (58).

<sup>7</sup> Riepma offers an extended discussion of the relationship between women and ministers in the nineteenth century and specifically in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction as it applies to Edna’s relationship with Mr. Hammond (117-21).

Murray, a man whose intellect is keen but whose soul is deeply troubled.<sup>8</sup> The ways in which Edna fulfills both these projects demonstrate Evans' understanding of and commitment to a Carlylean work ethic that emphasizes the social, intellectual, and spiritual responsibility of the hero. Moreover, the contradiction between Evans' blatant anti-feminist rhetoric and the masculine erudition of her main character is ultimately reconciled by this notion: for both Evans and Carlyle, a Christian believer has a duty to educate herself in order to strengthen her faith.

From the beginning of the novel, Edna's character is Carlylean in her exceptionality and her sense of her own solitary nature. She is effectively orphaned twice—once as an infant, and again at the age of twelve, when the death of her grandparents sends her out into the world.<sup>9</sup> Her lament upon her grandfather's death, "All alone" (19), is one that will resound throughout the novel. Despite the support she is offered in various forms, she continues to feel spiritually isolated because of her lack of a family. Even late in the novel, after Dr. Howell has diagnosed her heart condition, she tells him, "I am alone in this world. I have no family to love me [...] do you suppose I ever forget that I am kinless? It is a mournful thing to know that you are utterly isolated among millions of human beings; that not a drop of your blood flows in any other veins. My God only has a claim upon me" (282). Of course, Edna does not choose to be an orphan and

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<sup>8</sup> Edna does not go through a genuine spiritual crisis in the novel though briefly after her grandfather's death she feels forsaken by God when "For the first time in her life she could not pray; she wanted to turn away from the thought of God and heaven, for it seemed that she had nothing left to pray for" (18). Reading *St. Elmo* in the continuum of Evans' fiction, however, suggests that Edna's strong faith may be an outgrowth of the spiritual crisis of Beulah Benton, the heroine of Evans' earlier novel *Beulah* (1859). Papashvily describes how Beulah "doubted, questioned, searched, fainted and fell before, in the concluding chapters, she emerged victorious, able to reconcile all human knowledge with fundamental theology" (161). Both Baym and Jones argues that *St. Elmo* reprises *Beulah*. The real crisis in *St. Elmo* will be for the title character, and Edna's role as teacher will be a key to his salvation. The development and resolution of his spiritual crisis will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Baym describes the "woman's fiction" plot as "the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she has rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world" (11). Hence the loss of both sets of Edna's "parents" is necessary to the type of novel plot Evans is writing. Helen Waite Papashvily more comically argues that "in [Evans'] novels parents represented surplus equipment to be removed as early as possible from the scene" (157). Sarah Brusky's argument builds on Baym's, but she claims that both Mrs. Murray and, to a lesser extent, St. Elmo become "othermothers" to Edna. Certainly Mrs. Murray does gradually become a mother figure, but Edna's connection to her seems to be primarily emotional. Intellectually and spiritually, she is primarily self-guided, as is Teufelsdröckh.

her lack of a biological family is a situation over which she has no control. Her loss, however, does give her the option of creating an entirely original self, so ultimately she is ambivalent about her lack of a family. Cindy Weinstein considers this choice a fundamental one for sentimental heroines, arguing that the re-structuring of families in sentimental novels presents a challenge to traditional patriarchal structures where “the family is being redefined as an institution to which one can choose to belong or not” (8). Edna mourns her “kinless”-ness, but she also seems to choose her own intellectual isolation and indeed to draw inspiration from it. She also suggests that she has replaced her earthly family with a spiritual presence, so her isolation actually strengthens her faith. Moreover, because of her commitment to self-reliance she routinely refuses the support and companionship which she is offered, accepting help only on her own terms.

Edna is so determined to control her own destiny that she only agrees to receive help if she believes it is sent from God. She interprets the help that she does accept as a spiritual gift, which does not truly make her less alone but offers consolation. She tells Mrs. Murray early in the novel, “I was so wretched. And then God raised up friends even among strangers, and shows me I am not forsaken, if I am desolate” (30). Her true comfort, then, derives less from a connection to other people than from her relationship with God. Her vision of herself as “desolate,” though, still appears to be more a matter of choice than circumstance. Baym writes generally of Evans’ heroines: “They make their way in the world not because someone has deprived them of their props, but because they scorn to lean. Generally, the heroine is offered all manner of support and refuses all. Thus she triumphs not as a matter of facing necessity and turning misfortune into a challenge, but as a matter of choice [...] [they] remain true to their own vision of what their lives should be and resist” (278). So Edna’s familial isolation is thrust upon

her, but her sense of individuality is borne of her own recognition of her exceptional nature and her insistence upon not only making her own way but making a meaningful contribution in the world. And, moreover, she believes her contribution will only be meaningful if it is hers alone. Her commitment to complete self-reliance and her unique nature—which is recognized by others as well as by herself—make her a direct descendant of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh.

Teufelsdröckh is a completely original man, a “quite new human Individuality” (8). He is also “doubly orphaned” (83); he is a foundling whose true parentage is unknown, and his adoptive parents, Andreas and Gretchen Futteral, pass away early in his adulthood. He is not only alone in the world but once he goes out on his own he becomes keenly aware of his exceptionality. He first realizes his difference from other boys upon entering the Hinterschlag Gymnasium, and his sense of this difference both isolates and inspires him. Upon learning that the Futterals were not his biological parents, Teufelsdröckh responds with ambivalence: “A certain poetic elevation, yet also a corresponding civic depression, it naturally imparted: I was like no other; in which fixed-idea, leading sometimes to highest, and oftener to frightfullest results, may there not lie the first spring of Tendencies, that in my life have become remarkable enough? As in birth, so in action, speculation, and social position, my fellows are perhaps not numerous” (83-84). His singularity lifts him above the mass of other men; he interprets his solitary nature both as a sign of his destiny and as the condition which has determined his destiny.<sup>10</sup> In his complete uniqueness, Teufelsdröckh sees a corresponding responsibility; his vocation to work and teach through his writing will ultimately spring directly from this solitary nature. Because of his individuality, he will possess and develop a unique insight. He also sees his aloneness in light of an even greater connection with God. He writes, “The Andreas and

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<sup>10</sup> Teufelsdröckh’s elevation will be made manifest in the description of his apartment from which he observes the masses (16-18). This also seems to relate to Carlyle’s Calvinist upbringing with its implication of election. Suzy Anger provides a good general discussion of Carlyle’s relationship to Calvinism.

Gretchen, or the Adam and Eve, who led thee into Life, and for a time suckled and pap-fed thee there, whom thou namest Father and Mother; these were, like mine, but thy nursing-father and nursing-mother: thy true Beginning and Father is in Heaven, whom with the bodily eye thou shalt never behold, but only with the spiritual” (66). So Teufelsdröckh is both alone and a child of God, and his physical and intellectual isolation are ultimately repaid by spiritual communion with God. The value of earthly parents is undercut by the presence of a heavenly Father; like Edna, he sees true gifts as spiritual ones. Individuals like these do not require parenting in its most traditional sense but find greater solace in their intellect and insight.

The other source of solace for both Teufelsdröckh and Edna is nature, which they see as closely connected to God. Through the intellectual interpretation of the natural world, their faith is strengthened as their unique insights distinguish them from the rest of humanity.

Teufelsdröckh feels nurtured by the natural world and believes that he has a divinely human responsibility to interpret and learn from it. Indeed, nature becomes a much more important teacher than formal instructors, and in using his intellect to decipher its mysteries he develops a sense of reverence and wonder. He recalls:

Thus encircled by the mystery of Existence; under the deep heavenly Firmament; waited on by the four golden Seasons, with their vicissitudes of contribution [...] did the Child sit and learn. These things were the Alphabet, whereby in after-time he was to syllable and partly read the grand Volume of the World [...] For Gneschen, eager to learn, the very act of looking thereon was a blessedness that gilded all: his existence was a bright, soft element of Joy; out of which, as in Prospero’s Island, wonder after wonder bodied itself forth, to teach by charming.

(75)



Even as a child, Teufelsdröckh believes his vision to be unique, and he has a responsibility to understand its divinity. His ability to interpret the natural world becomes essential to his understanding of God, himself, and his vocation. This will eventually develop into his theory of knowledge and wonder, which further connects the powers of reason and belief. He asserts that “Thought without Reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous” (53). Intellect alone cannot arrive at truth, and what passes for knowledge in this age, Teufelsdröckh believes, is lacking. The development of this faculty is essential to identity as well, for “The man who cannot wonder, who does not habitually wonder (and worship), were he President of innumerable Royal Societies, and carried the whole Mekanique Celeste and Hegel’s Philosophy, and the epitome of all Laboratories and Observatories with their results, in his single head,—is but a Pair of Spectacles, behind which there is no Eye. Let those who have Eyes look through him, then he may be useful” (54). This passage demonstrates not only Carlyle’s theory of knowledge but the pun on eye/I also shows how knowledge relates to the construction of the individual. The man who knows only facts not only has no knowledge, but he also has no true self. Hence intellect is connected with both the self and the ability to wonder, which is a product of faith and interpretation.

Like Teufelsdröckh, Edna feels as close to nature as she does to the people around her, and she is unusual in this regard even as a child. The narrator idealizes her singularity:

Edna loved trees and flowers, stars and clouds, with a warm, clinging affection, as she loved those of her own race; and that solace and amusement which most children find in the society of children and the sports of childhood this girl derived from the solitude and serenity of nature. To her woods and fields were indeed vocal, and every flitting bird and gurgling brook, every passing cloud and

whispering breeze brought messages of God's eternal love and wisdom, and drew her tender, yearning heart more closely to Jehovah, the Lord God Omnipotent.

(17)

Nature is there for Edna not only to enjoy but also to examine; through the interpretation of nature she can learn even more about God and her relationship with him. Nature affords her the ideal: solitude from man but communion with God. Because she is a child of God she is also a child of nature, and being a part of the natural world makes her feel less alone. This communion stands in stark contrast to the emptiness and solitude of the world in ways that echo Carlyle's disdain for materialism. Leaving the rural environment of her early childhood causes difficulty for Edna. After moving to Le Bocage, she despairs that "the majestic repose and boundless spontaneity of nature yielded a sense of companionship, almost a tender dumb sympathy, which all the polished artificialities and *recherché* arrangements of man utterly failed to furnish" (39). She also calls the mansion a "temple of Mammon" (39) and shows that she feels more isolated among material things and people who value them than she does alone in the world of nature. In this place, her only real comfort becomes the indulgence of her solitude through intellectual work.

What Carlyle demonstrates, and Evans echoes, is that religious faith and intellect should work in concert with rather than in opposition to each other and that each individual, male or female, is responsible for his or her own salvation through the application of intellect. After quoting Carlyle's words to praise Edna's teacher, Evans' narrator goes on to envision a future where "every pulpit in Christendom [...] shall be filled with meek and holy men of ripe scholarship and resistless eloquence, whose scientific erudition keeps pace with their evangelical piety" (58). This passage suggests that a man of intellect can more effectively convince his

followers of spiritual truths. Edna's ideal man of this type is Mr. Hammond, a man who offers her a rigorous education, including the study of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, which exposes her equally to religious history. And because she believes this kind of education serves a spiritual and moral purpose, Edna, an outspoken believer in the cult of true womanhood, can justify her own participation in it. For while she does not believe that women should be able to vote, urging them to remain in their "divinely limited sphere" (301), she believes firmly in their right and responsibility to be educated. Hammond tells her, "where one woman is considered a blue-stocking, and tiresomely learned, twenty are more tiresome still because they know nothing" (56). So even for women, being ignorant is more unattractive than seeking knowledge, and, moreover ignorance places the soul in peril.

Edna takes her intellectual salvation seriously: in addition to her formal lessons with Mr. Hammond, she reads widely in both the parsonage library and that at Le Bocage. In this way her learning is largely self-motivated, as "with a boundless ambition, equaled only by her patient, persevering application, Edna devoted herself to the acquisition of knowledge, and astonished and delighted her teacher by the rapidity of her progress and the vigour and originality of her restless intellect" (58). Once again Edna proves exceptional in both her motivation and her ability. While she seems dedicated to traditional notions of femininity, she is also committed to her intellectual pursuits in a way that may violate traditional expectations of feminine behavior.<sup>11</sup> Recognizing Evans' debt to Carlyle can help to make sense of this conflict, however, because all

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<sup>11</sup> Critics who have considered the gender politics of the novel have frequently read Edna as a character who reflects conflicted notions of femininity. Trubey, for example, argues that "*St. Elmo* depicts its heroine [...] at war with herself, struggling with the accepted limits of femininity" (125). Karen Tracey attributes this conflict to Evans' commitment to tradition, arguing that "Evans cannot allow her heroines to satisfy ambition and love simultaneously because the egalitarian marriages that would result might threaten hierarchical society" (105).

believers have the same responsibility in Carlyle.<sup>12</sup> In *Sartor Resartus*, the description of the “thinking man” is followed by with the declaration that “With such high vocation had I too, as denizen of the Universe, been called” (93). Though much of the biography of Teufelsdröckh demonstrates his exceptionality, his extreme individuality is always tempered by a sense of responsibility to the universe around him and a keen understanding of his place within it; his intellectual education is key to that responsibility. The vocation to be a thoughtful believer is, he argues here, a responsibility that results from this relationship to the universe, and all believers share this responsibility. An even greater responsibility, though, falls on those with exceptional insight and ability. This is where Edna’s genius ultimately trumps her womanhood, and while she repeatedly rails against pedantic women, she obviously participates in the public sphere by continuing to write and publish articles and books. She does so, however, to fulfill a divine educational and spiritual mission, one which her reading of Carlyle justifies. So while she is clearly an exceptional woman, because this call is first and foremost a human one, she can answer it and still fulfill a womanly role—indeed, it is her duty to do so.<sup>13</sup>

The breadth of Edna’s education resembles that of Teufelsdröckh; though she has a better teacher in Mr. Hammond than he ever does, both are extraordinarily self-motivated and driven in their quests for intellectual achievement. Teufelsdröckh dismisses his formal schooling, calling it “the insignificant portion of [his] Education” (79). Instead, he believes that his real education derives from his own indulgence of his intellectual curiosity: “Meanwhile, what printed thing soever I could meet with I read [...] By this means was the young head furnished with a considerable miscellany of things and shadows of things” (79). When he goes to University and

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that Carlyle did not believe in gender stratification, but instead to suggest that one’s duty is human rather than restricted by gender. And, as my Introduction states, Carlyle did recognize the possibility of genius in a woman.

<sup>13</sup> Edna sets out to be a teacher in the traditional sense; she ends up fulfilling that role in a more Carlylean way.

has access to a vast library, he “succeeded in fishing up more books perhaps than had been known to the very keepers thereof. The foundation of a Literary Life was hereby laid: [he] learned, on [his] own strength, to read fluently in almost all cultivated languages, on almost all subjects, and sciences” (88). So Teufelsdröckh, like Edna, takes on the responsibility of education himself and seeks to become as learned as he can in order to expand both his intellect and his spiritual understanding. His real criticism of the system of formal education he encounters stems from its unwillingness to nurture the kind of individuality in which he believes. Yet, in a strange way, the system works for him: his isolation from his classmates and his inability to train for a satisfying profession ultimately lead to his true education. Because he essentially designs his own course of study, Teufelsdröckh becomes a well-rounded individual, preparing himself for the position of “Professor of Things in General” at the University of Weissnichtwo (14).

The scope of Edna and Teufelsdröckh’s educations will be further broadened in the breadth of the intellectual projects they undertake: Teufelsdröckh’s clothes-philosophy and Edna’s attempt to create a new theory of mythology. The originality of her project mirrors that of Teufelsdröckh’s clothes-philosophy, which the Editor describes as “a quite new Branch of Philosophy” (8) that along with the biography of Teufelsdröckh “might work revolutions in Thought” (9). The revolution depends, however, on what readers do with the philosophy; the burden of understanding lies with the public, and it is a heavy burden indeed. The Editor describes the philosophy as “an ‘extensive Volume,’ of boundless, almost formless contents, a very Sea of Thought; neither calm nor clear, if you will; yet wherein the toughest pearl-diver may dive to his utmost depth, and return not only with sea-wreck but with true orients” (8). Teufelsdröckh’s method, which lacks a clear organizational plan, sometimes threatens to

interfere with his mission. The Editor explains that the Professor's approach "is not, in any case, that of common school Logic, where the truths all stand in a row, each holding by the skirts of the other; but at best that of practical Reason, proceeding by large Intuition over whole systematic groups and kingdoms; whereby we might say, a noble complexity, almost like that of Nature, reigns in his Philosophy, or spiritual picture of Nature: a mighty maze, yet, as faith whispers, not without a plan" (41). His true mission becomes training his audience as readers and thinkers; a cursory reading of the philosophy will be neither educational nor entertaining. At the same time, his method really mirrors his message—intellect and reason must work together with faith if his message is to be discerned. The ideal reader will not only do the work it takes to decipher the philosophy, but he will eventually learn that the true rewards of intellectual work are also spiritual in nature. The Editor suggests that his mission has not yet been widely successful and that it is in fact still in process. Near the end of *Sartor Resartus*, the Editor muses,

can it be hidden from the Editor that many a British Reader sits reading quite bewildered in head, and afflicted rather than instructed by the present Work? Yes, long ago has many a British Reader been, as now, demanding with something like a snarl: Whereto does all this lead; or what use is in it? In the way of replenishing thy purse, or otherwise aiding thy digestive faculty, O British reader, it leads to nothing, and there is no use in it; but rather the reverse, for it costs thee somewhat. (204)

To understand the clothes philosophy requires the reader to work, and the effects of such understanding will be spiritual and intellectual, not material. The reception of Teufelsdröckh's philosophy is basically the opposite of that of Edna's novel, and the Editor suggests that this is

because the public is simply not ready to hear his message. The effects of the message, however, are crucial, as they will ultimately assist in the readers' salvation.

Edna's mission is an intellectual and a didactic one, and she fulfills this through study and writing. Following a Carlylean impulse to seek a universal truth, she seeks to write a book that shows the unity of all mythologies and hence demonstrates the validity of Christianity; the subject matter with which she engages and her approach to it definitively separate her from other female "scribblers." The belief that underlies her project is that by stimulating her readers' intellects, she will stimulate their spirits. She criticizes any book that does not take on such a serious mission, arguing:

To write *currente calamo* for the mere pastime of author and readers, without aiming to inculcate some regenerative principle, to photograph some valuable phase of protean truth, was in her estimation ignoble; for her high standard demanded that all books should be to a certain extent didactic, wandering like evangels among the people, and making some man, woman, or child happier or wiser, or better—more patient or more hopeful—by their utterances. (107)

The true purpose of any book, then, should be to improve the spiritual well-being of its readers by expanding and improving their intellects. In order to fulfill this goal, the writer must find an effective way to communicate with his/her readers. Edna believes that she can best reach and instruct her audience by using a form they already know and feel comfortable with (and will seek to read), so "in order to popularize a subject bristling with recondite archaisms and philologic problems, she cast it in the mould of fiction" (108). Thus she takes a form that is much associated with women writers of the time, the didactic novel, and recreates it by making it not only a spiritual but also an intellectual enterprise; she chooses to write a novel in order to engage

intellectually those who tend to read strictly for entertainment. She is aware of the originality of her approach, acknowledging that “she was conscientiously experimenting on public taste, and though some of her indolent, luxurious readers, who wished even their thinking done by proxy, shuddered at the ‘spring water pumped upon their nerves,’ she good-naturedly overlooked their grimaces and groans” (334). What she is doing, then, is something entirely new: she is creating a new idea, and she is presenting it by using a familiar form in a new way.<sup>14</sup> She realizes that she is potentially compromising the enjoyment of some of her readers, but she believes she is fulfilling a higher purpose in doing so. Most importantly, she is seeking to teach her audience to read and to think in a new way.

Her desire is that she will motivate her audience to think differently about the unity of human experience (and ultimately to recognize the validity of Christianity as the true religion), but she recognizes that members of her audience must contribute to their education by participating in the intellectual experience she is providing.<sup>15</sup> She expects her readers to work in order to gain the benefits her work can provide. This is part of her justification for women’s education: they need to be able to interpret their world in order to understand their proper role within it. She can only provide the intellectual material; her readers are ultimately responsible for using it for their own salvation. When Manning warns her that she is misjudging the reading public and that they will not embrace such a book, she asks, “is it not nobler to struggle against

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<sup>14</sup> The novel serves as a kind of meta-narrative in this way, as the erudite style of *St. Elmo* has been the subject of a great deal of both contemporary and recent criticism of the novel. The most obvious example is, of course, C. T. Webb’s parody of the novel titled *St. Twel’mo* (1868). Bradley Johnson suggests that Evans responds directly to criticisms of her earlier novel, *Beulah* (19).

<sup>15</sup> Harris’s narratological reading of *St. Elmo* suggests that the novel itself invites divergent readings that depend on the stance of the audience. She argues, “[T]hose who use fiction only as reconfirmation of the stories they already know (the narrator of *St. Elmo* refers to this process as the ‘hasty, careless, novel-reading glance’)—will see only the cover story, the narrative, fictional or other, that reflects the dominant theme, that women should not possess effective verbal authority in realms beyond the domestic. Other readers—those to whom Herman Melville, writing in a similar context, refers as ‘eagle-eyed’—those struggling with their own desires to operate outside the boundaries of women’s social roles, will respond to the covert story, the one that opposes and ultimately disrupts the overt text” (271-72).



than to float ignominiously with the tide of degenerate opinion?" (238). Her responsibility is not simply to reflect "the spirit of the age" (287), but to do something to affect it.<sup>16</sup> Edna's readership proves her right, accepting her efforts warmly, and even "many who did not fully appreciate all her arguments and illustrations, were at least clear-eyed enough to perceive that it was their misfortune, not her fault" (287).<sup>17</sup> The response to Edna's books suggests that there is a reading public that sympathizes with her mission even though she is doing something revolutionary.<sup>18</sup>

Despite their varying levels of success, the goal of both writers is to teach their readers the value of using their intellect to feed their spirituality. Carlyle recognizes the desire to teach as a fundamentally human calling, arguing that "man is emphatically a Proselytizing creature" (8), and the lesson Teufelsdröckh and Edna teach is one of intellectual self-reliance and spiritual faith. The method of education from which Teufelsdröckh benefits (which mimics the education of Edna Earl) is the same one which he seeks to construct in his book: he wants to expose his readers to new ideas and new ways of thinking and to expand their curiosity. The Editor argues that despite its flaws, "the Book had in a high degree excited us to self-activity, which is the best effect of any book; that it had even operated changes in our way of thought; nay, that it promised to prove, as it were, the opening of a new mine-shaft, wherein the whole world of Speculation

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson again compares Edna's mission here to that of the novel's author and argues that her work is specifically about women's education. He contends, "As Evans clearly understood, her readers were primarily women, and the educational component of her work was at least partially directed at countering the exclusion of women from metaphysical inquiry" (19).

<sup>17</sup> Trubey, also noting the gender composition of Edna's audience, suggests that her popularity represents another contradiction in Evans' gender politics that mirrors the complexity of femininity in the Nineteenth Century. She describes Edna's books as "dense and scholarly, demanding a level of erudition from their readers that implies radical alteration to female education; their popularity suggests that her audience relishes the challenge and values Edna as a public figure. Yet at the same time, Edna's texts argue for the naturalness of domestic womanhood" (127).

<sup>18</sup> Edna carefully distinguishes her public readership from the "critics"; where the Editor of *Sartor* suggests that a general readership is most likely to resist or misunderstand Teufelsdröckh's message, Edna finds her warmest support from the general public while her book is panned by critics. In lieu of a preface to her first book, she quotes lines from *Aurora Leigh* that address "My critic Belfair" (285); again, this may very well be a response to Evans' experience with critics of *Beulah*.

might henceforth dig to unknown depths” (22). What Teufelsdröckh ultimately seeks to teach his readers, then, is a method, a new way of thinking that is both expansive and inclusive. What the clothes-philosophy really offers its readers is an intellectual opportunity, a means of re-examining the world from a new point of view. Edna’s novel offers the same kind of opportunity; in rethinking the history of mythology, she offers her readers the opportunity to reconsider and, she hopes, to reaffirm or strengthen their beliefs.

If the scope of both Teufelsdröckh and Edna’s works is ambitious, so too are their experiments with style and form. Edna’s unique subject matter is embodied in her novel’s unique form as well. In a metaphor that also echoes Carlyle, she aptly compares her writing to weaving, calling her book “a mental tapestry”; after she has finished her book manuscript, she expresses concern about the public’s potential response to the book for which she has “laboured so assiduously at the spinning-wheels of fancy—the loom of thought” (279). She is, indeed, weaving together an intellectual and spiritual mission with an entirely new use of the novel form. This metaphor echoes *Sartor Resartus* by evoking clothing, but also a passage about Teufelsdröckh’s clothes-philosophy describing “[a]lready, when we dreamed not of it, the warp of thy remarkable Volume [that] lay on the loom” (13). The sewing metaphor evokes both the subject matter of Teufelsdröckh’s philosophy and a perhaps more fitting feminine occupation for Edna. The real threads both books weave, though, are those of thought and belief; their methods ultimately echo their missions, and these return always to the most fundamental Carlylean imperative: work.

For Edna, as for Teufelsdröckh, the intellectual and spiritual truths she seeks are found only through work, and the spectre of Time haunts her as she seeks to fulfill what she believes to be her earthly vocation. After she finishes her first book manuscript and collapses, Dr. Howell

reveals that she suffers from a heart condition and warns her that she must “throw away [her] pen and rest” (281). She responds, “Rest! rest! If my time is so short I cannot afford to rest. There is so much to do, so much that I have planned and hoped to accomplish. I am only beginning to learn how to handle my tools, my life-work is as yet barely begun. When my long rest overtakes me, I must not be found idle, sitting with folded hands” (281-82).<sup>19</sup> She fears, as does Teufelsdröckh, that Time will defeat her if she does not remain diligent in her work, no matter what the cost. Her determination echoes the description of Teufelsdröckh who even as an infant almost never cried because “He already felt that Time was precious; that he had other work cut out for him than whimpering” (69). The pressure of time is especially intense for the exceptional individual: his vocation is clear even in the cradle. Later, he acknowledges this fear even more explicitly, writing, “It continues ever true [...] that Saturn, or Chronos, or what we call TIME, devours all his Children: only by incessant Running, by incessant Working, may you (for some threescore and ten years) escape him; and you too he devours at last” (99). For Edna, the threat that she may not live a long life only intensifies this fear of Time; she is not afraid of death itself but is afraid of dying before she has fulfilled her vocation. In the same conversation with her doctor she echoes *Sartor Resartus* directly, lamenting that “I did not suspect that just as I had arranged my workshop, and sharpened all my tools, and measured off my work, my morning sun would set suddenly in the glowing east, and the long, cold night fall upon me, ‘wherein no man can work’--” (282). These final words of “The Everlasting Yea” chapter of *Sartor Resartus* once again suggest that Edna’s vocation is a specifically Carlylean one, just as the type of work she is doing—creating “revolutions in thought”—is Carlylean.

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<sup>19</sup> Trubey argues that “Edna’s longing to push her mind past the limits posed by her body suggests [...] anxiety over the blurred boundary between appropriate and “unwomanly” delights” (133).

Carlyle is essentially rethinking the very concept of knowledge as a combination of faith and intellect, reason and intuition, and Evans echoes his questioning. In this rethinking, both writers seek to preserve tradition while purporting the necessity of renewal and reconstruction of human institutions, and both believe they are living in times of transition. Near the end of *Sartor Resartus*, Teufelsdröckh writes, “The World [...] as it needs must, is under a process of devastation and waste, which, whether by silent assiduous corrosion, or open quicker combustion, as the case chances, will effectually enough annihilate the past Forms of Society; replace them with what it may” (178). Society is undergoing a process of destruction that is both inevitable and necessary: when society has become too corrupt, complete destruction is the only real option. The Carlylean hero is not without hope, however. This is a natural process and one which must be reenacted in every age, and the reborn society is always an improvement on the one that has been destroyed before it. The obliteration of society does not cause panic but relief, then, as the Editor describes: “Thus is Teufelsdröckh content that old sick Society should be deliberately burnt (alas! with quite other fuel than spicewood); in the faith that she is a Phoenix; and that a new heavenborn young one will rise out of her ashes!” (180). Teufelsdröckh has faith in revolution and reconstruction as part of an organic process that cleanses the illness of the past and renews man’s relationship with his spirituality.

Edna similarly sees a great deal of sickness in her society, but she has faith in humanity and its power to learn from history. While she too criticizes society’s materialism and corruption, she believes that humanity can ultimately be saved. Like Teufelsdröckh, she laments the growing materialism dominating the times, but like him she believes that this corruption is ultimately reparable because “[w]heresoever two or three Living Men are gathered together, there is Society” (Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* 179). Considering the times in which she lives, she

evokes Carlyle directly, lamenting that “Positivism in philosophy and pre-Raphaelitism in art, confronted her in the ranks of literature—lofty idealism seemed trodden down—pawed over by Carlyle’s ‘Monster Utlitaria’” (299). In *Sartor Resartus*, the Monster Utilitaria is the force that will essentially lead to the complete destruction of institutions to make way for the new.

Teufelsdröckh in fact awaits the time when the Monster will “tread down old ruinous Palaces and Temples, with her broad hoof, till the whole were trodden down, that new and better might be built!” (179). Edna’s ideals regarding society’s reconstruction are more conservative, for where Carlyle’s “monster” is awaited with a certain anticipation, Evans does not welcome its appearance. For her, a world that did not require radical change would be preferable. While she laments the monster’s appearance, however, she ultimately adopts a Carlylean view of a return to elements of tradition as a means of revolution.

The context of the novel may further explain Evans’ attraction to Carlyle’s notions of destruction and rebirth, as *St. Elmo* is set on the cusp of the outbreak of the Civil War and published soon after its end. While the novel is not about the war and in fact only refers once to “the cause which she [Edna] felt was so just, so holy” (360), Evans’ awareness of the changes her native region is beginning to (and will continue to) experience likely informs her response to Carlyle’s idea of the Phoenix. David Russell argues that the post-war South experienced a “widespread postwar cultural phenomenon—a desire to return to antebellum practices as a bulwark against the cataclysmic changes wrought by the war” (50). Evans, who is looking at these changes, creates a character in Edna who is looking toward these changes. Like Teufelsdröckh after he has passed through “The Everlasting Yea,” Edna feels a responsibility to help her society pass through its revolution: she “looked deeper, and found much that encouraged her, much that warmed and bound her sympathies to her fellow-creatures. Instead of

following the beaten track she struck out a new path, and tried the plan of denouncing the offence, not the offender; of attacking the sin while she pitied the sinner” (300). Neither Evans nor her heroine recognizes sinfulness in the institution of the South, but both do see and sympathize with the sinful potential of humankind. She envisions a solution in the form of her books; like *Teufelsdröckh*, she believes an intellectual approach can solve the world’s spiritual and moral problems. Edna’s return to the past in her look at mythology can be read, then, as an attempt to offer a unified notion of spirituality and faith which can offer the new society a stable foundation. Her second book, which she titles “*Shining Thrones of the Hearth*” looks to traditional women’s roles as a mean of providing this stability.

This book, which essentially takes the form of a conduct book, is ultimately rather conservative in both its form and content, but Edna still believes she is creating something new in addressing this old topic. She revisits the metaphor of weaving once again, asserting that “The aim of the book was to discover the only true and allowable and womanly sphere of feminine work, and though the theme was threadbare, she fearlessly picked up the frayed woof and rewove it” (337). While she attempts to re-envision the topic of woman’s place, she chooses not to use the novel form this time, instead constructing a persuasive argument based on vast historical research. She does not rely on contemporary examples but instead “Most assiduously she sifted the records of history, tracing in every epoch the sovereigns of the hearth—those who had reigned wisely and contentedly, ennobling and refining humanity” (338). So while her subject matter is well worn, she takes a uniquely scholarly approach to the topic. Her main theme is the necessity of women confining their exercise of power to the home and the careful moral influence of those within it. The ideal she espouses for all women is usefulness, mirroring the Carlylean/Goethean notion of doing “the duty that lies nearest” (Carlyle 148). So like her

first book, this one ultimately recommends a return to history and tradition as a means of achieving stability; she once again uses her intellect to achieve a moral goal.

The conservative nature of Evans' depiction of ideal domestic womanhood is ironic given the vocation of her heroine, but the valuation of feminine intellect suggests a reconsideration of this role. Russell argues that "Edna thus sees herself as an agent for cultural stability, not revolution. Her instruction aims at making women worthy of sustaining patriarchal authority" (56), and Edna's second book does indeed reinforce traditional notions of patriarchy. She insists, however, on the importance of women's education, believing that women can only fulfill their moral duty if their intellect is nurtured. In this book, she "contended for every woman's right which God and nature had decreed the sex. The right to be learned, wise, noble, useful, in woman's divinely limited sphere" (301). So she upholds a traditional notion of womanhood, but she combines it with a Carlylean respect for intellect. Evans is writing after the war has already occurred, and she is envisioning the establishment of a new order and negotiating its relationship with the old order in a Carlylean way. Her ideal postbellum culture will, like the antebellum culture, recognize distinctions of gender and race, but it is also based on a Carlylean aristocracy of intellect.

Her rejection of ideals of equality, then, does not simply reflect her anti-feminism or even her investment in the ideals of the Old South, but it allows the exceptional individual—the Carlylean individual—to claim her rightful place. Edna tells Sir Roger: "I have no aristocratic prejudices, for my grandfather was a blacksmith, and my father a carpenter; but I do not believe that 'all men are born free and equal'; and think that two-thirds of the Athenians were only fit to tie Socrates' shoes, and not one-half of Rome worthy to play valet and clasp the toga of Cato or Cicero" (254). While she may not have traditional "aristocratic prejudices" regarding birth, she

does embrace the ideal of a meritocracy where those who are intellectually and/or spiritually superior will be treated as such and will be given the power to rule the masses. This hierarchy of merit applies to gender roles as well, and Edna does envision different roles for different types of women. She believes that all women should reign primarily in the home, but she does make one exception which justifies her own ambition (and presumably, that of all exceptional women). Addressing single women, “she entreated the poor of her own sex, if ambitious, to become sculptors, painters, writers, teachers in schools or families; or else to remain mantua-makers, milliners, spinners, dairy-maids” (338). The distinctions of intellect inherent in these two “classes” of work suggest another Carlylean hierarchy of merit; while she conservatively allows that only single women should engage in wage-earning work, she does create a place for the exceptional woman to pursue the arts and/or to engage her intellect for the greater spiritual good of those around her. Most importantly, she believes that all women should develop their minds in order that they may contribute to the spiritual well-being of those around them.

while the novel considers societal revolution, it also traces a more individual revolution in the conversion of the book’s hero, which is resolved through the novel’s romance and marriage plot. Feminist critics have been disturbed by the marriage that concludes *St. Elmo*—and understandably so.<sup>20</sup> Edna is physically weak and pale before the ceremony begins, and immediately after Mr. Hammond has pronounced them married, Mr. Murray “turning to take her in his arms [...] saw that her eyelashes had fallen on her cheeks—she had lost all consciousness of what was passing” (365). Once she has recovered and St. Elmo carries her to the church, she “laid her head down on the altar-railing, and sobbed like a child” (366). Certainly a heroine who

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<sup>20</sup> Others have simply dismissed the conclusion as formula. Susan Harris chooses to focus on the “middles” of the women’s texts she explores because these are the parts which show “potential for ideological disruption” (21). Drew Gilpin Faust reads the novel’s conclusion as a capitulation, arguing that Edna’s “life and story culminate in conventional wedded bliss” (178).



reacts to her marriage with such excessive emotion is striking, and it may be tempting to infer that Edna's physical collapse signals her recognition of an intellectual loss. Tracey argues that "The rhetoric of death and illness signifies how difficult it was for Evans's independent heroine[s] to submit even to [a] renegotiated hierarchical marriage[s]" (103). Reading Evans through the lens of Carlyle, however, demonstrates that the marriage with which the novel ends is necessary to the spiritual-intellectual resolution for both Edna and St. Elmo, even if it is not satisfying for the modern reader. *St. Elmo*, unlike the other books in this study, is titled for its hero rather than its heroine; this is particularly striking given the strong personality and independence of Edna Earl.<sup>21</sup> As already noted, many critics have read Evans' novel as an attempt to restore confidence in the ideal of Southern masculinity, and this may account in part for this choice. It is probably not a coincidence that this is her first post-war novel, and it is the only one she names for a male character.

The title of the novel matters also because St. Elmo is the character who endures a genuine spiritual crisis and conversion in the novel, and ultimately Edna ensures that he is responsible for his own salvation. He is the character who, like Teufelsdröckh, must learn to "love not pleasure, love God" (Carlyle 146), and Edna is responsible not for saving him but for demonstrating the value of this philosophy. As Baym contends, "Edna does not save St. Elmo but in fact refuses to do so, resisting the greatest temptation that can be put in the path of a romantic, enthusiastic, and pious girl, especially if she is in love with the scoundrel" (290). St. Elmo must go through his own spiritual crisis in order to make true use of his vast intellect and to become worthy of Edna. So while the novel is clearly Edna's story and she is the key to

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<sup>21</sup> Many critics have noted the extent to which the novel's popularity led to the use of the names Edna Earl and St. Elmo in various ways (see Fidler, etc.). Johnson, however, suggests that "the protagonist of *St. Elmo*, Edna Earl, did not inspire the same cultural reverence as her rakish counterpart [...] The culture's fascination with St. Elmo may represent a Victorian attraction to violations of moral codes which is made socially acceptable by St. Elmo's ultimate repentance" (27).

sympathy, the salvation of St. Elmo is the event on which the validation of the Carlylean spirit-mind connection hinges; in order to demonstrate the necessity of thinking and belief, St. Elmo's salvation must lie at the heart of the novel. As Russell notes, the fates of Edna and St. Elmo are very deeply intertwined: "St. Elmo improves as Edna declines, and this simultaneous trajectory leads to the logical culmination of the double-proposal novel" (57). Their relationship drives the spiritual and intellectual as well as the romantic plot of the novel.

The connection between Edna and St. Elmo is a passionate and ambivalent one from their first meeting, near the beginning of the novel. In this initial encounter, St. Elmo is traveling near Chattanooga and, needing a horseshoe repaired, stops at the blacksmith shop run by Edna's grandfather, Aaron Hunt. St. Elmo treats the elderly man with disrespect, and Mr. Hunt tells Edna that he is "a rude, blasphemous, wicked man" (15). When Edna moves to Le Bocage and realizes that he is her new guardian's son, she regrets having agreed to stay. Yet Edna and St. Elmo are alike in their exceptional intelligence and their sense of their own isolation from the rest of the world. St. Elmo is a wanderer, described as "An Ishmael in society, his uplifted hand smote all conventionalities and shams, spared neither age nor sex, nor sanctuaries, and acknowledged sanctity nowhere" (59). He has no regard for societal or religious institutions, and years of such living have harmed him spiritually and physically. Yet while Edna is repulsed by his immorality, she is drawn to his mind because she recognizes its great potential. His intellectual influence over Edna begins with their first meeting, when he inadvertently introduces her to Dante by leaving his copy of *The Divine Comedy* behind when he flees from the blacksmith's shop. The book, like its owner, alternately excites and frightens Edna, as "Night and day she pored over this new treasure; sometimes dreaming of the hideous faces that scowled at her from the solemn, mournful pages; and anon, when started from sleep by these awful

visions, she would soothe herself to rest by murmuring the metrical version of the Lord's Prayer continued in the 'Purgatory'" (16). So St. Elmo unknowingly leads Edna to prayer even as he inspires her intellect when she attempts to make sense of the poetry which is "beyond her comprehension" (16). Her return of the book to its rightful owner reflects her character as well, which even the cynical St. Elmo realizes: he tells her, "Edna Earl, you are at least honest and truthful, and those are rare traits at the present day" (48). She will become the key to his salvation not because she agrees to save him but because she offers him hope for humanity.

As their relationship develops throughout the novel, her response to him remains much the same: she is frightened by his moral bankruptcy but intrigued by his erudition. They frequently disagree, particularly about the value of women's learning and writing, but the intensity of their debate fuels the fire of her mind's curiosity. Her character requires a man who can match her intellectually as well as morally, as Mr. Hammond tells Gordon Leigh upon her refusal of his proposal: "If she ever marries, it will not be from gratitude or devotion, but because she has learned to love, almost against her will, some strong, vigorous thinker, some man whose will and intellect master hers, who compels her heart's homage, and without whose society she cannot persuade herself to live" (123). The language of mastery and submission here reminds us of Edna's traditional sense of proper womanhood, but at the same time it is clear that accomplishing what Mr. Hammond envisions would be no small task. Indeed, of the many men who seek Edna's hand, St. Elmo is the only one whose mind can possibly earn her devotion. The problem is that St. Elmo's intellect surpasses his spirituality: his spiritual malaise contrasts with his intelligence, and the imbalance is the true tragedy. Mr. Hammond tells her, "He has the finest intellect I have ever met among living men; but it is unsanctified—worse still, it is dedicated to the work of scoffing at and blaspheming the truths of religion" (64-65). In this way

he is almost a foil for Edna, who uses her intellectual curiosity and ability specifically to try and prove the truths of religion. He cannot be a fit mate for her until he passes through his conversion. So when she initially feels attracted to him, she determines to resist “this strange temptation which Satan has sent to draw my heart away from God and my duty” (144). Like St. Elmo, at this point Edna faces a battle between her spirit and her intellect: they will both have to achieve a balance in order to resolve the conflict. In this way St. Elmo becomes a vehicle for the testing of Edna’s spirit; hence he ultimately strengthens her relationship with God.

St. Elmo’s moral struggles and despair echo those of Teufelsdröckh, as does their cause. Like Blumine in *Sartor Resartus*, Agnes Hunt betrays St. Elmo, and like Teufelsdröckh, St. Elmo responds to this betrayal with what initially appears to be aimless wandering. After Teufelsdröckh sees Blumine and Herr Towgood riding together after their wedding, “He quietly lifts his Pilgerstab (Pilgrim-staff), ‘his old business being soon wound up;’ and begins a perambulation and circumambulation of the terraqueous Globe!” (114). St. Elmo’s betrayal has much graver consequences, as this romantic triangle concludes with the death of Murray Hammond following a duel between the two men, but his response echoes that of Teufelsdröckh. He explains to Edna, “As soon as I was able to travel, my mother took me to Europe, and for five years we lived in Paris, Naples, or wandered to and fro. Then she came home, and I plunged into the heart of Asia. After two years I returned to Paris, and gave myself up to every species of dissipation” (202). St. Elmo’s travels will continue for years to follow, and his wanderings will only fuel his disregard for religion and lack of sympathy for his fellow human beings. Both of these wounded men must heal themselves, and their seemingly aimless wanderings actually lead them to salvation. Evans’ description of St. Elmo as an “Ishmael” also echoes Carlyle’s allusion to the same Biblical character. The Editor, referring to the young Teufelsdröckh’s education,

observes: “Thus from poverty does the strong educe nobler wealth; thus in the destitution of the wild desert, does one young Ishmael acquire for himself the highest of all possessions, that of Self-help” (88). Like Teufelsdröckh, St. Elmo will have to help himself to restore his spiritual health.

Edna’s role in his conversion is a complex one: she is a positive example, but she does not save him; in fact she repeatedly refuses to do so, encouraging him to rely on himself and his God. When he initially proposes marriage to her, he claims that her power over him can bring about his salvation, pleading, “It is not too late for me to do some good in the world; and if you will only love me, and trust me, and help me—” (210). Edna responds that she cannot marry him because she does not trust him, but most importantly because she cannot save him.<sup>22</sup> She urges him to “Look yonder to Jesus, weeping, bleeding! Only his blood and tears can wash away your guilt [...] He only can save and purify you” (211). While expressed in the rather conventional language of sentimental Christianity, the idea is also Carlylean; salvation is achieved through an individual interpretation of Christ’s relationship to man. Before leaving for New York, she pens a letter to her would-be fiancé that is even clearer in its articulation of the necessity of spiritual self-reliance. She writes, “To the mercy of God, and the love of Christ, and *the judgment of your own conscience*, I commit you. Henceforth we walk different paths, and after to-night, it is my wish that we meet no more on earth. Mr. Murray, I cannot lift up your darkened soul; and you would only drag mine down. For your final salvation, I shall never cease to pray, till we stand face to face, before the bar of God” (217-18, emphasis mine). What Edna suggests here is not that she is uninvolved in the salvation of St. Elmo; she does have a human, Christian duty to pray for his soul and to try and lead him to God’s mercy. She acknowledges

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<sup>22</sup> This also echoes Aurora’s refusal of Romney’s initial proposal of marriage; though in different ways, both Edna and Aurora validate the Carlylean ideal of self-help.

the importance of their relationship and his power over her, but she is not capable of or responsible for the fate of his soul; only his own conscience can guide him, and only Christ can save him.

St. Elmo's conversion, then, is his own individual responsibility, and indeed does take place while Edna is away from Le Bocage; she is not even present for his ordination. When he comes to New York to retrieve her, his plea is not for her to assist in his salvation but instead in his work. His second proposal greatly resembles the first, but the spirit is different; this time he speaks not of her power to save him but of what they can accomplish by working together. He implores her, "But perhaps if you could realize how much I need your help in my holy work, how much more good I could accomplish in the world if you were with me, you might listen, without steeling yourself against me, as you have so long done, Can you, will you trust me fully? Can you be a minister's wife, and aid him as only you can?" (363). He acknowledges here that the work is his to do, and the help he asks for is not with his own salvation but with a greater mission. For this reason, and because of the change that has been wrought in his soul, Edna is able to respond, "Oh! I trust you! I trust you fully!" (363).<sup>23</sup> Finally St. Elmo's spiritual health has achieved a balance with his intelligence, and they are able to share in the Carlylean imperative to work.

The marriage itself, as already discussed, comprises the final pages of the novel, and it is carried out with melodrama, implying that Edna's career as a writer, which has nearly ruined her

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<sup>23</sup> Edna does not speak her love for St. Elmo any more directly than this; she meets his plea that she say, "St. Elmo, I love you" with silence, and instead "The glowing face was only pressed closer" (363). This seems to reflect Evans' rewriting of the conclusion of *Aurora Leigh*, which Edna criticizes: "While I yield to no human being in admiration of, and loving gratitude to Mrs. Browning, and regard the first eight books of 'Aurora Leigh' as vigorous, grand, and marvellously beautiful, I cannot deny that a painful feeling of mortification seizes me when I read the ninth and concluding book, wherein 'Aurora,' with most unwomanly vehemence, voluntarily declares and reiterates her love for 'Romney' [...] I find it difficult to forgive the unwomanly inconsistency into which she betrays her heroine" (255). Edna suggests here that silence is the more womanly response to a declaration of love, but in so doing she also implies the power of silence.

health, is in fact ended. After Edna has recovered from her “attack” following the wedding ceremony, St. Elmo tells her, “To-day I snap the fetters of your literary bondage. There shall be no more books written! No more study, no more toil, no more anxiety, no more heart-aches! [...] You belong solely to me now, and I shall take care of the life you have nearly destroyed in your inordinate ambition” (365). Edna does not respond to this declaration of her freedom, answering only to tell him that “the pain has all passed away. I am perfectly well again.” The final paragraphs express typical nineteenth-century Christian sentiments about Edna’s bliss at St. Elmo’s conversion and the life they will share together, and St. Elmo utters the novel’s final words, lines from the conclusion of Tennyson’s “The Princess.”<sup>24</sup> All of these factors can easily lead to the conclusion that Edna is effectively silenced at the novel’s end.<sup>25</sup>

But Edna’s silence appears quite different when read in the light of her characterization and her earlier statement of her plans for the future; her lack of a response to her liberation from literary bondage echoes her silence in the face of St. Elmo’s desire that she openly declare her love, and both suggest an ambivalence that may be read as Carlylean. Before St. Elmo comes to New York to “save” her, she has already informed Mr. Manning that “At present, I expect to write nothing. I want to study some subjects that greatly interest me, and shall try to inform and improve myself, and keep silent until I see some phase of truth neglected, or some new aspect of error threatening mischief in society [...] Books seem such holy things to me, destined to plead

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<sup>24</sup> These lines allude to Edna’s criticism of *Aurora Leigh*, the conclusion of which she compares unfavorably with that of Tennyson’s poem. Russell sees this quotation as a representation of the traditional marriage Edna makes: “The language of the poem highlights the limits Edna has now accepted—she is ‘yoked’ to St. Elmo; her ‘hopes’ necessarily merge with his, and in the merger, Edna helps ‘accomplish’ St. Elmo’s manhood” (59). As Tracey points out, however, Evans may call this into question by actually changing Tennyson’s language. She argues that “even this final endorsement of Tennyson’s vision is altered by St. Elmo’s, or Evans’s, deletion of the imperious and perhaps indelicate command ‘Come, / Yield thyself up’ (342-43) from the middle of the quotation” (77). Perhaps, this suggests, Evans is indirectly suggesting a more equitable marriage.

<sup>25</sup> Trubey argues such a reading most stringently, contending that “The contrast between Edna’s intellectual voice and her infantilized crying is marked; for a woman who has been vocal throughout the narrative, her loss of voice at the end suggests a death-like state” (128).

either for or against their creators, in the final tribunal, that I dare not lightly or hastily attempt to write them” (356). So when St. Elmo claims that he is rescuing Edna, he does not know that she has already made a decision to refrain from writing until she feels prepared to approach her task with the appropriate reverence and knowledge. Her silence in response to his proclamation, then, may not imply complicity; perhaps this conversation will continue later. Her decision to remain silent follows Teufelsdröckh’s injunction: “[D]o thou thyself but hold thy tongue for one day: on the morrow, how much clearer are thy purposes, and duties [...] Speech is too often not, as the Frenchman defined it, the art of concealing Thought; but of quite stifling and suspending Thought, so that there is none to conceal” (165). In this regard, Edna’s silence as a writer and her silence in response to St. Elmo seem suggestive; perhaps she plans to put down her pen only until she feels she has something important to say.

The context of our readings of *St. Elmo* should expand to include the intellectual as well as the political and regional traditions with which Evans was engaging. Recognizing Edna Earl’s familiarity with Carlylean thought offers a new and compelling reading of the novel that makes it possible to consider the important issues of intellect and spirituality with which Augusta Jane Evans and her heroine were wrestling. The questions this novel asks are not just those of a Southern patriot or a conservative woman, but they encompass the most profound of all human problems: the relationship between the mind and the spirit.



## CHAPTER 5

“FIND SOME USEFUL, HAPPY WORK TO DO”: DIOGENES TEUFELSDRÖCKH AND  
 “PILGRIMING” IN *LITTLE WOMEN*

When critics have examined the background of *Little Women*, they have most often looked to Louisa May Alcott’s family, which was obviously a major source for the plot, characters, and themes that the novel develops.<sup>1</sup> The fascination with *Little Women* seems to be almost as much about its author as the text itself. Sheryl A. Englund argues that the identification of Alcott’s life with her fiction essentially created her writerly persona, that “The discourse of the autobiographical so common in the interpretation of her fiction is [...] the pivot of Louisa May Alcott’s literary celebrity, however that celebrity is delineated and understood at any given historical moment” (202). When the novel became popular, Alcott exploited the identification of the March family with the already well-known Alcott family. While Englund reads the use of autobiography as a kind of marketing technique, and it was certainly an effective one, Alcott saw it as a literary technique, believing that her book derived its truth and power from the authenticity and simplicity of the March family’s story. She wrote, “The characters were drawn from life, which gives them whatever merit they possess; for I find it impossible to invent anything half so true or touching as the simple facts with which every day life supplies

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the important critical studies to focus on a biographical reading of Alcott’s most famous novel include those by Valerie Alderson, Madelon Bedell (*The Alcotts*), Humphrey Carpenter, Ednah D. Cheney, Margaret Crompton, Sarah Elbert, Karen Haltunnen, Eugenia Kaledin, and Martha Saxton.

me” (*Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* 118).<sup>2</sup> As a result of Alcott’s identification of the book with her life, the interest in Alcott’s personal biography has at times overshadowed attention to her intellectual heritage.

While the endeavor to understand the autobiographical elements of the novel remains worthwhile, readings of Alcott’s background have largely limited themselves to psychoanalytic approaches. The complexities of the psychology of the Alcott family have been explored rather thoroughly, but *Little Women*’s engagement with the intellectual culture of its time has been given rather short shrift. Judith Fetterley’s well-known reading in “Alcott’s Civil War” suggests the problematic nature of taking the authorial persona at face value. Though she too applies a psychoanalytical approach, Fetterley’s aim is to consider Alcott’s intellect. She reads the critical neglect of Alcott’s intelligence as a result of the style and popularity of her most famous novel, arguing that Alcott’s sensation stories demonstrate “the amount of rage and intelligence Alcott had to suppress in order to attain her ‘true style’ with *Little Women*” (370). Fetterley’s reading further suggests an underlying tension in the text which relates directly to the suppression of Alcott’s intellect, both in her own time and in responses to her work. Jesse Crisler, who provides perhaps the most thorough examination of the literary allusions in *Little Women*, similarly suggests the value of using Alcott’s intellectual autobiography as a means of understanding the novel’s autobiographical nature in a new way. She suggests that “A close examination of the various works to which Alcott alludes provides a stimulating reading of her novel, one which supports its autobiographical nature, albeit in a way which has been previously neglected” (27).

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<sup>2</sup> While Englund argues that Alcott consciously perpetuated this myth (and the identification of herself with the character of “Jo”), Alcott would eventually come to regret revealing so much of herself in her work. Madeleine B. Stern notes that after she became a famous writer of books for children, “Now that the fame Louisa Alcott had coveted was hers, she found it less a pleasure than a burden. Her early amazement at being treated ‘like the Queen of Sheba’ turned into aversion for being lionized. Requests for autographs, the sudden appearance of inquisitive strangers at her doorstep, made her ‘porcupiny’” (Introduction, *Journals of Louisa May Alcott* 23).

Both Fetterley and Crisler demonstrate that attributing Alcott's inspiration solely to her family situation or background ignores a rich tradition of thought and an intelligent and capable woman's engagement with it. The approach to *Little Women* that this chapter will present expands on these readings of Alcott's intellectual heritage by examining her engagement (and struggle) with one of the most challenging texts of her time: Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.

As many have noted, the family in which Louisa grew up was not necessarily "typical" of its time, fathered as it was by a progressive and sometimes controversial Transcendentalist philosopher, A. Bronson Alcott. Many critics have explored the elder Alcott's influence on his daughter, but once again the focus has frequently remained fixed on the psychological aspects of the father-daughter relationship.<sup>3</sup> While I do not wish to discredit these readings, I contend that it is also important to consider the impact of the intellectual environment such an upbringing fostered and the ways in which Alcott struggled with her father's philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we must consider the ways in which the intellectual relationship between the Alcotts becomes mediated by outside influences, namely other thinkers and texts of which the two shared knowledge. Through Louisa's relationship with her father's philosophizing she was introduced to two important and interconnected master narratives that would greatly influence *Little Women*: John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.

Critics have not granted a great deal of attention to Louisa May Alcott's intellectual relationship with Carlyle except to acknowledge that she knew and apparently admired his work.

As a young woman, she professed a great attraction to his "earth-quaky style" (*Journals of*

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<sup>3</sup> Bedell, Brooks, Gay, Morrow, and Saxton have explored this relationship thoroughly, all with a psychoanalytic approach.

<sup>4</sup> One of Louisa's best known fictional responses to her father's idealism was "Transcendental Wild Oats," a short story which satirized the experience of Fruitlands. Carol Gay suggests the contradictions of the relationship between Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, suggesting that she "largely ignore[d] him in her writing, [...] poke[d] fun at him among her friends, and—at the same time—[...] devote[d] her life to making him comfortable" (181).

*Louisa May Alcott* 105), and in her journal of 1852 listed “Carlyle’s French Revolution” and “Hero and Hero Worship” on her “list of books I like” (67). While she was aware of Carlyle’s rather harsh judgment of her father, she did not seem to let this interfere with her admiration.<sup>5</sup> Instead of blaming Carlyle for his judgment of her father, she recognized their meeting as a foolish and hence a failed experiment. Later in her life she wrote to Anna Alcott Pratt (in 1882): “A. B. A. & T. C. never could meet and understand one another, & it was vain to try” (*Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* 260).<sup>6</sup> Alcott’s assessment of the impossibility of such a meeting highlights the inherent tension between these two great thinkers and also recalls the tensions she explored in *Little Women*; these tensions are linked directly to the problem of work and to the authors’ divergent readings of *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

While Carlyle did not profess the same attraction to *Pilgrim’s Progress* that Bronson Alcott did, it is certainly an important predecessor to *Sartor Resartus*.<sup>7</sup> Not many critics have specifically examined Carlyle’s use of Bunyan, but those who have tend to point out the material-spiritual negotiations whereby *Sartor Resartus* redefines Christian’s pilgrimage for a new era. Edwin Paxton Hood calls the book “a real Pilgrim’s Progress [...] a story of a pilgrim who through many scenes, and every variety of all but unutterable sorrows, through which the child of painful thought and wild passion passes, claims at last his birthright as a living immortal soul” (52). This reading reflects the journey to salvation and suggests that Teufelsdröckh achieves a kind of salvation on earth, as he becomes spirit in the course of the story itself. Barry

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<sup>5</sup> The Editors of the *Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia* suggest that “Her attitude toward Carlyle changed as the result of an unfortunate meeting of her father with Carlyle in London in 1842” (Eiselein and Phillips 47). The primary evidence seems to suggest otherwise, as all of the positive mentions of Carlyle in her journals appear well after this meeting.

<sup>6</sup> The meeting of Alcott and Carlyle is documented in Carlyle’s letters to Emerson and in Alcott’s Journals. See Slater 326 and *The Journals of Bronson Alcott* 163.

<sup>7</sup> The language of pilgrimage abounds throughout the book, especially in the central chapters describing Teufelsdröckh’s spiritual crisis. The hero is compared to John the Baptist (23) and Ishmael (88), and the journey to the “Everlasting Yea” is described as “shadow-hunting and shadow-hunted Pilgrimings” (141).

Qualls, who reads *Pilgrim's Progress* as a foundational text for the development of the Victorian novel, argues that Carlyle helps bring not only an old moral but also an old form into the modern age. This unusual book is, he argues, “the prototypical Victorian fiction” (11). He asserts that *Sartor* “amalgamate[s] the Romantic strands of the Bildungsroman and the progresses of the old religious books, and [...] found[s] this amalgamation in the harsh realities of contemporary social life” (10). He specifically looks to Carlyle’s “emphasis on “practical life” and “common household affections” (11).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, both of these authors assert Carlyle’s emphasis on individuality, both spiritual and material. Given Alcott’s admiration for the Victorian sage, we should not be surprised to discover that these assessments also parallel Anne K. Phillips’ reading of Alcott’s rendering of the American pilgrim: “Beyond Bunyan, in the American context, a pilgrim is one who chooses to leave a community for spiritual reasons and to embrace an alternative system of values and beliefs. This sense of the individual in opposition to the larger society, and the individual’s responsibility to set an example for others, permeates *Little Women*” (225). Phillips’ description of the responsible but isolated individual could equally apply to Diogenes Teufelsdröckh and reflects an important part of radical individuality common to Bunyan, Carlyle, and Alcott: a didactic mission and a sense of social responsibility. The tension between materialism and spirituality is accompanied by a tension between the individual and his responsibility to the universe around him.

Louisa May Alcott was introduced to both *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Sartor Resartus* through her father’s influence, both directly and indirectly.<sup>9</sup> Critics have long recognized that reading (and re-reading) *The Pilgrim's Progress* was, for Bronson Alcott, a formative experience.

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<sup>8</sup> This will echo some of the critical responses to *Little Women* which follow in this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Emerson was also a mediator in the relationship between Louisa and Carlyle. As Bernstein notes, “Emerson, himself profoundly inspired by Thomas Carlyle, also exerted an enormous influence on the philosophy of both Bronson and Louisa May Alcott” (31-32). See also Shealy, “Singing Mignon’s Song,” on the relationship between Emerson and Louisa.

Anne K. Phillips directly attributes Louisa's use of Bunyan in her novel to the elder Alcott's influence (213-14). He frequently refers to Bunyan in his journals, perhaps most eloquently summing up his response in the following passage: "More than any work of genius, more than all other books, the Dreamer's Dream brought me into a living acquaintance with myself, my duties; and if the value of work is to be determined by its power to interest and to educate its readers, then I must acknowledge my debt to be the greatest to the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*" (qtd. in Morrow 23). The elder Alcott passed on this guide to his children and to his students, encouraging them to read and even act out the book, a practice seen in the early chapters of *Little Women*.<sup>10</sup> Given his interest in spirituality, it seems quite appropriate that Bronson Alcott would feel so strongly attached to a story of a man's spiritual growth and eventual salvation. His daughter, however, was not only interested in affairs of the spirit, but was concerned with negotiating and succeeding in the material world as well. So while Bronson Alcott's belief in the educational value of *Pilgrim's Progress* would influence Louisa's mission in *Little Women*, her concern with the material would diverge from her father's reading of Bunyan and help to account for her deep appreciation for Carlyle, an appreciation that her father clearly did not share.

Abigail Ann Hamblen attributes Louisa's conflicting attitudes toward spirit and matter to her parents' differences: "Like her father, Louisa seemed to have a deep belief in the power of some form of communion with a divine presence and trusted in the ultimate goodness of her God [...]" Like her mother, however, she was a stern advocate of the Puritan work ethic, and had a deep orthodox conviction that man was responsible for his actions and must use his common sense to make his way in the world" (59). As the author of *Little Women* negotiated these conflicting

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<sup>10</sup> In her letters and journals, Louisa May Alcott recalls a school festival in 1861, during which her father's students "to whom Father had read *Pilgrim's Progress* told the story, one child after the other popping up to say his or her part, and at the end a little tot walked forward, saying with a pretty air of wonder,--"And behold it was all a dream." The event was a great triumph for Bronson, whose innovations in education were praised by those who saw the performance (*Journals* 104).

attitudes in various ways, so too would the characters of the novel. But while critics like Hamblen return to biographical explanations for Alcott's conflicting attitudes toward spirit and matter, a more satisfying explanation can be found if we turn once again to the influence of Carlyle, whose ideas will mediate her reading of *Pilgrim's Progress* throughout the novel.

Critics who have specifically examined Alcott's engagement with Bunyan in *Little Women* see *Pilgrim's Progress* as both a structural model for the novel and a moral guide for its characters. Some have examined the extent to which Alcott's take on the allegory is decidedly gendered. Linda Kerber, for example, suggests that while Puritanism offered the possibilities of individualism for men, for Alcott's little women Bunyan offered only "repeated images of restraint, resignation, and endurance" (166).<sup>11</sup> Karla Walters' examination of Alcott and Bunyan similarly focuses on repression in the novel, arguing that Alcott "transform[s] the metaphor of the pilgrim's quest for the Celestial City into a metaphor for the submission of personal ambition to domesticity and civilization" (153). Furthermore, she argues that "the captivity narrative is a more likely genre to fit the feminine experience of pilgrimage than is the more masculine quest" (155). Both of these readings suggest that the influence of Bunyan was in many ways a negative one for the female characters at the center of *Little Women* because it reinforced gender expectations and the priority of domesticity for women. The restrictive nature of *Pilgrim's Progress* and American womanhood may help explain where Alcott thought there was room for the influence of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle's interpretation of the meaning of pilgrimage, though also gendered, may have offered Alcott a greater freedom, for his focus is less on the

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<sup>11</sup> Several other critics argue that the main impact of Bunyan's influence is both gendered and repressive. Greta Gaard argues that "unlike Bunyan's Pilgrim, whose journey leads to self-actualization, the journey to fulfillment for little women ends in cheerful self-denial" (10). Beverly Lyon Clark similarly argues that after her conversion, a little woman must learn "to live by God's Word, or by John Bunyan's word, not by her own" (81). Karen Haltunnen reads *Pilgrim's Progress* as a kind of drama enacted in both the novel and the Alcott household, arguing that it ultimately "guides [the March girls'] conscientious efforts to develop emotional self-control" (233).

individual's identity than on the individual's actions. In the Gospel of Work, doing one's duty and engaging in work are themselves meaningful activities, and while the exceptional individual (like Teufelsdröckh) may be destined for greatness, all of humanity is ultimately bound together by the same vocation. In Carlyle's vision—if not in reality—no work is degraded or degrading. Moreover, *Sartor Resartus* validates the importance of work as part of a pilgrimage on earth that is both spiritual and material.

The question of how earthly pilgrims negotiate material existence and spiritual growth is another which critics have examined in Alcott's use of *Pilgrim's Progress*; this question also connects *Little Women* to *Sartor Resartus*. But critics often miss the influence of Carlyle on Alcott's novel, and when they do, they risk misreadings. David E. Smith, for example, focuses on materialism and social class in the novel, criticizing Alcott's use of Bunyan as a kind of diminishment of the purely spiritual ideals of the original text. He argues that *Little Women* represents a transformation of *Pilgrim's Progress* into the "banal and mediocre language of middle-class sentimental piety" (102). Furthermore, he suggests that the Marches' pilgrimage ends at the City of Vanity, "smacking of the Cities of Destruction and Carnality" (102).<sup>12</sup> In spite of his misreading, Smith correctly identifies the tension between spirituality and materialism that characterizes the pilgrimages of the March sisters throughout the novel. Rather than reading Alcott's novel as a failure to reach the spiritual ideals of Bunyan's book, we should see it as an account of one family's struggle to balance spiritual and material well-being, a struggle that echoes Carlyle's critique of mechanization and modernity in *Sartor Resartus*. As he recalls his spiritual crisis in "The Everlasting No," Teufelsdröckh laments: "To me the

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<sup>12</sup> In part his reading rests on a kind of misinterpretation of the material circumstances of each of the March women at the end of the novel; he argues that each girl becomes rich, which is not exactly the case. All the March pilgrims except for Amy end up decidedly middle class, but certainly not rich. The larger mistake is his failure to note the presence of Carlyle in the novel.



Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, roling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb” (127).<sup>13</sup> Both Alcott and Carlyle, then, show how the conditions of material existence have changed since the time of Bunyan’s writing, and both demonstrate the difficulties spiritual beings face in negotiating these conditions. As Foster and Simms suggest, the modern world as Louisa May Alcott sees it is too complicated to rely on *Pilgrim’s Progress* alone. They contend that “the sisters succeed only partially in conforming to its template of spiritual perfection, and the existence of alternative literary identities within *Little Women* indicates the inadequacy of Bunyan’s powerfully simple ideal in resolving the contemporary problems which the girls encounter” (91). Bunyan’s ideal is useful but limited; the struggles of Carlyle’s hero will ultimately offer a more realistic model.

Alcott’s real concern, then, is the same as Carlyle’s: to demonstrate how one should live in this world, not simply how to achieve the next. For example, Ruth K. MacDonald sheds a more positive light on materialism in *Little Women*, arguing that “For all that Alcott’s work is patterned on *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, it does not deny the interests and appeal of real life. [...] Life is to be lived and enjoyed, not simply endured until one dies. Religion is efficacious in dealing with life’s problems, but death is not to be wished for as a final solution, though it is to be greeted with equanimity when it comes” (*Christian’s Children* 77). This reading suggests that Alcott’s interest in the material is an attempt to consider reality in a way that does not diminish the importance of spirituality but instead places it in a contemporary context and explores the potential struggle for Christians who wish to live a fulfilled life in this world rather

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<sup>13</sup> This reflects Bronson Alcott’s response to (and likely misunderstanding of) Carlyle’s gospel. He describes his philosophy as follows: “‘Work! Work!’ is with him both motto and creed; but ‘tis all toil of the brain, a draught on the memory, a sacrifice of the living to the dead, instead of devotion to living humanity and a taste of her ennobling hopes” (*Journals* 163).

than waiting for the next. It is particularly interesting to consider this in light of Teufelsdröckh's struggle not to commit suicide as he passes through his spiritual crisis. After long years of what he describes as "Death-agony" (128), he finally resolves: "Despicable biped! what is the sum-total of the worst that lies before thee? Death? Well, Death; and say the pangs of Tophet too, and all that the Devil and Man may, will, or can do against thee! Hast thou not a heart; canst thou not suffer whatso it be; and as a Child of Freedom, though outcast, trample Tophet itself under thy feet, while it consumes thee? Let it come, then; I will meet it and defy it!" (128-29). Despite the difficulties he faces, he grows determined to embrace life and defy death. Karla Walters also considers Alcott's concern with earthly life, but she focuses on domesticity, arguing that "While not entirely ignoring the other-worldly tradition of the Celestial City, Alcott's text demonstrates a confirmed belief in the importance of making home a little heaven on this earth" (154). This suggests that the spiritual is not replaced by the material alone but more importantly by the idea of the home. And it falls to women, of course, to create this domestic ideal; it is this for which the March women learn to strive.

While she considers the importance of gender, Anne K. Phillips also examines Alcott's transformation of Bunyan's moral lessons for all readers in a new century. She argues that the emphasis in *Little Women* on self-control is a model for adults and children, men and women, that stems from Alcott's understanding of *Pilgrim's Progress*. But instead of suggesting typical Victorian repression, she argues that Alcott's reinterpretation of Bunyan provides a model through which the characters actually gain "freedom from the limitations of nineteenth-century social mores" (214). I would argue that this freedom may also stem from Alcott's use of *Sartor Resartus* as another model, one which interprets duty as a service not only to others but to the self as well. This argument suggests that the pilgrimage Alcott depicts is not just about salvation

but about individuality as well; for the March family, “Self-reliance elevates them above the limitations of their social and economic position in the world” (215). This self-reliance takes the form of spiritual independence or individuality, but Alcott also considers the problem of material independence for women. It is here that Phillips takes her reading into Book II of *Little Women*, where she argues that “each of the sisters must negotiate her way between her immediate desire, which may involve material wealth and fashionable mores, and her moral instincts” (219).<sup>14</sup> In order to achieve spiritual or moral well-being, the March girls must learn to repress their material desires, just as Christian and Teufelsdröckh do.

So while *Sartor Resartus* and *Little Women* differ from each other a great deal in plot and structure, *The Pilgrim's Progress* serves as a key master narrative for both texts; like Bunyan, both authors create stories that can be read as allegories of spiritual growth and development in a material world and both envision their work filling a didactic need in a new way. Indeed, both recognize the value of this narrative for the same reasons Bronson Alcott does, even if they interpret its value in new ways. They consciously see themselves constructing books to teach their readers how to live in this world, just as Bunyan wrote a guide preparing his readers for the next. Carlyle describes the story of Teufelsdröckh to his editor as “put together in the fashion of a Didactic Novel; but indeed properly *like* nothing yet extant” (*Sartor Resartus* 227). What Alcott sought to do with *Little Women* was new as well; she vowed to “work away and [...] try the experiment, for lively, simple books are much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need” (*Journals* 166). Ruth MacDonald notes that the novel was indeed “for its time [...] unique in American literature, not only because of its intended audience but in its style and method of teaching as well.” She further remarks that “A code of right behavior is implicit here, but the author does not intrude to point a finger at the reader and preach, as other writers for children did

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<sup>14</sup> Phillips’ reading is unique here; other critics have seen Bunyan’s influence primarily in Book I of the novel.

at the time” (*Louisa May Alcott* 15). Her experiment succeeded (and continues to succeed) for generations of women to follow, as Martha Saxton notes: “Just as Louisa’s father regarded *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as a guide to personal contentment, so *Little Women* became a handbook for girls desiring wisdom about becoming good women” (5).<sup>15</sup> In fulfilling their educational missions, Carlyle and Alcott re-envision Bunyan in a way that shifts the focus to the importance of meaningful work as a means of growing in spirit as well as in mind; the protagonists develop both materially and spiritually through work; this is part of the lesson of each text. As Qualls suggests, in *Sartor Resartus*, “Work connects the inward and outward worlds” (26); the same is true in *Little Women*. The central pilgrims in these texts—Diogenes Teufelsdröckh and Jo March—are on journeys to salvation as is the central figure of Bunyan’s allegory; however, their journeys toward spiritual fulfillment and moral development are achieved through material work.

One of the key ways in which Carlyle and Alcott’s readings of Bunyan diverge is that Carlyle depicts the pilgrimage of one man while Alcott depicts that of an entire family. Teufelsdröckh’s journey is much more literalized and is more like Christian’s; he actually physically moves and is alone. His solitude reflects the story of the hero who leaves behind his family to find his own salvation: “*he that comes after him, and hates not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sister; yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple*” (*Pilgrim’s Progress* 23). Alcott, however, depicts multiple pilgrimages throughout the course of *Little Women*; she focuses most closely on the character of Jo, but the other main characters in the novel, both male and female, are on spiritual journeys as well. The novel actually depicts several pilgrims, each of whom can be seen to represent some part of Teufelsdröckh’s character or struggle in his pilgrimage toward meaningful work. As Anne Dalke argues, “Like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, on which she drew so heavily, Alcott’s novel offers a

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<sup>15</sup> On the long-term influence of *Little Women*, see Heilbrun, Ozick, Janeway, Sicherman.

‘stereoscopic’ view of two journeys: the first individual and the second communal” (571).<sup>16</sup>

The pilgrimages in *Little Women* are less literal journeys and are more closely tied to home and family, which reflects the gender expectations of the times in which these texts were written but does not mitigate Alcott’s dialogue with Bunyan and Carlyle.<sup>17</sup> Instead it suggests an elevation of home and family and reflects Carlyle’s notion of doing “*the Duty which lies nearest thee*” (148).<sup>18</sup> These journeys are, then, more confined but no less spiritually meaningful than Teufelsdröckh’s.

In many ways, the pilgrims in both *Sartor Resartus* and *Little Women* are searching more than anything else for meaningful work and for meaning through work. Indeed, if the central pilgrimages of these texts are earthly as well as spiritual, Work itself becomes the Celestial City, the goal that all should be seeking. This is the realization that Teufelsdröckh reaches after his conversion both to the love of God and the Gospel of Work. The Editor describes the new Teufelsdröckh as follows: “It is here then that the spiritual majority of Teufelsdröckh commences: we are henceforth to see him ‘Work in Welldoing’ with the spirit and clear aims of a Man. He has discovered that the Ideal Workshop he so panted for, is even the same Actual ill-furnished Workshop he has so long been stumbling in” (150). Meaning derives from the opportunities he finds in the corner of the world where he finds himself. The work one does combines choice and destiny, as men share an innate desire, a universal “creative instinct” that tells even the smallest child that “his vocation is to Work” (71). Though the vocation is innate and human, Teufelsdröckh must learn to attend the call; that is the true pilgrimage he faces. He must then teach others that “every being that can live can do something; this let him *do*” (150).

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<sup>16</sup> Carpenter also reads *Little Women* as a kind of familial quest.

<sup>17</sup> *Little Women*’s view of family marks a radical departure from Bunyan; the idealization of family in the novel is central to many critical responses. See Auerbach, Bassil, Bernstein, Carpenter, Elbert.

<sup>18</sup> This is actually an echo of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* but is a key idea in the conclusion of “The Everlasting Yea.” This phrase (as well as the idea) will be echoed in *Little Women* as well.

For Carlyle, the conversion is less about the Gospel of Religion than the Gospel of Work, and the end of Teufelsdröckh's conversion experience is a realization about God *and* about man's duty to work. The two are so closely intertwined that true salvation can only be accomplished by recognizing and acting on both. While "The Everlasting Yea" is "Love not pleasure; love God" (146), belief alone is meaningless. The true vocation of man, Teufelsdröckh argues, is to act upon his beliefs by responding to his vocation to duty. He asserts that "Conviction, were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into Conduct" (148). Man must do whatever he is called by God to do: "Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it in God's name [...] Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called To-day, for the Night cometh wherein no man can work" (149). Man's duty on earth is to work, and this work is directly associated with earthly existence—the "night" that follows does not afford the opportunity to work. The point, for Carlyle, is to do the work that is available; it will matter.

Because work itself serves such a valuable spiritual purpose, any work that one does in answer to the call of duty is inherently valuable, even work that is primarily done to meet material needs.<sup>19</sup> As long as work is done with the appropriate attitude of reverence for the universe, social responsibility, and sense of duty, it is meaningful. The quest, for Teufelsdröckh, is to find the work that allows him to fulfill all of these needs and to satisfy the soul as well. Teufelsdröckh's biographer admits that little is known about the means by which the young man met his bodily needs, but he does depict his struggle to find the work that will ensure his spiritual growth. He is able to earn enough to survive physically, including work such as tutoring and translating, from which he "at best earns bread-and-water wages [...] Nevertheless [...] that [he]

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<sup>19</sup> The distinction between material needs and desires becomes particularly important in *Little Women*, as the upcoming discussions of individual characters will show.

subsisted is clear, for you find [him] even now alive” (96). Finding work that grants more than subsistence is more challenging. Work that is only done out of economic necessity may lead to survival of the body but not the spirit. At the same time, though, material necessity also prevents his spiritual destruction after he is gravely disappointed by Blumine: “That I had my Living to seek saved me from Dying,—by suicide” (121). The necessity to survive leads him to the central part of his pilgrimage and ultimately to the Celestial City of meaningful work. Because work ultimately saves the soul, work cannot be degrading; instead, failure to work represents an unproductive sacrifice of the self.

Teufelsdröckh’s pilgrimage is echoed in *Little Women*: each of the March girls faces a similar conversion, as she seeks the work that is most appropriate and meaningful to do in the world. The opening chapter of *Little Women* presents the necessity of work for both material and spiritual reasons. The problem of material poverty (or at least comparative poverty as the March girls perceive it) as well as the difficulties and triumphs that accompany the necessity of work are all contextualized within the girls’ desire to play good pilgrims in order to please their father. As the book opens, the March daughters are complaining about their recent poverty: “‘Don’t you wish we had the money papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me, how happy and good we’d be, if we had no worries,’ said Meg, who could remember better times” (6). When Beth reminds Meg of the King family, who are unhappy in spite of having money, Meg admits that “‘though we do have to work, we make fun for ourselves, and are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say” (6). Where Meg suggests that the family’s loss of money is unfortunate, Beth—the character who “los[es] no time in doing the duty that lay nearest her” (13)—reminds her of the other rewards their lives bring. Moreover, the novel will come to show that the Marches are

actually fortunate because they have to work, as Carlyle would argue. Material necessity will be their salvation even though much of what they do will be what Jo refers to as “grubbing.”<sup>20</sup>

The character in *Little Women* who most obviously echoes Carlyle’s Gospel is Marmee, who teaches her daughters the value of hard work and self control in ways that not only recall *Pilgrim’s Progress* but also echo Teufelsdröckh’s upbringing. Critics have been very interested in the repressed nature of the March household, and they have attributed this both to gender politics and the influence of Bronson Alcott.<sup>21</sup> And while the emphasis on repression and duty may seem somewhat harsh to modern readers, from a Carlylean standpoint such an upbringing is a necessary component of a pilgrimage that will lead to the salvation of a meaningful vocation. While *Sartor Resartus* reveals very little about Diogenes Teufelsdröckh’s childhood, it does make clear that his childhood taught him obedience and what a hostile critic might call “repression,” but which makes more sense in the context we have been considering as “renunciation.” He recalls: “I was forbid much: wishes in any measure bold I had to renounce; every where a strait bond of Obedience inflexibly held me down. Thus already Freewill often came in painful collision with Necessity” (76). Even as a child, then, his individual desires conflict with the expectations his family holds for him. This is an important lesson, though, for Carlylean individuality is about balancing the needs of the self with the responsibility to the universe of which one is a part. Learning to value duty and necessity is invaluable, and while Teufelsdröckh does not idealize his childhood, he does not criticize his parents. “Hereby was laid for me the basis of worldly Discretion, nay, of morality itself. Let me not quarrel with my

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<sup>20</sup>This term, which was a “favourite slang for ‘work’ among the Alcotts” (*Little Women* 474), is used specifically in the novel in conjunction with work that is morally or spiritually unsatisfying and is done primarily to assure physical survival. The *OED* defines grub as “To lead a meanly plodding or groveling existence; to live laboriously or ploddingly, to toil.” The connection to the slang use of the term to refer to food is suggestive as well of its material connotations.

<sup>21</sup> See Carpenter, Crompton, Hamblen, Kaledin, and Saxton.



upbringing! It was rigorous, too frugal, compressively secluded, every way unscientific: yet in that very strictness and domestic solitude might there not lie the root of deeper Earnestness, of the stem from which all noble fruit must grow?" (76). Expressing one's individuality must always take place in a larger context, and repression teaches Teufelsdröckh this lesson.

Marmee, much like Teufelsdröckh's mother, is the one who most effectively teaches her daughters a work ethic both through her actions and through the lessons she directly imparts to them. For example, when Meg complains that she would rather live a life of luxury than have to "grub," Jo suggests: "Well, we can't have it, so don't let's grumble, but shoulder our bundles and trudge along as cheerfully as Marmee does" (35). Jo's use of the words "burdens" and "trudge" demonstrates that Marmee is a pilgrim as well as a teacher in the novel, and her daughters will follow the example she sets through her own pilgrimage. While father exhorts his daughters to work in his letter, reminding them that "while we wait we all may work, so that these hard days need not be wasted" (12), Marmee most effectively demonstrates this point when she conducts her "Experiment" in Part I of the novel. Having a week of vacation, the March girls determine to spend it doing no work, and Marmee agrees with the hopes of teaching them a lesson. They initially enjoy their freedom, but eventually "It was astonishing what a peculiar and uncomfortable state of things was produced by the 'resting and revelling' process. The days kept getting longer and longer; the weather was unusually variable, and so were tempers; an unsettled feeling possessed every one, and Satan found plenty of mischief for the idle hands to do" (108). The girls becoming increasingly dissatisfied with themselves and each other because they are not working. After the experiment is over and they have expressed their frustration, Marmee reveals that they have been so unhappy in their idleness in part because they have thought only of themselves, for "the comfort of all depends on each doing their share faithfully" (115). The

value of work, then, is partly for the sake of others; Marmee shows how the work of each individual contributes to the well-being of the whole. At the same time, though, she reminds her daughters that work shapes the self: “Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for every one; it keeps us from *ennui* and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion” (115).<sup>22</sup> This part of Marmee’s lesson again reflects Carlyle’s ideal that contributing to the universe leads to feelings of self-satisfaction, but she also suggests that women are particularly well served to empower themselves through work rather than through traditional material means which are so frequently associated with women. She suggests that they must engage with the material world in ways which will not merely increase their material wealth but will improve their spiritual well-being. As Bedell argues, “It is through work—independent, self-sustaining work—that a woman maintains her identity and dignity” (“Introduction” xviii). Throughout the rest of the novel, the March girls demonstrate how they have internalized this lesson and repeatedly teach it to each other and others outside the family.

As Marmee’s experiment makes clear, even “grubbing” is better than idleness, and the value of work extends far beyond its ability to satisfy material needs and desires. Each of the March girls must learn to value work over reward and to balance her material desires with her spiritual well-being. Moreover, the burden that each sister bears in her pilgrimage reflects some aspect not only of Christian’s quest, but also of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh’s. Of all the sisters, Meg is most challenged by her desire for material things; she is typically more interested in the material rewards of work than she is in work itself, and her desire for fashionable things is the burden she must carry in her pilgrimage. In the chapter titled “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair,” she

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<sup>22</sup> This is just one of many lessons in the novel that use clothing to represent materialism. This seems to reflect the times and expectations of women’s attention to fashion, but it also echoes the clothes-philosophy in *Sartor Resartus*.

reflects on an idea that could have come straight from Teufelsdröckh's philosophy: "there is a charm about fine clothes which attracts a certain class of people, and secures their respect" (89). She wishes to be a part of this very class until she overhears others speculating about Marmee's mercenary intentions toward Laurie. When she accepts the Moffatts' offer to let her borrow a dress for a party, she learns that the clothes do not actually have the effect she wishes. She overhears Major Lincoln say, "They are making a fool of that little girl [...] they have spoilt her entirely; she's nothing but a doll to-night" (90). She realizes then that she is only playing a part, and it denies her humanity. She is ultimately glad to return home, "feeling as if she had been to a masquerade, and hadn't enjoyed herself as much as expected. She was [...] quite fed up with her fortnight's fun, and feeling that she had sat in the lap of luxury long enough" (92). The world of material comfort that she has longed for and idealized is actually inferior to her home, where work itself is valued over its rewards. Marmee's response to Meg's description of her time at the Moffatts' shows her view of materialism as well as her view of noble womanhood. She tells her daughters that "Money is a needful and precious thing,—and, when well used, a noble thing,—but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace" (95). This passage taken in combination with Marmee's comments in Chapter 11 ("Experiments") suggest that she values the intangible rewards of work over its material reward except insofar as work and money are used to enable independence and develop feelings of self-worth. In Part II of the novel Meg learns the true value of the material when she purchases a piece of silk that she and John can't afford and must ask Sallie Moffat to buy it from her. In both cases Meg learns lessons about the relative worth of material goods and the importance of putting one's own needs in the context of others'.

While Alcott seems to reflect Carlyle's view of work and materialism, she challenges his view of women, and Meg's story provides one interesting counter-narrative to the depiction of Blumine in *Sartor Resartus*.<sup>23</sup> Teufelsdröckh's eventual heartbreak and disillusionment spring directly from his beloved's materialism even though he had imagined her as a completely spiritual creature. The older Teufelsdröckh recalls his youthful idealization of women:

[I]n his secluded way of life, and with his glowing Fantasy, the more fiery that it burnt under cover, as in a reverberating furnace, his feeling towards the Queens of this Earth was, and indeed is, altogether unspeakable. A visible Divinity dwelt in them; to our young Friend all women were holy, were heavenly. As yet he but saw them flitting past, in their many-coloured angel-plumage; or hovering mute and inaccessible on the outskirts of *Aesthetic Tea*; all of air they were, all Soul and Form; so lovely, like mysterious priestesses, in whose hand was the invisible Jacob's-ladder, whereby men might mount into very Heaven. (104)

The Editor suggests that Teufelsdröckh's view of women derives at least in part from a lack of experience with them. At the same time, however, this description both anticipates and reflects the prevailing Victorian notion that would be most famously canonized nearly twenty years later in Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House"; it is easy to imagine Carlyle writing such a passage with sarcastic intent. Part of what this language demonstrates, whether intentionally or not, is the dehumanizing effect of such valorization. The women Teufelsdröckh's envisions are not people at all—they are simply visions.

This idealization is countered, then, by the way in which Blumine's relationship with Teufelsdröckh concludes, an abrupt end which still seems to shock the Professor. Although he

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<sup>23</sup> Amy also reverses Blumine by choosing not to marry Fred Vaughn though she still makes the most materially profitable marriage of all the March sisters. Marmee observes that "something better than what you call 'the mercenary spirit' had come over [Amy]" (420).

has idealized her past the point of humanity, Blumine does prove to reside in the material world. The Editor poses the question that he supposes her to have asked before deciding to break off the relationship:

What figure, at that period, was a Mrs. Teufelsdröckh likely to make in polished society? Could she have driven so much as a brass-bound Gig, or even a simple iron-spring one? Thou foolish ‘absolved Auscultator,’ before whom lies no prospect of capital, will any yet known ‘religion of young hearts’ keep the human Kitchen warm? Pshaw! thy divine Blumine, when she ‘resigned herself to wed some richer,’ shews more philosophy, though but a ‘woman of genius’ than thou, a pretended man. (112)

The narrator’s chiding here can be read as anti-feminist rhetoric, but it may also be a kind of reminder that the material cannot always be ignored in matters of romance. Blumine does appear to be pained by her decision to leave Teufelsdröckh, but she does get what she wants when she marries Herr Towgood. The difference between the March sisters and Blumine is that while Meg struggles with John’s poverty and admits that she is “tired of being poor” (273), she marries for love rather than money and learns to negotiate her material desires with the material and spiritual well-being of her husband. The Marches demonstrate that women do not have to be all spirit or all body; instead Alcott depicts women who are both fallible and capable of learning, i.e., they are human. And while it is possible to argue that *Little Women* simply reinscribes restrictive gender roles, Alcott presents a positive alternative by depicting women who struggle with and ultimately overcome crass materialism.

While Meg shares at least part of Blumine’s material nature, Beth is the sister who most closely resembles Teufelsdröckh’s ideal of womanhood. Ironically, in this way she also echoes

Teufelsdröckh himself. She is, as Ruth K. MacDonald notes, the character who takes the most spiritual view of her pilgrimage, most closely associating the Celestial City with heaven:

“Though Jo and the other sisters see the parallels in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* relating clearly to their present life and its possibilities, Beth sees the parallels to the afterlife, reasserting the spirituality both of their game and of her own vision” (*Christian’s Children* 74). From the beginning of the novel, she is generally divorced from the world around her, especially that outside her family. She does not participate in the family theatricals, and is “too bashful to go to school” (39). She is the sister most closely identified with the home, and she is willing to accept her duty within her family and her community in a way that is completely selfless. She is the only sister selfless enough to visit the Hummels in Marmee’s absence, a gesture for which she pays with her life.

While she is the sister who sees the spirituality of *Pilgrim’s Progress* most clearly, she is also the one who seems to achieve spirituality even before her death, gradually seeming to vaporize over the course of the novel. She is an ethereal creature throughout the book, but as she nears death she seems to disappear physically. When Jo returns from New York, she comments on the change in her sister’s face: “there was a strange, transparent look about it, as if the mortal was being slowly refined away, and the immortal shining through the frail flesh with an indescribably pathetic beauty” (357). This description suggests that as Beth’s flesh has begun to melt away, her true self (and hence her “pathetic beauty”) has begun to shine through more strongly: as she becomes physically weaker, she becomes spiritually stronger. The language here also echoes Teufelsdröckh’s vision of the ideal woman who is “all Soul and Form” (104) and the typical Victorian ideal. This description also echoes Teufelsdröckh’s metaphor of the flesh as a garment. The truth of man, Teufelsdröckh suggests, is hidden by his physical being:

“To the eye of Pure Reason, what is he [man]? A Soul, a Spirit, and divine Apparition. Round his mysterious ME, there lies, under all those wool-rags, a Garment of Flesh (or of Senses), contextured in the Loom of Heaven” (51). Because Beth’s flesh is disappearing, the truth of her self is appearing. Because of this gradual change, Beth’s actual death is somewhat anticlimactic in its depiction, seeming to be only a minor transition. She is rewarded with the peaceful death which she has sought and deserves: “As Beth had hoped, the ‘tide went out easily’; and in the dark hour before the dawn, on the bosom where she had drawn her first breath, she quietly drew her last, with no farewell but one loving look and a little sigh” (402). Though in their most ideal forms they resemble each other, the difference between Beth and Blumine is quite obvious: Beth lives up to her ideal, and she truly is a spiritual rather than a materialistic (or material) being.

This difference and Beth’s achievement of immortality on earth seem to link her even more directly to Teufelsdröckh himself. As his quest draws to a close, he too appears to be more spirit than flesh, a shift which has gradually occurred over the course of the narrative. From the beginning, he is defined by his spectral appearance, his “dreamy” eyes in which appear “gleams of an ethereal or else a diabolical fire” (13). This fire results in a spiritual crisis and transformation from The Everlasting No to the Everlasting Yea in the central section of the book. In these chapters the language of wandering (and wondering), journeying, and pilgrimage become most evident as does the description of Teufelsdröckh’s gradual physical disappearance. Teufelsdröckh’s true self will emerge as he passes through his spiritual crisis and conversion, just as Beth does when she is approaching death. The Editor of *Sartor Resartus* describes the relationship between the flesh and spirit as follows:

Under the strange nebulous envelopment, wherein our Professor has now shrouded himself, no doubt but his spiritual nature is nevertheless progressive,

and growing: for how can the 'Son of Time,' in any case, stand still? We behold him, through these dim years, in a state of crisis, of transition: his new Pilgrimings, and general solution into aimless Discontinuity, what is all this but a mad Fermentation; wherefrom, the fiercer it is, the clearer product will one day evolve itself? (123)

Teufelsdröckh is evolving into his true self, which is first and foremost a spiritual being; the language here suggests a rebirth of the spirit. And, as in the case of Beth, the language suggests a transformation through a natural process of gradual unveiling of truth. After he sees Blumine and Towgood leaving their wedding, he begins a process of physical disappearance: "from this point, the Professor is more of an enigma than ever. In figurative language, we might say he becomes, not indeed a spirit, yet spiritualised, vaporised" (119). As he passes through the Centre of Indifference, he continues to transform: "The first preliminary moral Act, annihilation of Self (Selbst-tödtung), had been happily accomplished; and my mind's eyes were now unsealed, and its hands ungyved" (142). His physical sight is replaced by spiritual sight, and this allows him finally to see the truth, that his calling and the calling of all men is to work. "It is here that the spiritual majority of Teufelsdröckh commences" (150); it is also where he becomes increasingly ethereal, leading his readers through "fantastic Dream-Grottoes" (156).

By the final chapter, the Editor admits that "Professor Teufelsdröckh, be it known, is no longer visibly present at Weissnichtwo, but again to all appearance lost in Space!" (223). He has, it seems, disappeared in much the same way Beth does even though the Editor believes him to be still alive. He hints at something which he does not fully reveal regarding the Professor's whereabouts: "Reason we have, at least of a negative sort, to believe the Lost still living: our widowed heart also whispers that ere long he will himself give a sign [...] Our own private



conjecture, now amounting almost to certainty, is that, safe-moored in some stillest obscurity, not to lie always still, Teufelsdröckh is actually in London” (224-25). The uncertainty of his whereabouts suggests that he has achieved the endpoint of his pilgrimage as Beth did—within this life rather than in the next. He has become pure spirit.

If Beth is the most selfless of the March girls, Amy is the most selfish. Critical responses to her character have been kinder than her creator was, and some see her as the true proto-feminist artist of the novel.<sup>24</sup> Her pilgrimage reflects the didacticism of Teufelsdröckh, as she not only undergoes a conversion but also effectively converts Laurie to the Gospel of Work, demonstrating the Editor’s contention that “man is emphatically a Proselytizing creature” (8). Amy’s vanities are first “quenched” by having to wear her cousin’s second-hand clothes (41). The most important lesson she must learn, though, relates to work and virtue, and her ambition and desire for attention and praise must frequently be brought under control. In one of these instances, after Amy has been punished at school, Marmee dispenses her wisdom: “There is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked long; even if it is, the consciousness of possessing and using it well should satisfy one, and the great charm of all power is modesty” (69). The Carlylean point that Marmee makes here is to do one’s duty for the sake of duty itself—not for glory or praise. As Amy grows older, she learns this lesson, for although she continues to attempt “every branch of art with youthful audacity” (246), she also “resolve[s] to be an attractive and accomplished woman, even if she never became a great artist” (247-48). She eventually accepts her duty over her desire and goes on to teach similar lessons to Laurie as he begins a pilgrimage of his own.

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<sup>24</sup> See Goldman.

Laurie reacts to Jo's rejection of him much as Teufelsdröckh does to Blumine's. Before Jo rejects him, he seeks an ideal much as the Professor has done. He creates a kind of muse to inspire his Opera, described as a

phantom [that] wore many faces, but it always had golden hair, was enveloped in a diaphanous cloud, and floated airily before his mind's eye in a pleasing chaos of roses, peacocks, white ponies and blue ribbons. He did not give the complaisant wraith any name, but he took her for his heroine, and grew quite fond of her, as well as he might,--for he gifted her with every gift and grace under the sun, and escorted her, unscathed, through trials which would have annihilated any mortal woman. (405)

Though he feels himself wronged, he continues to valorize the ideal of the woman as angel in a way that echoes Teufelsdröckh's vision. At his grandfather's urging, he embarks alone on a journey to Europe, wandering aimlessly much as Teufelsdröckh embarks on "His so unlimited Wanderings [...] without assigned or perhaps assignable aim; internal unrest seems his sole guidance" (115). Laurie seeks change, however, after Amy begins to teach him both by her example and by her words. She tells Laurie that she despises him "Because with every chance for being good, useful, and happy, you are faulty, lazy and miserable" (392). Such indolence, she suggests, is wrong in part because it is selfish. Laurie has not considered the people who love him: "Here you have been abroad nearly six months, and done nothing but waste time and money, and disappoint your friends" (392). Amy connects her disappointment with Laurie to both his spiritual and material well-being. He has shirked his responsibility to those around him by failing to do any work and succumbing to self-centeredness. Laurie's thoughtlessness mirrors Teufelsdröckh's wanderings and solitude after he has been rejected by Blumine, a time when he

recalls “Invisible yet impenetrable walls, as of Enchantment, divided me from all living [...] Now when I look back, it was a strange isolation I then lived in” (127). When Amy points out Laurie’s selfishness, she is suggesting that he has similarly isolated himself by disappointing those around him and refusing to go to his grandfather; in doing so she connects this isolation to Laurie’s unwillingness to work. Moreover, “Laurie began to wish he had to work for his daily bread” (406). And though Laurie will not admit that Amy’s advice contributes to his change, Amy’s influence is made clear by the change in his attitude and behavior as their journey through the continent continues. The change in Laurie even begins to serve as an example for Amy. The narrator describes how “At Nice, Laurie had lounged and Amy had scolded; at Vevey, Laurie was never idle, but always walking, riding, boating, or studying, in the most energetic manner; while Amy admired everything he did, and followed his example as far and as fast as she could” (413).

Of course much criticism of *Little Women* has focused on the character of Jo, who is the most unconventional and influential of the March girls. Carolyn Heilbrun sums up her impact as follows: “She may have been the single female model continuously available after 1868 to girls dreaming beyond the confines of a constricted family destiny to the possibility of autonomy and experience initiated by one’s self” (21). She has captured the imagination of female readers for over a century because of her determination to support her family and her independence. David E. Smith argues that Jo is also the member of the family who is most like Christian from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*: “She is the head of the family, she understands the nature of the pilgrimage, and ultimately, through her writing, she defines the quality of the family’s experiences, specifically in the context of the house in which they live” (134). This reading of the character of Jo suggests that she determines the destiny of her family through her material support and,

ultimately, through her understanding of the spiritual journey they are all undergoing as well. She is also the character whose quest for meaningful work most closely matches that of Teufelsdröckh; she is the sister who struggles the most to fulfill her duty and to find work that sustains her mind and spirit as well as her (and her family's) physical being. For Jo the meaning of work is particularly important, and she has a difficult time learning Marmee's lessons about duty; in Book II of the novel she must also learn now to compromise her spiritual well-being for material gain.

Part of Jo's dissatisfaction stems from the restrictions of gender: the kind of work a woman can do is not what she considers meaningful. In the opening chapter of the novel, she complains: "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay home and knit like a poky old woman" (7). The work which is assigned to women—that which Beth is glad to do—does not satisfy because it does not have an impact on the world outside the home. Because her aspirations are higher, her pilgrimage toward meaningful work is more difficult. She struggles to emulate Marmee's example, and as she and Meg both depart for their jobs, "Jo gave her sister an encouraging pat on the shoulder as they parted for the day, each going a different way, each hugging her little warm turn-over, and each trying to be cheerful in spite of wintry weather, hard work, and the unsatisfied desires of pleasure-loving youth" (37). This passage explicitly relates Jo's struggle to that of Teufelsdröckh, as it echoes the "Everlasting Yea" from *Sartor Resartus*: "Love not pleasure; love God" (146). Though she echoes this passage early in the novel, it will take years for Jo truly to learn this lesson.

The other lesson that Jo must learn is how to control her anger and to balance repression with expression. She is the most passionate and wild of the March sisters from the beginning,

and she is the most reluctant to deal with the changes that result from growing into womanhood.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most discussed example of her anger is her response to Amy's burning of her stories; she puts her sister in danger and suffers great guilt when Amy nearly drowns. Marmee responds to Jo by once again revealing her own pilgrimage: "I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it [...] I've learned to check the hasty words that rise to my lips" (78). Marmee's quiet understanding of her own daughters also demonstrates the wisdom of her silence. When the family receives news of Laurie and Amy's engagement, Jo observes, "How sharp you are, Marmee, and how silent" (420), and Marmee responds that "Mothers have need of sharp eyes and discreet tongues, when they have girls to manage" (421). Marmee suggests the wisdom of observation over expression, and though her advice has been read as gendered rhetoric, which reinscribes women's voicelessness,<sup>26</sup> it also echoes Carlyle's thoughts on silence as Teufelsdröckh expresses them in "Symbols." He praises silence less because it prevents hurt feelings than because it provides opportunities for thought and learning, but like Marmee, he suggests that silence can ultimately be a productive response. "'The benignant efficacies of Concealment,' cries our Professor, 'who shall speak or sing? [...] Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule [...] Nay, in thy own mean perplexities, do thou thyself but hold thy tongue for one day: on the morrow, how much clearer are thy purposes, and duties; what wreck and rubbish have those mute workmen within thee swept away, when intrusive noises were shut out!'" (165). So the

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<sup>25</sup> Carpenter argues that Jo's resistance to womanhood marks her central quest in the novel. He contends that "The 'pilgrimage' which Marmee encourages the girls to make throughout the story [...] is not (for Jo) the spiritual journey it appears to be, but a quest, undertaken reluctantly enough, for a conventionally feminine sex-role" (95). He argues that she achieves this quest but in doing so loses her struggle for individuality.

<sup>26</sup> See Crowley, Gaard.

lesson Jo learns from Apollyon is not only a lesson about womanhood but also a Carlylean lesson about the creative value of silence.

Jo's pilgrimage takes her away from her family, but its resolution occurs when she returns home, first to care for Beth during her illness and then to attempt to replace Beth's role in the family. She learns, however, that is not suited for this role; her duty will become more apparent after she passes through her own spiritual crisis. Jo's crisis reverses Teufelsdröckh's in some ways: he wanders out into the world to face his conversion while Jo's crisis occurs after she has returned home. But in spite of the difference in their geographical locations, both feel alienated from and persecuted by the world around them. Teufelsdröckh's solitary existence as he passes through this crisis is resolved by his understanding his own freedom and heeding the Gospel of Work; he is still alone at the end of the book, however. Jo's crisis, which is described most explicitly in the chapter titled "All Alone," is quite similar; she feels separated from the rest of the world, and she believes that the work she is doing to take care of her family is not what she is destined to do. She mourns, "I can't do it. I wasn't meant for a life like this, and I know I shall break away and do something desperate if somebody don't come and help me" (416). She continues to struggle with her duty to her family, and the return of Amy and Laurie reminds her that she is not only alone, but also lonely.

Jo's salvation begins when Marmee encourages her to write, which is the work to which she is more suited, and ends when she finds a partner with whom she can share her burden. What she writes becomes the novel that will connect her most closely to her public and will ultimately re-connect her with the other needful thing to cure her loneliness—love; the two will become very closely intertwined. The lesson that Jo has to learn as she makes her pilgrimage is the same lesson that Teufelsdröckh learns—her duty in life is to move beyond pleasure and to

fulfill a larger purpose as she is destined. At the same time, though, “the natural craving for affection was strong” (422); Jo resolves that she will be an old maid, but “the prospect was not inviting” (424). This need will be fulfilled by the appearance of Professor Friedrich Bhaer, who has already taught her to value morality over material gain by discouraging her from publishing her thriller stories in the *Volcano*. Professor Bhaer’s Germanness and his knowledge of Goethe may itself allude to the character of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, but his devotion to thought and work further suggests a connection. The relationship he develops with Jo challenges Carlyle’s depiction of romance, demonstrating a connection that Teufelsdröckh can never achieve in his objectification of Blumine; Jo insists that they be equals in intellect and, most importantly, in work. As they discuss his proposal of marriage, she tells him that they will share the work of their family: “‘I’m to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I’ll never go,’ she added resolutely” (462). Jo refuses to allow her husband to confine her to a traditional feminine role; she insists that she will be a breadwinner as well as working within the home. In addition, she insists that she will work for her own satisfaction; though she loves Friedrich, she will not give up that part of herself for him. Once again echoing Carlyle’s language, she tells him, “I have my duty also, and my work. I couldn’t enjoy myself if I neglected them even for you” (462). Work and duty are part of her identity, and she could not be herself if she were separated from them. Jo’s conversion, then, ends with a marriage, but romance is not the point: the relationship she has entered will entail a shared sense of purpose and commitment to the Carlylean gospel of work.

Ultimately, *Little Women* presents a collective pilgrimage whose goal is not only heaven but also a more enlightened earthly journey. The novel’s pilgrims struggle to find meaning through work and a creed which Alcott learned not only from John Bunyan and the influence of

her family, but also from her engagement with Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. By recasting Diogenes Teufelsdröckh as pilgrim through her characters, she expands the borders of domestic fiction, demonstrating that spiritual journeys can take many forms and that the world of the home is itself a meaningful journey. That meaning, for Alcott as well as Carlyle, is found in work.



## CHAPTER 6

“BUT EVERY ONE IS NOT SO READY TO SEE WHAT IS RIGHT”: CARLYLEAN  
PROPHECY IN *THE STORY OF AVIS*

Avis Dobell, the heroine of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877), is a transitional figure in American women's writing. While in many ways a logical descendent of Aurora Leigh, Edna Earl, and Jo March, she is also a foremother of many literary heroines to follow. Her devotion to meaningful work anticipates the New Woman novels of the 1890's, and, as Carol Farley Kessler notes, her story "points the way from the nineteenth- to the twentieth-century female-artist novel" (xix).<sup>1</sup> Like her creator, Avis seems to look simultaneously to the past and to the future, even as she critically observes the present moment, realizing that her time has not yet come. Avis, as Linda Huf observes, "is not the New Woman," for "[the] New Woman will have to 'wait' until some future day when the world will be ready for her" (48-49). This anticipation is made manifest by the fact that Avis is the one heroine in this study who becomes a mother to a daughter, aptly named Waitstill. The key conflict Avis faces in the novel, between her decision to marry and her devotion to her art, typifies the conflict between the "True Woman" of the past and the "New Woman" who is yet to come. Karen Tracey examines Phelps's position on that conflict, arguing that "viewed from a contemporary perspective, Phelps is as much a backward- as a forward-looking writer. In her novels she enlarges the scope of women's career possibilities and explores the challenges of two-career marriages in a 'modern' way, but also relies upon courtship codes that reproduce restrictive assumptions about male and

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Baym more specifically asserts that the novel "seems an obvious influence on a far better book, 'The Awakening' by Kate Chopin" (22).

female differences' (148). Tracey suggests that Phelps has her heroine seek to improve her professional opportunities without sacrificing the more romantic notions of traditional courtship. Even as she doubts the wisdom of marrying Philip Ostrander, Avis remains invested enough in traditional feminine values to seek a kind of middle ground between two types of womanhood. However, her story shows that this middle ground ultimately does not exist, requiring her to look ahead as her own story reaches its conclusion.

Phelps's negotiation of conventional and progressive views has led to a certain level of critical dissonance about the author's relationship to feminism. Her earliest post-recovery critics depict her as a revolutionary figure. Carol Farley Kessler, for example, reads Phelps as a true progressive feminist, noting her "unqualified belief in women's right to achievement and fulfillment" ("A Literary Legacy" 28).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Christine Stansell calls Phelps's fiction "a devastating analysis of the nature of heterosexuality and its implications for the liberation of women" (239). Deborah Barker asserts that Phelps articulates a feminist re-interpretation of aesthetics, arguing that *The Story of Avis* "can best be understood as a feminist revision of [Hawthorne's] *The Marble Faun*" ("The Riddle" 31). Phelps's willingness to capitulate to certain traditional feminine ideals, however, has led others to see her as more conservative. For example, Susan Coultrap-McQuin evaluates Phelps's feminism on the True Woman-New Woman continuum, arguing that "her views fall on the conservative side of New Womanhood because, while she wished to expand women's rights and social opportunities, she only ambivalently rejected the ideals of the True Woman" (181). Many have read Phelps's apparent ambivalence as an outgrowth of her relationships with her parents—a patriarchal minister father and a mother whose promising writing career was cut short by her untimely death, which Phelps

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<sup>2</sup> In her book-length biography of Phelps and her introduction to *The Story of Avis*, Kessler also reads Phelps as a feminist.

attributed to “the civil war of the dual nature which can be given to women only” (*Chapters from a Life* 12).<sup>3</sup> In this phrase lies a key to Phelps’s insights, which will form the crux of the problem of womanhood in *The Story of Avis*. The real issue the novel addresses is not whether she privileges the True Woman or the New Woman; the problem, as Phelps sees it, lies in the fact that these two types may ultimately be irreconcilable. As Anne E. Boyd argues, “Phelps makes it clear that she believes the dilemma [of the woman artist] is not simply socially imposed but is inherent in woman’s nature” (101). This view again reinforces the influences of Phelps’s mother, whose untimely death her daughter sees as a direct result of this internal conflict between dual natures, but it also connects Phelps to a broader literary and religious tradition: that of prophecy.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I will argue that a complex and radical project is at work in *The Story of Avis*. The novel’s revolutionary nature derives not simply from its critique of marriage and gender roles but also from its evocation and rewriting of a genre historically reserved for men: the prophetic text. Once again Phelps looks back to a traditional means of communication, but she creates a new context for this tradition. By creating a character who adopts the role of the prophet, Phelps places herself and her heroine in the Biblical tradition that Thomas Carlyle

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<sup>3</sup> As is the case with all of the women writers in this study, Phelps’s biography lies at the center of critical approaches. Scholars have been particularly interested in Phelps’s relationship with her mother, who was clearly a major influence on the development of her daughter’s feminist views, and whose name the younger Phelps took for her own after the elder’s death. Particularly in reading *Avis*, most have followed the lead of Phelps’s earliest twentieth-century biographer, Mary Angela Bennett, who argues that “*Avis*’s early life is a fusion of Miss Phelps’s and her mother’s. The relation of the father and daughter, and the effect of the reading of *Aurora Leigh*, come right out of the author’s own memories” (80). Like many of her daughter’s fictional heroines, Mrs. Phelps struggled (unsuccessfully) to combine a writing career with the demands of family life. Conversely, critics have examined Phelps’s struggle against the extremely conservative views of her minister father, Austin Phelps, whom she admired despite the differences in their beliefs. In her 1897 autobiography, *Chapters from a Life*, Phelps briefly discusses her parents, glossing over much of her disagreement with her father’s point of view. Privett contends that “Phelps’s near idolatrous admiration for both her mother and father [...] colored nearly everything she wrote about relationships between men and women, about marriage, and about parenting” (17). Lori Duin Kelly and Carol Farley Kessler also focus on biographical interpretation in reading *Avis*.

<sup>4</sup> In her autobiography, Phelps writes of her mother’s death, “Her last book and her last baby came together, and killed her” (12).

engages in *Sartor Resartus*, and she creates a heroine who descends from Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. She uses this tradition in a new way, though: she offers a critique of the place of women in her time and seeks to create a new vision of womanhood for the future. By placing her heroine in the prophetic tradition, she elevates the “woman problem” to a higher moral status, suggesting that it is in fact a *human* problem. While Avis is not entirely successful in conveying her message through her art, her story becomes a cautionary tale for the generation of women to follow.

Phelps echoes Carlyle’s use of sage writing as it derives from the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. George Landow defines this form of prophecy as “a scriptural genre that devotes itself as much to diagnosing the spiritual condition of an age as to predicting the future” (17-18). The Old Testament prophets like Daniel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah read the world (and the people) around them carefully in order to gain an understanding of the past, present and future course of humankind. Landow argues that Carlyle (along with Ruskin and Arnold) re-interpreted this form to create sage writing, a new genre which both advocates and questions orthodox belief systems.<sup>5</sup> Phelps participates in this same tradition, adopting a prophetic stance to examine the situation of women in her own time. She does not, as the aforementioned critics have noted, reject traditional notions of womanhood outright, but she questions the accepted relationship between the nature of the artist and the nature of woman. Reading Phelps as a part of the prophetic tradition allows us to see this ambivalence as more than conservative politics; this context helps explain her seemingly paradoxical attitudes. While her gender politics are complex, her desire to escape from traditional boundaries of women’s roles at the same time that she reinforces them is an inherent element of the prophetic tradition. Sage writing, also like Old

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<sup>5</sup> Because he focuses primarily on nonfiction, Landow’s reading of Carlyle does not analyze the use of prophecy in *Sartor Resartus*; he focuses on the more overtly political *Past and Present*, acknowledging, though, that Carlyle “alludes to [the prophetic tradition] frequently” in his other writings (58).

Testament prophecy, simultaneously looks forward and looks back, asserting that the current “established political, moral, and spiritual powers [...] have abandoned orthodox wisdom or reduced it to an empty husk” (Landow 23). The role of the Carlylean prophet, like that of his Old Testament forbears, is to call readers back to the truth from which they have strayed. At the same time, the prophet is called to reveal new truths. Phelps answers this call, asserting a new truth about the condition of womanhood in the nineteenth century.

While she works within a tradition that she shares with Carlyle, Phelps’s direct engagement with his writings is difficult to establish because of a dearth of primary materials that directly address her reading habits. She would have been exposed to his ideas through her knowledge of Emerson, whose work she read and who was a guest in the Phelps family’s Andover home, and whose views she respected even though she did not always agree with him (*Chapters from a Life* 45, Coultrap-McQuin 171).<sup>6</sup> Her choice to address topical matters directly connects her more closely to a Carlylean than an Emersonian model, however. Landow argues that Emerson is not part of the sage tradition in which he includes Carlyle, for “he [Emerson] avoids the particular and almost never interprets specific contemporary phenomena” (31). Phelps would also been exposed to Carlylean thought through her reading of *Aurora Leigh*, which she cites as an important source of inspiration. In her autobiography, she recounts reading the poem at the age of sixteen, and recalls that “what Shakespeare or the Latin Fathers might have done for some other impressionable girl, Mrs. Browning—forever bless her strong and gentle name!—did for me. I owe to her, distinctly, the first visible aspiration (ambition is too low a word) to do some honest, hard work of my own in the World Beautiful, and for it” (65-66). The inspiration she describes is distinctly Carlylean: the call to do work that benefits the world around her.

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Colatrella discusses the influence of Emerson’s ideas on *Doctor Zay* (1882), another of Phelps’s novels.

In addition to the philosophy she gained from her literary background, Phelps would also have been exposed to the prophetic tradition through her upbringing. She was, like Carlyle, raised in a household that espoused orthodox Calvinist beliefs, and like Barrett Browning, Evans, and Alcott before her, she shared with him the language and tradition of the Christian Bible. She descended from a family of ministers and confessed that “The daughter of two or three generations of clergymen cannot get the preacher’s blood out of her veins very easily” (Letter to Phillips Brooks). The twentieth-century tendency to equate Christianity with conservatism, however, has led to critical short-sightedness on this matter. Coultrap-McQuin, for example, argues that “Christian values were as deeply embedded in Phelps’s concept of writer as they were in her concept of womanhood and, likewise, gave her work, especially at the end of the century, a conservative cast” (182). Equating Christianity with conservatism oversimplifies Phelps’s views; we must not confuse the writer’s views with those of her father. For despite her connection to a rather orthodox theological tradition, Phelps’s vision of religion was in many ways unconventional and progressive for its time. As Ronna Coffey Privett notes, “even with this obviously conservative Christian background, Phelps’s emphasis on faith and religion in her works most often dealt with the hypocrisy of established religion and the need for new forms of religion for people to face the increasingly complex world of the Gilded Age” (9). Like Carlyle, Phelps believed that religion was only meaningful as it could be translated into understanding and meaningful action in the present time.

To this end, she sought to use her books as a vehicle for sharing her beliefs and urging action on the part of her readers; from the beginning of her career as a writer she saw herself as a kind of prophet or priest. In her discussion of Phelps’s relationship to realism, Susan V. Donaldson argues that *The Gates Ajar*, which presented a radical, feminized re-vision of heaven,

“transformed Phelps into something very like a lay minister with her own congregation brought together by her considerable correspondence [...] The controversy, in turn, appeared to have radicalized her and pushed her further toward feminism” (98). Her dissatisfaction with a traditional Christian worldview ultimately led her not to disbelief but instead to a radical reconsideration of some of its central tenets. In her view, Christianity should not oppose women’s rights but instead provides a strong argument in favor of the cause, for women have the same opportunities for communion with God as do men. As Stansell notes, “In her theology, religion serves not only as a vindication and solace for the female, but as a kind of emancipation: she petitions, ‘Be Thou Breadth, freedom, walking-space before us.’ Woman has the power of God’s elect, and power, however oblique, is a form of deliverance from subjugation” (245). Religion, then, becomes a path toward liberation for women. While their political beliefs differ, Phelps shares with Carlyle a revolutionary impulse to restructure Christian orthodoxy.

Moreover, Phelps’s rewriting of conventional, masculinist religious views places her squarely within the tradition of the prophet as Landow defines it, but unlike the traditional prophets she invents a new direction by asserting a completely new truth. In so doing, she both responds to and challenges Carlyle. The traditional prophets “offered no essentially new message” (Landow 25); Carlyle asserts that the truth is a universal, so even though the prophet should say something new, it is a truth that ultimately descends from that universal. Phelps, on the other hand, adopts the stance of the prophet to assert a truth which is truly new. As Landow notes, the voice of the prophet emanates not from the center, but from the margins: “[s]tanding apart from society and charging its members with having abandoned the ways of God and truth had always been the function of Old Testament prophets” (24).<sup>7</sup> Phelps positions herself in this

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<sup>7</sup> Barrett Browning’s influence can be felt here as well, as Aurora Leigh uses the voice of the prophet to interpret her own time, and the verse-novel ends with a note of prophecy taken from Revelations.

way, using Christianity and the tradition of prophecy as sources of authority for her plea for the rights of the marginalized. The cause of women's rights, she believes, should be a Christian one, and she seeks to Christianize feminism while feminizing Christianity. One straightforward example of this desire appears in her appeal to John Greenleaf Whittier for help with the cause. She writes:

I have had it in mind to beg of you, of late; that is, to sing us a battle-cry or a chant, for the future of woman. I am, as perhaps you may suppose, almost invested in the "Woman Cause." It grows upon my conscience, as well as my enthusiasm, every day. It seems to me the first work God has to be done just now, notwithstanding the earnest efforts of our most earnest men and women, I feel that the subject wants solemnizing; it wants Christianizing; it needs perhaps a great hymn from a great heart which has always been ready to sanctify a struggle for freedom. (Letter to John Greenleaf Whittier)

Like the prophet, Phelps both claims woman's cause as God's work and recognizes its current marginality. Her appeal also implicitly connects her cause to that of abolition, which Whittier had championed in his poetry, by reminding the poet of his willingness "to sanctify a struggle for freedom." In so doing she presents another example wherein a social and spiritual sickness was cured by the intervention of Christianity and literature. Finally, she claims that "woman's cause" is in essence God's cause, and she asserts the voice of a Christian prophet to trumpet that cause in *The Story of Avis*.

*The Story of Avis* begins with Avis Dobell's return to Harmouth after years in Florence, where she has been studying painting. Avis has always been an exceptional woman who has sought to nurture her artistic talent above all else, but upon her arrival she becomes the object of



Philip Ostrander's attentions. Ostrander is a junior professor at Harmouth University, and initially he appears to be a progressive man, one who will support Avis's decision to be an artist and insists that he does not want his wife to be simply a housekeeper. Despite his persistence, Avis remains skeptical and resists his romantic overtures until he returns from the Civil War a wounded man. At this point, she finally agrees to marry him. Almost immediately tensions arise over her inability to take care of even the most basic household chores, and Avis finds herself with increasingly little time to devote to her art. Once her two children are born, there is even less time, and when she can find the opportunity to paint she cannot summon the energy. These problems are compounded by Philip's poor health and the eventual loss of his position at the University. Eventually all of the family's financial burdens fall on Avis and force her to compromise her artistic vision for money. After the death of their son, Van Dyck, Philip's health continues to deteriorate and Avis takes him to Florida in an attempt to nurse him back to health. The couple grows closer on this trip and reconciles many of their differences, but Philip ultimately dies. By this point Avis's artistic ability has eroded completely; she is left able only to teach and hope that her daughter, Waitstill, can find a way to live the life she could not.

Avis's unusual nature is demonstrated immediately in the first chapter of the novel, which opens with a question: "What *was* it about her?" (3). This question is pondered by Coy Bishop, Avis's foil and a "typical" woman, and the differences between these two women that are explored in the first two chapters of the novel establish Avis's exceptionality. Coy initially ponders Avis's unique beauty and charm, noting that "Avis had that one particular coloring about her (Coy decided to call it coloring), which is, in a woman, powerful above all beauty, wit, or genius,—that subtle something which we call *charm*" (5). As her character is more established, however, it becomes clear that Avis is even more greatly distinguished from others

in Harmouth (and other women in particular) by her intellect, her vision, and her desire for solitude. As they are walking home from the Harmouth Poetry Club meeting, we are introduced to her point of view:

She was glad it was nobody but Barbara's brother, poor fellow! who was to walk with her, and that he did not expect her to talk about the stars, and that Coy and John Rose seemed so very comfortable together just in front of them [...] She longed for the poise which solitude only can give, and half wished that she had not invited Coy to spend the night with her, and see the Venetian views to-morrow. (13)

Avis wishes to ponder matters that are larger than Harmouth society, and she believes that she must be alone to do so. As a young girl she resisted her Aunt Chloe's attempts to make her "gentle and womanly like other girls" (31), and during her time in Europe has cultivated both her artistic vision and her individuality.

Avis is like Diogenes Teufelsdröckh in her exceptionality; their uniqueness not only distinguishes them from others, but it also separates them from others. Being a successful prophet means living a solitary existence; for an exceptional individual, a vocation will complicate and even supersede the possibility of romantic partnership. Teufelsdröckh's lone attempt at romance shows that he does not choose a solitary path, but his nature demands it. When the young prophet meets Blumine, the Editor notes that "our Philosopher, as stoical and cynical as he now looks, was heartily and even frantically in Love" (106). He is susceptible to love like any other man, but he will love only once. The failure of his romance with Blumine indirectly results from his calling as well, for his courtship ends because of her desire for material wealth which the work of a prophet cannot provide. After she tells him "they were to

meet no more,” he chooses to remain single, even believing it to be his fate (113). The Editor ascribes this choice to his individuality: “for a Teufelsdröckh, as we remarked, will not love a second time. Singular Diogenes! No sooner has that heart-rending occurrence fairly taken place, than he affects to regard it as a thing natural, of which there is nothing more to be said” (115). This description challenges the idealization of romantic love, but it also suggests that the true prophet-hero will be not only without peer, but also without a partner, and Teufelsdröckh begins to recognize that solitude is his natural state. His failed romance suggests the danger that such a relationship can pose for an exceptional man, and like a true prophet, he aptly diagnoses his present situation and foresees a future in which he will remain alone. The chapters that follow reveal that this heartbreak and resulting solitude were necessary to his conversion and his most important realizations about his call to prophecy.

Where Teufelsdröckh’s failed relationship leads to inspiration, however, Avis’s marriage destroys a promising artistic career. All of Harmouth acknowledges that Avis Dobell is without peer. As Coy Bishop, Avis’s aptly named foil, remarks early in the novel, “Avis is not like other women. She never was” (14). As a young woman, she neither cares for nor succeeds in typical feminine pursuits; she cares only for her art and her artistic vision of the world around her. Her exceptionality extends beyond such quotidian distinctions, however. She is unique in her passions as well, particularly in her eye for and attraction to beauty. In the opening chapter of the novel, Avis enters the Harmouth Poetry Club and instinctively seats herself before the carmine drapery—which most women would have avoided—that best suits her complexion. Her attraction to it is seemingly irresistible: “Avis went to it as straight as a bird to a lighthouse on a dark night. She would have beaten herself against that color, like those very birds against the glowing glass, and been happy, even if she had beaten her soul out with it as they did” (7). Her

desire for beauty is even greater than her instinct for self-preservation. This passage initiates the novel's central metaphor—Avis as bird—as well as foreshadowing the danger her artistic vision will ultimately present. It is not the desire for beauty alone, however, but the “dual nature” of the exceptional woman that will seal Avis's fate. This kind of attraction to beauty and art is dangerous for a woman, for the artistic nature will find itself in conflict with an ideal feminine nature when she falls in love with Philip Ostrander.

The conflict between these two natures is the main subject of the novel, which ultimately suggests that a vocation compounds the difficulties of womanhood. Most women, the novel suggests, may suffer in marriage but can ultimately function within the traditional institution. And while Avis has before her the examples of exceptional women like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the heroine of *Aurora Leigh*, she ultimately finds herself in less favorable conditions than either of these precursors. For the exceptional woman in *The Story of Avis*, the conflict between the artistic nature and the demands of marriage is too great to be reconciled, and she is ultimately forced to choose between the two. After Philip has been wounded and Avis has realized that she loves Philip, the narrator remarks, “There now began in Avis a memorable conflict, which only a woman, and of women perhaps only a few, can articulately understand” (104). This sense of conflict, which initially leads her to refuse Philip's proposal of marriage, appears to be resolved when he tells her that he does not want her to give up her art for the role of a traditional wife. He tells her, “I do not want your work, or your individuality. I refuse to accept any such sacrifice from the woman I love [...] Only let us love, and live, and work together. Your genius shall be more tenderly my pride than my little talents can possibly be your” (107-08). He appeals both to her vocation and her desire for love, and he convinces her that as she is an exceptional woman, he is an exceptional man.

Avis makes the choice that fulfills her womanly nature, but in so doing she ultimately sacrifices her art. After her marriage, her vision remains intact, but she can no longer realize that vision in her painting. This eventuality is foreshadowed after she accepts Philip's proposal and puts her fate into his hands: "[s]lowly at first, with her head bent, as if she resisted some opposing pressure, then swiftly, as if she had been drawn by irresistible forces, then blindly, like the bird to the light-house, she passed the length of the silent room, and put both hands, the palms pressed together as if they had been manacled into his" (110). She has, the language of this passage suggests, compromised her vision (moving "blindly") and allowed herself to be imprisoned. Her failed attempt at a romantic partnership lies at the center of her story, making Phelps's novel unique among the women's texts within this study. Where the other novels end with the heroines' marriage, Avis's story essentially begins there. As Carol Farley Kessler notes, "where Aurora [Leigh] makes her reputation and then marries a blinded man (thus to prevent his domination), Avis marries a wounded man *before* achieving artistic maturity" ("Introduction" xviii—emphasis mine). Her choice to marry, the novel shows, arrests her development as an artist. As a true prophet, she is able to foresee this outcome, but the conflict she faces proves too much, and she makes her choices as a woman, not an artist.

From the beginning of their courtship, Avis knows that accepting Philip's proposal will most likely endanger the realization of her artistic vision. She, like Teufelsdröckh, has a nature that would best be suited to pursue a single course singularly. In her resistance, she tells him, "Marriage [...] is a profession to a woman. And I have my work; I have my work!" (71). Moreover, she believes that she possesses a gift which is her true birthright, her nature. When Philip tells her she is risking her womanhood for "an unproved but as yet untried power," she responds, "at least I can dare. There is that in me which will not *permit* me not to dare. God

gave it to me” (72). She recognizes that her artistic nature differs from “typical” feminine nature, and while she eventually hopes to speak for all women, at this point she is uniquely concerned with the plight of the exceptional woman. She laments that God made her not only an individual, but a woman as well: “I do not say, Heaven knows! that I am better, or greater, or truer than other women, when I say it is quite right for other women to become wives, and not for me. I only say, if that is what a woman is made for, I am not like that: I am different. And God did it” (107). Avis here reverses traditional notions of woman’s identity by suggesting that her nature actually runs counter to it, thereby making the radical suggestion that women, too, can be individuals. It is not in her nature to be a wife, but to be a painter; when she cannot nurture her gift, she loses her ability to exercise it. Ultimately both Carlyle and Phelps show that romance is not feasible for the prophet, whose vocation necessitates isolation. But, as Phelps shows, marriage is not as easily avoided for the woman artist because of the social role women are expected to play regardless of their individual natures. Avis is also vulnerable to Philip’s insistence that he wants her to pursue her vocation. As Lori Duin Kelly notes, “Avis ‘capitulates,’ in part, because she is convinced that Philip Ostrander represents a new kind of manhood that will be compatible with her new kind of womanhood” (101). Ironically, the woman who is defined by her vision cannot see the truth about the man she has married until it is too late.

The prophet is indeed defined by vision, and this is a divinely granted gift. At the same time, however, the gift must be cultivated in order to develop, and the differing social attitudes about men’s and women’s upbringing will affect this development. Teufelsdröckh’s remembrance of his upbringing shows that the prophet is indeed born with the gift of prophecy, but he must also be nurtured to develop that gift. He does not believe that “an acorn might [...]

be nursed into a cabbage,” but he suggests that nature alone does not create a prophet (73). The right conditions must be present if the growth is to occur: “I too acknowledge the all but omnipotence of early culture and nurture: hereby we have either a doddered dwarf bush, or a high-towering, wide-shadowing tree; either a sick yellow cabbage, or an edible, luxuriant, green one” (73). One’s upbringing cannot fundamentally change one’s nature, but it can, he suggests, determine how fully that nature develops. In the case of the exceptional individual, this nature is divinely granted, but he must be nurtured in order to answer his vocation. Despite the unsatisfactory nature of Teufelsdröckh’s formal schooling, he does have the opportunity to indulge his intellectual and spiritual curiosity, and this allows him to answer the call when he realizes it. After his spiritual crisis and conversion, he reaches what the Editor calls his “spiritual majority” (150), when he finally realizes the work he is meant to do in the world: prophecy. Recalling this moment of realization, Teufelsdröckh tells himself: “Awake, arise! Speak forth what is in thee; what God has given thee, what the Devil shall not take away. Higher task than that of Priesthood was allotted to no man: wert thou but the meanest in that sacred Hierarchy, is it not honour enough therein to spend and be spent?” (151). He is called to a lofty role, and he has both the nature and the appropriate nurturing and experience to answer this call.

While Teufelsdröckh’s moment of vocation occurs in adulthood, Avis’s calling to art occurs when she is a young teenager, “perhaps sixteen” (30). Avis is rare among the heroines in this study in that we actually see the moment of her vocation, and her recognition of that vocation evokes Carlyle’s privileging of the spiritual over the material. She receives her calling in response to her direct questioning of God’s purpose for her life. She is twelve years old and reading *Aurora Leigh* in an apple tree when she looks into the sky and remarks, “I am alive. What did God mean by that?” (32). At this moment, she recognizes her own exceptionality, and

Avis climbed down from the apple-tree by and by, with eyes in which a proud young purpose hid. It had come to her now—it had all come to her very plainly—why she was alive; what God meant by making her; what he meant by her being Avis Dobell, and reading just that thing that morning in the apple-boughs, with the breath of June upon her,—Avis Dobell, who had rather take her painting-lesson than go to the senior party,—just Avis, not Coy, nor Barbara. (32)

She immediately recognizes her calling in terms of how it distinguishes her from the other young women she knows. This revelation seems to explain differences that she has already recognized, but the idea that these can be explained by her God-given nature changes her entire vision of her life. Because God made her different from other girls, he intended for her to *do* something different; he meant for her to be an artist. But where the young Teufelsdröckh is nurtured to develop his insight and intellect, she is discouraged. When she goes inside and tells her father that she wants to be an artist, he responds, “Nonsense, nonsense! [...] I can’t have you filling your head with any of these womanish apings of a man’s affairs, like a monkey playing tunes on a hand-organ!” (33). Their discussion goes on to echo that of Aurora and Romney Leigh in Book II of the poem, with Avis even quoting Barrett Browning directly, telling her father that she wants to create instead of making “pretty little copies”: “I who love my art would never wish it lower to suit my stature” (34).<sup>8</sup> This echo shows that the fundamental problem of the woman artist has changed very little in the twenty years since the publication of Barrett Browning’s novel-poem, and this problem is part of a larger Carlylean concern: true individuality and the responsibility it brings.

Understanding the nature of humanity is the prophet’s primary responsibility, and both Carlyle and Phelps evoke the image of the sphinx to demonstrate this mission. For Carlyle, the

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<sup>8</sup> The original passage is from *Aurora Leigh* II, 492-94.



very nature of humanity is a mystery that cannot entirely be explained, but the prophet attempts to decipher this mystery and help others to understand. Landow argues that the story of the riddle of the Sphinx itself demonstrates the role of the prophet/sage. He argues that by solving the riddle, Oedipus “saved a community by comprehending the nature of man. In essence every sage attempts to do the same, for no matter what his point of departure, no matter what phenomenon he interprets, he ends up trying to define some crucial aspect of the human” (Landow 43). Considered in this way, the prophet’s mission is crucial to the spiritual life and well-being of humanity, and Teufelsdröckh uses the image of the Sphinx to show its seriousness. Despite the repeated attempts of the philosophers who precede him, “The secret of Man’s Being is still like the Sphinx’s secret: a riddle that he cannot rede; and for ignorance of which he suffers death, the worst death a spiritual” (43). Men have attempted, he goes on to explain, to make sense of the great mysteries of the universe by simplifying it, by looking for “Axioms, and Categories, and Systems, and Aphorisms” (43). Most are not capable of looking beyond these simplistic explanations or the words that express them. Most importantly, none but the prophet can look beyond the restrictions of time and place, which is essential to achieving a genuine understanding of humanity. Rather than attempting to simplify these mysteries, he suggests, we should embrace the wonder they inspire and attempt to develop the kind of vision that can encompass a truth that expands beyond the boundaries of the material world. The prophet possesses this vision and must use it to teach others about the wondrous nature of humanity.

Teufelsdröckh believes that the beginning of the prophet’s understanding is the ability to see in this expansive way; the prophet must see the truth before he can speak it. He argues, “But it is with man’s Soul as it was with Nature: the beginning of Creating is—Light. Till the eye have vision, the whole members are in bonds” (149). Here he suggests that individual

enlightenment (of the eye/I) must precede the enlightenment of the larger societal whole: if the prophet can see, he can help to liberate the rest of humanity. This vision begins with introspection but must extend outward as well; the prophet must understand the self but must also be able to understand the role of the self in the larger world. The truth lies within, but the prophet must interpret that truth in order to share a meaningful vision. This vision takes time to develop: “in this mad work, must several years of our small term be spent, till the purblind Youth, by practice, acquire notions of distance, and become a seeing Man” (93). The prophet’s vision gains meaning when it is directed at the realities of the immediate surroundings: “O thou that pinest in the imprisonment of the Actual, and criest bitterly to the gods for a kingdom wherein to rule and create, know this of a truth: the thing thou seekest is already with thee, ‘here or nowhere,’ couldst thou only see!” (149). The material of prophecy is readily available; the prophet contributes his interpretation to help man see the truth.

Vision is Avis’s key sense; she is, after all, a painter. She has an innate aesthetic sense, but as the novel develops her vision becomes broader, developing into a sense of responsibility for using her vision in a positive way.<sup>9</sup> She seeks to use her eye for beauty to inspire understanding of the condition of humanity and, more specifically, the condition of women. As she realizes this responsibility, she works to create a more specific vision—not of humankind but of womankind in the mystery of the Sphinx. So while she sees her internal conflict as specific to the woman artist, she also sees herself as part of womankind and recognizes the responsibility she, as a prophet, bears. Before she begins painting the sphinx (and before she agrees to marry Philip), Avis feels a call to use her talent to create something that will speak for women. She has

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<sup>9</sup> A strong sense of social responsibility is central to all of Phelps’s work. As Elizabeth T. Spring notes in her biographical sketch of Phelps, “There is no happier stroke in the book than that which makes her not simply in love with her art and ambitious to excel, but gravely conscious of responsibility for the use of her talent” (571). Privett similarly notes that Phelps believes “a writer is not a true ‘literary artist’ if he or she believes moral responsibility can be removed from the art” (xv).

a mystic vision of the sphinx, wherein “[i]nstantly the room seemed to become full of women. Cleopatra was there, and Godiva, Aphrodite and St. Elizabeth, Ariadne and Esther, Helen and Jeanne d’Arc, and the Magdalene, Sappho, and Cornelia,—a motley company. These moved on solemnly, and gave way to a silent army of the unknown” (82). In a vision that echoes a Carlylean view of history as the story of “great men,” she sees these women in a hierarchy, with the “great women” of history ahead, and the silent army behind. As she sees these women in various states, she envisions her painting of the sphinx, and “The riddle of ages whispered to her. The mystery of womanhood stood before her, and said, ‘Speak for me’” (83). Here the roles of the prophet are clearly delineated: she is both a visionary and a communicator. She sees the unity of women across time and place, and she realizes that her unique vision of this unity brings a responsibility with it. She, as the prophet-artist, must communicate a message through her painting of the sphinx. The message she must communicate is a timeless one, and her vision connects the past, present, and future of all women, suggesting a historical unity that evokes Carlyle and highlights the simultaneous backward and forward looking of the prophet.

At the time of this vision of the Sphinx, she is not yet ready to understand the strength of her connection to other women; only after she has experienced the difficulties of married life for herself can she truly realize that even in her exceptionality she shares something with women who are different from her. After passing through one of the most difficult trials of her life with Philip, his flirtation with Barbara Allen, she turns her keen vision to her own situation. After he has left for Europe, she begins to reflect once again on the status of womanhood:

In the calm of her first solitary hours she was chastened to perceive how her married story had deepened and broadened, nay, it seemed, created in her, certain quivering human sympathies [...] A strange kinship, too solemn for any

superficial caste of the nature to blight, seemed to bind her to them all. Betrayed girls, abandoned wives, aged and neglected mothers, lived in her fancy with a new, exacting claim. To the meanest thing that trod the earth, small in all else, but large enough to love and suffer, her strong heart stooped, and said, "Thou—thou, too, art my sister." (201)

This image is particularly noteworthy in comparison to her earlier vision of the sphinx, in which she sees herself charged with speaking for the "great women" of history, with the others portrayed as an "army." After her own experience of marriage, she begins to individualize these other women and to align herself with the downtrodden. And despite her exceptional nature, Avis sees herself as one of them because she is still a woman. Her suffering is necessary to the development of her sympathy with other women; her experiences enhance her prophetic vision. And as such, her responsibility as a prophet is to use her vision to help those women who are most in need. Here Phelps draws on Carlylean tradition but challenges his political beliefs; she wishes to use prophetic vision in a more democratic way; she wants to tell the story of *all* women. Like Aurora Leigh before her, Avis will reject elements of Carlylean hierarchy for a more sympathetic and less class-bound vision of humanity.

While the prophet's first task is to see the truth, his ultimate calling is to speak the truth. Clarity of vision does not always lead to successful expression, however, as the reception of Teufelsdröckh's philosophy suggests. The Editor suggests that there are two potential problems: first, the British public is not yet ready for his ideas, and second, they are not able to understand his mode of expression. The Editor claims, "as in opening new mine-shafts is not unreasonable, there is much rubbish in his Book, though likewise specimens of invaluable ore. A paramount popularity in England we cannot promise him" (22). Despite his great insights, "he is the most

unequal writer breathing” (23). Creating a connection between the prophet the audience is difficult, for the prophet is by his very nature ahead of his time and intellectually above the people; his audience is by definition not prepared for his message. Part of his job, the Editor suggests, is to create discomfort within his readers. In the final chapter of the book, the Editor asks, “How could a man occasionally of keen insight, not without keen sense of propriety, who had real Thoughts to communicate, resolve to emit them in a shape bordering so closely on the absurd?” (222). He answers this question in part by speculating that “Teufelsdröckh is not without some touch of that universal feeling, a wish to proselytize” (222). This answer suggests that the philosopher’s unevenness and his lack of clarity in expression are actually part of his mission: the method is the message. The prophet’s task is not simply to reveal truth to men, but to help man find truth. For this reason prophecy is itself necessarily obscure; if the prophet reveals his message too directly, he is depriving his audience of their inherent responsibility to wrestle with the truth for themselves.

Avis’s attempt to convey her message is also unsuccessful, but her failure results not from her desire to complicate her message but directly from the circumstances of her marriage. Her painting of the sphinx does not speak the truth she wishes it to because after she marries her duties distract from her attempt even to understand it, and she is never able to complete it properly. Upon looking at the painting in its unfinished stage, she initially anticipates the message it can offer: “Grave as the desert, tender as the sky, strong as the silence, the parted lips of the mysterious creature seemed to speak a perfect word. Yet in its deep eyes fitted an expectant look that did not satisfy her; meanings were in them which she had not mastered; questionings troubled them, to which her imagination has found no controlling reply” (142). The longer she is married and the more burdensome the responsibilities of her home become, the less

time she has to devote to deciphering these mysteries. When she does finally complete the painting, it is for the purpose of selling it, and she must rush to do so. She tells Maynard that she has to finish the painting quickly: “That child in the foreground—the Arab child looking at the sphinx with his finger on his lips, swearing her to silence—do you remember? I put in that child in one hour” (205). So her greatest work of prophecy is compromised, and the sphinx is silenced, by the realities of her marriage. The final addition, that of the silencing child, reinforces her message about the conflict between the calling to prophecy and the possibilities the woman prophet is granted, particularly if she becomes a wife and mother. The most obvious association with the silencing child is Avis’s son Van Dyck, who is depicted crying outside her studio until she relents and opens the door (203). It also evokes her marriage, however; after Philip’s illness progresses, Avis takes him “under the wing of her great love with a kind of maternal protection” (177), and she feels “as if a third child had been born unto her” (177-78). When Maynard tries to encourage her, reminding her of her youth and potential, she tells him, “Life is behind me too [...] Don’t be too much disappointed in me, if there are never any more pictures” (205-06). Avis’s resignation echoes exactly what Carlyle demonstrates through the short-lived romance plot in *Sartor Resartus*: the exceptional individual is called to do his/her work alone; the prophet is a lone voice. By marrying, Avis silences her prophetic voice.

During her vision of the Sphinx, Avis also has a more personal prophecy that directly foreshadows her future and the inevitable conflict faced by the woman artist. Her vision of scenes of war is prophetic because it directly precedes her learning of Philip’s injury, but it also predicts the psychic wounds she will suffer as a result of her own internal conflict. Like her other predictions about marriage, she does not heed its warning. After the parade of womanhood has left her vision, there is a dramatic shift:

For now she was pursued by a vision of battles. Martial music filled the room; bright blood-streaked standards waved and sank and rose again; human faces, like a wind-struck tide, surged to and fro; men reeled, threw up their arms, and fell; the floor crawled with the dead and dying; wounded faces huddled in corners, came and vanished on the ceiling, entered and re-entered through the door, gasped their life away upon the bed. (83)

The violence of this vision contrasts with the grandeur of that which precedes it, and it suggests the individual woman's future that follows from this history. This vision also seems to predict Avis's conflict over her feelings about Philip when he will return from the war and she will find resistance more difficult. The language of war pervades this central section of the novel, and the destruction that she envisions suggests a physical manifestation of the internal conflict she faces. Referring to the dual nature of woman and artist, she tells Philip at one point that her feelings are "civil war" (106), and it is a war that she believes she is destined to fight. When Philip tries to tell her that marriage is a natural state for women, she argues, "But I do not see it to be his will for me, [...] He has set two natures in me, warring against each other" (107). Where Philip sees union as a natural state, Avis sees conflict as her natural state; because this conflict is God's will, she suggests, it is inevitable. She fears that if she attempts to have both art and love, the conflict will inevitably continue. So when she envisions the grotesque deaths of young men on the field of battle, it is appropriate that they are happening in her own room, for she is foretelling not only the literal physical wounding of Philip, but also foreshadowing the destruction of a part of herself.

Indeed, as Philip's health deteriorates and Avis becomes increasingly burdened with the responsibilities of the household, part of what she loses is her femininity. Though she has been an unusual woman throughout the novel, she was always distinguished by a grace and beauty

that remained feminine. As the circumstances of her life grow more difficult, however, she gradually adopts a more traditionally masculine role; as she becomes stronger, Philip grows weaker and more feminized. As Donaldson notes, “[I]f *The Story of Avis* opens and closes with the incarcerating frame of romance, the text itself periodically hints that Avis is the hero and Philip is the heroine of the narrative” (103). Eventually Avis comes to realize this; she is finally able to use her vision to see the truth about her husband. Ruminating on the weakness of his character and constitution, she asks herself:

Was it possible that her soul had ever gone upon its knees before the nature of this man? So gentle had been the stages by which her great passion had grown into mournful compassion, her divine ideal become this unheroic human reality, the king of her heart become the dependent on its care,—so quietly this had come about, that, in the first distinct recognition of it all, she felt no shock; only a stern, sad strain upon the muscle of her nature. There was, indeed, a certain manhood in her—it is latent in every woman, and assumes various forms. Avis possessed it only in a differing degree, not in differing kind, from most other women,—an instinct of strength, or an impulse of protection, which lent its shoulders spontaneously to the increasing individuality of her burden. (178)

So while her vocation put her in conflict with her womanhood, it is the role that she must take on in her marriage with Philip that is ultimately most damaging to her perception of her own femininity. This description suggests that her situation has forced her to use a kind of strength that brings out a manly instinct rarely needed by women. Because she has to bear burdens traditionally carried by men in marriage, she ultimately feels less a woman after she has married than she did in refusing to marry.



Because they are stories of prophecy, both *Sartor Resartus* and *The Story of Avis* conclude by speculating on the future rather than simply resolving the conflict they have explored. By the conclusion of his story, Teufelsdröckh the man has disappeared, but he has left the legacy of his work behind. The Editor refuses to interpret the prophet's disappearance as evidence of his demise, insisting that he continues to live as a spirit if not in the flesh. He claims: "Reason we have, at least of a negative sort, to believe the Lost still living: our widowed heart also whispers that ere long he will himself give a sign" (224). The book ends, then, anticipating further communication from the hero.

*The Story of Avis* also ends with anticipation, though in this case the hope is that the next generation of women will offer new hope. As Carlyle believes that Society is a Phoenix and "that a new heavenborn young one will rise out of her ashes" (180), Avis hopes that the destruction of her talent will eventually be redeemed by her daughter and the generations of women to follow. By the novel's end, she has lost her gift for painting. She tells her father, "my pictures come back upon my hands. Nobody wants them—now. They tell that my style is gone. Goupil says I work as if I had a rheumatic hand—as if my fingers were stiff. It is true my hand has been a little clumsy since—Van—But the stiffness runs deeper than the fingers, father" (244). Here again the prophetic nature of Avis's character shines through. Despite the bleakness of Avis's artistic future, the vision which the novel ends is not without optimism. The final chapter presents Avis's world as entirely populated by woman; she is alone with her daughter, Wait, as both her husband and her son have died. Avis sustains the hope that her daughter will be in a better position than she was: "It would be easier for her daughter to be alive, and be a woman, than it had been for her [...] She had the child, she had the child!" (247). Despite her own experiences, she is able to maintain her optimism for the future. This shows that she has

maintained her vision; as a prophet, she is able to separate her personal experience from her larger sense of the world around her.

Ultimately, *The Story of Avis* reconsiders the idealism of Carlyle by creating a heroine with a prophetic potential she cannot realize because of the social constraints and expectations imposed upon women. While Barrett Browning, Evans, and Alcott derive inspiration from the vastness of the Carlylean hero, Phelps shows that the ways in which women are naturally and socially different from men compromise their ability to act as individuals. She does adopt a prophetic stance, however, to suggest that the future of womanhood is not predetermined by these conditions. The generations that follow may be able to escape the limitations of gender and become more fully realized versions of the Carlylean ideal. While Avis's story is a tragic one, she remains not only optimistic but also patient for this future woman, which the novel's final chapter foresees:

We have been told that it takes three generations to make a gentleman: we may believe that it will take as much, or more, to make A WOMAN. A being of radiant physique; the heiress of ancestral health on the maternal side; a creature forever more of nerve than of muscle, and therefore trained to the energy of the muscle and the repose of the nerve; physically educated by mothers of her own fibre and by physicians of her own sex. (246)

The new womanhood, Phelps suggests, will have to comprise an entirely new social context, one which will nurture rather than stifle natures like that of Avis Dobell. It is too late for Avis and the women of her generation, but she prophesies a future in which women can be true individuals.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Recently at a women's faculty event at my new institution, I found myself seated with a professor of English and Women's Studies. When we struck up a conversation and she learned that I was nearing completion of my degree in English, she asked the inevitable question: "What is the topic of your dissertation?" I told her that I am examining the influence of Thomas Carlyle's work, specifically *Sartor Resartus*, on the work of a group of nineteenth-century women writers. As is so often the case in these conversations, I could see her eyes glaze over as soon as I uttered the name "Thomas Carlyle," and she immediately said, "That's not my area"; I'm quite certain that she never even heard me utter the words "women writers"—which *is* her area. I share this anecdote not to criticize this scholar but to suggest that her response is quite telling: it is easy for feminist critics—and others as well—to operate under the assumption that Carlyle is no longer relevant and that he was never relevant to understanding women's experience. On some level this is understandable; certainly many of his ideas are offensive to the twenty-first century reader. What I hope I have shown here, however, is that Carlylean thought was central to a continuing conversation about women's individuality which would shape the debates of feminist politics for the next century and beyond. And while direct engagement with Carlyle would become less relevant, women writers in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be building on ideas that grew out of the conversation begun by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Jane Evans, Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.

As *The Story of Avis* concludes, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps is looking ahead to a new generation of women; Avis Dobell believes that her daughter, as part of that new generation, will have the opportunity to realize her personal ambitions fully. As part of that next generation, the “New Woman” writers of the 1880’s and 1890’s would, like the women writers who preceded them, concern themselves with issues of marriage, independence, and women’s creativity. Writers like Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, Sarah Grand, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Kate Chopin, and others would envision new roles for women in their families and their careers. As Carol A. Senf argues, the New Woman novel “introduced a number of new and interesting types of characters to fiction, and it broadened the range of possibilities for women characters. While not entirely eliminating old stereotypes, it opened the way for women in fiction to have careers as well as marriages; to argue with parents, husbands, and, brothers; and to have intellectual aspirations and sexual desires” (xvi). Carolyn Forrey describes the New Woman similarly:

She was determined to live her own life and to make her own decisions. She was eager for direct contact with the world outside her home. She held independent views. Often she managed to be financially independent as well, earning her own living and perhaps committing herself to a lifelong career. She was well educated. She was physically vigorous and energetic. Above all, she wanted to stand in a new relation to man, seeing herself as a companion—an equal—rather than as a subordinate or dependent. (39)

Both of these descriptions demonstrate that a major concern of new woman fiction was the same concern that women’s fiction of the previous generation shared with Thomas Carlyle: the problem of individualism. The germ of these possibilities clearly exists in the characters of

Aurora Leigh, Jo March, Edna Earl, and Avis Dobell; these new types would not have been possible without these predecessors.

The most important aspect of new womanhood was a desire for options; the “New Woman” was not simply one type.<sup>1</sup> As Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis argue, “Victorian feminism is not a simple story of a radical break with tradition. For example, even by the *fin de siècle*, many New Women wanted to achieve social and political power by reinventing rather than rejecting their domestic role” (9). New Woman novels ultimately depicted a fundamental desire for the opportunity for women to be individuals, and in many cases they advocated for women’s right to choose a career instead of marriage. Most importantly, the novels deplored a system that required all women to fit the same mold; as Gullette argues of Mona Caird, they criticized “how systematic society was in programming all women mindlessly to undertake the one adult career path that connoted female ‘success’: marriage and child-rearing” (496). Certainly this critique recalls Carlyle’s depiction of Teufelsdröckh as one who must “swim apart” in order to escape the systematic education that would have made him a professional like other men rather than the heroic individual he becomes (*Sartor* 95). The plea for women’s rights was, in many of these novels, primarily a plea that women be treated as individual human beings first and as women second.

Furthermore, the New Woman, like Carlyle’s “new man” (*Sartor* 93), develops in and for a new time, and the desire to revolutionize womanhood derives at least in part from a Carlylean view of history. Patricia Murphy argues that Victorian concerns about the New Woman are closely connected with the Victorian obsession with time and anxiety about change. She sees

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<sup>1</sup> Most critics recognize that New Woman novels feature more than one type of heroine. A. R. Cunningham, for example, suggests that there are two types of novels and heroines: the “purity school” novels depicted heroines whose “intelligence and independence were used to dispel the hypocrisy which surrounded the Victorian concept of marriage”; the other type of novel presented a more radical treatment of women’s sexuality and its attendant psychology (179-80).

this connection as ultimately negative for those writers with feminist aims, arguing that “time became a covert but potent means of naturalizing repressive definitions of female subjectivity in response to the threatening New Woman” (2). One of the ways that New Woman writers resisted this impulse, I contend, is by espousing Carlyle’s belief that society must continually be destroyed and reconstructed. While he looks to the past for universal truths, he believes that the structure of society must be reinvented, and it is the task of the “new man” to incite this change. Teufelsdröckh argues that “Society, long pining, diabetic, consumptive, can be regarded as defunct; for those spasmodic , galvanic sprawlings are not life, neither indeed will they endure, galvanise as you may, beyond two days” (176). Linda Dowling argues that contemporary critics and reviewers identified New Woman fiction with literary decadence because they shared a vision of “social apocalypse,” of “[a]n old world in collapse, with faint thunders of falling cities” (453). The writers discussed in the earlier chapters foresaw this collapse, and the New Woman writers envisioned the new womanhood that would follow in the new order.

The preceding chapters make a plea for reconsideration both of Thomas Carlyle’s legacy and of the context in which we read women writers. Because of the unpopularity of his political views (particularly in his later writings) and the unfortunate association of his ideas with Nietzsche and Hitler in the twentieth century, it has become too easy to dismiss the breadth of his influence in his own time. As a result, while Carlyle scholarship continues, it seems to occur in a critical vacuum. I contend that feminist critics and others who study women writers might do well to look more frequently in the direction of this seemingly unlikely figure of inspiration. His contemporaries—women as well as men—read his work with great interest, and even when they disagreed with him they were forced to wrestle with their own positions in order to understand why. In order to understand this, we as critics must remove our twentieth-century lens and

consider the nineteenth century in all its dimensions. Finally, we must continue to break down the false barrier of the Atlantic Ocean. As my Introduction shows in a brief discussion of Carlyle and American culture, the exchange of ideas between Britain and America was rich, frequent, and productive. Understanding these exchanges more fully can only expand our understanding of literature and women's place within it.

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