

## PRE-VICTORIAN POST-ROMANTICISM: THE PECULIAR CASE OF THOMAS CARLYLE

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### The Victorian Sage Grows a Beard

In 1854 Thomas Carlyle grew a beard; he was fifty-nine years of age. He had joined a fashion started by returning soldiers from the Crimea, a fashion which had broken a two hundred year trend of clean-shaven English faces said to be the image of secular civilisation. The romantic era in particular sought the image of the youthful son. The high Victorian era needed something more serious, something more emblematic of "manliness" befitting the world's greatest empire. As the Promethean sons of the romantic era transformed themselves into the Titans of the Victorian Empire, a whole generation of men grew beards. Carlyle's beard was anything but patriarchal in length and style but the 1850s saw his transformation in the eye of the public from controversialist to Sage. With the publication of the first two volumes of *Frederick the Great* and the serial production of the *Collected Works* in 1857, Carlyle had reached the point at which a "writer is no longer simply a creator of books but the embodiment of a cultural myth" (Kaplan 412). The author who wrote on Faust, Prometheus, of "gods of the lower world," had in the eyes of his contemporaries become an Olympian hero of the modern epoch himself (412).

The 1850s also witnessed the sudden popularity of photography and over the course of the next two decades Carlyle, the cultural myth, was not only captured on canvas by the great painters of the era such as Whistler, Millais, Watts, and in sculpture by Boehm, but also in numerous photographs, most hauntingly by Julia Margaret Cameron. All of these images are of a man between the ages of sixty and eighty-five years and as such should tell us more about Victorian aesthetics and middle-class consciousness than about Carlyle. Yet their cumulative impact has been to entrench twentieth-century critical reception of Carlyle as a serious (humourless), fierce (angry), sad (tragic) and reactionary patriarch. If we accept these images, we remain mid-Victorians instead of their interpreters.

To overcome the received caricature of Carlyle the Victorian, it is necessary to read more closely the younger pre-Victorian Carlyle. 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. It is too infrequently remembered, for example, that Carlyle was the first to introduce into English language discourse the terms "a romantic," "a romanticist," and "romanticism," long before they gained common currency as shorthand descriptions of an epoch and of specific schools of thought and practice (Wellek 2: 110). While he was at times an acerbic critic of the English romantics he was a most assiduous promoter of their German counterparts. His bold

championing of modern German intellectual culture, in particular the contributions of Schiller, Goethe, Novalis, and Jean Paul, effectively introduced transcendental idealism, philosophical dialectics and aesthetic critical theory to British readers. Rather than posit two Carlyles, however—the young romanticist and the older Victorian—we can read him as a close interpreter of romanticism and romantics, but one who seeks a post-romantic position by using romantic forms to achieve other than romantic ends. That he was able to do this was in part due to his self-conscious positioning of himself as an European man of letters. The cumulative effect of this immersion in European letters enabled him to cultivate a highly idiosyncratic, radical and cosmopolitan intellect by the time he had settled in Chelsea in 1834.

### **The Economy of Modern European Literature**

Like the romantics, Carlyle saw himself as a radical-mystical outsider, yet this self-description had some empirical validity. Carlyle's difference was in his distinctive combination of contingent factors: as a Scottish provincial; as an outsider to the philosophic Whig circles of Edinburgh, the romantic-Christian circles of London (Irving and Coleridge) and the Lakes (Wordsworth and Southey), the philosophic radical circle of Westminster; and as a literary outsider eavesdropping on the Weimar (Goethe) and Coppet (de Staël) circles. Carlyle exploited his own marginality, his own geographical, political, social and literary fringe-dwelling status beyond the circumference of these closer circles by offering a critical editorial perspective on the whole configuration. He endeavoured to bring the antinomies of idealism and realism, romanticism and utilitarianism, politics and economics, reason and history, faith and reason, synthesis and analysis (criticism) into a synthetic and holistic representation of the modern revolution. By 1834 Carlyle, due a strenuous self-education process, was equally familiar with European literature and languages (Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, German and some Greek), European history, and contemporary European political and economic revolutions; European Protestant reformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and European Enlightenments of the eighteenth century.

After *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle's occasional writings were a function or an offshoot of his larger research projects and books. Between 1819 and 1834, however, essays, translations and reviews were his key form of self-expression and the source of his income as a professional man of letters. As G.B. Tennyson first highlighted in "*Sartor*" Called "*Resartus*" thirty years ago, *Sartor Resartus* was the result of some fifteen years of Carlyle's immersion in reading, revising, reviewing, translating and editing European literature. Carlyle was not an original, creative writer in the sense hallowed by the romanticism of theory: he showed little aptitude for novel writing or poetry, and rarely wrote free standing essays or non-fictional prose. Of the total of sixty items published up until the time of *Sartor Resartus* only four items of non-fiction prose are "*not* reviews, redactions, or translations" (Tennyson "The Editor" 47). He came to understand that the tasks of reading, reviewing, translating, redacting and editing shared more than a family resemblance: "Carlyle, uniquely, it seems . . . in the nineteenth century, grasped the nature of the similarities and dissimilarities in the editorial roles of

editor, reviewer, and translator, and he saw the literary possibilities inherent in them” (46).

Having grasped this critical insight into the complex relationships between reading and writing, inter-textuality, and the author-editor-reviewer-translator and reading public interface, Carlyle turned his own skills into a *modus operandi* and into a sociological interpretation about the nature of modern society which creates the historic and material conditions for such a multiple and democratic literary culture in the first place. He poured his private troubles, and ambitions to be a creative writer, into the writing process itself, thereby underwriting the problematic nature of the modern public sphere in which writers and readers take their place along with the general populace, a place where authorities are always contested and in which, as he asserts in *On Heroes*, “every man is his own king.”

Yet Carlyle is not the romantic theorist as hero. Rather, Carlyle himself viewed romanticism as one of the cultural and historic outcomes of modernity as revolutionary epoch, and hence caught in a Faustian dance with the Enlightenment. To Carlyle, therefore, the subjectivism and nostalgic romance of romanticists are but the symbiotic emanation of a revolutionary rupture with all forms of feudal society made possible by revolutions in commerce and the rise of secular reason as embodied in the logics of government (utilitarianism) and the market (political economy). His critique of romanticism as a dis-eased symptom of the metaphysical malaise that represents the new age is borne out by his prototypical sociological insight that the economy of literature, through the technological means of printing, has become entangled with the very same “profit and loss” logics of utilitarianism and political economy. For Carlyle no amount of metaphysical tomes, romance poetry and sentimental novels would reverse this process. Instead he set himself the onerous task of overcoming the divided self as expressed in a divided society where the few exploit the many in the name of progress and bourgeois civilisation. This is the Thomas Carlyle of his famous essays “Signs of the Times” (1829), “Characteristics” (1831), and of all of his books from *Sartor Resartus* onward.

But how did Carlyle travel to post-romanticism via romantic means? Most Carlylean studies note the German connection but Carlyle’s cultural and literary references are far more extensive than is commonly appreciated. Here I use one under-appreciated avenue by way of example, that of Jean Charles Leonard Simonde de Sismondi (1773-1842), a Genevan man of letters who made his name both as political economist and as literary and political historian. Sismondi’s fame in his own lifetime, however, was based as much on his stormy, flamboyant and cosmopolitan lifestyle as on his literary output. As befitting an “Age of revolutions,” he experienced “three exiles, three imprisonments, a change of citizenship, a love affair frustrated by family objections to marriage plans, periods of financial strain, and a final row with political foes in Geneva” just before he died in of cancer in 1842” (Sowell “Neglected Pioneer” 63). He moved in various intellectual circles, not least Madame de Staël’s at Coppet in France and, after his marriage to an Englishwoman in 1819, among the philosophic Whigs in England. He was also justly famous for his multi-volumed histories of the

Italian City Republics of the middle ages and of the romance languages and literatures of the South of Europe. Sismondi's political economy writings had greater influence on later generations of socialists, labour movements and social liberals than on his own generation. Nevertheless, he was as proud of his theoretical and his practical knowledge of commercial affairs and political economy as he was of his literary and historical scholarship, and was frustrated at his seeming lack of contemporary influence. After a brief apprenticeship as a banker in France, he worked as a farmer in Tuscany, and by 1818 had written two treatises on political economy and a third, a Tableau—part-memoir, part-travelogue, part-economic history—of his Tuscany farming experience. This was the decade of his greatest literary output, being also the time of publication of his epic histories.

The relationship between Sismondi and Carlyle is strictly literary and the influence is entirely one way. They met only once and then as late as the 1840s. Neither man was impressed with the other. The influence of Sismondi on the younger Carlyle, however, is significant for it shaped both Carlyle's understanding of political economy and his sense of the economy of literature, and the place of literary history as a secularised philosophy of history. It is an influence that Carlyle at least realised and appreciated in the 1820s if not in his later years. Curiously, however, the connection and its importance has never been studied in the history of Carlylean studies.<sup>1</sup> Its significance can be elucidated by a look at how, in the process of translation work, Carlyle learned about political economy through the work of one of its pioneering and controversial critics and practitioners, and then how he copied the mode of literary history of particular national traditions used by Sismondi to produce a comparative historical sociology of Europe and the civilising process writ large. From Sismondi the political economist, Carlyle learned to translate and appropriate his arguments to British settings. From Sismondi the literary historian and political historian, Carlyle mimicked the form and appropriated the arguments for his own ends and contexts.

### **Carlyle and Sismondi: The Critique of Political Economy**

Since Raymond Williams's influential *Culture and Society* (1957) highlighted the importance of Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" essay, it has gained fresh recognition as a classic of its genre. The essay marked Carlyle's debut as a social and political commentator of contemporary national affairs in Britain's leading journal, the *Edinburgh Review*, and it provided a critical and formal mould for much of the political and social critique and commentary of the Victorian era. Written at a time of great anxiety, "Signs of the Times" was a self-consciously political intervention concerned with Poor Laws, Corn Laws, Combination Laws, Reform Bills, the repeal of the Test Acts, and then of the Catholic Disabilities. Nevertheless it is not an essay which attends to the minutiae of these political debates but instead contains a nascent theory of the

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<sup>1</sup> G.B. Tennyson's thorough bibliographical review essay, "Thomas Carlyle," for example, fails to mention Sismondi at all. There is no evidence of any subsequent work on this connection. Since the discovery of Carlyle's translation of Sismondi's "Political Economy" article, mention is made of it as an influence but its nature and extent remained unexplored.

tendencies of the epoch writ large: of industrialisation as the systematic and functional logics of technological change; of capitalism as the systemic logic of the universalisation of markets and the social relations of production which it produces; and of the peculiarly modern problems of government associated with urbanisation, secularisation, pluralism and an emergent age of democracy, as a signifier of the new language of rights, citizenship and individual freedoms. Within the circumference of a single essay, Carlyle offers the kernel of a theory of both industrialisation processes and of capitalism—and both these systems are discussed in terms of cultural changes of class, power, knowledge and language. As such, “Signs of the Times” is an uncanny anticipation of modern social theory, offering an encapsulation of many of the key contemporary political economy debates even as it eschews its philosophical claims to be able to provide a moral science for the government of society.

A key term and concept in “Signs of the Times” is “the Age of Machinery” which Carlyle uses as a canopy term: first, to evoke both the site and social experience of urban-industrialisation and of its negative externalities, not least for the working classes who work and live in the cities; second, to present a view of the Promethean ideal of expansive productive and entrepreneurial qualities of industrialism, extracting wealth and conquering nature; and third, to employ the term as a metonymy of the spirit of the age. The “Age of Machinery” is an example of Carlyle’s doubled approach to social and political issues in which he combines a spiritual and a materialist analysis into a symbolic reading of modernity. This double approach becomes a matter of course in all of his later major works. As for Carlyle’s use of “machinery” and “mechanism” as metonyms of the “spirit of the age,” he self-consciously positions his own critique *vis-à-vis* the various contemporary contending parties and perspectives. On the one hand he directs his rhetoric towards the undue pessimism of the Tories and the doomsaying of the millenarians; on the other he directs it against the excessive optimism of the “millites” (that is, James Mill and the philosophic radicals): both the “Fifth-Monarchy men [who] prophesy from the Bible and the Utilitarians from Bentham” can offer only readings of the sky instead of responding to the needs of the present hour. While one announces hell, and the other heaven on earth, Carlyle dismisses both as but dis-eased symptoms of the fatalism endemic to the mechanical age itself. Carlyle was unhappy with them all, be they the philosophic radicals of the *Westminster Review*, the philosophic Whigs of the *Edinburgh Review*, or the Tory defenders of God, King and Nation (Church, State and Land) of the *Quarterly*, *Blackwood’s*, and *Fraser’s*. Carlyle positions himself in these discourses as *in* but not *of* them; he reads all of the review journals, he writes for some of them, lives beyond the margins of their circles, and seeks to transcend them. The economy of literature is, in any case, only one of the characteristic spheres of spiritual and material exchange that constitutes the modern epoch which Carlyle wanted to address.

Until “Signs of the Times” in 1829, Carlyle did not write any essays on political economy. The mystery is that Carlyle, famous throughout the Victorian era as critic of “pig philosophy,” “the dismal science” and its proclamation of the gospel of mammon and laissez-faire, took so long to find his vocation, or at least express it so publicly.

Perhaps more puzzling is the question of where Carlyle obtained his “idiosyncratic radical” perspective on the so-called sciences of politics and political economy? There are many possibilities and hypotheses but one (arguably the most important) source for Carlyle’s economic knowledge is an often overlooked article that he was commissioned to translate by David Brewster for the *Edinburgh Encyclopedia*. The article, simply titled “Political Economy,” was written by Sismondi. It is not known why Brewster commissioned Sismondi to write “Political Economy” when any number of the Edinburgh circle could have done the task, but the decision is less mysterious when it is appreciated that Sismondi was as well known in England as he was on the continent. Sismondi’s family had lived in England as exiles from the French revolution and he was to return there on many occasions in later life. Not least of these occasions was in 1819 when he married the sister of Josiah Wedgewood and the sister-in-law of James Mackintosh—patriarchs of two leading philosophic Whig and business families in Britain. Sismondi was also a friend of Malthus and known to Ricardo and Say; all four kept up lively debates in their publications, personal meetings and by correspondence.

Sismondi probably wrote the forty-three page encyclopedia article sometime in 1818 and he then used it as the basis of his book *Nouveaux principes d’économie politique* (1819; e.t. 1991). It was not until the late 1960s that the editors of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* project discovered that Carlyle had translated this piece, a fact still apparently not appreciated in economic and history of economic thought circles, where it is still commonly assumed that Sismondi had written the article in English. The confusion is exacerbated by Sismondi himself for he spoke English fluently and his introduction to the first edition of *Nouveaux principes* in 1819 presumes that his encyclopedia article had already been published. However, letters between Carlyle, his brother John, and his editor Brewster state that Carlyle translated “Political Economy” sometime in 1823 and delivered the manuscript to Brewster in January 1824. A week after its appearance in the publication of volume seventeen of the *Edinburgh Encyclopedia* in December 1824, Brewster wrote to Carlyle thanking him for his contribution.<sup>2</sup>

None of this would be of much import had not Sismondi’s ideas on the new science proved immediately and highly controversial. Indeed, his announcement of “nouveaux principes” when Ricardo’s ink on the *Principles of Political Economy* had barely dried, was a self-conscious attack on what he deemed to be an “orthodoxy” (a

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<sup>2</sup> See Letter 1, *Carlyle Letters* 1: 260. The encyclopedia article has been published twice in reprint by Kelly (1966, 1991) from the 1828 American edition published by Parker. Kelley quotes Sismondi as claiming to have written the article in 1815 (Sismondi, *Political Economy* 458). This recollection of Sismondi appears to have to be taken on trust by one of his latter day interpreters, Thomas Sowell, who, in his *New Palgrave* entry (1972), even brought it forward to 1814 (4: 387). In 1933 Halévy suggested 1818 (5), but in an odd slip refers to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Richard Hyse, translator of *Nouveaux principes* in the first ever English edition, also suggests that 1818 is the more likely date but he too perpetuates the myth that Sismondi wrote the article in English. This is not surprising given Sismondi’s “Foreword” to the first edition of *Nouveaux principes d’économie politique* published in 1819: “This work . . . can in many respects be regarded as an extension of the article ‘Political Economy’ which I published in the *Edinburgh Encyclopedia*” (1).

typification he invented; see Halévy [6]). In the author's "Foreword" to the first edition of the *Nouveaux principes*, Sismondi states boldly that political economy is a "science of public welfare" (2) and that his motivation for writing stemmed from the public distress caused by the "business crisis" Europe was experiencing, particularly since it had caused "the cruel suffering of the factory workers" and since the recession in the business cycle was being aggravated by wrongly advised governments (1-3).

After seven years of open debate with the political economists in the British reviews, Sismondi published a second edition of *Nouveaux principes* (1862), and declared even more clearly his difference from the reigning orthodoxy: "I called for the intervention of the state to regulate the progress of wealth, instead of reducing political economy to the simplest, and apparently most liberal motto of *laissez faire et laissez passer*" (7).

The significance of Sismondi's intervention in these debates in the quarterly reviews on Carlyle's intellectual development cannot be stressed too highly, even if we need to proceed by interpreting the influence by analogy and inference. First and foremost, Carlyle would have recognised in these discussions the reality of the plurality of views among the political economists themselves; Sismondi's epistemological attack on the pretensions of political economy to be a social science and of its protagonists' belief in *laissez-faire* as a law of nature, must have made an indelible impression on the young Carlyle if his own writings on such matters are taken as evidence. Second, from the outset of his first reading of Sismondi's literary history in 1820, Carlyle found Sismondi an attractive character. On the one hand, Sismondi was a cosmopolitan figure, at home in Geneva, Tuscany, Paris and London, an intellectual of wide learning and ambition who believed in the progress of European civilisation (the very kind of figure Carlyle was endeavouring to become in the 1820s). On the other hand, Sismondi's personal history and beliefs were analogous to Carlyle's own. Sismondi was the son of a Calvinist minister and a strong advocate of federalist, republican city-state government on the lines first developed by Calvin and his *confrères* in Geneva—albeit tempered with the eighteenth-century rationalism of his university teachers, Pictet (about whose theories of gravitation Carlyle had written in 1819) and Prevost. As a practising farmer for many years, Sismondi grew to respect the importance and dignity of the sturdy yeomen whose oral traditions of knowledge were ground out of centuries of experience of the seasons and vicissitudes of nature and the development of local markets. Above all, at a time when Carlyle was moving from a focus on Newtonian science to a study of literature and aesthetics, Sismondi's attack on the deductive, abstract and mechanical logic of Ricardo was highly attractive. Sismondi counteracted Ricardo's ideas with his own counterpointed emphasis on pragmatic politics, historical, national and institutional experience and the importance of developing fluid, dynamic analyses. Finally, Sismondi's sympathy for the lot of the poor and the working classes would also have impressed Carlyle; neither thinker advocated democracy or equality but rather a hierarchy of merit and personal industriousness, and a concern for the material welfare of the industrious working poor.

To Carlyle, the opportunity to translate Sismondi's encyclopedia article was even more important than his moral example. It should not be forgotten that the act of translation represents not only a close reading of a document but also involves re-writing in another language. To translate is an act of cultural creation, or better, mediation; and it was to prove Carlyle's path. This is a banal, almost tautological point, except when recontextualised by Carlyle's other encounters with political economy debates in the review pages of the journals of the time. By having to engage in a close reading and translation of the article, Carlyle was granted an insider's view of the argot of the new discipline and the method for conducting an immanent critique of the main claims of the key political economic doctrines at the very historic moment these debates were first being waged.

The central concern of all Sismondi's reflections on political economy is that the question of wealth creation and its relation to wealth distribution was a problem of good government. This is the informing spirit of his thought and its pragmatic goal: "The diffusion of wealth . . . still more than its accumulation, truly constitutes national prosperity, because it keeps up the kind of consumption most favourable for national reproduction" (*Political Economy* 53-54). Ricardo also recognised that political economy was about distribution, but he saw it as a problem of ensuring that commercial wealth was put into the right hands—a problem to be solved by a theoretical study of markets to ascertain the "natural course of rent, profit and wages" (3). Sismondi saw the problem of distribution as a *social* problem, a function of a complex set of dynamic factors which may never find equilibrium in the market place: historical patterns, cultural habits and institutions, national character, individual decisions, and modes of government. Because Sismondi worried about the happiness of all of society's citizens, his "science of public welfare" effectively amounts to a form of historical sociology (and not economics, as it came to be delimited), to a study of the "social system." And so it is in "Signs of the Times" that Carlyle proves himself a good student of Sismondi and, with Sismondi, a critic of Ricardo:

It is the Age of Machinery . . . the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practises the great art of adapting means to ends . . . What wonderful accessions have thus been made, and are still making, to the physical power of mankind; how much better fed, clothed, lodged and, in all outward respects, accommodated men now are, or might be, by a given quantity of labour, is a grateful reflection which forces itself on every one. What changes, too, this addition of power is introducing into the Social System; how wealth has more and more increased, and at the same time gathered itself more and more into masses, strangely altering the old relations, and increasing the distance between the rich and the poor, will be a question for Political Economists, and a much more complex and important one than any they have yet engaged with. (*Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* 2: 233-34)



While the problem of social inequality was brought to the foreground by Sismondi, Carlyle grasped that it was the product of progress itself. Technological innovation and commercial society had instituted a new social imaginary: the spectre of Goethe's "Faustian man." Mechanical progress ushers in the expectation of still further progress and the public awareness of inequality as a problem of what Runciman in our own century came to call "relative deprivation." The expectation is for ever more progress, ever more change; Faustian man cannot stop.

The dynamic of the modern age was not only a dynamic of productive forces but generated a dynamic culture of consumption for its reproduction. Thus far, the age of mechanism had produced mechanical reason in the form of political economy and utilitarianism. Carlyle recognises that the utilitarians had in them an "infinite hope," for they postulated the possibility of human happiness in infinite material growth. For Carlyle, however, the quest was not just for full stomachs—although this was an urgent task for Irish peasants and English and Scottish working classes—but for a politics of the modern soul. For this quest he needed a "science of dynamism." He therefore embarked on a long exploration of the moral, ideal and aesthetic economies of literature in the hope that his soul could win out over his stomach. While the Germans, particularly Schiller and Goethe, Novalis and Jean Paul, are major sources for Carlyle's critical reflections on these issues, here again Sismondi is an important conduit for Carlyle's thinking and writing about the economy of literature.

### **Sismondi and Carlyle: Narrating the Origins of Modern Europe**

Carlyle was the only one of his generation in Britain to import "the concept of a national literature unified by a national mind, the concept of literary evolution, and the whole ideal of narrative consecutive literary history" (Wellek 3: 91-92). These achievements are generally under-recognised by scholars because of too narrow a focus on Carlyle as interlocutor of German literature in Britain. The process of importation was also one of transformation. The problem is that the significance has been cast as unilateral and derivative. To focus on Carlyle as "the conduit" of all things German is to misdirect attention away from an appreciation that Carlyle's attraction to German national literature is part of a wider ambition to be a cosmopolitan reader and interpreter of—and participant in—European literature (Goethe's *Weltliteratur*) and universal history. Rather than look at Carlyle's German literature essays in the 1820s and early 1830s, it is helpful to look sideways at the way de Staël and Sismondi were both influential intermediaries of his interest in the Germans. More importantly for Carlyle, de Staël and Sismondi provided examples of how to develop historical, cultural, political and literary contextualisation of national histories in the wider history of Europe.

As is frequently recognised by commentators, Carlyle first became conscious of the other world of German literature in the fall of 1818 when he read Madame Germaine de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* (1813; e.t. 1813). Part travel book, part study of national character from a psychological, sociological and historical perspective, *De l'Allemagne* was for her French readership a pioneering romantic exercise in comparative literature

and literary history. Designed as a way of introducing German literature to a French readership, de Staël's work also advocated the importance of a revivification of French culture through a cross-fertilisation of ideas and poetics. To Carlyle, however, de Staël was but an entrée to the world of European literature; already by 1820 he was reading another of the leading lights of her famous literary salon: Sismondi—in the first place less as economist, than as social theorist of comparative literature and European history. Sismondi's participation in de Staël's salon is not surprising. Both de Staël and Sismondi shared a common background in Calvinism, civic republicanism, a Rousseauian love of political liberty, and an eighteenth-century attachment to the enlightenment reading of history as progress which inclined to a positivistic sociology loosely coupled with German historicism. The latter interest was encouraged in Sismondi by de Staël herself. She redirected Sismondi's interest away from political economy to literary history. De Staël took Sismondi with her on tours of Italy (1804-05) and Vienna (1808), where he met A.W. Schlegel and listened to his *Dramatic Lectures* (e.t. 1815).

Carlyle was a prodigious reader of histories of Europe. During his university years he was a diligent student of David Hume's *History of England* (1754-1762) and Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788). Even more significant may have been Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Outlines of a Philosophy of History of Man*) (1784-1791; e.t. 1800), which he read in the original German version in 1826. Notwithstanding the importance of these sources for his developing philosophy of history, Sismondi has a particular significance, since he directly addressed two key issues that Carlyle himself was wrestling with at the time he was reading Sismondi's histories. First, Sismondi demonstrated to Carlyle the significance of the economy of literature in the civilising process of Europe, not least the specific importance of poetic periods of great literary creativity such as in the middle ages, when romance literature did much to mollify the violence of barbarism by praising ideal worlds of love, chivalry, religion, charity and valour. Second, Sismondi highlighted the importance of the medieval communes and guilds of Northern Italian cities as social imaginaries and political projects which made possible the emergence of freedom as a key value and practice of modern civilisation. The first argument is to be found in Sismondi's *Litterature du midi de l'europe* (*Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe*) (1813; e.t. 1823) and the second in *Histoire des republiques italiennes au moyen age* (*A History of the Italian Republics, Being a View of the Origin, Progress and Fall of Italian Freedom*) (1803-1818; e.t. 1966).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Litterature du midi de l'europe* was published in four volumes in 1813 (e.t. 1823), the same year as *De l'Allemagne*, while the *Histoire des republiques italiennes* was published in sixteen volumes (1803-1818). Carlyle read *Litterature du midi de l'europe* between the Spring of 1820 and the end of 1821, thereafter commending Sismondi to his student Jane Baillie Welsh (later to become his wife for forty-two years) as this "lively, dapper, elegant, little fellow full of good sense and learning and correct sentiment" and "a clever man, with rather less of natural talent than Jeffrey has, and about ten times as much knowledge and culture" (Letters 2: 251; 1: 1: 259-60; 314). In a letter to Jane Welsh written in early 1823, Carlyle recommends Sismondi's *Histoire des republiques italiennes* in a list of modern histories of ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, medieval Italy through to the modern age (Letters: 2: 267; Shine, *Early*

Sismondi was the “first modern literary historian in French” (Wellek 3: 3) and therefore was a major conduit of the historicist doctrines and romantic theories of Herder, Goethe, and the Schlegel brothers to a non-German readership. While de Staël acted as a kind of literary publicist and provocateur, Sismondi was the first to put into practice a European history of national literatures. *Litterature du midi* was the “first attempt to treat medieval literature as a totality” (3: 4), while *Histoire des republiques italiennes* was the “first . . . attempt to write the history of medieval Italy with its manifold political divisions as a single story” (Ferguson v). Both multi-volumed histories are the first of their kind in celebrating the middle ages, asserting the significance of romance languages, literature and cultures in the rise of modern literatures, and thereby inverting the claims of Renaissance history and classicism in general that the middle ages were dark and barbaric and medieval poetry crude. Both histories follow the German canon of historicist argument that each nation/city-state has its own kind of literature and culture (Wellek 1: 5).

*Histoire des republiques italiennes* has a clear moral philosophy of history: “History has no true importance but as it contains a moral lesson. It should be explored, not for scenes of carnage, but for instructions in the government of mankind . . . it instructs us to avoid mistakes, to imitate virtues, to improve by experience” (Sismondi *Italian Republics* 1). As in the case of political economy, Sismondi believed that history was about “government,” the “prime cause of the character of peoples” (xiv). Sismondi was scornful of those who attributed the character of peoples to the effects of climate and race—a snide reference to Montesquieu and de Staël alike. Moreover, his interest in the history of government was limited to that of “civilisation,” for where there is government by violent force and oppression alone, there is nothing to be learned. Only where an association exists of “all the inhabitants of a country organised for the common good” does “useful history begin” (1-2). This is why the medieval communes of the Northern Italian city-states in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were so important to Sismondi, for they represented an intimation of the progress of political liberty into the modern age. Ancient civilisation declined with the loss of political liberty in the Roman empire; its recovery was made possible in the medieval Italian city-state republics because of a high level of civic-minded culture leading to economic prosperity, political liberty and legal justice, and a brilliant literary and artistic culture. Indeed, Sismondi argued that the moral, aesthetic and historic value of any literary and artistic culture is closely aligned to the extent of political liberty achieved by a society. For Sismondi, these city-state republics are the seed-beds of the modern age: “Let us not, while we now reap the harvest, forget the parent soil” (5). The moral dimension to Sismondi’s passionate love of political liberty and city-state republicanism was a belief that the key challenge of any government seeking to marry the governors to the governed for the common good was an achievement and goal predicated in the first

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Reading No. 756). Shine, however, states that Carlyle had “known and valued Sismondi’s large work on medieval Italian history since June, 1820 . . . and his work on the literature of Southern Europe since May, 1822” (*Unfinished History* No. 46: 101).

place on a high standard of public and private morality, for when “one was lost the other necessarily declined” (Ferguson xv).

*Litterature du midi* provides the complement of German romantic historicism to *Histoire des republiques italiennes*'s Calvinist emphasis on city-state republican autonomy and moral discipline, and the Rousseauian ideal of political liberty. It is in historical terms the explication of the main platform of de Staël's political program outlined in *De L'Allemagne*. Its very title is derivative of de Staël's North/South division of Europe. While Sismondi ignores de Staël's interest in climate and race, his plan follows de Staël's *On Literature* in a study of the “reciprocal influence of the political and religious history of the people on their literature and of their literature on their character” (qtd Wellek 3: 4). Not surprisingly, perhaps, *Litterature du midi*'s philosophy of history is entirely in accord with that of *Histoire des republiques italiennes* and the moral meaning of history is the same: where political liberty is lost, so in the longer term literary creativity declines. So too, where the light of reason is snuffed out, the progress of civilisation is impeded. Literature in such a political and cultural setting can at best be imaginative but will be without solidity of thought.

De Staël's North/South division influenced more than Sismondi's choice of title, however, for *Litterature du midi* was intended as the first of a two part study of the whole of European literary history. In his introduction to *Litterature du midi* Sismondi promised a second course of studies on the “literature of the North,” of the Teutonic languages ranging from England, Germany, Scandinavia, “as well as on that of the nations descended from the Sclavonians, the Poles, and the Russians” (*Literature of the South* 1: 12). The promise was not kept as Sismondi's interest returned to political economy. The history which does exist ranges over more than seven centuries beginning with an overview of the origins of European languages and the significance of the Arabs for the South before surveying the various strands of romance languages and literature from Provençal which Sismondi claims was the first to introduce the literature of “love, chivalry, and religion” (4: 566), Old French, and Italian, through to the Spanish and Portuguese up until the eighteenth century.

Sismondi's failure to produce a second course on the “literature of the North” to match that of his *Litterature du midi* was almost made good by Carlyle's endeavours in a similar project—although Carlyle's aim was apparently the more modest one of reviewing the “History of German Literature” from the middle ages to the modern era in four volumes. Ironically it was the vicissitudes of the modern era itself which prevented the publication of Carlyle's work. The study was first commissioned by a publisher but the market for literary projects declined in the early 1830s in the face of national economic recession and political reform agitation. For want of a publisher, Carlyle's study was never completed beyond the first one and half volumes, the literary remains of which were dissected into several articles.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the industrious endeavours of Hill

<sup>4</sup> Namely for “Luther's Psalm” *Fraser's Magazine* (Jan 1831); “Taylor's Historic Survey of German Poetry” *Westminster Review* (March 1831); “The Nibelungen Lied” *Edinburgh Review* (July 1831); and “German Literature of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries” *Foreign Quarterly Review* (October, 1831).

Shine we now have a hypothetical reconstruction of how Carlyle's History may have looked had it been finished: the publication *Carlyle's Unfinished History of German Literature* (1951) contains the first volume.

This volume takes the story from Antiquity and the emergence of German national culture, outlines German traditional lore and language, and engages in a long exposition of the "two main German monuments of Long-written Popular Poetry, *Heldenbuch* and *Nibelungen Lied*," heroic epics incorporating oral traditions from the fifth century B.C. E. and attaining written form around 1200. The work concludes with an account of chivalrous love poetry and songs of the Minnesingers and Meistersingers in the twelfth and thirteen centuries, considered by Carlyle to be the "First Era of German Literature" (*Unfinished History* 80). The review articles bring the story up to the end of the fifteenth century and are probably adaptations of the material that would have been published in the second volume of the History. Carlyle had proposed a further two volumes on modern German literature and to that end his review article of "Taylor's History of German Poetry" is an intimation of the themes and foci that would have been found there.

Carlyle's conceptual schema for organising these materials betrays a resemblance to Sismondi's tri-partite periodisation of Italian romance poetry from the middle ages to the modern age, with two intervening periods of prosaic decline. In Carlyle's case, with reference to Germany, the twelfth century is the first poetic era—a period when the chivalrous ideal overcomes barbaric war-mongering, and when the emergence of the German peoples in antiquity via the vast "Northern Immigrations" is the "beginning of European Culture; and in importance of result, perhaps second only to the appearance of Christianity itself" (20). By the onset of the middle ages, a further achievement for the Germans was the development of a distinctive language, a national tradition which "no vicissitudes or war-ravages can utterly obliterate" (23); Carlyle traces the development of the emergence of the modern dialects of German and its relation to the rise of German literature. His purpose is partly polemical for he wishes to defend the aesthetic worth and civility of a tongue commonly dismissed as barbaric by his contemporaries, English and French speakers alike.

The twelfth century for Carlyle, then, offers the first intimation of "European man," the first "fair coherent figure and representation of Manhood [that is, humanity] for these modern ages" (71). Like de Staël, Sismondi, and the Schlegel brothers before him, Carlyle viewed the middle ages not as an historical cul-de-sac, but as the epoch making source of the modern age. Against Sismondi, however, but with the Schlegels and de Staël, Carlyle saw the German people as the key nodal point in the making of modern Europe. While the Germans do not have their own Dante or Shakespeare, they instead produced "people's poetry"—their own epic in *Nibelungen Lied*, and their own fables, comic (*Tyll Eulenspiegel*; *Reinecke Fuchs*) and tragic (*Faust*) (Carlyle Letters 3: 227), which belong to Europe and not to Germany alone. These fables (*Tyll*; *Reinecke*; *Faust*; *Ship of Fools*) belong to Carlyle's second "didactic" poetic period, beginning in the fourteenth century and culminating in the Lutheran reformation at the onset of the sixteenth century. By "didactic poetry," Carlyle means a literature which addresses the

intellect and not the heart. Carlyle's third poetic age was the still emerging one, signified for him by the rise of modernity's first "benignant spiritual revolutionist," Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "the first of the moderns" (*Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* 4: 181; *Reminiscences* 281-82).

Carlyle's aim in writing his *History* was to develop a national literary history to complement and complete the European project started by de Staël and Sismondi, and he shares many of their working assumptions. The history of national literatures is a total history, for it is the history of the "culture of the European mind" (3: 171). Literature is the symbol and product of culture and is therefore a good indicator of the progress of European civilisation (3: 171; 225). Whereas Sismondi seeks a positive correlation between political freedom and literary liberty in the civilising process, however, Carlyle's emphasis is at once more materialist in its emphasis on the struggle of humanity against the domination of Nature, yet also more idealist in its praise of literature as transcending this struggle so that it paradoxically puts humanity back in touch with Nature. In particular, Carlyle parts company with Sismondi and all other historians of national literature by denying any form of mechanistic or genetic-based schemes for explaining how Poetry "rises, prospers, declines, and even finally terminates" (*Unfinished History* 9), whether it be National wealth, political freedom, or the culture of language. While Carlyle seeks to apprehend the whole of History, he spurns the hopes of a complete positivist science: "The truth is, those Cause-and-effect Philosophers, who for every Why are so ready with their Wherefore, and can spin the whole chaos of human things into a single thread, or bead-string, are no trustworthy guides" (10). His dialectical mode of thought works not only against the limits of sociological typology, but also against the essentialism of national character. As such, Carlyle is both the critic of Victorian social science *avant la lettre* and a post-romantic in his hermeneutical suspicion of national character sociology. Sismondi's mediating role in both educating Carlyle about these traditions of thought and in offering a model for critical appropriation can be seen to be important in the fields of political economy and literary history alike. The uncovering of Carlyle's connections to Sismondi helps to recover an appreciation of the pre-Victorian Carlyle and interpret him as one of romanticism's first radical critics.

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<sup>5</sup> My colleague Michael Schneider has visited both the Sismondi archives at the Biblioteca Magnani, Pescia, Italy and the Library of the University of Geneva. Manuscripts of Sismondi's writings are housed at the Biblioteca Magnani. From his research he has assured me of the following: that Sismondi wrote the "political economy" article for David Brewster sometime in late 1816, early 1817 (Pellegrini 361, 373) and that Carlyle scholars are right to suppose that Carlyle translated Sismondi's article. The ms at the Biblioteca Magnani is in French and the evidence of the correspondence between the various parties involved proves Carlyle to be the translator. This fact is generally not known in history of economic theory circles, perhaps because Sismondi himself does not allude to it and implies otherwise in his own foreword to the first edition of *Nouveaux principes*; moreover it seems that scholars have used only the sources at the Library of the University of Geneva and not cross-referenced these with the original manuscripts in the Sismondi archives in Pescia.

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