

Towards a Wise Despotism: Traces of Thomas Carlyle in the BBC *North & South* (2004)

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Mid-Victorian novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell were saturated in the words and works of Thomas Carlyle. The most respected social critic of his day, he set the terms for discussion of the Condition-of-England question – coining that very term in his 1840 pamphlet *Chartism*. Engels asserted that Carlyle had «sounded the social disorder more deeply than any other English bourgeois» (2008: 328), and all the novelists who later took up the issue created works shadowed by Carlylean language and ideology. The decline in Carlyle’s reputation after his death was sudden and precipitate, and he is ostensibly absent from late-20th/early 21st-century cultural memory, yet the writers he inspired are seemingly as popular as ever, still read and now experienced through film and television adaptations. Gaskell, in particular, has been given a new lease of cultural life by recent adaptations, most notably, perhaps, the 2004 BBC serial based on her 1855 industrial novel *North and South*. An underappreciated aspect of that novel is its debt to Carlyle’s writings, and its basic adherence to a Carlylean ideology. Adapting Gaskell, then, is to wrestle with the ghost of Carlyle, a social commentator now generally discredited, where not forgotten, but one whose influence permeated class discourse in Victorian England far too much for him to be entirely eradicated.

Among his contemporaries, Carlyle's place as one of the foremost men of letters of the age was never doubted. Walt Whitman predicted in 1881, just after Carlyle's death, that

It will be difficult for the future to account for the deep hold this author has taken on the present age, and the way he has color'd its method and thought. I am certainly at a loss to account for it as regarding myself. But there could be no view, or even partial picture, of the nineteenth century, that did not markedly include Thomas Carlyle. (1971: 459)

Carlyle's influence, as Whitman appreciated, defied calculation and estimation, and was not limitable to the concrete ideas derived from his teachings, but also coloured the method and thought of the age in its entirety. Similarly, George Eliot, writing in 1855 (the year of *North and South's* publication), averred that:

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 this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived. (Eliot 2000: 187)

More than a century and a half hence, Carlyle's books are indeed no longer read, but to read any of his contemporaries, including George Eliot herself, is to read Carlyle, an intertextual presence identifiable to the Victorians without having to be expressly invoked but existing to our culture only as an unnamed and perhaps unnoted colour in these books.

The point of departure for Carlyle's social doctrine, as set out in the seminal tracts *Chartism* (1840) and *Past and Present* (1843), was his conviction that England was in a state of unprecedented turmoil, and must be set right or face oblivion: «England is full of wealth, of

multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition» (Carlyle 1965: 7). The blame for this he laid squarely at the feet of the *laissez-faire* economy, which had given rise to rampant materialism and extinguished spirituality. He famously proclaimed that «Cash Payment has become the sole nexus of man to man» (Carlyle 1840: 61). Carlyle's solution to this was that his society must learn the value of reverence: «[W]hoso cannot obey cannot be free [...] [O]nly in reverently bowing down before the Higher does [man] feel himself exalted» (Carlyle 1999: 189-190). This reverence was to have a basis in religion, but was also to be directed towards the most fitting members of the human species:

Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise him to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him: you have a perfect government for the country; no ballot-box, parliamentary eloquence, voting, constitution-building, or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit. (Carlyle 1841: 196-197)

The identification of the Hero was society's greatest challenge. Once this was accomplished, all that remained was to demonstrate total submission to this individual, and to refrain from obstructing him with red tape, acts of parliament or the clattering of ballot-boxes. The result would be despotism, but, so long as the despot was a true Hero, it would be a just, if rigorous, despotism, and, as Carlyle argued: «Despotism is essential in most enterprises» (Carlyle 1965: 278).

The Hero could take many forms: Divinity, Prophet, Poet, Priest, Man of Letters and King, are the six categories allowed by Carlyle in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841). His inherent Heroism would express itself in the mode most suited to the society in which he found himself. In Carlyle's own society, he sought a new set of Heroes, an Aristocracy of Talent to supersede the idle ruling classes. In *Past and Present* he specifically called on the factory owners, The Captains of Industry, to transcend narrowly pecuniary motivations and provide the strong and moral leadership that was needed to quell

workers' disquiet. The search for a true leader was, he felt, the motive force for working-class agitation, contrary to its declared aims:

Bellowings, inarticulate cries as of a dumb creature in rage and pain; to the ear of wisdom they are inarticulate prayers: 'Guide me, Govern me! I am mad and miserable, and cannot guide myself.' Surely of all 'rights of man', this right of the ignorant man to be guided by the wiser, to be, gently or forcibly, held in the true course by him, is the indisputablest. (Carlyle 1840: 52)

Firm guidance was Carlyle's prescription, not excluding severity and physical force. This guidance was to be characterized by strict justice: «Pay to every man accurately what he has worked for [...] to this man broad lands and honours, to that man high gibbets and treadmills» (Carlyle 1965: 25). The provision of such guidance, which would fulfil the workers' deepest desire and instil in them reverence and a sense of obligation, was the province of the Aristocracy of Talent, the wisest and best of the society. To a generation of novelists keenly aware of social inequalities but uneasy about democracy, Carlyle's writings were eagerly received, providing them with a flattering mirror in which to see themselves, as a socially-pioneering Aristocracy of Talent with the means to create social justice without endangering their own position of superiority. This sense of purpose and social vocation found voice in many of the great novels of the 1840s and 50s, from Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), which refers to Carlyle's writings almost continually and introduces him as a character, to Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), which was inscribed to Carlyle.

Elizabeth Gaskell's first industrial novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), took its epigraph from Carlyle and has been considered to be «written in his spirit» (Cummings 1996: 419). Yet *North and South* more clearly embodies Carlylean ideas of leadership and patriarchy. John Thornton's philosophy as expounded in the book's early sections is derived from Carlyle:

In our infancy we require a wise despotism to govern us. Indeed, long past infancy, children and young people are the happiest under the unfailing laws of a discreet, firm authority. I [...] consider our people in the condition of children, while I deny that we, the masters, have anything to do with the making or keeping them so. I maintain that despotism is the best kind of government for them; so that in the hours in which I come in contact with them I must necessarily be something of an autocrat. (Gaskell 1994: 141)

Later in this exchange, Thornton confirms the Carlylean basis for his thought when he remarks: «Cromwell would have made a capital mill-owner, Miss Hale. I wish we had him to put down this strike for us» (*ibid*: 145), invoking the quintessential Carlylean hero, lauded in *On Heroes* and again in Carlyle's introduction and elucidations to his edition of *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (1845) as his country's last great leader of men, «the last glimpse of the Godlike vanishing from this England; conviction and veracity giving place to hollow cant and formulism» (Heffer 1996: 248).

Similarly Carlyle-inflected is Thornton's disquisition on "Teutonic blood" (Gaskell 1994: 398), incorporating a paean to the glory of work and a statement of opposition to government interference and imposition on the people of Milton of laws drafted from afar. For Thornton, as for Carlyle, «Acts of Parliament are small, notwithstanding the noise they make» (Carlyle 1841: 92). Rather, Thornton as magistrate chooses to place himself above all codified law, as he demonstrates when he closes the case on Leonards because it may implicate Margaret: «[S]hame it would be to pledge [Margaret] to lie in an open court, or otherwise to stand and acknowledge her reason for desiring darkness rather than light» (Gaskell 1994: 332). In according Thornton a supra-legal status, Gaskell again locates her ideology in the realms of the Carlylean, wherein laws are good, but the guidance and decision of superior men is better.

But it is in Thornton's demeanour that the force of the Hero is most clearly present: «He was regarded by [his fellow factory owners

or “masters”] as a man of great force of character; of power in many ways. There was no need to struggle for their respect» (*ibid*: 192). The inherent power and mastery of Thornton is insisted on throughout; like the Carlylean Hero, his superiority pre-exists any heroic actions, it is simply *there*, and by its undeniability allows him to control any social or interpersonal situation. This is most important in the climactic riot scene, wherein he fearlessly confronts the rioters, standing before them “still as a statue” and telling them in no uncertain terms that he has no intention of acceding to their demands. «Now kill me, if it is your brutal will» (*ibid*: 213), he concludes, and walks down the steps into their midst, still with his arms folded in a gesture of defiance, but at that moment they begin to disperse, finally overpowered by his show of will¹.

At this point, the strike breaks down and the workers return to their positions. Thereafter the master-worker relationship at Marlborough Mill is entirely harmonious as compromise is made on both sides. Thornton’s attitude is represented as having altered: «My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere ‘cash nexus’ » (*ibid*: 515). He is still, as his use of the term *cash nexus* indicates, following a Carlylean model of thought. The mill has in no sense been democratized, and the new regime in no way conflicts with Thornton’s earlier ideal of the “wise despotism”. When Thornton re-hires Nicholas Higgins, the failed

¹ The dispersal is narrated as recurring precisely at the moment Thornton descends to the crowd, certainly implying that he has mastered the “demoniac” (Gaskell 1994: 209) will of the rioters, but Gaskell is purposely vague as to its motivation, speculating that it may be «the idea of the approach of the soldiers», the sight of Margaret Hale’s face as she lies unconscious having been hit by a pebble, or else it began «as unreasoningly [...] as the simultaneous anger» (*ibid*: 213). It seems that the attribution of the retreat to Thornton’s actions would have been too ludicrous to suggest outright, so Gaskell merely juxtaposed the two events to create the impression of Thornton’s power without committing to such an improbability.

Union leader, he does so in terms that sharply emphasize his continuing autocracy:

“So, measter, I’ll come; [says Higgins] and what’s more, I’ll thank yo’; and that’s a deal fro’ me [...]

“And this is a deal from me,” said Mr Thornton, giving Higgins’s hand a good grip. “Now mind you come sharp to your time,” continued he, resuming the master. “I’ll have no laggards at my mill. What fines we have, we keep pretty sharply. And the first time I catch you making mischief, off you go. So now you know where you are.” (*Ibid.*: 389)

After his magnanimous offer of employment to the blacklisted Higgins, Thornton quickly and pointedly “resumes the master”, indicated by his stern warning and his firm handshake, lest Higgins or the reader be under any misapprehension as to the nature of industrial relations in Marlborough Mill. Thornton remains in every sense the master, with the difference that the workers are now happy to work under his guidance, though they have achieved none of the aims of their strike. Aside from a general air of harmony, Thornton has helped the workers set up a food kitchen, though it is to be worker-funded: «I don’t want it to fall into a charity», insists Thornton (*ibid.*: 433). Systematic changes are absent at Marlborough Mills, but the spirit of co-operation is borne of Thornton’s wish to go beyond the cash-nexus in his attitude toward his workers. He is a prototype of Heroic leadership, having fulfilled Carlyle’s prediction: «Ye shall reduce them to order, begin reducing them. To order, to just subordination; noble loyalty in return for noble guidance. Their souls are driven nigh mad; let yours be sane and ever saner» (Carlyle 1870: 272). At the moment when the working-class mob threatened to lapse into full lawlessness and riot, only Thornton kept a cool head, and placed before them the image of a leader and a Hero to be followed, and thereafter Marlborough Mills becomes Gaskell’s vision of a model workplace, featuring heroic leadership and a docile workforce.

When *North and South* came to be serialized by the BBC in 2004, it was less with an eye to its social relevance than as a pseudo-Austen romance, one whose similarities to *Pride and Prejudice* were an important selling point. For all its social realism, Gaskell's novel was structured around a romance highly reminiscent of *Pride and Prejudice*, though the author never acknowledged a debt (Barchas). The serial can perhaps be included in the class of "De(Re)composing Adaptations" posited by Kamilla Elliott, a class which decomposes the source and redistributes its elements, favouring certain aspects of the text and placing others in the background. In this case, the romantic elements of *North and South* are given precedence and the politico-social elements are not rejected, but subordinated. Accordingly, the DVD cover billed *North & South* (the serial took the ampersand) as a «passionate tale of love across the social divide», and reproduced a quote from the *Sunday Express* calling the adaptation «*Pride and Prejudice* with a social conscience». Viewer reaction among the 250-odd reviewers on *Amazon UK* would appear to confirm that the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (dir. Simon Langton, scr. Andrew Davies) was the primary point of comparison: «It has even eclipsed the BBC *P&P* in my heart [...] forget Darcy, Thornton is so much better»; «Truly I can safely say that it is better than the acclaimed *Pride and Prejudice* and is now officially my favourite book and drama of all time.»; «Forget *Pride and Prejudice*, it has nothing on *North and* [sic] *South*»; «Rivals *Pride and Prejudice* with both main characters being every bit as endearing as Darcy and Elizabeth»; «If you like *Pride and Prejudice* or if you're just looking for a period drama, I highly recommend this one» ("Customer Reviews: *North & South*"). Rather than using customary "fidelity" considerations wherein the source novel becomes the idealized point of comparison, reviewers consistently invoked *Pride and Prejudice*, a comparison which suggests that *North & South* functioned primarily as a romance rather than an investigation into class relations – except insofar as these class relations provided a barrier to the love of the central figures, a "social divide" which love must cross.

Yet the inherent power that is such a defining feature of Gaskell's Thornton and is seen to be necessary to the creation of class harmony,

is stressed equally strongly in the adaptation. Thornton's first appearance, early in Episode 1, is particularly notable, coming in a scene not derived in any particular from the source novel. In this scene Margaret Hale enters Marlborough Mills, and her attention is drawn to Thornton, a tall, dark figure, standing on a raised platform looking out over the mill-workers. After a few seconds of stillness, Thornton breaks suddenly into action, shouting «Stephens!» (*North & South* Ep. 1), and sprinting down from the platform in pursuit of the character of that name, catching him and charging him with lighting a pipe in the mill. He then administers to Stephens a severe beating involving kicks to the stomach and punches to the face, leaving him bleeding and gasping for breath. Thornton's power in this scene is most dramatically expressed by, but not limited to his physical strength; even earlier than this it is acknowledged by Margaret Hale, whose gaze alights on Thornton among all those in the factory, and fixes on him with evident admiration, remaining so fixed for some seconds before he has performed any action that could render him of interest. The black suit he wears also clearly marks him out from the workers clad in dull greys and browns, as does his calm, watchful stillness in the midst of the bustle going on around him, and his positioning physically above the workers is another signifier of his relation to them. The mise-en-scène works to create a sense of Thornton's personal magnetism, and of the untrammelled power he wields in Marlborough Mills, unquestioned (except by Margaret herself, before he has her escorted from the premises) even when wielded with great violence.

Thornton's beating of Stephens provides a demonstration of one available mode of reducing the workers to order. Thornton's action is carefully rationalized later in the episode; he has recently witnessed the aftermath of a factory fire: «Three hundred corpses laid out on a Yorkshire hillside [...] Many of them were children, and that was an accidental flame» (*North & South* Ep. 1). The strength of the alibi² that

² Used in a sense similar to that employed by Peter Gay in *The Cultivation of Hatred*. His "alibi" denotes: «beliefs, principles, rhetorical platitudes that legitimated verbal or physical militancy on religious, political or, best of

is provided for Thornton's actions indicates a desire to condone his use of violence, especially when Union leader Nicholas Higgins admits: «He was right to do it» (*ibid*). Thornton's response to Stephens's transgression also brings him further towards the Carlylean ideal of leadership than even Gaskell's portrayal, and is a wholly appropriate response to Stephens' action by Carlylean standards:

Every stupid, every cowardly and foolish man is but a less palpable madman; his true liberty were that a wiser man, that any and every wiser man, could, by brass collars, or in whatever milder or sharper way, lay hold of him when he was going wrong, and order and compel him to go a little righter. (Carlyle 1965: 212)

In these early sequences of *North & South*, Thornton is established as an individual supremely endowed with personal power in many ways, and able to bring it to bear on his inferiors, to make them go "a little righter"; not only has he an inherent authority immediately noted by Margaret, but he is able to wield physical power over his workforce, and is prepared to do so, though only where strong justification exists.

The adaptation also makes copious visual use of the textual detail of Thornton and his mother and sister living within the mill. Their living-room window overlooks the yard, allowing Thornton and on occasion Mrs Thornton to keep up surveillance of activities, arrivals and departures. Margaret Hale herself is frequently seen by Thornton or Mrs Thornton at moments when she is acting equivocally: when she is questioning workers in the yard about their conditions, Thornton materializes silently behind her, discomfiting her by the force of his silent disapproval; on leaving the mill after the Stephens incident, she glances back to find herself watched by Mrs Thornton from the overlooking window; Thornton is looking down from a window when the workers enter the hall for their Union meeting, and sees Margaret

all, scientific grounds» (1995: 6). In the case under discussion, I will argue that Thornton's physical militancy is implicitly legitimated on grounds related to Carlylean views of socio-industrial dynamics.

enter behind them, in search of her father, and she sees that she is being seen; when Margaret is with Frederick at the railway station – a most compromising situation as she cannot divulge that he is her brother – Thornton is again watching from the shadows. Similarly, Thornton is the first to become informed when a fellow master plans to deviate from general policy, knowledge of which intention he reveals is his because «I overheard some of my men talking» (*North & South* Ep. 1). These and other incidences combine to create a feeling of claustrophobia in Milton, and an impression that everything that is done, is done under the gaze of Thornton. Milton works, because Thornton watches. As Carlyle noted: «All men, if they work not as in a Great Taskmaster's eye, will work wrong, work unhappily for themselves and you» (Carlyle 1870: 207). Thornton functions as the Great Taskmaster's eye, the panoptic eye, and it is seen to control Milton society; though in the Austenized adaptation of *North & South*, the focus is more on Margaret Hale's experience of Thornton's power, whether as exercised on herself, or as she sees it exercised on others.

As the series approaches its denouement, the importance of politico-social elements becomes less. The harmony between worker and master has been established, and the series does not have the novel's tension of Thornton remaining masterful over his workers while extending his relationship with them beyond the cash-nexus; for Gaskell he was to remain «strong and tender, and yet a master» (Uglow 1994: 366), but for the adapters, his continued masterfulness is less important. In a late scene after the mill has closed down, Thornton responds to Higgins addressing him as master with «I'm nobody's master now», and so Higgins takes to calling him "Thornton" (*North & South* Ep. 4). Thus Thornton has willingly relinquished his mastery rather than retained the acute consciousness of it that Gaskell's character exhibits, and this relaxed attitude towards class relations permeates the latter part of the series. Instead, the final episode shows Thornton preparing himself for domestication. Several scenes are included involving Thornton and young Tom Boucher, the working-class orphan, wherein Thornton's fatherly tenderness is indexed.

The ultimate recomposition of *North & South* to entirely divorce the romantic plot from its wider social setting takes place in the closing scene. Rather than the notably restrained scene in which Gaskell brings Thornton and Margaret together, the adaptation allows for the complete transcendence of romantic love over social concerns by depicting a public kiss between them, taking place in a crowded railway station, and in the presence of Margaret's travelling companion and suitor Henry Lennox. All of Margaret and Thornton's social history evaporates at this moment, as meaning is impoverished to make way for the mythologized image of the kiss (see Barthes 1972). This image makes no compromises with social realism or other concerns external to that precise image and that precise moment; rather the prior presence of these concerns is revealed to have performed a catalyzing function around this ultimate and climactic nucleus. It is Margaret and Thornton's unsocialized selves that take over at the climax, performing an act for which there is no social alibi.

The Hero-figure posited by Carlyle retains his power as an idealized image in the adaptation of *North and South*, and much of the adaptation is concerned with bearing witness to his methods of employing his inherent superiority; however, the wider social application of his powers is ultimately a secondary consideration, and important mainly in how it is displayed to Margaret Hale. The Hero has outlived his social usefulness, or has an attraction not contingent on his social usefulness. While for Carlyle and Gaskell in the mid-19th century, the ability to bring the workers to order, and ideally "noble order", was a live and pressing concern, for the 21st century adapter Thornton's power is attractive without being as obviously necessary. Having demonstrated his Heroic personality, Thornton is not called upon to continually exercise the discipline of a leader of men; rather, it is the tempering of his power with domesticity and romantic sensitivity that provides the best application of the Heroic personality. The station the Hero held was always, for Carlyle, contingent on the circumstances in which he found himself:

The Hero can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will, according to the kind of world he finds himself born into. [...] The grand fundamental character is that of the Great Man; that the man be great. Napoleon has words in him which are like Austerlitz battles. (Carlyle 1841: 94)

Carlyle felt that as civilization progressed the station in which the Hero was found became progressively less exalted. Where once the world had Heroes as Divinities (Carlyle's example was Odin), then as Prophets (Mohammed), in Carlyle's time the Hero was, he considered, more likely to be a man of letters. Gaskell's Hero was a Captain of Industry; in the 21st century adaptation of Gaskell, the Hero undergoes a process of domestication, a partial turn away from social duties towards the family. That he is a great leader of men is clear, but this is far from his whole duty. Ultimately, the modern adaptation of *North and South* finds that heroism is best expressed in the private sphere; it is a quality whose expression is not owed to the world or to history, but to those few who have the greatest call on the Hero's affections.

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