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SYMBOLIZING THE SUPERNATURAL IN CARLYLE'S SARTOR RESARTUS

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In “Natural Supernaturalism,” a central chapter of his strange work *Sartor Resartus*, Thomas Carlyle’s hero, Teufelsdrockh, exclaims with amazement: “Witchcraft, and all manner of Spectre-work, and Demonology, we have now named Madness and Diseases of the Nerves. Seldom reflecting that still the new question comes upon us: What is Madness, what are Nerves? Ever, as before, does Madness remain a mysterious-terrific, altogether infernal boiling-up of the Nether Chaotic Deep, through this fair-painted Vision of the Creation, which...we name the Real. Was Luther’s Picture of the Devil less a Reality, whether it were formed within the bodily eye, or without it?”¹

In this passage, three approaches to the supernatural are indicated. One is suggested in the allusion to Martin Luther, who threw a lead ink-stand at the Devil that appeared to him: he took it literally—as an outer perception of his “bodily eye.” The second attitude is the rational approach: not to take such phenomena seriously, but to dismiss them as superstition, madness, or bad digestion. The third way is that of Carlyle himself: to assume that the manifestation originated within the “bodily eye,” but to regard the vision as nonetheless significant—a symbol to be taken seriously though not literally.

In these three attitudes toward the supernatural, we have the “Victorian dilemma”: the critical 19th-century conflict among at least three different versions of reality—the Religious, the Rational, and the Romantic world-views. In the 18th-century “age of reason,” western man’s faith in religious revelation and romantic imagination was seriously challenged. He began to rely more heavily on reason to define reality, while religion and romanticism assumed increasingly defensive postures. In extreme views, the revelations of the prophets were denigrated as psychotic hallucinations; and the inspirations of the poets were regarded as rather childish, but usually harmless, and often diverting fantasies.

*Sartor Resartus* is Carlyle’s fictionalized spiritual autobiography, representing his own struggle with this Victorian dilemma. Through his eccentric character, Diogenes Teufelsdrockh, he portrays his own effort to resolve this cultural conflict.

Central to Carlyle’s resolution of the dilemma is his theory of symbolism, which Teufelsdrockh expounds in the chapter entitled “Symbols.” There he defines man as the symbol-making animal: “It is
in and through *Symbols* that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being" (*Sartor*, 222). This emphasis on symbols is a unifying principle in the structure of Carlyle's work. For at the heart of *Sartor Resartus* (literally, "The Tailor Retailored") is the view that man uses symbols to clothe his world with a sense of order, value, and purpose; that the old symbolic construct of the Medieval period—the "supernaturalism" of the religious tradition—is worn out; that the world-view of the Enlightenment—the "naturalism" of the rational tradition—is too limited; and that, therefore, a new set of clothes—the "natural-supernaturalism" of the romantic tradition—must be created to cover the spiritual nakedness of modern man.

As Teufelsdrockh notes, man's symbolic constructs are imaginative creations. But the imagination can body-forth hellish nightmares as well as heavenly daydreams. For Teufelsdrockh insists, "not our Logical, Mensurative faculty, but our Imaginative one is King over us; I might say, Priest and Prophet to lead us heavenward; or Magician and Wizard to lead us hellward" (*Sartor*, 222).

The category of the *supernatural* is traditionally subdivided into two modes—the "sacred" and the "demonic." Building on the religious studies of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, Peter Berger explains that "religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power...which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience."2 Historically, Berger notes, man has variously expressed his experiences of sacred power in animistic, polytheistic, monotheistic, or pantheistic terms. Although the awesome power of the sacred can be dangerous, it is perceived as basically a creative potency, graciously sustaining a vital cosmic order of light and life.

Opposed to this vision of a "sacred cosmos," however, is the sense of "demonic chaos." This counter-reality is vividly expressed, Berger continues, in those myths "that confront the divine order of the world...with an under-world or anti-world that has a reality of its own—negative, chaotic, ultimately destructive of all who inhabit it, the realm of demonic monstrosities" (*Sacred*, 26).

In the 19th century, Carlyle-Teufelsdrockh encounters this "demonic chaos" in its modern guise as the rational world-view of mechanistic materialism. This radical naturalism he associates with Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism—a philosophy whose practical hedonistic aim is to calculate the greatest happiness of the greatest number. "Fantastic tricks enough man has played, in his time," Teufelsdrockh asserts, "but to fancy himself an Iron-Balance for weighing Pains and Pleasures on was reserved for his latter era.... Alas, poor devil! spectres are appointed
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to haunt him; one age he is hagridden, bewitched; the next, priestridden, bedevilled; in all ages, fooled. And now the Genius of Mechanism smothers him worse than any Nightmare did; till the Soul is nigh choked out of him, and only a kind of Digestive, Mechanic life remains. In Earth and in Heaven he can see nothing but Mechanism; has fear for nothing else: the world would indeed grind him to pieces....” (Sartor, 220-1)

The imagery here symbolizes the mechanistic world-view as a demonic monster, a destructive agent of chaos. It implies that to hold this rational world-view is, ironically, to be held in the grip of a dark hellish power as in demonic possession.

This pattern of imagery is most prevalent in the chapter “The Everlasting No,” where Teufelsdrockh is represented as losing his religious vision after encountering the skeptical rationalism of the time. There he complains: “Some comfort it would have been, could I, like a Faust, have fancied myself tempted and tormented of the Devil...but in our age of Down-pulling and Disbelief, the very Devil has been pulled down, you cannot so much as believe in a Devil. To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. O, the vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death!” (Sartor, 164)

Here, although bereft of a naively literal belief in the supernatural, the hero describes his condition in mechanical images that, ironically, involve implicit allusions to the demonic. For the “Steam-engine,” which symbolizes the materialistic world-view, is a mechanical version of the dragon, a Satanic monster. Later in the chapter, this imagery becomes explicit: “it seemed as if all things in the Heavens above and the Earth beneath would hurt me; as if the Heavens and the Earth were but boundless jaws of a devouring monster, wherein I, palpitating, waited to be devoured” (Sartor, 164). Symbolizing the materialistic world-view, this demonic dragon confronts modern man with the threat of a meaningless nihilism—the death of God.

This nihilism or atheism is Carlyle’s the “everlasting no.” It is both the outer Hell of the Mechanistic universe and the inner Hell of skeptical despair. Although Teufelsdrockh now experiences no “sacred” reality, he feels various “demonic” effects: “The heart within me, unvisited by any heavenly dew-drop, was smouldering in sulphurous, slow-consuming fire” (Sartor, 167-8).

While the imagery of Sartor Resartus symbolizes the rational world-view as a demonic monster, threatening spiritual death, the characterization and allusions in the work associate Teufelsdrockh with
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the archetypal Hero figure. And the central experience of Carlyle's Hero, then, is structured as an archetypal Quest-Journey. However, although Teufelsdrockh does travel some, his Journey is primarily a psychological quest—an inner pilgrimmage of the spirit. Essentially, his Journey is a Quest for ultimate meaningfulness, as set forth especially in the two most famous chapters—"The Everlasting No" and "The Everlasting Yea." Having traced the Hero's descent to a demonic under-world in the first, we need now to trace his ascent to a sacred upper-world in the second.

In "The Everlasting Yea," Teufelsdrockh relates a mystical vision that he experienced. It is a numinous perception of nature's awesome power in a snow-storm on a distant mountain. Although he uses the image of witchcraft to describe the phenomenon at first, suddenly his perspective dramatically shifts: "Often also could I see the black Tempest marching in anger through the Distance: round some Schreckhorn...would the eddying vapour gather, and there tumultously eddy, and flow down like a mad witch's hair; till, after a space, it vanished, and, in the clear sun-beam, your Schreckhorn stood smiling grim-white, for the vapour had held snow. How thou fermentest and elaboratest, in they great fermenting-vat and laboratory...of a World, O Nature!—Or what is Nature? Ha! why do I not name thee God? Art not thou the Living Garment of God!" (Sartor, 187-8)

Here is the archetypal motif of the holy mountain, like Sinai or Olympus, where divine light is shining and a transfiguration occurs. In Carlyle's terms, when Teufelsdrockh is able to stop looking at the world through the lens of reason (Verstand) with its limited sense of reality and, instead, beholds the world through the eye of intuitive imagination (Vernunft), his perspective is radically transformed. What he then perceives is essentially a Romantic world-view: an idealistic, transcendent, pantheistic view of God as immanent in nature—the "everlasting yea."

The imagery in the work shifts, then, from the chaotic, mechanical, and demonic to the organic, personal, harmonious, and sacred: "Like the mother's voice to her little child that strays bewildered, weeping, in unknown tumults; like soft streamings of celestial music to my too-exasperated heart, came that Evangel. The Universe is not dead and demoniacal, a charnel-house with spectres; but godlike and my Father's!" (Sartor, 188) Symbolically, the imagery in this chapter proclaims that he is a child of God, that the universe is his home, and that all creatures are his brethren. And the chapter "Natural Supernaturalism" merely spells out in greater detail this new vision of
the open secret—the latent yet manifest presence of the sacred in all being.

Thus Carlyle expressed, powerfully and beautifully, a personal resolution of the Victorian dilemma. When rational naturalism threatened to dissolve religious supernaturalism, Carlyle felt despair at the prospect of the *demonic chaos* that would be unleashed by the "death of God"—that is, the loss of a *sacred cosmos* investing human life with ultimate meaningfulness. Therefore, he imaginatively transformed the traditional Christian vision of reality. To re-symbolize this consoling vision, he re-clothed it in a new vesture—Romantic "natural-supernaturalism." As Myer Abrams indicates in his *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, a major task of the Romantic writers was indeed to re-symbolize lost religious values in the wake of the Enlightenment; and in that effort Carlyle's contribution in *Sartor Resartus* is singularly notable.

NOTES


5 *Naturalism Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971).