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Thomas Carlyle's Inverse Sublime and Early Canadian Humor

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The Tory idealism of Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) proved peculiarly congenial to Canadian authors during the colonial period and in the first sixty years after Confederation (1867), one possible reason being that the Canadian parliamentary system founded at Confederation was a projection and protector of the hierarchical and varied community that Carlyle’s principles embraced. The earliest influence of his tenets is particularly evident in emigrant literature, and his social philosophies are integral to the United Empire Loyalist myth as promulgated by William Kirby (1817–1906). Canadian academics such as George Robert Parkin (1846–1922) and Archibald MacMechan (1862–1933) taught Carlylean doctrines in the classroom to students who included two Confederation poets, Charles G. D. Roberts (1860–1943) and Bliss Carman (1861–1929), and the humorist, L. Maud Montgomery (1874–1942). As a result of the influence of his doctrines on these as well as other canonical writers, such as Archibald Lampman (1861–99) and Stephen Leacock (1869–1944), Carlyle’s sublime humor helped define Canada in the first years of the twentieth century.

Carlyle’s discussion of forms in his lectures On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the
Carlyle's Inverse Sublime


Heroic in History (1841) is an index of the major issues that inform both his social and his comic visions:

It is meritorious to insist on forms; Religion and all else naturally clothes itself in forms. Everywhere the formed world is the only habitable one. The naked formlessness of Puritanism is not the thing I praise in the Puritans; it is the thing I pity, – praising only the spirit which had rendered that inevitable! All substances clothe themselves in forms: but there are suitable true forms, and then there are untrue, unsuitable. As the briefest definition, one might say, Forms which grow round a substance, if we rightly understand that, will correspond to the real nature and purport of it, will be true, good; forms which are consciously put round a substance, bad.

According to Carlyle, all societies and individuals require political and social order. Form – or order – is what makes a community habitable, a life livable; it is the conqueror of shapelessness, chaos. Furthermore, true forms, religious or otherwise, are organic: they clothe without being works of artifice and so are complementary, not distorting. Carlyle arrived at his view of a naturally ordered society having eschewed what he regarded as the unnatural forms placed on English society preceding and during the Victorian period. His ideal community is, therefore, one in which individual responsibility is not legislated (social legislation, he argues elsewhere, is the sign of an unhealthy community), and yet it is one in which everyone plays a role. The community is whole and active.

While Carlyle is best described as a social critic, not a theorist (he disdained formulas), he was a literary theorist, and his social philosophy is present in his theories on humor, harmony, and the inverse sublime. Carlyle's first major text, Sartor Resartus (1833–34), is a comic work in which he demonstrates how unnatural forms – particularly, outdated religious forms – disfigure rather than adorn society. The protagonist of Sartor Resartus, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, shares his author's view of forms:

"All visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken, is not there at all: Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some idea, and body it forth. Hence Clothes, as despicable as we think them, are so unspeakably significant."

Because Carlyle held that "[c]ustom . . . doth make dotards of us all," he argued that old ideas that had become mechanical needed to be stripped away and new forms, natural forms, allowed to grow. In Sartor Resartus, this stripping away is done with an almost surgical irony. To underscore his technique and purpose, Carlyle has his Editor (who has charge of making sense of Teufelsdröckh's papers) remark that it is "wonderful . . . with what cutting words, now and then, he [Teufelsdröckh] severs asunder the confusion; shears down, were it furlongs deep, into the true centre of the matter." But despite its razor sharpness, the humor Carlyle practiced is not the acerbic wit of the rake; it is genial and inclusive. The exposed form beneath, like the undressed form of Puritanism in the lectures On Heroes, is to be pitied for its bareness and praised for its spirit. The style of comedy that Carlyle championed, then, blends humor and pathos to create sympathetic laughter, not ridicule. The "finest" laughter, he explains in "The Hero as Poet," "is always a genial laughter." This harmonious humor, producing genial laughter, was the comic expression of the same social vision that idealized an organic or whole community.

The relationship between humor and sociology was not lost on early Canadian authors. Tory writers who saw Carlyle's organic community as the promise of Confederation praised responsibility and labor. At a time when the creation of a Canadian literary canon was viewed as a national imperative, most Canadian humor adhered to the theories of sympathetic humor expounded by Carlyle, especially his concept of the inverse sublime.

HUMOR AND SOCIOLOGY

In an 1830 review in Fraser's Magazine, Carlyle lamented that the "true fountain of comic inspiration has long since been dried up in England," adding that the drought would continue with the result that "the cursed and Typhonian influ-
In An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776), Smith explains that the individual, “[b]y pursuing his own interest[,] . . . frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”

In the field of economics, laissez-faire therefore operates on the principle that, socially, self-interest can serve the greater good. Also current in Victorian economic and social thought was the Benthamite belief that whatever causes the greatest happiness is for the greatest good. Carlyle’s reading of the story of Job did not suggest to him, however, that happiness is a meaningful standard for human value. Like his friend and literary correspondent, the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), Carlyle felt it was more important for individuals to be self-reliant than to be happy, and so he saw the ability to realize self-worth through labor as a more responsible and Christian basis for determining what might prove to serve the greatest good.

As a result of his conservative humanism, Carlyle challenged the landed gentry on the Corn Laws (1815–46), and yet he also opposed working-class Chartism. The fact that Carlyle, like Karl Marx (1818–83), decried the abuses of Adam Smith’s laissez-faire capitalism did not mean that he favored revolution. Despite his sympathies for the common man, Carlyle was neither a communist nor a radical. He was a Tory. The true hero in Carlylean philosophy is not the rebel perse (although his heroes included Oliver Cromwell) but the individual who creates or maintains order. In part, Carlyle was able to uphold his conservative values despite the more radical views of other reformers (including those of his friend John Stuart Mill) because he rejected the major philosophical tenets that had shaped the rational revolution of the late eighteenth century. His English translation of texts in the tradition of German idealism in combination with his inherited beliefs showed him a route out of the dominant philosophical concourses that ran like tributaries from Lockean empiricism and Continental ra-
Burke's Toryism is the conviction that civil institutions should be maintained and improved rather than abandoned or overthrown. In *Reflections*, Burke argues that "[w]e procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle upon which nature teaches us to revere individual men; on account of their age; and on account of those from whom they are descended." And, in a statement that resounds in Carlyle, Burke rebukes the *Tiers État* at the time of the French Revolution: "The best [of them]," he scoffs, "were only men of theory."13 Along with their Toryism, with their belief in slow progress and in the importance of the past, both Burke and Carlyle also adapted their social critiques to literary practice in their theories on the sublime. Burke wrote *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) while, in his essays on Jean Paul ([Johann Paul Friedrich Richter] 1763–1825), Carlyle described the "humorous sublime."

To see Carlyle's humor as being a reflection of his serious philosophic attitudes, then, is to recognize the deep conservatism behind his comic vision. But although Carlyle's humor was conservative, it was also comprehensive. While Carlyle distrusted the revolutionary spirit, he did not advocate stasis. He clarifies this position in "Characteristics" (1831): "Change is universal and inevitable," but "[t]he true Past departs not, nothing that was worthy in the Past departs; no Truth or Goodness realised by man ever dies, or can die; but is all still here, and, recognised or not, lives and works through endless changes."14 Carlyle's perspective on the present is not one in which it is necessary or even useful to break free from the tyranny of history (as it would be for some modernists after the First World War). "The bough that is dead shall be cut away, for the sake of the tree itself," he expostulates in *Past and Present* (1843), but nowhere in his writing does he advocate uprooting the tree for the sake of a new growth or even a wall.15 Nor is it his view that it would be desirable (were it possible) to turn back the clock; rather, he sees the present as being in a constant state of transition while maintaining faith in what he deems to be the
D'Arcy McGee (1825–68) to American democracy. Carlyle had written in *Chartism* that American democracy could exist only in a fertile land where work was abundant and “[w]here no government . . . [was] wanted, save that of the parish-constable” and that even then it was best seen as a temporary measure, “as a swift transition towards something other and farther.” McGee’s comments in a speech delivered in Cornwall, Ontario, and recorded in the *New York Times* on 2 July 1867, the day after Confederation, are a forceful expression of political beliefs that are very similar to Carlyle’s:

"Democratic rule may be good in some respects; but our representative system, founded upon the recognition of the right of all classes, acknowledging the claims of minorities to protection from the tyranny of majorities . . . is the highest system of free government yet instituted among men. In established representative institutions here we are doing true service to the people of the United States, we are teaching them the advantage of our form of government over theirs. If there are among our neighbours’ minorities, religious, political or social, borne down by the weight of the mere majority, they have only to look across the St. Lawrence to find a place of asylum where they can obtain that security denied them at home."

What McGee approvingly describes – a hierarchical system that can protect the rights of all classes – is a fundamental aspect of the Carlylean political ideal. Twelve years after “Characteristics,” in which he depicted society as a living organism with each individual playing a vital role, Carlyle returned in *Past and Present* to his theme of social connectedness, and examined and named the concept of *wholeness*. Society, Carlyle maintained throughout his literary career, should be regarded more in terms of something living than of something legislated. Like the various constituents of a body, persons in a community are distinct from each other but still essential to the survival of the group as a whole. In “Characteristics” he stresses this interconnectedness:

"To understand man . . . we must look beyond the individual man and his actions or inter-
This passage merits examination. Here, in germination, is the Carlylean doctrine of wholeness – an idea of individual and collective responsibility that might be called a *gestalt* theory of society (that is, a theory in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts). According to Carlyle’s interpretation of the social sphere, individuals are enlarged by their communion with others. This enlargement is spiritual and moral. Carlyle’s delineation of society as “genial” projects a familial identification between persons and their community. As is generally the case in home life, it is in society that “Morality begins; here at least it takes an altogether new form, and on every side, as in living growth, expands itself.” This is a description of neither communism nor democracy, but of wholeness: “Society [in the past] was what we can call whole, in both senses of the word,” Carlyle explains in “Characteristics”; “[t]he individual man was in himself a whole, or complete union; and could combine with his fellows as the living member of a greater whole.” Unlike communism or democracy, the principle of wholeness could not simply (or entirely) be legislated into existence, but required active participation from members of the community. When Carlyle asserts that “all men, through their life, were animated by one great Idea; thus all efforts pointed one way, everywhere there was wholeness,” the “one great idea” to which he refers is that of personal responsibility. 23 In *Past and Present*, Carlyle illustrates his argument with a striking allusion to Nova Scotian author Thomas Chandler Haliburton and his character, Sam Slick, who appeared in Haliburton’s satirical sketch-
es: “Vagrant Sam-Slicks, who rove over the Earth doing ‘strokes of trade,’ what wealth have they? . . . Slick rests nowhere, he is homeless.” 24 What Carlyle advocates, then, is very different from what was to become the great American export: democracy. In contrast to Carlyle’s ideal of responsibility and difference, the American system touted freedom and stressed homogeneity.

Carlyle’s organic society is representative of the underlying social philosophy that, according to McGee’s Cornwall speech, Canada’s parliamentary system was established to protect; and Carlyle’s humor, which was the product and reflection of his ideologies, found fertile soil in the newly shaped country. During his lifetime, Carlyle’s influence crossed a seemingly incompatible political divide: his doctrines resonate in the writings of emigrant authors such as Susanna Moodie (1803–85) and Catharine Parr Traill (1802–99), and also in the work of Kirby, a neo-Loyalist mythographer. After Confederation and into the first third of the twentieth century, while his reputation waned in Europe, Carlyle’s philosophical attitude remained a force on Canadian writers, critics, and academics engaged in the project of identifying and promulgating a sense of national identity. And his influence was especially enduring among Canadian scholars and among the Confederation poets and humorists.
Carlyle’s theory of social wholeness was translated in his humor as comic harmony. His first major work, Sartor Resartus, is a transcendental, semi-autobiographical account of the author’s spiritual and intellectual growth that also includes his views on the spiritual condition of his culture. Despite – or perhaps because of – its serious objectives, Sartor Resartus is a work of humor. Peter Allan Dale observes that the “humor, the essentially friendly and sympathetic rather than satiric laughter that Teufelsdröckh and his Editor inspire, keeps the reader constantly in mind of the fact that the ultimate aim of the book is not Denial but Affirmation.”

Teufelsdröckh, the author of a philosophical treatise on clothes, regards – as Carlyle does – all systems of belief as being tantamount to outer apparel. As the garments of belief become worn and frayed they need to be replaced, which is what Carlyle, through Teufelsdröckh and his baffled Editor, attempts. In Sartor Resartus, Carlyle demonstrates how meaningless creeds and dead traditions can be parted from the body beneath, how the stultifying weight of outdated beliefs can be shed in deference to the truly human. The metaphor was not new when Carlyle employed it; Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) in A Tale of a Tub (1696) also used clothing as an allegory for religious beliefs. In Swift’s work, man is held up to righteous ridicule because beneath his disguise he is not noble but pretentious. For Swift, man is a species of hypocrite, and the very existence of his clothing proves the meanness of what lies beneath. In contrast, Carlyle disrobes his subject of his beliefs in order to sympathize with the unadorned human condition, not to condemn it. He notes in Sartor Resartus that “there is something great in the moment when a man first strips himself of adventitious wrappages; and sees indeed that he is naked, and, as Swift has it, ‘a forked straddling animal with bandy legs; yet also a Spirit, and unutterable Mystery of Mysteries.’” The clothes are extraneous; they are not indicators of character flaws. The distinction is important and points to a change of attitude towards humor that occurred principally during the Victorian period, and against the background of which Carlyle needs to be seen.

In the nineteenth century, most critical discussions of humor derived from one of two sources, either the superiority theory as espoused by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) or the incongruity theory first sketched by Aristotle (384-22 BCE) in Poetics and expounded by theorists from Joseph Addison (1672–1719) to Carlyle. Neither of these concepts can be said to constitute a theory, but, by the dawn of the nineteenth century, ideas turning on incongruity dominated critical views of what humor should be and what it should do, whereas explanations based on superiority had outlived their popularity with critics and theorists. During the Restoration period, the comic sensation of superiority – what Hobbes described as “Sudden Glory,” along with the type of humor said to produce that sentiment – suited the sociopolitical creed of a society reacting against Puritanism. In Leviathan (1651), Hobbes explains how feelings of superiority underlie “Sudden Glory”:

Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity.30

Hobbes associates laughter with egotism, an explanation that can stake only a modest claim to a theory of comedy (although Sigmund Freud’s “tendency wit” resembles Hobbes’s Sudden Glory).31 Hobbes’s commentary amounts to a rebuke to laughter, and the power of the interregnum and Cromwellian legal piety to influence literary productions waned with time. By the nineteenth century, Hobbes’s kind of laughter, associated with Cavalier wit, was regarded as vulgar and irreligious.

Hobbes’s statement that the work of
“great minds” is not to laugh but to “free others from scorn” suggests the influence of the Bible on his understanding of the human condition. Throughout *Leviathan*, Hobbes attempts to reconcile the ways of God with the workings of a nation; and laughter, in the Bible, is consistently associated with vanity and moral stupidity. A New Testament story that is common to the Synoptics associates laughter with shame. In Matthew, Jesus raises from the dead the daughter of a ruler: “Give place: for the maid is not dead, but sleepeth,” Jesus says to an astounded, disbeliefing household, which replies by “laugh[ing] him to scorn” (Matt. 9:24, and see Mark 5:40 and Luke 8:53 [AV]). In that story, laughter is next to blasphemy, because the laughter expresses superiority where humility is warranted. If laughter in the New Testament is linked to arrogance, in the Old Testament it is associated with foolishness, and its very sound is cacophonous, not cheerful. According to *Ecclesiastes* 7:4–6: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. . . . For as the cracking of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity.” Biblical outrage at laughter is consistent with Hobbes’s condemnation of it. And Carlyle, while himself a humorist, was likewise antagonistic to certain uses of laughter.

Carlyle was, of course, aware of the Biblical disapproval of laughter, and in three separate works he condemns humor arising from an assumption of superiority. In the lecture “The Hero as Poet,” he argues that “good laughter is not ‘the cracking of thorns under the pot,’” and he contends for a different type of laughter that exists beyond what is described in the Old Testament: “Laughter means sympathy.” In the 1829 essay “Voltaire,” he deflates specifically the kind of humor arising from superiority: “Ridicule,” he comments, “is indeed a faculty much prized by its possessors; yet, intrinsically, it is a small faculty; we may say, the smallest of all faculties that other men are at the pains to repay with any esteem.” In *Past and Present*, he connects a stance of superiority in humor with insincerity, warning that “Such grinning inanity is very sad to the soul of man.”

Backing Carlyle’s rejection of superiority as grounds for humor was Victorian gentility. Donald Gray describes Victorian society as one that “championed benevolence and gentle manners as marks of high civilization,” and for this reason Carlyle’s admonition against superiority in humor placed him among the majority of critics. Most nineteenth-century writers rejected superiority in favor of incongruity as an explanation of laughter, one that suggested a kindlier humor, but this alternative theory likewise suffered from vagueness and was open to a wide range of interpretations.

Incongruity, as the concept was first used by Aristotle to frame a theory of humor, indicates a duality that in and of itself is bereft of social or moral contexts. Ideology needs to be asserted as a component of incongruity in order for comedy to have propagandistic value. For instance, in *Laughter* (1900), Henri Bergson (1859–1941), writing at the close of the Victorian period, theorizes that “[a] situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time.” This account differs from Hobbes’s in attributing laughter to the intellectual pleasure of observing a paradoxical arrangement rather than to feelings of superiority, but the “independent series of events” to which Bergson refers might involve any actions whatsoever. As an ideological statement, Bergson’s notion of the comic, at least in the passage quoted above, is without content. In another passage, Bergson’s theory is specific because the kind of incongruity he chooses to focus on relates firmly to his arguments about elasticity. “Any arrangement of acts and events is comic,” he writes, “which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement.” Here, the incongruity is specifically between the living and the mechanical, but the theory of incongruity available to scholars at the beginning of the nineteenth century was broader.
The type of humor Aristotle describes in *Poetics*, a style of comedy that is more kind than cruel, formed the basis of most Victorian ideas about humor. For Aristotle, the ludicrous consists in some defect of ugliness that is not painful or destructive. As an example, Aristotle points to the comic mask, which is “ugly and distorted,” but which does not imply pain. The provisions that Aristotelian humor must exclude pain and combine the possible with the actual, or the ideal with the real, meant that the theory could be used to assert positive social values. Abigail Bloom explains that “implicit in this idea [of doubleness or incongruity] is a normal world order against which difference can be measured.” While the idea of incongruity implied a standard against which Victorian humorists could measure the foibles of society, their humor would not be as aggressive or hurtful as Restoration wit had been. Instead, there was to be what Stuart Tave describes as a “good-natured and good-humored ideal [that] exerted a twofold influence on the comic: it corrected the Puritan by liberating and encouraging the milder forms of comic expression, the smile, or sympathecatic laughter, and innocent mirth; and it corrected the rake by controlling and discouraging the more vigorous forms, punitive laughter, ridiculitic, satiric wit.” But the humor of incongruity still needed concrete definitions – even a new language of critical terms – in order to enter into academic discourse.

In “Mr. Bannister” (1807), Leigh Hunt described the humor of the stage actor, John Bannister (1760–1836), as more Aristotelian than Hobbesian because of what it did not do – it avoided scorn. But what it did do by marrying humor and pathos rendered it nearly unclassifiable. In Hunt’s description of Bannister one can sense the freshness of the idea. Hunt opines that “to mingle feeling with humor, and humor with feeling, seems to be Mr. Bannister’s nature rather than his art.” The distinction between nature and art is neither irrelevant nor equivocal, but essential and absolute; Bannister’s humor is organic to his characterization – it is the comedic pulse that gives life to his portrayals. Unable to place Bannister’s work within the current terms of critical discourse, Hunt coins a new term:

It cannot be called tragi-comedy, for though it breathes a gentle spirit of humor, its essence is really serious; it differs widely from ludi-
crous distress, for though it raises our smiles, it never raises our contempt, but in the midst of our very inclination to be amused absolutely moves us with a pathetic sympathy; perhaps it may be defined as the humorous pathetic, the art of raising our tears and our smiles together, while each have a simple and distinct cause.

Here, in embryo, is a definition of the genre of humor that would typify Victorian productions. Hunt’s “humorous pathetic,” itself a form of incongruous humor, would be further explicated by Carlyle, and given a new terminology that translated the dramatic to the liter-
ary.

Not surprisingly for Carlyle, he found a language for his humor in German literature. In his 1827 essay, “Jean Paul Friedrich Richter,” he identifies the “humor-
ous pathetic”: “Richter is a man of mirth, but in his smile itself a touching pathos may lie hidden, a pity too deep for tears.” Pity, for Richter, is not cathartic (as it is for Wordsworth), but social. In Richter, a man of feeling, in the noblest sense of that word,” Carlyle could claim a humor-
ist whose humor produced an effect of “harmony,” which is a key word in Car-
lyle’s epistemology. Harmony, like sympathecacy, is knowledge. As Carlyle’s Editor claims in *Sartor Resartus*, a man’s laughter gives insight into his moral character:

Some men wear an everlasting barren simper; in the smile of others lies a cold glitter as of ice: the fewest are able to laugh, what can be called laughing, but only sniff and titter and snigger from the throat outwards; or at best, produce some whiffing husky cachinnation, as if they were laughing through wool: of none such comes good. The man who cannot laugh is not only fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; but his whole life is already a trea-
son and a stratagem.

True humor is “sympathy,” as Carlyle as-
serts in “The Hero as Poet.” This state-
ment places Carlyle’s humor in cor-
respondence with his social criticism. According to Tave, “By the beginning
of the nineteenth century an increasing confidence in the goodness of the free play of natural emotion and spirits made frank laughter a sign of an open and universal humanity, and even an un-restrained laughter at times a sign of a large, wise, and sympathetic heart.\(^45\) As the age became increasingly mechanical, however, Carlyle perceived that a mechanical society was beset by a crisis in sympathy. Formulas supplanted extra-rational humanistic values; ideas superseded beliefs. When Carlyle writes of Richter that "Aversion itself with him is not hatred; he despises much, but justly, with tolerance also, with placidity, and even a sort of love, the focus on tolerance and placidity was the result of Carlyle’s perception of this crisis in sympathy.\(^46\)

In *Poetics*, Aristotle opposes comedy to tragedy, designating tragedy as "an imitation of personages better than the ordinary man," and arguing that tragic characterization should attempt to "re-produce the distinctive features of a man, and at the same time, without losing the likeness, make him handsomer than he is." According to Aristotle, then, tragedy involves a representation of personages of high station in which the characters presented are to be elevated above the common man. In contrast, comedy, for him, is "an imitation of men worse than the average."\(^47\) Here, again, there is an attempt at producing difference. In comedy, the personages represented are to be of low station, and they are to be represented in a way that stresses the human aspects that place them below the common man.

In his essays on Richter, Carlyle mixes elements from Aristotle’s genres in order to produce an effect that he calls the *inverse sublime*. In "Jean Paul Friedrich Richter," he makes his most important statement on humor, one that establishes a method by which the humorous pathetic can be adopted to produce a harmonious humor. As is the case with the Carlylean notion of wholeness, the comedic ideal of harmony is personal and public:

> True humour springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love; it issues not in laughter, but in still smiles, which lie far deeper. It is a sort of inverse sublimity; exalting, as it were, into our affections what is below us, while sublimity draws down into our affection what is above us. The former is scarcely less precious or heart-affecting than the latter; perhaps it is still rarer, and, as a test of genius, still more decisive. It is, in fact, the bloom and perfume, the purest effluence of a deep, fine and loving nature; a nature in harmony with itself, reconciled to the world and its stintedness and contradiction, nay, finding in this very contradiction new elements of beauty as well as goodness.\(^48\)

The style of humor that Carlyle admires in Richter is more Aristotelian than Hobbesian, and yet distinct from both of those theoretical orientations. Richter’s humor, in Carlyle’s account, has its basis in incongruity in that it is humanistic, but it does not necessarily have its basis in comedy. Because Carlyle’s inverse sublime draws on the lofty and not just on the low, and because it humanizes its subject (whether high or low), it is twice removed from Aristotelian comedy. Carlyle was evidently aware of the distinction when he wrote in his second essay on Richter, "Jean Paul Friedrich Richter Again" (1830), that Richter "is a Humorist... not only in low provinces of thought, where this is more common, but in the lofliest provinces, where it is well-nigh unexampled."\(^49\) The purpose of the inverse sublime is to produce a state of harmony, which is the comedic equivalent to social wholeness. In a study of inverse sublimity in Victorian humor, Max Keith Sutton writes: "This analogue to the view of an organically unified existence is the viewpoint underlying the inverse sublimity of Victorian humor. As a way of looking at life, it could appeal to the desires of many persons to see a more human, more poetically interesting world than the one described by scientists."\(^50\) While Carlyle’s inverse sublime presents the heroic in comedy as deeply human, the concept also presents a strategy for Carlyle’s more serious writing.

When applied to his serious characterizations of important people, Carlyle’s inverse sublime can be said to have its ancestry in the Puritan artistic sensibilities of Cromwell as well as in Richter’s prose. Cromwell uttered the quintes-
are poetic, even sportful, and this idea of humor that elevates the subject was especially attractive to Dickens, who might almost be considered Carlyle’s protégé in the art of this kind of comedy. Mildred G. Christian, writing on Carlyle’s influence on Dickens, remarks about the two writers’ personal relationship: “in the enthusiasm of any fresh encounter with Dickens, Carlyle was likely to be carried away with the man’s personality and especially with his ‘cheerful geniality’ – Carlyle’s own phrase.” Carlyle’s enthusiasm for Dickens was more than reciprocated by the younger man. According to Christian, “Dickens, in his nearly thirty years’ friendship with Carlyle, maintained, throughout, an attitude of respectful, enthusiastic, loving veneration, such as a son might offer a father.”

Respecting Carlyle’s influence on Dickens’s social ideas, Christian describes Dickens as “attempting throughout the period of his novel-writing to be one of those ‘wielders of a sharp sickle’ whom Carlyle so earnestly desired”:

The greatest evidence of Carlyle’s influence upon the social theory of Dickens is to be found in *Hard Times*. The novel, inscribed to Carlyle, made a deliberate attempt to weave in as many of his teachings as possible. The multiplicity of details supplying proof of influence is striking. The upshot of Carlyle’s description of an utterly human, quotidian act is a moment of heartfelt realism – that is, a realism whose closest relative can be located in the language and literature of sensibility and domesticity, not in naturalism. The same spirit that informs his serious portraiture is also at play in his comedy, but to fully represent harmony, Carlyle’s sublime must also make the low accessible to the high.

Carlyle’s humor is again distinct from that of Aristotle and Hobbes in that it raises characters of low stature to the level of their audience, and it was this idea of a humor that elevates its subject, rather than expressing contempt, that influenced Charles Dickens (1812–70), among others. In the essay, “Schiller” (1831), Carlyle explains the connection between humor and humanity: “Humour is properly the exponent of low things; that which first renders them poetical to the mind. The man of Humour sees common life, even mean life, under the new light of sportfulness and love; whatever has existence has a charm for him.” Types of comic characters that Carlyle admires, then, are the Falstaffs and Sancho Panzas of literature whose lives are ruled by their stomachs and yet whose portrayals
With no financial resources, no one to give him a “push,” he launched himself in London in 1873, to practise Medicine for a livelihood, but especially to study what he used to call “problems of the World and of Human Life,” and to offer his original solutions in this vast puzzle through the medium of literature. One reads with a certain amused interest how in search for counsel on this project he betook himself immediately after his arrival to the writer whose books had at once stimulated and perplexed his own thought so much in the rural hamlet of Ontario. After a letter in which he asked for an interview with Thomas Carlyle had secured an invitation for “not more than ten minutes,” he made his way to Cheyne Row and waited his turn to see the sage of Chelsea. Standing on the hearth-rug, young Crozier explained that he had much to say to mankind about “great problems of the World and Human Life.”

Stewart’s sketch of Crozier provides remarkable evidence of the extent of Carlyle’s popularity—the reach of his celebrity—in Canada during his lifetime. Even though Carlyle told Crozier to stick to medicine—it paid better—the memory of the meeting between the two men was important enough to Crozier that, nearly fifty years after the event had taken place, it remained as one of the defining stories of his life.

These two examples, the Lutheran psalm and Stewart’s eulogistic anecdote, suggest both the subtlety and the penetration of Carlyle’s influence on early Canadian writers. How aware were parishioners singing “Hymn 391,” the Lutheran psalm “Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott.” Even twenty-seven years after his death, Carlyle’s name remained ubiquitous in Canada. His writing and translations had an impact on every level of Canadian society. A 1921 article in the Dalhousie Review gives surprising evidence of the extent to which Carlyle’s celebrity penetrated even small-town Ontario. In “A Neglected Man of Letters,” Herbert L. Stewart describes the literary career of Dr. John Beattie Crozier (1849–1921), the author of History of Intellectual Development on the Lines of Modern Evolution (1897). In the course of describing Crozier’s intellectual development, Stewart relates the following anecdote:

Carlyle’s inverse sublime was not only a term but also a technique that belonged to the literature of a peculiar social vision. His theories on humor inspired a generation of English writers, including Dickens, and his influence on Canadian writers from the colonial to the Confederation periods would prove especially strong.

THE DOCTRINE OF WHOLENESS, THE HUMOR OF HARMONY, AND THEIR IMPACT ON CANADIAN WRITERS

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G. B. Tennyson agrees that the concept achieves the status of theory:

Carlyle’s . . . “inverse sublimity” is an excellent translation of Jean Paul’s “das umgekehrte Erhabene.” Humor in Carlyle, then, as in Jean Paul, goes beyond the mere perception of similarities, although it is likely to start there. It goes from that which is beneath us to that which is above. As an example of what the theory means in Carlyle’s practice, we have only to look at the subject of Sartor Resartus—Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. Diogenes, born of God, is linked with Teufelsdröckh, devil’s dung. The juxtaposition must be comic if it is not blasphemous—or perhaps it is both at once.

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book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived. The 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. The extent of his influence may be best seen in the fact that ideas which were startling novelties when he first wrote them are now become common-places.65

A similar point was made in the obituary of Carlyle published twenty-six years later in the Toronto Globe. According to the Monday, 7 February 1881, edition, Carlyle stands in the very front rank of English literatures, not so much on account of the great amount of work he accomplished during his long literary life as of his widespread and enduring influence on all modern thought. Many writers, and a still greater number of thinkers, have been more or less moulded by his views and opinions who are not themselves conscious of the spell under which they developed, and some of whom have very little acquaintance with his writings. Of him more than of any other English writer, living or dead, it may truly be said that his thoughts have saturated the intellectual life of his day, and imparted to it their own colour and tone.64

Both in the Leader and also the Globe, Carlyle is described in terms that cannot be quantified. “Moulded opinions and views” are matters of perception that are themselves untraceable.

The language of Carlyle’s other Canadian obituaries further evidences his enduring popularity. The Globe spoke about his “grim but not unkindly humour,” and predicted that his “predominating influence would not be confined to his own generation.”65 Similarly, the Montreal Gazette observed that his “vigour and earnestness, produced an effect on both hearer and reader which had scarcely a precedent in modern time.”66 Indeed, Carlyle’s impact on Canadian society is palpable from the sheer number of obituaries that appeared in Canada both in city and small-town newspapers, from the Ottawa Daily Citizen and the Toronto Evening Telegram to the St. Mary’s Argus, the latter proclaiming that the “announcement [of his death] will be heard throughout the entire world with regret.”67 While Alexander Carlyle had predeceased his older brother, Canadians could still assert that their country maintained blood connections with the “Sage of Chelsea.” The Globe boasted that, although Carlyle died childless, he “left a large circle of relatives, many of whom are in Canada, to cherish his memory.”68 In the Canadian Monthly and National Review alone, six publications on Carlyle appeared during the first year after his death.69 As late as 1894, John Sharp, writing in the Queen’s Quarterly, could claim a place for Carlyle’s criticism in contemporary Canada:

Carlyle began his work in an age when the selfishness of men was regarded as one of the highest evidences of divine providence, Bentham, Ricardo, Mill, were the names to conjure with, and it was held that if men were let alone, society would run itself. . . . In this vortex or rather co-mingling of vortices Carlyle was the first Englishman to discern and herald the order which was struggling through the disorder. . . . It may be added that notwithstanding the changes of the past sixty years Carlyle’s criticism of society is still vital, and the light which he brought to the problems of his day may still be a torch to us.70

Not only is Sharp’s essay an argument about Carlyle; it is also a document on the peculiar influence that Carlyle exerted in Canada long after his death.

Carlyle’s importance to Canadian authors during colonial times is best seen by the degree to which his ideas are disseminated in the writing of two significant groups: British emigrant writers, and writers who subscribed to the Loyalist myth. His doctrine of responsibility focusing on labor as an indicator of personal worth is at the moral core of Alexander McLachlan’s (1818–96) writing; and his idealization of an organic community in which the practice of hero-worship is respected, and in which the need for social continuity with the past is cherished, is at the heart of Kirby’s construction of the United Empire Loyalist myth (as it is in the writings of Ralph Connor [1860–1937], the best-selling writer in the English-speaking world in the 1890s). In all these writers, treatments of Carlyle’s key doctrines are infused with humor: humor allows McLachlan to elevate the
working man, while it enables Kirby to humanize his portrait of Sir Isaac Brock (1769–1812).

Although the four-stages theory that underpins many early Canadian conceptions of social development argued that a fully developed country allows its citizens time for leisure, emigrant literature written in and about Canada during the colonial period is deeply indebted to Carlyle’s valuation of work over recreation.70 As noted above, Carlyle’s worship of work was one reason why his philosophy was opposed to Benthamism, since he argued that a notion of happiness that is measured solely by material possessions, leisure, and mirth, is not a meaningful goal for any individual’s life, let alone for the life of a society; such happiness is a mere byproduct of striving. “It is not what a man outwardly has or wants,” Carlyle contends in Chartism, “that constitutes the happiness or misery of him.”71 Happiness can be acquired, but it is not properly in itself the product of an individual’s acquisitiveness. In any case, the Bible does not promise happiness on earth; rather, in a Carlylean emphasis, it insists that “[i]n the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” and instructs that “[s]ix days shall work be done” for every one day of rest (Gen. 3:19; Exod. 35:2).72

Work is peculiarly suited to Carlyle’s worldview for a number of reasons. Labor is private; regardless of how many people work together, an individual’s exertions are his or her own. Labor becomes public when it produces order. This was often the case in colonial Canada where, for instance, the labor of clearing land produced tangible results from which neighbors could benefit along with the individual. Moreover, in keeping with the notion of a whole society in which only active participation brings about the full realization of society, such a society was more living than legislated. Labor – both personal and public, but above all active – was not just a metaphor; it was a process.

In emigrant literature a person’s labor is the yardstick by which his or her social status is marked within the community. As Catharine Parr Traill observes in The Backwoods of Canada (1836) and Susanna Moodie likewise recognizes in Roughing It in the Bush, the leisured class was unsuited to life in Canada. A gentleman, Traill warns her readers, “brings with him a mind unfitted to his situation; and even if necessity compels him to exertion, his labour is of little value.”73 Moodie concurs: “To the poor, industrious working man it [Canada] presents many advantages; to the poor gentleman, none.”74 (Notably, one of Moodie’s greatest embarrassments mentioned in Roughing It in the Bush is her inability to milk cows.) In a world sans social registry, the very unsuitableness of gentlemen – and ladies – to colonial life meant that other standards for social status than inherited ones would apply. Carlyle professes in Chartism that the man who can work is a born king:

He that can work is a born king of something; is in communion with Nature, is master of a thing or things, is a priest and king of Nature so far. He that can work at nothing is but a usurping king, be his trappings what they may; he is the born slave of all things.

Let a man honour his craftsmanship, his can-do.75

Carlyle’s regal language proved important to emigrant authors. In an article, “The Dignity of Labour,” which Susanna Moodie and her husband excerpted from Sartor Resartus and printed in their Victoria Magazine (1847–48), Carlyle uses the language of nobility when he describes the “hard hand” of the “toil-worn craftsman” as “indefeasibly royal, as of the septre [sic] of this planet,”76 and this was the idiom of identity throughout emigrant literature. Carlyle’s indefeasibly royal scepter of labor was politically empowering for Max in Isabella Valancy Crawford’s (1850–87) Malcolm’s Katie (1884), who boasts: “We build up nations – this my axe and I!”77 In Alexander McLachlan’s poetry, the Carlylean labor ethos found perhaps its most vocal champion.

McLachlan’s “Acres Of Your Own” contains the lines, “True men all must toil and drudge. / Nature’s true Nobility / Scorns such mock gentility,”78 an aphorism that testifies to the extent to which Carlyle’s ideals influenced the poet’s social outlook. E. H. Dewart (1828–1903),
who edited Selections from Canadian Poets (1864), and who wrote an introductory essay for The Poetical Works of Alexander McLachlan (1900), considered McLachlan “the Burns of Canada,” and saw at play in his work the relation of “racy humor” to “natural paths,” a humorous pathos that is also the hallmarks of Carlylean humor. Perhaps this connection is why E. Margaret Fulton prefers to name McLachlan “the Carlyle of Canada.” McLachlan’s “Up, and Be a Hero” clearly is patterned on Carlyle’s lectures on hero-worship. “High heroic deeds are done,” he claims in the poem, “Without either sword or gun.” McLachlan’s sense of the heroic is Carlylean in that his metaphor links together intellectual and working-class endeavors, the hero sowing the “seed which must be sown” – which of course suggests farming – “[i]n the mighty fields of thought.” Fulton describes how McLachlan echoed Carlyle’s social outlook in his poetry and in the speeches he delivered during a series of lecture tours in Canada: “Carlyle had taken very seriously his task of raising the ‘British heathen’ to nobler ideals by preaching the gospel of work, duty, and silent reverence for God.” Like Carlyle, McLachlan undertook a series of lecture tours where he spoke to mechanics and tradespeople, as well as to the more educated classes. He, too, assumed the role of “man of letters” in an effort to elevate the whole tone of man’s thinking, and to raise the whole cultural level in Canada. Poems like “Heroes,” “Gladstone,” and “Garibaldi” suggest the influence of Carlyle’s Heroes and Hero Worship; and the subject for a lecture at Queen’s College, Kingston, was “Great Men.” Clearly McLachlan in his way was attempting to do for Canada what Carlyle with his lecture series was doing for England, and Emerson for the United States. If the reviews of the day are to be trusted, McLachlan was no less successful than either Carlyle or Emerson.

“Cutting the First Tree” in McLachlan’s long poem, The Emigrant (1861), is a study of the Carlylean idealization of labor and the community, and it is also infused with humor. The Emigrant includes the comic figure of “lazy Bill” who prefers pessimistic speeches to honest work. His humorous diatribe is opposed by the Carlylean language of the “orator” who spurs on his fellow men by asserting that “by honest manly toil, / Lords we shall be of the soil.” He continues in the lexicon of aristocracy, claiming that “[w]hen a job is well begun, / Success crowns the persevering.”

Work not only signified social rank and self-worth, but also placed the solitary woodsman or farmer, laboring in the wilderness, in contact with the sublime. Like Saint Paul, Carlyle discerned that the creation of order through labor brought him closer to his own creator: “All true Work is sacred; in all true Work, were it but true hand-labour, there is something of divineness,” he declares in Past and Present; and in the passage quoted by the Moodies from Sartor Resartus, he expresses how “[u]nspeakably touching is it” when he finds “both dignities united: and he that must toil outwardly for the lowest of man’s wants, is also toiling inwardly for the highest.” McLachlan describes the combined work of a number of men cutting the first tree as “a kind of sacrament.” Labor is ennobling according to emigrant writing because it ennobles the soul, bringing the sublime within reach of the understanding and making the poor self-reliant and responsible. McLachlan’s humorous treatment of the theme of labor in Canada serves a serious purpose by elevating the common man and dignifying his work, an aim that is consistent with Carlyle’s social outlook and with his literary theories. Labor was the metaphoric church and castle of emigrant writing, and this theme also proved a component of the United Empire Loyalist myth.

The Loyalist myth in Ontario during the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods held a vital position in the historical and literary productions from this period and helped to define and assert a conservative ethos, one effect of which was the bringing together of disparate communities from Niagara to Kingston and beyond. According to Dennis Duffy, the Loyalist myth “was not a matter of ancient precedent and philosophical positions alone, but a view shaped by specif-
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Carlyle's Inverse Sublime

ic, recollected, ordered, and embellished historical events.”99 Nowhere was it more strongly asserted than in the writing of Kirby who, like McLachlan, admired and adopted Carlyle's doctrines, transplanting them in New World soil. In Kirby's writing, Loyalist history is translated into a near-biblical account of paradise lost (the Loyalist migration from the United States after 1783), paradise regained (the creation of peaceable communities in the Canadian wilderness), and paradise defended and secured (the War of 1812–14, the Rebellion of 1837, the Fenian Raids of 1866). The fact that a small army of British soldiers and natives had, with the help of Loyalist volunteers, defeated a numerically superior enemy during the War of 1812–14 seemingly testified to Kirby's belief in Loyalist destiny. His treatment of the three mythological stages of Loyalist settlement is indebted to a Carlylean belief in labor, order, and heroism, and his depiction of an ideal community is bolstered by the unifying power of humor as embodied in his hero.

Kirby's admiration for Carlyle is repeatedly evident in his *Annals of Niagara* (1896). In the opening chapter, Kirby introduces his history of Loyalism with a Carlylean exhortation:

Riches are deceitful if they occupy too exclusively our thoughts and energies in their acquisition. Pleasures and pastimes that are not the allowable relaxation of honest work or study, weaken the hands and dull the edge of the intellect – deadening the better feelings which dignify and adorn true manhood.90

In "The Hungry Year" (1859), Kirby describes Canada, as Carlyle did, as a "land of labour, but of sure reward."91 His long poem, *The U.E.: A Tale of Upper Canada* (written in 1846 and published in 1859) begins in Carlylean fashion by imagining an idyllic past in which labor is ennobling. In Kirby's Edenic history, people "In cheerful labours pass their peaceful days, / While grateful evening all their toil repays."92 D. M. R. Bentley intimates the close connection between Kirby's long poem and Carlylean doctrine: "As the machinery that would produce Confederation ground forward, Kirby sought a foundation for the future in an idealized past.”93 In *The UE*, that past contains a place where “toil repays” and where "Schoolmen” “learn that serving God is love to man.”94 In *Canadian Idylls*, that place in the past is also one of supreme order. Remembering a state that never truly existed, Kirby laments:

The world goes rushing by
The ancient landmarks of a nobler time, –
When men bore deep the impress of the law
Of duty, truth, and loyalty unstained.95

Order was the byword of the United Empire Loyalists in Kirby's rendering of their history, but equally important was the manner in which order was created.

Carlyle wrote in "Characteristics" that "[i]t is not by Mechanism, but by Reli-
gion; not by Self-interest, but by Loyalty , that men are governed or governable,"96 and Kirby's history of the Servos family identifies Carlylean order as the strongest principle guiding the United Empire Loyalists' exodus from the United States. In *The United Empire Loyalists in Can-
ada: Illustrated Memorials of the Servos Family*, he pronounces: "While the United States lost the very best and most moral of their people, Canada was the gainer by having its territory settled and the foundation of its greatness laid by the advent of these loyal, high-principled men, who preferred starting the world anew in the wil-
derness, rather than be untrue to their King and the British flag, which was their own native symbol."97 The post–Revolu-
tionary War migration into Canada was predicated on loyalty and resulted in the bringing of order – stability – into Cana-
da. William Renwick Riddell notes that Kirby "stressed that part of Canadian life which most nearly corresponded to his English ideal":

He was himself, and always thought and wrote of the great mass of Canadians as contented, conservative and intensely patriotic, with no love for drastic political measures, or even reform, and firmly believing in the doctrines of the Established Church of England.98

The American Revolution was for Kirby the historical cataclysm that the French Revolution had been for Carlyle, repre-
senting the triumph of unwholesome passions over order.99 In order to pre-
serve the type of society the United Em-
pier Loyalists imagined, Carlyle posited the need for hero-worship. In On Heroes, he wrote that the great man’s “mission is Order; every man’s is. He is here to make what was disorderly, chaotic, into a thing ruled, regular. He is the missionary of Order.”

While critics would increasingly condemn Carlylean hero worship (especially after the First World War), Chesterton emphasized the humanity of Carlyle’s heroes and his hero-worship:

His view is not that human nature is so vulgar and silly a thing that it must be guided and driven; it is, on the contrary, that human nature is so chivalrous and fundamentally magnanimous a thing that even the meanest have it in them to love a leader more than themselves, and to prefer loyalty to rebellion. When he speaks of this trait in human nature Carlyle’s tone invariably softens. We feel that for the moment he is kindled with admiration of mankind, and almost reaches the verge of Christianity. Whatever else was acid and captious about Carlyle’s utterances, his hero worship was not only humane, it was almost optimistic. He admired great men primarily, and perhaps correctly, because he thought that they were more human than other men.

The softening of tone Chesterton observes in Carlyle’s treatment of heroes is consistent with the sage’s theory of humor. What Chesterton describes when he writes that Carlyle sees great men as “more human than other men” is the inverse sublime. This notion of humanistic heroism is at the heart of Carlyle’s humor and is a vital aspect of Kirby’s treatment of Sir Isaac Brock in Annals of Niagara.

In Annals, Kirby calls Brock “the Hero of Upper Canada,” and he describes him in a sonnet commemorating a large stone, called “Brock’s Seat,” as being able “to unlock / The people’s hearts and fill them from his own.” In Kirby’s rendering, Brock is not godlike. He is a human hero, and it is precisely his humanity — his sympathy — that makes Brock heroic. “How much lies in Laughter,” Carlyle declares in Sartor Resartus, “the cipher-key, wherewith we decipher the whole man!” In the Annals, Kirby’s depiction of Brock includes an important statement about the power of humor to unite the residents of Niagara in a heroic cause:

Colonel Brock had the social qualities of a popular member of society as well as of a gallant officer. . . . His good humour and affability won their hearts, and man, woman and child loved and honoured Colonel Brock, declaring he was the equal of [Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, John Graves] Simcoe [1752–1806], and higher praise than that they could not give. . . . His visits to the houses of the farmers were hailed as the happiest of events.

Brock’s good humor produces and defends social harmony. Kirby’s Brock resembles Carlyle’s Cromwell. In his lecture on “The Hero as King,” Carlyle praises the “depth and tenderness” of Cromwell, “the quantity of sympathy he had with things, – the quantity of insight he would yet get into the heart of things.” The Carlylean warrior does not rule by physical force alone but also by the force of sympathetic insight. The same is true of Kirby’s Brock. The passage in which Kirby describes Brock’s amiability and humanness may be indebted directly or indirectly to Carlyle’s inverse sublime, and it suggests as well the social philosophy of harmony and geniality integral to neo-Loyalist writers during the Confederation period. It was this style of humor that Archibald Lampman would endorse and that a generation of Canadian humorists, including Sara Jeanette Duncan (1861–1922), L. Maud Montgomery, and Stephen Leacock, would produce during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

CARLYLE, CANADIAN EDUCATORS, THE CONFEDERATION POETS, AND THE CONFEDERATION HUMORISTS

In a 1946 letter to the writer Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947), the critic E. K. Brown (1905–51) chides himself for “not get[ting] much writing done these days.” He explains that he is “reading instead. I have decided to offer a course on Carlyle next quarter, and need to read and reread much. It is more than a decade since I read the French Revolution; and I am glad that it seems even better now than it did then.” Even after the First World War, after his importance had di-
Carlyle's philosophy remained important to many Canadians—even to some Canadian modernists. As suggested earlier, the reason for his staying power may have had something to do with the adaptability of his doctrines to the Canadian sociopolitical environment. Carlyle preached a gospel of social wholeness, of organic relationships between individuals and communities, which suited the Canadian situation after Confederation.

Of the Confederation poets who came under Carlyle's spell, none was more profoundly influenced and influential than Archibald Lampman. The historical vision and heroic ideology behind his essay on "Gambetta" (1883) has its roots in Carlyle's *On Heroes and The French Revolution* (1837). Lampman names and quotes Carlyle three times in order to describe the pulse of French history and Léon Gambetta’s (1838–82) heroism, arguing:

There are times in every nation, especially that of the French with their vehement and sensitive, but at the same time light and changeable character, when some ill-government, some hollow "formula," has rested so long upon the people, that all the pulses of the national spirit are deadened, and life itself to every active thinking man becomes a heavy, wearisome, unbearable thing, and men begin to cry to one another in their different, dim ways for something living, something human, they know not what – but know that some new thing must come – times in which the old and known leaders of the people have lost all heart or know not in what way to set themselves to the gigantic work. Then rises the brave, powerful, original man whose soul is carried away in the untrammeled tide of energy and hope, who knows no fear or any other retarding impulse – the man too with an "eye," as Carlyle would say – and tells the people in words of fire, that are borne upon the four winds to every corner of the earth, just what it is they all want.

Lampman’s disdain for formulas is similar to Carlyle’s. His discussion of French character, as D. M. R. Bentley has noted, is likewise drawn from Carlyle, and the very language of his essay, Lampman’s "words of fire, that are borne upon the four winds to every corner of the earth" serve both as an endorsement of Carlylean hero-worship, and also as an attempt to replicate its heroic spirit.

In 1885, two years after penning "Gambetta," Lampman again found inspiration in Carlyle’s writing, this time in *Sartor Resartus*, for his fairy tale, "Hans Fingerhut’s Frog-lesson." Lampman’s fairy tale is the story of a poet, Hans Fingerhut, who, because of his unrequited vanity, becomes increasingly "peevish and querulous" to the point that no one will listen to him anymore. Having lost his audience, Hans becomes a tailor, but his personal descent continues. Hans (impotently) assaults a river for speaking in beautiful murmurs and, as one might expect in a fairy tale, he is punished by being magically transformed into a frog, and he must remain in that state until he can correctly interpret the water’s song:

Bentley writes in his introduction to *The Fairy Tales of Archibald Lampman* that "the very fact that Hans Fingerhut is a tailor aligns him with the craftsmen in several . . . of the Grimms’ fairy tales . . . , but herein lies a significant difference: Hans is not simply a tailor but, by virtue of his frog-lesson, a tailor re-tailored (sartor resartus) along Carlylean lines so that he is no longer angry, bitter, and out of tune with the natural world.” While the clothing metaphor also has a Swiftian quality, perhaps suggesting *A Tale of a Tub*, Hans’s rebirth is similar to Teufelsdröckh’s. Both emerge from a spiritual crisis and embrace a positive worldview.

In "The Modern School of Poetry in England" (1885), Lampman expounds on the humorous pathetic in a manner that resembles Carlyle’s discussion of humorous sympathy in his essay on “Schiller,” an essay that Lampman quotes, before almost immediately engaging in a discussion about how humorous geniality is fundamental to the work of true poets:

The work of all the greatest poets has been very varied, and it has been very genial. Looking with a wide and hearty and sympathetic eye upon all life, they have touched innumerable notes, and have absorbed themselves readily into every phase of its humour or pathos. They have laughed and wept with living men and women; and in their laughter is the kindliness of a large heart, in their sadness the sweetness of brotherly sympathy.
are wrapped up in their own ideas of bettering the world, are perfectly incapable of looking at the ridiculous side of anything. On the other hand, the great reformers of all ages have been intensely susceptible to humour, and appreciated it to the fullest extent. Hence all of the greatest humorists have been closely identified with the world’s progress.114

Campbell’s dissertation on humor is fired with the passionate conviction of a literary man who considered literary theory to have a practical application beyond the printed page. In this he resembles Carlyle. Campbell’s association of humor with “great reformers” is a nod to both Carlyle and Dickens, and his “intense zealots” are similar to the older philosopher’s humorless man in Sartor Resartus whose “whole life is already a treason and a stratagem.”115 Campbell and others continued to praise Carlyle’s writing and to espouse his theories long after the philosopher’s death; as a result, Carlyle’s influence on Canadian authorship continued to be strong.116

The Halifax scholar and contemporary of Lampman, Archibald MacMechan, described the same sadness in Carlyle’s humor and gave it a name that resonates in Canadian theories of humor: 

humorous melancholy

In MacMechan, Carlyle’s philosophies found one of their ablest and most vocal adherents, and MacMechan in turn played a significant role in the literary development of two Confederation humorists, Sara Jeannette Duncan and Stephen Leacock. In the 1880s, MacMechan completed a B.A. at the University of Toronto and he wrote about his experiences and his influences in “Reminiscences of Toronto University”:

When Toronto men of the early eighties call that time Toronto’s Age of Gold, they are thinking chiefly of certain hearts of gold, which every test of time only proves true metal. But it is just possible that the dons of the day did not hold precisely this opinion. We were undoubtedly a licentious crew. . . . We read Sartor for the Blumine episode; we despised “gig men”; our greatest oath was by Saint Thomas of Carlyle.117

MacMechan’s interest in Carlyle con-
Carlyle’s Inverse Sublime

continuing long after graduation. He edited North American editions of Sartor Resartus (1896) and of Carlyle on Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (1901). In the classroom, he remained devoted to the Sage of Chelsea. In an appreciation published in the Dalhousie Review the year of MacMechan’s death, a former student, G. C. Sedgwich, explained that “Archie was proud of being and remaining a Victorian”; and Wilhelmina Gordon (1886–1968), writing in the Queen’s Quarterly that same year, described how “Carlyle profoundly influenced him.” MacMechan, she notes, “called himself ‘a professed Carlylean,’ and [he] had analysed the style of Sartor as admiringly as the thought.”

MacMechan’s discussion of Carlyle’s humor in his introduction to Sartor Resartus places Carlylean humor in line with what MacMechan calls in later discussions of Alfred Tennyson (1809–92) and Herman Melville (1819–91) the “humour of the North.” He writes: “the essence of . . . [Carlyle’s humor in Sartor Resartus] consists in a juxtaposition of the remote and the incongruous with the result of awakening a feeling of amusement or of scorn or of sadness.” It is the third of these, Carlyle’s ability to turn “the jest into sadness,” that MacMechan also observes in Tennyson and Melville. In his introduction to Select Poems of Alfred Tennyson (1907), MacMechan describes Tennyson’s humor as “deep and rich.” Of Tennyson’s earlier poems, he explains that “[t]he beauty of the form makes us forget the eternal note of sadness in them all. Tennyson’s sadness is the melancholy of the North, which is quite compatible with a gift of humor.” In his ground-breaking essay on Moby Dick (1851), entitled “The Best Sea-Story Ever Written,” and published at a time when Melville was a forgotten man, MacMechan reads in Melville’s “humour . . . the usual tinge of Northern melancholy.”

As a critic of Carlyle, Tennyson, and Melville, MacMechan’s scholarship was substantial and his position in Canadian letters remains considerable. MacMechan authored Head-waters of Canadian Literature (1924), and was one of the patriarchs of Canadian literary studies. His conclusion to Head-waters is particularly striking in speaking to the respect that Canadian critics and academics held for the work of humorists. After assessing the field of Canadian authorship, he names two Confederation humorists, Duncan and Leacock, as belonging to posterity. Duncan had written to MacMechan on 4 May 1905, to thank him for his review of her work: “I need not say that I have taken the greatest pleasure in your generous expression of liking for The Imperialist” (1904), she begins; “I confess I had wondered, a little here on my remote hill top, whether anybody had listened to me in Canada and had come rather to the conclusion that I had been too far away to be well heard, or perhaps I had forgotten my country’s note.” It is a measure of his penetration, of his critical insight, that MacMechan, ahead of the majority of critics of his generation, recognized Duncan’s achievement as he had Melville’s. He was also aware of Montgomery’s work. She had been his student at Dalhousie University, and he adroitly picked up on the realism in her comedy, writing in his Head-waters that Anne of Green Gables (1908) “is pervaded with a sense of reality; the pitfalls of the sentimental are deftly avoided.”

In MacMechan, the “professed Carlylean,” all three Confederation humorists found a strong supporter within the upper echelon of Canadian scholarship. MacMechan corresponded with Duncan, taught Montgomery, and concluded Head-waters of Canadian Literature with an endorsement of Duncan’s and Leacock’s work. All three Canadian humorists became internationally famous for works that incorporated Carlyle’s theories of humor and that legitimated his organic doctrines.

Nowhere was Carlyle’s influence more evident during the early years of the twentieth century than on this generation of Canadian humorists born within a few years of each other at the time of Confederation. As late as 1938, in his Humor and Humanity, Leacock expressed Carlyle’s comic theory: “Humor in its highest reach touches the sublime,” Leacock writes; “humor in its highest reach mingles with pathos: it voices sorrow
for our human lot and reconciliation with it.”^26 Leacock and the Leacockean middle way, which combined conservative and socialist values in a Tory political view, reflects Carlyle’s closest comic relation. Carlyle’s dictum, from “The Hero as Poet,” that no one should laugh “at mere weakness, at misery or poverty; never” is often repeated in Leacock’s critical and theoretical arguments about humanizing humor; and Carlyle’s sublime humor, a humor that mingles comedy and pathos, is integral to Duncan’s Imperialist and Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables. Adopting and adapting Carlyle’s doctrines of social wholeness and comic harmony for a late-Victorian and Edwardian readership, the Confederation humorists gave his humor its fullest expression.

NOTES


3. Ibid., 206 (bk. 3, chap. 8).

4. Ibid., 23 (bk. 1, chap. 4).


8. Major publications during this period include German Romance (1827), “Signs of the Times” (1829), “Characteristics” (1831), Sartor Resartus, History of the French Revolution (1837), Chartism (1839), On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (1841), and Past and Present (1843).


10. G. B. Tennyson observes the influence of German idealism on Carlyle, and he traces the influence of Carlyle’s translations of German authors on Anglo-German literary history. “Between 1824 and 1831 Carlyle produced a body of work that alone would have sufficed to secure him an important place in Anglo-German literary history. His translations and essays infused new vigor into the waning cult of Germanism and gave it a different and much more intellectual direction.” The distinction between rationalism and intuitive rationalism is that “Carlyle’s artist, or, as he always called him, the poet, must like the philosopher see through appearances and employ what Carlyle would call Kantian reason as opposed to mere Understanding” (Sartor Resartus: The Genesis, Structure, and Style of Thomas Carlyle’s First Major Work [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965], 66, 90).

It should be noted, however, that many critics do not attribute Carlyle’s notion of Kantian reason to his reading but to his misreading of German idealism. See, as Tennyson suggests, C. F. Harrold, Carlyle and German Thought: 1819–1834 (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1934), 120–147.

11. Against natural rights, Carlyle poses duty, and he offers the following fraction in Sartor Resartus: “Obedience is our universal duty and destiny; wherein whoso will not bend must break: too early and too thoroughly we cannot be trained to know that Would, in this world of ours, is as mere zero to Should, and for most part as the smallest of fractions even to Shall” (p. 79 [bk. 2, chap. 2]). Later, he has Teufelsdröckh explain that “the whim we have of Happiness is somewhat thus. By certain valuations, and averages, of our own striking, we come upon some sort of average terrestrial lot; this we fancy belongs to us by nature, and of indefeasible right. It is simple payment of our wages, of our deserts; requires neither thanks nor complaint; only such overplus as there may be do we account Happiness; any deficit again is Misery. . . . So true is it, what I then said, that the Fraction of Life can be increased in value not so much by increasing your Numerator as by lessening your Denominator. Nay, unless my Algebra deceive me, Unity itself divided by Zero will give Infinity. Make thy claim of wages a zero, then; thou hast the world under thy feet” (pp. 152–53 [bk. 2, chap. 9]).


13. Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolu-
Carlyle's Inverse Sublime


Haliburton's satirical sketches were originally published in the Novascotian, and first collected in The Clockmaker, or, the Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick of Slickville, a work that garnered international fame for Haliburton (available at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/05/clckm10a.txt [accessed 1 July 2009]). The Clockmaker predates Carlyle's Past and Present by seven years, having been first published in London and Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1836. It should be noted in this passage that Carlyle decries the social irresponsibility of English, not American, Sam Slicks. Nevertheless, the argument is between permanence and inconstancy, and the naming of (if not a direct reference to) Haliburton's celebrated creation suggests that the influence of Carlyle on Canadian writers was not strictly one way.


29. Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, 45 (bk. 1, chap. 9).


33. The belief that humor could disguise immoral purposes is expressed in early Canadian literature by Susanna Moodie, who describes the “Land-Jobber” in Roughing It in the Bush (1852) as being a “humorist . . . because he found that jokes and fun admirably served his turn. They helped to throw people off their guard, and to conceal his hang-dog look” (Susanna Moodie, Roughing It in the Bush, or, Life in Canada, 2 vols., reprint (with an afterword by Susan Glickman (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), 235 (vol. 1, chap. 13).


36. Carlyle, Past and Present, 151 (bk. 3, chap. 3).

Although Carlyle seems on occasion to have resented the younger man's financial success, it cannot be doubted that Carlyle and Dickens shared a common view of humor, as is evident in an anecdote related by the American journalist, James Shepherd Pike (1811–82), in a journal entry of 28 April 1863: "To-night I saw the greatest thing in London. It was Dickens reading Pickwick's Trial to Thomas Carlyle. I thought Carlyle would split, and Dickens was not much better. Carlyle sat on the front bench and he haw–hawed right out over and over again till he fairly exhausted himself. Dickens would read and then he would stop in order to give Carlyle a chance to stop. Of course the whole crowded audience were in the same mood and the uproar was tremendous. I laughed till my jaws ached, and I caught myself involuntarily stamping. Now and then some fellow would astonish himself and the audience by a loud bawl." James S. Pike, "Dickens, Carlyle, and Tennyson," *Atlantic Monthly* 164, no. 6 [December 1939]: 80–19, 81.


65. Ibid.


67. "Thomas Carlyle," *St. Mary's Argus* (St. Mary's, Ont.), 7 February 1881, 2.

69. In the *Canadian Monthly and National Review* for 1881, see Fidelis [Agnes Maule Machar], “In Memoriam: Thomas Carlyle” (6 [March 1881]: 316–18); Garet Noel, “Carlyle” (6 [April 1881]: 433–34); William Dawson Le Sueur, “Carlyle and Comte” (6 [June 1881]: 639–42); Louisa Murray, “A Defence of Carlyle’s ‘Reminiscences,’ Partly Written by Himself” (7 [August 1881]: 121–33); Gowen Lea [Mary Morgan], “On the Death of Carlyle” (7 [September 1881]: 302); Louisa Murray, “Thomas Carlyle and Edward Irving” (7 [September 1881]: 303–15). With the exception of Le Sueur’s article, which compares Carlyle negatively with Comte and attacks what Le Sueur perceives as Carlyle’s lack of system, the various publications (Noels “Carlyle” is a poem, Murray’s “Defence” is ostensibly a book review, Machar’s “In Memoriam” is a eulogy) are positive in their treatment of both Carlyle and Carlylean ideology. Machar’s assertion that Carlyle is “the grandest literary figure of the present century” (6:316) is typical of the views of Carlyle’s comedy to his social philosophy and to emigrant readers is underscored by the fact that the Moodies found this passage on labor in Carlyle’s humorous work, *Sartor Resartus* (see Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 181–82 [bk. 3, chap. 4]).

70. John Sharp, “Some of Carlyle’s Hints to Theology,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 2 (July 1894): 103–9, 103.

71. The four-stages theory argued that as a society developed through savage, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial stages, it became more morally sophisticated. The commercial stage allowed for more leisure and for the pursuit of knowledge.

72. Carlyle, *Chartism*, 144 (chap. 5).

73. Saint Paul uses labor as a metaphor for spiritual closeness with God, writing that “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:8–9); and Carlyle, while in agreement with Paul, expands his metaphor of constructing God’s building to include the social as well as the divine.


76. Carlyle, *Chartism*, 135 (chap. 3).

77. Thomas Carlyle, “The Dignity of Labour,” *Victoria Magazine*, ed. Susanna Moodie and J. W. D. Moodie (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Library, 1968), 120. Susanna Moodie and her husband, J. W. Dunbar Moodie (1797–1869), founded the *Victoria Magazine* in Belleville in 1847 in the “hope of inducing a taste for polite literature among the working classes (p. 287). The magazine, which contained mostly their own writing, including significant parts of *Roughing It in the Bush*, closed the next year. Their publication of Carlyle in the fifth issue speaks volumes for the Moodies’ estimation of him. The importance of Carlyle’s comedy to his social philosophy and to emigrant readers is underscored by the fact that the Moodies found this passage on labor in Carlyle’s humorous work, *Sartor Resartus* (see Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 181–82 [bk. 3, chap. 4]).


87. Moodie merges self-reliance with the sublime when she exclaims: “Ah, glorious poverty! thou art a hard taskmaster, but in thy soul-ennobling school I have received more godlike lessons, have learned more sublime truths, than ever I acquired in the smooth highways of the world! The independent in soul can rise above the seeming disgrace of
poverty, and hold fast their integrity, in defiance of the world and its selfish and unwise maxims. To them, no labour is too great, no trial too severe” (Roughing It in the Bush, 352 [vol. 2, chap. 7]).

88. The belief that Canada was ideally suited to the laboring classes did not belong exclusively to literate and literary Canadian emigrants; it was a view held by Carlyle himself. In the same letter in which Carlyle expressed his desire to visit his brother, Alexander, in Canada (see n. 20, above), he wrote: “Canada, by Stream and other means, is coming daily closer to Britain; for my share, I see not but it is likelier the whole of them [the British farming class] may have to go out to you if times do not mend. There is positively no existence for an industrious tiller of the soil in this country in our day” (The Letters of Thomas Carlyle to His Brother Alexander, 555). Carlyle also promoted Canada publicly in Chartism: “For all this of the ‘painless extinction’ [Malthusianism], and the rest [laissez faire], is in a world where Canadian Forests stand unfilled, boundless Plains and Prairies unbroken with the plough; on the west and on the east green desert spaces never yet made white with corn; and to the overcrowded little western nook of Europe, our Terrestrial Planet, nine-tenths of it yet vacant or tenanted by nomades [sic], is still crying, Come and till me, come and reap me!” (Carlyle, Chartism, 203 [chap. 10]).


94. Kirby, The U.E., 7 (canto 1, sect. ii).


98. William Renwick Riddell, William Kirby (Toronto: Ryerson, 1923), 158.


100. Carlyle, On Heroes, 203 (lecture 6, “The Hero as King”).


102. Kirby, Annals of Niagara, 131, 135 (chap. 20).

103. Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, 26 (bk. 1, chap. 4).

104. Kirby, Annals of Niagara, 126 (chap. 20).


108. D. M. R. Bentley, editorial notes to Essays and Reviews of Archibald Lampman, e.g., 220–21.


111. Archibald Lampman, “The Modern School of Poetry in England,” in The Essays and Reviews of Archibald Lampman, 58–69, 59. In his editorial notes to Essays and Reviews, Bentley discusses the quotation from Carlyle’s Schiller” (pp. 247–48).


114. Wilfred Campbell, “May 1892,” in At the Mermaid Inn: Wilfred Campbell, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott in “The Globe,” 1892–93, with an introduction by Barrie Da-
vies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 68–69, 68.

116. Carl Berger describes two pivotal Confederation-era educators, George Robert Parkin (1846–1922; principal of Fredericton Collegiate School, 1871–89, and later principal of Upper Canada College, 1895–1902), and George Monro Grant (1835–1902; principal of Queen’s College, 1877–1902), and he places Carlylean doctrine within the realm of education, in general, and suggests a possible connection to the educations of Charles G. D. Roberts and Bliss Carman, in particular. Both of the latter Confederation poets were students at the Fredericton Collegiate School during Parkin’s tenure. Berger writes that Grant and Parkin “were heavily influenced by Carlyle’s conception of the role of great men in the past” and, as educators, it is not unlikely that they introduced their students to their views on history. This was no passing interest. Berger writes that Grant’s “idolization of . . . Thomas Carlyle . . . was life—long and intense” (Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867–1914* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970], 220, 24). Berger suggests that Carlyle’s writing may have played a role in the early intellectual development of Roberts and Carman in much the same way that it did in that of John Beattie Crozier (1849–1921).


120. MacMechan, introduction to *Sartor Resartus*, xiii–lxxi, lv, lvi.


125. MacMechan, *Head-waters*, 211.
