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Speaking the Social Body: Language-Origins and Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*

Barbara Barrow

Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837) is an epic history of bodies. The work opens with the dying body of King Louis XV lying sick at Versailles; it pauses, at another point, to consider at length the 'multiplex atrabiliar' and 'greenish-coloured' appearance of Maximilien Robespierre.¹ Groups of bodies gather in Carlyle's Paris, from the procession of royal bodies that advances on gala-day at Versailles, the 'strangest Body of Men' (*FR* I, 155), on to the soul of the revolution that threatens to continue on 'through one bodily shape into another' long after the restoration of order (*FR* II, 441). Not only does Carlyle describe, display and anatomize bodies, he shows how language itself is charged with somatic content. He insists that there is an animating 'spirit in the word of man' that outlasts the 'audible bodied word' of the ordinances and royal proclamations that bedeck the walls of revolutionary Paris (*FR* I, 331). Here Carlyle's narrator, himself embodied in the text as an eyewitness, shows how the freighted corporeal idiom of the Revolution penetrates the very language of the historian.

Carlyle uses these figures of the body to represent and describe the modern polity as it emerged from the French Revolution, a revolution that brought about the 'instantaneous change of the whole body politic' (*FR* II, 189). Carlyle's weakened sick royal bodies and his descriptions of the collective bodies of the revolutionaries symbolize the transfer of sovereign authority from a divinely endowed hereditary order to popular sovereignty. In *Making a Social Body*, Mary Poovey writes that the phrase 'the social body' emerged in the nineteenth century as part of a linguistic shift from the metaphor of the 'body politic', understood as the king and Parliament, to the metaphor of the 'social body', widened to include the labouring classes.² *The French Revolution* is a powerful meditation on the modern polity as a sovereign body, and on the new forms of linguistic representation this body demands. Describing the formation of the French National Assembly, Carlyle asks what has become of the 'Triumvirate of Princes, Queen, refractory Noblesse and Clergy'; the question, he concludes, is 'scarcely answerable in living political dialects' (*FR* I, 168). My essay aims

1. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, ed. K.J. Fielding and David Sorensen (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1989), pp. 1 and 148; hereafter all volume and page references are to this edition and appear after *FR* in parentheses.

2. *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830–1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 7–8.

to show how Carlyle's use of language in *The French Revolution* draws on divine and material readings of the body to create a new idiom, a 'living political dialect' that expressed the emergent notion of the social body in the wake of the Revolution.

In tracing Carlyle's style to changes in the nineteenth-century social order, I join critics such as Catherine Gallagher, Chris Vanden Bossche, and John Ulrich, whose work links Carlyle's idiosyncratic use of language to contemporary political debates. In Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, for example, politics reveals the 'ironic degradation of the symbol', causing Carlyle to relocate the symbol's divine potential in the heroic realm.³ Vanden Bossche links the circular structure of *The French Revolution* to Carlyle's scepticism that the French would ever author a new social order.⁴ More recently, John Ulrich has shown how Carlyle aims to redress a crisis of representation characterized by the deterioration of labour and the body, where the 'body' is understood both as a reference to the weakened bodies of labourers and the metaphorical degradation of the social body.⁵ In documenting the emergence of Carlyle's notion of the social body I build on these critics' analyses of Carlyle's intense linguistic self-consciousness, bringing this analysis to bear on the conceptual production of the social body and on the neglected role Victorian language-debates played in Carlyle's political articulation of style. As I hope to show, late-Enlightenment and early nineteenth-century debates about the origin of language were central to Carlyle's understanding of the figure of the body, an understanding that translated into his conception of the 'bodied word' as both a theological and a political form of expression.

Carlyle's unacknowledged role in the linguistic production of the 'social body' is all the more important, I contend, in light of recent studies of Victorian liberalism that take the figure of the body as central to the Victorian polity's emergent tropes of self-identification. While critics such as Pamela K. Gilbert and Elaine Hadley have made powerful arguments about the social body, their studies have not included a wide consensus on what is meant by the 'body' in this phrase.⁶ Hadley's *Living Liberalism*, for example, offers a model of the liberal subject as an instance of 'abstract embodiment' in which the disinterested individual becomes an 'insistently situated body' in order to exercise its duties of citizenship.⁷ Implicitly, this 'body' is multiple and unstable, both a material signifier and an ideological abstraction. We recover a

3. Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832–1867* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 195.

4. Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 81.

5. John Ulrich, *Signs of Their Times: History, Labor, and the Body in Cobbett, Carlyle, and Disraeli* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), p. 4.

6. Pamela Gilbert, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). See also Amy E. Martin, 'Blood Transfusions: Constructions of Irish Racial Difference, The English Working Class, and Revolutionary Possibility in the Work of Carlyle and Engels', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.1 (2004), pp. 83–102.

7. Hadley, *Living Liberalism*, p. 14.

detailed provenance for this dialectical figure in *The French Revolution*, which understands the body as at once fleshly and divine, part political ideology and part theological dispensation. In what follows, I trace Carlyle's notion of embodied language as it emerged in response to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century debates about the origins of speech, considering how Carlyle's belief in a providential vernacular developed in conversation with his sources for *The French Revolution*. I then offer a reading of Carlyle's epic to show how he represents the historical transfer of power from the body politic to the social body through reiterated somatic tropes of sovereign agency. I conclude by analysing the ways in which this fluctuating trope of the body as both a material and a metaphysical presence becomes a crucial means through which Carlyle simultaneously legitimizes and contains the political agency of the working classes.

Language-origins

Carlyle's attitudes about language developed in response to a variety of scientific, historical, and linguistic sources. During the 1830s, as Carlyle was researching and composing *The French Revolution*, the field of comparative philology, or what Max Müller would characterize as the 'science of language' in 1864, had yet to fully crystallize as a discipline in Britain.⁸ Consequently, pronouncements on the development and growth of language were part of a fluid and interdisciplinary debate, and Carlyle and his contemporaries encountered texts on language authored by figures as diverse as clergymen, polymaths, ethnologists and missionaries.⁹ Carlyle's 'bodied word' responds to scientifically materialistic readings of language-origins by insisting on the divine properties of speech, using these properties to meditate on language as a locus of political authority.

Carlyle's ideas about language react against late-Enlightenment theories of language's development. As Linda Dowling writes, a tradition of empiricism beginning with John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) threatened the idea of speech as a divine gift, seeming to desacralize language by making it into 'another physical reality in a universe now wholly governed by physical laws'.¹⁰ In the early Victorian period, the notion of language's divinity was further threatened by developments in the natural sciences. Robert Chambers's notorious, anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), for example, would dismiss a miraculous origin for language and offered its own proto-evolutionary account: 'there is a great inclination to surmise a miraculous origin for it, although

8. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 5th edn (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1866), pp. 1–29. Google e-book. For an account of the emergence of comparative philology in the 1830s and 1840s see Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England 1780–1860* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 162–210.

9. Christine Ferguson, *Language, Science, and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 21–27.

10. Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. xiv.

there is no proper ground, or even support, for such an idea in Scripture'.¹¹ In Chambers's account, speech itself was not a divine gift from God to man, but rather a function of man's particular organization of the larynx, trachea and mouth. The capacity for speech was not a divine gift but a function of bodily mechanism.

Carlyle resists such potential reductions of speech to material, evidentiary factors like the senses and the speech organs. In *The French Revolution* he protests the Lockean notion that language derived from the evidence of sensory perception: 'But if the very Rocks and Rivers . . . are, in strict language, made by those outward Senses of ours, how much more, by the Inward Sense, are all Phenomena of the spiritual kind' (*FR* I, 8). The 'spirit in the word' that animates his 'bodied word' insists that all material forms of language are underwritten by divine potential. To contest evidentiary readings of language in *The French Revolution*, Carlyle drew on his belief in the Incarnation, or the idea of the sacred word-become-flesh, a doctrine that had taken on new significance for Carlyle in the years leading up to *The French Revolution* through his friendship with the preacher Edward Irving. Today, Irving is mostly remembered for his notorious trial and deposition from the Church of Scotland for his apocalyptic preaching and for allowing his congregation to speak in tongues.¹² However, as Stewart J. Brown reminds us, Irving had initially roused accusations of heresy for his belief in Christ's human nature.¹³ In 1828 Irving published his collected *Sermons, Lectures, and Occasional Discourses*, where he argued that the Incarnation would restore man to a state of grace through Christ, through the word-made-flesh: 'This grace and truth came, not by the word but by the Word Incarnate For it was in the act of becoming flesh that all grace and all truth was embodied.'¹⁴ The Incarnation had been an important point of agreement between Carlyle and Irving in the years leading up to *The French Revolution*. As Irving wrote to his wife in 1829, lamenting his Edinburgh companions' resistance to his views, there was in Annan 'a strength' where different acquaintances were 'firm as to the human nature of Christ, which none here is, except Thomas Carlyle'.¹⁵

Carlyle, while deeply sceptical of Irving's religious literalism and his congregation's 'speaking in tongues', would nevertheless recognize Irving's logic of incarnation as a potential stay against materialist accounts of language. In the Johannine account of the Incarnation, the word came before its material embodiment in the person of Christ.

11. Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, ed. James Secord. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 310–11.

12. For a recent study of Carlyle's and Irving's friendship, see Caroline McCracken-Flesher, 'Carlyle, Irving, and the Problematics of Prophecy', *Literature and Belief*, 25.1–2 (2005), pp. 25–52.

13. Stewart J. Brown, 'Irving, Edward (1792–1834)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14473>> [accessed 26 October 2013].

14. Edward Irving, *The Doctrine of the Incarnation Opened in Six Sermons*, in *Sermons, Lectures, and Occasional Discourses*, 3 vols (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1828), I, 15. Google ebook.

15. See Margaret Oliphant's *The Life of Edward Irving, Illustrated from his Journals and Correspondence*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862), II, 79–80.

If the spoken word that preceded the flesh was divine, then the material forms of the body, the speech organs and senses, even individual words themselves, were secondary manifestations underwritten by the spirit in the word that precedes its material forms.¹⁶ Carlyle's bodied word, the spirit of the word that endows man himself, highlights the sacred impulse that preceded evidentiary appeals to the speaking body by creating a hieratic vision of language, one in which a sacred authority was behind such forms as diverse as and redacted as the Old Testament and the newspaper.¹⁷ The animating principle of the Incarnation effectively invalidated materialist theories of speech by positing a sacred language itself as the wellspring of the material world.

The doctrine of the Incarnation not only countered materialist readings of language, it also offered a somatic idiom central to *The French Revolution's* representation of the body politic. Monarchical authority was historically coded in readings of Christ's body. In his classic *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), Ernst Kantorowicz analyses how the dialectical nature of Christ as both human and divine influenced perceptions of the monarch's body in medieval times, so that the feudal king was endowed with a physical body and an immortal super-body.¹⁸ The notion of Christ's two bodies emerged as a response to the reading of the Eucharist, which came to symbolize dialectically both the natural body or the host on the altar and the mystical body of the Church; this mystical body would evolve into the early modern 'body politic' with the king at its head.¹⁹ More recently, Eric Santner has taken up Kantorowicz's study to argue that the aftermath of the French Revolution in Europe saw a period of struggle to reconstitute the body politic in the transition to popular sovereignty.²⁰ Carlyle's 'bodied word' draws on this long figurative tradition of somatic authority. *The French Revolution* begins by identifying the weakened elements of the feudal body politic: the Church has 'for centuries seen itself decaying'; now, when yoked to a rotting Kingship, the two institutions will 'stand and fall together' (*FR I*, 13). Moreover, Carlyle relocates this somatic authority in the revolutionaries who

16. Both Boyd Hilton and Michael Wheeler write that the Victorian period saw a shift towards a belief in the Incarnation as opposed to the Atonement in response to the evolutionary and biological sciences because the metaphor of the Incarnation posited an animating essence as an antecedent to the material world. Carlyle, I would argue, draws on a similar notion in his relation of the Incarnation to language-study. See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism On Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 299; Michael Wheeler, *St. John and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 237.

17. In his lecture on 'The Hero as Man of Letters', Carlyle declared that 'Those poor bits of rag-paper with black ink on them; – from the Daily Newspaper to the Sacred Hebrew BOOK, what have they not done, what are they not doing? – For indeed, whatever be the outward form of the thing . . . is is the *Thought* of man; the true thaumaturgic virtue' (*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1840), p. 195).

18. *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 3–23.

19. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, pp. 193–206.

20. Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. xi.

come together in Paris: a national spirit penetrates the 'isolated Body-corporate' of the assembled Three Estates (*FR* I, 88). Carlyle's use of the Incarnation relocates the embodied authority of the monarch to the French subjects who body forth into political collectives, signifying the figurative transition to the social body.

In relocating the monarch's embodied sovereignty to the subjects who overthrow the feudal government Carlyle also relocated the authority encoded in the monarch's language. During and after the French Revolution critiques of monarchical language, with its divine authorization, often made their cases through critiques of the dictionary. For example, the radical politician and philologist John Horne Tooke, in *The Diversions of Purley* (1786, 1805), criticized Samuel Johnson's definition of 'rights' in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), declaring that 'He did not indeed acknowledge any RIGHTS of the people; but he was very clear concerning . . . all the mysteries of divinity, and the sacred, indefeasible, inherent, hereditary RIGHTS of Monarchy'.²¹ Carlyle's historical research for his epic history acquainted him with this misleading function of the dictionary in the work of Louis Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814), a French dramatist and writer whose own eyewitness descriptions of Paris, *Panorama of Paris* (1781–1788) and *The New Paris* (1789) are frequently cited in *The French Revolution*.²² Mercier distanced himself from the top-down, hieratic language he saw as characteristic of the French Academy, whose first rule was that language should be defined by the kind of language spoken at court.²³ In *Picture of Paris*, Mercier writes that the 'Moutard, the Queen's book-publisher, sells a dictionary in four enormous volumes, approved by the censors and with a privilege from the king, in which one will find the story of every castle, college, and alleyway. If the monarch ever thinks of selling his capital, this fat dictionary would serve, I think, as a catalogue or inventory'.²⁴ In Mercier's hands the dictionary is a tool of monarchical wealth and oppression. His own account, on the contrary, is composed of episodic, eyewitness vignettes of Parisian life: street lighting, markets, street singers and barbers' shops. In keeping with this inventory of urban street life, Mercier promoted an understanding of language as a creative force which rises from the speech of the people. 'I call the people the sovereign judge of language', he wrote in his own *La Neologie*, a dictionary that celebrates the generative force of new coinages.²⁵

We can trace some of Carlyle's characterization of his own style back to Mercier's passionate investment in neology. Defending his writing in a letter to John Sterling,

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21. J. Horne Tooke, *The Diversions of Purley*, part II (London: J. Johnson's, 1805), pp. 5–6. Google ebook.
 22. Charles Frederick Harrold records that *Nouveau Paris* is cited 26 times and *Tableau de Paris* three times in Carlyle's history. See Isaac Watson Dyer, Appendix II, 'Carlyle's Sources for "The French Revolution"', in *A Bibliography of Thomas Carlyle's Writings and Ana* (Portland: The Southworth Press, 1928), pp. 582–84.
 23. Daniel Rosenberg, 'Louis-Sébastien Mercier's New Words', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36.3 (2003), 367–86 (p. 372).
 24. Mercier, *Panorama of Paris*, in *Selections from Le Tableau de Paris*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 23.
 25. Qtd. in Rosenberg, 'Louis-Sébastien Mercier's New Words', p. 378.

who had called Carlyle's language 'barbaric', Carlyle wrote: 'If one has thoughts not hitherto uttered in English Books, I see nothing for it but that you must use words not found there, must make words, – with moderation and discretion, of course'. He goes on:

But finally do you reckon this really a time for Purism of Style; or that Style (mere dictionary style) has much to do with the worth or unworth of a Book? I do not: with whole ragged battallions of Scott's-Novel Scotch, with Irish, German, French and even Newspaper Cockney (when 'Literature' is little other than a Newspaper) storming in on us, and the whole structure of our Johnsonian English breaking up from its foundations, – revolution there as visible as anywhere else!²⁶

With equal measures of delight and anxiety, Carlyle anticipates an impending linguistic revolution, a dialogic stampede of languages that will overturn the literary standard of Johnsonian English. Carlyle insists that the structures of established usage are changing and that these changes are intimately connected to changes in the social order. He dismisses what he calls 'dictionary style', a correct linguistic standard, as an adequate vehicle for expressing political upheaval. In *The French Revolution*, language generates meaning in opposition to the received wisdom of the dictionary. 'Men and Knitting-women repeat *Fédéraliste* with or without much Dictionary-meaning; but go on repeating it' Carlyle writes, 'till the meaning of it becomes almost magical' (*FR* II, 249). In place of the dictionary is a neology gradually internalized and comprehended through affective processes of repetition.

Carlyle's revolutionary invasion of languages blends a characteristically distasteful assessment of linguistic corruption – the 'newspaper Cockney' – with a belief in the providential, regenerative force of the vernacular. In this way, he combines Mercier's belief in the creative impulses of speech with his opposition to the prescriptive grammars of figures like Alexander Crombie, a Presbyterian minister who recommended a national standardized language as a key to unifying Britain's lower classes into linguistic and social coherence. In *The Etymology and Syntax of the English Language* (1802), Crombie advocated for a literary standard based on the use of 'reputable authors' as a stay against the diverse sociolects of the poor, whose speech, he complained, was 'hardly intelligible' from province to province.²⁷ As Crombie's complaint of trans-regional unintelligibility suggests, the Biblical story of the dispersion at Babel was a frequent reference in nineteenth-century accounts of linguistic difference. Ethnological research into the study of languages reinvigorated the story of the dispersion at Babel in accounts like James Cowles Prichard's *The Eastern Origin of Celtic Nations* (1831), a volume that attempted to link the Indo-European languages to the Eastern languages to suggest an aboriginal connection that

26. See 'Thomas Carlyle to John Sterling', 4 June 1835. *The Carlyle Letters Online [CLO]*, ed. Brent E. Kinsler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), <doi: 10.1215/lt-18350604-TC-JOST-01; CL8: 134–38 > .

27. Alexander Crombie, *The Etymology and Syntax of the English Language, Explained and Illustrated* (London: J. Johnson, 1802), in Manfred Görlach, *English in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 166–67 (p. 166).

was lost after a period of separation.²⁸ Carlyle disliked Crombie, declaring to Robert Mitchell in 1821: ‘Do you take . . . your Crombie . . . and let me be doing with Lake poets, Mystics.’²⁹ He was familiar with ethnological references to Babel, having apparently borrowed Prichard from the etymologist Hensleigh Wedgwood in 1837.³⁰ In *The French Revolution*, linguistic variations take on a providential revolutionary significance that highlights Carlyle’s dislike of standardized language: ‘To the ends of France; and in as many dialects as when the first great Babel was to be built!’ he declares of the divine ‘voice of the People’ (*FR* I, 329).

For Carlyle, the scattered dialects of Babel were not to be united by appeals to hieratic linguistic authority; rather, these dialects played a necessarily chaotic role in speaking history and in overturning received conventions of language. It was through the vitality of spoken language that he saw the past come alive in the works of Walter Scott and Robert Burns. Carlyle writes of Scott’s historical novels that they illuminate history by presenting ‘the idioms, features and vitalities of very men’; after Scott, all historical writing would have to exchange abstraction for Scott’s method of ‘direct inspection and embodiment.’³¹ Burns’s poetry offered Carlyle a vision of egalitarian sincerity that affected readers regardless of ‘casual varieties in outward rank or inward’; the potential political force of Burns’s poetry is evident in Carlyle’s declaration that his ‘appearance among the sages and nobles of Edinburgh must be regarded as one of the most singular phenomena in modern Literature; almost like the appearance of some Napoleon among the crowned sovereigns of modern Politics.’³² It was, then, with Edward Irving that Carlyle deepened and explored his belief in the word-become-flesh, whereas through Mercier, he developed notions of a populist neology, a politicized and historically embodied vernacular fuelled by his reading in Scott and Burns.³³ Carlyle brings these elements together in *The French Revolution*, extending

28. James Cowles Prichard, *The Eastern Origin of Celtic Nations* (Oxford: S. Collingwood 1831), p. 11 and p. 13. Google ebook.

29. ‘Thomas Carlyle to Robert Mitchell’, 16 March 1821, *CLO* I.343–46. <doi: 10.1215/lt-18210316-TC-RM-01 > .

30. ‘Thomas Carlyle to Hensleigh Wedgwood’, 1 February 1837, *CLO* 9: 136–37. <doi: 10.1215/lt-18370201-TC-HWE-01 > . See also the source note to this letter.

31. See ‘Sir Walter Scott’, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays Collected and Republished*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888), III, 165–224 (pp. 214–15). See also Crawford’s *Devolving English Literature*.

32. See *Essay on Burns*, by Thomas Carlyle, ed. Cornelius Beach Bradley (Boston: Benj. H. Sanborn & Co, 1901), pp. 19 and 72. See also Nigel Leask’s important study, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

33. There are several important studies that trace Carlyle’s historical research for *The French Revolution*. See John D. Rosenberg’s *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) for more on the influence of Edward Gibbon (pp. 29–31). For Carlyle’s reading of Swift, see David Sorensen’s “‘A Very Strange Plant’”: Carlyle, John Mitchel, And The Political Legacy Of Swift’, in *David Daiches: A Celebration of His Life and Work* (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2008), pp. 172–79, and Sidney M. B. Coulling’s ‘Carlyle and Swift’, *SEL: Studies In English Literature, 1500–1900*, 10.4 (1970), 741–58. For more on Carlyle’s French sources, including Mercier, see David Sorensen, “The Unseen Heart of the

the act of the Incarnation to a broader portion of revolutionaries whose activities beget a new political idiom. In *The French Revolution* the word-become-flesh becomes not only a metaphor for communicating the divine potential of language, it also describes the historical emergence of the social body whose new forms of speech overturn the structures of the monarchical order, creating a 'living political dialect' of the modern polity.

The French Revolution

Carlyle's account of the Revolution follows the incarnational logic of divine mediation and embodiment through its representations of healthy and diseased histories. The narrator sets out from the premise that there are two kinds of silence, the one a 'healthy peace' and the other 'ominous' and 'unhealthy' (*FR I*, 31). Carlyle figures the healthy peace as an oak that grows slowly in a forest, the patient, uneventful growth a reflection of his maxim that silence is divine 'and of Heaven; so in all earthly things too there is a silence which is better than any speech' (*FR I*, 29). By contrast, the unhealthy peace is the silent, ominous gathering of crisis, with noiseless forces gathering to confront the body politic, or the 'Churches, Kingships, Social Institutions' that perish (*FR I*, 30). Silence is sacred on the one hand, and foreboding on the other, a threat to a lazy body politic.

These two versions of silence have two distinct but related linguistic purposes. First, the narrator's reverence for 'healthy silence' presents the Revolution as a realm of devolved language. If healthy silence alone is divine, then all speech is inherently debased. To narrate history is even a crisis and a rupture: the narrator muses that the happiest nations are the ones with vacant annals, so that all events, and all narration of events, become corrupted materializations of a sacred healthy silence. With valences of post-Adamic fallenness, *The French Revolution* seeks to restore the divine properties of language while acknowledging its own situatedness in this fallen linguistic state. Second, the 'unhealthy peace' confers a providential role on the forces that act to change the body politic in its sick state. 'How much is growing, silently resistless, at all moments!' writes Carlyle, 'Thoughts are growing; forms of Speech are growing' (*FR II*, 59). Inherent in the very grammar of language is a transcendental change: 'The All of Things is an infinite conjugation of the verb To do' (*FR I*, 408). *The French Revolution* emphasizes that both the events of the Revolution and the act of historical narration take part in processes of renewal, attempts to regenerate politics and history through new forms of language.

Carlyle makes the hereditary order the target of this linguistic regeneration by equating language decay with the royal flesh. Carlyle describes the somatic weakness of the monarchical order by opening *The French Revolution* with the dying body of

Whole': Carlyle, Dickens, and the Sources of *The French Revolution* in *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Dickens Quarterly*, 30.1 (2013), 5–25. Sorensen demonstrates that Carlyle interpreted the French Revolution as a spiritual event before prominent French writers such as Jules Michelet and Alexis de Tocqueville had done so (see p. 16).

Louis XV, whose expiring flesh stands in for a broader tradition of sovereignty. He writes that ‘not the French King only, but the French Kingship . . . is breaking down’ (*FR I*, 9). Carlyle links Louis’s death to the feudal tradition of the body politic by connecting his demise to a weakness in the somatic authority of the monarchy: it is through a ‘lazy habit of body’ that hereditary institutions deteriorate (*FR I*, 31–32). This somatic decrepitude even extends to the weary and macabre self-awareness of King Louis XV himself, who, with a ‘spasmodic antagonism’, goes riding out in his carriage to contemplate graveyards (*FR I*, 21). The narrator conflates physical and verbal embodiment by extending these descriptions of sickness and decay to language. Louis is not only a dying king, he is a ‘Solecism Incarnate’, literally a language-blunder, a violation of grammatical rules (*FR I*, 23). If the king’s body here is an incarnation of ruined language, so too is language the incarnation of the ruined feudalism he represents. Expressions such as ‘Sir’ are ‘Tatters and fibres of old Feudality; which, were it only in the Grammatical province, ought to be rooted out!’ (*FR II*, 59). Echoing his description of the dispersion in his letter to Sterling, Carlyle anticipates a revolution of representation, one that will overturn a sick monarchy whose corruptions are inextricable from structurally rotten forms of expression.

Carlyle anatomizes Constitutional documents to portray the role of the social body overtaking the waning embodied authority of the monarch. In the scenes of the implementation of the new constitution in 1791, Carlyle writes that the Constitution is ‘very rheumatic, full of shooting internal pains . . . and will not march without difficulty’ (*FR II*, 31). The constitution is anthropomorphized, here given limbs and made to walk, signifying its new role as an attempted vehicle of the social body. The cornerstone of the Constitution, Carlyle writes, is ‘Sovereignty of the People’ (*FR II*, 182). Along with this understanding of the Constitution as a representative document comes a new linguistic shift: the shift from ‘De par le Roi’ to ‘De par la Republique’, or the shift from ‘in the name of the king’ to ‘in the name of the republic’ (*FR II*, 188). Resonant of the switch from the body politic to the body social, Carlyle’s embodied constitutional documents are a symbolic transfer of power from the king’s body to representative legislation, verbal scripts that beget their own linguistic changes.

Far from being a wholly democratic transfer of sovereign authority to the people, however, Carlyle’s language-metaphors show how the newly formed structures of the French government threaten to replicate despotisms experienced under the Old Regime. In this regard, he takes after Mercier, who was himself cautious about positing too great a breach between the old and the new order.³⁴ For both commentators the revolutionary nature of the political change threatened to overshadow or obscure continuities of injustice and the ways new structures of the polity could replicate them. ‘Are Representative Governments merely at bottom Tyrannies too?’ Carlyle asks, and do the tyrants of the National Assembly then gather to cancel each other with ‘jargon and hubbub?’ (*FR I*, 226). Carlyle borrows the top-down linguistic model of the old regime to stress the potential tyrannies inherent in the new polity. Accordingly, the National Assembly spends its time attempting to ‘get its theory of defective verbs

34. Rosenberg, ‘Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s New Words’, 371.

perfected' (*FR*, I, 320). Carlyle uses language-metaphors to suggest the potentially despotic idiom of representative government that accompanies the new revolutionary order.

Carlyle's implied triumph in this case is that members of the National Assembly will gather and cancel one another with jargon, and no theory of irregular verbs will get itself established. The voice of the people has the power to overturn the National Assembly, much as they overturn the Bastille. Carlyle symbolizes the force of this anarchic vocabulary by describing the French Revolution as a confusion of tongues: Revolutionary Paris is filled with 'jargon as of Babel, in the hour when they were first smitten (as here) with mutual unintelligibility, and the people had not yet dispersed!' (*FR* I, 105). Yet this is not a lasting chaos. In all human movements, Carlyle writes, there is 'order, or the beginning of order' (*FR* II, 126). The order that emerges from this Babel is the social body, and their power of linguistic regeneration lies in the symbolic corporeal power they now manifest as a newly embodied polity. Carlyle reminds us again of the new signification of the social body when he wonders about the signification of the phrase 'Revolution' itself. He writes, 'What then is this Thing, called La Révolution, which, like an Angel of Death, hangs over France' (*FR* II, 377). At first a mere chain of empty signs, Carlyle gives the Revolution a definition and a body. 'La Révolution,' he writes, 'is but so many Alphabetic Letters, a thing nowhere to be laid hands on . . . where is it? what is it? It is the Madness that dwells in the hearts of men' (*FR* II, 377). Here, Carlyle converts language into flesh, collapsing signification into the collective body of the revolutionaries. Letters or signs are made flesh in Carlyle's grotesque incarnations of political violence.

In order to describe this 'Madness' Carlyle draws on Mercier's perplexed linguistic characterizations of the Revolution, using them to justify his proposition for the historian's new role as a neologist, as someone who must 'make make words', as he had described in his letter to Sterling. Like Mercier, Carlyle acknowledges that the available language of history is inadequate to describe the Revolution: the fanaticism Carlyle sees as inspired by the Reign of Terror is a 'wonderful, tragical predicament; – such as human language, unused to deal with these things . . . struggles to shadow out in figures' (*FR* II, 246–47). History, attempting to describe the Terror, 'babbles and flounders' (*FR* II, 332). Carlyle's narrator finally concedes that the historian's task is that of Adamic naming: 'It is thus . . . that History, and indeed all human Speech and Reason does yet, what Father Adam began life by doing: striving to name the new Things it sees of Nature's producing' (*FR* II, 333). Yet the Terror baffles even the creative powers of neology:

But what if History were to admit, for once, that all the Names and Theorems yet known to her fall short? That this grand Product of Nature was even grand, and new, in that it came not to range itself under old recorded Laws of Nature at all, but to disclose new ones? In that case, History renouncing the pretension to name it at present, will look honestly at it, and name what she can of it! Any approximation to the right Name has value: were the right Name itself once here, the Thing is known henceforth; the Thing is then ours, and can be dealt with. (*FR* II, 333)

In this landscape of fallen language, which Vanden Bossche characterizes as a 'Babelian fragmentation', to name new things after the principle of Adam is to

participate in the Revolution's own anarchic idioms without bringing about order.³⁵ The historian's task is 'helpless' not only because all attempts to name the acts of the Revolution are mere approximations, but also because the existing languages of history contain no ordering principles with which to represent the Revolution. Because neology is inherently destabilizing, the very attempts to name the events with a new historical idiom perpetuate the chaos this language seeks to describe.

Carlyle's answer to this problem of representation is in the act not only of speaking but also in the act of physical witnessing: to 'look honestly', echoing Mercier's declaration that 'everything is optical'.³⁶ 'How will the historian get out of this labyrinth?' writes Mercier. 'How will he avoid the sway of his own opinion, when those who have the most penetrating eyes have had such difficulty in seizing the point of view, and of fixing an object in such extreme and continual change of position?'³⁷ Carlyle, dismissing the 'Dryasdust' histories of the literary critic Hugh Blair, answers this vertiginous procession of history by making the subject a historian within the text and, more importantly a historian with a body.³⁸ If 'everything is optical' then the act of historical narration must be a dynamic act of eye-witnessing, an act that necessarily involves the historian's own physical presence. Describing gala-day at Versailles, Carlyle tells his readers: 'Yes, friends, ye may sit and look: bodily or in thought, all France, and all Europe, may sit and look; for it is a day like few others It is the baptism day of Democracy . . . the extreme-unction day of Feudalism!' (*FR* I, 139–40). Carlyle's figurative placement of his own body and those of his readers within the text, his emphasis on the act of looking, reveals how this seminal transition from the body politic to the social body can only be represented through tropes of somatic agency. For Carlyle, modern history is the history of the social body. To 'speak' the social body for Carlyle is to speak a new incarnational and historical language whose embodied properties symbolically express the relocation of hereditary authority to the under classes.

Carlyle closes *The French Revolution* by extending this symbolic, corporeal transfer of authority during the Revolution to the language of his own contemporary reader in the era of Reform. Carlyle addresses the reader as a kindred spirit, as the 'disembodied

35. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*, p. 83.

36. Mercier, *New Picture of Paris*. Translated from the French. 2 vols. (London, C. Whittingham, 1800). *Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Gale Digital Collections*, vol. II, p. 411. < <http://gdc.gale.com/products/eighteenth-century-collections-online/> > .

37. Mercier, *New Picture of Paris*, II, 412.

38. For Carlyle's meditations on the uninspired dullness of 'Dryasdust' history, see his prologue to *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 3 vols. (1845; London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), I, 3–74. Google ebook. Carlyle, anticipating adverse responses to his writing, wrote to John Stuart Mill in 1836 that if only some small portion of readers had 'a feeling that the form after all perhaps came from within, and was what it best could be, and only contradicted Blair's Lectures . . . I shall reckon it much'. ('Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill', 2 March 1836, *CLO* 8:316–18. <doi: 10.1215/lt-18360302-TC-JSM-01 > .) See also Blair's 1783 *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Harold F. Harding (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965).

or not yet embodied voice of a Brother', while he describes himself as a 'Voice' (*FR II*, 453). In so doing, Carlyle suggests the reader's own potential in effecting revolutionary change, anticipating the reader's gradual embodiment as a linguistic – and hence, political – agent. In the post-Revolutionary order, man, generically understood, is an 'incarnated Word': a bearer of untapped revolutionary potential and a newly embodied subject of the modern polity (*FR II*, 453). In extending this political agency to the reader, Carlyle suggestively parallels his closing warning of the Sans-culotte energies that will continue on in 'one bodily shape into another' after the Revolution, those forces of the 'unhealthy' peace that worked to destroy the old regime. Carlyle implies that this same revolutionary force is available to contemporaries whom he saw as languishing in Reform-era Britain. Writing to John Carlyle in 1832, Carlyle lamented: 'there is nothing in London at present but stagnation and apprehension, and Radical Reform: the Bill will not pass yet for months, and then – what better shall we be?'³⁹ Against what he rates as an inefficient and bureaucratic stasis, what he termed 'National Palaver' in his epic history (*FR I*, 329), Carlyle anticipates the reader as a potential agent in cycles of regeneration and change. The polity follows the logic of neology and, in so doing, perpetuates what Philip Rosenberg calls Carlyle's 'doctrine of permanent revolution.'⁴⁰

Yet in positing a generically understood reader as a potential wellspring of revolutionary change, a change symbolized by the reader's role in a social body characterized by a new linguistic and political agency, Carlyle also created a new somatic figure of containment. *The French Revolution* takes seriously the providential role of the social body, and Carlyle's radical relocation of a divinely authorized, incarnated speech in the populace sought to legitimise and amplify their real sufferings and demands. This same providential authorization, however, contains the agents of the social body in reiterated acts of formation and destruction. Like the dialectical play of the sovereign body, at once a sacred essence and a material force, the revolutionary polity swells with divinely sanctioned vengeance and acts out its destructive forces in the political sphere. In shuttling back and forth between silent formation and revolutionary action, this movement of the social body generates its own form of political stasis. The embodied, modern polity is destructive but never creative, a product of historical forces but unable to direct or organize its own energies. The trope of incarnated, sovereign authority suggested that the polity was always directed by a divine power that was just beyond it and inaccessible. Carlyle's positioning of both revolutionaries and readers as sources of untapped, embodied potential paradoxically set the terms for a Victorian conception of the modern polity that was always mediated by an outside authority, for a living political dialect that harnessed the vital but 'not yet embodied' agency of the speaking social body.

39. 'Thomas Carlyle to John A. Carlyle', 10 January 1832, *CLO* 6:82–89. <doi: 10.1215/lt-18320110-TC-JAC-01; CL 6:82-89 > .

40. Philip Rosenberg, *The Seventh Hero: Carlyle and the Theory of Radical Activism* (Cambridge, ma: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 201.

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