ON HEROES, HERO-WORSHIP AND THE HEROIC IN HISTORY (1841)

Thomas Carlyle


We have undertaken to discourse here for a little on Great Men, their manner of appearance in our world's business, how they have shaped themselves in the world's history, what ideas men formed of them, what work they did;—on Heroes, namely, and on their reception and performance; what I call Hero-worship and the Heroic in human affairs. Too evidently this is a large topic; deserving quite other treatment than we can expect to give it at present. A large topic; indeed, an illimitable one; wide as Universal History itself. For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. Too clearly it is a topic we shall do no justice to in this place!

One comfort is, that Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them. On any terms whatsoever, you will not grudge to wander in such neighborhood for a while. These Six classes of Heroes, chosen out of widely distant countries and epochs, and in mere external figure differing altogether, ought, if we look faithfully at them, to illustrate several things for us. Could we see them well, we should get some glimpses into the very marrow of the world's history. How happy, could I but, in any measure, in such times as these, make manifest to you the meanings of Heroism; the divine relation (for I may well call it such) which in all times unites a Great Man to other men; and thus, as it were, not exhaust my subject, but so much as break ground on it! At all events, I must make the attempt.

[...]

We have chosen as the first Hero in our series Odin the central figure of Scandinavian Paganism; an emblem to us of a most extensive province of things. Let us look for a little at the Hero as Divinity, the oldest primary form of Heroism.

[...]

Worship of a Hero is transcendent admiration of a Great Man. I say great men are still admirable; I say there is, at bottom, nothing else admirable! No nobler feeling than this of admiration for one higher than himself dwells in the breast of man. It is to this hour, and at all hours, the vivifying influence in man’s life. Religion I find stand upon it; not Paganism only, but far higher and truer religions,—all religion hitherto known. Hero-worship, heartfelt prostrate admiration, submission, burning, boundless, for a noblest godlike Form of Man,—is not that the germ of Christianity itself? The greatest of all Heroes is One—whom we do not
name here! Let sacred silence meditate that sacred matter; you will find it the ultimate perfection of a principle extant throughout man's whole history on earth.

Or coming into lower, less unspeakable provinces, is not all Loyalty akin to religious Faith also? Faith is loyalty to some inspired Teacher, some spiritual Hero. And what therefore is loyalty proper, the life-breath of all society, but an effluence of Hero-worship, submissive admiration for the truly great? Society is founded on Hero-worship. All dignities of rank, on which human association rests, are what we may call a Heroarchy (Government of Heroes), or a Hierarchy, for it is "sacred" enough withal! The Duke means Dux, Leader; King is Kon-ning, Kan-ning, Man that knows or cans. Society everywhere is some representation, not insupportably inaccurate, of a graduated Worship of Heroes—reverence and obedience done to men really great and wise. Not insupportably inaccurate, I say! They are all as bank-notes, these social dignitaries, all representing gold;—and several of them, alas, always are forged notes. We can do with some forged false notes; with a good many even; but not with all, or the most of them forged! No: there have to come revolutions then; cries of Democracy, Liberty and Equality, and I know not what:—the notes being all false, and no gold to be had for them, people take to crying in their despair that there is no gold, that there never was any! "Gold," Hero-worship, is nevertheless, as it was always and everywhere, and cannot cease till man himself ceases.

I am well aware that in these days Hero-worship, the thing I call Hero-worship, professes to have gone out, and finally ceased. This, for reasons which it will be worth while some time to inquire into, is an age that as it were denies the existence of great men; denies the desirableness of great men. Show our critics a great man, a Luther for example, they begin to what they call "account" for him; not to worship him, but take the dimensions of him,—and bring him out to be a little kind of man! He was the "creature of the Time," they say; the Time called him forth, the Time did everything, he nothing—but what we the little critic could have done too! This seems to me but melancholy work. The Time call forth? Alas, we have known Times call loudly enough for their great man; but not find him when they called! He was not there; Providence had not sent him; the Time, calling its loudest, had to go down to confusion and wreck because he would not come when called.

For if we will think of it, no Time need have gone to ruin, could it have found a man great enough, a man wise and good enough: wisdom to discern truly what the Time wanted, valor to lead it on the right road thither; these are the salvation of any Time. But I liken common languid Times, with their unbelief, distress, perplexity, with their languid doubting characters and embarrassed circumstances, impotently crumbling down into ever worse distress towards final ruin;—all this I liken to dry dead fuel, waiting for the lightning out of Heaven that shall kindle it. The great man, with his free force direct out of God's own hand, is the lightning. His word is the wise healing word which all can believe in. All blazes round him now, when he has once struck on it, into fire like his own. The dry mouldering sticks are thought to have called him forth. They did want him greatly; but as to calling him forth—! Those are critics of small vision, I think, who cry: "See, is it not the sticks that made the fire?" No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own littleness than disbelief in great men. There is no sadder symptom of a generation than such general blindness to the spiritual lightning, with faith only in the heap of barren dead fuel. It is the last consummation of unbelief. In all epochs of the world's history, we shall find the Great Man to have been the indispensable savior of his epoch;—the lightning, without which the fuel never would have burnt. The History of the World, I said already, was the Biography of Great Men.
Such small critics do what they can to promote unbelief and universal spiritual paralysis: but happily they cannot always completely succeed. In all times it is possible for a man to arise great enough to feel that they and their doctrines are chimeras and cobwebs. And what is notable, in no time whatever can they entirely eradicate out of living men's hearts a certain altogether peculiar reverence for Great Men; genuine admiration, loyalty, adoration, however dim and perverted it may be. Hero-worship endures forever while man endures. […]

In all times and places, the Hero has been worshipped. It will ever be so. We all love great men; love, venerate and bow down submissive before great men: nay can we honestly bow down to anything else? Ah, does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him? No nobler or more blessed feeling dwells in man's heart. And to me it is very cheering to consider that no sceptical logic, or general triviality, insincerity and aridity of any Time and its influences can destroy this noble inborn loyalty and worship that is in man. In times of unbelief, which soon have to become times of revolution, much down-rushing, sorrowful decay and ruin is visible to everybody. For myself in these days, I seem to see in this indestructibility of Hero-worship the everlasting adamant lower than which the confused wreck of revolutionary things cannot fall. The confused wreck of things crumbling and even crashing and tumbling all round us in these revolutionary ages, will get down so far; no farther. It is an eternal corner-stone, from which they can begin to build themselves up again. That man, in some sense or other, worships Heroes; that we all of us reverence and must ever reverence Great Men: this is, to me, the living rock amid all rushings-down whatsoever;—the one fixed point in modern revolutionary history, otherwise as if bottomless and shoreless.

So much of truth, only undeveloped and in ancient obsolete vesture, but the spirit of it still true, do I find in the Paganism of old nations. Nature is still divine, the revelation of the workings of God; the Hero is still worshipable: this, under poor cramped incipient forms, is what all Pagan religions have struggled, as they could, to set forth. I think Scandinavian Paganism, to us here, is more interesting than any other. It is, for one thing, the latest; it continued in these regions of Europe till the eleventh century: eight hundred years ago the Norwegians were still worshippers of Odin. It is interesting also as the creed of our fathers; the men whose blood still runs in our veins, whom doubtless we still resemble in so many ways. Strange: they did believe that, while we believe so differently. Let us look a little at this poor Norse creed, for many reasons. We have tolerable means to do it; for there is another point of interest in these Scandinavian mythologies: that they have been preserved so well. […]

Saemund, one of the early Christian Priests there, who perhaps had a lingering fondness for Paganism, collected certain of their old Pagan songs, just about becoming obsolete then,—Poems or Chants of a mythic, prophetic, mostly all of a religious character: that is what Norse critics call the Elder or Poetic Edda. Edda, a word of uncertain etymology, is thought to signify Ancestress. Snorro Sturleson, an Iceland gentleman, an extremely notable personage, educated by this Saemund's grandson, took in hand next, near a century afterwards, to put together, among several other books he wrote, a kind of Prose Synopsis of the whole Mythology; elucidated by new fragments of traditionary verse. […]

The primary characteristic of this old Northland Mythology I find to be Impersonation of the visible workings of Nature. Earnest simple recognition of the workings of Physical Nature, as
a thing wholly miraculous, stupendous and divine. What we now lecture of as Science, they
wondered at, and fell down in awe before, as Religion. [...] 

Of the chief god, Odin, we shall speak by and by. Mark at present so much; what the essence
of Scandinavian and indeed of all Paganism is: a recognition of the forces of Nature as
godlike, stupendous, personal Agencies,—as Gods and Demons. Not inconceivable to us. It is
the infant Thought of man opening itself, with awe and wonder, on this ever-stupendous
Universe. To me there is in the Norse system something very genuine, very great and
manlike. A broad simplicity, rusticity, so very different from the light gracefulness of the old
Greek Paganism, distinguishes this Scandinavian System. It is Thought; the genuine Thought
of deep, rude, earnest minds, fairly opened to the things about them; a face-to-face and heart-
to-heart inspection of the things,—the first characteristic of all good Thought in all times. Not
graceful lightness, half-sport, as in the Greek Paganism; a certain homely truthfulness and
rustic strength, a great rude sincerity, discloses itself here. It is strange, after our beautiful
Apollo statues and clear smiling mythuses, to come down upon the Norse Gods "brewing ale"
to hold their feast with Aegir, the Sea-Jotun; sending out Thor to get the caldron for them in
the Jotun country; Thor, after many adventures, clapping the Pot on his head, like a huge hat,
and walking off with it,—quite lost in it, the ears of the Pot reaching down to his heels! A
kind of vacant hugeness, large awkward gianthood, characterizes that Norse system;
enormous force, as yet altogether untutored, stalking helpless with large uncertain strides.
Consider only their primary mythus of the Creation. The Gods, having got the Giant Ymer
slain, a Giant made by "warm wind," and much confused work, out of the conflict of Frost
and Fire,—determined on constructing a world with him. His blood made the Sea; his flesh
was the Land, the Rocks his bones; of his eyebrows they formed Asgard their Gods'-dwellings;
his skull was the great blue vault of Immensity, and the brains of it became the Clouds. What
a Hyper-Brobdignagian business! Untamed Thought, great, giantlike, enormous;—to be
tamed in due time into the compact greatness, not giantlike, but godlike and stronger than
gianthood, of the Shakspeares, the Goethes!—Spiritually as well as bodily these men are our
progenitors. [...] 

For the Norse people, the Man now named Odin, and Chief Norse God, we fancy, was such a
man. A Teacher, and Captain of soul and of body; a Hero, of worth immeasurable; admiration
for whom, transcending the known bounds, became adoration. Has he not the power of
articulate Thinking; and many other powers, as yet miraculous? So, with boundless gratitude,
would the rude Norse heart feel. Has he not solved for them the sphinx-enigma of this
Universe; given assurance to them of their own destiny there? By him they know now what
they have to do here, what to look for hereafter. Existence has become articulate, melodious
by him; he first has made Life alive!—We may call this Odin, the origin of Norse Mythology:
Odin, or whatever name the First Norse Thinker bore while he was a man among men. His
view of the Universe once promulgated, a like view starts into being in all minds; grows,
keeps ever growing, while it continues credible there. In all minds it lay written, but invisibly,
as in sympathetic ink; at his word it starts into visibility in all. Nay, in every epoch of the
world, the great event, parent of all others, is it not the arrival of a Thinker in the world—! [...] 

How the man Odin came to be considered a god, the chief god?—that surely is a question
which nobody would wish to dogmatize upon. I have said, his people knew no limits to their
admiration of him; they had as yet no scale to measure admiration by. Fancy your own
generous heart's-love of some greatest man expanding till it transcended all bounds, till it
filled and overflowed the whole field of your thought! Or what if this man Odin,—since a
great deep soul, with the afflatus and mysterious tide of vision and impulse rushing on him he
knows not whence, is ever an enigma, a kind of terror and wonder to himself,—should have
felt that perhaps he was divine; that he was some effluence of the "Wuotan," "Movement",
Supreme Power and Divinity, of whom to his rapt vision all Nature was the awful Flame-
image; that some effluence of Wuotan dwelt here in him! He was not necessarily false; he was
but mistaken, speaking the truest he knew. A great soul, any sincere soul, knows not what he
is,—alternates between the highest height and the lowest depth; can, of all things, the least
measure—Himself! What others take him for, and what he guesses that he may be; these two
items strangely act on one another, help to determine one another. With all men reverently
admiring him; with his own wild soul full of noble ardors and affections, of whirlwind chaotic
darkness and glorious new light; a divine Universe bursting all into godlike beauty round him,
and no man to whom the like ever had befallen, what could he think himself to be?
"Wuotan?" All men answered, "Wuotan!"—

[...]

Thus if the man Odin himself have vanished utterly, there is this huge Shadow of him which
still projects itself over the whole History of his People. For this Odin once admitted to be
God, we can understand well that the whole Scandinavian Scheme of Nature, or dim No-
scheme, whatever it might before have been, would now begin to develop itself altogether
differently, and grow thenceforth in a new manner. What this Odin saw into, and taught with
his runes and his rhymes, the whole Teutonic People laid to heart and carried forward. His
way of thought became their way of thought:—such, under new conditions, is the history of
every great thinker still. In gigantic confused lineaments, like some enormous camera-obscure
shadow thrown upwards from the dead deeps of the Past, and covering the whole Northern
Heaven, is not that Scandinavian Mythology in some sort the Portraiture of this man Odin?
The gigantic image of his natural face, legible or not legible there, expanded and confused in
that manner! Ah, Thought, I say, is always Thought. No great man lives in vain. The History
of the world is but the Biography of great men.

To me there is something very touching in this primeval figure of Heroism; in such artless,
helpless, but hearty entire reception of a Hero by his fellow-men. Never so helpless in shape,
it is the noblest of feelings, and a feeling in some shape or other perennial as man himself. If I
could show in any measure, what I feel deeply for a long time now, That it is the vital element
of manhood, the soul of man's history here in our world,—it would be the chief use of this
discoursing at present. We do not now call our great men Gods, nor admire without limit; ah
no, with limit enough! But if we have no great men, or do not admire at all,—that were a still
worse case.

[...]