The Victorian *Fol Sage*

Comparative Readings on Carlyle, Emerson, Melville, and Conrad

Camille R. La Bossière

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à mon père,
à ma mère,
Camille Augustin,
Hermine Joséphine

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Preface

THIS book's comparative reading of four rhetorical responses to the principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum* aims to contribute to the history of wisdom's decline as the principle of knowledge and certainty in the nineteenth century. Comparison of the Victorian sage's "musical thought" and the skepticism of Montaigne, with its studied unscience and endless self-contradiction, serves to advance the argument that the disparagement of logical analysis and ethics in favor of imaginative synthesis and poetics could hardly have helped but make the work of the public teacher of wisdom nugatory. As Eugen Biser remarks, the falling off of wisdom as "insight into the order of nature and history so well-developed that it can be the rule of life" can be traced to the failure of modern thought to establish and comprehend "the opposition between abstract and concrete, universal and particular, idea and reality."[1] A harlequin artist and rhetorician of the coincidence of opposites, the Victorian sage contributed substantially to that failure. And there are elements in his modern reception to corroborate such an estimate. The current tendency among the students of the Victorian purveyor of wisdom to place little if any value on his dogma does more than simply register a change in critical fashion or moral belief. Their appraisal faithfully translates the contradiction built into and undermining his enterprise. Carlyle, for example, who aspired to the role of prophet to his age, is at his best not as a provider of life-guidance, by A. L. Le Quesne's reckoning in 1982, but as an artist *malgré lui,* a seer with "double vision," and a player adept at keeping opposites "in balance."[2]

The choice of the first two authors for study, Carlyle and Emerson, was virtually dictated by history. As James Joyce recalled in 1900, they were (with Rousseau) "those giants" who before Ibsen had held "empire over the thinking world in modern times."[3] Carlyle and Emerson dominate in an age remarkable for the number and variety of its moral guides and teachers. Melville, the subject of the third chapter, was chosen for the reason that his entire work turns on the

skepticism fundamental to the wisdom of Carlyle and Emerson, which he takes to its logical conclusion, of self-betrayal or self-consumption: "WISDOM IS VAIN," Melville's poem "The Conflict of Convictions" pronounces. Their contradiction of each other and themselves demonstrates the folly of would-be sages. The selection of Conrad, finally, was made at the perceptive suggestion of John Holloway's classic study, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (1953), where the modern writer of ambiguous fabulations implicitly figures as the *terminus ad quem* of the Victorian teacher of wisdom. Not a knowing seer in a democracy of the blind, the Conradian artist renders the truth of himself and humanity as the intimate alliance of contradictions, and consequently renounces the vocation of sage. For Conrad the artist as for Montaigne the skeptic, "l'individu se modèle selon un devenir étranger à toute fin éthique."[4]

It goes without saying that the writer of this book has sympathy with the authors he considers. The humility of *que sais-je?* is attractive, of course, chastening as it is to rationalism of the overweening kind. There is much to endear in professions of unknowing and much to divert in the play of self-contradiction. He must, on the other hand and by the same token, demur at the earnest imperialism latent in the self-consuming (but hardly self-effacing) artificer's way of reading the world: it is "antidiscursive and antirational; rather than distinguishing, it resolves, and in the world it delivers the lines of demarcation between places and things fade in the light of an all-embracing unity."[5] Like darkness in its erasing of differences, the light of unreason tends to be omnivorous. In the absence of reason, everything goes. Nor is this writer persuaded of the pedagogical value of that drowsiness which unreason, again like darkness, has a tendency to induce. As Walter Kaufmann reminds us, the illumination provided by antirational and antidiscursive works can be soporific: it "often puts the critical sense to sleep."[6] "The Consolation of Folly," the postscript to this study engaging Carlyle, Emerson, Melville, and Conrad, the nature and method of which are designed to respect those differences that make similitude and therefore genuine dialogue possible, draws out that point. Since it is fundamentally negative, the value of unreason as an instrument for teaching (or criticism) is somewhat doubtful and, to the student prizing discursive or rational understanding, necessarily short-lived.

And if life is a dream, as skeptics and synthetic night-thinkers are inclined to say with Montaigne, this writer is persuaded that it is not his alone. There is, for example, the matter of those gifts from others that went into the making of *The Victorian "Fol Sage"* and that he is delighted to record. My thanks to Gerald Morgan, Emeritus Pro-

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fessor of literature and philosophy at the Royal Roads Military College of Canada, for his guidance in the literature of wisdom and Conradiana; to John Spencer Hill and David Lyle Jeffrey, of the University of Ottawa, for their valuable questions, corrections, counsel, and encouragement; to George Thomson, Dominic Manganiello, Irene Makaryk, and Ina Ferris, also of the University of Ottawa, for putting useful suggestions in my path; to Murray Baumgarten, of the University of California (Santa Cruz), Bill Bonney, of Mississippi State University, and Leo Damrosch, Jr., of the University of Maryland, for the present of books and ideas; to E. D. Blodgett, of the University of Alberta, and J. J. Healy, of Carleton University, for their kind support of this project at its inception; to Mrs. Oukje De Bruyn, of Ottawa, for her translation of Jacob Revius; to the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Ottawa, for timely research grants; and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, for the leave fellowship that made the writing of this book possible. And not least, there is the growing debt of gratitude to my wife and son, Diane and Paul.

"Logical thinking is . . . of indispensable use in giving clearness and compactness to our knowledge, and enabling us, with light mastery, to impart it to others." The words are John Sterling's.[7] My hope is that the reader who finds them congenial will come away from *The Victorian "Fol Sage"* as a whole with some measure of satisfaction.

The first chapter of this book was developed from an article, "Of Silence, Doubt, and Imagination: Carlyle's Conversation with Montaigne," which appeared in *English Studies in Canada* 10 (1984): 62–76.

The Victorian *Fol Sage*

Introduction: The Victorian *Fol Sage*

Let us go down into the blind world.
—Dante, *Inferno*

The wise contradict themselves.
—Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young"

"THE Plato of Walter Pater is Montaigne's Plato," Harold Bloom recalls in *Figures of Capable Imagination* (1976).[1] The student of Socrates is the skeptical dialectician engaged in the subversion of all philosophies, taking himself for subject and object and public: "Just there, lies the validity of the method—in a dialogue, an endless dialogue, with one's self," in the words Bloom cites from Pater's *Plato and Platonism* (1893).[2] For Walter E. Houghton, in *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (1956), Pater's revival of "the scepticism of Hume" in the 1868 "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* marks the waning of an age of faith in social, moral, and intellectual progress, which creed is pronounced moribund by the time of *Plato and Platonism* and Pater's discovery of "the beginning of the modern, relative spirit in Montaigne."[3] "*Que scais-je?* it [the age] cries."[4] "The father of Anglo-American Aestheticism," as Bloom's history repeats, "yielded up the great societal and religious hopes of the major Victorian prose-prophets, and urged us to abide in the mortal truths of perception and sensation."[5] Pater's position as skeptic and aesthete opposes him to Carlyle, for example, the principal of the "teachers" with "moral preoccupations" featured in John Holloway's *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (1953).[6] As Holloway affirms in his conclusion, which includes a defense of the sage's way of seeing and teaching, the chief thing the Victorian purveyors of wisdom have in common is the poetical articulation of moral principles based on "what they think the world is like."[7] Their advocacy of convictions of practical concern in human life gives a measure of the distance separating them from Pater and the long line of skeptics who, like Hume

in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, have reckoned the attempt to infer *ought* and *ought not* from *is* and *is not* an absurd and comical enterprise.[8]

Strong as the disjunction is, in principle, between the skeptical Pater and the Victorian teacher of practical wisdom, there is considerable history and practice to sustain a reading of their relationship that sees them not quite so far apart. In 1848, for example, more than two decades before Pater's *The Renaissance* and some ten years after John Sterling's widely influential article linking Montaigne with Socrates and the Shakespeare of *Hamlet*,[9] Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve imagined Saint-Évremond, Hume, himself, and perhaps all of his contemporaries as a line of followers in Montaigne's funeral cortege.[10] Charles Dédéyan's more recent history, *Montaigne chez ses amis anglo-saxons* (1943), concurs, beginning as it does in the seventeenth century its continuous tracking of the *Essais* through English romanticism to the time of *Plato and Platonism*.[11] And additional confirmation of Sainte-Beuve's picture of 1848 appears in Holloway's portrait of the Victorian sage. "It is not altogether clear how these . . . are legitimate in any way at all," Holloway's introduction declares, questioning the authority of the sage's teachings. The question does not go unanswered. "It becomes clear," *The Victorian Sage* subsequently concludes, "that . . . his message finds part of its sanction, maybe the only solid part, in what we actually see or feel: in our environment or our emotions."[12] Clearly, Holloway's study has led him to the place of the Montaigne-like Pater, who "urged us to abide in the mortal truths of perception and sensation."[13] The conclusion is understandable: the sage's "disparagement of logic" in favor of "the essentially individualist methods of the artist"[14] draws the mind steadily to that end. Though it does not say so explicitly, Holloway's study hints at a contradiction of end and means making of the sage's vocation a calling to suicide.

Indirect suggestion of the subversive nature of Holloway's work and the wisdom of the age he examines comes early in *The Victorian Sage*, with two references to Conrad. Wisdom, in the view of the model teacher Carlyle, is "somehow an opening of the eyes," and the sage a seer gifted with "insight that is abnormally keen."[15] That notion invites comparison with Conrad's account of his own purpose in the 1897 Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*: "before all, to make you *see*. That, and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."[16] And the method by which Carlyle strives to make his reader see is that of the

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