

# CSA 19



**Carlyle Studies Annual**

**Number 19 • 1999-2000**

## *Illness as Speech in the Life of Jane Welsh Carlyle*

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Jane Welsh Carlyle left in her letters—that impressive body of literary work—an extensive record of sickness and health. That record has usually been used by biographers and critics to indict one or the other of the partners in the Carlyles' marriage: Thomas for his self-centred neglect of his wife's ailments; Jane for mental imbalance or morbid self-indulgence. Yet seen in a broader and more productive context, her account can be interpreted as an attempt at communication and self-expression. If we assume that illness can involve a complex interaction of body and mind, and that when Jane experienced ill health, it was not always solely due to bacteria, viruses, or ailments resulting from accidents, then her letters provide many opportunities to hear her illness as speech. If we listen for what she may have been communicating through ways she handled her illnesses, metaphors used to describe them, and the miracle cures that sometimes took place, our understanding of her can be enriched.

Victorian women who suffered hysterical symptoms, diseases for which no organic cause could be found, appeared in large numbers among the upper-middle classes in Britain and America, and on the Continent as well. They were given an array of medicines, including opiates, and subjected to rest and water cures (like the one Thomas Carlyle took at Malvern, where he was accompanied by Jane). Hysteria was "one of the classic diseases of the nineteenth century," defined as "peculiarly female," often with pejorative implications (Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* 197). It has even been called "the most popular female discourse of the day" (Howells 16). Among those who suffered from it, women attached to famous literary men make an interesting subgroup—like Alice James, sister

of William and Henry, and Winifred Howells, daughter of William Dean<sup>1</sup>—invalids whose expectations were raised by their famous connection, but whose lives were also severely circumscribed.

As Jane Carlyle recognized, increased expectations in confining circumstances can intensify frustrations. Jane followed up a remark about her "whole life" being "a sort of *puddling* [muddle] as to health" with the joking but odd comment: "Too much of schooling hadst thou poor Ophelia!" (*Letters* 7: 32). Like many a chance remark of Jane's, this radiates in several directions: Thomas is the brooding, distracted Hamlet; she is his Ophelia. Rather than drowning in "too much water" she is being made crazy, in her restricted sphere, from having had too-great expectations. In 1847 she told a friend that "over-educating people" was a mistake. Jane claimed that because of her own education (culturally rich and unusually stimulating for a girl of her era), "her health ha[d] been injured for life" (Fox 240). This comment echoes a common nineteenth-century medical belief that education harmed women, particularly their womanliness.<sup>2</sup>

Two feminist classics bracket Jane Carlyle's life like bookends: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869)—an indication of the liberating strains reverberating in the air—and Jane knew personally quite a few women making excellent use of the education they had acquired, including such eminent figures as Harriet Martineau and Margaret Fuller. Yet opinions promulgated in etiquette books by Sarah Stickney Ellis and others, which Jane's novelist friend Geraldine Jewsbury referred to as the "Mrs. Ellis-code," proved far more pervasive and influential.

And there were, of course, her husband's views. It would be wrong to attribute twenty-first century ideas to Jane, but Thomas, on occasion, made great storms of noise about the man being head of the household, and other patriarchal sentiments. Some of his harangues deeply affected her. As she once wrote to the writer Martha Lamont: "That he thinks us an inferior order of beings—that is, an order of beings born *to obey*; I am afraid there is not the shadow of a doubt!" (*Letters* 17: 223).

Virginia Woolf, daughter of a late-Victorian literary father (who had known Carlyle personally), felt she had escaped only narrowly the fate of disappearing into his shadow.<sup>3</sup> A sufferer herself, she took illness as a subject seriously, worrying about how difficult a thing it is to describe. As she observed in her essay "On Being Ill," "among the drawbacks of illness as matter for literature there is the poverty of the language." "English,

which can express the thoughts of Hamlet . . . , has no words for the shiver and the headache." She thought we needed a new language for this, one more "primitive, subtle, sensual, obscene." Without it, one must "coin words himself . . . taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other . . ." (*Essays* 318-19). Perhaps Jane Carlyle came close to this, as when she described a migraine: "such a day of headach of retching and fainting as I had not passed the like of for twelve months—and ever since till yesterday I have been as *smashed* as *kneaded together* . . . as a lump of glaziers putty!" (*Letters* 17: 257). She could certainly conjure an expression or two to describe "the shiver and the headache." Lively and articulate in her written depictions, Jane was far less paralyzed than some of her sister sufferers. We might think of her, then, as giving voice to the often-unexpressed pressures, conflicts, and heartaches of the many.

During her lifetime, Jane endured headaches, protracted colds and flus (with sore throats and coughing), insomnia, toothaches, neuralgia, her monthly "sick week," and "shattered nerves," as well as ailments caused by accidents. In 1857 she remarked: "Harriet Martineau used to say of me, with that show of accuracy never accurate, which distinguishes her, 'Jane Carlyle has eight Influenzas *annually*; I wonder how she survives it!'" But Jane continued morosely: "Now it is getting to be *one* influenza lasting all the year around" (Bliss 268).

In exploring her illness as speech, however, we must keep in mind the gravity of physical illness in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1837 Thomas Carlyle wrote memorably to his brother John: "There has been really a most sad time here . . . with weather and *Influenza*. The funeral bell never ceased here, nothing but funerals whenever you stirred; crawling along, dreary, thro' the mud and fog" (*Letters* 9: 143). At the moment Thomas was putting these words to paper, Jane was recovering from her second life-threatening bout of influenza of the season. The actor William Charles Macready, a friend of the Carlyles, lost his first wife Catherine and most of their children, several of them to tuberculosis, another instance of the all-too-real dangers in the air.

We should also, in discussing her health, keep Jane Welsh Carlyle, the whole person, in mind: the woman who knew some of the most fascinating people in literary London and formed close friendships; the housekeeper *par excellence*; and, especially, the writer of many brilliant, witty letters. The Carlyles themselves, on occasion, seemed to reduce Jane's life to illness. It was while they were living at Craigenputtoch that Jane wrote the

phrase "my whole life has been a sort of *pudding* as to health." When older, she lamented how illness had made her life a "mess" and a "failure." Reading through Jane's 1857 letters after her death, Thomas, though in a mood of uxorious nostalgia and remorse, let slip a burst of annoyance: Jane's "sufferings," he said, "seem little short of those in a hospital fever-ward, as she painfully drags herself about . . ." (Huxley v).

The Carlyles' own emphasis may have influenced some who wrote about Jane to overemphasize this aspect of her life. Early evaluations were the harshest. Dr. James Crichton-Browne, who wrote the introduction to *New Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1903), spoke ominously of a mental disturbance called "climacteric melancholia" that caused Jane's letters to exude the miasma of a "vapour-breeding brain" (Alexander Carlyle liii and lvii). A reviewer of this book concluded that Jane's "own letters afford ample proof that her life was a long disease; as Sir James Crichton-Browne puts it, they are pervaded by a sick-room flavour, with frequent invocations of castor oil" ("Genius and Matrimony" 1388).<sup>4</sup> Leonard Huxley, in the introduction to his 1924 edition of Jane's letters, attributed some of her negative attitudes toward her husband to the "morphia" she sometimes took, attitudes the editor found "baseless" (xii).<sup>5</sup> As recently as 1994, a reviewer of *The Collected Letters*, volumes 19-21, thought he perceived a double standard concerning health matters on the part of the indexer: "In spite of the frequency with which both Carlyles refer to their health, the index . . . offers a mere eight citations in respect of Thomas, but forty-one for Jane; the discrepancy is unaccountable" (Jackson 579).

It may be that in telling the lives of women, illness is given disproportionate weight. In the introduction to volume 25 of *The Collected Letters*, after quoting an angry explosion from Jane about her dependency on Thomas ("If I have to lead another life in any of the planets I shall take precious good care not to hang myself around any man's neck either as a locket or a millstone!"), the editors comment that "Jane seemed to recognize that many of her problems arose from her health" (ix). In the context of this creative couple's complicated relationship, this seems narrowing. Hearing illness as speech can amplify its meanings.

In the Carlyles' marriage, illness provided an avenue for communication. As Thomas put it, "grumbling & complaining . . . is the habit of us both" (*Letters* 27: 365). With physical love and the voicing of endearments (outside of letters) severely limited, as seems to have been the case, talking

about their illnesses allowed them to express sympathy and concern for each other's bodies. Complaining about her health was also a way for Jane to tell her husband, who could be preoccupied and neglectful, whose thoughts and even feelings strayed, "I too am here." A consistent cry of the heart was "I'm miserable—pay attention." She was, we should remember, the daughter of a doting doctor-father who had died when she was only eighteen.

Although Jane sometimes lay dangerously ill, there was often thought to be "nothing organic gone wrong" (*Letters* 9: 191). Her handling of health problems suggests other factors at work like depression. Unhappily Jane came to believe that both prevention and cure required staying indoors, though doing so seemed to exacerbate her headaches. Thomas and Jane used the word *imprisonment* to describe these sieges. Her husband depicted her as still and quiet, a mouse, a dormouse, confined to the sofa or inside her red bed hung with curtains. She preferred the image of a hyena in a cage (*Letters* 24: 304). Weeks, even months could pass without her venturing over the threshold. Influenza became her "jailor." This claustrophobic reclusion (a sort of self-imposed "rest cure") increased dependency on Thomas, aggravated her mood, and reduced her sense of efficacy. So why did she cloister herself to such an extent?

In the Victorian era, "creative maladies" served multiple purposes.<sup>6</sup> Being an invalid allowed Elizabeth Barrett to rebel against her father in a socially acceptable way and to acquire the privacy and quiet needed to write her poetry. Some have suggested that valetudinarianism offered a legitimate, alternative social role—"the chronic female invalid"—to those who otherwise would not have fit in.<sup>7</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, author of popular etiquette and conduct manuals, inveighed against female faults like "selfishness" and advocated confining, restrictive, dutiful, submissive roles for women. Even modest departures from the saccharine wifely ideals portrayed in Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* might have seemed deviant. Jane's behavior, the occasional jailing of herself, implies, metaphorically, unconscious punishment for the guilt she suffered for having "unacceptable"—that is to say, unwifely and undaughterly—feelings and desires.

Now and then, however, a miracle cure transpired. Knowing the cure may shed light on the illness. The buoyant energy with which Jane described those moments when illness vanished in a flash may gauge their importance to her. In August of 1841, while visiting her mother in Scotland,

she for once received the care she had been yearning for. Grace Welsh was close to her daughter, her only child, yet seems also to have been an erratic and inconsistent mother, flighty and temperamental. Jane gave a humorous account of this Edenic experience, rhapsodizing to her friend Fanny Wedgwood: "On my arrival at my Mothers, the first thing I did was to go to bed and be very ill for two days—and the comfort of these two days was indescribable! To feel myself so intensely once more in the region of white sheets, and pretty chintzy curtains and soft carpets and green waving trees!—and to have one's *clean* nice-looking mother bringing one little seductive-looking *white*-napkined trays, which one had the firmest, most consolatory assurance would *not* contain—a *flounder!* . . . oh you cannot figure what a 'rehabilitation of the flesh' all this was for me!" (*Letters* 13: 224-25).

Although both Carlyles, at moments of great distress, could wail for their mothers, Jane's account of receiving this attention and nurturing go beyond childishness, I think. She was portraying the rest and restoration any weary spirit might require. Having secured this calm, aesthetically pleasing "maternal blessing," Jane said to Fanny: "Now I am up again—running about looking at every thing, and extacizing over every thing as if I had been just imported from the backwoods . . ." This is a touching account of the regrouping a creative person needs to move back into the world with confidence and a fresh sense of wonder. Jane goes on to paint a surprisingly modern picture of a cubistic, fragmented self made whole: "actually I have looked at myself in every mirror in the house with a sort of childish exultation in beholding the face of me once more all of a piece!—at Newby [where she had been visiting] I never saw myself but 'with the eyes all about' and divided into sections—" (*Letters* 13: 225). Eyes or *I*'s all about, one might say—a nice metaphor, and a prevision of the modern psychological concept of the parental "mirroring" necessary for the healthy development of a child's sense of self.<sup>8</sup> Nothing less than her sense of identity and wholeness had been at stake.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, including Harriet Martineau, Jane Carlyle did not fall under the spell of mesmerism, an increasingly popular method of healing. At a tea party late in 1844, she successfully exerted her will against a charismatic magnetizer whose power nearly overwhelmed her—showing an astonishing ability to summon strength of character.<sup>9</sup> On a different occasion, however, Jane proved herself highly susceptible to the healing influence of another person. She was visiting Isabella Buller, no

mesmerist but an older woman, a family friend, who was treating her like "the daughter of the house." She was ill in bed when Mrs. Buller entered the room and begged her to take some medicine. As Jane told a cousin, "She poured me something into a glass out of two different vials—I swallowed it and—in one instant I was well!!—I winked—*listened* to find where the horrid pain was gone but could hear no more tell of it!—Prince Hohenlohe performed no better accredited miracle!" (*Letters* 15: 65-66). Whether owing to some sort of benevolent hypnosis or the placebo effect, a dose of motherly love again effected a cure.

Excitement and stimulation could bring about a different kind of miracle cure. On the verge of staying home one evening from little Nina Macready's birthday party—Thomas had just confirmed how ghastly Jane felt, saying "My dear . . . I think I never saw you look more bilious your face is *green* and your eyes all *blood-shot*"—Jane received a note urging her to attend, making her feel wanted; and the party, a "little knot of blackguardist literary people," turned out to be wonderful fun. Her letter about it, one of her most dazzling, describes "that excellent Dickens playing the *conjurer* for one whole hour" and recalls how she talked "the maddest nonsense with *him*, Forster Thackeray and Maclise." When "a universal country dance was proposed," she said, "Forster *seiz[ed]* me round the waist, whirled me into the thick of it—and MADE me dance!! like a person in the tread mill who must move forward or be crushed to death! Once I cried out 'oh for the love of Heaven let me go! you are going to dash my brains out against the folding doors!' to which he answered . . . 'your *brains!* who cares about their brains *here?* let them go!'" When Jane fell into bed that night, she said she "slept like a top!!!! Plainly proving that *excitement* is my rest!" (*Letters* 17: 220-21).

She echoed this almost a decade later. In charge of renovations at 5 Cheyne Row, Jane was, for her, in a healthy phase of life: "For my part I am got quite used to the disturbance, and begin to like the what shall I say?—*excitement* of it—to see something *going on* and to help its going on fulfils a great want of my nature!" (*Letters* 27: 216). Restorative care, stimulating friendship, a sense of usefulness and of agency: in Jane's accounts of her miracle cures she was conveying "the great wants of her nature."

A nature needs what Geraldine Jewsbury called "ready-made channels to run in." If they are not available, whether because of personal circumstances or cultural/social limitations, unnatural torques in the

personality can occur. When self-expressive energy runs in self-defeating channels, psychosomatic symptoms may result. Anger that cannot change anything can turn in against the self, causing depression.<sup>10</sup> Jane made an illness-anger connection in a letter she wrote early in her marriage, linking the "headaches, heartache, and all kinds of aches" she was suffering from with efforts not to "break out into fiery indignation over my own destiny and all the earth's" (*Letters* 6: 410). Later, in a letter to a young friend about the dangers of brooding (what we might call neurotic obsessing), she chose images of unnaturalness: "Oh don't I know what comes of that same *grübeln* [brooding]! how one gets swamped within an inch of ones life in one insoluble problem after another—knocks oneself black and blue against laws of nature! God preserve *you* from such a habit! the flowers in your lifegarden will all wither one after another, if instead of watering and weeding them you continually *scrape the earth from them to examine the roots*, and no good seed that you sow will bear fruit if you poke it up time after time *to see how it is getting on!*" (*Letters* 26: 282). The atypical stiffness of this extended metaphor Jane attributed to attempting to write as the Wife of a Sage, but her point gets made: futile obsessing can harm one's natural development.

If Jane had found a public outlet to channel her creative energies, might her health problems have been eased? Friends thought so. Jane herself seemed to believe this, as when she cried out in 1846, "I wish I could find some hard work I *could* do—and saw any sense in doing—If I do not soon it will be the worse for me—" (*Letters* 20: 194). Her physician brother-in-law, Dr. John Carlyle, agreed. In 1833 Jane quoted him approvingly in a letter to a friend: "He told me yesterday, 'Could I give you some agreeable occupation to fill your whole mind, it would do more for you than all the medicines in existence'" (*Letters* 6: 410-11). Yet absent sympathy and assistance, the same advice could be turned around to bludgeon her; what might have been helpful became patronizing, even hostile. The doctor would chastize her in later years, saying—Jane complained—"that if I had ever done anything in my life this would not have been: that no poor woman with work to mind had ever had such an ailment as this since the world began." When Jane heard about a working woman who had committed suicide, she asked acerbically: "What does Dr. Carlyle make of such a case? No Idleness, no Luxury, nor novel reading to make it all plain" (*Letters* 6: 411n).

In August 1850, upon receiving a letter from Thomas, who was in Wales visiting a friend, Jane had an insight into how fatal to the soul over-dependency could be. Thomas had referred to the legend of Undine, a water nymph who could acquire a soul by marrying a human, but would be compelled to return to the sea if her lover should prove unfaithful. The friend, Charles Redwood, was providing Thomas with every domestic comfort, yet the man irritated him. Thomas told Jane that there was in Redwood "a strange vitality of cheerfulness;—something really strange in the man's relation to me: like that of a *male Undine*; and such a dreadfully dull one!" Although Jane in her explosive reply did not comment explicitly on the myth, she lost no time responding angrily, as if Thomas had accused her and Redwood alike of being strangely-vital leeches: "It is sad and wrong to be so dependent for the life of my life on any human being as I am on you," she said, "but I cannot by any force of logic cure myself of the habit at this date, when it is become 'a second nature.'" She went on to say: "If I have to lead another life in any of the planets I shall take precious good care not to hang myself around any man's neck either as a locket or a millstone!" And she added, "Give my regards to poor dear Redwood—whose feelings I can quite understand" (*Letters* 25: 162-64). Undine and the Biblical millstone (Luke 17:2, Revelation 18:21) share a common fate: they are destined to be cast into the sea, an image suggesting the drowning feelings of overdependency.

Another undercurrent is the fatal effect of infidelity on the water nymph. During this period of her life, Jane's miseries were compounded by Thomas's feelings for the aristocratic society hostess Lady Harriet Baring, which seemed to threaten her marriage and her sense of identity. In her quick and hostile response to Thomas's letter, Jane is vividly depicting *soul* sickness.

Geraldine Jewsbury sympathized with Jane's physical symptoms, perhaps more than anyone. Yet where another might also have perceived hypochondria and malingering, Geraldine heard something very different, even to the point of believing that Jane, though stumbling forward in the dark, anticipated women's brighter future. Writers of later eras have, in fact, found Jane Carlyle "a strangely modern instance,"<sup>11</sup> no doubt because of her witty expressions of frustration, her refusal to settle compliantly into assigned roles, her ongoing irritated sense that life should be different and better.

Geraldine intuited her best friend's illness as a form of speech. She picked up on Jane's refusal to conform and her aspirations for development and fulfillment in her best-known letter to her friend, composed in 1849 when she was 37 and Jane 48. Jane had just written to her, complaining that her life amounted to a "fifteen years' long illness," apparently concluding that this made her a "failure." Jane's interpretation of the meaning of illness in her life became the context and inspiration for Geraldine's response.

"Except when my health is out of order, I do not feel that either you or I are to be called failures," Jewsbury wrote back. "We are indications of a development of womanhood which as yet is not recognized. It has, so far, no ready-made channels to run in, but still we have looked, and tried, and found that the present rules for women will not hold us—that something better and stronger is needed." Jewsbury asked her friend pointedly: "will you lay your hand on your heart, and say that, in your 'fifteen years long illness,' as you call your life, you have not both felt and shown qualities infinitely higher and nobler than all the 'Mrs. Ellis-code' can dream of? You know you have" (Jewsbury 347-8). Jewsbury announced a new vision of womanhood, in words which still inspire: "I believe we are touching on better days, when women will have a genuine, normal life of their own to lead. There, perhaps, will not be so many marriages, and women will be taught not to feel their destiny *manqu[é]* if they remain single. They will be able to be friends and companions in a way they cannot be now. All the strength of their feelings and thoughts will not run into love; they will be able to associate with men, and make friends of them, without being reduced by their position to see them as lovers or husbands. Instead of having appearances to attend to, they will be allowed to have their virtues, in any measure which it may please God to send, without being diluted down to the tepid 'rectified spirit' of 'feminine grace' and 'womanly timidity'—in short, they will make themselves women, as men are allowed to make themselves men" (347).

### Notes

1. See Howells 14-18 for a discussion of Winifred Howells. I am indebted to Polly H. Howells for suggesting the topic of illness as speech.
2. Ellen L. Bassuk, for instance, quotes S. Weir Mitchell, a prominent Philadelphia neurologist practising in the latter part of the nineteenth century: "Mitchell insisted that women were irreversibly constrained by their bodies and should not aspire beyond traditional domestic roles. He commented that 'the woman's desire to be on a level of competition with men and to assume his duties, is I am sure, making mischief, for it is my belief

that no length of generations of change in her education and modes of activity will ever really alter her characteristics . . . I am concerned with her now as she is, only desiring to help her in my small way to be in wiser and more healthful fashion what I believe her Maker meant her to be . . ." (146).

3. On what would have been Leslie Stephen's ninety-sixth birthday (28 November 1928), Virginia Woolf wrote: "His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened [had he lived]? No writing, no books; —inconceivable" (*Diary* 3: 208).
4. Another, quite thorough account of Jane Carlyle's ill health by George M. Gould attributed it all, peculiarly enough, to presbyopia, or farsightedness, and astigmatism. Gould's reductionism was topped only by Sir Richard Quain, who attributed the lifelong dyspepsia of his patient Thomas Carlyle to the consumption of some "very nasty gingerbread" (1147).
5. The issue of the Carlyles' opium use is difficult to evaluate. It was, at times, an effective pain reliever, and the Carlyles were often sharply observant of its precise effects; yet the effects could certainly be deleterious. An interesting discussion of nineteenth-century opium use can be found in Alethea Hayter's *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*.
6. See George Pickering's *Creative Malady: Illness in the Lives and Minds of Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale et al.*
7. Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg 302, n. 51. Another "alternative role," that of the eccentric, is suggested by Hermione Lee in her discussion of Anne Thackeray Ritchie: eccentricity may have been "a form of defence for a woman writer, allowing her to create her own peculiar style in the teeth of male disapproval," yet it got such women "laughed at and marginalized" (Lee 78).
8. See Heinz Kohut on the mirroring transference in *The Restoration of Self* (passim).
9. Alison Winter opens her study of Victorian mesmerism with an account of Jane Carlyle's feat of resisting the powerful hypnotic current she experienced.
10. See, for instance, Dana Crowley Jack's *Silencing the Self: Women and Depression*.
11. Diana Trilling contemplated writing about Jane Carlyle, whom she called "a strangely modern instance of old-fashioned frustrated female talent" (*The Beginning of the Journey* 349). Trilling herself passed through what one might call a long "Jane Carlyle" phase—characterized by physical/ mental/ emotional distress and frustrated ambition, in the context of a marriage to an

eminent writer—before breaking into print and establishing herself as a public figure.

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