Wonder, Metaphor and Fact

The unique character of the Carlylean-Novalian image reflected in the mountain passage cited above becomes even clearer when one remembers Carlyle’s sense of wonder, a word he uses often implicitly and explicitly. He had written not only of mighty glimpses into the ‘spiritual Universe’ and the possibility of ‘supernatural (really natural) influences’; he had also talked of every living man being a ‘living mystery: he walks between two Eternities and two Infinitudes’. Perhaps Carlyle’s attitude is summed up best by his statement: ‘Wonderful Universe! Were our eyes but opened, what a “secret” were it that we daily see and handle, without heed!’ (2NB, p. 142). Carlyle’s sense of wonder and his constant use of the word ‘miracle’ are connected, of course, with his emphasis on the ‘Spiritual Force’ behind the laws of Nature, and these concepts also reflect his attitude towards art. His ideas and his way of expressing them metaphorically are linked.

Indeed, the emphasis on the ‘wonderful’ is particularly significant, for it helps explain his reliance on metaphor. ‘He was unobtrusive, but when asked for his opinion he gave it in his metaphorical manner’ (Froude, III, p. 9). ‘As to this metaphorical talent’, Carlyle himself wrote in his Journal (1822) ‘it is the first characteristic of genius. . . . It denotes an inward eye quick to perceive the relations & analogies of things; a ready memory to furnish them when occasion demands; and a sense of propriety & beauty to select what is best, from the immense store so furnished’ (2NB, p. 30). ‘What am I but a sort of Ghost?’ he noted another time. What a miracle is all existence’, he wrote to Jane in 1835 (Froude, III, p. 20); while in his Journal for 1836 we find: ‘[Life] is fearful and wonderful to me’ (2NB, p. 73).

One of the most moving passages is his description of Mrs Welsh’s grave in 1843:
Nobody knew me. I sate two minutes in Thornhill Street, unsuspected by all men, a kind of ghost among men. The day was windless: the earth stood still: grey mist rested on the tops of the green hills, the vacant brown moors: silence as of eternity rested over the world. It was like a journey through the kingdoms of the dead, one Hall of Spirits till I got past Crawford. . . . I was as a spirit in the land of spirits, called land of the living. (Froude, III, p. 323)

At times this sense of wonder, this inward eye, and the metaphorical expression come together felicitously: 'Then sawest thou that this fair Universe . . . is in very deed the star-doomed [sic] City of God;¹ that through every star, through every grass-blade, and most through every living soul, the glory of a present God still beams. But Nature, which is the Time-vesture of God, and reveals Him to the wise, hides Him from the foolish' (Works, i, p. 210).

There are times when this metaphorical thought becomes translated into what for Carlyle does indeed become fact, and this 'leap' or insight constitutes the basis for the climactic chapter in Sartor, 'Natural Supernaturalism'. This chapter is filled with 'Natural' imagery taken from the heavens, and it becomes, in Carlylean 'coterie' writing, the key to Carlyle's 'prophetic' vision. The following is typical: 'Are we not Spirits, that are shaped into a body, into an Appearance; and that fade away again into air and Invisibility? This is no metaphor, it is a simple scientific fact; we start out of Nothingness, take figure and are Apparitions; round us, as round the veriest spectre, is Eternity; and to Eternity minutes are as years and aeons' (Works, i, p. 211). Another incorporates the cosmological:

We speak of the Volume of Nature: and truly a volume it is,—whose Author and Writer is God. To read it! Dost thou, does man, so much as well know the Alphabet thereof? With its words, Sentences, and great descriptive Pages, poetical and philosophical, spread out through Solar Systems, and Thousands of Years, we shall not try thee. It is a Volume written in celestial hieroglyphs, in the true Sacred-writing of which even Prophets are happy that they can read here a line and there a line. . . . That Nature is more than some boundless Volume of such Recipes, or huge, well-nigh inexhaustible Domestic-Cookery Book, of which the whole secret will in this manner one day evolve itself, the fewest dream. (Works, i, pp. 205–6)