

“ENGLISH AFFAIRS AND NORSE”:
CARLYLE’S IGDRA SIL, NORSE MYTHOLOGY,
AND THE MYTH OF BRITISH RACIAL ANCESTRY

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Considered “one of the main cosmological symbols of the Teutonic North” (Donington 219), the Yggdrasil is important to Thomas Carlyle. Its ties to Norse mythology helped shape his ideas on Teutonic Britain. The Yggdrasil is constitutive of cosmic harmony and historical continuity; “a seed-grain that cannot die; unnoticed to-day..., it will be found flourishing as a Banyan-grove ... after a thousand years” (*Sartor Resartus* 30). In a letter to Jane Carlyle, a keen observer of powerful Norse women (see Wawn 154), Carlyle finds assurance in the Yggdrasil (which he routinely spells Igdrasil): “the Tree Igdrasil which reaches up to *Heaven*, goes down to the Kingdoms of Hela, and God (the Everlasting GOOD and JUST) is in it all” (*Collected Letters* 14: 68). The “world-tree” is not named in *Sartor Resartus*, but is included among correlative trees in the ash, banyan, lime, and oak (71). Its “twigs” are aspects of that vegetative system that has evolved into a full-blown Western and Christian mythology. A rhythmic life force, a sacred and “symbolical myth” (Froude, *Forty Years* 1:81), even a mythological tree of ancestry, the Yggdrasil is imagined as the central tree connecting heaven and earth. The “most holy place of the gods,” it is “an immense tree,” says Finnur Magnússon, with branches that “spread over the whole world, and reach up over the heavens” (qtd in Keightley 226-27). Robert Donington connects the Yggdrasil to tree and cross (69; 125). Advancing Edenic associations, Hilda Davidson sees it pictured as “an apple tree” growing among “wonderful fruit trees” in a garden known as “the Land of Youth or the Land of Promise, the Plain of Delight,” which exists “outside human time” (*Lost* 69-70).

The ur-text of Carlyle’s Yggdrasil is his little-known essay, “Igdrasil. From the Norse,” which was published in 1890 as “an unpublished MS. of Thomas Carlyle’s, in the possession of C. Oscar Grindley, Esq.” The essay apostrophizes the Yggdrasil (“O TREE of Igdrasil”) as eternal, incomprehensible, ineffable, organic, and, like the Christian trinity, reflects differing manifestations of the same.¹ Wild, untamed, and sublime, the Yggdrasil is the