

THOMAS CARLYLE AS A HISTORIAN

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Melfort Swidinsky

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Preface

The purpose of this work is to examine sympathetically and critically the ideas entertained by Carlyle with respect to the writing of history. The practice of writing about historians is, of course, an old one. In recent years, however, the role of the historian has become significantly one of the main vehicles of historical criticism. The changing emphasis, at least in part, stems from the altered concept of history itself. The various historical relativists, Charles A. Beard, Benedetto Croce, and Wilhelm Dilthey, for example, have fittingly persuaded historians to shift their attention away from questions of data and method and to focus instead upon the assumptions and ideological factors with which the historian approaches his work.

It is within this framework of reference that a study of Carlyle as a historian has been attempted. The analysis, accordingly, rests heavily on Carlyle's own historical works and correspondence. Although few writers have commanded as much critical attention as Carlyle, this thesis proposes to focus upon his works in a way not previously attempted. Louise Merwin Young's dissertation, the one work devoted entirely to Carlyle and the art of history, for example, deals primarily with "Carlyle's philosophic approach to the materials of history." The present thesis attempts to assess the impact of Carlyle's social and political environment upon his writings, to spell out in more detail the nature of

his sources, to examine his over-all purpose in writing history, and to estimate the historical value of his works. These issues, while important, are treated improperly by Young and virtually ignored by most of Carlyle's biographers. In this respect, it may be contended, this work differs in a major way from previous interpretations.

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Introduction

"History" is a Greek word which means, literally, "investigation". This meaning may be broadly expanded to stand for the investigation of the nature of the universe in general, its discernible patterns, and man's place in it or, it may be narrowed down to mean a meticulous examination of a single document. It must be recognized, however, that there is an over-riding theme in history -- the common human experience, the unity of mankind, the shared agony over the perplexities and mysteries of life. History, in brief, is the study of human beings involved in extraordinary drama.

As so often happens in most disciplines, two diametrically opposed themes have formed the body of historical thought. Until the appearance of Carl Becker, R. G. Collingwood, and Friedrich Meinecke, for example, rationalists and empiricists -- the positivists -- held the field. Their approach to history was clearly stated in J. B. Bury's assumption that "history is science, no less and no more." It was their conviction that an objective reality could be extracted from manuscripts and archival material by the application of precise "scientific" rules of historical method. According to this school of thought any two historians applying the rules correctly to the same facts must inevitably arrive at an identical conclusion.

Only a moment's reflection will show that "scientific investigation", as understood by the positivists, is impos-

sible and that history writing is "a vastly more complicated matter than one of merely fitting observed data into a structure of human thought that was presumed to be universal."¹ Between the data to be observed and the formulation of the results of observation, lies the stage of the historian's own awareness of the data — the state of "consciousness". This indeed is the central position of the idealists in history. They recognize the extent to which the thoughts of historians as individuals and as members of society are in fact determined by hidden desires, interests, and passions. The facts in the study of man and society, it is clear, do not speak for themselves for they are profoundly tainted by the historian's own involvement in the subject he is describing.

On this wide historians' spectrum of historical thought, Carlyle belongs with the idealists. He sought to find meaning beyond the immediate facts, to put forth ideas based not on empirical, scientific, and analytical techniques but upon a reflective and personal interpretation of the human situation. He revolted against the notion, prevalent in the early nineteenth century, that tended to consider man as a perfectly rational being freely selecting among alternatives in a world where reason triumphed over evil.

The impact of Thomas Carlyle, it may be safely asserted, is due not to what he added to knowledge by meticulous re-

¹H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 16.

search, but to what he contributed to historical perspective and synthesis. He made history a living force, and not a dead weight of amassed pedantry. He turned his back on the fragmentation of history and, like the great historians of the past, struggled to gain a universal and deeper insight into the historical process.

This is not to say, of course, that Carlyle had discovered a solution to the philosophical problem confronting historians. It is true that an assertion of the "scientific" character of historical writing often leads to an unsophisticated positivist application of the methods of natural science to the course of human affairs. On the other hand it is also true that an indiscriminate reliance on intuition in historical interpretation subordinates history to metaphysics. Clearly the central question is how the two approaches are to be employed if the historian is to arrive at a balanced interpretation.²

Those who read Carlyle today may, understandably, feel greatly perturbed by his views on the crucial problems of historical interpretation. Although a Victorian, he was closer in his philosophical conception of the universe to Milton and even to the Medievalists than to his fellow-

²A number of writers, including H. Stuart Hughes in Consciousness and Society, have addressed themselves to the implications involved in any attempt to bridge the gap between positivism and idealism. Hughes focuses on Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, and other thinkers who in their different ways strove "to comprehend the newly recognized disparity between external reality and the internal appreciation of that reality."

Victorians. His view of history sprang out of his transcendental Life-Philosophy. History was the "revelation of the Divine Idea," he held, "the true Epic Poem, and universal Divine Scripture, whose 'plenary inspiration' no man, out of Bedlam or in it, shall bring in question."³ Everywhere the reality of the historic process, he felt, showed the imprint of the Divine Idea. History has meaning and that meaning is the purpose of God. Carlyle advanced, Karl R. Popper suggests, a "theistic historicism."⁴ God reveals Himself and His judgment in the affairs of men, in their sorrows and joys, in their failures and successes, in short, in the total human experience.

Carlyle vehemently denied that history was the progressive development of reason through God's providence. He denied that God had implanted in man a principle of reason that is universal. The individual arrived at Eternal Truth through intuition and imaginative insight. Carlyle's approach was a relentless assault on the Enlightenment with its reliance on reason, order, and its basic contempt for the past. The Enlightenment denied his premise that God revealed Himself in crises and catastrophes, in thunder and lightning, arising out of the struggle between the forces of light and darkness,

³The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes. Centenary Edition. Edited by H. D. Traill (London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1899-1904), XXVIII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iii, 176. (Hereafter cited as Works).

⁴The Open Society and its Enemies (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 454.

of Good and Evil. For, although Carlyle's Universe was a unity, it was a Universe in conflict; and the clash of opposing principles — the extinction of dead shams by the realities of Truth was everywhere suggested.

Carlyle used history as an urgent response to a crisis in society, rather than as the interpretation of historic data and the refinement of methodology. He fashioned his extraordinary philosophy to counteract the transitional forces that gave rise to industrialization, materialism, urbanization, skepticism, national self-consciousness, and science. "England," he observed, "is full of wealth, of

multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. To whom, then, is this wealth of England wealth? Who is it that it blesses⁵

His vision of life stemmed from an impatience with this dismal baseness and cowardice, from a feeling of being out of place in a world of superficial sentiment and mediocre living, from an awareness of being in conflict with his time and with his world. That conflict, it must be acknowledged, Carlyle made the center of his view of life.

II

The Carlylean system, then, rests on broad metaphysical premises which Carlyle asserted consistently and dogmatically. Like some mythical figure emerging from the fog he struggles tirelessly toward the reader. His literary style reflects

⁵Carlyle, Works, X, "Past and Present," 1.

his whole way of looking at the world. It gives the effect of disorderly energy flowing through the whole of life. "His language," suggests Roger Sharrock, "was neither strictly logical nor poetic, a language with rules of its own directed towards the enactment of the beliefs it seeks to communicate."⁶

In the practice of history as literature, the English have a strong tradition. Francis Bacon, Edward Gibbon, Lord Macaulay, John Milton, together with Sir Walter Scott and Sir Walter Raleigh are well remembered as literary historians. In fact, if we take the whole body of what commonly is catalogued as historical writing, the most important element is narrative. From Herodotus onward, history has been regarded as a branch of literature and historians have been tellers of tales. It does not follow that the historian will be the better scholar for being the worse artist. James T. Shotwell's view that "the historian's method of investigation often seems to weaken in proportion as his rhetoric improves"⁷ is sheer unmitigated nonsense. In point of fact clarity of mind is often, though obviously not always, reflected in clarity of style.

Carlyle was a great literary historian. His pictorial power, his capacity for bringing a scene to life, his shrewd

⁶"Carlyle and the Sense of History," Essays and Studies, XIX (1966), 83.

⁷The History of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. 10.

grasp of individual character, have earned his dramatic works a unique place in historical literature. Nonetheless, it is not altogether true, that as H.D. Traill states in the introduction to the Centenary Edition of Carlyle's Works, that he owes his survival not so much to his vision of history as to his skilful and sensitive handling of the English language, that he is destined, as Traill points out, to remain "simply a great master of literature who lives for posterity by the art which he despised." ⁸

G. P. Gooch, quite fairly, feels that "Carlyle was the greatest of English historical portrait painters," ⁹ whose works are "a supreme achievement of the creative imagination" ¹⁰ G. M. Trevelyan views Carlyle as "the most historically minded of all historians" whose "attraction to history was not mainly ethical or philosophic, still less scientific, but pure human." ¹¹ Louise Merwin Young defends Carlyle as a historian by contending that "those who judge him do so in the light of theories regarding the function and character of history which were not current in England during the early decades of the nineteenth century, and which are not necessarily more valid than the theories Carlyle himself worked on." ¹²

⁸ Carlyle, Works, 1, "Sartor Resartus," viii.

⁹ History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), p. 332.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 324.

¹¹ "The Two Carlyles," The Living Age, CCXCVIII (July 27, 1918), 226.

¹² Thomas Carlyle and the Art of History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939), p. 1.

Beneath the voice of the literary historian, however, the voice of the prophet is constantly making itself heard. Carlyle was convinced that he had attained the absolute Truth and it was his duty to instill that Truth in the foolish and wicked by emphatic statement and moral exhortation. "The assumption of inspired insight," suggests Walter E. Houghton, "was by no means limited to a few philosophers

and intellectuals who had read the German transcendentalists. It is found in most Victorian writers because it was part of the literary tradition. The man of letters was generally considered, and often considered himself, ¹³ no mere artist or craftsman. He was a genius.

In his lectures on Heroes, Carlyle offered his own conception of his task. "The true literary man," he asserted, ". . . is the light of the world, the world's Priest; — guiding it, like a sacred Pillar of Fire, in its dark pilgrimage through the waste of Time."¹⁴ It is clear, then, that Carlyle's chief aim was not scientific historiography in the narrow sense. Indeed, this was exactly what he wished to avoid, exactly what was incarnated in the antiquarian "Dryasdust", the one-sided grubber of facts. History, Carlyle insisted, was instructive; it was the working of Didactic Destiny. It taught men their own nature, revealed to them their world, and showed them their proper place in it.

¹³The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 151-2.

¹⁴Carlyle, Works, V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 157.

III

Being a prophet, Carlyle's approach to history was extraordinarily dogmatic, violent, and excessively emotional. Relying upon intense faith and boiling conviction, rather than reason, his style was turned deliberately into a torrential cascade of words. The sentences, wild, disorderly, and even chaotic, beat upon the reader with such emphasis that eventually they cease to have any meaning. They remain merely evidence of their author's confidence that he was in "possession of an infallible power of insight . . . needing only to be announced with appropriate force."¹⁵

Yet, when the rhetoric subsides there is true objectivity, even at times sobriety, about Carlyle, the historian. He understood those social factors to which his age was still blind; he saw the broad connections, as between the Reformation and Revolution; he recognized the importance of that symbolic figure whom he called the Hero; he knew how to handle documents, if not how to annotate them. His penetration of political situations and motives is sharper than that of many better documented and more accurate histories of the same events by later historians. He saw that the economic problem underlay the political, that the system of irresponsible private property and laissez-faire was impoverishing the nation intellectually and morally. Sympathizing with the demand of the common people for suffrage as a means of

¹⁵Houghton, p. 149.

taking government out of the hands of "fat, elderly gentlemen" incompetent to rule, he, nevertheless, profoundly distrusted the "collective wisdom" of the uneducated masses, and would have persuaded them to depend on the judgment of men of conspicuous ability. "Fools!" he exclaimed, "I say, it is the everlasting privilege of the foolish to be governed by the wise: to be guided in the right path by those who know it better than they." ¹⁶

Consumed by a fiery zeal for practical activity in bettering the human lot, he built a vision of a more humane economic and political order influenced by ethical and aesthetic considerations. Unfortunately in his constant use of symbolism and of the words "God", "Divine", and "Hero" he laid himself open to misinterpretation. The suggestion that Carlyle somehow did his country an ill-service by promoting a friendly interest in German history and literature is regrettable. Similarly, the suggestion that he is the ideological forerunner of Fascism is ridiculous and dangerous rhetoric, betraying a lack of historical insight. His later writings, suffering from a tone that had become too shrill, were not an argued theory of despotism but a blinded, ill-tempered, and embittered old man's condemnation of the whole tendency of modern times.

Carlyle would have been dismayed to find that his Heroes has been so blatantly associated with Hitler and Mussolini.

¹⁶Carlyle, Works, XX, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," 23.

In point of fact, his emphasis on heroes was due, not so much to a faith in despotism, as to a realistic sense of the fact that if there be history there are actions and if there be actions there must be men who act. Thus, recognition of heroes is a modification of "trends" and "tendencies" as explanatory forces. Carlyle's view that great men make history was strengthened by his belief that "history is the essence of innumerable biographies." The problem of "spiritual freedom", the inward life and the spiritual condition of the people, became a crucial issue for Carlyle. It is here that the hero became important, for he was one who grasped the facts of existence firmly, and rejected the superficial and ideological. He understood the supreme value of the gift of intuitive perception of Truth, embraced the divine message, and applied these notions to the affairs of man.

Carlyle had a deep realization of himself as a prophet, not a historian. He wrote to John Gibson Lockhart, then editor of the Quarterly Review, that he had, and has had "for many years, a word to speak on the condition of the lower classes in this country."¹⁷ Unfortunately, he ended up too often a ranting preacher. He saw too many things too clearly and asserted too much. As a man intensely concerned with the problems of his country and his time, he wrote with passionate sincerity. In his condemnation of social injustice, his

¹⁷John W. Cunliffe, Leaders of the Victorian Revolution (London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), p. 49.

vision of the ills which attended the blooming of the Age of Machines was angry, clear, and prophetic. Yet something remains. Few historians could give to past events the immediacy of the present. Few have conveyed better the actuality of historical events, few have been able to hold a concept in their grip and fill it with such meaning as Carlyle did with the French Revolution, and few have communicated more forcefully the sense of awe, thunder, despair, confusion, and delight in reconstructing the past.

IV

This thesis proposes to show that underlying everything Carlyle wrote was a passionate revolt against his age -- an age which, in his opinion, had degenerated into a "hag-ridden" and "wig-ridden" vulgarity. In his personal utterances, social and political pronouncements, and historical works, rebellion constituted the major motivating force. He posed as a prophet and took upon himself the responsibility of vehemently condemning the faults of Victorian England and his countrymen. He turned to the French Revolution to illustrate the consequences of exploitation of man by man and to Oliver Cromwell and Frederick the Great as examples of an earlier, more equal form of organization, untainted by laissez-faire, materialism, and democracy.

Carlyle, this thesis maintains, used history not only for establishing the degeneracy of his present but also as a reservoir which contained a possible solution to the ills of

his time. In pursuing these immediate aims Carlyle, inadvertently, produced works of history which may be recognized as representing a respectable contribution to the field of history. His handling of the materials of history, on the whole, was sound. He wrote with a definite point of view. He showed a constant concern for accuracy, and his presentation, although out of place in the mid-twentieth century, was reasonably coherent.

In Chapter I, Carlyle, the man, holds the centre of the stage. Although little new can be added to the massive documentation of his life that has already taken place, this section contains biographical information necessary for the proper understanding of Carlyle, the historian. It helps to uncover the mind of Carlyle, his perspective, assumptions, principles, and mode of reasoning. It tries to clear away some misconceptions, legends, and myths that have come to be accepted as facts through careless thinking. Carlyle's intellectual background and development as prophet and historian are considered. The life of Carlyle does not, of course, fully explain Carlyle's works but it does reveal how this introspective and melancholy sage and champion of spiritual reality came to think as he did. No one can dispute the fact that the writer's temperament, idiosyncracies, and personal experiences have a crucial bearing on the nature of his writings.

Chapter II, based on the assumption that Carlyle was

the child of his age, provides a general background of English conditions painted, however, a trifle too briefly. Beneath the glimmering structure of Victorian optimism, moral certainty, and material prosperity lay unrest, uncertainty, and anxiety. Like so many of his fellow Victorians, he rebelled violently against the "circumambient chaos", the "endless calamity, disruption, dislocation, and confusion"¹⁸ of his day. We have a picture of a neurotic personality, ridden with internal conflicts, a product of a neurotic age, at once magnificently confident in the future and pathetically frightened of it. Since the forces of the age are directly related to the development of Carlyle's thought, it is essential to comment on the period itself.

Chapter III, closely related to the second chapter, describes Carlyle's reaction to the main trends of his time. England, Carlyle perceived, had become an open society and the absence of certainty and order produced bewilderment and frustration in his countrymen. Carlyle expressed in his social and political writings a longing for the return of the closed or authoritarian society.

Chapter IV is concerned primarily with an analysis of Carlyle's thoughts about the French Revolution, his purpose for writing about it, and the application of his philosophy of history to that event. It will be seen at once that criticism by someone writing in the twentieth century of a his-

¹⁸ Carlyle, Works, XX, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," 1.

torian who wrote in the mid-nineteenth century about events in the eighteenth is necessarily a three-point relationship and therefore subject to various strains. A discussion of Carlyle's treatment of Speeches and Letters of Oliver Cromwell follows in Chapter V. Carlyle's role as editor is assessed, his comments evaluated, and his view of the Protector examined. In typical fashion Carlyle, in his ambition to vindicate both the character and policy of his hero, makes wayward and exaggerated statements which positively invite comment. A more balanced interpretation will be offered, showing that Cromwell did not, in fact, carry out God's purpose on earth but responded, rather, to social, economic, and political pressures.

Chapter VI focuses on Carlyle's gigantic work, Frederick the Great, his last significant historical work. This work has value because Carlyle went to the original sources which other people had neglected but it suffers from undue bias. Carlyle did not attempt the work because he admired the cynical Prussian exponent of Realpolitik. Rather, he set out to illustrate to his contemporaries a state that was ideally organized and free from the strains he witnessed in his own society. The three main strands of Carlyle's philosophy of history, touched upon throughout this work, are subjected to a fuller and more systematic analysis in Chapter VII. The significance of biography and the 'great man' theory in history, as interpreted by Carlyle, the notion that history is

a universal and uninterrupted war between the Divine and evil forces of the world -- a movement from sham to reality-- and Carlyle's idea that history is instructive are discussed in some detail. The final chapter gives a summary of my findings and contains an argument that Carlyle, whatever his motives and weaknesses, has earned himself a rightful place among the great historians of the past.

Chapter I

The Sage of Chelsea

Carlyle has a unique quality which he himself did not understand and which his contemporaries failed to appreciate. Like Robert Burns, the Scottish national poet, he sprang from the people. He was born in 1795 among rude Scots peasant-folk in the village of Ecclefechan which he remembered affectionately all his life. This does not mean, however, that he admired the people to which he belonged. In point of fact he revolted against his own class as he did against his age. He was accepted by the "idle, game-preserving" aristocracy, and success and affluence wrought a far-reaching change upon his original austerity. He wasted years making a Hero out of Frederick II, and ostensibly ran after Lady Ashburton. Yet, there was no escaping his origin or his character. Privately he boggled, for he could never, even for the sake of fame, become an aristocratic idler. And though he ranted against "the multitudinous canaille", he remained a Scots Calvinist, a peasant, of the type that to this day is part of the glory of Scotland, with a stone-mason for a father.

Carlyle was a prophet, a philosopher, a "sage" in the sense that he expressed a view of life, even though he did not expound systems of metaphysics, logic, or ethics; even though, indeed, he did not expound at all, but communicated his thoughts with all the intricacies and subtleties that constitute an art. "Carlyle," notes B. E. Lippincott, "was

such a power in his day primarily because he appealed not to men's minds but to their emotions. And here his strength lay above all in his extraordinary ability to stir the moral feelings — he was nothing so much as a prophet.

Although he rejected the modes of abstract thought and proof, his vision did, in fact, spring from a vivid conception of the principles governing the workings of the world. He was convinced that rational deduction was not the sole means of expressing truth, that such knowledge was only a part, and an imperfect part, of wisdom which can be attained only by employing other than logical faculties. "Every Society, every Polity," Carlyle pointed out in Characteristics, "has a spiritual principle; is the embodiment, tentative and more or less complete, of an Idea" ² The world, he observed, was fundamentally a Spiritual and Infinite reality; the familiar material world of time and space was a world of semblances, temporary, trivial, overlying a world of fact — "True, Divine, and Eternal."

Carlyle's great conversion is well known from Sartor Resartus — how one day as he strolled down Leith Walk in Edinburgh his tortured and defiant spirit was suddenly "born again". It was at this moment that he passed from the destructive energies of the "Everlasting No" to the bliss of the "Everlasting Yea". But only briefly. He soon relapsed

¹ Victorian Critics of Democracy (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1938), p. 6.

² Carlyle, Works, XXVIII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iii, 13-14.

into the "Everlasting No" — no to parliamentary reform; no to "Mammon-worship"; no to "Exeter-Hall" sentimentalism; no to "the rotten carcass of Christianity"; no to the emancipation of the Jamaican Negroes. By the time he reached the end of his literary career his critical utterances turned into an angry, stormy, and almost incoherent attack upon the sins of the modern world.

Carlyle's writings, suggests Julian Symons, are likely to appear uncongenial to most contemporary readers, for they show how "an unorthodox Radical thinker became an advocate of extreme authoritarian rule."³ His judgment is perhaps too harsh but it cannot be denied that Carlyle started off on the moving stairway leading up to the Century of the Common Man. Then he lost heart and started furiously trying to step downwards — an undignified and futile enterprise. Carlyle belonged, at the beginning, to the small intellectual avant garde of the time. But his early radicalism quickly turned into defection. His respect for the masses faded into indifference; his hatred of the incompetent aristocracy changed into hope that from such an aristocracy might come the saviour of England; his generous view of human potentialities disappeared into a rigid doctrine of hero-worship.

Indeed, in his younger years Carlyle sympathized with the oppressed masses. He expressed their outlook. "Which was the greatest innovator," he asked in 1830, "which was

³Carlyle: Selected Works, Reminiscences and Letters (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955), p. 10.

the more important personage in man's history, he who first led armies over the Alps and gained the victories of Cannae and Thrasymene; or the nameless boor who first hammered out for himself an iron spade?"⁴ He himself was shaped by the years of High Tory reaction which followed the Napoleonic Wars and by the turbulent years when the masses straightened their backs and asked to be heard. Carlyle shared the Chart-ist bitter discontent although, of course, for different reasons. "A feeling very generally exists," he observed in Chartism, "that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it."⁵ His French Revolution represented the end of a society whose soul was dead and served as a warning of what might occur in England if the wealthy continued to oppress the poor.

Carlyle was one of many of his age who took up the mantle of prophecy. But he saw more clearly than any of his contemporaries that humanity itself was in danger of disintegration; he exposed, with devastating force, the whole Victorian idea of progress. He saw to the heart of the philosophical bewilderment of the newly scientific age. He perceived more clearly than his contemporaries the lie in the soul of a society organized just to pursue material prosper-

⁴Carlyle, Works, XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," ii, 86.

⁵Ibid., XXIX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iv, 118.

ity. There were the aristocrats, like Palmerston, who opposed reform and advised their subordinates to "Rest and be thankful!"; there were the industrialists who substituted the cash nexus for the complicated and personal relationships; there were the Whigs who believed that freedom can be "mechanically hatched and brought to light" through the political machinery of votes; there were the Radicals with their talk of progress and flattery of the mob. Against these practices, degrading and vulgar, he revolted so that the society of tomorrow might encompass new forms of excellence in life. He revolted against them because he did not believe they were a solution to the ills of society. "Call ye that a society," he thundered, "where there is no longer any

Social Idea extant; not so much as the Idea of a common Home, but only of a common over-crowded Lodging-house? Where each, isolated, regardless of his neighbour, turned against his neighbour, clutches what he can get, and cries 'Mine' . . .
 6

But when Chartism really stirred, Carlyle backed away. His feelings for humanity — so admired by Friedrich Engels and Charles Dickens, for instance, sank into an abyss of despair. He went sour — a disillusioned Radical turned Tory. It is difficult, of course, to explain why he drifted away from his noble position. What does seem likely is that as long as Carlyle believed civilization was still possible through the revival of old values, particularly those of the

⁶Ibid., 1, "Sartor Resartus," 185.

monk of the Bury St. Edmund's Convent, Abbot Samson, he remained in touch with his times. In Past and Present, for example, Carlyle asked the reader to imagine the "comparatively blessed" twelfth century as set out in the Chronicle of Jocelin de Brakelond. There were, Carlyle pointed out, no Poor Laws, no "monster Utilitaria", no scrambling after profits; instead, the spiritual principle asserted itself to promote order, obedience, and righteousness, and to give men a purpose in life. When Carlyle decided, however unconsciously, that modern England had become brutalized beyond salvage, when, that is, what he saw around him became divorced from his ideality, he lost whatever made him a prophet and sage and became a paranoid ranter.

He set himself up as a self-made Jehovah, thundering out his violent commandments. The abolitionists were "rabid Nigger-Philanthropists;" Heinrich Heine "a slimy and greasy Jew". Germany, "noble, patient, deep, pious, and solid" had become the "First Nation of the Universe," the "Queen of the Continent."⁷ As he became more authoritarian he lost his patience with those who contradicted him. "The intellect of a man who believes in the possibility of 'improvement' by such a method [as parliamentary reform]," he protested in Shooting Niagara: and After, "is to me a finished-off and shut-up intellectual, with which I would not argue: mere waste of wind between us to exchange words on that class of topics."⁸

⁷Ibid., XXX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," v, 59.

⁸Ibid., pp. 9-10.

The giddy multitude, in his opinion, must acknowledge that political power should be vested in the class obviously fitted by nature to use it wisely. "One thing I do know," he asserted in The Present Time, ". . . [is] That the few Wise will have, by one method or another, to take command of the innumerable Foolish" ⁹ Always firm on the issue of the right-thinking hero, he cried out for real leadership as the condition of anything better. "O, if thou really art my Senior, Seigneur," he demanded, "my Elder, Presbyter or Priest,

— if thou art in very deed my Wiser, may a beneficent instinct lead and impel thee to 'conquer' me, to command me! If thou do know better than I what is good and right, I conjure thee in the name of God, force me to do it; . . . Liberty requires new definitions. ¹⁰

He became progressively more bitter with the approach of the Mid-Victorian years. His prophetic countenance hardened in its irritation. He reprovved everything of his age — laissez-faire, machines, Utilitarianism, progress. Democracy discredited his concept of the hero; Darwinism scandalized him; the inner life, he felt, was dead. "Oh," he exclaimed in desperation, "shall not victory at last be to the handful of brave; in spite of the rotten multitudinous canaille, who seem to inherit all the world" ¹¹ Carlyle's last days were spent in an atmosphere of almost unrelieved depression.

⁹ Ibid., XX, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," 34.

¹⁰ Ibid., X, "Past and Present," 212-13.

¹¹ J. A. Froude, ed., Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881), p. 170.

II

Carlyle, the "censor of the age", displayed his general character when at the age of fourteen he walked one hundred miles to enter the University of Edinburgh. Here he began studies with half-hearted aspirations toward the ministry, but these were soon abandoned. Leaving the university without taking a degree, he tried in 1814 to make a living as mathematics tutor, first at Annan and later at Kirkcaldy. He soon discovered that teaching did not suit him and in 1819 he returned to Edinburgh University — this time to study law. Unable to feel any real meaning in life after three lonely and tortured years, he gave up law and gradually drifted into miscellaneous writing. Already he had begun to suffer — perhaps through early privations — from the dyspepsia which was to plague the rest of his life with gloom, melancholy, and depression.

Carlyle's writings before Sartor Resartus ranged over a wide variety of subjects. His earliest published writings were anonymous scientific contributions to the Edinburgh Philosophical Journal. In the troubled years that lay ahead he read voraciously and found refuge in the mists of German transcendentalism. He became acquainted with Johann Fichte, Johann Herder, Jean Paul Richter, and Johann Schiller, all of whom were practically unknown in England, and Johann Wolfgang Goethe became his spiritual master. Entering enthusiastically upon a study of the German writers, he moved

from science to biography and history and contributed a number of articles to David Brewster's Edinburgh Encyclopedia. He continued to translate and interpret foreign works, and in 1822 his essay on Goethe's Faust appeared in the New Edinburgh Review. His first serious task as translator of German literature came in 1824 with the appearance of Wilhelm Meister. The excellent Life of Schiller which appeared a year later revealed an original and creative mind at work. In 1827, German Romance, Carlyle's greatest achievement in translation made its appearance. In all of this work he found his own voice and his own style and established himself as a literary critic and as the leading popular interpreter of German literature and culture.

Thus inspired by German thought, Carlyle retired into the wilderness, like John the Baptist, to the lonely and forbidding Craigenputtock farm — "the dreariest spot in the British Dominions" — to develop his own ideas. It was here that he conceived of Sartor Resartus, or "The Tailor Repatched", consisting of a series of speculations on the conventions and shams of society by an imaginary Professor Teufelsdröckh. Essentially it was a record of his own spiritual adventures. The imaginary German philosopher merely acts as a mouthpiece for Carlyle who revealed first his personal struggles to overcome poverty, sickness, skepticism, and despair, and then emerges as a prophet to proclaim to his own generation its shortcomings and the remedies for them.

Through its extraordinary blend of wild humour, bitterness, spiritual sincerity, and imaginative contemplation, it achieved great popular success and became a unique work in English literature.

That Carlyle's ideas were strongly coloured by his study of German writers of the Romantic period has long been recognized. But it is fruitless to level against Carlyle the charge of "imitation" of such writers as Richter, for the undoubted similarities rest rather on similar philosophical assumptions. In German thought Carlyle sought confirmation and support for his own feelings and convictions of the spiritual nature of the world, in contrast with the materialistic or skeptical trend he found in English and Scottish thought. He taught himself. His ideas and his values sprang from his own efforts, and owed little to traditional culture, Calvinism, or German transcendentalism. His ideas were those of a man in revolt — cloudy, half-formed, organic, rooted in humanity, with little constructiveness to follow. Carlyle may have been indebted to Goethe, but he hardly comprehended his thoughts concerning the eternal riddle of the relation between man and his universe. Carlyle understood still less the deeper meanings of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and read him in the light of Fichte's moralism. Even Fichte, to whom Carlyle owed the form of enunciation of many of his doctrines, was known to him chiefly through a few of the more popular works. "Carlyle's debt to German thought," Louise

Merwin Young points out, "has been made the subject of sev-

eral critical studies. There is a general agreement that the debt is more truly one of affinities than of direct borrowings. His primary purpose in reading himself into German thought was to reassure himself regarding his approach to metaphysical ideas -- in other words, to secure a theoretical basis for convictions already held.¹²

Indeed the most striking quality in Carlyle is not his borrowing but his singular creativity and originality. He rejected not only the established ideas current in his own country but also the established forms of expression. His ideas and his vision of life are expressed through the medium of an extraordinary, grotesque, symbolic language that is clearly a revolt against his age. His writings, particularly the French Revolution, stand with Tristram Shandy and Ulysses as the most original prose works of their century. Like them, they express a dissatisfaction with the prevailing modes of describing experience or outlining truth; and with a seriousness born of despair they try to render experience more concretely without abstracting it. Carlyle evolved a style that denied logic or reason as a method of persuasion.

It is fair to say that most of Carlyle's stylistic devices were strictly his own innovation. When he wished his readers to sense the destruction which animates the world, he drew, like a Hebrew prophet, recurring images of fire, metaphors of water, and flashes of violence. No part of his prose

¹²Thomas Carlyle and the Art of History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939), pp. 191-2.

was unrelated to this purpose. His verbal marches and counter-marches in argument prepared the reader's mind for new assertions, while a repetition of Biblical language conveyed the notion of God and revived in the reader's mind a whole world of deeply rooted associations. The fascinating subject of Carlyle's wild imagery and forceful style has been explored most excellently by John Holloway who discusses how the tenets of Carlyle's faith were reinforced and conveyed by a variety of brilliant literary weapons.¹³

At no point does reasoned, analytical, and consecutive argument replace dramatic discussion or assertion. It was, indeed, largely against Voltaire's rationalism that Carlyle reacted. That he waged a courageous struggle against the eighteenth-century intellectualism is not surprising. Its rational religion was anathema to this born and bred Calvinist, and its urbanity, irreverence, and aristocratic assumptions offended his humble origins. Like Rousseau he smelt insincerity in every corner of salon society. He revolted against the meticulous, precise, rationalized explanation of Man and Nature, the irreverent ruthless individualism, the notion of the perfectability of man, and the mechanical, abstract formulation of human psychology.

From his earliest pronouncements to the closing pages of Frederick the Great where he exalted the King for not being "a Liar and a Charlatan as his Century was," Carlyle

¹³Victorian Sage (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1955), pp. 21-57.

battled the eighteenth century. To him the century of the Enlightenment represented negation and depredation, the counter to spiritual progress. This is particularly evident in his comparison of the end of the eighteenth century to a decaying organism. The death of an entire way of life, he held, underlay the chaotic French Revolution. "I should not have known what to make of this world," he once said to Froude, "if it had not been for the French Revolution."¹⁴

For Carlyle there was meaning only in the transcendental; all else was meaningless. "Adieu, dearest," he wrote to his wife, "take care of yourself, take courage, and sink deep into your own soul and you will there find comfort: deep in our souls is God."¹⁵ A passage like this is not literary embellishment. It is a definite affirmation of the spirituality of the universe. It matters little whether it be called mysticism or idealism. It was a "philosophy of the spirit," a faith in the immortally divine nature of the spirit of man.

Indeed, the message of Sartor Resartus is Believe! Believe in yourself — because the Divine essence is in you and pervades the world around you. The "open secret" of the Universe is available to all. Only an effort of will and a trusted intuition is necessary to experience that redeeming insight into the spiritual reality. A spiritual vision of

¹⁴Quoted in John Maccunn, Six Radical Thinkers (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), p. 174.

¹⁵Trudy Bliss, ed., Thomas Carlyle: Letters to his Wife (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1953), p. 141.

ourselves and the world cannot be apprehended in any purely intellectual way. Conventions, logic, and material events are illusory outer garments only, obliterating the Truth which lies "a little beyond". "To know; to get into the truth of anything," Carlyle pronounced, "is ever a mystic act, — of which the best logics can but babble on the surface." ¹⁶ The human mind is the substance of soul, divinely endowed with the essence and knowledge of God, and thus completely free. The universal Truth is not an observed, but a felt Truth, grasped in a moment of insight. "Submit," exclaimed Teufelsdröckh, submit to the discipline of the Divine Law.

III

It was in bitterness and poverty that Carlyle and his wife, Jane Welsh, whom he met through his friend Edward Irving and married in 1826, endured the solitudes of the Dumfriesshire moors. Then, in 1834 the Carlyles moved to London and settled in Cheyne Row, Chelsea, which became their permanent home. Their residence was comfortable — "a most massive, roomy, sufficient old house," according to Carlyle. From the outset Carlyle laboured unremittingly, beginning with the ambitious historical epic, The French Revolution, which he saw as an inevitable judgment upon the folly and selfishness of the monarchy and nobility. In Chartism he

¹⁶ Carlyle, Works, V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 47.

appeared as a bitter opponent of laissez-faire. He knew that the real questions lay deeper than radical doctrines of universal suffrage. "It never smokes but there is fire," was the motto he chose for Chartism.

The years 1837-40 were occupied with public lectures, the most successful of which was the fourth and last series, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History. Two years later he wrote Past and Present, "one stiff volume, treating of the grand 'Condition of England Question' . . . in a somewhat unexpected way."¹⁷ In 1845 Carlyle rehabilitated the great Protector in The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell: With Elucidations. His next important work was Latter-Day Pamphlets in which the bitter side of his nature was particularly prominent. The Life of John Sterling, containing some of Carlyle's most trenchant writing, appeared in 1851. The most ambitious and massive of Carlyle's works — The History of Friedrich II of Prussia, called Frederick the Great — had still to come. The first volume appeared in 1858, the sixth and last in March, 1865.

As Carlyle's literary fame mounted, his personal life declined into a curious sea of perpetual bickering. The Carlyle marital problems have been documented with devastating thoroughness and the issue has been the subject of several reputable studies. The main source for this side of Carlyle's

¹⁷Alexander Carlyle, ed., New Letters of Thomas Carlyle, Vol. 1 (London: Jane Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), pp. 282-3.

life is the private correspondence of Carlyle and Jane themselves. Both were inveterate letter-writers and recorders of their private thoughts, particularly about one another. Carlyle's fervid penitence after Jane's death, expressed in a long memoir and in notes to her letters, is also revealing. The works by Froude¹⁸ have led to the deplorable Carlyle-Froude controversy, while the letters and conversations of Geraldine Jewsbury,¹⁹ the fussy and effusive friend of the Carlyles', provide detailed but rarely uninteresting revelations.

The often expressed view that Jane, a vivacious, joyous, and talented creature was a martyr to an impotent, tyrannical, neurotic husband scarcely bears examination. Nor does the legend of the poor old sage, warm, passionate, and simple, turning slowly upon himself as a result of a frigid wife sound convincing. Nonetheless, that they were unhappy, often desperately so, cannot be denied. "I would have written yesterday, if I could have done anything on earth but cry," Jane once wrote to Helen Welsh. "I suppose 'the fact is,' as Carlyle says, 'that I am very unwell'. . . ." ²⁰

¹⁸ Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle, 2 vols. (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881); Thomas Carlyle, A History of his Life in London, 1834-81, 2 vols. (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884); A History of the First Forty Years of his Life, 1795-1834, 2 vols. (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1882); My Relations with Carlyle (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903).

¹⁹ Mrs. Alexander Ireland, ed., Geraldine Jewsbury: Selections from the Letters of Geraldine Endor Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892).

²⁰ Trudy Bliss, ed., Jane Welsh Carlyle: A New Selection of her Letters (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1949), p. 179.

The Carlyles had trouble keeping maids; they had thirty-four in thirty-two years. Indeed, while Jane treated these girls with benevolent protectiveness, they lived in squalor and suffered from overwork. The servants had to put up with many peculiarities on which the domestic ease of the Carlyles depended. Carlyle, for instance, liked to smoke his pipe last thing at night in front of the dying kitchen fire. This meant that the servants who slept in the kitchen were forced to wait shivering until he went to bed. Bugs, mice, and cockroaches were a constant irritation. Thea Holme vividly describes a scene in which Carlyle stamped his foot on the hearth-rug and called out furiously to a mouse: "Get along, sir!"²¹

That Carlyle was hypersensitive is surely the cause of half his despair. He was acutely sensitive to his own sufferings, to the muddle-headedness of other men, to his own incapacity to set the world to rights, and especially to noise. Quietness was essential to his work. Leigh Hunt, the poet, lived only a few paces away with a squalid household of children, while Miss Lambert's piano next door was unbearable. "Oh that horrible, squalling girl," Jane wrote her cousin, Jeanie Welsh, ". . . rattles me up with her accursed scales, vocal, and instrumental!"²² Carlyle endured it as long as he could, then banged on the wall with a poker. The scales

²¹The Carlyles at Home (London: Oxford University Press, 1965),

²²p. 120.
Ibid., p. 63.

and trills ceased abruptly.

And always there were minor ailments, depressions, and indigestion. The Carlyles dosed themselves incessantly, and it is proof of their fundamental strength that they did not die young from the ravages of mercury, castor oil, senna, and all the other purgatives which Carlyle had even persuaded himself were good for the nerves. With typical abandon Jane Carlyle drugged herself with morphia and morphine to kill the migraines, the insomnia and neuralgia, that were surely psychosomatic in origin.

The gentlemen who arrived at the house were of considerable distinction. Lord Tennyson once spent an evening of blissful, unbroken silence with his host. Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Forster, James Anthony Froude, Leigh Hunt, Charles Kingsley, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Dean Stanley were occasional visitors. Among women guests there were Harriet Martineau, Miss Rigby, and that tiresome and forgotten novelist, Geraldine Jewsbury.

From the outset there were marriage complications. When Jane accepted Carlyle as husband, the condescension was all on her side. She was his superior socially, and pretty and intelligent enough to have other suitors. Although she puffed on a pipe, dined alone in restaurants, and walked unaccompanied in the streets, she was, nonetheless, of professional middle class, the daughter of a much respected doctor, with a background of comfort, refinement, even culture. She

recognized the greatness in the Annandale peasant when few others did, and decided, without much affection for him, to become his wife. This was probably the basis of their subsequent incompatibility.

As the balance shifted, and Carlyle became ever more sought after and famous, Jane developed a feeling of resentment, envy, and jealousy. The disparity between Carlyle and his wife increased as he moved from the early radicalism of Sartor Resartus into his characteristic position of prophet of the age. Symbolically he would climb into his insulated room on the top floor of the house, which was supposed to shut out the crowing of cocks and other earthly noises, and there, on this mountain top, like the bearded Moses, he hammered out his philosophy of the spirit. While this agony of the spirit went on upstairs, Jane would preside downstairs over a gathering of witty and amusing people, herself the wittiest of them all. The temptation to allegorize this household is almost irresistible. If Carlyle was the prophet of his time, she was his "necessary evil", sly, talkative, fond of good company and admiration, malicious — his very spirit of contradiction.

It must be recognized, however, that there is a danger in exaggerating these differences. Jane Welsh was born to be dissatisfied. She was from birth greedy for something she never understood. A good deal of her self-tormenting came partly from frustration in finding no outlet for her intellect

other than in her letters, her conversations, and the trivialities of daily life, and partly from exasperations arising out of an unconsummated marriage. She married Carlyle because she had a streak of greatness in her that she could not express for herself, and hoped to fulfil that need vicariously. But this scheme soon dissatisfied her and reflected itself in the form of sleeplessness and nervous exasperation.

Similarly, Carlyle's failure to come to terms with his wife derived from a deeper cause. It stemmed from some spiritual incapacity which prevented him from achieving the serenity which much lesser minds have attained. In other words, it derived from an inability to relate his deep and abiding sense of the mystery of the universe to any corresponding sense in his own life. He was religious without a religion; a materialist enraged by his own materialism. Confined in the dark prison of egotism, he cried aloud for the light which never came. The God he so often invoked, the Eternity he so often proclaimed, the Spirituality he so often preached, seemed to have eluded him.

IV

In 1865, at age seventy, Carlyle became Lord Rector of Edinburgh University. The speech he delivered at his installation had the usual tone of high moral exhortation. It became an immediate success and was published under the title, On the Choice of Books. But this triumph ended in tragedy. Before he returned to London, news reached him that his wife

had been found dead in her carriage while driving in Hyde Park. The light of his life had gone out and his creative career was over. His last fifteen years were years of weariness, boredom and seclusion. His history, The Early Kings of Norway, which appeared in 1875, has little of the old fire and strength.

A few public causes gained his support in these fading years of his illustrious career. He was active in the defense of Governor Eyre, dismissed from his post in 1865 on account of the ruthlessness with which he put down the Negro rising in Jamaica. "Truly," he wrote in Shooting Niagara: And After, "one knows not whether less to venerate the Majesty's Ministers, who, instead of rewarding their Governor Eyre, throw him out of window to a small loud group, small as now appears, and nothing but a group or knot of rabid Nigger-Philanthropists, barking furiously in the gutter" ²³ The rise of Prussia excited him and he wrote to The Times in 1870 that Germany ought to be recognized as the Queen of the Continent.

Suffering from dyspepsia, he heaped upon himself bitter reproaches, and condemned himself for being too self-absorbed and for being responsible for his wife's unhappiness. He fell into a degree of depression almost amounting to despair, and became more than ever "a veritable Prophet, mourning in sack-

²³Carlyle, Works, XXX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," v, 12.

cloth and ashes the sins of the world." ²⁴ In his disillusioned estimation "all Europe, indeed the whole civilized world [was] in weltering and confused struggle and mutiny" ²⁵ He never did witness the forthcoming holocaust he predicted. He died in London on February 5, 1881 and although Westminster Abbey was offered for burial, he was buried, according to his wish, beside his parents at Ecclefechan.

Carlyle stirred the conscience of his age. He was one of the strongest moral forces in the literature of his time; he persuaded thousands to see their experiences in a spiritual context and to find new meaning in a monotonous and drab existence; he denounced without fear the optimism and materialism of the Victorians, their obsession with progress and delusions of righteousness. He did "not make much of 'Progress of the Species', as handled in these times of ours," he told the audience at his lectures on Heroes, nor did he think they would care to hear much about it, for "talk on that subject [was] too often of the most extravagant, confused sort." ²⁵

The Victorians, themselves full of doubt, enjoyed his rantings and reproaches, hoping that his strenuous exhortations had a message concealed in them somewhere. Emerson's repeated invitations to Carlyle for an American visit indicate

²⁴John W. Cunliffe, Leaders of the Victorian Revolution (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963), p. 47.

²⁵Carlyle, Works, V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 118.

that he regarded Carlyle for a time as a possible leader of the American Transcendentalists. Engels praised and translated him. Dickens dedicated Hard Times to him, and John Ruskin Munera Pulveris. Huxley wrote that Sartor Resartus led him to know that a deep sense of religion was compatible with an entire absence of theology. Carlyle stirred the heart of Walt Whitman and won the friendship of John Stuart Mill, who advanced him money for the continuation of The French Revolution after the unfortunate destruction of the first draft. At Oxford he found, recovering from the mystical quest of Tractarianism, men like Froude and Arthur Hugh Clough who, having followed John Henry Newman to the frontier of Rome and recoiled, were apt pupils of his transcendentalism. Charles Kingsley sought to translate his social criticism into the fiction of Yeast and Alton Locke. John Ruskin proceeded to impart the same lessons into the fact of the Guild of St. George. His spiritual doctrine lent itself readily to the religious principles of Broad Churchmen like Frederick Denison Maurice, Edward Stanley, and Frederick William Robertson. It guided Tennyson in his conflict with intellectual doubt and became the theme of triumph in Robert Browning's oft-repeated dramatic contests of the heart and the head.

Carlyle told the truth as he saw it, albeit with unrestrained bitterness and exaggeration, and thereby won not only the respect but also the affection of many of his contemporaries. Even in his old age the world heaped honors upon the

solitary and angry Carlyle. Queen Victoria honoured him with a personal interview and Benjamin Disraeli offered him a baronetcy, a pension, and the Grand Cross of the Bath, all of which he declined as "they would be an encumbrance, not a furtherance" to him. In 1874 Carlyle accepted the Order "Pour le Mérite" from Bismarck, and on his eightieth birthday he received an honorary degree from Harvard and a gold medal from the University of Edinburgh with which he had all his life been associated.

Unknown to himself, Carlyle was the most Victorian of Victorians, outliving such great figures as Dickens, George Eliot, Mill, Lord Macaulay, and William Makepeace Thackeray. He was weaker and more sensitive than they, and while he spoke as one of them in the 1830's and early 1840's, he proved at length a misfit who took the wrong road. Realizing that what he taught was either misunderstood or ignored, his voice grew more strident as he reproached his contemporaries for failing to see the waves beating or hear the winds roar. He became what George Meredith has called a "heaver of rocks" rather than a shaper.²⁶ He had the misfortune to be born into a chaotic world; of growing to manhood amidst constant wars, revolution, and reaction; of witnessing with aversion reform movements scarcely distinguishable from revolutions.

Here indeed was a Victorian whose whole life was one

²⁶ Quoted in Carolyn Washburn Houtchens, and Lawrence Huston Houtchens, The English Romantic Poets and Essayists (London: University of London Press, Ltd., 1966), p. 336.

long tempestuous voyage, whose works bear witness to that struggle and despair. Not a poet proper, he had the imagination of a poet; not a novelist, he successfully dealt in fiction. He was rather a "sage", an essayist, a social reformer, a historian, although it is difficult to place him properly in the development of historical thought. The one thing his contemporaries agreed upon, however, was his angry assault on the trends of his century and critics to this day continue to find fresh evidence of it. He was the word-painter and unsuccessful savior of a society in shipwreck.

Chapter II

Thomas Carlyle and his World

Any enquiry into the historical works of Thomas Carlyle involves, out of necessity, a comprehension of the age of which he was a part, the age in which he saw so much brutality, the age he tried to recreate in his own image. It goes without saying that Carlyle sought to express notions, for instance, about the impending ruin, the spiritual values of life, and the re-birth of society. But his faith in both the dignity of man and the ultimate triumph of justice cannot be properly and vividly expounded without taking into account what Walter E. Houghton has called "the Victorian frame of mind".

It is generally acknowledged that there existed an intimate connection between what Carlyle produced and the age in which he produced it. Since Carlyle was a product of Victorian England, he presumably reflected the sentiments of that age. He was part and parcel of his time. He captured and felt his world pulsing in himself.

The age of which he was a part affected the whole of Carlyle's vision. It affected his sympathies; it affected his values; it affected his sense of the probable; it affected the nature of the problems that confronted him. His age circumscribed his personality, his conception of reality, his experiences, his perception, his ways of thought. It structured his inner world, imposed boundaries on his behaviour, and limited, drastically, the effect of his will on the course of

history.

It may be argued that Carlyle had so much that was idiosyncratic, so much that was not natural to his age, that it would be more realistic to forget the background and present him as a unique case. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that there is no real contradiction here. Only two approaches are open to the critical historian. He can investigate the significance for Carlyle of the age in which he lived; or he can attempt to study the inner workings of the self as a unique phenomenon, not to be explained by reference to any generalization historians have made about the period. Each approach, of course, may yield new knowledge and new insights. But they must be inter-related so as to make the greatest contribution to the understanding of the problem, for it is clear that Victorian England and Carlyle illustrated each other. Either approach developed alone, to the exclusion of the other, is liable to lead to undesirable distortions and misconceptions.

II

Victorian England took its shape under the impact of the tremendous revolutionary upheavals which characterized the period between 1750 and 1830. For decades England lived in the shadows of the French Revolution. France turned violently away from the eighteenth century and waved Europe onward to make a similar break. The harsh challenge of the revolution broke in upon the English established order, threat-

ening dissolution, disorder, and the collapse of familiar values and traditions. The aristocratic mode in political life and the Christian mode in personal life, with their emphases upon permanence and obedience were severely disrupted. The Industrial Revolution, an inheritance from the "polite" eighteenth century, did even more violence to the established order. It gave rise to the vast manufacturing and commercial cities with swollen populations miserably fed and housed. An agrarian and balanced way of life, essentially feudal in nature, was being forced to give way to a new social organization.

The Reform Bill of 1832 proved that the English traditional political system and the eighteenth-century constitution were by no means sacred, and that the franchise was, in fact, alterable. Since it gave the old order a severe jolt, the Reform Bill may be regarded as the event that opened the Victorian Age. The accession, itself, of Victoria in 1837 coincided with an acceleration of technological invention, industrial and urban expansion, the construction of railways, and furious economic competition. Politically, "Peel, Palmerston, Russell, and Aberdeen, all of them pre-Victorians, [were] in no haste to make way for their successors," but, in literature, it was only a matter of time "before the early Victorian lions began to roar and the early Victorian nightingales to sing."¹

¹W. N. Medlicott, ed., From Metternich to Hitler: Aspects of British and Foreign History 1814-1939 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 75.

The Victorian, if he were perceptive, must have seen his age in perpetual motion. He saw, for instance, that the conventional age was rapidly disappearing and a new age was appearing — a thrusting, blustering, rowdy age, facing disaster at one moment and anticipating peace on earth the next. "So widespread and so rapid were the changes wrought by the nineteenth century in the material conditions of living," suggests Jerome Hamilton Buckley, "that no one, however much he might wish to dwell in the spirit, could altogether escape a sense of almost physical exhilaration or bewilderment rushing in upon him."²

England was in one of her most difficult times of transition. The Victorian society found itself in flux; contradictions abounded everywhere. Behind middle class prosperity and respectability, for example, cowered lower class poverty, child labour, and shivering streetwalkers. "English society was poised on a double paradox which its critics, within and without, called hypocrisy," asserts G. M. Young. "Its practical ideals were at odds with its religious professions, and its religious belief was at issue with its intelligence."³

That the nineteenth century was a period of tremendous change is an observation about which there is extraordinary

²The Triumph of Time (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 9.

³Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 16.

consensus. "The Queen's reign," affirms G. Kitson Clark, began with "bishops in cauliflower wigs and the great ones of the world driving in coaches with footmen behind . . . [and] ends with expensive people driving in motor cars . . . ; it starts with gentlemen fighting duels . . . [and] ends with gentlemen playing golf."⁴ The Queen's name has been chosen, G. M. Young points out, "to impose an illusory show of continuity and uniformity on a tract of time where men and manners, science and philosophy, the fabric of social life and its directing ideas, changed more swiftly perhaps, and more profoundly, than they have ever changed in an age not sundered by a political or a religious upheaval."⁵

Transition or social change involves a cultural phenomenon that entails the creation of new wants resulting from the acceptance of a new value system, and a willingness to change traditional patterns of life. It means that transitional man can imagine and hope for a better life, but in his mind this exciting possibility is balanced against old doubts and fears. The literate elite, for instance, may talk of progress with fluency and apparent conviction, but latent within them is a conflict between new modes of action and ingrained habits and values of the traditional society. No matter how passionately in one part of their being men want to see their societies change, they are capable of sustaining

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The Making of Victorian England (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 30.

⁵Young, p. 181.

psychologically only a limited range of change. They instinctively cling to traditional elements in society as a source of security where much else about them is changing. It is within this framework of apprehension, fear, and condescension that the Victorian mind must be seen.

To the Victorians it appeared that the ordered English society, based on the village, the manor house, and the cottage was all but destroyed and in its wake came machines, fragmentation, and anarchy. The Victorian gentleman, moreover, feared the eruption of the primitive drives in himself for, he felt, if the social structure collapsed, the conventional moral life could not be sustained.

"Though the Victorians never ceased to look forward to a new period of firm convictions and established beliefs," Walter E. Houghton contends, "they had to live in the meantime between two worlds, one dead or dying, one struggling but powerless to be born, in an age of doubt."⁶ The sense of perpetual change, of the passage of time, was central to the intellectual life of Victorian England. The Victorians found themselves torn by doubt, spiritually bewildered, and lost in a troubled universe. Intellectually and emotionally they placed their faith in progress and waged a desperate struggle against the power of decay. Indeed, as Houghton rightly concludes, "the Victorians reacted to their age with hope and dismay, optimism and anxiety."⁷ They surveyed

⁶The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 10.

⁷Ibid., p. 23.

their world with alternate hope and fear, with exultation that accompanies the idea of progress and the terror that attends the assumption of progress, for they seemed not to understand that death and birth are frequently two aspects of the same process. Nearly every decline, it may be perceived, is also a rise, but the Victorians were too close to their own problems to see this double character, at once constructive and destructive, of any transitional age.

The age, of course, was swirling with ideas. The Victorian conscience was alive and working. Articulate Victorians challenged popular opinion and, in the end, guided it. But behind the blustering optimism of the Victorians there was a deep sense of the need for a renovated faith in some intellectually acceptable creed, and for a sober inspection and improvement of social and political conditions. Two great polar ideas, apparently irreconcilable, superimposed themselves upon the Victorians with unusual clarity — the idea of progress and the idea of decadence. As Buckley so aptly states, the Victorians "felt the menace of time almost as much as its promise; and the comfortable notion of progress was often forced to do battle with the darker concept of decadence."⁸

These two intellectual tendencies could not be reconciled because, by and large, the Victorian mind was dogmatic, rigid, and authoritarian. It tended to follow a narrow one-

⁸Buckley, p. 70.

sided line of thought, to rush into extreme and extravagant views, and to divide issues into tight true-false, good-bad, right-wrong categories. "It was a mind," observes Houghton, "that in various ways was bred by the breakdown of traditional thought and existence of a mass of new ideas, old ideas, or a mixture of both, on every conceivable subject; with the result that it chose one truth to cling to rigidly and insist upon dogmatically."⁹ The Victorians asserted theories as facts and possibilities as certainties because there was no possible middle ground. In a period when political, religious, and moral principles had to be re-examined and the masses cried out for guidance there was no time for flexibility and compromise. There was time only for extreme opinion, categorical judgment, and powerful pronouncement.

III

Progress was everywhere evident in Victorian England. England happened to be the dominant world power possessing a great navy, a great empire, and great overseas trade and investments. She was the power that had "stopped" Napoleon, ruled India, opened up China, took a major share in the scramble for Africa, consistently thwarted French schemes, and prevented Russian expansion in the Balkans, Central Europe, and the Middle and Far East. It is, therefore, no accident that the idea of progress was a dominant theme throughout the century. "The history of England," wrote Lord

⁹Houghton, p. 162.

Macaulay, "is emphatically the history of progress. It is the history of a constant movement of the public mind, of a constant change in the institutions of a great society."¹⁰

In History of England this Whig apostle of progress proceeded to demonstrate that the 1840's were the happy years which witnessed the end to a drama of suspense and fear and marked the beginning of the good and comforting life. In contemporary England, he maintained, virtue emerged supreme over the evil and threatening elements. Macaulay's work received an enthusiastic reception. The Victorians, particularly the Mid-Victorians, responded with satisfaction to Macaulay's frame of mind and sometimes even seem to have echoed his language. Dr. Arnold, Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Kingsley, John Stuart Mill, Henry Morley, and Herbert Spencer, for instance, reaffirmed the idea of progress, although in their different ways and measured by rigid standards, as a primary dogma of the Victorian period.

The Tory trust in the Crown, the Church, the aristocracy, and other established institutions did not altogether prevent a gradual relaxation of the oligarchical control of government. The Radicals and humanitarians — Lord Brougham, John Bright, Richard Cobden, John Arthur Roebuck, Lord Shaftesbury — consistently challenged the legal, social, and constitutional order of "universal harmony". Indeed, after the Chartist disturbances the Victorians enjoyed a new sense

¹⁰"Sir James Mackintosh," Critical and Historical Essays, Vol. 2 (London: Methuen & Co., 1903), p. 72.

of order and security. In 1867 and again in 1885 the franchise was extended to the lower classes. In 1870 a system of education on a broad democratic basis was established. Trade unions obtained organizational and bargaining rights. England continued to drift away from the revolution which many individuals anticipated and the Mid-Victorian years were a remarkable period of tranquility and equipoise. The new horrors of industrialization were gradually mitigated or removed by legislation, and most workers, undeniably, enjoyed better food, clothing, and housing than did their ancestors. Improvements whetted their desire for further reform and this new state of mind, in turn, reflected itself in notable advances in sanitation, local government, and organized recreation.

These hopeful and optimistic trends may be attributed, in part, to the power of Evangelicalism. It penetrated and pervaded all spheres of life. It was the strongest binding force in the nation. It imposed cleanliness, thrift, and industry on the proletariat and social responsibility and a passion for success on the gentleman. The Victorians did not, of course, discover Evangelicalism. They inherited it from the days of John Wesley. Elie Halévy, the French historian, pays a striking tribute to the Evangelical piety of the Victorians. "Men of letters," he notes, "disliked the Evangel-

icals for their narrow Puritanism, men of science for their intellectual feebleness. Nevertheless during the nineteenth century Evangel-

ical religion was the moral cement of English society. It was the influence of the evangelicals which invested the British aristocracy with an almost Stoic dignity, restrained the plutocrats . . . and placed over the proletariat a select body of workmen enamoured of virtue and capable of self-restraint. ¹¹

Just as Evangelicalism dominated the ethics and morals of the Early and Mid-Victorians, so Utilitarianism dominated their political and economic thought. It justified the economic process that had been so haphazardly erected. It enabled men who controlled the destinies of England to rid themselves of moral and intellectual restraints, to break with the medieval tradition of a moral and purposive society, held together by mutual inter-dependence from Crown to the humblest labourer. Clearly, the Utilitarian ethic was one of the most influential and pervasive forces of the period. In the field of government it meant non-intervention; in commerce it meant free trade and competition; for the individual it meant conduct based upon self-interest. Efficiency was the underlying principle of Utilitarianism. An application of this philosophy, it was felt, was the correct path to the abolition of muddle and waste, of slums, disease, and hunger, that deprived men of their human dignity. John Stuart Mill emerges as the best utilitarian mind of the time, always keeping his perspective, seldom being lured into dogmatism, never losing his firm conception of society as a whole, and always

¹¹A History of the English People 1830-1841 (London: T. Fisher Unwin Limited, 1927), p. 166.

listening to reason. In his works On Liberty and Principles of Political Economy he conveys confidence in the conceptions of individualism, the state, and indeed, liberty and truth.

It is not surprising, therefore, that it was in 1859 that Darwin produced his Origin of Species, nor that Darwinism enjoyed such popularity. Evolution, as it was then understood, was seen as ethically good, since it brought man closer to moral and material perfection. The concept of evolution involved the conviction that the meaning of life lay not so much in present achievement as in continued onward aspiration. The hero of Lord Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" clearly expressed this optimism:

"When I dipt into the future, far as human eye
could see;
Saw the vision of the future, and all the
wonder that would be." ¹²

The idea of progress, however illusory and evasive, acted as a spur to fresh creative effort. Indeed, Robert Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra assured his listeners:

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:" ¹³

¹²"Locksley Hall," The Poems of Lord Tennyson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1933), p. 189.

¹³"Rabbi Ben Ezra," The Poetical Works of Robert Browning, Vol. IV (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1894), p. 109.

IV

For the majority of Victorians, however, the idea of progress had altogether lost its authority and the idea of decadence grew steadily more urgent and immediate. A mood of despondency and a deep malaise pervaded Victorian thought and letters. In the 1860's James Anthony Froude, fearful of the evil days ahead, warned his readers that they lived "in times of disintegration, and none can tell what will be after us."¹⁴ In the next decade John Ruskin exclaimed with dismay that "the British nation [was] at present unhealthy, poor, and likely to perish, as a power, from the face of the earth."¹⁵

The forces of change appeared to have crushed the human will. Each successive extension of the franchise, for instance, was held by Robert Lowe, the opponent of the Reform Bill of 1867, to be an immense national disaster arising out of colossal destructive forces. The Victorian gentleman was especially dismayed, for three fresh problems were now introduced which haunted and vexed him. First, the poor were newly aware of themselves as a class, by virtue of their vastly increased numbers, their congregation in the urban areas, and the sharpened senses that came from new forms of deprivation. Second, deriving from the first, the collective poor had a new knowledge of the rich, new because the richness of the

¹⁴"The Science of History," Short Studies on Great Subjects (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898), p. 37.

¹⁵"Fors Clavigera," The Works of John Ruskin, XXVIII (London: George Allen, 1907), Letter 67, 638.

rich became more noticeable as the poor became more aware of their collective poverty. Third, the staggering population growth among the poor and their gathering in the cities were visible not only to themselves but to the rich.¹⁶

London became a stinking city with "rookeries" where the poor swam in their own filth, a city sodden with garbage. On certain days, it is alleged by E. P. Thompson, the stench of the Thames at Westminster made it impossible to keep open the windows of the House of Commons, and as late as the 1850's an evening stroll by the waters sometimes resulted in sudden fever.¹⁷ Even the wealthiest homes were infested with cockroaches, lice, and rats. Indeed, there never was a Merry England. There was, rather, a battlefield where a nation fought neurosis, barbarism, and greed.

"O life unlike to ours!" cried Matthew Arnold to the Scholar Gypsy:

"Who fluctuate idly without term or scope,
Of whom each strives, nor knows for what he strives,
And each half lives a hundred different lives:
Who wait like thee, but not, like thee, in hope."¹⁸

For John Keble, John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey, and the little tractarian group of Oxford clerics, the spiritual, social, and political confusion of Victorian England made life unbearable. Led by a profound spiritual instinct they re-

¹⁶Michael Wolff, "Victorian Study: An Interdisciplinary Essay," *Victorian Studies*, VIII (Sept., 1964), 61.

¹⁷The Making of the English Working Class (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1965), pp. 318-31.

¹⁸"The Scholar-Gypsy," Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), p. 278.

treated into the comfort of the Medieval Church. The higher meaning of life they sought could not be found in the England of their day. The melancholy and pessimism of the age was almost overwhelming. "Can a world," argued Anthony Trollope in his Autobiography, "retrograding from day to day in honesty, be considered to be in a state of progress?"¹⁹

It cannot be denied that industrialization imposed rigid controls over the human will. Machines set the standard of performance and product — telling the worker when to start working, when to stop, what to do, and how to do it. For the first time the clock became the regulator of both human and mechanical activity. An ugly fact exposed itself to the Victorians: machinery was controlling them more than they were controlling machines. Indeed, as labour became a mechanically regulated commodity, man lost part of himself.

It can be easily recognized that industrialization created a catastrophic dislocation in the lives of the lower classes. Before the industrial transformation the feudal peasant enjoyed a basic economic security. He may have had a minimum of legal and political rights, but he "belonged" to a plot of land. The enclosure movement dispossessed the peasant of his land, and the industrial revolution transformed him into a worker. The worker found that his economic security was completely at the mercy of an employer, and the

¹⁹An Autobiography (London: Williams & Norgate Ltd., 1946), p. 308.

employer, in turn, had to meet the ruthless competition of an impersonal market. The industrialist found himself subject to economic depression and inflation, both of which he failed to understand, to changes of demand for his product, and to inventions that could make his product quickly obsolete. In contrast to pre-industrial, medieval conditions, few Victorians paid much attention to traditionalism or to the idea of a just price. Unquestionably, as the Victorian found himself partially freed from the binding limitations of tradition he lost his sense of security and rootedness in the process.

V

Carlyle, like many of his contemporaries, perceived the basic trends of his age and rebelled against them. "We know the opinion on this subject of our philosopher Mr. Carlyle," asserted Trollope. "If he be right, we are all going straight away to darkness and dogs."²⁰ Indeed, Carlyle felt so strongly about democracy, industrialization, and laissez-faire that his words tumbled over themselves. His social and political writings, however, reflect not an original political and social theorist but an original writer.

Carlyle shared the anxiety and perplexity of Matthew Arnold and Ruskin, for example, but his response was more strident and he treated his readers with a greater dogmatism. He saw himself as a sage, eminent in wisdom, prudence, and

²⁰Ibid., p. 308.

good judgment, and therefore refused to consider contrary notions and beliefs. He insisted that his own views, although seldom resting upon reasoned argument, should be considered by his countrymen as absolutely right.

Carlyle's authoritarian attitude is easy enough to explain. He stressed the moral order of the universe and the absolute laws of God because he himself, like his audience, was plagued with inner conflict and doubt. "Man is, properly speaking," he stated, "based upon Hope. He has no other

possessor but Hope; this world of his is emphatically the 'Place of Hope'. What, then, was our Professor's possession? We see him, for the present, quite shut-out from Hope 21

It should be noted, further, that at a time when Victorian society was in rapid transition — when traditional beliefs and established authorities underwent reappraisal — men were urged to state their own schemes of reconstruction and to defend them. "The discussion," Houghton correctly contends, "might have been more balanced and rational if the issues at stake had not seemed so crucial that they activated intense emotions of attachment and hostility."²² According to this view Carlyle could not possibly have approached his work in a moderate and dispassionate manner for clearly the need to focus upon and to pursue a particular line of thought remained too imperative.

²¹Carlyle, Works, I, "Sartor Resartus," 129.

²²Houghton, p. 162.

Chapter III

Carlyle's Treatment of Contemporary England

Carlyle "has come forward as a teacher of mankind,"
Froude wrote of Carlyle in his biography. "He has claimed

'to speak with authority and not as the Scribes.'
He has denounced as empty illusion the most fa-
vourite convictions of the age. No concealment
is permissible about a man who could thus take
on himself the character of a prophet and speak
to it in so imperious a tone.¹

Although Carlyle was at first reluctant to enter into social and political writings, his early essay, Signs of the Times, shows that he was being drawn that way by the unrelieved condition of the poor and the ready applicability of his "Everlasting Yea". This essay may safely be regarded as Carlyle's first great effort to pose as a crusader for the rights of "most men and women" against a selfish and tyrannical minority. It is not, however, altogether correct to attribute to Carlyle a definite social and political philosophy. He was critical rather than constructive, in rebellion against the Victorian cult of progress.

He focused upon social discontent and gave it expression in a way which attracted attention. His thoughts were not original, nor subtle, nor difficult. They were, rather, simple and sincere but Carlyle uttered them with such a fierce invective that he made them deceptively striking. To say

¹Thomas Carlyle: A History of his Life in London 1834-1881,
Vol. I (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), p. 4.

many bitter things about his own generation was his self-appointed mission. It was he, suggests A. W. Evans, who made the "Condition-of-England-Question" the key issue of the day, "and his strictures upon idle aristocracy sank deeply into the public mind and gave currency to the conviction that social advantages involve social duties, and that those who have inherited wealth and power are called upon to do something to justify their position."²

After careful examination, however, it may be readily seen that Carlyle was doing what many of his contemporaries — Arnold, Arthur Clough, Dickens, Disraeli, Kingsley — were also doing in their different ways. He was criticising a society that obviously deserved to be criticized. Victorian society, it seemed to him, had retreated into irrationality and disorder. It sank into a dark and dangerous tunnel created by the Industrial Revolution with which the nation had to come to terms before it could emerge into the daylight and prosperity of the Mid-Victorian years.

The hungry Forties were a particularly disturbed and crucial period. Crop failures in Norfolk, East Anglia, and Suffolk, for example, and potato blight in Ireland led to widespread distress and discontent. There was mass unemployment on an unprecedented scale arising out of mass migrations into the cities and an imbalance between production and distribution. The price of corn soared and gave birth

²Carlyle: Representative Selections (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1913), p. xliii.

to the middle class campaigns of the Anti-Corn Law League. The collapse of Owenism, the limited measures of the Reform Bill of 1832, and the continued ruling class distrust of the working classes found expression in the Chartist Movement that roused the country. In Ireland the Young Ireland party of Davis and Gavin Duffy was beginning to stir.

As Carlyle looked upon England from his retreat in Chelsea it was a spectacle of deep-seated social disorganization that he saw. The problems, as he interpreted them, were deeper and more far-reaching than the "do-nothingism" of the Whigs and Tories could possibly solve. The England that the Victorians had created, he alleged, was a country of full purses and full poor-houses, of superfluous wealth and over-production where clothes could not find backs and backs could not find clothes, where machines were preferred to men, where there was endless work to be done and willing workers sought in vain for work to do. It was an England dismembered by protection, free trade, agrarian outrages, parliamentary reform, working-class agitation, radicalism, and factory legislation. It was an England that was in flux and adrift, where everything was out of step with everything else, an England ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-governed, discontented, and heading for disaster. Carlyle saw all this, felt it, and called for a reorganization of society.

"At first sight," writes John Maccunn, "his politics puzzle. He is not Tory, nor Whig, nor Radical (in

the ordinary sense of the word) . . . Carlyle was all his life a believer in aristocracy, but, as happens sometimes with other believers in aristocracy, like Plato, Burke and Coleridge, his tributes to the natural aristocracies of insight and of worth are the bitterest of satires upon the aristocracy of titles, pedigrees, broad acres, sport and luxury. ³

Indeed Carlyle was especially struck by the dereliction of duty of the aristocracy and as his thinking developed he called out to this privileged class to equip itself for the correct exercise of power, to make itself an active and responsible governing class, and to purge itself of impotence. Since he assumed that in fact government was the responsibility of the few he was above all anxious that the right ones should be chosen, "the fire pillars", endowed with exceptional qualities of mind and character. Carlyle's appeal to the upper class, it should be noted, ended in failure, however. "The call was addressed by Carlyle to the aristocracy," suggests Raymond Williams, "but it was most heeded in the middle class" ⁴

The Signs of the Times, published in 1829, was Carlyle's first sound and comprehensive contribution to the social thought of his time. It stated his general position which was to remain the basis of much of his subsequent social and political criticism. Carlyle focused on one main

³ Six Radical Thinkers (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), pp. 142-3.

⁴ Culture and Society 1780-1950 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 81.

issue — Industrialization. "Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet," he noted, "we

should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of the word⁵

His response to industrialization was bitter indeed.

"Nothing is now done directly, or by hand;" he stressed, "all

is by rule and calculated contrivance Our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster.⁶

The social changes, arising out of the industrial, came in for his disapproval for he clearly recognized how "wealth has more and more increased, and at the same time gathered itself more and more into masses, strangely altering the old relations, and increasing the distance between the rich and the poor" ⁷ Carlyle sensed with terrible clarity that "not the external and physical alone is now managed by

machinery, but the internal and spiritual also For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart as well as in hand.⁸

⁵Carlyle, Works, XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays,"

ii, 59.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 60.

⁸Ibid., pp. 60-3.

Nonetheless, Carlyle's over-all observation was that of hope, hope "that Mechanism is not always to be our hard taskmaster, but one day to be our pliant, all-ministering servant; that a new and brighter spiritual era is slowly evolving itself for all men."⁹ This optimism, expressed by Carlyle at the age of thirty-four, is very much in the spirit of the "Everlasting Yea". "There is a deep-lying struggle in the whole fabric of society; a boundless grinding collision of the New and Old . . . ," he concluded in "Signs of the Times". "Political freedom is hither the object of these

efforts; but they will not and cannot stop there. It is towards a higher freedom than mere freedom from oppression by his fellow-mortal, that man dimly aims.¹⁰

Carlyle conveyed this balanced and hopeful note into Chartism which he wrote in 1839 on the eve of the troubled "forties". Unlike Signs of the Times which is a bitter attack on industrialization, Chartism is a full-scale assault on the laissez-faire doctrine. The Chartists are scarcely mentioned in this political pamphlet nor is Carlyle in sympathy with their demands. He is concerned primarily with the circumstances which led to the Chartist movement and on this matter he is both persistent and thorough.

It may readily be seen that the toil-worn masses commanded his generous sympathy. "Nowhere can we find a more

⁹Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 82.

genuine human feeling, more earnest concern for the submerged tenth, more bitter disgust with a heartless industrialism masquerading as liberty . . . ,"¹¹ contends Herbert L. Stewart. His sympathy for the poor, however, did not extend to pauperism and vagabondage. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834¹² received his qualified support. It was "harsh but salutary . . . a protection of the thrifty labourer against the thriftless and dissolute; a thing inexpressibly important."¹³ At the same time the Poor Law showed that the government was prepared to provide guidance and assume a social responsibility. The people, Carlyle insisted, have the right to expect good government. "Surely," Carlyle held, "of all 'rights of man,' this right of the ignorant man to be guided by the wiser, to be, gently or forcibly, held in the true course by him, is the indisputablest."¹⁴

Carlyle then proceeded to pose the crucial question — whether "the poor man that is willing to work [can] always find work, and live by that work."¹⁵ The reply, of course, is in the negative and Carlyle surmised he had the explanation. "That self-cancelling Donothingism and Laissez-faire should have got so ingrained into our Practice," he pointed out,¹⁶ "is the source of all these miseries."

¹¹"Carlyle and his Critics," The Nineteenth Century and After, LXXXVI (Sept., 1919), 507.

¹²Carlyle, Works, XXIX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iv, 130.

¹³Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 167.

Carlyle began Chartism with characteristic insight.

"We are aware that, according to the newspapers," he wrote,

Chartism is extinct; that a Reform Ministry has 'put down the chimera of Chartism' in the most felicitous effectual manner. So say the newspapers; — and yet, alas, most readers of newspapers know withal that it is indeed the 'chimera' of Chartism, not the reality, which has been put down The living essence of Chartism has not been put down. Chartism means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad It is a new name for a thing which has had many names, which will yet have many. ¹⁷

Carlyle was not unaware of the fact that the intellectual ferment and discontent were in part, at least, a struggle for democracy. But to him democracy was no solution at all. Let all men see, he warned, "whose sight is good for much, that in democracy can lie no finality; that with the completest winning of democracy there is nothing yet won, —
¹⁸ except emptiness, and the free chance to win!" He saw in democracy an expression of the laissez-faire spirit, a cancelling of order and good government and an invitation to
¹⁹ social, economic, and political anarchy. Carlyle called for

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 118-9.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁹The meaning of freedom in Carlyle's terms has been examined by Erich Fromm in Escape from Freedom (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1942). The concept of loneliness and the sense of personal disorientation, resulting from the freedom to act according to one's own will, are his dominant theme. Freedom, as it is understood in a highly competitive and sophisticated society, results, Fromm suggests, in a profound loss of one's own identity, anxiety, and isolation. Fromm applies this psychoanalytic theory to the rise of Nazi Germany and argues, rather convincingly, that the growth of totalitarianism may be attributed to an anxiety-laden search for psychological security.

more government, not less; more order, not less. This, he perceived, was the authentic demand and need of the English people.

There is, of course, a fair degree of validity in Carlyle's argument. Whenever democracy is considered solely as a political expedient it is open to Carlyle's charge. The Reform Bill of 1832 satisfied only a few and antagonized many. It was a half-measure, a political palliative, a stop-gap. The Bill, it is true, gave the old order a severe jolt but apart from that it did very little. The electorate was not significantly increased. It was still corrupt. The electors expected to be paid for their votes. Local influences still counted for more than did party allegiance. Landed aristocrats continued to be returned to parliament, and old abuses, particularly in the small decaying boroughs were preserved. Many constituencies remained the property of a single magnate and the Crown still used its patronage to win votes for the candidates it favoured.

The chaotic English conditions, in Carlyle's view, were essentially part of the same movement that gave birth to the French Revolution. "These Chartisms, Radicalisms, Reform Bill, Tithe Bill, and infinite other discrepancy, and acrid argument and jargon that there is yet to be, are our French Revolution,"²⁰ he asserted. Distressed though he was, he yet expressed the hope that England might settle her sore

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 149-50.

problems by discussion rather than by bloodshed, that "God grant that we, with our better methods, may be able to trans-²¹act it by argument alone."

Carlyle's Past and Present, written at the mature age of forty-eight, though hopeful in tone, is not nearly as sympathetic as his earlier works. "The manner is more exhortative and shows impatience," suggests Carlisle Moore, "especially in the chapters 'The English' and 'Democracy' where he alternately praises and condemns."²² It must be admitted, however, that Past and Present came forth at a time of great distress, fierce agitation, and clashing ideologies and became inevitably symptomatic of its time. The conditions under which Carlyle wrote this work compelled him to surrender his sympathetic position and to reflect upon his age with bitterness and satire.

Past and Present is a piercing glance at an ideal medieval order and a no less acute condemnation of contemporary England. The work opens with "Proem", a very impressive beginning indeed. Here Carlyle painted the actual condition of England as he saw it in the first years of Queen Victoria's reign — a time of ruin, distress, and agitation. With vigor and plainness he brought to the attention of the Victorians "the condition of England", its bankruptcies, stagnation of trade, growing pauperism, machine riots, Chartist

²¹Ibid., p. 150.

²²"The Persistence of Carlyle's 'Everlasting Yea'," Modern Philology, LIV (Feb., 1957), 189.

meetings, class antagonisms, and incompetent governments. Never was England wealthier and yet "some two millions, it is now counted, sit in Workhouses, Poor-law Prisons," he charged, ". . . pleasantly so-named, because work cannot be done in them . . . pent up, as in a kind of horrid enchantment; glad to be imprisoned and enchanted, that they may not perish starved."²³

Carlyle was deeply moved by the scenes he had witnessed as he passed by the Workhouse of St. Ives in Huntingdonshire in pursuit of material associated with Cromwell's early life. His mind became filled with indignation at the system of government which did nothing to improve the lot of the unemployed poor. "He was still more shocked," remarks A. L. Rowse, "by the condition of things in Glasgow, Manchester, Stockport and elsewhere revealed by the papers and blue-books, the reports which Edwin Chadwick was beginning to compile and of which Marx was to make such use later."²⁴ As in his earlier works, Carlyle continued to attack laissez-faire capitalism. The shirt-spinners, he asserted, produce "millions of shirts", unsaleable, while "two million shirtless or ill-shirted workers sit enchanted in Workhouse Bastilles, give million more (according to some)"²⁵

Then, almost without warning he plunges the reader into

²³ Carlyle, Works, X, "Past and Present," 1-2.

²⁴ "Message of Past and Present," The New Statesman and Nation, XLVII (June 5, 1943), 370.

²⁵ Carlyle, Works, X, "Past and Present," 170-1.

the twelfth century which, as described by Carlyle, is free from the evils he traced in "Proem". It should be noted that "The Ancient Monk" is based literally on a twelfth-century manuscript, Chronica Jocelini de Brakelonda, de rebus gestis Samsonis Abbatis, published by the Camden Society.

This means that since the picture of Bury St. Edmund's and the portrait of Abbot Samson are substantiated by authority and scholarship Carlyle expected a fair degree of attention. His approach, although not original, was remarkably persuasive. At a time when almost every eminent historian described the past as a mere foil to the present, Carlyle actually used the flimsy and degraded present as a foil to the past. In other words Carlyle proceeded to show that the sense of superiority of the materialistic present over the past was a mere illusion, that the escape from feudalism was in fact not progress, and that in many respects the present was worse than the past. With great imagination and skill Carlyle debunked the notion of progress -- that the best is yet to come, that every effort is to be directed to the future -- with the implication that England had entered a period of decadence.

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Carlyle was actually using a style of argument that must have been familiar to his readers. The theory of the "Noble Savage", the notion of the "Golden Age", and Calvinism, for example, were all in one form or another expressions of the belief that the primitively innocent and free past was superior to the present. The most persistent form of this idea, suggests Christopher Hill in Puritanism and Revolution (London: Secker & Warburg Ltd., 1958) may be seen in the theory of the "Norman Yoke". In its main outlines it maintains that the Anglo-Saxons, before the Norman in-

In "The Modern Worker" Carlyle developed the ideas suggested in the "Proem" and in "Horoscope" he attempted, rather incoherently and passionately, to read the future of the working-class in the light of his own present-day England. The future that he envisaged was not altogether dark and chaotic; it included the eventual emancipation of the worker, "a system of Order and Government,"²⁷ and the end of industrial tyranny. "An actual new Sovereignty, Industrial Aristocracy," he urged, "real not imaginary Aristocracy, is indispensable and indubitable for us."²⁸

In this difficult age of transition Carlyle stood up as the fearless prophet who felt compelled to say the unpopular things that had to be said. He directed his thoughts primarily to the aristocracy for "land is the right basis of an aristocracy; whoever possesses the Land, he, more emphatically than any other, is the Governor" ²⁹ He reminded the ruling class that they owe the people good government and if they do not fulfil their duty "things painful, and not pleasant"³⁰ almost certainly will follow. Carlyle's denunciations of the "Idle Aristocracy" intent only on protecting their privileges and escaping their real duties are

vasion, had lived as free and equal citizens governed by representative institutions. The Normans deprived them of this liberty, established their own tyranny of a foreign aristocracy, and the people have struggled ever since to recover their lost rights.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 250.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 174.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

forceful and direct. Few men of his time were more insistent upon the duty of government to regulate the affairs of the country and to remedy the evils that caused so much disorder and misery among the poorer classes.

The need for strong leadership and good government, in view of the degenerate state of the Church, had become, according to Carlyle, more urgent than ever before. The conventional dogmas of the established institutionalized religion were no longer related to the "spiritual condition" of society. Carlyle regarded them as vestures, "Hebrew old-clothes", without creativeness and vitality. Carlyle's views on the question of religion had been forcefully expressed in Characteristics, his earlier work. "Considered as a whole," he stated, "the Christian Religion of late ages has been continually dissipating itself into Metaphysics; and threatens now to disappear, as some rivers do, in deserts of barren sand."³¹

The Victorians, Carlyle charged in Past and Present,³² had "forgotten God." Theirs was a religion without faith. The clergy were blind leaders aimlessly leading the blind. The faith of Abbot Samson, unlike that of the Victorians, was silent, complete, unquestioning. Under Monk Samson there was "no Methodism"; Religion was "not yet a horrible restless Doubt . . . but a great heaven-high Unquestionability, encom-

³¹Carlyle, Works, XXVIII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iii, 13-14.

³²Ibid., X, "Past and Present," 136.

passing, inter-penetrating the whole of Life." ³³ It was not, according to Carlyle, "a diseased self-introspection, an agonizing inquiry." ³⁴ On the contrary, it lay over the medievalists "like an all embracing heavenly canopy, like an atmosphere and life-element, which is not spoken of" ³⁵ Let his readers reflect upon this frightful contrast and repent.

Carlyle's remarks thus far were harsh but they were held in restraint. His vehemence did not get out of hand nor did he lose all sense of balance as in his later political writings, Latter-Day Pamphlets and "Shooting Niagara". In Past and Present he was content merely to expose the deficiencies of industrialism by contrast with selected aspects of a medieval community and to insist upon the need for sincere, candid, and able leadership.

As might be expected Carlyle's method in Past and Present was that of the literary artist. The work is filled with minute detail while the imagery, though frequently grotesque, produces a perfect effect. "Woolwich grapeshot will sweep clear all streets, blast into invisibility so many thousand men" ³⁶ Carlyle wrote of the Manchester Insurrection. He introduced, throughout the work, an amazing exuberance of feeling and expression. "There lie poor sal-

³³ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

low work-worn weavers, and complain no more now;" he exclaimed, "women themselves are slashed and sabred, howling terror fills the air" ³⁷

All stylistic devices known to Carlyle are commanded in Past and Present. He employed mythology in the two chapters, "Midas" and "The Sphinx", for instance, and developed each myth into an elaborate application to England. "In the first," writes Stanley T. Williams, "the 'baleful fiat of enchantment' prevents the conversion of the nation's wealth into prosperity; and in the second, England, since she has failed to answer the spiritual questions of life, is being torn to pieces." ³⁸ When Carlyle could no longer think of names from the world of literature and history, he invented them. The usefulness of Jabesh Windbag, for example, is sufficiently self-explanatory for the flavour lies not so much in who he is as in what he connotes. In this unusual way Carlyle belaboured through four long parts, attacking and ridiculing the strongholds of English apathy. He convinces not so much by exaggeration which prevails throughout the work as by the "profusion of his illustrations, comment, and exhortation; and these qualities are the essence of Past and Present, differentiating it from the commonplace pamphlets of the time." ³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁸ "Carlyle's Past and Present: A Prophecy," The South Atlantic Quarterly, XXI (Jan., 1922), 32-3.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

Carlyle's Past and Present, written with the English industrial leaders in mind, was intended to have a practical value. It painted for Carlyle's readers a society which might be compared, point for point, with the nineteenth century. Carlyle relentlessly pursued the contrast between the two social orders — Bury St. Edmund's and Victorian England. "One can see at once," suggests Stanley T. Williams, "that Bury St. Edmund's under Abbot Samson is a

tiny corner of a Carlylean social heaven. Here was a government untainted by laissez-faire, one that took care of its people. The business of government is to govern. Abbot Samson ruled and cared for those under him; among his people were no Chartisms or Manchester insurrections. Let the nineteenth century ponder on this sequence of cause and effect; a government that governs and a contented people.⁴⁰

It is difficult to bring Carlyle's political and social utterances into a coherent system but it does appear that in Past and Present the key political problem as he saw it was "how in conjunction with inevitable Democracy, indispensable Sovereignty is to exist" ⁴¹ Carlyle's anti-democratic bias is well known but it never prevented him from recognizing that Democracy was a fact. "Here in England," he declared, "though we object to it resolutely in the form of street-barricades and insurrectionary pikes, and decidedly will not open doors to it on those terms, the

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 36-7.

⁴¹ Ibid., X, "Past and Present," 251.

tramp of its million feet is on all streets and thoroughfares" ⁴²

Carlyle, of course, did not expect the British government to undergo wholesale reform at his suggestion. But he did insist that the kind of leadership England was suffering from could be altered. Real leaders, not "mock superiors" must be selected. The great contrast, in his view, between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries was not in institutions but in men. The implication here is clearly the doctrine of the hero, Carlyle's one persistent theory. England was to find a hero who, by virtue of his exceptional qualities of mind and character and superiority of spiritual force, would remove the evils that threatened to lead to a revolution.

Carlyle failed to persuade his countrymen. They noticed his work and read it with veneration, enthusiasm, doubt, and amusement but remained unconvinced that his notion of the "hero" was a practical remedy. Indeed Carlyle as a political and social critic is one person; Carlyle as a constructive theorist is another. The Victorians admired "The Ancient Monk" for its vividness and beauty but doubted Carlyle's analogy and practicality. They knew, as Carlyle did not, that the conversion of nineteenth-century industrial England into something in the nature of Abbot Samson's ordered medieval community was nothing more than a visionary

⁴²Ibid., XX, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," 9.

proposition.

Carlyle's Past and Present, it may be held, belongs to his earlier refreshing and balanced set of political writings. Thereafter Carlyle felt himself isolated. He set himself against society and discovered that society was against him. He failed to awaken the Victorians to the need of arresting the strong tide of democracy and industrialism that was sweeping England toward chaos. The revolutions of 1848 added to his anger for Europe, in protesting against false government, was prepared to plunge into no government at all.

Increasingly he felt himself misunderstood. "Lonelier man is not in this world that I know of . . . ,"⁴³ he confessed in his Journal. "My voice sounds to me like a One Voice in the world, too frightful to me, with a heart so sick and a head growing grey."⁴⁴ His bitterness reflected itself in his works. The Nigger Question which appeared in Fraser's Magazine in December, 1849 was offensive even in his day with its contemptuous denunciations and references to "the Rights of Negroes", "Exeter-Hall Philanthropy", idleness, disobedience, and lack of true leadership. Carlyle showed much indiscretion in this essay and did irreparable harm to both his influence and reputation. His dislike of "deep froth-oceans of "Benevolence," 'Fra-

⁴³Froude, Vol. I, p. 422.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 452.

ternity,' 'Emancipation-principle,' 'Christian Philanthropy,' and other amiable-looking, but most baseless, in the end baleful and all bewildering Jargon . . ." ⁴⁵ led him into a callous disregard for inhumanity. After observing that in England several millions are on the verge of starvation he proceeded to draw the comparison that the West Indian Negroes lived "remarkably well" with little labour. England taxed her own labourers, he surmised, so that the Negro may remain in idleness "up to the ears in pumpkin, regardless of 'work', and of a world all going to waste for their idleness." ⁴⁶ Carlyle was opposed to slavery but since his over-all solution to "The Nigger Question" was related to his doctrine of the hero he inevitably arrived at the same position. "You are not 'slaves' now;" he observed, "nor do I wish, if it can be avoided, to see you slaves again: but decidedly you have to be servants to those that are wiser than you, that are born lords of you; servants to the Whites, if they are (as what mortal can doubt they are?) born wiser than you." ⁴⁷

The Nigger Question was intended merely as a precursor to Latter-Day Pamphlets which unquestionably was one of the most virulent attacks on contemporary England. Its language was abusive, bitter, and angry. "The pamphlets,"

⁴⁵ Carlyle, Works, XXIX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iv, 351.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 378.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 379.

reflects Carlisle Moore, "lost him many friends and supporters — Mill, Mazzini — and offended Forster and Emerson."⁴⁸ The disapproval of his friends intensified his discouragement and his manner became one of dogged persistence and invective.

Carlyle's original intention had been to write twelve pamphlets and to re-issue the series in two volumes but Peel's death brought the enterprise to an end. The genesis of this work may therefore be safely conjectured. "At this time," suggests Norwood Young, "Carlyle had definite hopes of a public career, as a supporter of Peel, and he wrote these pamphlets in order to further his candidature."⁴⁹ Peel's fall from his horse dashed these hopes only to add to the ever-deepening gloom and disappointment converging upon Carlyle.

To many readers Carlyle now became, as Matthew Arnold saw him, a "moral desperado."⁵⁰ He had permitted himself to be swayed by issues he could not see in clear perspective and his growing feeling of rejection was beginning to darken his "faith in the imperishable dignity of man."⁵¹ He was forced, by harsh circumstances, to relinquish his hope

⁴⁸ Moore, p. 192.

⁴⁹ Carlyle: His Rise and Fall (London: The Camelot Press, Limited, 1927), p. 251.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Moore, p. 192.

⁵¹ Carlyle, Works, XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," ii, 80.

that England would produce a hero-leader in his own day. All of this had a bearing on Carlyle's Latter-Day Pamphlets. "The prophet," H. D. Traill comments, "is too wildly excited; there is a suggestion of panic in his utterances . . ." ⁵² and it is almost certain that his warnings were uttered with these disappointing events fresh in his mind.

The two pamphlets, "The Present Time" and "Downing Street", convey Carlyle's central ideas in Latter-Day Pamphlets. At the very moment that Macaulay, the inspired spokesman of freedom and progress, was reminding his countrymen of the immense material strides that England was making under the stimulus of individual liberty, millions were living and working under conditions so intolerable and degrading as to deprive them of nearly every human attribute. "What a world," Carlyle exclaimed, "have we made of it, with our fierce Mammon-worships, and our benevolent philanderings . . . Supply-and-demand, Leave-it-alone, Voluntary Principle, Time will mend it: — till British industrial existence seems fast becoming one huge poison-swamp of reeking pestilence physical and moral; a hideous living Gologotha of souls and bodies buried alive." ⁵³ Indeed Carlyle thought he saw, in what was generally reputed to be the wealthiest country ever known to exist, a state of poverty so evil as to profoundly affect the conscience of even the most impartial

⁵² Ibid., XX, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," viii.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 27.

observer.

The object of Carlyle's invective was probably Palmerston's government then in office. He asked whether the men on Downing Street — steeped in the affairs of distant countries, "dexterously writing despatches" concerning Don Pacifico's loss of furniture in Athens and Radetsky's advance on Milan, could not devote some of their energy to the alleviation of social distress at home. The ministry deeply embroiled in diplomatic affairs seemed, in his view, to have forgotten the "thirty-thousand outcast Needlewomen working themselves swiftly to death; three-million Paupers rotting in forced idleness . . . ,"⁵⁴ and the Irish refugee stalking through Picadilly "blue-visaged, thatched in rags, a blue child on each arm; hunger-driven, wide mouthed"⁵⁵

It was Carlyle's self-imposed mission to destroy the hypocrisy responsible for the unhappy plight of England and his message was clear. "Justice, Justice," he called out, ". . . is but one thing needed for the world; but that one is indispensable."⁵⁶ He insisted that the problem was the responsibility of the government which must accept the practice of leadership — not according to mechanical rules, but according to judgment and conscience. The alternative, he stressed, was clearly impending dis-

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 94.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 68.

aster. "England," he wrote with great foreboding, "with

the largest mass of real living interests ever intrusted to a Nation; and with a mass of extinct imaginary and quite dead interests piled upon it to the very Heavens, and encumbering it from shore to shore . . . must contrive to manage its living interests, and quit its dead ones and their methods, or else depart from its place in this world. Surely England is called as no Nation ever was, to summon-out its kings, and set them to that high work! ⁵⁷

By the time of Shooting Niagara Carlyle's call for leadership and the reorganization of society turned into a contemptuous assault upon everything. ⁵⁸ His earlier recognition of the dignity of man passed into contempt for the masses — "Sons of the Devil in overwhelming majority," ⁵⁹ while the "Reform Measure" of 1867, in his opinion, invited "new supplies of blockheadism, gullibility, bribeality, amenability to beer and balderdash . . . ⁶⁰" Shooting Niagara, which appeared in Macmillan's Magazine in 1867 was Carlyle's last political work and unquestionably the angriest. "There probably never was since the Heptarchy ended," he stormed, "or almost since

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 134-5.

⁵⁸Carlyle's eager defense in 1866 of the controversial Governor Eyre who invoked martial law and inflicted needless losses upon the rebelling Negroes in Jamaica clearly illustrates the magnitude of his embittered attitude. He was of the opinion that in the crisis the Governor's policy was defensible, that he acted as a public benefactor, and that there was no miscarriage of justice.

⁵⁹Carlyle, Works, XXX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays,"

⁶⁰v, 4.
Ibid., p. 9.

it began, so hugely critical an epoch in the history of England as this we have now entered upon, with universal self-congratulation and flinging-up of caps" ⁶¹

His utterances now became wild, whirling, derisive, and almost incoherent. Depressed by the triumph of chaotic democracy over order, he hurled scorn at the "human swine" — the working-classes, the Captains of Industry, the aristocracy — for they, having rejected him, no longer roused his pity and love but only anger and contempt.

II

No one is likely to deny that on at least one point Carlyle was indubitably right. The problems were difficult and deeper than the politicians on Downing Street imagined. "It is easy now to see," writes John Maccunn, "that the

reforms of 1832 and the years that immediately followed could not fulfil the democratic hopes that were built upon them. Hence disillusionment and embitterment. Hence Chartism. Hence the cry for a new, and still again a new Reform Bill. Hence, in due season, the advent of Socialism. ⁶²

Carlyle was convinced that the problems were more complex and more formidable than parliamentary reform could solve. Democracy, he maintained, was not the solution. It was unequal to the work that had to be done — ineffective and impotent in the presence of deep and urgent social

⁶¹Ibid., p. 1.

⁶²Maccunn, p. 151.

problems and issues. It was weak, he held, because it was unable to choose true leaders. The idea of leadership in a democracy, he argued, consisted of nothing more than publicity and the playing down to the mob. In the ironical portrait of Sir Jabesh Windbag, Carlyle produced his impression of democratic leadership. Windbag was "weak in the faith of a God, which he believes only at Church on Sundays, if even then; strong only in the faith that Paragraphs and Plausibilities bring votes; that Force of Public Opinion, as he calls it, is the primal Necessity of Things, and highest God we have."⁶³

Democratic government, in Carlyle's view, was no government at all. It rested on a notion that "a man's liberty consists in giving his vote at election-hustings, and saying, 'Behold, now I too have my twenty-thousandth part of a Talker in our National Palaver'"⁶⁴ Carlyle attached little importance to political liberty. "Liberty, I am told, is a divine thing," he wrote. "Liberty when it becomes the 'Liberty to die by starvation' is not so divine!"⁶⁵ His own interpretation of Liberty involved the "finding out, or being forced to find out the right path, and to walk thereon."⁶⁶

⁶³ Carlyle, Works, X, "Past and Present," 223.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 219.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 212.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

To set about finding "the right path" denoted, according to Carlyle, the finding of "government by your Real-Superiors."⁶⁷ His leading thought — expressed forcefully in Heroes and Hero-Worship — was that social and political perfection can come only under the initiative and guidance of "men of light and leading", men superior in courage, insight, and understanding. It stemmed from his passionate life-long yearning to see justice done, to redeem his world given over to tremendous change, irrationality, falsehood, illusion, and self-seeking. "Give me a leader; a true leader, not a false sham-leader; a true leader," Carlyle exclaimed, "that he may guide me on the true way, that I may be loyal to him, that I may swear fealty to him and follow him, and feel that it is well with me!"⁶⁸

The year 1850 brought the brief raising of Carlyle's high hopes for England's future in the person of Sir Robert Peel who, at the cost of his own ministry, had presented himself as a real leader in the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Carlyle felt Peel had the qualities of a hero-statesman who might miraculously save England by undertaking "the reform of Downing Street" ⁶⁹ The death of Peel, the one contemporary statesman in whom Carlyle

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 220.

⁶⁸ Carlyle, Works, XXIX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iv, 159-60.

⁶⁹ Ibid., XX, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," 169.

had so much confidence, however, brought an end to his hopes and thereafter his disbelief in the English constitution steadily grew upon him. "I have now no definite hope of peaceable improvement for this country . . . ," he wrote in his Journal. "The one statesman we had, or the least

similitude of a statesman so far as I know or can guess, is suddenly snatched away from us. What will become of it? God knows. A peaceable result I now hardly expect for this huge wen of corruptions and diseases and miseries 70

The difficulty with Carlyle is not so much the diversity of his thought and expression as their transformation through the years. It was Carlyle's tragedy that his earlier hopefulnes should have been dragged down by the very society he set out to help. Revolting against the irreversible trends of his time he gradually alienated himself from his age, his proposed remedies unheeded and his tolerance spent.

⁷⁰Froude, Vol. II, p. 48.

⁷¹Carlyle's assault on the doctrine of laissez-faire, his distrust of democracy, and his advance of the hero theory are often grotesquely misunderstood. Eric Bentley, in A Century of Hero-Worship (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944); H. J. C. Grierson in Carlyle and Hitler (Cambridge: University Press, 1933); and Sidney Hook in The Hero in History (New York: Humanities Press, 1943), for example, see in his writings a dangerous sign of uncontrolled subjectivism and egotism, an over-eagerness to deify brute force, and a preliminary to twentieth-century totalitarianism. On the other hand Arthur Bryant in "Message in Carlyle's Latter-Day Pamphlets," The Illustrated London News, CCXII (June 26, 1948) claims that more than any other works -- even those of Robert Owen or Marx's Das Kapital -- Carlyle's writings "made the British people socialist in

The derivation of Carlyle's misery lay, in part, in the very conception of his political philosophy. He believed in God and in the individual but he distrusted the collective will. He was not prepared to admit that in the civic or community spirit lay the essence of all sound national life. If he did look at the collective will it was only to point out its weakness and ignorance. "He never understood the nature of the forces by which men act and react upon each other," suggests A. W. Evans, "and which can be seen, not by regarding them as isolated individuals, but by looking at them as possessing a collective as well as an individual activity."⁷² The spontaneity of the masses, in his view, could never be trusted and must at all times be disregarded in favour of the true leader.

Carlyle's bitterness, it may be assumed, was further deepened by his persistent failure to find meaning in life—a failure which ever since his sudden conversion in the summer of 1822 forced him to retreat into the "Everlasting No". At the root of all else lay his conviction, intense and far-reaching, that the world is made up of appearances and that life is a fleeting and unsatisfying thing at best. His personal conflict originated with his striving to find a lasting relationship with his Universe, to find permanence

feeling." They profoundly "made almost everyone, even the most convinced Conservative or adherent of laissez-faire a partial convert to the Socialist thesis."⁷²
⁷² Evans, p. xlii.

beyond mutability, reality behind illusion. His political and social writings are therefore a verdict of his own struggling involving a search for a glimpse of God's Law which might bring meaning and contentment into a brief and ever-unsatisfied life.

Chapter IV

'The Grand Poem of Our Time'—Carlyle's 'French Revolution'

Carlyle concluded his French Revolution in 1837 after six years of unspeakable agonies. It is a noble edifice that he raised, the most impressive literary monument ever reared in recognition of that historic event. It is a work filled with passion, poetry, and drama. It won him a national reputation and gave him real distinction as an author. He exposed the English reading public to a phenomenon few Victorians adequately understood, gave it a fundamental Carlylean interpretation, and left behind images and impressions that perhaps will never be eradicated.

The trials and hardships of writing the French Revolution were many and there is much reference to them in Carlyle's correspondence. The story of the loss of the first volume while still in the manuscript stage is well known; John Stuart Mill's friendly encouragement is another familiar aspect of its composition. Carlyle wearied of his task and confessed to Reverend John Sterling that upon its completion he "was ready both to weep and to pray" for it was "a thing disgusting to [him] by the faults of it" ¹

Carlyle's own vivid pronouncement on his work is indeed informative. The French Revolution, he asserted, had "come hot out of [his] soul; born in blackness, whirlwind

¹Alexander Carlyle, ed., New Letters of Thomas Carlyle, Vol. I (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), p. 50.

and sorrow" ² To his brother, Dr. Carlyle, he wrote "that the Book is one of the savagest written for several centuries: . . . written by a wild man, a man disunited from the fellowship of the world he lives in" ³

Carlyle was much more severe in his judgment than were the leading men of letters of his day. His French Revolution made an extraordinary impression on them; they extolled its mysterious power and its high epic quality; they recognized Carlyle's serious intentions and deep earnestness. The Athenaeum could not find words to express adequately its exasperation and disapprobation but, having done its duty, conceded that the work included "many finely conceived passages, and many just and vigorous reflections." ⁴ The Literary Gazette began with a typical expression of bewilderment exclaiming that "of this strange work we hardly know how to speak." ⁵ Fraser's Magazine, as was to be expected, contained a very favourable review and suggested that those who did not appreciate the work betrayed a lack "of discipline, both intellectual and moral, without which no history, of any kind is suitable reading" ⁶ Carlyle's earlier work, Sartor Resartus, had appeared, at

² Ibid., p. 50.

³ Ibid., pp. 55-6.

⁴ Robert T. Kerlin, "Contemporary Criticism of Carlyle's 'French Revolution!'," The Sewanee Review, XX (July, 1912), 284-5.

⁵ Ibid., p. 285.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 286-7.

least in part, in its columns and, on the whole, its editor recognized in Carlyle a new force in literature.

In the opinion of the Literary Examiner the French Revolution was "one of the few books of our time that are likely to live for some generations beyond it,"⁷ while Thackeray, in the Times, after reflecting on the eccentric style and grotesque imagery, claimed that the work teemed "with sound, hearty philosophy" and possessed "genius, if any book ever did."⁸ The Westminster Review printed a long article by John Stuart Mill who held, with great insight, that it was "not so much a history, as an epic poem; and notwithstanding or even in consequence of this, the truest of histories."⁹ Only the London Quarterly Review expressed strong disapproval on grounds that "not only is his historical view miserably defective, but his morality is erroneous and pernicious."¹⁰

Carlyle's contemporary critics were not wide of the mark in their estimate of the work. The French Revolution is a great "flame-picture", produced not by a scientific historian but an artist dealing with materials that were both diversified and unreliable. The confusing and inaccurate sources may have misled Carlyle on many points of detail but at no time did they force him to depart from

⁷Ibid., p. 289.

⁸Ibid., pp. 291-3.

⁹Ibid., p. 288.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 293.

his fundamental theme. To Carlyle the French Revolution was the great historical conflagration that had to be foreseen and avoided in the England of his own day.

Beginning with the death of Louis XV at Versailles on May 10, 1774 and ending with the rise of Napoleon on October 5, 1795, Carlyle's narrative rarely looks back or forward beyond those years -- a limitation that invites criticism but gives force and compactness to his story. The strict adherence to the revolutionary years permitted Carlyle to deal with the Revolution in terms of individuals rather than forces or events. To be sure, Carlyle was not unaware of the fact that the Revolution had social, constitutional, ideological, diplomatic, economic, and industrial implications but the whole pattern of his thought made it impossible for him to grant such considerations prime importance. He preferred to see the Revolution as a gigantic panorama in which innumerable lesser lives crossed and tangled, in which each successive stage of the Revolution was the product of a host of individual destinies. He plunged into the very midst of the confusion of actual life and exploited the revolutionary terror to the extreme.

That Carlyle treated this one area superbly cannot be denied. But the fact remains that an undue emphasis on a single factor is not good history. The narrative suffers from exaggeration and from lack of proportion. The relation of France and Europe, the significance of the past

and the future, legal developments, local government, and whole spheres of economic and constitutional development are sacrificed in favour of the one theme that provoked the strongest reaction from Carlyle. Undoubtedly Carlyle imagined that as long as he was telling his Truth he could not go wrong — but in so doing he left himself open to criticism from those who demand a more complete analysis of the event.

Scenes of minor importance, such as the mutiny at Nancy are treated at length while crucial factors of causation are barely mentioned. The intellectual undercurrents that undermined the traditional government, the revolutionary principles of egalitarianism and popular sovereignty derived from such works as Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality and Social Contract Carlyle prefers to ignore. The defeat of France in the Seven Years' War, the example set by the revolt of the American Colonies, the financial difficulties arising out of the war appear in Carlyle's work not to be part of the revolutionary episode. The intrigues of the Prussian ambassador in Paris, the unpopularity of Marie Antoinette, l'Autrichienne, and the impact of the weird and scandalous rumours emanating from the French Court on national stability are hardly considered by Carlyle as relevant.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Carlyle's interest in the French Revolution derived partly from his

reading of Thiers's Histoire de la Révolution française. He must have been one of many who were both impressed and challenged by this version of the Revolution, and stimulated by both its defects and merits. French history began to engage him and to engross him and gained precedence over all else. He objected to Thiers's mechanistic interpretation of the Revolution, his notion of forces, the deterministic ideas he advanced, and the emphasis on the relentless march of events. Carlyle's own interest — the human and dramatic — had been virtually ignored by Thiers. An irresistible desire to correct this flaw came over Carlyle. It was, as he wrote to Mill in 1833, the "only possible Poem, that hovers for me in every seen Reality."¹¹

The decisive factor that called Carlyle's attention to French affairs, however, was not Thiers, nor even the Revolution of 1789, but the revolutionary events of 1830. He sought to explain them and arrived at the simple conclusion that when common people have been grossly misgoverned for centuries and their institutions are thoroughly inept they inevitably overthrow the chains that bind them and free themselves from the tyranny of bishops and nobles. "Alas, yes!" he exclaimed, "a whole world to remake, if she could

see it: work for another than she! For all is wrong, and gone out of joint; the inward spiri-

¹¹Alexander Carlyle, ed., Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1923), p. 57.

tual, and the outward economical; head or heart, there is no soundness in it It will accumulate: moreover, it will reach a head; for the first of all Gospels is this, that a Lie cannot endure for ever.¹²

Carlyle had a deep sympathy for the sufferings of the poor, among whom he had been brought up and with whom he had himself suffered. "We have faith," he wrote in Signs of the Times, . . . in the high vocation to which, through-¹³ out this his earthly history, [man] has been appointed." It was this bias — this sympathetic insight into the feelings of the common man that Carlyle applied to the case of the French Revolution.

Indeed, it might be added, Carlyle conceived of his French Revolution in the decade of disturbances and reform, of wild trade union movements and Chartism, when workers flocked into the industrial centers to be exploited by a ruthless factory system. He cast an anguished eye on his world and saw that a social revolution was about to erupt. He therefore envisaged the Revolution in terms of fears of England of his own day — even though the revolt of 1789 and its sequel was concerned with the changing of the political rather than the social structure of the country.

The overthrow of a corrupt government, in Carlyle's view, did not stem from the human will but from God's wrath

¹²Carlyle, Works, II, "The French Revolution," i, 36.

¹³Ibid., XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," ii, 80.

on those who abandoned His Law. The Revolution was therefore God's revenge, the people were agents of Divine Justice, and the Revolution itself was proof of the crime. The French Revolution, Carlyle asserted, meant "the open violent Rebellion, and Victory, of disimprisoned Anarchy against corrupt worn-out Authority: how Anarchy breaks prison; bursts-up from the infinite Deep, and rages uncontrollable, immeasurable, enveloping a world" ¹⁴ Carlyle's view of the Revolution coincided with, or rather, derived from an intense dislike of the eighteenth century, and France's role in that century was to him most distasteful. Thus, even though his knowledge of France was not extensive his severe moral disapproval of her conduct was a comfortable compensation.

While Carlyle sympathized deeply with the desire of the poor to free themselves from the shackles of oppression, he did not give up his strong desire for a stern God-father leader and regarded the National Assembly with intense disfavour. "It has its Right Side and its Left," he noted in one of his typical violent passages, "the less Patriotic

and the more, for Aristocrats exist not here or now: it spouts and speaks; listens to Reports, reads Bills and Laws; works in its vocation, for a season: but the History of France, one finds, is seldom or never there. Unhappy Legislative, what can History do with it These Seven Hundred and Forty-five elected individuals doubt not but they are the first biennial Parliament,

¹⁴ Ibid., II, "The French Revolution," i, 211.

come to govern France by parliamentary eloquence:
and they are what? And they have come to do what?
Things foolish and not wise! ¹⁵

For Carlyle, the Revolution suffered from the fact that it seemed to have a surplus of assemblies and a deficiency of heroes although it was Napoleon, with his "heart-hatred of anarchy" who brought the insurrection to a close. It was in the First Consul that France had found a real leader, instead of a sham one; under him that the illusion of aristocracy had given way to an actual one. Not that Napoleon had solved the constitutional problem of securing the rule of the best; that problem had never been solved as the events of 1830 had proven. But he had at least shown that the alternative to a false aristocracy was not an abolition of aristocracy, but the recognition of a true one. It can be seen, almost at once, that the principle of the hero has further implications. It provided the criterion by which Carlyle could select, condense, and interpret his materials and build them into a meaningful narrative.

To Carlyle's critical eye the ultimate meaning of the Revolution had moral and ethical manifestations. History was philosophy teaching by example. It awakened the moral conscience as it told the lessons of the past for the warning of the present and the edification of the future. He

¹⁵ Ibid., III, "The French Revolution," ii, 203-4.

made it clear why his French Revolution was ever written at all. Prior to 1789, he pointed out, France was a "Despotism tempered by Epigrams;"¹⁶ the Revolution proved "that Man and his Life rest no more on hollowness and a Lie, but on solidity and some kind of Truth."¹⁷ Throughout the work Carlyle prompted his readers to look upon history as the most instructive of all studies. History, he observed, has a purpose, bereft of which it is meaningless. From the study of history, the accumulated experience of previous generations, men draw, or ought to draw, the lessons which determine their actions in their public capacity. "Wherefore let all men know," he insisted, "what of depth and of height is still revealed in man; and with fear and wonder, with just sympathy and just antipathy, with clear eye and open heart, contemplate it and appropriate it; and draw innumerable inferences from it."¹⁸

Carlyle's own conversion powerfully reinforced the phoenix idea and made him regard the French Revolution as the crowning example of a phoenix death, if not yet of rebirth. He was greatly moved by the idea of an old society falling apart and a new one coming to birth. He was forever impatient of slow reform, of gradual amelioration, and expected all his life another and more successful cataclysm,

¹⁶Ibid., II, "The French Revolution," i, 45.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁸Ibid., IV, "The French Revolution," iii, 313.

this time, of course, in England. Change and social improvement, he felt, could come only through the violent overthrow of the existing order. In fact, Carlyle came to look upon violent change as the unwritten law of all things.

In all of this the influence of Romanticism is clearly traceable. With the Romantics he shared a temperamental aversion to eighteenth-century rationalism, and felt their exhilarating hope that French revolutionary ideals might fill that vacuum and create a new and better order. Romanticism in England was the counterpart of the French Revolution. "It was precipitated by the same ideological conflict," suggests F. A. Lea, "— between a Christianity that offended the head and a materialism that offended the heart."¹⁹ The basic difference, however, was that "in France, that conflict found mainly political expression; in England, mainly poetic."²⁰ The Romantics endeavoured to surmount that conflict, to reconcile "head and heart". They saw in the French Revolution their own experience and struggle writ large.

Hence Carlyle's preoccupation with the French Revolution. His own experience was a weary struggle between materialism and spirituality. The Calvinism he inherited from his father was shattered by the skepticism of Edinburgh

¹⁹ "Carlyle and the French Revolution," The Listener, LXXII (Sept. 17, 1964), 421.

²⁰ Ibid.

and before long Carlyle could discern certain parallels. The old régime, for instance, was comparable to the Christianity he had been forced to relinquish; "what skepticism was to the Church, insurrection was to the State" ²¹

Inevitably Carlyle combined, reconciled, and articulated these divergent tendencies into a whole encompassing Divinity, Nature, and Man. History became for him an organic revelation; history revealed God and exemplified the world. While it is true that the revelation was only partial and incomplete and absolute knowledge impossible for man, much insight into historical fact and God's Law could be gained through intelligent study of actualities such as the French Revolution and their complex interrelations. At the very root of Carlyle's philosophic waywardness and devotion to history was the belief that history revealed God's Judgment and it was the historian's function to interpret Providence and expound the essentially Spiritual nature of the World.

II

Carlyle was undoubtedly a great master in the art of literary history, and it has become almost fashionable to refer to the brilliant but inaccurate pages of Carlyle. It should be noted, however, that to Carlyle accuracy meant not the slavish dependence upon source materials, but the discovery and adequate presentation of the Truth. History

²¹ Ibid., p. 422.

in his eyes was not a scholarly collection of facts based on unimpeachable sources but a coherent whole, the essential parts of which had to be supplied from the best sources available. Carlyle never allowed himself to become the mere slave of his sources which, after all, are only the chance survivors of a much greater mass of material itself representing the area under investigation.

Carlyle did not set out to capture facts but to capture the Truth, the wildness and confusion, the whole exciting human turmoil. His ability to portray stark reality cannot be denied. But that was not his primary objective. Carlyle set out to reveal the profound Truth behind this reality. Thus, while the familiar straight-forward argument cannot be traced in his work and proof is clearly missing, it is by no means clear what needs proof. The ultimate answers Carlyle offered rest more firmly on imagination and intuition than logic.

Appealing to metaphor, imagery, and creativity Carlyle impressed on the reader the essential characteristics of the Revolution. The Revolution, for instance, may be seen as a complete historical process. It is therefore likened to "a plant blossoming and wilting; to a gathering storm; to a self-consuming firework" ²² The Revolution everywhere manifests proximity, violence, and inexhaustible

²² John Holloway, The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1953), p. 63.

energy as the "shams" are ousted, and Carlyle's rhetoric is correspondingly chaotic. There are "mad multitudes dancing round the bonfire . . . wind music, red night caps, and the madness of the world" ²³ The Autumn night is shattered by "the Powder-tower of Lyons, nay the Arsenal with four Powder-towers, which has caught fire in the Bombardment; and sprung into the air, carrying 'a hundred and seventeen houses' after it." ²⁴ And always there are masterful portraits of those who led the Revolution. Marat has a "contempt for fine outsides," while Danton, "no hollow Formalist . . . but a very Man: with all his dross he was a Man; fiery-real, from the great fire-bosom of Nature herself . . . walked straight his own wild road, whither it led him." ²⁵ Mirabeau, who dominates the first part, emerges as the "roughest lion's-whelp ever littered of that rough breed," ²⁶ one who has "made away with all Formulas . . . yet not without a strong living Soul in him, and Sincerity there: a Reality, not an artificiality, not a Sham!" ²⁷

Of the 1700 paragraphs in The French Revolution more than 500 contain no historical material whatever, but express Carlyle's reactions to the Revolution, to democracy,

²³ Carlyle, Works, IV, "The French Revolution," iii, 228.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 260.

²⁶ Ibid., II, "The French Revolution," i, 138.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 140.

and other similar issues. There are over 850 citations re-
²⁸lating to eighty-three sources. Whatever may be the truth
 regarding his handling of his sources and his skill in adapt-
 ing them to his purpose there is much to indicate that Car-
 lyle's use of sources was in every way admirable for a his-
 torian working in the 1830's. Every paragraph depicting a
 historical situation can be shown to have one or more mutu-
 ally agreeing originals to support it. For the passage
 pertaining to the call "to arms" on July 12, 1789, for in-
 stance, Carlyle consulted at least three sources which he
 then synthesized into a vivid narrative: Histoire Parlemen-
taire, ii, 37 and 81; Besenval, Mémoires, iii, 411; and
Vieux Cordelier, by Camille Desmoulins, No. 5 (reprinted
²⁹in Collection des Mémoires) p. 81. Similarly, in dealing
 with the question "whether Avignon cannot now cease wholly
 to be Papal, and become French and free" Carlyle consulted

²⁸ Charles Frederick Harrold, "Carlyle's General Method in
 'The French Revolution'," Publications of the Modern Lan-
guage Association of America, XLIII (Dec., 1928), 1150.
 This kind of content analysis is deceptive for Carlyle's
 footnotes do not reveal his massive reading. In Car-
lyle's Early Reading to 1834, Hill Shine discusses Car-
 lyle's enormous reading and gives over 3000 entries, with
 references to some 1600 different works by nearly 1000
 authors compiled from his letters and notebooks, published
 works, and other sources. C. P. Finlayson in "Thomas
 Carlyle's Borrowing from the Edinburgh University Library,
 1819-1820," Bibliothek, 1961 has confirmed Shine's
 findings.

²⁹ Carlyle, Works, II, "The French Revolution," i, 174-5.

a minimum of four sources: Dampmartin, Evénemens, i, 267; Barbaroux, Mémoires, p. 26; Choix des Rapports, vii, 273-93; and Histoire Parlementaire, xii, 419-23.³⁰

Carlyle did not always acknowledge every source he consulted and it is not unfair to suppose that he made far greater use of them than is apparent. He read Madame Roland's Appeal to Posterity, for example, but did not refer to it; he read Mignet's work without explicitly mentioning it. In Volume I of The French Revolution, Biographie Universelle is cited in footnotes in only seven instances. It may readily be seen, however, that Carlyle consulted this work throughout the first twenty chapters and such scenes as "The Insurrection of Women", the activities of Theroigne de Mericourt, Marat's funeral-honors, and the flight to Varennes can be explained best by referring to this source.

Whatever his message, Carlyle was not unconscious of the need for facts and he did his best to acquire the raw materials. He received much assistance from Cavaignac who elucidated numerous little points and tolerated Carlyle's view on larger issues. He asked his brother, who was passing through Paris, for a piano-score of the Ça ira, and enquired of him if the tree of liberty planted in 1790 in the Rue du Faubourg St. Antoine were still there.³¹ He was

³⁰ Ibid., III, "The French Revolution," ii, 213-14.

³¹ Julian Symons, Thomas Carlyle: The Life and Ideas of a Prophet (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1952), p. 149.

a frequent visitor of the British Museum. He consulted, as his footnotes indicate, eleven *histoires* the majority of which were royalist, over forty *mémoires*, and a wide assortment of biographical dictionaries, letters, diaries, reminiscences, periodicals, and miscellaneous works. Clearly much of his material was treacherous, deficient in coherence and perspective, and often a greater hindrance than a guide.

In view of the fact that Carlyle was not attempting a strictly scientific history but a work of art, it is hardly surprising that he is guilty of minor departures from his sources. At the hanging of Foulon the account in Deux Amis is misrepresented so that it was Bailly and not Lafayette who addressed the futile words about legal justice. No mention is made of the cries of 'Vive le Roi' at the Federation as Mme. de Stael notes, even though it is clear that he read her Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française. He misconstrued Montgaillard's Histoire de France and Moleville's Mémoires so that their denial of Abbe Edgeworth's alleged cry, "Son of Saint Louis, ascend to Heaven," at the execution of Louis XVI is nowhere indicated.³² There is also violation of chronological order. Dame Lavergne's petition to President Lafarge, for instance, is dated August 29, 1792 though the incident, as narrated in Histoire Parlementaire occurred on October 9.³³

³²Harrold, pp. 1162-3.

³³Ibid., p. 1164.

Throughout his work Carlyle embellished and paraphrased his scenes, unquestionably to enrich the narrative and give it a dramatic vividness. He added speeches and conversations that had not basis in fact. In none of the sources can one find the cry, "Oyez, oyez, All men to their districts to be enrolled!" which is to be found in Carlyle's narration of the events of July 13, 1789; on the sixth of October there was apparently no cry on the part of the sentinels of "Save the Queen"; Paris did not exclaim, on discovering that the King had fled to Varennes, "We have no King, yet we slept sound enough."³⁴ Despite these criticisms Carlyle's treatment of the major events, on the whole, was entirely faithful to the facts presented in the sources. The departures are confined to minor detail and the fabrications are not serious. His method was mainly to compromise between a slavish adherence to his materials, which were not sound enough to deserve it, and complete freedom in expressing a totally personal point of view.

Nor can it be said that the translated portions of The French Revolution are misleading versions of the original. "Of the forty-eight noteworthy translations," Harrold suggests, "varying in length from a single sentence to three pages, a careful examination will reveal that five show rearrangements of sentences and phrases without a definite change in meaning, that eight show minor embellish-

³⁴Ibid., pp. 1165-6.

ments arising from the operation of Carlyle's style, and that the remaining thirty-five are substantially such as any translator would be bound to respect."³⁵ The alterations are minor and, for the most part, do not alter the meaning of the passage. In "A Trilogy", for example, "à deux heures du matin" is translated as "three in the morning".³⁶ To the translated passage taken from Histoire Parlementaire depicting Danton during a speech at the time of the September massacres he added, "to hurl them back, what do we require?"³⁷ From L. S. Mercier's Nouveau Paris he omitted "le tout pour le billet de quinze sols" and "Des terrines de feuilles vertes occupent le milieu sous le nom de salades, et sollicitent les passans."³⁸

On the whole, Carlyle relied too heavily on Besenval's Mémoires, Toulangeon's Histoire de la France depuis la Révolution de 1789, Buchez and Roux's Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française and the Moniteur. He undoubtedly would have found helpful suggestions in Robespierre's journals — Défenseur de la Constitution and Lettres à ses commettans, files of which are to be found in the British Museum. J. W. Croker's eleven volumes of brochures, the Recueil des oeuvres de Maximilien I Robespierre, should

³⁵ Charles Frederick Harrold, "The Translated Passages in Carlyle's 'French Revolution'," The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XXVII (1928), 51.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

have constituted a major part of Carlyle's research, but he lost interest in them after discovering that they could not be removed from the shelves. In view of the fact that so many of Robespierre's papers were destroyed under the anti-Jacobin reaction of 1794-9 and, to a lesser extent, under the Napoleonic and Bourbon régimes that followed, it is indeed regrettable that the noise prevented Carlyle from working in the British Museum.

There is no reference in Carlyle's French Revolution to Thierry's Lettres sur l'histoire de France, to John Adolphus's Biographical Memoirs of the French Revolution, or to Fantin des Odoards's Histoire philosophique de la Révolution, a royalist work largely based on Girondist memoirs. Carlyle should have used the secondary sources to greater advantage. He virtually ignored Lacretelle's Histoire de la Révolution française, paid scant attention to Mignet's Histoire de la Révolution française depuis 1789 jusqu'à 1814 and Michelet's Précis de l'Histoire moderne, and dismissed Thiers's work with "dig where you will you come to water."³⁹ It is difficult, of course, to determine why Carlyle failed to consult the secondary sources but it is possible that he considered them rivals and therefore unworthy of serious contemplation. It is well known, however, that he had met by this time many of his literary

³⁹ Carlyle, Works, XXX, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," v, 3.

contemporaries, but for the majority of "this rascal rout, this dirty rabble"⁴⁰ he had only the greatest contempt.

III

Carlyle wrote The French Revolution at a time when a considerable body of source material — much of it in the form of memoirs — had recently come to print. In a sense the episodic nature of his narrative is a reflection of the episodic nature of this material. Memoirs may provide picturesque information but they are a flimsy and unreliable source of evidence. Carlyle was not unaware of the "indolent falsehood" of memoirs but he did, nevertheless, permit himself to be misled on a number of occasions. He accepted the legend that Mlle. de Sombreuil drank a cup of aristocrat blood to save the life of her father. He included in his work the sinking of the Vengeur which he found in Choix de Rapports, an invention of Barère for purposes of propaganda. He regarded the last supper of the Girondins, a creation of Nodier, as having historical value. He even acknowledged⁴¹ the prophecy of Cazotte, written after the events.

In all honesty it must be admitted that Carlyle must have found it extremely wearisome and difficult to disentangle the truth from the falsehood and that the method of

⁴⁰ Beatrice Saunders, Portraits of a Genius (London: John Murray, 1959), p. 61.

⁴¹ G. P. Gooch, History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), p. 326.

comparing memoirs against each other was the only procedure open to him. The least convincing of all records, indeed, are memoirs and private papers — for these are often written by persons who wish to justify themselves. Their memory of the facts is often the vaguest; legends and forgeries are readily incorporated into various accounts; and great events are often explained in terms of petty motives. The memoirs of Besenval, for example, on which Carlyle drew heavily, are a collection of old scandalous anecdotes compiled by Ségur and disavowed by Besenval's family; those of Weber were largely drawn up by Lally-Tolendal.⁴² In nearly every instance the reason for preserving an account is derived from a desire to moralize, to find excuses for various actions, to celebrate the heroism of a particular party, to draw attention to sufferings, to praise or blame, to condemn, to pass judgment, to expose the cruelty and perfidy of opponents. The historian must therefore always bear in mind the fact that he is sifting through source material produced by frail and potentially dishonest human beings.

In nearly all his utterances Carlyle posed as a great moralist. But while moralizing contributes to the strength of his social and political writings it constitutes a major defect in The French Revolution. Like other Romantic

⁴² Alfred Cobban, "Carlyle's 'French Revolution'," History, XLVIII (Oct., 1963), 313.

historians of his time, he was inclined to credit the actors in history with exalted and extravagant motives, good and bad, and to condone certain crimes and to expose others. In these matters one can detect the influence of the age on Carlyle. The Victorian period was the era of morality, of moral preaching in law and in economics, in politics, in art, in literature, and in history.

Carlyle defended the mock trials of September, 1792 where "man after man is cut down; the sabres need sharpening, the killers refresh themselves from wine-jugs"⁴³ on the ground that the Sicilian Vespers, the Bartholomew massacre, and the "Burgundies massacring Armagnacs" were examples of greater horror and that those who plotted for the King deserved such treatment. He regarded Danton as "a gigantic mass of valour, ostentation, fury, affection and wild revolutionary force and manhood . . . [guilty] of many sins; but one worst sin he had not, that of Cant."⁴⁴

The account of the flight to Varennes is full of errors and distortions, deliberately inserted so as to change a well-planned enterprise into a childish scheme which deserved to fail. Carlyle supplied the fugitives with a heavy and clumsy vehicle. "Miserable new Berline!" he asserted, "Why could not Royalty go in some old Berline similar to that of other men?"⁴⁵ King Louis and the Queen, in his

⁴³ Carlyle, Works, IV, "The French Revolution," iii, 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 259-60.

⁴⁵ Ibid., III, "The French Revolution," ii, 168.

view, from vanity and love of grandeur, made themselves needlessly conspicuous. "King Louis too will dismount," he alleged, "will walk up hills, and enjoy the blessed sunshine."⁴⁶ The Bodyguard Couriers were "loyal but stupid; unacquainted with all things."⁴⁷ Carlyle changed the distance from 150 to sixty-five miles even though an article by Croker in the Quarterly Review in January, 1823 had already given the distance correctly.⁴⁸ Carlyle's purpose was to cast ridicule on the "Slow Royalty" and in order to sustain that moral judgment he misrepresented and invented some things, and accepted others without even the most ordinary examination.

The question of whether the historian should sit in judgment over the great drama of the past and over the men and women who performed on that vast and confusing stage, exposing evil and celebrating virtue, is as old and familiar as history itself. By no means, said J. B. Bury, should historians damn and praise famous men; always, said Lord Acton and Thomas Carlyle. The issue is difficult and intriguing, perhaps insoluble. It is related to the hard questions of the purpose of history, the nature of historical judgment, and the distinctions, if any, between what

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 169.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Norwood Young, Carlyle: His Rise and Fall (London: The Camelot Press Limited, 1927), p. 146.

might be called moral and secular judgment. It raises questions, too, about the competence of any historian to judge the past, and the sanctions, if any, behind such judgments as are rendered.

To Carlyle, moral judgment was more than a form of self-indulgence; it was high Duty. In his view moral laws were universal, timeless, absolute. The historian could not stand above the moral laws or stand aside from them, but must acknowledge them, participate in them, and apply them. If he did not, he failed the cause of morality -- and of history as well -- and forfeited the confidence and respect of his peers.

Apart from making moral judgments Carlyle, from beginning to end, failed to understand fully the phenomenon he was describing. He failed to realize that the Revolution was essentially directed by the middle classes and that even the "armée révolutionnaire" which constituted its fighting force should have been envisaged largely in terms of the craftsmen and shopkeepers of eighteenth-century France and not the urban proletariat of nineteenth-century England. Every known leader of the Revolution -- Robespierre, Marat, Saint Just, Danton -- no matter how radical and outlandish, was of middle class background. That the proletariat suffered from economic grievances cannot be denied, but it most certainly was not their revolution. The lower classes were not properly organized and united; they lacked funds and

suffered from inexperience; they could not frame their own manifestoes; they were too inarticulate to conduct effectively a revolutionary movement nor did they understand the revolutionary aims. If they had an objective it was cheaper food, not the change of the political process. Hence, Carlyle's view that the "twenty-five million" of France, after enduring centuries of tyranny, were at long last inspired by God to rise and destroy their oppressors has no historic basis at all.

Carlyle's error stemmed from the mistaken belief that the aristocracy in France was excessively tyrannical and self-indulgent and that the poor were far more wretched and down-trodden than their equals in other parts of Europe. "On the whole, the French nobility compared well with other Continental nobilities," argues Norwood Young, "[and] many of those who were elected to the States-General went there with the intention of abandoning some of their privileges; . . . on the 4th August, 1789 they gave up, voluntarily, all their feudal rights."⁴⁹ It was their "tenderness", he continues,⁵⁰ not their tyranny that led to their undoing.

It is, of course, a mistake to sanction the Terror even if, according to Carlyle, the Revolution was an example of Divine Vengeance, God's Judgment for Sin. If the Revolution washed away the "shams", it most certainly did

⁴⁹Young, p. 137.

⁵⁰Ibid.

not herald in the good. The years following the Revolution — the years Carlyle failed to consider — were far from being a period of fulfilment. The lot of the poor had become infinitely worse than it had been under the ancien régime. The struggle for freedom and justice was sidetracked into tyranny. There France lay, pale and exhausted. The Terror made her detested in Europe; it destroyed the brightest hopes of the Revolution. The Terror was unnecessary for the defence of the Revolution. It did not save France; rather was France saved despite the Terror.

IV

If Carlyle's French Revolution is deficient in scholarship by modern standards it should be remembered that it was written 130 years ago from inadequate sources at a time when a systematic examination of causal factors had barely begun. Carlyle, indeed, suffered from serious handicaps. He was denied the assistance of innumerable printed sources, collections, books of reference, bibliographies, and aids of study which are taken for granted today. As Julian Symons points out, "his single-handed battling with the slippery spirit of fact means little to us in a time when historical documentation can be carried out by a whole corps of assistants equipped with a wide assortment of tools."⁵¹ The leading contemporary accounts of the period were available only

⁵¹ Symons, p. 157.

in unsatisfactory and incomplete editions or had not been printed at all. Manuscript material guides which existed in the British Museum, in the Archives, and in private hands were utterly inadequate. The Public Record Office had not yet been erected or the Calendars of State Papers begun. The Historical Manuscripts Commission was still a dream of the future. There were no typewriters, no filing cabinets, no photostats, no microfilms, no punch cards, no computers. Carlyle had to rely entirely upon his own industry, his memory, and his imaginative faculty.

In these circumstances, it may be contended, the fact that he accomplished so much is proof of his tremendous intellectual powers. There are many critics, including Eric Russell Bentley, G. P. Gooch, and Norwood Young, who claim that despite the colossal achievement, Carlyle did not write history. It is not sufficiently "objective" for their taste. But if "objective" means faithful to facts Carlyle was just as objective as Gibbon. Though creative, his work is not fictional; though his descriptions are imaginative, they are never imaginary. No scholar was ever less tolerant of slovenly research, or more insistent on accurate documentation than Carlyle. It is evidence of his concern for documentation that he realized that only the first seven volumes of Deux Amis de la Liberté had any real historical value.⁵²

The correction relating to the sinking of the Vengeur, and

⁵²Cobban, p. 312.

the footnote he added in 1868 to remove his original assertion that Frederick the Great was the only king ever to attempt suicide further attest to the fact that he was sensitive to detail.

In much the same manner these critics insist that Carlyle wrote literature rather than history because of the absence of impartiality. Carlyle's conception of impartiality, however, was not quite the same as that which now prevails. To the historian of today, impartiality means primarily avoidance of error. He therefore adheres closely to, even allows himself to be dominated by his authorities. His main ambition is to be able to quote, at first hand, a reliable authority for every statement he makes.

To Carlyle, on the other hand, impartiality meant the discovery and adequate presentation of the Truth. It meant not an accurate and substantial arrangement of facts but an achievement of Truth through them. Facts were to serve him, to substantiate a Truth much greater than was apparent. He set out to reveal the profound Truth that lay behind his sources and this, in his view, could only be accomplished by a complete involvement, an intense identification, and deep sympathy. Detachment would have meant negation of his basic condition for the writing of history. He could never resort to the practice of "letting the documents speak for themselves", as if documents, like the Bible, are sacred. Carlyle could not abdicate his function or evade his respon-

sibilities in this manner. It is precisely this — the constant intrusion of his vigorous personality into his historical work that has inevitably laid his French Revolution to charges of personal bias.

Carlyle's real weakness, in fact, is neither the matter of objectivity nor excessive personal involvement, but exaggeration and overstatement. A love of exaggeration and a tendency toward overstatement were personal characteristics of Carlyle, apparent in all his writings. It is not merely that Carlyle's blacks are always too black, and his whites always too white. His characters — Danton, Mirabeau, Robespierre — assume giant proportion and stride across the pages of history with formidable might. Yet, it should be noted, it is this very weakness which forms one of the major reasons why his French Revolution in spite of all the criticism directed against it, retains its very high place in popular esteem. The average readers have little objection to exaggeration. Common sense enables them to recognize it and allow for it without effort. It makes for interest and lucidity. They may even find it amusing, and feel mildly flattered at being entrusted with the task of determining how seriously it should be taken. To the critical historian, on the other hand, exaggeration is the unforgivable sin. Carlyle was well aware that his language was extravagant. He called his work "a wild savage Book, itself a kind of French Revolution";⁵³ and never, it is

⁵³Kerlin, p. 288.

almost certain, intended that everything he said should be interpreted as literally as if it were part of a scientific treatise.

His French Revolution, ultimately, is a unified poetic drama possessing great images drawn from fire and metaphors that cluster in compelling patterns. It must be viewed, as Mill so aptly recognized, as a philosophic poem. Carlyle, however, wrote less as an artist than as a prophet and believed that the French Revolution was the living manifestation of the Truth he held most dear. His work was therefore as much a commentary on the post-revolutionary conditions of England as a history of a great social upheaval. He focused on the Revolution to warn his countrymen of what he imagined would be the chaotic consequences of the growing demand for democratic institutions on the one hand and the entrenchment of an incompetent government on the other.

His reading audience listened to him for he was passionately sincere, because his intellectual insight was strange, and because he had immense moral courage. They did not particularly care about the defects of his work nor were they troubled by the fact that Carlyle never quite reconciled the view of the Revolution as the manifestation of the Supreme with that of the Revolution as an exhibition of human action. Nonetheless it must be recognized that Carlyle had a keen sense of social events, if not constitutional principles, and he understood human nature. Intuition drove

Carlyle along the right path. As historical description his French Revolution was highly successful and served, in his own day, as a useful corrective to the works of those argumentative nineteenth-century historians who represented different points of view in a political and ideological debate.

Chapter V

Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches: with Elucidations

Too many critics, among them Lytton Strachey, Julian Symons, and A. J. P. Taylor, suffer from a preconceived notion of deprecation when they look at a historian like Carlyle. They pat him on the head, nod patronizingly at his inventiveness of phrase, and even mildly approve of his eloquence. Then they hurriedly dismiss him as a museum relic, an archaic thinker and relegate him to the attic together with numerous other antiquities.

This is indeed regrettable for Carlyle shows that he took his responsibilities and obligations as historian in Letters and Speeches very seriously. The documents and records, he wrote in the Introduction, "scattered waste as a shoreless chaos . . . lie there, printed, written, to the extent of tons and square miles, as shot-rubbish; unedited, unsorted, not so much as indexed . . . waiting happier days."¹ His work may suffer from exaggeration and may be superficial in places but it is never even for a moment dull. He illuminated a controversial period of the English past and the sympathetic portrait he painted of Oliver Cromwell will probably never be displaced in the popular mind. It matters little that Carlyle was adrift much of the time. Even the most gifted historians have found that Cromwell is an

¹ Carlyle, Works, VI, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," i, 2.

extremely difficult subject since, besides drawing his portrait and revealing his character, it is necessary to describe the background social forces and their effect upon Cromwell's career.

A number of pressing problems remain unsolved to this day and it would be presumptuous to think that Carlyle had produced a definitive work on Cromwell. It might be useful, for instance, to have the final word on whether Cromwell was the prophet who voiced new social and political claims or the adventurer who exploited them, whether he was a deliberate architect of events or a victim of his time. To comment intelligently on this question is to have done something to decide the case between his differing interpreters — between his contemporaries who detested him as a hypocritical and ambitious schemer and the eighteenth century which regarded him as a ridiculous fanatic, between the nineteenth century that honoured him as a progressive non-conformist liberal and the twentieth century that denounced him as a dictator, between all of these and the Irish who, alone and always consistent, have for three centuries looked upon the Protector as the Devil himself.

Then there is the matter of the Army. It is impossible, of course, to separate Cromwell from the Army which he created. It made him first a successful general, then a dictator; and when it deserted, his wavering dynasty collapsed and gave way to the Restoration. In all the uncertainties

of his rule it was the one force upon which he consistently relied, and to which he was even forced angrily to yield. He knew well that he could not deny the basis of his very existence. He defeated the Royalists in war, subverted the Crown and Church, and crushed, one by one his own allies — the Presbyterians and republicans, the Levellers and fanatics. But with that instrument which reduced him to a "drudge upon all occasions" he could not break. In his last and difficult years, when he wearily considered the Crown, it was the Army which forbade the experiment. And yet, since the Army was in fact a radical army, his power derived fundamentally not from a military source but from radicalism.

When Cromwell emerged as a public figure he was already middle-aged and but for the chance of the Civil War he would have remained unknown except to local antiquaries of Huntingdon. "Till his hair was grown grey," Carlyle noted, ". . . he had been content to plough the ground, and read his Bible."² Cromwell, he added, "renounced the world and its ways; its prizes are not the thing that can enrich him."³ It was chance and circumstance that suddenly converted this man of the Bible and Plough — this socially conservative, politically illiterate, deeply religious country squire — into a phenomenon unknown to English politics either before or since. John Buchan's sympathetic assessment of Cromwell

²Ibid., V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 223.

³Ibid., p. 213.

as a devotee of law "forced to be often lawless" by "an era of dilapidation and disintegration"⁴ is perhaps closer to the truth than any other such statement.

Revolutionary situations, always extremely complex, provide men with vast and spectacular opportunities. Observers are therefore easily misled into thinking that Cromwell was a revolutionary giant, of genius equal to his fortune. Evidence will not support this view and there are fewer signs of Cromwell's greatness than of his limitations. Indeed, it is rather odd that a man who seldom uttered a political sentiment till he reached middle age should suddenly discover important political truths thereafter. Apart from the four "fundamentals" -- government by a single person and parliament, regular elections, liberty of conscience, and the sharing between Protector and parliament in the control of the Army -- there is not the slightest evidence that he ever had any fixed political programme, ambition, or even ideas. He was merely a successful soldier, it may be assumed, devout and sentimental, turned into an unwilling dictator by the uncomprehended events that thrust themselves upon him. Once matters fell into his hands Cromwell, suffering from strange self-delusions, proceeded to create what he believed to be a divinely ordered society, a God-fearing, integrated, pure and undefiled

⁴Oliver Cromwell (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1934), p. 21.

society — which had been the persistent Puritan ideal since the beginning of Elizabeth's reign.

From his earliest years a literary work dealing with the English Revolution held Carlyle's imagination. He projected, but never actually undertook, a collection of essays on the Civil War and its consequences, with sketches of Cromwell, Laud, Fox, Milton, Hyde, and others. Mill's invitation to Carlyle to write an article on Oliver Cromwell for the Westminster Review also ended in frustration. Carlyle's first meaningful encounter with Cromwell came on May 22, 1840. On that day he delivered his last lecture on the theme of heroes to an appreciative upper class audience — The Hero as King. Cromwell. Napoleon: Modern Revolutionism. His treatment of Cromwell at a time when most historians held it to be "indisputably true" that Cromwell "lived a hypocrite and died a traitor"⁵ must have been startling indeed. "One Puritan," Carlyle lectured with his customary touch of exaggeration,

. . . and almost he alone, our poor Cromwell, seems to hang yet on the gibbet, and find no hearty apologist anywhere. Him neither saint nor sinner will acquit of great wickedness.⁶

His defence of Cromwell grew progressively more convincing. "Is it not strange," he continued, "that, after all the mountains of calumny this man has been subjected to, after

⁵ Maurice Ashley, The Greatness of Oliver Cromwell (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1957), p. 13.

⁶ Carlyle, Works, V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 208.

being represented as the prince of liars, who never, or hardly ever, spoke truth, but always some counterfeit of truth, there should not yet have been one falsehood brought clearly home to him?"⁷ Cromwell's Maker noticed him and inspired him to wage a war of Belief against Unbelief, a war of truth against quackery and sham. It was not, according to Carlyle, the constitutional question nor "the right to tax oneself" that caused the revolt against the Government. "The Hampdens, Pym, and Ship-money," he declared, were "an amorphous heap of rubbish."⁸ It was the refusal to have the "moral self annihilated" that led to the Civil War. "The self is mine," he warned his audience, "and God my Maker's; it is not yours."⁹

It can be seen, then, that when Carlyle began his larger work on Cromwell he had already formed a number of ideas about his hero. No other great epoch, he confessed in his letters to Reverend John Sterling a few months after his lectures, lay "so buried under rubbish as this of Cromwell and his Puritans."¹⁰ For two centuries, he charged, Cromwell had been the victim of skepticism, quackeries, stupidities, and curses of the world. As he read this wasteful "continent of cinders" he discovered, however, that

⁷ Ibid., p. 211.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁰ Alexander Carlyle, New Letters of Thomas Carlyle, Vol. I (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), p. 213.

the character of Cromwell came before him "clearer and clearer, as of a great man, almost as of a kind of god."¹¹

Nonetheless, as was so natural with Carlyle, the hot fit of enthusiasm for a newly conceived project was succeeded by regret for his decision and disenchantment with his task. "A thousand times," H. D. Traill reports Carlyle to have written, he "regretted that this task was ever taken up,"¹² and as late as July, 1844, he complained to his friend, Edward Fitzgerald, that such was "the 'Curse of Cromwell' resting on [him], for the time being."¹³

There is indeed much evidence to suggest that the writing of Letters and Speeches involved Carlyle in "continual toil and misery." Begun as a narrative of the Civil War it was soon transformed into a biography. But months of anxiety had shown him that no adequate biography of Cromwell could be written. Carlyle "gathered accurately together the fruit of six weeks' hard writing; and fairly burnt it all in the fire" ¹⁴ In the end the work was to become a collection of letters and speeches in which the hero related the story of his own career, with the aid of Carlyle's explanatory notes. During all this time Carlyle patiently investigated and denounced, of course, the materials pertaining to Cromwell. He would even defy the "Museum headache" in

¹¹ Ibid., p. 250.

¹² Carlyle, Works, VI, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," i, xix.

¹³ Alexander Carlyle, Vol. I, p. 315.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 303.

order to verify some significant date or name. In 1842 he visited the field of Naseby in company with Dr. Arnold and in 1843 he visited the battle sites at Worcester and Dunbar.

The immediate success of Letters and Speeches astonished everyone, including Carlyle. The view of the Protector's career which Carlyle developed and triumphantly supported with factual material was thoroughly heretical. Victorians accepted not only the portrait of Cromwell as the most evil of human beings; they accepted also Dr. Samuel Johnson's eighteenth-century statement that "everything worth saying about him had already been said."¹⁵ A new edition was begun before many weeks after the first was published, and a third edition, in four volumes, containing large additions appeared in 1849. Carlyle was understandably pleased. "The new edition of Cromwell," he wrote to Thomas Ballantyne, ". . . has met with very unexpected reception in the world: — I fancy in fact it will far survive all my other books; and may be the beginning of great benefit to this bewildered world, in various ways."¹⁶

In this last prediction Carlyle was closer to the truth than he had realized. The impact of Letters and Speeches on its readers was of the kind that rarely occurs in the literary world. It disarmed Cromwell's opponents, dispelled the theory of Cromwell's hypocrisy, and convinced subsequent

¹⁵Ashley, p. 12.

¹⁶Alexander Carlyle, Vol. II, p. 21.

historians and biographers that Carlyle's conclusions were both reasonable and sound.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that a number of studies sympathetic to Cromwell had appeared before Carlyle's Letters and Speeches and, though timid and not extensive, they had broken the ground on the subject and prepared the way for Carlyle. "Cromwell did much for his country," wrote Lord John Russell in Essay on the History of the English Government published in 1821. "He augmented her naval glory and made her name formidable to all the legitimate Sovereigns to whom his birth was a subject of derision."¹⁷ In 1826 William Godwin, in an original survey of the Protectorate period, set out to build a fair conception of Cromwell's character. In 1828 Macaulay, in his essay on Hallam's Constitutional History, startled the readers of the Edinburgh Review with his praise of Cromwell whom he described as the greatest soldier of his age and the most statesman-like of English princes. In 1832 Lord Nugent attempted to vindicate the Protector in Memorials of Hampden and in 1840 Dr. Robert Vaughan, the founder and first editor of the British Quarterly Review published a historical work in which he attempted to render justice to the hero of the "Puritan Revolution."¹⁸

¹⁷Wm. Howie Wylie, Thomas Carlyle: The Man and his Books (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909), p. 255.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 254.

II

In the preface and introduction to Letters and Speeches, Carlyle described his over-all design and method. "These authentic utterances of the man Oliver himself," he began, "I have gathered them far and near; fished them up from the foul Lethean quagmires where they lay buried; I have washed, or endeavoured to wash them clean from foreign stupidities . . . and the world shall now see them in their own shape."¹⁹ To this forceful assertion he added that of Cromwell's various biographies there was extremely little to be known. "It is from his own words . . . from his own Letters and Speeches well read, that the world may first obtain some dim glimpse of the actual Cromwell, and see him darkly face to face."²⁰ The letters, he stated with determination, will show that "this man Oliver Cromwell was, as the popular fancy represents him, the soul of the Puritan Revolt; . . . that this man Oliver was not a man of falsehoods, but a man of truths; . . . that the character of Oliver, and of the Affairs he worked in, is much the reverse of that mad jumble of 'hypocrisies,' etc. etc., which at present passes current as such."²¹ The words and letters of "a noble English Man," he added, must be recovered from obscurity; the star that was almost extinct must be brought back to light.²²

¹⁹Carlyle, Works, VI, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," i, 12.

²⁰Ibid., p. 13.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 77.

Most of the 225 letters and eighteen speeches that Carlyle accumulated for his first edition had appeared in print before 1845. They had never been properly collected, however, and this fault provided Carlyle with an excellent opportunity to denounce everyone who had had anything to do with Cromwell's writings. The "letters and authentic Utterances of Oliver," he wrote, "stand in their old spelling, mispunctuated, misprinted, unelucidated, — defaced with the dark incrustations too well known to students of that period."²³ The speeches, as hitherto set forth in The Somers Tracts, in The Milton State Papers, and in Burton's Diary, he reminded his readers, were an "agglomerate of opaque confusions."²⁴ The King's Pamphlets, he charged, some "Thirty to Fifty Thousand" lie in the British Museum, "huge piles of mouldering wreck," waiting to be indexed, edited and, of course, read.²⁵ In point of fact the King's Pamphlets, or the Thomason Tracts, consist of some 22,800 separate pieces collected between the years 1640 and 1661. This voluminous material is arranged in five parts in chronological order and has a suitable manuscript catalogue. In 1761 this great collection was bought by George III and in the following year was presented by him to the British Museum.²⁶

²³ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁶ Norwood Young, Carlyle: His Rise and Fall (London: The Camelot Press Limited, 1927), p. 208.

John Rushworth's Historical Collections of Private Papers of State, etc. and the Thurloe Collection of State Papers, in Carlyle's opinion, were not worth reading; Bulstrode Whitelocke's Memorials of the English Affairs, etc. were filled with idleness and inaccuracies; while the works by Reverend Mark Noble -- Cromwell, Memoirs of the Protectoral House of Cromwell, and Lives of the Regicides -- were "not worth completing or rectifying" for they were based on James Heath's Flagellum, the Chronicle of the Civil Wars, Annus Mirabilis, and other evidence "worth nothing".²⁷ Undoubtedly Carlyle poured ridicule upon his rivals in order to strengthen his own position and to satisfy his personal vanity. But it must also be noticed that it is precisely to these "unworthy" and antiquarian sources that Carlyle owed the greater part of his material. From Thurloe he borrowed thirty letters, nine from Rushworth, and fifteen from the King's Pamphlets. In the introduction alone, he made extensive use of Noble's works, citing them sixteen times. Clearly, a historian who demonstrated such waywardness in the appraisal of his source material must be regarded with a certain amount of suspicion.

Carlyle's judgment became even more cloudy when he offered his over-all conception of the turbulent events. It was not, he asserted, the "Constitution, 'Liberty of the

²⁷ Carlyle, Works, VI, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," i, 14-16.

people to tax themselves,' Privilege of Parliament, Triennial or Annual Parliament, or any modification of these sublime Privileges now waxing somewhat faint in our admirations, that mainly animated our Cromwell's Pym, and Hampdens to the heroic efforts we still admire in retrospect."²⁸ The causes were other and deeper, he maintained. The revolutionaries were inspired by a Heavenly Purpose. "To see God's own Law, then universally acknowledged for complete as it stood in the holy Written Book, made good in this world . . . that God's Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven,"²⁹ — this, and this alone, Carlyle triumphantly announced, "was the general spirit in England in the Seventeenth Century."³⁰

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, Carlyle's Letters and Speeches must always lie on the desk of those who study Cromwell. It lacks, of course, the greater objectivity and the larger historical sweep of W. C. Abbott's Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, but the 318 items are arranged in a simple chronological sequence and the elucidations — passionate, violent, and testifying excessively to the Lord — give a picture of the period that has seldom been duplicated. "Carlyle possessed three enormous advantages over anyone who ventures to follow him in such a task as this," suggests W. C. Abbott. "He had an extraordinarily arresting style; he

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²⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

Ibid.

had entire confidence in the infallible righteousness of his subject, his cause and himself; and he had a relatively limited amount of material upon which to base his narrative and his judgments."³¹

Carlyle's four volumes on Cromwell are far from being a simple collection of documents. They are also an interpretation of the period and of Cromwell's life set in a framework of a running and brief narrative. The Preface to the first volume is also the preface to the whole, and Carlyle must be commended for explaining the scheme of the whole work before proceeding to a consideration of its first part. The appearance of the first two editions, he noted, brought to light "new Cromwell matter". But, he protested, "to unhook your cask again, and try to insert new staves, when the old staves, better or worse, do already hang together, is what no cooper will recommend."³² He therefore inserted eighteen letters into the Appendix together with a variety of documents including Dictionary Lists, not immediately connected with Cromwell, "but useful for students of this Historical Period," a List of the Long Parliament, Lists of the Association Committees, and the Squire Papers "which is for the present, and must for a long time remain, of doubtful authenticity to the world"³³ The index

³¹The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, Vol. I (Cambridge, Massachusetts:Harvard University Press, 1937), p. xiii.

³²Carlyle, Works, VI, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," i, v.

³³Ibid., p. viii.

at the end of volume IV to the entire work is complete and satisfactory.

There are two major weaknesses in the general plan of this work. In the first place Carlyle lumped together letters and speeches, legal documents and miscellaneous writings, and a sketch of Cromwell's life which is in reality a short history of the period. To Carlyle every detail was equally important. Eventually what emerged essentially were three separate books fused into one, a work in the nature of the Cromwellian annals. It is always unwise to make all the available letters and speeches serve as the skeleton of a history. A complete correspondence is difficult to deal with since it prohibits the historian from pursuing a single theme. A selection or sampling of letters and speeches threaded together with editorial notes would appear to be a far more scholarly approach.

The second weakness in Carlyle's overall plan is the assumption that Cromwell's letters and speeches reveal in his character the secret of his power over his soldiers, reconcile his uncertainties and contradictions, and provide the reader with a profound view of the Protector's actions and thoughts. The fact that much of Cromwell's passionate writing was sincere and came straight from the heart proves very little. He was an opportunist of the kind whose furious energy derived from an intense faith in God. His actions were seldom based on fixed political

ideas and he wavered and changed his mind continually. Indeed he scarcely ever looked more than one step ahead. "No man rises so high as he who knows not whither he is going," he is reported to have said, and the French minister de Retz thought the words proved him "a fool".³⁴ Cromwell, moreover, was a man with an instinct for practical solutions, for thinking and acting quickly, solving and pushing aside each problem as it arose. The letters and speeches of Cromwell therefore cannot form a consistent whole because the essence of Cromwell's generalship and statesmanship consisted of the urge to act and think impulsively for each occasion on the one hand and of long delays during which he awaited the revelation of God, untrammelled by the articulated policies of the past, on the other. Nor do his speeches and letters lend themselves to easy interpretation. Careful examination will show that his multifarious sayings and writings contain evidence of generosity and ruthlessness, of frankness and duplicity, of recklessness and caution, and indeed, of liberal toleration and illiberal authoritarianism. It is therefore impossible to analyze them adequately from a single perspective viewpoint as Carlyle had attempted to do.

The first volume deals with Cromwell's early life, his activities in parliament, the outbreak of the Civil War, and ends with the execution of Charles I. As Cromwell

³⁴Abbott, Vol. I, p. 472.

rose to fame and power, his letters, speeches, and similar items increased in number. The greater part of volume II is concerned primarily with military campaigns in Ireland and Scotland. Told in terms of letters and detailed military orders and arrangements it makes rather tedious reading. There is nothing exhilarating about the massacres at Drogheda and Wexford or the battle of Dunbar, although it must be admitted that passages such as "God made them as stubble to our swords"³⁵ reveal a fanaticism that was even more violent than Carlyle's by comparison.

Volumes III and IV cover the years 1651-58 and are clearly more important than the first two volumes since they not only show a new ruler wrestling with crucial domestic problems but also touch on the whole record of Cromwell's foreign policy. The material relating to foreign affairs is rather skimpy and Carlyle might have done well to draw some of the material from European archives. Cromwell's instructions to his agents on the continent and in the colonies are unfortunately sporadic and it did not occur to Carlyle that he should include the many reports of conversations conducted by foreign ministers and private Englishmen with the Protector. The official and diplomatic documents that Carlyle did include in his work raise certain questions. Carlyle made no attempt, for instance, to estimate to what extent the Protector was involved in

³⁵Carlyle, Works, VI, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," i, 188.

composing the letters written to foreign dignitaries or how far Milton or some other secretary wrote them and he merely signed them. Carlyle disclosed little that is new in Cromwell's foreign policy and the accounts written by his Secretary of State, John Thurloe, remain to this day our best source in this area.

It is a weakness of this work, perhaps owing to Carlyle's understandable desire to make the documentation as personal and full as possible, that insufficient attention is paid to the relative values of the different sources of evidence. It would be interesting to know, for example, what Cromwell's contemporaries thought of his aims and motives. The views of the Venetians, the French, or even the royalists like Clarendon or the republicans like Ludlow would have added immensely to the understanding of the Cromwellian era. To this end quotations from the dispatches of Giavarina, the Venetian envoy in London, or Bordeaux, the French ambassador, might easily have been included. Unfortunately Carlyle perceived all this as misleading and considered that to obtain a fair appraisal of the Protector it was necessary to turn to his own letters and speeches. To surround this autobiographical core with a mass of other evidence, however authentic, he insisted, is merely to obscure his hero's true character rather than clarify it.

In explaining the purpose of Letters and Speeches Carlyle made it abundantly clear that he was aware of his

editing responsibilities. He corrected the spelling and divided the letters into paragraphs in the modern manner, he explained, for his sole purpose was to have the letters read and understood. "Here and there," he informed the reader, "to bring out the struggling sense" he had "added or rectified a word, — but taken care to point out the same; what words in the Text of the Letters are [his] , the reader will find marked off by double commas: it was of course [his] supreme duty to avoid altering in any respect, not only the sense, but the smallest feature in the physiognomy, of the Original."³⁶ There is no reason for doubting Carlyle's sincerity. If he made errors it was due more properly to the nature of the task than to a deliberate design to deceive the reader.

It is often extremely difficult to be sure that we know what the words used meant to the original writer. The assumption that the meaning of words is standard throughout the years is dubious indeed. The intention, the force, and the implication of words can be notoriously affected by the identity of whoever used them and the circumstances of their usage. To add to the difficulty, some individuals develop a wholly idiosyncratic use of words, their own private use of symbols and special associations. The editor therefore should make perfectly clear the relationship between what

³⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

he prints and the original, and under no circumstances is he to revise the original manuscript in order to make it appear clearer, better, or more desirable without informing the reader of the alterations. The reader will then see at one glance the condition of the original text and satisfy himself as to the value of the corrections made, even if the emendations and words inserted are of the most trivial nature.

In view of these difficulties it is fair to say that Carlyle's Letters and Speeches compare well with even the most modern works. His mistakes may be numerous but not, as a rule, important. He often inserted words of his own, for example, without reflecting that, as Cromwell was a very accurate writer, he did not need Carlyle's peculiar embellishments. There can be little doubt that many readers would prefer to have Cromwell's letters as he himself wrote them to Carlyle's improved renditions. The alterations pertaining to Letter XCIII, for example, written to Richard Mayor on the subject of Richard Cromwell's marriage were completely unwarranted. Into this letter Carlyle inserted nineteen words, most of them quite unnecessary, and one or two misleading.³⁷ He changed "son" to "grandson" and suggested that "die" meant more properly "live".³⁸

³⁷Young, p. 210.

³⁸Carlyle, Works, VII, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," ii, 18.

Of much greater consequence, however, is the fact that many of the letters that Carlyle consulted were already altered versions of the original. Letters VIII, XIX, XXXVI, XLV, and LVIII in volume I, for example, were borrowed from the dubious source — the Gentleman's Magazine. Letters XII, XXVII, XXVIII, XXXI, LIX, and LXXXIII came from Rushworth's Historical Collections. Other letters originated from such far-flung areas as Morant's History of Colchester, the Fairfax Correspondence, the Annual Register, Parliamentary History, and Seward's Anecdotes.

Nonetheless, if it is agreed that W. C. Abbott represents modern scholarship, it can be shown that Carlyle's edition suffers from only slight variations. Carlyle was more willing than Abbott to retain Cromwell's words, and this can readily be seen in the short letter written to John Dunch on August 27, 1657 which both Carlyle and Abbott obtained from Harris's Life of Cromwell. Carlyle had Cromwell conclude the letter with the words, "With my respects to your Father, — I rest, your loving friend,"³⁹ while Abbott prefers the shorter version, "With my respects to your Father, — I rest."⁴⁰

On the other hand Carlyle should be reprimanded for his acceptance of the Squire Papers. It seems strange that a man of William Squire's reputation should have been able to

³⁹Ibid., IX, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," iv, 127.

⁴⁰Abbott, Vol. IV, p. 613.

convince Carlyle that the forgeries he had concocted were copies of letters written to Squire's ancestor.⁴¹ The story of the destruction of the originals together with the remarkable Journal of an Ironside, the omission of dates, the peculiar signatures, and the modern phraseology should have aroused Carlyle's suspicion from the very outset. Carlyle's handling of these thirty-five letters, professedly written by Cromwell, is in every way more serious than the faults of the "dull antiquaries" upon whom he poured so much scorn.

The endeavour to build a narrative from Cromwell's speeches is a much more formidable task than that which is involved in the use of his letters. There can be no doubt that the original versions were not taken down at the time of the speech, but were translations of reports in shorthand, difficult to decipher and since then lost to us. And even if it can be proved that the speeches were not originally taken in shorthand it can be safely asserted that nearly all the manuscripts and evidence on which historians of the Cromwellian era rely — the Clarke Manuscripts, the Lansdowne Manuscripts, and the Ayscough Manuscripts — are copies of documents now lost to us.⁴² It comes as a grievous disappointment when it is realized that what purports to be Cromwell's actual speech is in fact an incomplete,

⁴¹W. Aldis Wright, "The Squire Papers," The English Historical Review, I (April, 1886), 311-348.

⁴²Charles L. Stainer, Speeches of Oliver Cromwell 1644-1658 (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), p. viii.

inaccurate, and unreliable translation or copy of a translation. Shorthand in the seventeenth century was clumsy and shorthand writers were not skilful. This means that an extensive reconstruction was necessary before a coherent account of a speech could be presented and even then there were many omissions and repetitions. As soon as it is realized that a certain amount of material has been added from the imagination of the compiler in order to clarify the meaning, the nature of the document changes drastically.

Cromwell was no doubt a very rapid speaker and often spoke for two or three hours at a time. Speech I, for instance, delivered at the Opening of the Little Parliament on July 4, 1653 is twenty-eight pages in length;⁴³ Speech V, relating to the Meeting of the Second Protectorate Parliament on September 17, 1656 is forty-two pages long;⁴⁴ Cromwell's speech on April 21, 1657 to the Fourth Conference with the Committee of Ninety-nine in regard to the title of King takes up thirty-five pages.⁴⁵ The length of these speeches suggests that some kind of relay system must have been used and this raises the further problem of assembling the notes and finding agreement among the various writers.

⁴³ Carlyle, Works, VIII, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," iii, 42-70.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 268-310.

⁴⁵ Ibid., IX, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," iv, 79-114.

The eighteen speeches Carlyle included in his work were obtained from only four sources, all of them reasonably reliable, however. Burton's Diary provided Carlyle with six, Parliamentary History with four, Somers Tracts with five, and Commons Journal with three speeches. Again, as with Cromwell's letters it might be profitable to compare Carlyle's handling of the speeches with that of Abbott's modern scholarship. It will be seen that the discrepancy between the speeches is greater than that involved in the letters. The Speech at the opening of Parliament on September 17, 1656 begins in Abbott's work as follows:

Gentlemen,

When I came hither, I did think that a duty was incumbent upon me a little to pity myself, because (this being a very extraordinary occasion), I thought I had very many things to say to you; but truly now, seeing you in such a condition as you are, I think I must turn off in this, as I hope I shall in everything else, and reflect upon (you) as certainly not being able long to bear that condition and heat that you are in.

Rhetoricians, to whom I do not pretend, neither to them nor to the things they use to speak: Words. ⁴⁶

Carlyle was more successful in retaining the Cromwellian flavour:

Gentlemen, — When I came hither, I did think that a duty was incumbent upon me a little to pity myself; because, this being a very extraordinary occasion, I thought I had very many things to say unto you, "and was somewhat burdened and straitened

⁴⁶Abbott, Vol. IV, p. 260.

thereby." But truly now, seeing you in such a condition as you are, I think I must turn off "my pity" in this, as I hope I shall in everything else: — and consider you as certainly not being able long to bear that condition and heat that you are now in. — — "So far as possible, on this large subject, let us be brief; not studying the Art of Rhetoricians." Rhetoricians, whom I do not pretend to "much concern with"; neither with them, nor with what they use to deal in: Words! ⁴⁷

On the other hand Carlyle spoiled the speeches by constantly involving himself in them and inserting frequent interjections. "It is yet but three days, your Highness," ⁴⁸ he reminded Cromwell at one point. "Whitlocke, in a heavy manner, smiles respectful assent," ⁴⁹ he exclaimed in another instance. And there are numerous expressions that actually border on the ridiculous. "Lenthal tries to blush," ⁵⁰ or "Better not, your Highness," ⁵¹ or "Yes, my brave one!" ⁵² or just plain "Yea" ⁵³ are idiosyncracies that are best left out regardless of the form that the historian chooses for writing his history.

Carlyle had allowed his elucidations to run to no small lengths but, on the other side of this defect, is the liveliness of the narrative and the sense which the reader gains

⁴⁷ Carlyle, Works, VIII, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches,"

⁴⁸ ibid., 268.

⁴⁹ Ibid., IX, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," iv, p. 27.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 51.

⁵² Ibid., p. 87.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 64.

Ibid., p. 61.

from the detailed scenes. Where the Cromwellian documents did not suffice Carlyle added relevant and illuminating quotations from other authorities. Altogether, however, he relied rather too heavily on Rushworth's Historical Collections, the Commons Journals, Parliamentary History, and Thurloe's State Papers. The commentary, always a mixture of detailed narrative and personal reflection, necessarily grew as Cromwell became increasingly more immersed in events, both domestic and foreign.

III

There can be little doubt that the varied interpretations of Cromwell's character, motives, and place in history stem from the mass of complexities that colour his confused and unstable career. Coming to warfare with no training, little reading, and caring little for fame he became the greatest cavalryman in British military history. He organized an army to fight for Parliament against the King but in 1648 acquiesced in the Army's purge of Parliament and in 1653 himself used the Army to dissolve Parliament. A champion of tolerance, he justified the massacre of Irish Catholics at Drogheda as "a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood" ⁵⁴ He was never quite sure whether his main duty was to the people of England or to

⁵⁴ Ibid., VII, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," ii, 60.

the people of God and the long delays and hesitations during which Cromwell sought to hear the voice of God were intermittently marred by such violent actions as can be seen in Joyce's seizure of the King at Holmby House in June, 1647, the dissolution of the Long Parliament, and the final rejection of the Kingship.

To the Royalists of the seventeenth century Cromwell was, in the words of Lord Clarendon, "a brave bad man,"⁵⁵ a rebel and tyrant who had killed their King while they, after all, had only been able to hang Cromwell's bones. To the republicans he was equally a betrayer who had "sacrificed the public cause to the idol of his ambition."⁵⁶ Eighteenth-century writers judged Cromwell with the same severity as his contemporaries. Most Tories hated him because he overthrew the monarchy, most Whigs because he overthrew Parliament. "Cromwell, damned to everlasting fame,"⁵⁷ served Pope to point a moral against the desire of making a name in the world. Voltaire summed up Cromwell as a half knave, half fanatic.⁵⁸ Burke saw in him one of the great bad men who "exercised the power of the State by force of character and personal authority,"⁵⁹ while Hume affirmed in History of England that it was "by fraud and violence"

⁵⁵Buchan, p. 19.

⁵⁶Ashley, p. 13.

⁵⁷Charles Firth, Oliver Cromwell and the Rule of the Puritans in England (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), p. 476.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹John Morley, Oliver Cromwell (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1901), p. 2.

that Cromwell "rendered himself first in the State."⁶⁰ 148

Even in the nineteenth century John Forster was able to claim that it was "indisputably true" that Cromwell had "lived a hypocrite and died a traitor."⁶¹ Nevertheless, apart from Carlyle, a number of writers began to see Cromwell in a more favourable light. The liberals saw in him their champion of progressive reform. S. R. Gardiner, for instance, while agreeing with Carlyle that the Stuarts were an aggressive but incompetent dynasty and that the Great Rebellion was "the Puritan Revolution", interpreted Cromwell as a man who, "coming to power by military means, nevertheless wished for 'bit-by-bit' reform, opposed 'the exaggerations of Puritanism' and was frustrated in his attempt to found a constitutional monarchy only by the circumstances of his day."⁶² In the latter part of the nineteenth century the revolutionaries hailed him as their first great representative, while staunch conservatives greeted him as a gifted Englishman who put down anarchy and restored order.

As might be expected, twentieth-century writers hold an even greater diversity of opinion. Morley, writing at the beginning of the century, suggested that Cromwell was a "rare and noble type"⁶³ of leader whose "freedom of

⁶⁰Ashley, p. 13.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Christopher Hill, Oliver Cromwell 1658-1958 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 4.

⁶³Morley, p. 493.

spirit, and the energy that comes of a free spirit . . . his good faith, his valour, his constancy" have impressed his name upon the imagination of men wherever the English tongue prevails. ⁶⁴ Firth, also writing at the turn of the century, presented Cromwell as a great "champion" with a "heroic magnitude of mind"; ⁶⁵ Buchan describes him as "a mystery to his contemporaries and an enigma to his successors"; ⁶⁶ Abbott hints at Cromwell's unscrupulousness; ⁶⁷ Trevor-Roper sees him as a member of the declining gentry, a "country-house radical"; ⁶⁸ Ashley calls him a conservative dictator whose greatness lay in his "liberty of conscience", ⁶⁹ while Christopher Hill holds that, because Cromwell's career is characterized by paradoxes, no final verdict is possible. ⁷⁰

Whatever the interpretation, it is wrong to treat the English Revolution almost as Cromwell's creation and the notion advanced by Carlyle that Cromwell was called upon by God to establish God's Law on earth is far from the truth. The Great Rebellion was a highly more complex phenomenon than Carlyle had imagined it to be. The Crown's arbitrary actions in the years of "Thorough", for example, alienated many men of rank and wealth who were its natural

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 6.

⁶⁵Firth, p. 486.

⁶⁶Buchan, p. 19.

⁶⁷Abbott, Vol. IV, pp. 877-99.

⁶⁸Hill, p. 5.

⁶⁹Ashley, pp. 361-4.

⁷⁰Hill, pp. 5-9.

supporters. It led to the unanimous determination in the early months of the Long Parliament to punish the King's "evil councillors", to overthrow the prerogative courts, and to make the policy of "Thorough" impossible in the future. As the "landmarks" began to be cast down, as the royal concept of government became gradually undermined, the radicals -- Essex, Hampden, Pym, Vane, and others -- began to consider seriously an effective transfer of power from the Crown to parliament.

Indeed no one can discount the impact of radicalism on events in the period 1640-1660. These two decades witnessed a tremendous revival and dynamism -- a brief blossoming of an English renaissance. England found herself completely overcome by a spirit of restlessness, agitation, and exuberance. The Civil War, more properly, was a fight over ideas and principles and not, as Carlyle suggested, a return of mankind to God's Truth.

The one consistent theme of continuity in this period of intellectual ferment was the question of legality, involving the concepts of natural law and common law. The proclamation of natural law and natural right was to be the great watchword inspiring Pym, Lilburne, Hampden, Milton, Harrington, Hobbes, and others, to recreate society in a new image and it is by this theme that they are joined to the revolutionary decades. Natural law, that general rule arising out of the essential reason of man, they argued,

was to be the basis for common law. They held that sovereignty lay in the people, that rulers hold office by virtue of consent of the people, and that the people have natural rights including property, individual liberty, and contentment. In a brilliant speech delivered on April 13, 1641 Pym summed up these views on the seventeenth-century constitution. "It is the law," he declared, "that doth entitle

a king to the allegiance and service of his people; it entitles the people to the protection and justice of the King The law is the boundary, the measure between the King's prerogative and the people's liberty. Whilst these move in their own orbs they are a support and a security to one another; . . . if the prerogative of the King overwhelm the liberty of the people it will be turned into tyranny; if liberty undermine the prerogative, it will grow into anarchy ⁷¹

Parliament, Pym insisted, was to become a permanent part of the constitution on the theory that it was the representative element in the constitution. What was therefore needed was a major restatement of the legal position of both Crown and parliament. Reaction to this kind of parliamentary radicalism of the early 1640's came almost immediately. It may be seen most clearly in the writings of the extreme royalist, Sir Robert Filmer, who insisted in Patriarcha that the King alone, without the consent of parliament can make or break law. His royalist doctrine was challenged by the left-wing democratic principles of

⁷¹ J. P. Kenyon, The Stuart Constitution 1603-1688 (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), pp. 214-15.

the Levellers whose fiery tracts stimulated violent debates and contributed much to the entire spectrum of political thought. Among the other radical movements the most interesting were the Diggers and the Fifth Monarchy Men who proposed to sweep away the social and political evils that had plagued man from time immemorial.

Carlyle virtually ignored the social and economic changes of the time, particularly the decline of the aristocracy and Crown and the concomitant problem involving the adjustment of the constitutional realities to a rising gentry. The country was becoming progressively wealthier while the Crown, because of inflation, the absence of an efficient bureaucracy, and diminishing sources of revenue, was growing poorer. Depending on industrial interests for survival, the government was forced to pass legislation favouring the commercial and industrial classes who emerged as the most dangerous rivals of the Crown in political matters. Apart from making significant concessions, the Crown was forced to resort to questionable means of raising money — which although legal, defied the spirit of the law and led to widespread unpopularity.

⁷²A number of studies have been devoted to the economic aspect of the English Revolution. Among the more valuable are Lawrence Stone, Social Change and Revolution in England 1540-1640 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1965) and The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Richard H. Tawney, "The Rise of the Gentry," Economic History Review, XI, (Jan., 1941), 1-38; Hugh R. Trevor-Roper,

Indeed a case against Carlyle can be built by examining all those factors that had a bearing on Cromwell's career. Carlyle's constant walking in his hero's shadow seriously impaired his vision. So closely did he identify with Cromwell's greatness of soul, so strongly was he drawn to Cromwell by his own Calvinist upbringing, that he was unable to see the part played by public opinion or any other force unrelated to God. The true Cromwell, the Cromwell who responded to his contemporaries, who overthrew Charles's tyranny, who blundered politically, is hidden from the audience in Carlyle's work. What Cromwell was objectively to his fellow countrymen Carlyle failed to indicate. For that the reader must go to Firth or Buchan or Ashley. The Cromwell Carlyle offered was a man who was a perfect hero, always right in a world of fools and sinners — the great man who, by Divine appointment, attempted to bring the Divine Law of the Bible into actual practice in the affairs of men.

This is not to say, of course, that Puritanism was an unimportant factor in the events leading to and following the Civil War. Even during Elizabeth's reign the Puritans were the most hostile, troublesome, and subversive element in the kingdom. But the Great Rebellion was not a "Puritan

"The Elizabethan Aristocracy: An Anatomy Anatomized," Economic History Review (1951, 2nd ser., III), 279-298; and P. Zagorin, "The Social Interpretation of the English Revolution," Journal of Economic History, XIX (Sept., 1959), 376-401.

Revolution". It was more than that. It originated from a number of forces — religious, intellectual, political, economic, financial, constitutional, and social — all of them at work simultaneously setting society adrift; all, in fact, themselves being part of the chaos that prevailed for nearly two decades.

The problems, as Carlyle correctly noted, that were responsible for the Civil War were by no means solved with the execution of Charles I in 1649. After almost a decade in which the reins of power were effectively in Cromwell's grip, England was no nearer to a political settlement than she had been when the King was sent to the block. Perhaps the fact that Cromwell was over fifty and in poor health when he became supreme ruler of England may partly explain his quarrels with his later parliaments and his furious dismissals of them. He was lonely, friendless, and alienated from his countrymen. Pym and Hampden with whom he had sat on the bench of the Opposition to the King's ministers ten years earlier were both dead. Henry Ireton, his son-in-law, on whom he had leaned so heavily during the famous political debates in the Army Council in 1647 was also dead. His old and close friendship with Henry Vane, the opponent of Cromwell's Protectorate, had come to an end. Henceforth Cromwell had to rely on his own judgment and feelings and the independent advice of his civil servants and agents headed by his faithful Secretary of State, John Thurloe.

Little is known of Cromwell's formative years, and Carlyle's treatment of this aspect of Cromwell's life is inadequate. It is widely accepted, however, that from his boyhood he had always been an intriguing ringleader — a ringleader who "hoped to live to see never a nobleman in England," who said that "if he met the King on the battlefield he would shoot him," who later threatened to cut off Charles's head with the Crown on it — and did so. His youthful development was moody, and filled with much puritanical prayer. As a young man he was repeatedly chosen for parliament. At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642 he emerged as a military genius. The divine revelations, however, were less plain to him in the political sphere than on the field of battle.

Indeed it may be safely argued that from 1653 onward, Cromwell was left fumbling in a maze of political uncertainties. Always the opportunist, he scarcely knew how best to serve his country when the opportunity had arrived. He had sent Charles I to the scaffold as a despot who betrayed his trust only to discover four years later that he himself inherited powers that were even greater than those that Charles had enjoyed. The powers of dictatorship came to him but he could not employ them. Financial problems, dissension in the Army, Royalist, Presbyterian, and Laudian opposition, and his own poor health restricted drastically his course of action. Henceforth he engaged in a series

of constitutional experiments every one of which was a failure. Like Charles, Cromwell was never able to govern without parliaments and never able to govern with them. "It is curious," Carlyle indicated, "to see how he struggles to govern in some constitutional way; find some Parliament to support him; but cannot."⁷³ The experiment with "Parliaments having failed," he added, "there remained nothing but the way of Despotism."⁷⁴

The view advanced by Ashley, however, that Cromwell accelerated the coming of modern democracy if only because he put an end to Charles I and preached "liberty of conscience" in an intolerant age is hardly worthy of consideration. Cromwell himself spoke not of democracy but of "religion" and the "interest of the nation" as his two guiding principles. He engaged in the late wars, he wrote, "to follow the Lord's providence in serving His cause and People; not doubting but He will give such an issue to this Business as will be to His glory and your comfort."⁷⁵ For him, religion and government were indissoluble parts of a whole. Politics had no meaning without religion and God Himself was deeply involved in the whole disordered political world where men were striving for the salvation of their souls. As for the nation as a whole it is fair to suggest that the

⁷³ Carlyle, Works, V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 232.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 235.

⁷⁵ Ibid., VII, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," ii, 253.

furious events of the 1640's and 1650's forced Englishmen to become more cautious and conservative, as the Restoration demonstrates, and the earlier democratic successes were set back by the radical parliament for at least a century.

The crucial question — the question Carlyle failed to consider — is whether it was fortunate for Cromwell's fame that he died when he did. All evidence points to a verdict in the affirmative. "He was fortunate," suggests Abbott, "in more ways than one, especially in that he died

in time to make his fame secure. If one thing emerges more clearly than another from a study of the last days of his Protectorate it is that, barring some miracle, its days were numbered. As it was then situated it could not have gone on much longer. Financially it was tottering to its fall. Politically its position was always precarious and never more so than in its last days. Its only strength lay in its army and its fleet and though they gave it a strong position in diplomacy, it was an edifice built on sand. ⁷⁶

The Cromwellian system had too many enemies and was too disunited to survive much longer. The Protestant League and its aims were anachronistic while the Caribbean expedition and England's participation in the Franco-Spanish war were major errors. Cromwell's misguided program might temporarily have enhanced England's diplomatic prestige abroad but it created much difficulty at home. The wars abroad strained England to the point of bankruptcy.

⁷⁶ Abbott, Vol. IV, p. 872.

Like Charles before him Cromwell was forced to resort to questionable methods of raising revenue. The Cromwellian administration was thus made far more unpopular than it might have been and this unpopularity contributed immensely to the final disintegration of the Protectorate form of government. Cromwell "was condemned to build that which could not last," writes Buchan. "Even at his death the dream-fabric was dissolving" ⁷⁷ Crushed from all directions and facing an England nearly at its last gasp Cromwell rapidly relapsed into a bewildered and unwell country gentleman whose greatest achievement ultimately was not those constructive actions which merely season the bad memory of every dictator but the one act that has made his name live for three centuries -- a timely death.

⁷⁷ Buchan, p. 20.

Chapter VI

History of Friedrich II of Prussia called Frederick the Great

Frederick is one of the great historical works of the English literary world and Carlyle's major bid for fame. In its conception and execution it is a magnificent historical study, possessing an artistic excellence and a moral message few historians have succeeded in mastering. Ever since the publication of the first two volumes in 1858 generations of readers have derived entertainment and instruction from this monumental creation. Its accuracy as history has withstood the erosion of time remarkably well. To be sure, later research has greatly extended our knowledge of Prussian history, and given way to new and less sympathetic interpretations but Carlyle's Frederick remains still a generally trustworthy and always illuminating work.

The work bears unmistakably the stamp of its author's personality and the marks of the age in which it was written. It contains, too, elements which transcend these limitations and give it lasting value among the works that attempt to apprehend the meaning of the human spirit. For Carlyle wrote as a "philosophic historian", one who aspired to say something about the nature and destiny of man, and he wrote at a time when history was considered a literary art. Nonetheless, in his thirteen year dedication to his great task, in the fearsome dimensions of the work, and in the scrupulous accuracy and the extreme care with which he

guided the execution of his work he easily earned himself a place of pre-eminence among historians.

In Frederick, Carlyle again presented himself as a moral sage and in Frederick's human nature he saw an opportunity to exemplify the virtues of which he spoke so often. Like Cromwell, Frederick transcended the events that surrounded him, and emerged "a King every inch of him, though without the trappings of a King."¹ He became a "Reality worthy of being seen,"² whose greatness was realized in an organized nation and an invincible army. Carlyle saw him as the outstanding if imperfect type of human virtue and integrity. "He was a specimen of humanity," declares John Holloway, "ready-made for the moralist to teach, on a grand scale, by the method of example." It is this personal interest, he adds, "that dominates the book and controls and subordinates every other aspect."³

There can be no doubt that Carlyle wrote Frederick partly out of reaction to the English conditions of his own day. Like many of his contemporaries he was greatly disturbed by the contrast that seemingly existed between the strength of Prussia and the English laissez-faire system. "Friedrich Wilhelm's History will well reward study," he therefore suggested, "and teach by example, in a very simple

¹ Carlyle, Works, XII, "Frederick the Great," i, 2.

² Ibid., p. 8.

³ The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument (London: Macmillan & Co. Limited, 1953), p. 76.

and direct manner."⁴

The rise of Prussia, Carlyle asserted, was the supreme phenomenon of modern times and throughout the whole work there is evidence of this single complex attitude which he applied to the management of every part. Prussia appeared to him the emblem of order, good government, and victory over chaos. Here indeed was a realized ideal, needing only Carlyle's voice to make this message of hope known to the nations of the world. In the appearance of this new and disciplined nation, observing God's laws and accordingly extending its power, there might yet be hope of universal reconstruction.

It seemed to Carlyle that there was no place in Prussian affairs for the errors and falseness of which he complained in Chartism, Past and Present, and Latter-Day Pamphlets. If Frederick had shortcomings it was not entirely his fault. Rather, it was the eighteenth century that must be blamed. For the century in which he played so dominating a part, according to Carlyle, had offended and abandoned God. It was lost, wandering, degenerate. "The Eighteenth Century," he stated, ". . . does not figure to me as a lovely one." It had, in his view, "nothing grand in it"⁵

Against this bleak and hopeless background the figure

⁴Carlyle, Works, XII, "Frederick the Great," i, 347.

⁵Ibid., p. 8.

of Frederick looms large and clear and his virtues become a rare spectacle in a rare age. Frederick, Carlyle wrote to Emerson, "the genuine little ray of Veritable and Eternal that was in him, lay imbedded in the putrid Eighteenth Century, such an Ocean of sordid nothingness, shams, and scandalous hypocrisies, as never weltered in the world before" ⁶ No matter what had been written or recorded about him, he protested, Frederick "tragically lies There; — and ought not to lie there." ⁷ Unlike the degenerate and feeble Princes who held sway in Europe at the time, Frederick brought order and stability to his state by establishing a paternalistic and efficient government, and enforcing habits of industry and thrift on his subjects. Thus while the eighteenth century was abhorrent to him, Carlyle, nevertheless, turned to Frederick for he supposed him to be the one man of purpose and sincerity in an age of cant and decay. Moreover, Frederick personally was not detached from God for, if the state of the eighteenth century was chaotic, a King who contended against chaos was in fact observing the laws of God.

According to this view, Carlyle had extolled Prussia in the language of Frederick and conversely denounced England. Ever since the appearance of Frederick critics have

⁶ Charles Eliot Norton, ed., The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson 1834-1872, Vol. II (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), p. 239.

⁷ Ibid.

consistently formulated a judgment against Carlyle, accusing him of motives, sins, and designs that are not only historically absurd but betray a serious lack of acquaintance with Carlylean thought. Bertrand Russell, for example, contends that Carlyle was inspired by an instinctive aversion which "led him to belittle most men, finding satisfaction only in those who had been notably destructive of human life -- Frederick the Great, Dr. Francia, and Governor Eyre." ⁸ Eric Russell Bentley argues that Carlyle's conception of the hero in Frederick is frightful and forbidding ⁹ and J. Salwyn Schapiro interprets Carlyle as a prophet who deified force, whose "views on social and political problems, divested of their moral appeal by the march of time, are revealed to be those of a fascist in their essential implications." ¹⁰ Others regard him as an oddity with a shallow philosophy to be dissected with minute curiosity. "We discover at last," suggests Hippolyte A. Taine with his usual humour, "that we are in presence of a strange animal, a relic of a lost family, a sort of mastodon, who has strayed in a world, not made for him." ¹¹

All of this, of course, reveals the fact that many of

⁸Quoted in Herbert L. Stewart, "Carlyle and his Critics," The Nineteenth Century and After, 86 (Sept., 1919), 506.

⁹"Modern Hero-Worship: Notes on Carlyle, Nietzsche, and Stefan George," The Sewanee Review, LII (1944), 441-56.

¹⁰"Thomas Carlyle, Prophet of Fascism," Journal of Modern History, XVII (June, 1945), 97.

¹¹History of English Literature, Vol. IV (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), p. 285.

those who come forth with criticism are uncertain and confused about Carlyle's writings and permit their opinions to be coloured by events which have nothing to do with his Frederick. It is true that Bismark rewarded Carlyle with the Order of Merit; it is true that a book of selections from his works, translated into German, sold three hundred thousand copies during the period 1926-32; it is also true that his Heroes and Hero-Worship was made compulsory reading in Nazi schools. But all of this proves very little. If it proves anything it is that Carlyle's authoritarianism lends itself to easy misinterpretation and that demagogues and fanatics are forever eager to exploit famous men to serve their own ends.

In point of fact throughout the course of the narrative it becomes starkly clear what this impatient and dyspeptic dreamer had in mind when he wrote his Frederick. The predominant quality with which Carlyle endowed his ideal hero was not force or power, but God's Truth. Carlyle's great men and heroes did not stand outside the moral order, beyond good and evil, but rather served as the instruments of God's will, executors of decrees which often were not of their choosing and did not necessarily serve their individual purposes.

Carlyle by no means justified the Frederick of popular opinion. The Frederick that he brought to birth was a man with genuine human feelings, whose compassion was revealed

in his having sought out "one thousand poor old women, the destitute of Berlin," hiring vacant houses for them, fitting them on sound principles of hygiene and comfort, and setting these unfortunates to spin at His Majesty's charges under proper officers, with proper wages, and proper treatment.¹²

To the charge that he was building a "gospel of force" Carlyle himself replied to William Lecky, the Irish historian and essayist, that he should "have to tell Lecky one day that quite the converse, or reverse, is the great and venerable author's real opinion — namely that right is the eternal symbol of might . . . and that, in fact, he probably never met with a son of Adam more contemptuous of might, except where it rests upon the above origin."¹³ In Frederick, Carlyle's spokesman, Sauerteig, dismissed wars as futile, often too much recorded and filling too large a space in the imagination of those who wrote history. "Wars are not memorable," he stated, "however big they may have

been, whatever rages and miseries they may have occasioned, or however many hundreds of thousands they may have been the death of, — except when they have something of World History in them withal . . . Unless perhaps the feats of prowess, virtue, valour, and endurance, they might accidentally give rise to, were very great indeed . . . Wars otherwise are mere

¹²Carlyle, Works, XII, "Frederick the Great," i, 350.

¹³James Anthony Froude, Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London 1834-1881, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), p. 422.

futile transitory dust — whirlwinds stilled in blood; extensive fits of human insanity, such as we know are too apt to break out¹⁴

II

Even a most cursory examination of Frederick will show that there is a certain disharmony between the ideal and real world in its pages, and though it is the ideal that gives the work its stamp of quality the excess of its presence robs it of much of its historical value. Frederick was justified in seizing Silesia, Carlyle assured his readers, because he could best administer the conquered territory. The result of the Prussian occupation was beneficial to Silesia itself. Wrought to the Prussian model it was worth six times to Prussia what it had been worth to Austria. Frederick, he insisted, "speaks when business

requires it, of 'those known rights' of his, and with the air of a man who expects to be believed on his word . . . his eye set on the practical merely. 'Just rights?' What are rights, never so just, which you cannot make valid?¹⁵

Carlyle justified the partition of Poland on the equally dubious ground that Prussia's mission transcended all national boundaries. Her nobility of purpose, he held, superior to that of the neighbouring countries, committed Prussia to expansionist action. The partition was "Heaven's

¹⁴Carlyle, Works, XV, "Frederick the Great," iv, 144.

¹⁵Ibid., XIV, "Frederick the Great," iii, 405-6.

Justice . . . an event inevitable in Polish History; an operation of Almighty Providence and of the Eternal Laws of Nature, as well as of the poor earthly Sovereigns concerned there."¹⁶

It is clear that Carlyle surveyed Frederick's life with an eye that seriously distorted his vision. Amid all the brilliance of the picture he provided for the reader there are historical situations where the reader might do well to suspect Carlyle as a guide. He was, indeed, writing with a thesis in mind. He was predisposed to an ethical theory which the events he was describing were to illustrate. He cared little for reasoned argument. He was a writer who "never set out from premises and reasoned his way to conclusions, and who never thought calmly but always in a passion."¹⁷ His voice was arresting, his gestures were extravagant, and his method was that of inspired harangue. It can easily be recognized that Carlyle consistently introduced a set of ethical standards which were not derived from history itself and applied his own standard of truth to the situations that confronted him.

To be more specific, Carlyle had undertaken to prove from history a moral doctrine about the triumph of good which history could not prove and indeed often seems rather to refute. He "strained the evidence to make it fit his

¹⁶Ibid., XIX, "Frederick the Great," viii, 119.

¹⁷Herbert L. Stewart, "Carlyle's Place in Philosophy," The Monist, XXIX (April, 1919), 162.

thesis, and the inevitable result was to change the meaning of the thesis into something which the evidence he invoked was inadequate to support."¹⁸ In trying to show from historical evidence that the way of the world is just, he ended up giving the impression that by justice he meant the way of the world.

It is tempting, of course, to exonerate Carlyle from this particular failing. Self-deceit on the part of biographers regarding the subject of their work is not unusual. Biographers guilty of it, however, should not with rashness be accused of personal obliquity. Moreover, while it is true that Carlyle was concerned primarily with constructing a moral picture, no one could deny that he toiled among the sources with enormous diligence and pursued the facts with a severity not to be excelled by the Dryasdust historians whose claims and methods moved him to scorn. He waded through mountains of books, manuscripts, calendars and condemned their dullness. Schlosseur, Preuss, Ranke, Förster, Vehse, were in his opinion "dark chaotic dullards whose books are mere blotches of printed stupor, tumbled mountains of marine stores."¹⁹ While the "heavy old printed German rubbish" together with Voltaire's correspondence were a constant irritation to him, he did approve of the

¹⁸ Herbert L. Stewart, "The Alleged Prussianism of Thomas Carlyle," International Journal of Ethics, XXVIII (Jan., 1918), 173.

¹⁹ John Nichol, Thomas Carlyle (London: Macmillan & Co., Limited, 1892), p. 159.

mémoires of Wilhelmina, Frederick's sister. He was fond of quoting, observes Nancy Mitford, "in small print, someone described as 'a certain author whom we often follow' or 'one recent tourist' or 'my abstruse friend'," all of whom may be identified "as Carlyle himself — from his style which is unmistakable."²⁰

In 1858 his insistence on historical exactitude compelled him to make the journey to Germany to cover the scenes of the twelve battles whose cumulative result, between 1741 and 1760, was to leave Prussia definitely one of the great European powers. He even claimed the devotion of two assistants whose self-sacrificing made the completion of Frederick possible — Joseph Neuberg, a retired German business man, erudite and painstaking, who acted as Carlyle's assistant in research, and Henry Larkin, the young Chelsea clerk who volunteered his services as indexer and shouldered more and more of the routine labour until the last volume was off the press. But the use of such great and indispensable primary authorities as Frederick's own Oeuvres, the Politische Correspondenz of his reign, and the elaborate military histories published by the German and Austrian Staffs was unknown to Carlyle and the works were unavailable. At the end of this long thirteen-year ordeal, Carlyle emerged as an old and weary man, becoming more and more tragically miserable

²⁰ "Tam and Fritz: Carlyle and Frederick the Great," History Today, XVIII (Jan., 1968), 4.

every year.

It should be noted, however, that despite the enormous amount of work that has been done on the life of Frederick — in Europe, particularly—Carlyle's appraisal of his political career is still among the best. He was the first English historian to produce a substantial work sketching the character of Frederick and defining its relation to the rise of Prussia. His conclusion that Frederick deserved the title of "the Great" for having raised Prussia to the rank of a chief power is perfectly sound. He contended in his usual public manner, and brought to the attention of Englishmen, the fact that Prussia had been created, that she had become a great force in European affairs, and that she would continue to go a great way on the impulse she received from Frederick. His work remains to this day an opulent storehouse of valuable information, detail, and opinion.

There has been little argument since Carlyle's day about Frederick's shaping role in history. The quarrel, rather, has been more with Carlyle than with Frederick. Though they possess superior historical materials and have the marked advantage of much literature on the subject, English historians invariably use Carlyle's Frederick as a standard against which they react. They set out to paint a more balanced picture, for the Frederick that Carlyle presented to the world was a distorted version of a great

master-builder whose actions were, at least in part, determined by God. Prussia, suggests G. P. Gooch, had no "legal

right to the whole of Silesia: the claim was only to the four duchies of Liegnitz, Brieg, Wohlau and Jägerndorf. Carlyle's characterization of the rape as 'a rushing out to seize your own stolen horse' is grotesque
 21

W. F. Reddaway concedes that as in the case of Cromwell, Carlyle exposed to the world a man who had "the art of wearing among his fellow-creatures a polite cloak of darkness, a man politely impregnable to the intrusion of human curiosity"²² but denies Carlyle's contention that the execution of Katte was just, that the imprisonment of Frederick was wise, or that the King was a father yearning to reconcile his son with God and with himself. "An opinion more widely held," Reddaway notes, "is that the execution and imprisonment were unjust but politic, that reasons of state excused them, that their righteousness was proved by their success" ²³

Carlyle's eloquent treatment of Frederick and his emotional attachment to his hero have prompted Norwood Young to react so strongly that the picture he presents of Frederick is even more untrustworthy. It is clear that his

²¹ Frederick the Great: The Ruler, The Writer, The Man (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), pp. 9-10.

²² Frederick the Great and the Rise of Prussia (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), p. 24.

²³ Ibid., p. 47.

harsh judgment is directed as much against Carlyle as against Frederick — both of whom he neither likes nor understands. If Frederick was "Great", as Carlyle had maintained, suggests Young, it was solely because he increased his domains by conquest. In no other sense, according to Young, was Frederick great. On the contrary, he was a man of mediocre intelligence, of mean spirit, a cruel man devoid of generous sentiments and of moral principles, concerned only for his own glory.

It matters little that Carlyle was not alone in his favourable approach to Frederick. Ranke, for example, had not a word of blame for the seizure of Silesia; Droysen delighted in the name of Frederick and expounded Prussia's historic mission; Treitschke saw in Frederick the greatest German statesman since Gustavus Adolphus; Koser expressed satisfaction that Frederick had raised Prussia to great heights of glory.²⁴ But these were leading German historians and, on the whole, English critics are prepared to overlook their nationalistic bias. They recognize to what extent the services of German historians have been enlisted in the defence of Prussian policy and the Prussian state. There can be, however, no such excuse for Carlyle.

The key issue is, of course, the perplexing question of whether Frederick deserved to be treated as the instrument for Carlyle's theme. The high moral valuation Carlyle

²⁴Gooch, pp. 328-60.

set upon Frederick's personal achievement has forced subsequent writers to reduce the treatment of Frederick to its lowest terms. The history pertaining to Frederick and Prussia often becomes a struggle between good and bad forces, between good and bad actions. Indeed, this very issue was the burden of a hundred passages in Carlyle's letters and journal. Several possibilities crossed his mind. "He

thought of Ireland, but that was too burning a subject; of William the Conqueror, of Simon de Montfort, the Norsemen; but these may have seemed to him too remote "Luther" might have been an apter theme; but there too it would have been a strain to steer clear of theological controversy, of which he had had enough. Napoleon was at heart too much of a gamin for his taste. ²⁵

Looking over Europe, it appeared to him that the modern stability of Prussia might serve his needs although he remained undecided for many months. "Frederick the Great," he stated, "continues very questionable: nobody yet could say, I should ever fairly try to write a Book about him." ²⁶ As he worked on Frederick he found himself oppressed by hesitations as to the choice of his hero and to the extent to which Frederick could properly fulfil the function that was required of him. He himself declared that he had tried to put some humanity into Frederick but "found it hard work." To his brother, Dr. Carlyle, he wrote that he was deeply

²⁵Nichol, p. 115.

²⁶Alexander Carlyle, ed., New Letters of Thomas Carlyle (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), p. 142.

distressed by "the want of sufficient Love for lean Frederick and his heroisms" on his part "— which is a sad objection indeed!"²⁷ Nevertheless, despite these inner disparities, Carlyle pressed on with his initial objective and idealized Frederick as a great creative force. "He determined," suggests John Nichol, "almost of malice prepense, to exalt the narrow though vivid Prussian as 'the last of the kings, the one genuine figure of the eighteenth century,' and though failing to prove his case, he has, like a loyal lawyer, made the best of his brief."²⁸

At the same time, suggests H. D. Traill, if a writer is "to select a hero with a special view of using his biography for a temporary polemical purpose, it is just as well that he should not plan his work on such a scale as to make it last him the remainder of his life."²⁹ Any of his heroes in his lectures on Hero-Worship might easily have served as a better vehicle for denouncing the immorality of England and for illustrating what in his opinion was the ideal social organization. At least they did not involve the massive and formless detail that Frederick's career involved. As it was, Carlyle found, to his dismay that he had implicated himself in writing an eighteenth-century history of Germany and Europe — a task that to this day remains tangled

²⁷Ibid., p. 149.

²⁸Nichol, p. 72.

²⁹Carlyle, Works, XII, "Frederick the Great," i, xiv.

and difficult.

III

Frederick gives the appearance of being a solidly constructed edifice, with a unity of design and harmony of proportion in all its parts. The entire structure is unified by a single theme and the style shows only slight modification and variation as the narrative unfolds. Indeed the structure of Frederick is among its most impressive features for it is a work that was composed over a period of thirteen years. There is ample evidence to suggest that the topic and scope of the undertaking were continually growing in his mind. Henry Larkin testified, for instance, "that Carlyle contemplated a fairly complete account of Frederick's reconstruction of his kingdom, which he regarded as the most important and instructive lesson of his career."³⁰ Unfortunately, Frederick "was already longer than he had anticipated," his energies were exhausted, and he came to the conclusion "that no living picture could be built up from official reports and statistics."³¹ Yet there is throughout the entire work a remarkable homogeneity of thought and form and structure.

Carlyle's aim was moral and philosophical instruction, and the various actions spread out over the twenty-one carefully wrought Books contribute to an understanding of

³⁰G. P. Gooch, History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), p. 331.
³¹Ibid.

this overall theme. Each scene, the most memorable, beginning with the "Twelve Hercules — labours of this King"³² to the most trivial such as the Applewomen knitting at their stalls, "encouraged and quietly constrained"³³ is distinguished by the importance it bears to the main burden of the narrative. They provide material both for the formulation of the theme and its illustration. Fixed in the reader's memory, they are secure anchors to hold the more abstract commentary in place.

The same careful attention to form, order, and design may be found in Carlyle's management of all the larger strands of his work. His suspension of one narrative for the introduction of another and then the synthesis of the two with other elements of his history is a common, but important technique. He introduced the Polish crisis in Book IX, for example, considered thereafter a host of other issues, and returned to the "Troubles in Poland" and its partition in Book XXI. This literary device permitted Carlyle to clarify the relationship of the parts, to employ shifting emphasis, and, most important, to exercise a vast amount of control over his material and to produce with far more precision exactly the effect he desired.

Diligent research presented to Carlyle, as it does to any other historian, a gigantic mass of confused and dis-

³²Carlyle, Works, XIX, "Frederick the Great," viii, 2.
³³Ibid., XII, "Frederick the Great," i, 350.

parate raw material, and it is proof of his great intellectual strength and energy that he was able to reduce it to order and coherence. The first shaping concept which he imposed on it was the moral character of Frederick. Beyond that, a series of subordinate concepts and skills grew and developed as he prosecuted his task.

The army and battles, for example, comprise a large portion of the whole. As Prussia appeared to Carlyle the symbol of stability, good government, and victory over anarchy, so the army was the ultimate expression of this spirit. The preparations for the battles and initiation of hostilities generate suspense and prepare the reader for great action. "The King makes all his dispositions," Carlyle wrote in describing the Battle of Mollwitz,

sketches out punctually, to the last item in Four Columns, ready for Neipperg wherever he may be Neipperg, for his part, struggles forward a few miles, this Sunday April 9th; the Prussians rest under shelter in the wild weather. ³⁴

The reader is then given considerable penetration into the different states of mind. "King Friedrich . . . had not, or had hardly at all, slept during those two nights, such his anxieties." ³⁵ Neipperg, on the other hand, "is much at his ease on this white resting-day." ³⁶ The fury

³⁴Ibid., XV, "Frederick the Great," iv, 114.

³⁵Ibid., p. 117.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 119-20.

of the approaching battle is suggested in the reference to the "day of wild drifting snow, so that you could not see twenty paces" ³⁷ The scene is then narrowed to a smaller area and Carlyle prepares the reader for the actual battle. The terrain is described, the lines of battle are drawn, and suddenly Römer cries "Forward! . . . and his Thirty Squadrons, like bottled whirlwind now at last let loose, dash upon Schulenburg's poor Ten" ³⁸

The "hours of chaos" wear on. The reader grows acutely aware of galloping horses flying "wildly", of deafening cannon, of glittering bayonets, of pierced bodies and a great "loss of men, on both sides." But while the reader becomes involved in the conflict, Carlyle does not permit him to lose perspective of the whole. His narrative makes the reader experience the suspense, share in the excitement, witness the violence on the field, only to discover that the entire episode had a significant bearing on the fortunes of Prussia. "Such was Mollwitz, the Battle of Silesia," Carlyle alleged, "which had to cost many Battles first and last.

Silesia will be gained, we can expect, by fighting of this kind in an honest cause. ³⁹

Beneath the vividly detailed battle scenes, the historical narrative, and the generous commentary lay, of course,

³⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

Carlyle's real intention — the portraiture of Frederick touched with moral intentions. But the complexity and meaning of this enterprise are quite missed if it is supposed that Carlyle presented his readers merely with a specimen of a good character. Carlyle's Frederick contains something much more ambitious than this. It gradually amasses a multitude of varied individuals who collectively, in the end, give an exhaustive picture of human virtues and vices as they appeared to Carlyle.

The character of Frederick himself is an example. It is well known that Carlyle portrayed him sympathetically. Frederick "managed not to be a Liar and Charlatan as his Century was" ⁴⁰ All the same, however, he was clearly a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. He was "a wild man", too fond of "wild pranks" and not deeply reverentially fond of wisdom. ⁴¹ "Literary fame itself he regards as mountebank fame," but "no King, scarcely any man, had less of reverence for the Sciences so-called." ⁴² He was too preoccupied with the opening of his Opera-House "while Belleisle filed out of Prag that gloomy evening." ⁴³ Frederick, then, was by no means a figure of perfection. He was simply a remarkable specimen of how sterling qualities — practical judgment, steady perseverance, and indifference to trivial-

⁴⁰ Ibid., XII, "Frederick the Great," i, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 337.

⁴² Ibid., XIII, "Frederick the Great," ii, 85.

⁴³ Ibid., XV, "Frederick the Great," iv, 406.

ities — may ultimately emerge victorious over diverting frailties.

Frederick took his place not in "a simple scale of virtue but a complex order of individuals."⁴⁴ The Prince of Anhalt-Dessau who had lived through Benheim and Malplaquet and was the practical creator of the Prussian Army possessed a strange sorrow in his heart. A "rugged man, whose very face is the colour of gunpowder," he married "the daughter of one Fos an Apothecary at Dessau,"⁴⁵ and when she died the hard core of his hard existence had withered away. Frederick William with his domestic tyrannies, outrages, and industry was "a thick-set, sturdy, florid, brisk fellow; with a jovial laugh in him, yet of solid grave ways, occasionally somewhat volcanic."⁴⁶ Captain Ziethen had a "face thrice-honest, intricately ploughed with thoughts which are well kept silent,"⁴⁷ while Zisca was "stout and furious, blind on one eye and at last of both, a kind of human rhinoceros driven mad"⁴⁸ The characters of whom Carlyle more or less disapproved were varied and numerous although few of them were bad without qualification. Frederick's governess, Dame de Roucouilles, "was from Normandy, of gentle blood, never very rich . . . and the dreadful bore";⁴⁹

⁴⁴Holloway, p. 79.

⁴⁵Carlyle, Works, XII, "Frederick the Great," i, 327.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁷Ibid., XVI, "Frederick the Great," v, 36.

⁴⁸Ibid., XII, "Frederick the Great," i, 147.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 322.

Stanislaus Poniatowski, who was "terribly plucked to pieces on the stage of the world," was "not a sublime specimen of Ornamental Human Nature";⁵⁰ his Excellency, Montijos, the Spanish delegate to the Imperial Election, was "a brown little man . . . who, finding matters so backward at Frankfurt, and nothing to do there, has been out, in the interim, touring to while away the tedium."⁵¹

Carlyle's method, then, was elaborate and comprehensive. He introduced a panorama of individuals both good and bad. He described their appearance, their virtues, their vices, their propensities in sharp and vivid detail, and in so doing controlled ultimately the exact attitude of favour or disfavour that the reader was to acquire in relation to Frederick. In this way he achieved his purpose as a moralist by persuading the reader not to judge Frederick by his own standards but by those that Carlyle imposed upon him.

⁵⁰Ibid., XIX, "Frederick the Great," viii, 68.

⁵¹Ibid., XV, "Frederick the Great," iv, 209.

Chapter VII

Carlyle's Philosophy of History

"History recommends itself as the most profitable of all studies . . . ," Carlyle asserted in 'On History Again'. "History is the Letter of Instructions, which the old generations write and posthumously transmit to the new; nay, it may be called, more generally still, the Message, verbal or written, which all Mankind delivers to every man."¹ Since history is the message of all mankind to every man, since, in other words, it sanctions man's behaviour, he urged, "it is not only the fittest study, but the only study, and includes all others whatsoever."² Carlyle's thoughts about history were indeed lofty, framed with distinction and ennobled by sincerity. It was, he held, "the first distinct product of man's spiritual nature"³ and not only civilized nations but the rudest tribes have endeavoured to perpetuate their records of history. In "all modern as well as ancient times," Carlyle contended, "men have ranked history "among the highest of arts."⁴

The art of history, in Carlyle's opinion, was never more esteemed than in his own day "for whereas, of old, the claim of History lay chiefly in gratifying our common appetite for

¹ Carlyle, Works, XXVIII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," iii, 167.

² Ibid., p. 168.

³ Ibid., XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," ii, 83.

⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

the wonderful, for the unknown; and her office was but as that of a Minstrel and Story-teller, she has now farther become a School-mistress, and professes to instruct in gratifying." ⁵ It showed, according to Carlyle, "whence the course of man's destinies in this Earth originated, and whither they are tending." ⁶

In its simplest form the argument regarding the instructive value of history presupposes that history can reveal the past so extensively, so correctly, and so concisely that the problems of the future, which presumably arise out of past conditions, may be met with an overwhelming degree of confidence. The future is the victim of its past; the time has come when historians must turn upon the past and exploit it with a practical eye in the interest of the future. Properly interpreted, history can teach lessons by furnishing to both individuals and nations examples for imitation and warning. Carlyle wrote his French Revolution to show Englishmen that anarchy and ruin must result from authority which is unjustly used — that revolutions stem from erroneous and unheroic leadership. In Frederick the Great he elevated the Prussian monarch into a hero and model who might serve as an example for his wayward age.

That history has a purpose is a theory that has a persistent and classical tradition — as old as history itself.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

Despite Carlyle's claims, there is ample evidence that the entire controversy originated with the Greeks. "This is the showing forth of the Inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus," Herodotus introduced his work at the beginning of Book I, "to the end that neither the deeds of men may be forgotten by lapse of time, nor the works great and marvelous, which have been produced, some by Hellenes and some by Barbarians, may lose their renown" ⁷ The aim to furnish examples that may be profitable to his readers is obviously implicit in Herodotus's explanatory words, even as there was an implicit purpose in the writing of Greek tragedy.

The successors of Herodotus not only implied but definitely stated that instruction was their purpose. Polybius, for example, introduced his great work by asserting that it is history "which forces us to consider that the knowledge gained from the study of true history is the best of all edu-⁸cations for practical life." Plutarch set out to edify by illustrating the good and bad in human character. "Moral good," he wrote in reference to Pericles, "is a practical stimulus; it is no sooner seen than it inspires an impulse to practice; and influences the mind and character . . . and so we have thought fit to spend our time and pains in

⁷ Quoted in J. B. Bury, The Ancient Greek Historians (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1909), p. 242.

⁸ Quoted in James T. Shotwell, The Story of Ancient History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 235.

writing of the lives of famous persons"⁹

To the Roman historians, history was similarly justified by its utility and was absolutely essential as a guide to action. "The great advantage to be derived from the study of history," wrote Livy, is that one is "abundantly furnished with clear and distinct examples of every kind of conduct"¹⁰ Tacitus, lamenting the chaos into which Rome had fallen, declared, nevertheless, that the period, "barren as it was of public virtue, produced some examples of truth and honor."¹¹

The idea concerning the instructive value of history persisted in one form or another until the nineteenth century -- and its shadows may still be detected today. In England itself the tradition established by the Greek and Roman historians persisted steadily, though, of course, with great changes in emphasis, from the time of Bede. In 1154 Henry of Huntingdon concluded his chronicle with the reminder that "the attentive reader will learn in this work both what he ought to imitate and what he ought to eschew"¹² Among the English Renaissance writers William Caxton, the first English printer, Thomas Elyot, the translator of The Doctrine of Princes, and Thomas More, author of History of Richard III continued the tradition of purpose in history.

⁹Quoted in D. T. Starnes, "Purpose in the Writing of History," Modern Philology, XX (Feb., 1923), 283.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 284.

¹¹Ibid., p. 285.

¹²Ibid., pp. 285-6.

They reduced history to a fragmentary array of examples and biographical idealization for it was only in striking and selected examples that historians could realize the fulfillment of their purpose.

The view that history is the teacher of private virtue and correct public policy was carried into the eighteenth century by the rationalist historians. This was the main feature, for example, in Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Hume expressed the hope that his History of England would be "entertaining and instructive". In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, however, this conception of history began to give way to a set of very different ideals. "By 1830 the basic elements in the nineteenth-century conception of history — romantic enthusiasm for the study of the past, nationalist zeal in portraying it, and the use of 'scientific' methods in ascertaining the facts about it — had already found considerable expression among historians."¹³

Carlyle stood outside these new developments. He seems to have been too strongly influenced in his conception of history by the traditional purpose in the writing of history. There is no reason to suppose that Carlyle, in view of his massive reading, was unacquainted with the views of the Ancient Historians or the medievalists. The traditional

¹³ Thomas Preston Peardon, The Transition in English Historical Writing 1760-1830 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), p. 9.

pragmatic notion of history, moreover, suited his purpose better.

The key question — whether we do in fact learn from history — Carlyle, however, never really examined. Careful examination will show that individuals have a certain degree of freedom over all the pressures of events and causal chains in which they are involved. While there are, undoubtedly, discernible historical patterns in human affairs nearly every effort of philosophers to predict events upon the basis of these alleged patterns has resulted in error and confusion. This is because although the actors in the historical drama are partly determined by the circumstances that bear upon their decisions they also remain free to make new, creative, and unpredictable choices.

That men learn from the "lessons" of history, as Carlyle maintained, is indeed a dubious proposition. It is an obsolete illusion to suppose that history supplies information of practical utility in the conduct of life, lessons directly profitable to individuals and peoples on the ground of a few accidental historical recurrences. The conditions, the variables under which human actions are performed are rarely sufficiently similar at two different points in time for the "lessons" of history to be directly applicable.

"Everyone knows that history is drama," argues Reinhold Niebuhr, "yet we persistently try to make it into

something else."¹⁴ The present and future bear the stamp of uniqueness, Niebuhr reflects, and "nothing happens with such a compulsion of natural or rational necessity that the future may be predicted upon the basis of past events."¹⁵

The history of man elaborates virtually infinite variations and even if it were possible to establish historical analogies or parallels, it might be well to bear in mind that when "history repeats itself" it never does so exactly. The future is forever unlike the past; plurality and differentiation seem to be the general rule of our existence; there is an endless emergence of novel factors in each situation which makes every analogy and comparison inexact. "One thing is clear," writes Herbert Butterfield with an air of exasperation, "we are not entitled to imagine that the past ever quite determines or explains the future; for the wills and choices of human beings here in the present are always interposed between the two."¹⁶

On the other hand, while purpose in history in the Carlylean sense must be rejected, there can be little quarrel over the fact that history has uses. Clearly one of the most obvious uses of history is that it gives a nation its sense of identity. It provides a nation with an identity by giving it a common memory and a common feeling. History

¹⁴"Is History Predictable?" The Atlantic Monthly, CXCIV (July, 1954), 69.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 71-2.

¹⁶"The Role of the Individual in History," History, XL (Feb., 1955), 3-4.

moderates our pervasive parochialism by exposing men to different faiths, loyalties, cultures, ideas, and ideals. It enables men to place their own problems and issues in a larger perspective. It broadens experience, develops understanding, liberates the mind, and enriches the self.

II

To Carlyle, then, history was "philosophy teaching by experience." However, Carlyle insisted, "before Philosophy

can teach by Experience, the Philosophy has to be in readiness, the Experience must be gathered and intelligibly recorded. Now, overlooking the former consideration, and with regard only to the latter, let any one who has examined the current of human affairs, and how intricate, perplexed, unfathomable, even when seen into with our own eyes, are their thousandfold blending movements, say whether the true representing of it is easy or impossible. Social Life is the aggregate of all the individual men's Lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies. ¹⁷

This short passage contains Carlyle's basic statement on history. The proper study of mankind, in his view, was man and the vastness of history, if it is to be of any value, should be interpreted, organized, and written in the form of biography. The emphasis Carlyle placed on biography inevitably led him to claim that great men made history. "Universal History," he observed in his first lecture on Heroes, "the history of what man has accomplished in

¹⁷ Carlyle, Works, XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," ii, 85-6.

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 realisation 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. ¹⁸

Carlyle's philosophy of history raises a number of related questions. It bears on the subject of what is history, whether men make it, and what share in its making can be assigned to the outstanding individual properly known as the "hero". It invites a discussion of what is meant by the "Great Man", whether greatness is dependent upon success in war, whether it is, in fact, based on intrinsic strength or on national enthusiasm, the halo of legend, or on charisma. The issues are undeniably incalculable and complex and those who aim at a more objective view have to struggle against an ingrained and traditional habit of passion and rhetoric.

Carlyle's view that history is "innumerable Biographies" may be interpreted to mean two things — that history is made by men and that biography is the proper means of writing and understanding history. Carlyle took the view that history must be conceived of as a whole, as a collective individual. It must take account of the silent workings

¹⁸ Ibid., V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," I.

of "the long-forgotten train of artists and artisans . . .

. . ." ¹⁹ History, he held, was the story of man's past; its major concern was man. If one must speak of forces and institutions it is necessary to translate them into interactions, roles, and attitudes of individual men. Discussing the responsibility for the condition of France on the eve of the Revolution, Carlyle asserted "that some men

blamed Turgot, others said it was Necker, others said it was the queen; they argued 'it was he, it was she, it was that'." ²⁰ Carlyle had little patience with this kind of argument. "Friends!" he exclaimed, "it was every scoundrel that had lived," every man doing less than his duty who ²¹ contributed to the evil.

It would appear, according to Carlyle, that the determining trends and forces are not disembodied mysteries that compel events to happen. They are all reducible to the behaviour patterns of individual men living under determinate historical conditions and traditions. On this point it is difficult to disagree with Carlyle. The genesis of historical events lies in human beings. It is men who make history. In economic history, social history, political history, and intellectual history, the human beings, it is true, may be too numerous to be mentioned by name. Yet in

¹⁹ Ibid., XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," ii,

²⁰ 87.

²¹ Butterfield, p. 5.

Ibid.

one way or another everything in history is ultimately referable or reducible to "innumerable biographies". All historical situations designate ultimately the relations between the behaviour patterns of human beings — individuals interacting as members of a society or culture.

Nonetheless, to say that human beings are the essential stuff of history is to miss something. Human activity, whether political or otherwise, inevitably gives rise to novel forces which, however elusive, cannot be ignored. We have only to look around to see that the general will is not the arithmetical sum of individual wills. The whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. It is therefore necessary to look beyond individual biography if the essential meaning of a historical situation is to be grasped.

Apart from this disadvantage Carlyle's biographical approach has serious shortcomings as a means of writing and understanding history. "Biography takes short views," writes Allan Nevins, "and in fact is seldom good for anything but short views."²² Indeed this is a major reason why biography can never be adequate for understanding the past. The span of human life projected against the full length of a nation's history is exceedingly short, and the span of most active careers is even shorter. Lincoln's really significant public leadership extended from 1854 to 1865; Kennedy's

²²"Is History made by Heroes?" The Saturday Review, XXXVII (Nov. 5, 1955), 43.

from 1960 to 1963. And even if the historian is interested in a short-range view, biography is likely to be too narrow an approach and, from the historical standpoint, superficial. Its form forbids it to make extensive use of broad interpretive ideas, institutions, forces, and other impersonal factors. The fall of Rome, for example, probably owed more to malnutrition, lack of sanitation, and malaria than to the degeneracy of Honorius and Valentinian III.

At the same time biography is often troubled by the deceptive legends that manifest themselves around great names — a fault that is particularly evident in Carlyle's treatment of Cromwell and Frederick. Elizabeth I is the very soul of Elizabethan greatness; John A. Macdonald almost alone created a new nation; nearly every Union achievement in the Civil War is credited directly or indirectly to Lincoln. As late as 1896 Sir Sidney Lee defined biography as "an instinctive desire to do honour to the memories of those who, by character and exploits, have distinguished themselves from the mass of their countrymen."²³ It is well known how savagely J. A. Froude was assailed and how he fell into the darkest disgrace over his frank Thomas Carlyle: A History of his Life in London 1834-1881. Indeed biography is often guilty of overhumanizing the past, of oversimplifying the matter of causation, and of carrying an excessive

²³The Development of English Biography (London: The Hogarth Press, 1933), pp. 11-12.

amount of trivial material that would best be left out.

"Unescapably," Nevins comments, "biography takes partial and one-sided views, and consciously or unconsciously almost always magnifies the role of its central figure."²⁴

This is not to say, of course, that biographies are unrewarding. Indeed the advantages of biography as a tool for examining the past are not to be underrated. Within the general rules of biographical writing "there is room for endless variety as long as the biographer honestly tries to describe his subject's career and character and does not encumber his work with what very long experience has proved to be extraneous and essentially unworthy motives,"²⁵ cautions John A. Garraty. In parliamentary history, for instance, group biographies may reveal many facts that emerge as common points in the evidence — points which are not likely to reveal their significance in a non-biographical approach.²⁶ Biography allows assessment of psychological, non-rational factors in a decision-making situation — that is, it defines X's view of a situation at a crucial moment. It can be conveniently dramatic in a way denied to history for the experience of one man can easily be unveiled as a succession of dramas. Apart from this "we may add to the

²⁴Nevins, p. 44.

²⁵The Nature of Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 257.

²⁶J. E. Neale, "The Biographical Approach to History," History, XXXVI (Oct., 1951), 196-200.

partial credit of biography," suggests Allan Nevins, "that it breaks up the illimitable detail of the past into simple and comprehensive units; for the biographical structure necessarily imposes a pattern."²⁷

That Carlyle was aware of these advantages and exploited them with great skill cannot be denied. The conclusion that must be drawn from this discussion, however, is that biography is one of the doors of history but only one, and excessive dependence on it easily distorts history. Social, economic, political, and intellectual forces are similarly a door, but one only, and excessive dependence on them leads directly to historical determinism. This leads us directly to the fundamental question centering on how far great men are masters of their age and how far they become merely victims of inherent, unplanned, and perhaps unforeseen tendencies. To Carlyle history was made by great men. They were, he wrote, "the inspired Texts of that divine Book of Revelation, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some named History."²⁸

In Heroes and Hero-Worship the great men of history are Carlyle's heroes and the theme of the work is the influence of great men on human affairs. His choice of heroes was eccentric, unconvincing, and limited to six types -- heroes as gods, prophets, poets, priests, writers, and kings.

²⁷Nevins, p. 43.

²⁸Carlyle, Works, I, "Sartor Resartus," 142.

Carlyle's heroes were broadly similar as makers of history. "We have repeatedly endeavoured to explain," he noted, "that all sorts of Heroes are intrinsically of the same material" ²⁹ Carlyle regarded the differences as superficial rather than vital for "the Hero is he who lives in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine and Eternal, which exists always, unseen to most, under the Temporary, Trivial" ³⁰ Behind the varied historic conditions which were responsible for the divergent types of heroism, the Carlylean heroes possessed the same fundamental quality — one deep spiritual source of power possessing a Soul "actually sent down from the skies with a God's message to us" ³¹

Carlyle considered the great man to have penetrated into the sacred mystery of the Universe, into the realized Thought of God. "All things which we see or work with in this Earth," Carlyle urged, "especially we ourselves and

all persons, are as a kind of vesture or sensuous Appearance: that under all there lies, as the essence of them . . . the Divine Idea of the World; this is the Reality which lies at the bottom of all Appearance. To the mass of men no such Divine Idea is recognisable in the world; they live merely . . . among the superficialities, practicalities, and shows of the world, not dreaming that there is anything divine under them. But the [hero] is sent hither specially that he

²⁹ Ibid., V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 115.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 155.

³¹ Ibid., p. 43.

may discern for himself, and make manifest to us, this same Divine Idea³²

This aspect of Carlyle's philosophy of history was neither original nor elaborate. The people were sheep and God provided them with shepherds. Almost everything Carlyle wrote was in some way related to the role of the great man or hero and the subjects who revered him. The Carlylean hero detected the unreality of things. He understood that the only meaningful and enduring reality was the elusive world of the soul. He had an immediate grasp of the Divine Law and the moral order of the world. Through the force of his extraordinary being, he compelled men's allegiance, drew them away from mere convention, and disclosed to them the Eternal Truth. An agent of Providence he made his thought the shaping influence and himself the master of his age.

Beyond doubt Carlyle was correct in suggesting that various periods of crisis bring great men into such prominence that impersonal forces seem to drop into the background. Great men sometimes seem to exert an almost superhuman control over the fate of their generation. They appear to master the circumstances of their time and mould them according to their own ideas. The twentieth century has produced its fair share of great men . But the question whether all the dominant figures had legitimate great-

³²Ibid., p. 156.

ness and really shaped the course of history is not easily answered.

It may indeed be argued that frequently greatness is more apparent than real. The work of Columbus, examined in detail against the full background of the times, becomes part of a vast partnership of ideas, techniques, and experience which render Columbus's achievement more dubious than popular opinion has yet allowed. Newton was surrounded by a group of other thinkers who shared, approached, and even anticipated his success. His conclusions were "in the air" when he seized them. It is often lucky chance rather than personal merit that places men in the right place at the right time. The great man cannot influence history, until the times are "ripe" for him. It seems that changes appear first in institutions that liberate the innovating forces in men. What insured the greatness of Lenin is not the individuality of Lenin alone, but the revolutionary circumstances in which he found himself.

³³A number of works dealing with the question of the great man have appeared in recent years. In Scientific Creativity: Its Recognition and Development (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1963), Calvin W. Taylor and Frank Barron suggest that artistically creative people have certain characteristics or dimensions or syndromes in common. They are more adaptive, more original, and more flexible as opposed to authoritarianism. Creative persons strain towards an all-encompassing, complex, configuration or association. There is a striving for a personal understanding of the world. Everett M. Rogers's findings in Diffusion of Innovations (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962) show that the innovation of an idea and its spread from the source to its ultimate users or adopters varies directly with the norms of the social

Hero-worship in the past has tended to concentrate on one of two types — the conquering warrior and the self-denying saint. To be adequate it must be extended to all types of human greatness. Carlyle must be given credit for recognizing this fact. On the other hand, Carlyle's contention that great men are endowed with supernatural qualities, that they are chosen by God to make the "Divine Idea of the World" known to us is not tenable. In all forms of greatness it is possible to discern only a higher degree of qualities which are possessed to some extent by all men. "The Great Man," suggests F. S. Marvin, "is a conspicuous example, a fine flower blossoming on a stem from which innumerable others spring, and which derives its strength from common human qualities, themselves specialisations of the essential features of all conscious life."³⁴

Nonetheless, numerous cases could be cited where a

system in which these processes take place. In The Stages of Economic Growth (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), W. W. Rostow plays down the role of the individual by suggesting that all societies reveal a pattern of five economic stages in their development. From the take-off stage onward, the process generates its own momentum. E. E. Hagen argues in On the Theory of Social Change (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1962) that the study of societies must be a theory of personality, for the analysis of societies is the analysis of human behaviour. To Hagen the gradual or sudden appearance of a creative personality is the central factor in social, economic, and political change, whereas D. C. McClelland in The Achieving Society (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1961), while also emphasizing the psychological factors, stresses achievement motivation as a widespread phenomenon.

³⁴"The Great Man," The Hibbert Journal, XXVIII (July, 1930), 667.

necessary movement takes place confusedly and with long delays owing to the absence of a gifted individual who can actually gain control of the events and transform them into correct social action. The emancipation of the American Negro is a case in point. Here is a society, fully conscious of its faults and dilemma, eager for a Carlylean hero with the will and strength to set it right. Implicitly it awaits a leader who is ahead of the generality in his views and is articulate enough to have his views accepted.

The present-day tendency, however, is to repudiate the two extreme positions which state respectively that great men alone shape history and, contrariwise, that abstract or general forces determine history, using men simply as figure-heads. These two absolutisms will not suffice. The truth is that if men make their own history the situations under which they make that history must be considered. It would be unfair to expect Carlyle to express this balanced view. Indeed the world looked different to Carlyle than it does to the twentieth-century observer. As Carlyle looked across time he noticed that the norm had been not democracy but despotism supported by powerful bureaucracies. The Egyptian, Babylonian, Chinese, Persian, Roman, and even European political organizations were centralized bureaucratic systems. It may be contended, further, that he was sensitized to an environment in which the idea of the hero commanded much respect. Prior to Marx social forces were not nearly as all-pervasive

as they are at the present time. There was no build-up of mass communications, of mass movements, of giant productive forces, of consciousness or awareness of economic, social, or intellectual trends.

Indeed it may be argued that Carlyle simply reflected the sentiments of the Victorians. "The Victorians carried admiration to the highest pitch," suggests Walter E. Houghton. "They marshalled it, they defined it, they turned it from a virtue into a religion, and called it Hero-Worship."³⁵ The explanation is relatively simple. In the first place material success inflated the Victorians with an intense feeling of optimism and superiority, with tremendous exuberance and enthusiasm. Their temper was conducive to the cult of the hero. In the second place men inevitably look for a saviour when they find themselves in the uncertain state of rapid transition. "The problems to be solved are so vast and difficult," writes Houghton, "that [the saviour] must be more than an ordinary mortal; and the need for guidance is so imperative that he will not simply be applauded and respected, he will be looked up to with profound gratitude and reverence."³⁶ In the third place Victorian England, despite Carlyle's insistence to the contrary, did produce great men. In the period 1830-1880 the hero in England was a predominant force in politics,

³⁵The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 305.

³⁶Ibid., p. 310.

literature, technology — in fact, in all fields. This was the age of Wellington, Melbourne, Peel, Palmerston, Disraeli, and Gladstone. The concept of the hero as a superior force readily found its way into Carlyle's writings.

III

To Carlyle this was a world of semblances, of temporary and trivial appearances, overlying a world of fact and it was the hero, living in the Truth, who led those who saw nothing except the shadows hung out by Him in the infinite void. "The Artist in History," Carlyle affirmed, "may be distinguished from the Artisan in History; for here, as in all other provinces, there are Artists and Artisans; men who labour mechanically in a department without eye for the Whole, not feeling there is a Whole; and men who inform and ennoble the humblest department with an Idea of the Whole and habitually know that only in the Whole is the Partial to be truly discerned."³⁷ Carlyle had little respect for the "Dryasdust" historian who was satisfied to examine merely minute aspects of history be they political, social, moral or economic. The historian, Carlyle insisted, who was fulfilling his purpose was one who attempted to grasp the nature of his Being and related it to his Universe. The historian ought to reveal the greater Truth through an analysis of selected historical episodes. The only

³⁷Carlyle, Works, XXVII, "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays," ii, 90.

history worth writing, in the opinion of Carlyle, was universal history. "The general sum of human Action," he noted, "is a whole Universe, with all limits of it unknown, [and] History strives by running path after path, through the Impassable, in manifold directions and intersections, to secure for us some oversight of the Whole."³⁸

Carlyle regarded history as a philosophical exercise and a literary pursuit, not a scientific compilation and exposition. Historical situations were to be utilized as examples and illustrations of the universal Truth. He repudiated entirely the idea of evolutionary perfectionism and progress. The passage of time, in his view, led to a deceptive sense of change and to an illusion of progress. But Carlyle was not deceived by this illusion. Throughout his life he struggled to waken himself from the restless dreams of time and to reconcile himself to the still and motionless realities of eternity. To Carlyle, Time was always merely a film, neither wholly transparent nor wholly opaque, stretching in front of eternity. His over-all conception of history was altogether static. He did not look at history chronologically. He approached it by subject matter, glimpsing an imposing or attractive idea and then pursuing it tirelessly with the hope that it would illustrate man's purpose or destiny. According to Carlyle there could never be anything new under the sun — the "thing that

³⁸Ibid., p. 95.

hath been is that which shall be." 39

Carlyle's point of view was remarkably close to that of the Platonic mystics who regarded the material world as a travesty, a distortion, moving in meaningless recurrent cycles, from which man must in mysticism try to escape in order to come into the true reality and permanence of the immaterial world. Like the Platonic mystics Carlyle asserted that God intervenes in human affairs and it is the sovereignty of God over the whole of history which provides a general frame of meaning for historical events. It is because of this, not because of any unity which can be rationally demonstrated or which can be ascertained by an empirical survey that history is potentially and ultimately one story.

It is, of course, difficult to accept Carlyle's interpretation of universal history even though it must be admitted that some of the great historians — Benedetto

39 The attempts in recent literature to connect Carlyle with the Saint-Simonian concept of periodicity — the evolutionary alteration of organic and critical epochs — are dubious indeed. Among the works exaggerating Carlyle's indebtedness to Saint-Simon are Hill Shine, Carlyle and the Saint-Simonians: The Concept of Historical Periodicity (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941) and "Carlyle's Early Writings and Herder's 'Ideen': The Concept of History," Booker Memorial Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950); Ella M. Murphy, "Carlyle and the Saint-Simonians," Studies in Philology (Jan., 1936), 93-118; R. K. P. Pankhurst, The Saint-Simonians, Mill and Carlyle (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1957). In Carlylean thought the Saint-Simonian concepts were not sociological but transcendental and moral. The critical and organic periods, it may be assumed, were intimately related to the insight of men into the Divine Idea.

Croce, Herbert Butterfield, R. G. Collingwood, and Reinhold Niebuhr — may be regarded as idealists who accepted history, at least implicitly, as the manifestation of a Divine Providence. On the other hand it is impossible not to agree with Carlyle that universal history — history that knows no political boundaries or tariffs and rises above things temporary and relative — has a definite place in historiography.

The Carlylean framework is admittedly inadequate in its interpretation of the meaning, choices, and destiny of mankind. The evolution of analytical skills necessary to the handling of vast masses of complex data is only recent and still in its earliest stages of development. Accordingly, most historians have preferred to focus on national history or on one of its specialized areas. It may be readily seen, however, that the historian is unable to escape completely from the question of universal history. He may do a variety of things under the heading of history. He may study the fluctuation of fur prices in French Canada between 1820 and 1830; he may trace the career of Napoleon; he may even be a chronicler. But when he asks why he puts some items in his chronicle and leaves out others, why fur prices fluctuated, what forces gave rise to Napoleon, his troubles begin. He then finds himself perplexed by the same intellectual processes that beset Carlyle. He confronts the task of making some kind of pattern out of isolated particularities, and the longer and harder he thinks the deeper and wider become

the patterns — and the more certain he is to alarm or amuse his colleagues and contemporaries.

In contemplating world history Carlyle was actually returning to a tradition which reached back beyond the nineteenth century to the medievalists. The Greeks were too culture bound to see in history anything other than cyclical patterns. It was the medievalists who first fitted historical events into a rigid biblical context which followed St. Augustine's pattern of Christian revelation — creation, crucifixion, and last judgment. To the humanists of the Renaissance and to the men of the Enlightenment — Hume, Voltaire, Leibniz, for example — the idea of universal history was particularly congenial. It fitted in with their notion of progress, their view of mankind advancing steadily from primitive barbarism to reason and virtue and civilization. The men of the Enlightenment were as much philosophers as historians, however, and their designs too often resulted in a series of generalizations or patterns of a philosophical nature imposed upon history from outside without a detailed study of historical records.

In Carlyle's view universal history was not the sum or aggregate of national histories. Nor was it a conception which reconciled the universal insight of the medievalists with the profound feeling for national differences and individuality which marked the nineteenth century. Similarly it was not, as H. G. Wells points out, an attempt to trace

"in one continuous narrative the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known today."⁴⁰ It was rather a design that surveyed the whole vista of the historic past from a different vantage point in order to discover trends and patterns and general laws.

Universal history offered Carlyle philosophical theory with a definite frame of reference and a more powerful way of asking questions. It enabled him to display a firmer perspective from which to undertake research in areas of his own interest more creatively and effectively. It provided him with a set of strictly defined assumptions, a specific analytical and coherent structure, criteria with which to interpret the historical picture, and generalizations that enabled him to inter-relate factors and to fit the pieces into a meaningful narrative. It enabled him to think about different aspects of the situation, to come in on historical causation in a certain pre-cut way, to bring out-of-awareness things into awareness, and especially to preserve much mental energy. It simplified and organized the buzzing confusion of the world and enabled him to get implicit propositions and assumptions out into the open where they could be examined. Carlyle's universal history cut into reality at a different angle from other types of history. It dictated its own unique starting point, its own special problems and aims, and it is largely for this reason that Carlyle's works bear the stamp of distinction.

⁴⁰Outline of History (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), p.1.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion

Interpretations of Carlyle have ranged across a wide and diversified spectrum. At one end Eric Bentley, Pieter Geyl, and H. J. C. Grierson condemn him as a forerunner of twentieth-century fascism and racism while on the other Emery Neff, Raymond Williams, and David Alec Wilson praise him as a seeker after religious and social truth. Their investigations, however, while valuable, have not been conducted from the viewpoint of charting the relationships between his society, his personality, and his historical works. It is precisely this defect that the present work has set out to rectify.

Accordingly this thesis has attempted to focus on Carlyle from a special angle. It has proposed to probe into Carlyle's inner world and the external forces that imposed themselves upon him and shaped his behaviour. It has examined his belief system, his mode of perceiving his reality, and the way he shaped his mental processes. It has tried to establish, ultimately, the implications of all these factors in his historical writings.

There can be no doubt that Carlyle's writings sprang out of his alienation from Victorian society. The social system, if it is relatively stable, gives the individual a sense of being integrated into a world that is seemingly rational and supportive. It sanctions norms, statuses,

and roles, and provides psychological security and fulfillment. The Victorian society, however, was in a state of rapid transition. It gave rise to a number of negative conditions whose cumulative effect was to produce in Carlyle an identity crisis. Hurling into a new industrial society of the nineteenth century he discovered that the political, social, and religious traditions had lost their meaning. He lost his anchorage in the social system and sank into a state of isolation and self-estrangement.

The appropriate mode of adaptation in such a situation is usually adjustment. But to Carlyle the change of the self was impossible. His authoritarianism would not permit it. His severe dissatisfaction with the social system forced him to retreat, to rebel, and to attempt, with great determination, a reconstruction of society.

Carlyle was one of the first Victorians to write with the voice of alienation and rebellion. As he exposed the evils of industrialization and democracy, he simultaneously explored his own identity crisis with the hope of healing that pervasive sense of self-estrangement. His exceptional intellectual energy had taken him from a simple peasant environment and thrust him into a competitive, sophisticated urban situation of Edinburgh and London. As a student he departed from his Calvinist upbringing for "the Edinburgh

of 1810 was no longer the city of Knox but of Hume. It had become, after Paris, the Mecca of scepticism: and Carlyle, as a student of

science, was exposed to the full blast. Play-fair played havoc with his fundamentalism; Dugald Stewart demolished his anthropomorphic deity.¹

He failed to find himself in any of the traditional professions. He had little patience with his wife and much contempt for most of his literary contemporaries. His spirit was turbulent, agitated, melancholy, and angry. He could not stand noise. His voice would thunder at the street singers and organ grinders. Church bells, barking dogs, crowing roosters interfered with his work. In his large and gloomy attic study he wrestled night and day with what he called his "spiritual dragons".

Carlyle's literary career was one gigantic effort to overcome the identity crisis. Each conquest, however, merely led to new complications. He achieved the public role of prophet, for example, but this mission only led to new difficulties and doubts. As he called on the aristocracy to provide good leadership and on the bourgeoisie to restrain the industrialism responsible for the social evils and his own feeling of isolation, he discovered that he, in fact, was only courting their rejection.

Carlyle's identity crisis found expression in an authoritarian bias which was the common note throughout his works. Both J. W. Adorno and Milton Rokeach suggest that the authoritarian personality is an abnormal respecter of convention,

¹F. A. Lea, "Carlyle and the French Revolution," The Listener, LXXII (Sept. 17, 1964), p. 427.

submissive to authority, an admirer of toughness, cynical beyond the norm, and a possessor of pedestrian ideals. He is hardly less intelligent than non-authoritarians, is not confined to the upper class levels, and has no highly preferred political affiliation.²

Carlyle's writings reveal him as a highly authoritarian personality in terms of all the usual tests — the Fascism-tendency scale which measures rightist forms of intolerance, the Dogmatism Scale designed to measure individual differences in open and closed belief systems, and the Opinionation Scale which measures the extent to which one accepts or rejects others depending on whether they agree or disagree with him.

The central motive in Carlyle's Cromwell, for example, was the idea of an invincible Puritanism sweeping before it the falsities of a king "forsaken there of all but the name of Kingship" ³ His hero was highly gifted, far-seeing, devoted, brave, and strong, and the masses instinctively recognized his superiority. "We do not quite understand thee; we perceive thee to be nobler and wiser and bigger than we, and will loyally follow thee" ⁴ was the kind of attitude on the part of the loyal subjects which Carlyle was prepared to commend highly.

²The Authoritarian Personality (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1950); The Open and Closed Mind (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1960).

³Carlyle, Works, V, "Heroes and Hero-Worship," 214.

⁴Ibid., XX, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," 142.

Authoritarianism, suggests Rokeach, refers to a closed way of thinking — that is, a disposition to evaluate information in the light of its sources, an intolerance toward those with opposing beliefs, and a sufferance of those with similar beliefs. The findings of Rokeach further support the view that Carlyle was highly authoritarian. His treatment and justification of Cromwell's massacre of Irish Catholics at Drogheda as "a righteous judgment of God upon those barbarous wretches" provides insight into his intolerance.⁵

Carlyle's theory of the hero, his dislike of industrialization and democracy, his selection of Cromwell and Frederick as subjects for his biographies, and his treatment of the French Revolution were all different manifestations of his underlying personality pattern. His ideological pattern, in turn, was determined primarily by his emotional needs. It resulted basically from his sense of insecurity. The closed belief system, suggests Rokeach, is a consequence of threat. It represents a "defense against anxiety."⁶ The closed system sets in as the need to ward off threat becomes stronger. It constitutes a defence against a world one does not comprehend.

Mental rigidity and dogmatism — a resistance to change in behaviour, belief, and personality — were the dominant features in Carlyle's turbulent career. Like so many of his

⁵Ibid., VII, "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches," ii, 60.
⁶Rokeach, p. 26.

contemporaries he asserted his opinions in positive and often angry tones and rejected opposing issues and ideas in advance without inquiring into their nature. Inflexibility in the Victorian character became a cult in itself. Carlyle "never set out from premises and reasoned his way to conclusions," suggested Herbert Spencer, "but habitually dwelt in intuitions and dogmatic assertions."⁷ Dogmatism, Rokeach observes, "represents the total cognitive configuration of ideas and beliefs organized into a relatively closed system; rigidity, on the other hand, points to difficulties in overcoming single sets or beliefs encountered in attacking, solving, or learning specific tasks or problems."⁸

It can easily be seen that Carlyle wrote his works as much to discover a new identity as to persuade his reading audience to reform. In the French Revolution he attempted to come to grips with the dismemberment of an entire social system and its implications for both himself and Victorian society. The prophetic voice was again heard in Chartism and Past and Present where he warned that the revolution that occurred in France could, in fact, take place in England. Carlyle's Heroes represented a new bent in Carlyle's mind — on the one hand a retreat and on the other a conscious attempt to set society aright. His sense of

⁷Quoted in Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 150.

⁸Rokeach, p. 183.

insecurity and alienation, however, were greatest in Cromwell, Frederick, and Latter-Day Pamphlets and it was in these works that his tone became intense, the argument violent, and the proposed remedies extreme. He never did establish a new identity for despite his efforts he failed to reconcile himself with his society.

Indeed it is not surprising that Carlyle took his role as a self-appointed sage seriously. In all his writings he aimed at the portrayal of reality as he understood it. His standards were personal and moral and he wrote with the conviction that literary works had no right to lead an autonomous existence in a world divorced from the values of human life. They were part and parcel of his own situation. To him literature was no mere diversion. It was the true mirror of life.

In brief, Carlyle possessed three major qualities — a capacity for absorbing facts, a literary skill in stating them, and a point of view. He had a remarkable capacity for collecting, condensing, simplifying, and documenting his materials. In a mood of rejection and revolt he entered the field of history armed with certain ideas and permitted these thoughts to impose a controlling and directing influence over all of his writings.

Carlyle belonged essentially to the literary-philosophical school of historians and he wrote history not as a social scientist but as a prophet who wanted to be read.

A great moralist, his works possess a vigour and unconventionality that clearly reflect the Victorian spirit of which he was so largely a part. He had something to communicate to man that was of more than merely casual and contemporary interest. He believed he had a message for mankind and this conviction gave his works a substantiality and a depth of insight rarely found in purely analytical works. Carlyle saw the world in his own magnified image. He convinced himself that he held a trust for humanity despite the fact that throughout his productive years he suffered intensely over his own estrangement from society. All of this resulted in a pattern of thought which was uniquely Carlylean and which can be recaptured only with much difficulty.

Carlyle, of course, was a great transcendentalist who tried to see above material things to the principles of the universe. His view of the world was strengthened by the German idealistic philosophy which found its most influential English expression in him. The visible and temporal world, in his view, was merely a cloak of the invisible or transcendental which may be read through it. The task, however, belonged to the man of letters and it was partly this sense of responsibility that prompted Carlyle to delineate faithfully what happened in the past and to assess its ultimate value and meaning.

Whatever else may be said about Carlyle, this, at least is true, that his works represent the culmination

of an entire mental development rather than a summary of research conducted hurriedly over a few years. He entered the field of history in his maturity (his first significant work, The French Revolution, was published when he was forty-two) and brought into his works a storehouse of general knowledge, a philosophical view of the world, a coherent conception of how and why things actually happen, and a seriousness of purpose.

To the unsuspecting reader merely in search of historical facts, Carlyle presents a peculiar problem — the problem of eliciting the information wrapped up in the most highly involved literary passages. The unwary mind finds this a baffling task for, indeed, Carlyle did not present the truth in a plain way, exactly as he perceived it. He chose rather to pass it through a series of personally idiosyncratic processes until it emerged enriched beyond recognition.

It is necessary to bear in mind that Carlyle wrote as a literary historian who thought it was quite proper to speak of history as literature, or at all events, a branch of literature. He stood outside the movement which set out to treat historical evidence in terms of social and economic forces and he rejected the Dryasdust approach. There is no reason to suppose that he did not know of the new developments. He preferred, however, to fit the facts into his own framework. He had little respect for Henry Buckle and Lord

Macaulay; he was angry at G. C. Lewis and Von Ranke. Michelet, Mignet, and Thiers annoyed him. His perspectives and opinions were therefore almost entirely his own. Amid all the rest of his qualities, he was an artist. His highly individualized and frequently eccentric mode of expression revealed a Carlyle who was an original stylist. He had a profound relish for words, a sense of style, an imaginative eye, and a persistent Victorian literary intensity. His style was repetitive and included a perpetual over-emphasis and exaggeration. Repetitiveness was, of course, one of the greatest of Carlyle's weapons for it enabled him to convert the reader through persuasion while exaggeration, equally a useful stylistic device, overwhelmed the reader and forced him to capitulate.

Carlyle wrote at an age when form was as important as content — perhaps even more — and all who aimed at literary fame paid the utmost attention to stylistic perfection. Style was not merely a matter of finding appropriate words and of connecting the sentences in such a way as to give a passage unity and coherence. The architecture of paragraphs and frequently of whole chapters was carefully designed so that a desired effect might be produced, the emphasis properly controlled, the shades of meaning correctly distributed, and the details artistically grouped.

Carlyle owes his survival in part not so much to his vision of history as to his skilful and sensitive handling

of the English language, to a prose style in which the voice of the literary artist constantly blends in with that of the philosophical historian. His passages have striking beauty and the details are painted with an amazing technical accomplishment. The style, nonetheless, seems at once odd and unnatural, stemming undoubtedly from Carlyle's conviction that he was a prophet — and prophets cannot afford to speak as do ordinary mortals. His works consequently suffer from a major fault — that of lack of proportion.

All of this does not mean that Carlyle's style dragged him away from his obligations. If anything, it seems to have enriched his performance as a historian. His method permitted him to cut away restrictions and to give his mind free scope. Imaginativeness to Carlyle meant not concocting fiction, but the seeing of connections between his formal material and the things that lay outside it.

Yet Carlyle was not indifferent in his treatment of documents, nor was he ignorant of the technique of research. It is clear that Carlyle's fame is not the outcome of literary brilliance alone. He himself built his hopes largely on the historical truth embodied in his works. His scholarship and his concern for general accuracy deserve the highest admiration. This does not mean that he was not guilty of omissions, errors, and misconceptions, or that his judgment was complete. Indeed no historian can achieve finality either in his knowledge of facts or in his judgment

about them while records still remain to be explored and assimilated.

That Carlyle faithfully worked to diminish the possibility of error is well known. A sensitive and imaginative man who disliked research, he forced himself painfully to check details of trifling significance -- and, if a formidable number of errors nevertheless accumulated, it was largely because the scope of his works, as he had set it for himself, was truly endless.

His works, admittedly, have flaws which diminish their value as an authority. To be sure some of the errors are the inevitable result of time. Since Carlyle's day new documents have come to light which not only invalidate his conclusions but also disprove his statements of fact. No historical work can escape this fate. On the other hand his works betray shortcomings for which he himself is responsible. His French Revolution suffers from a too heavy reliance on the slender foundation of memoirs and miscellaneous source material. Many of his errors, moreover, stemmed from his predisposition to treat history as part of literature. He was more concerned with the effective conveying of his views than in research in the modern sense. His major concern was the stating of ideas clearly so that they might reach and alert the largest possible circle of readers.

It must be recognized that Carlyle could not, even had he so desired, assimilate all the material that was then

available. Nor could he have attempted more important or more difficult themes in his time. His French Revolution, for example, was completed in 1837 when conflicting records were still coming from a variety of sources and worse, when many were still unavailable. It was completed in an age when some men were still too busy making revolutions while others had not yet learned to accept or consider them properly.

While he succeeded, given his literary powers, in recreating the Revolution with great vividness, he did not keep up with the scholarship of his own time and has been outmoded still more by all that has been done since 1837. He nonetheless brought to the Revolution a gift which few other historians have ever done -- a prophetic sense. Nor have many other historians succeeded in recreating the atmosphere of the Revolution as dramatically as Carlyle. In his pages it is a prolonged and violent storm, not an analytical study of political theory. It describes a situation in which the bottom dropped out of the ancien régime which had lost all capacity to govern and all faith in itself. In brief, Carlyle set out to examine the breakup of an entire social order and its implications for his own society.

The French Revolution was the farthest Carlyle ever reached in his hopes for new social ideals and institutions. Thereafter he prosecuted his search for a "hero" as a redressor of wrongs and arbiter of human destiny. There is, never-

theless, an imaginative greatness in his conception of Cromwell, and a vigor and a passion in the over-all presentation of this seventeenth-century soldier. It is true, of course, that Carlyle approached Cromwell with an overmastering desire to turn the strange Protector into a moral hero after Carlyle's own image. But he did rescue Cromwell from his attackers while the act of recovering the letters and speeches and editing them with such elaboration is a valuable contribution to modern scholarship.

The most curious consequence of Carlyle's predilection for the hero in history may be seen in Frederick the Great. He selected Frederick as the exemplar of a great man responsible for a virtuous and harmonious society and converted this skeptical eighteenth-century despot into an Ideal God-like Hero. On the other hand the work represents an exhaustive collection of valuable information and detail. The vivid battle descriptions, rarely duplicated by other historians, reveal a mind that could trace strategical and tactical situations with unusual skill.

Carlyle belonged to that class of Romantics who could not live without a beneficent God and a moral order in the universe. His worry and misery arose not so much from the fear of the non-existence of God as from His non-presence in the affairs of man. Carlyle's conversion at Leith Walk was more than just a victory of faith in God, man, and nature over religious and moral doubt. It was

a pattern of positive convictions that enabled him to understand and interpret the world in a significant way and to see clearly what ailed it. The "Everlasting Yea" which began as a personal experience became almost immediately a prophecy. Indeed what had saved one man could conceivably rescue the whole society — what had happened to Carlyle could happen to Victorian society.

In his social and political writings Carlyle permitted himself to speak directly upon the problems that beset England. Chartism was permeated with warmth and optimism and with the positive convictions of the "Everlasting Yea". He affirmed and articulated the discontent of the masses. His tone was reasonable and kindly toward the working-class, reasonable but firm toward the rulers of England who, in his opinion, carelessly condoned the injustices which roused millions of workers to revolt. This hopeful and fundamentally sympathetic attitude, which was so much in the spirit of the "Everlasting Yea", seems to have survived through Carlyle's most vigorous and productive years. In Past and Present it continued to be a motivating force along with his mature doctrine of leadership and obedience, that is, of hero-worship.

By the end of the eighteen-forties, however, Carlyle was beginning to feel the effects of neglect, isolation, and rejection. His powerful warnings were not being heeded by his countrymen. He was a prophet crying in

the wilderness. His early exuberance yielded to exasperation and indignation. "There were two Thomas Carlyles," suggests G. M. Trevelyan.

The first, born in 1795 in a stone-mason's house in Ecclefechan, manfully struggled out through poverty and ill-health to the appointed destiny of his genius The second Thomas Carlyle . . . appeared about 1850, wrote in praise of Negro slavery, the gospel of force and Frederick the Great.⁹

Carlyle's Latter-Day Pamphlets displays a growing distrust of human nature and a gradual retreat into a callous indifference to human suffering. In Frederick the Great he developed an impatience for the attainment of a benevolent despotism which did much to undermine his earlier faith in man's inherent worth as well as his hope for England's future. He arrived at a remedy that was remarkably straightforward. England could not save herself from chaos unless she could find and obey a hero.

By 1860 the conflict of ideas responsible for the dogmatism and rigidity of Victorian society gradually gave way to open and flexible thinking. Mill's On Liberty, Lecky's Religious Tendencies of the Age, Matthew Arnold's Essays in Criticism, and Walter Pater's Renaissance clearly reflect this new climate of opinion. Instead of defending one-sided opinions men began to accept any convenient compromise. "In place of trying to decide how much validity there was in a

⁹"The Two Carlyles," The Living Age, CCXCVIII (July 27, 1918), 222.

given idea," Houghton contends, "they were adopting a broad-minded toleration of all ideas regardless of their intrinsic value."¹⁰ To some extent this development was the product of liberalism and to some extent it stemmed from the theory of historical relativism.

With the worst aspects of capitalism behind them, suggests Raymond Williams, the Victorians turned to those human values and capacities that made up a new "common culture", a collective, unalienated folk society where men worked and created for the common good.¹¹ With the expansion of the reading public, writers, like Dickens, moved "away from a style of novel read only by upper classes to one read by men in all strata of society."¹² Both writers and readers reflected a different social background and, inevitably, changes in viewpoint and interest. Carlyle stood outside these developments. If he permitted his style and attitude to change, it was only in the direction of greater dogmatism. The waning of his popularity thus indicates a firm Carlylean authoritarianism on the one hand and changes in the mood and composition of his readership on the other.

While Carlyle's French Revolution, Heroes and Hero-

¹⁰Houghton, p. 179.

¹¹The Long Revolution (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 5-18.

¹²Gerald H. S. Jordan, "Popular Literature and Imperial Sentiment: Changing Attitudes, 1870-1890," The Canadian Historical Association (June, 1967), 150.

Worship, and Cromwell's Letters and Speeches were highly successful and his readers echoed his sentiments, his Frederick the Great received only a lukewarm reception. Even as he began to work on it there was a noticeable change in the mood of his reading audience. The theory of the hero had by this time fallen into the background. The period, 1851-67, despite the political chaos that followed the repeal of the Corn Laws, was a time of social balance, progressive prosperity, and a deep sense of national security and patriotism. The country witnessed many good years and the government did not have to contend with social and economic unrest.

By 1860 the intellectual and political climate clearly foreshadowed the dramatic events that were to come. The old forces of the right, rooted in the possession and exploitation of land and centering upon both Crown and Church, were subjected to an increasingly powerful challenge. In 1864 Gladstone publicly declared he was in favour of universal suffrage and in 1867 Disraeli passed the Second Reform Bill. The measure proved that the extension of the franchise was not harmful to English order and stability. Political reconstruction followed and both Gladstonian liberalism and Disraelian conservatism adopted the view — the very opposite of Carlyle's — that all governments exist solely in the interests of all the people and those elected to office must see themselves as servants not as rulers.

In his last years Carlyle looked upon a world without light and cheer. His final years were like a dark night of the soul, his teachings rejected, and most of his friends gone. Keats and Heine, Bentham and Charles Lamb, Charles Darwin and a hundred others came in for his scorn. He made a final break with his old friend Mill when his essay, On Liberty, made its appearance. He could not tolerate the intellectual efforts, however sincere, of any man should they differ from his own. His difficulties in applying his ideas to the actual problems of Victorian England and his alienation from society forced him to fall back on his faith in God and his transcendental view of the world. To the bitter end he clung tenaciously to his belief in the Divinity of the world. "Nothing now, no person is beautiful to me," he wrote in his Journal in despair.

Nobleness in this world is a thing of the past. I have given up England to the deaf stupidities, and to the fatalities that follow, likewise deaf. Her struggles, I perceive, under these nightmares, will reach through long sordid centuries. Her actual administerings, sufferings, performings, and attemptings fill me unpleasantly with abhorrence and contempt God, our Eternal Maker, alone knows, and it shall be as He wills, not as he would. His mercy is upon us! What a natural human aspiration! ¹³

¹³James Anthony Froude, Thomas Carlyle: A History of his Life in London 1834-1881 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), Vol. II, p. 362.

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