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Excerpt

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I

*The Christian intellect and modern
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The reanimation of Protestantism I

The present aspect of spiritual Europe might fill a melancholic observer with doubt and foreboding. It is mournful to see so many noble, tender and high-aspiring minds deserted of that religious light which once guided all such: standing sorrowful on the scene of past convulsions and controversies, as on a scene blackened and burnt-up with fire; mourning in the darkness, because there is desolation, and no home for the soul; or what is worse, pitching tents among the ashes, and kindling weak earthly lamps which we are to take for stars. This darkness is but transitory obscurity: these ashes are the soil of future herbage and richer harvests. Religion, poetry, is not dead; it will never die. (Thomas Carlyle, *The State of German Literature*, 1827, in *Miscellaneous and Critical Essays*, vol. I, 1899, pp. 85–6)

If the convulsive struggles of the last Half Century have taught poor struggling convulsed Europe any truth, it may perhaps be this as the essence of innumerable others: that Europe requires a real Aristocracy, a real Priesthood, or it cannot continue to exist. (Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 1843, p. 241)

Of all Priesthoods, Aristocracies, Governing Classes at present extant in the world, there is no class comparable to that Priesthood of the Writers of Books. (Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, 1840 (Everyman edition, p. 396))

In this chapter a ‘reanimated’ Protestantism will be presented as a continuation of Reformation-virtue and Reformation-autonomy, as an heir to mediaeval Christianity insofar as mediaeval Christianity had not been abnormal, and as the religion for which the modern world had been waiting.

Stanley, Jowett, Matthew Arnold, Seeley and others who will be discussed in subsequent chapters, though they were not individually boring, turned Protestantism into a liberal and faintly boring ideology. ‘Reanimation’ did not begin like that and in Carlyle, Froude and Kingsley was only in the most problematical sense liberal.

Carlyle was a semi-detached critic of English society and the author of a cosmic condemnation of it. There is a great deal of Carlyle in Froude and Kingsley and a belief – more consistently Christian in Kingsley than in Froude – that England required a religious reorientation and the adoption, if not of Carlyle’s Cromwellianism, then of an untheological variant of Elizabethan Protestantism.

Kingsley was a Protestant and a churchman; Froude was a secularized establishmentarian; Carlyle’s Protestantism carried with it an intense secularism in politics, literature and religion. But all three shared the desire to see off

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Byronism, cynicism, Whiggism and Tractarianism, and to insert a new virtue into English public life and thought.

I

Carlyle¹ was born into a Scottish peasant family from which, as its clever boy, he was sent to Edinburgh University at the age of fourteen. By the time he was twenty he had taken a degree, had rejected both the family Calvinism and the family desire for ordination, and had begun to teach in preparation for a life dedicated to literature. After failing in a school he had set up with a friend, he had settled in Edinburgh as a freelance teacher but had produced only encyclopaedia articles by the time his translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* was published when he was twenty-eight. With *The Life of Schiller* a year later, a decade of thought achieved a constructive outcome.

In 1825 Carlyle was still a Scottish author, and essentially an aspirant rather than a success. On *The Life of Schiller* and the essays which he published by 1833, he then erected a scaffolding which was to stand up under all the strains he was to put it to after his removal to London as fame came between 1835 and 1850.

Carlyle died in 1881 at the age of eighty-six, his monument being a massive biography of Frederick the Great which was concluded when he was seventy; and his last significant works, apart from that, being *The Nigger Question*, which was an attack on missionary sentimentality, *The Life of John Sterling*, which was an attack on ecclesiastical Anglicanism, and *Latter-Day Pamphlets* and *Shooting Niagara* which between them attacked Tractarianism, the Jesuits and universal suffrage. Here we shall examine his thought as it developed between the essays of his early thirties and *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, which concluded the main phase of his writing life when he was fifty.

Carlyle's early essays asserted that political systems needed God, that the modern world could only be understood in terms of religion, and that it was the scepticism which the French aristocracy had borrowed from Voltaire, Shaftesbury and the Enlightenment which had blinded it to the 'fire and blackness' that had broken upon it in 1789. German literature was said, by contrast, to be of first significance for religion as well as for politics, and the 'profundity' and 'harmonious strength' which linked it to Elizabethan literature to have ensured that German thinkers would be 'set aside from oblivion' and 'claimed as instructors' by the 'great family of mankind'.

In *The Life of Schiller* Carlyle wrote of literature as addressing the

¹ Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), educated Edinburgh University. Author of *The Life of Schiller*, 1825; *Sartor Resartus*, 1835; *The French Revolution*, 1837; *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 1838; *Chartism*, 1840; *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, 1840; *Past and Present*, 1844; *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 1845; *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, 1850; and *The History of Frederick II of Prussia*, 1858–65.

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‘immortal part of men’ and winning from the ‘formless Infinite’ a ‘possession for ever . . . to all the generations of the earth’. He shared the German belief that German criticism and poetry sprang ‘from the depths of thought’ and the ‘subtlest problems of philosophy’, and that in Germany ‘literary men’ were a ‘perpetual priesthood’ whose function was to ‘dispense God’s everlasting wisdom’. In the 1820s Goethe was his primary hero and the thinker on whom his teeth were toughened. In the decade which followed, he achieved the main statements of his doctrine by taking out, brushing up and giving a higher version of the views he had expressed then about politics, culture and religion.

Of the works of this central decade *Sartor Resartus* was fantastic and rhapsodic – a ‘noble philosophic poem’ (according to Emerson) which leaves no mark on the unsympathetic mind a century and a half later. The analysis it applied to the philosophy of clothes was less telling against Byronism than the dozen or so paragraphs about Byron which Carlyle had written between 1825 and 1829 and the conspiracy of virtue that he conducted with John Stuart Mill, who shared his sense both of religious crisis and of the need for religious reconstruction if the English polity and English mind were to stand up to the strains which were being put on them in the 1830s and 1840s.

The political assumption of the past, as Carlyle (somewhat partially) perceived it, had been the normality of obedience. The political problem of the future would be to obtain obedience from the disobedient forces which had made themselves known in France and were making themselves known in England. In *The French Revolution* (which was published in 1837), the central subjects were the ‘masses’ as ‘persons who bled . . . if you pricked them’ and the new type of authority which would satisfy their natural desire for obedience.

The problem of the ‘masses’ was that there were ‘twenty-five millions of them’, that, though ‘gaunt and hungry’, they had ‘sinews and indignation’ and that they could no longer be held by the ‘Lie’ the French monarchy had become once the ‘Earth-Rind’ of ‘Habit’ had been broken, the ‘fountains . . . of the deep’ had ‘boiled forth’, and France had started her ‘cheerful’ dance towards the ‘Ruleless Unknown’.

Carlyle despised the Jacobins and the National Assembly for ‘spinning ropes of sand’ and turning the promise of 1789 into the ghastliness of the Terror. But the revolution was ‘the crowning phenomenon of modern times’ and had held within itself the bases of a ‘New Order’. Mirabeau had been a ‘titanic . . . reality’. His ‘sincerity and earnestness’ had rendered the ‘Untruth’ of French existence ‘insupportable’. He had seen through the ‘near-machiavellic *pretence* of belief’, and, in exposing a ‘buckram-world’ based on ‘consecrated dough-wafers and the godhead of a poor old Italian man’, had ‘burnt out’ the ‘church-woodwork’ that was helping to rot French life. Sansculottism, moreover, had had two faces. On the one hand it was a ‘frightful thing’ – the

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‘frightfullest thing born of Time’ – and Napoleon’s ending of it the proper occasion for ‘deafening jubilation’. On the other hand, it had been ‘of God’, its soul had not died with the death of its body: ‘in some perfected shape’ it would embrace the circuit of the ‘whole world’, reminding ‘wise men everywhere’ to ground their lives neither in ‘garnitures’ and ‘formulas’ nor in the ‘old cloth and sheepskins’ of the past but in their own ‘manhood’ and the ‘symbolic representations’ which it needed.

Carlyle wanted history to stop ‘shrieking’ at the revolution, to adopt his gnarled, granite belief that societies which failed to believe deserved to be destroyed, and to indicate the content of the new beliefs which would hold the ‘unwashed millions’ whom it showed being brought to life in France. In *Chartism* he expatiated on the ‘wild souls’ of the English poor, their ‘torments’ as the ‘inarticulate’ sufferings of ‘dumb creatures’ who were ‘in pain’ because they were not being governed, and parliamentary government and Whig progress as inadequate responses to their needs. *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* and *Past and Present*, explained what this meant.

Past and Present was an account of the twelfth-century abbot of an English monastery and of the life that went on in and around the monastery. Its main argument was relativistic – that one type of politics or religion might be suitable to one age or nation without being suitable to another but that mediaeval politics and religion, though as unsuitable to modern England as feudalism and Catholicism had been to eighteenth-century France, had been based on a reality which modern England would go on ignoring at its peril.

In *Past and Present*, the message was that the English aristocracy had become idle and dilettante, that English Moneybags suffered the defects of French Moneybags and that neither greed nor an idle aristocracy could supply a proper basis for a modern politics. The poor were suffering not just from hunger but also from unemployment, which could not be remedied either through supply and demand as conceived of by the industrial aristocracy nor through a landed economy as conceived of by the landed aristocracy. Work was a political issue – the work which had made England the workshop of the world, the work which was required by the English Poor Law, the lack of work which was hitting the poor in contemporary society; and it raised the question whether existing society could go on being governed so long as large numbers of its citizens were either without work or were compelled to engage in work without tenure or contract.

Carlyle had a peasant mistrust of luxury and wealth. But he was neither a Luddite nor an enemy of machinery; he admired the ‘work’ which had been done by Arkwright and the leaders of the Industrial Revolution; and he looked to them to restore the cohesion which the leaders of feudal Catholicism had established in the Middle Ages. Obedience, not liberty, was the crucial political experience, the creation of conditions in which obedience could be given was the crucial political problem, and the idle injustice of a

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landed, and the 'isolated' injustice of a *laissez-faire*, society were the chief respects in which modern political systems were defective.

Carlyle wanted to infuse 'soul' into the landed and industrial aristocracies, to make them understand that 'morality' was 'the very centre of the existence of man', and to persuade them that parliamentary government was an obfuscation. He called on the landed aristocracy to perform the 'sacred duties of its station', and on the industrial aristocracy to replace the 'Chivalry of Fighting' and Mammonistical greed by 'Chivalry of Work' and 'nobility' of mind. He was particularly anxious to show that Nature hated 'shams', that she showed 'the face of a Goddess' to those who obeyed her and 'the claws of a Lioness' to those who did not, and that her truths would be indispensable if a 'regimented mass' was to be made out of the 'bewildered mob' of industrial society.

What Carlyle wanted was a descent into the soul, the recognition that 'scepticism' was a 'disease', and an understanding of the corruption which Voltaire, Shaftesbury and the *philosophes* had sown in the minds of the English governing classes. He wanted corruption to be exposed, errors to be confessed and a litany to be recited because, unless they were, there would be no understanding of the fact that the poor were being neither guided nor governed.

Carlyle respected the poor, but was not a democrat. He identified democracy with destructiveness and demanded from the poor what he also demanded from the aristocracy – an attempt to negotiate proper grounds for obedience. Choice of ruler was the 'soul of all social business among men', it was in 'man's . . . nature' to 'honour and love' the best of his kind, and the 'relation of the taught to their teacher' was the 'vital element' of 'human society' without which it would 'fall down into death and . . . disappear'.

Carlyle wrote on behalf of 'Worth against Unworth' and with a Jacobinical ardour against the deference which English talent had had to give to hereditary position. He wanted an aristocracy of talent to replace the aristocracy of birth and a missionary duty to replace the 'flunkeyism', 'Midas-eared Mammonism' and 'double-barrelled dilettantism' which had been failing to rule England in the recent past. 'Great' souls went about 'under all manner of disguises'; 'true' governors were chosen 'differently' in 'every . . . epoch of the world': and what was needed in the nineteenth century was a new order to relate these facts, and the facts and realities of nature, to the deep truths of God.

II

For Carlyle the problem was to replace the 'pestilence' of disorder created by Sansculottism and the Chartists, to avoid sentimental squeamishness in the process, and to acknowledge the importance of force, as Mohammed, Charlemagne and Cromwell had acknowledged it. But essentially and primarily, the problem was that there had to be a religious revolution.

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Carlyle had a narrow upbringing against which he rebelled; by the time he became a significant thinker, he identified liberation from Calvinism with the practice of literature, which not only displayed the thoughts of ‘the great spirits of our western world’ but also showed that nature was ordered, that nature was God’s, and that men were missionaries of order who thirsted for God and for Nature’s ‘still small voice’ within them. It was God who had ‘breathed life’ into men, God who had created the ‘immensity’ and ‘eternity’ of the right which each man had to make himself what he had it in him to become, God who reminded all régimes and systems of thought that there was an ‘Adamant Table’, that nature had ‘terrible forceps’, and that His ‘absolute laws’ were ‘sanctioned by . . . Heaven and Hell’.

In Carlyle work and silence were interrelated. Man was the Word ‘Incarnate’ and ‘Labour’ survived to eternity where pleasure did not. The tongue was a ‘sacred organ’ and ought not to be abused, as it had been, by the ‘insincerity’ of parliamentary oratory. Insincere speech was the ‘prime material of insincere action’, and it was the ‘gospel of work’ which taught men to bring ‘method’ to bear on the ‘unmethodic’ and to smite ‘Ignorance, Stupidity and Brutemindedness’ wherever it might find them. This was what God had commanded, what He had spoken without ‘syllabled-speech’ out of the ‘silence of deep eternities’, and what the ‘unborn ages, . . . deep Death-Kingdoms and . . . all Space and Time’ had proclaimed – that men must work ‘while it is called Today’ since ‘Night’ would come ‘wherein no man could work’.

A convergence of theory and practice, the amalgamation of religion and work, and the need for objects which men could honour and respect, were central aspects of Carlyle’s doctrine. They dominated his conception of historical writing not only because of its status as ‘epic’ (unlike the ‘godless . . . philosophic history of the eighteenth century’) but also because it recorded God’s law as a necessary antidote to the ‘social gangrene’, worship of ‘money . . . and . . . success’ and practical atheism which the Restoration of 1660 had established in the English body politic. It was the Restoration which had signalled the failure of Puritanism and of Cromwell’s attempt to give practical effect to the gospel. And it was the Restoration mentality which had to be destroyed if Cromwell’s greatness was to be re-established.

Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches argued that Cromwell had been greater than Napoleon because he had ‘walked through long years with the Awful Unameable of the universe’ and had made himself the ‘strongest and terriblest’, as well as the ‘most English’, of Englishmen. He had been both a convinced Calvinist and a ‘Christian heroic man’ and, though thwarted by the ‘greediness, cowardice . . . and opacity’ of the ‘millions’ who were against him in the 1650s, was still the point from which ‘England would have to start . . . if she was . . . to struggle Godward . . . instead of . . . Devilward and Mammonward’, to allow labour – ‘noble Labour’ – to ‘take its place’ as the

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'King of the earth', and to destroy the servility and religious insincerity which arose when the aristocracy was only apparently best and only appeared to provide the governance which the best men gave in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*.

On Heroes and Hero-Worship located religion in man's inmost heart and emphasized its ubiquity and indestructibility. Religion, properly conceived and understood, was neither quackery and allegory, an 'opium for the people', nor an illusion of false consciousness. Religion was true consciousness, accurate perception of the facts of nature, and illusionless knowledge of the duties which were indicated by them.

Religion, in this sense, though it could issue in, did not require, theological expression. What it required was consonance with God and the silent practice by which great men left their marks on world-history. Odin had been a god, Mohammed a prophet, Luther and Knox priests, Dante and Shakespeare poets, Rousseau, Burns and Johnson men-of-letters, and Cromwell and Napoleon in effect kings. But all were of the same 'stuff' and differed from each other only in the 'shapes they assumed' under the conditions in which they appeared, looking through the 'show of things' into things themselves, and bringing a 'cosmic sincerity' for which the 'World's Soul was just' and the Universe 'made by . . . a law' which it was man's business to follow.

In all these respects, Carlyle's engagements were emphatic. But they were also ambivalent and his heroes oblique. Great men were 'geniuses' but part of their genius was to expose the fact that God's word was 'deep beyond man's soundings', displayed itself as a 'mystery', and was conveyed to those who understood it without 'consent . . . being . . . asked of them'. *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* described Protestantism's invitation to every man to be a hero, the subtlety of the relationship between the heroism of Carlyle's heroes and the heroism of all believers, and the continuity between the gods, prophets and priests of the past and the poets, men-of-letters and rulers of the present and future.

In the concluding lecture of *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, the ruler was the ultimate hero; 'getting . . . the truest-hearted . . . or . . . noblest men' invested with the 'symbols of authority' was the ultimate problem; and the outcome, when fully achieved, was a 'divine right' – not the 'divine right of kings', which had been 'mouldering in public libraries since the seventeenth century' but the divine right of the 'true king' who was at once 'missionary of order' and guide of 'the spiritual' from which 'all practice took its rise'.

None of the great men discussed in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* were scientists, though there was no reason why they should not have been. It was only because Carlyle wished to establish a parity of esteem for art, religion and morality that *The Hero as Man-of-Letters* concentrated on the modern man-of-letters who 'lived apart', spoke the 'inspiration that was in him' through the printing press, and ruled 'from his grave, after death, whole nations and generations who would, or would not, give him bread while living'.

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By man-of-letters Carlyle did not mean any old author and he certainly did not mean the ‘prurient, noisy’ authors whom he castigated in *Lectures on The History of Literature*. He meant the ‘heroic’ author like Shakespeare who was a ‘piece of the everlasting Heart of Nature’ and disclosed the ‘Divine and Eternal’ in the ‘temporary and trivial’.

The man-of-letters – a symbol of the passing of the verbal culture of the Middle Ages – was a man sent to remind modern men of God’s presence in the world, of the ‘perpetual priesthood’ which reached from the Old Testament to Goethe, and of a blessed poverty which resembled the blessed poverty of the mendicant orders of the Middle Ages. But the real point was neither about poverty, the replacement of a verbal culture by a book culture, nor the desirability of establishing a Coleridgean, Chinese or Millite aristocracy of talent. The real point was that ‘newspapers, pamphlets, poems and books’ were both a book-parliament which mattered more than the elected parliament, and a ‘real church’ which ‘guided’ men’s souls and ‘touched all hearts . . . with a coal . . . live . . . from the altar’.

This was an account of an alternative hierarchy or source of authority, and Carlyle made large claims for it – that everything which came to pass was the ‘vesture of a thought’, that the Hebrew prophets could be said to have ‘made’ St Paul’s Cathedral and that London’s ‘houses, palaces, steam-engines and cathedrals’ were ‘millions’ of ‘thoughts made into One’.

In the 1830s and 1840s Carlyle was concerned with total history – the history of the whole nation and the thoughts or mentalities which had caused it. He was also concerned with religion as the ‘chief fact’ about a man or a nation, ‘great men’ as its primary embodiment, and the greatness of nations as its consequence. And the question this raises is, was the religion that he was describing necessarily Christian?

That Carlyle intended it to be thought Christian and treated the Christian sense of heaven and hell as the ‘memorablest achievement of our species’ is not in doubt. Neither is the regard he expressed for the non-credal version of mediaeval Catholicism that he described in *Past and Present*. The problem is to know whether he was praising Christianity rather than religion in general.

Carlyle’s God, in theory, was a God of love. But He was also a God of nature, and it is necessary to tread carefully in relating the one to the other. The God of love avoided individualistic isolation and was a God of sorrow, whose pre-eminent decoration had been a ‘crown of thorns’. In many respects, moreover, He was an Old Testament God whose justice had been ‘ordained from the foundations of the world’.

Carlyle aimed to bring God back into public discourse and to use Him, as Byron had used his own misery, to destroy the complacency of contemporary respectability. A ‘splendour of God’ had to emerge from industrial society as it had from feudal society and, since the object was to obey only ‘God-made superiors’, the first step was to ‘sweep out the tailor-made ones’.