

THOMAS CARLYLE

There are two main moral necessities for the work of a great man: the first is that he should believe in the truth of his message; the second is that he should believe in the acceptability of his message. It was the whole tragedy of Carlyle that he had the first and not the second.

The ordinary capital, however, which is made out of Carlyle's alleged gloom is a very paltry matter. Carlyle had his faults, both as a man and as a writer, but the attempt to explain his gospel in terms of his 'liver' is merely pitiful. If indigestion invariably resulted in a 'Sartor Resartus,' it would be a vastly more tolerable thing than it is. Diseases do not turn into poems; even the decadent really writes with the healthy part of his organism. If Carlyle's private faults and literary virtues ran somewhat in the same line, he is only in the situation of every man; for every one of us it is surely very difficult to say precisely where our honest opinions end and our personal predilections begin. But to attempt to denounce Carlyle as a mere savage egotist cannot arise from anything but a pure inability to grasp Carlyle's gospel. 'Ruskin,' says a critic, 'did, all the same, verily believe in God; Carlyle believed only in himself.' This is certainly a distinction between the author he has understood and the author he has not understood. Carlyle believed in himself, but he could not have believed in himself more than Ruskin did; they both believed in God, because they felt that if everything else fell into wrack and ruin, themselves were permanent witnesses to God. Where they both failed was not in belief in God or in belief in themselves; they failed in belief in other people. It is not enough for a prophet to believe in his message; he must believe in its acceptability. Christ, St Francis, Bunyan, Wesley, Mr Gladstone, Walt Whitman, men of indescribable variety, were all alike in a certain faculty of treating the average man as their equal, of trusting to his reason and good feeling without fear and without condescension. It was this simplicity of confidence, not only in God, but in the image of God, that was lacking in Carlyle.

But the attempts to discredit Carlyle's religious sentiment must absolutely fall to the ground. The profound security of Carlyle's sense of the unity of the Cosmos is like that of a Hebrew prophet; and it has the same expression that it had in the Hebrew prophets--humour. A man must be very full of faith to jest about his divinity. No Neo-Pagan delicately suggesting a revival of Dionysius, no vague, half-converted Theosophist groping towards a recognition of Buddha, would ever think of cracking jokes on the matter. But to the Hebrew prophets their religion was so solid a thing, like a mountain or a mammoth, that the irony of its contact with trivial and fleeting matters struck them like a blow. So it was with Carlyle. His supreme contribution, both to philosophy and literature, was his sense of the

sarcasm of eternity. Other writers had seen the hope or the terror of the heavens, he alone saw the humour of them. Other writers had seen that there could be something elemental and eternal in a song or statute, he alone saw that there could be something elemental and eternal in a joke. No one who ever read it will forget the passage, full of dark and agnostic gratification, in which he narrates that some Court chronicler described Louis XV. as 'falling asleep in the Lord.' 'Enough for us that he did fall asleep; that, curtained in thick night, under what keeping we ask not, he at least will never, through unending ages, insult the face of the sun any more ... and we go on, if not to better forms of beastliness, at least to fresher ones.'

The supreme value of Carlyle to English literature was that he was the founder of modern irrationalism; a movement fully as important as modern rationalism. A great deal is said in these days about the value or valuelessness of logic. In the main, indeed, logic is not a productive tool so much as a weapon of defence. A man building up an intellectual system has to build like Nehemiah, with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. The imagination, the constructive quality, is the trowel, and argument is the sword. A wide experience of actual intellectual affairs will lead most people to the conclusion that logic is mainly valuable as a weapon wherewith to exterminate logicians.

But though this may be true enough in practice, it scarcely clears up the position of logic in human affairs. Logic is a machine of the mind, and if it is used honestly it ought to bring out an honest conclusion. When people say that you can prove anything by logic, they are not using words in a fair sense. What they mean is that you can prove anything by bad logic. Deep in the mystic ingratitude of the soul of man there is an extraordinary tendency to use the name for an organ, when what is meant is the abuse or decay of that organ. Thus we speak of a man suffering from 'nerves,' which is about as sensible as talking about a man suffering from ten fingers. We speak of 'liver' and 'digestion' when we mean the failure of liver and the absence of digestion. And in the same manner we speak of the dangers of logic, when what we really mean is the danger of fallacy.

But the real point about the limitation of logic and the partial overthrow of logic by writers like Carlyle is deeper and somewhat different. The fault of the great mass of logicians is not that they bring out a false result, or, in other words, are not logicians at all. Their fault is that by an inevitable psychological habit they tend to forget that there are two parts of a logical process--the first the choosing of an assumption, and the second the arguing upon it; and humanity, if it devotes itself too persistently to the study of sound reasoning, has a certain tendency to lose the faculty of sound assumption. It is astonishing how constantly one may hear from rational and even rationalistic persons such a phrase as 'He did not prove the very thing with which he started,' or 'The whole of

his case rested upon a pure assumption,' two peculiarities which may be found by the curious in the works of Euclid. It is astonishing, again, how constantly one hears rationalists arguing upon some deep topic, apparently without troubling about the deep assumptions involved, having lost their sense, as it were, of the real colour and character of a man's assumption. For instance, two men will argue about whether patriotism is a good thing and never discover until the end, if at all, that the cosmopolitan is basing his whole case upon the idea that man should, if he can, become as God, with equal sympathies and no prejudices, while the nationalist denies any such duty at the very start, and regards man as an animal who has preferences, as a bird has feathers.

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Thus it was with Carlyle: he startled men by attacking not arguments but assumptions. He simply brushed aside all the matters which the men of the nineteenth century held to be incontrovertible, and appealed directly to the very different class of matters which they knew to be true. He induced men to study less the truth of their reasoning, and more the truth of the assumptions upon which they reasoned. Even where his view was not the highest truth, it was always a refreshing and beneficent heresy. He denied every one of the postulates upon which the age of reason based itself. He denied the theory of progress which assumed that we must be better off than the people of the twelfth century. Whether we were better than the people of the twelfth century according to him depended entirely upon whether we chose or deserved to be.

He denied every type and species of prop or association or support which threw the responsibility upon civilisation or society, or anything but the individual conscience. He has often been called a prophet. The real ground of the truth of this phrase is often neglected. Since the last era of purely religious literature, the era of English Puritanism, there has been no writer in whose eyes the soul stood so much alone.

Carlyle was, as we have suggested, a mystic, and mysticism was with him, as with all its genuine professors, only a transcendent form of common-sense. Mysticism and common-sense alike consist in a sense of the dominance of certain truths and tendencies which cannot be formally demonstrated or even formally named. Mysticism and common-sense are alike appeals to realities that we all know to be real, but which have no place in argument except as postulates. Carlyle's work did consist in breaking through formulas, old and new, to these old and silent and ironical sanities. Philosophers might abolish kings a hundred times over, he maintained, they could not alter the fact that every man and woman does choose a king and repudiate all the pride of citizenship for the exultation of humility. If inequality of this kind was a weakness, it was a

weakness bound up with the very strength of the universe. About hero worship, indeed, few critics have done the smallest justice to Carlyle. Misled by those hasty and choleric passages in which he sometimes expressed a preference for mere violence, passages which were a great deal more connected with his temperament than with his philosophy, they have finally imbibed the notion that Carlyle's theory of hero worship was a theory of terrified submission to stern and arrogant men. As a matter of fact, Carlyle is really inhumane about some questions, but he is never inhumane about hero worship. His view is not that human nature is so vulgar and silly a thing that it must be guided and driven; it is, on the contrary, that human nature is so chivalrous and fundamentally magnanimous a thing that even the meanest have it in them to love a leader more than themselves, and to prefer loyalty to rebellion. When he speaks of this trait in human nature Carlyle's tone invariably softens. We feel that for the moment he is kindled with admiration of mankind, and almost reaches the verge of Christianity. Whatever else was acid and captious about Carlyle's utterances, his hero worship was not only humane, it was almost optimistic. He admired great men primarily, and perhaps correctly, because he thought that they were more human than other men. The evil side of the influence of Carlyle and his religion of hero worship did not consist in the emotional worship of valour and success; that was a part of him, as, indeed, it is a part of all healthy children. Where Carlyle really did harm was in the fact that he, more than any modern man, is responsible for the increase of that modern habit of what is vulgarly called 'Going the whole hog.' Often in matters of passion and conquest it is a singularly hoggish hog. This remarkable modern craze for making one's philosophy, religion, politics, and temper all of a piece, of seeking in all incidents for opportunities to assert and reassert some favourite mental attitude, is a thing which existed comparatively little in other centuries. Solomon and Horace, Petrarch and Shakespeare were pessimists when they were melancholy, and optimists when they were happy. But the optimist of to-day seems obliged to prove that gout and unrequited love make him dance with joy, and the pessimist of to-day to prove that sunshine and a good supper convulse him with inconsolable anguish. Carlyle was strongly possessed with this mania for spiritual consistency. He wished to take the same view of the wars of the angels and of the paltriest riot at Donnybrook Fair. It was this species of insane logic which led him into his chief errors, never his natural enthusiasms. Let us take an example. Carlyle's defence of slavery is a thoroughly ridiculous thing, weak alike in argument and in moral instinct. The truth is, that he only took it up from the passion for applying everywhere his paradoxical defence of aristocracy. He blundered, of course, because he did not see that slavery has nothing in the world to do with aristocracy, that it is, indeed, almost its opposite. The defence which Carlyle and all its thoughtful defenders have made for aristocracy was that a few persons could more rapidly and firmly decide public affairs in the interests of the people. But slavery is not even supposed to be a government for the good of the governed. It is a possession of the governed

avowedly for the good of the governors. Aristocracy uses the strong for the service of the weak; slavery uses the weak for the service of the strong. It is no derogation to man as a spiritual being, as Carlyle firmly believed he was, that he should be ruled and guided for his own good like a child--for a child who is always ruled and guided we regard as the very type of spiritual existence. But it is a derogation and an absolute contradiction to that human spirituality in which Carlyle believed that a man should be owned like a tool for someone else's good, as if he had no personal destiny in the Cosmos. We draw attention to this particular error of Carlyle's because we think that it is a curious example of the waste and unclean places into which that remarkable animal, 'the whole hog,' more than once led him.

In this respect Carlyle has had unquestionably long and an unquestionably bad influence. The whole of that recent political ethic which conceives that if we only go far enough we may finish a thing for once and all, that being strong consists chiefly in being deliberately deaf and blind, owes a great deal of its complete sway to his example. Out of him flows most of the philosophy of Nietzsche, who is in modern times the supreme maniac of this moonstruck consistency. Though Nietzsche and Carlyle were in reality profoundly different, Carlyle being a stiff-necked peasant and Nietzsche a very fragile aristocrat, they were alike in this one quality of which we speak, the strange and pitiful audacity with which they applied their single ethical test to everything in heaven and earth. The disciple of Nietzsche, indeed, embraces immorality like an austere and difficult faith. He urges himself to lust and cruelty with the same tremulous enthusiasm with which a Christian urges himself to purity and patience; he struggles as a monk struggles with bestial visions and temptations with the ancient necessities of honour and justice and compassion. To this madhouse, it can hardly be denied, has Carlyle's intellectual courage brought many at last.