

THOMAS CARLYLE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY

FOUR SCOTCHMEN, born within the limits of the same hundred years, all in the first rank of writers, if not of thinkers, represent much of the spirit of four successive generations. They are leading links in an intellectual chain.

DAVID HUME (1711-1776) remains the most salient type, in our island, of the scepticism, half conservative, half destructive, but never revolutionary, which marked the third quarter of the eighteenth century. He had some points of intellectual contact with Voltaire, though substituting a staid temper and passionless logic for the incisive brilliancy of a mocking Mercury ; he had no relation, save an unhappy personal one, to Rousseau.

ROBERT BURNS (1759-1796), last of great lyrists inspired by a local genius, keenest of popular satirists, narrative poet of the people, spokesman of their higher as of their lower natures, stood on the verge between two eras. Half

Jacobite, nursling of old minstrelsy, he was also half Jacobin, an early-born child of the upheaval that closed the century ; as essentially a foe of Calvinism as Hume himself. Master musician of his race, he was, as Thomas Campbell notes, severed, for good and ill, from his fellow Scots by an utter want of their protecting or paralysing caution.

WALTER SCOTT (1771-1832), broadest and most generous, if not loftiest of the group—"no sounder piece of British manhood," says Carlyle himself in his inadequate review, "was put together in that century"—the great revivalist of the mediæval past, lighting up its scenes with a magic glamour, the wizard of northern tradition, was also, like Burns, the humorist of contemporary life. Dealing with Feudal themes, but in the manner of the Romantic school, he was the heir of the Troubadours, the sympathetic peer of Byron, and in his translation of Goetz von Berlichingen he laid the first rafters of our bridge to Germany.

THOMAS CARLYLE (1795-1881) is on the whole the strongest, though far from the finest spirit of the age succeeding—an age of criticism threatening to crowd creation out, of jostling interests and of surging streams, some of which he has striven to direct, more to stem. Even now what Mill twenty-five years ago wrote of Coleridge is still true of Carlyle: "The reading public is apt to be divided between those to whom his views are everything and those to whom they are nothing." But it is possible to extricate from a mass of often turbid eloquence the strands of his thought and to measure his influence by indicating its range.

Travellers in the Hartz, ascending the Brocken, are in certain atmospheres startled by the apparition of a shadowy figure,—a giant image of themselves, thrown on the horizon by the dawn. Similar is the relation of Carlyle to the common types of his countrymen. Burns, despite his perfervid

patriotism, was in many ways "a starry stranger." Carlyle was Scotch to the core and to the close, in every respect a macrocosm of the higher peasant class of the Lowlanders. Saturated to the last with the spirit of a dismissed creed, he fretted in bonds from which he could never get wholly free. Intrepid, independent, steadfast, frugal, prudent, dauntless, he trampled on the pride of kings with the pride of Lucifer. He was clannish to excess, painfully jealous of proximate rivals, self-centred if not self-seeking, fired by zeal and inflamed by almost mean emulations, resenting benefits as debts, ungenerous—with one exception, that of Goethe,—to his intellectual creditors; and, with reference to men and manners around him at variance with himself, violently intolerant. He bore a strange relation to the great poet, in many ways his predecessor in influence, whom with persistent inconsistency he alternately eulogised and disparaged, the half Scot Lord Byron. One had by nature many affinities to the Latin races, the other was purely Teutonic: but the power of both was Titanic rather than Olympian; both were forces of revolution; both protested, in widely different fashion, against the tendency of the age to submerge Individualism; both were to a large extent egoists: the one whining, the other roaring against the "Philistine" restraints of ordinary society. Both had hot hearts, big brains, and an exhaustless store of winged and fiery words; both were wrapt in a measureless discontent, and made constant appeal against what they deemed the shallows of Optimism; Carlylism is the prose rather than "the male of Byronism." The contrasts are, however, obvious; the author of *Sartor Resartus*, however vaguely, defended the System of the Universe; the author of *Cain*, with an audacity that in its essence went beyond that of Shelley, arraigned it. In both we find vehemence and substantial honesty; but, in the one, there is a dominant faith,

tempered by pride, in the "caste of Vere de Vere," in Freedom for itself—a faith marred by shifting purposes, the garrulous incontinence of vanity, and a broken life; in the other unwavering belief in Law. The record of their fame is diverse. Byron leapt into the citadel, awoke and found himself the greatest inheritor of an ancient name. Carlyle, a peasant's son, laid slow siege to his eminence, and, only after outliving twice the years of the other, attained it. His career was a struggle, sterner than that of either Johnson or Wordsworth, from obscurity, almost from contempt, to a rarely challenged renown. Fifty years ago few "so poor as do him reverence": at his death, in a sunset storm of praise, the air was full of him, and deafening was the Babel of the reviews; for the progress of every original thinker is accompanied by a stream of commentary that swells as it runs till it ends in a dismal swamp of platitude. Carlyle's first recognition was from America, his last from his own countrymen. His teaching came home to their hearts "late in the gloamin'." In Scotland, where, for good or ill, passions are in extremes, he was long howled down, lampooned, preached at, prayed for: till, after his Edinburgh Inaugural Address, he of a sudden became the object of an equally blind devotion; and was, often by the very men who had tried and condemned him for blasphemy, as senselessly credited with essential orthodoxy. "The stone which the builders rejected became the headstone of the corner," the terror of the pulpit its text. Carlyle's decease was marked by a dirge of rhapsodists whose measureless acclamations stifled the voice of sober criticism. In the realm of contemporary English prose he has left no adequate successor;¹ the throne that does not pass by primogeniture is vacant, and the bleak northern skies seem colder and grayer since

¹ The nearest being the now foremost prose writers of our time, Mr. Ruskin and Mr. Froude.

that venerable head was laid to rest in the village ^{churchyard} church, far from the smoke and din of the great city on whose streets his figure was long familiar and his name was at last so honoured.

Carlyle first saw the world tempest-tossed by the events he celebrates in his earliest History. In its opening pages, we are made to listen to the feet and chariots of "Dubarrydom" hurrying from the "Armida Palace," where Louis XV. and the *ancien régime* lay dying; later to the ticking of the clocks in Launay's doomed Bastille; again to the tocsin of the steeples that roused the singers of the *Marseillaise* to march from "their bright Phocæan city" and grapple with the Swiss guard, last bulwark of the Bourbons. "The Swiss would have won," the historian characteristically quotes from Napoleon, "if they had had a commander." Already, over little more than the space of the author's life—for he was a contemporary of Keats, born seven months before the death of Burns, Shelley's junior by three, Scott's by four, Byron's by seven years—in the year when Goethe went to feel the pulse of the "cannon-fever" at Argonne—already these sounds are like sounds across a sea. Two whole generations have passed with the memory of half their storms. "Another race has been, and other palms are won." Old policies, governments, councils, creeds, modes and hopes of life have been sifted in strange fires. Assaye, Trafalgar, Austerlitz, Jena, Leipzig, Inkermann, Sadowa, Waterloo when he was twenty and Sedan when he was seventy-five, have been fought and won. Born under the French Directory and the Presidency of Washington, Carlyle survived two French empires, two kingdoms, and two republics; elsewhere partitions, abolitions, revivals and deaths of States innumerable. During his life our sway in the East doubled its area, two peoples (the German with, the Italian without, his sympathy) were consolidated

on the Continent, while another across the Atlantic developed to a magnitude that amazes and sometimes alarms the rest. Aggressions were made and repelled, patriots perorated and fought, diplomatists finessed with a zeal worthy of the world's most restless, if not its wisest, age. In the internal affairs of the leading nations the transformation scenes were often as rapid as those of a pantomime. The Art and Literature of those eighty-six years—stirred to new thought and form at their commencement by the so-called Romantic movement, more recently influenced by the Classic reaction, the Pre-Raphaelite protest, the *Æsthetic mode*,—followed various even contradictory standards. But, in one line of progress, there was no shadow of turning. Over the road which Bacon laid roughly down and Newton made safe for transit, Physical Science, during the whole period, advanced without let and beyond the cavil of ignorance. If the dreams of the *New Atlantis* have not even in our days been wholly realised, Science has been brought from heaven to earth, and the elements made ministers of Prospero's wand. This apparent, and partially real, conquest of matter has doubtless done much to "relieve our estate," to make life in some directions run more smoothly, and to multiply resources to meet the demands of rapidly-increasing multitudes: but it is in danger of becoming a conquest of matter over us; for the agencies we have called into almost fearful activity threaten, like Frankenstein's miscreated goblin, to beat us down to the same level. Sanguine spirits who

throw out acclamations of self-thanking, self-admiring,
With, at every mile run faster, O the wondrous, wondrous age,

are apt to forget that the electric light can do nothing
to dispel the darkness of the mind; that there are strict

limits to the power of prosperity to supply man's wants or satisfy his aspirations. This is a great part of Carlyle's teaching. It is impossible, were it desirable, accurately to define his religious, social, or political creed. He swallows formulæ with the voracity of Mirabeau, and like Proteus escapes analysis. No printed labels will stick to him: when we seek to corner him by argument he thunders and lightens. Emerson complains that he failed to extract from him a definite answer about Immortality. Neither by syllogism nor by crucible could Bacon himself have made the "Form" of Carlyle to confess itself. But call him what we will—essential Calvinist or recalcitrant Neologist, Mystic, Idealist, Deist or Pantheist, practical Absolutist, or "the strayed reveller" of Radicalism—he is consistent in his even bigoted antagonism to all Utilitarian solutions of the problems of the world. One of the foremost physicists of our time was among his truest and most loyal friends; they were bound together by the link of genius and kindred political views; and Carlyle was himself an expert in mathematics, the mental science that most obviously subserves physical research: but of Physics themselves (astronomy being scarcely a physical science) his ignorance was profound, and his abusive criticisms of such men as Darwin are infantile. This intellectual defect, or rather vacuum, left him free to denounce material views of life with unconditioned vehemence. "Will the whole upholsterers," he exclaims in his half comic, sometimes nonsensical, vein, "and confectioners of modern Europe undertake to make one single shoeblack happy!" And more seriously of the railways, without whose noisy aid he had never been able to visit the battle-fields of Friedrich II.—

Our stupendous railway miracles I have stopped short in admiring. . . . The distances of London to Aberdeen, to Ostend, to Vienna, are still infinitely inadequate to me. Will you teach

me the winged flight through immensity, up to the throne dark with excess of bright? You unfortunate, you grin as an ape would at such a question: you do not know that unless you can reach thither in some effectual most veritable sense, you are lost, doomed to Hela's death-realm and the abyss where mere brutes are buried. I do not want cheaper cotton, swifter railways; I want what Novalis calls "God, Freedom, and Immortality." Will swift railways and sacrifices to Hudson help me towards that?

The ECONOMIC AND MECHANICAL SPIRIT of the age, faith in mere steel or stone, was one of Carlyle's red rags. The others were INSINCERITY in Politics and in Life, DEMOCRACY without Reverence, and PHILANTHROPY without Sense. In our time these two last powers have made such strides as to threaten the Reign of Law. The Democrat without a ruler, who protests that one man is by nature as good as another, according to Carlyle is "shooting Niagara." In deference to the mandate of the philanthropist the last shred of brutality and much of decision has vanished from our code. Sentiment is in office and Mercy not only tempers, but threatens to gag Justice. When Sir Samuel Romilly began his beneficent agitation, and Carlyle was at school, talkers of treason were liable to be disembowelled before execution; now the crime of treason is practically erased, and the free use of dynamite brings so-called reforms "within the range of practical politics." Individualism was still a mark of the early years of the century. The spirit of "L'Etat c'est moi" survived in Mirabeau, "never name to me that *bête* of a word 'impossible';" in the first Napoleon's threat to the Austrian ambassador, "I will break your empire like this vase"; in Nelson turning his blind eye to the signal of retreat at Copenhagen, and Wellington fencing Torres Vedras against the world: it lingered in Nicholas the Czar, and has found, perhaps, its latest political representative in Prince Bismarck.

This is the spirit to which Carlyle has always given his undivided sympathy. He has held out hands to Knox, Francia, Friedrich, to the men who have made manners, not to the manners which have made men, to the rulers of people, not to their representatives: and the not inconsiderable following he has obtained is the most conspicuous tribute to a power resolute to pull against the stream. How strong its currents may be illustrated by a few lines from our leading literary journal, the *Athenæum*, of the Saturday after his death:—

“The future historian of the century will have to record the marvellous fact that while in the reign of Queen Victoria there was initiated, formulated, and methodised an entirely new cosmogony, its most powerful and highly-gifted man of letters was preaching a polity and a philosophy of history that would have better harmonised with the time of Queen Semiramis. . . . Long before he launched his sarcasms at human progress, there had been a conviction among thinkers that it was not the hero that developed the race, but a deep mysterious energy in the race that produced the hero; that the wave produced the bubble, and not the bubble the wave. But the moment a theory of evolution saw the light it was a fact. The old cosmogony, on which were built *Sartor Resartus* and the Calvinism of Ecclefechan, were gone. Ecclefechan had declared that the earth did not move; but it moved nevertheless. The great stream of modern thought has advanced; the theory of evolution has been universally accepted; nations, it is acknowledged, produce kings, and kings are denied the faculty of producing nations.”

Taliter, qualiter; but one or two remarks on the incisive summary of this adroit and able theorist are obvious. First, the implied assertion,—“Ecclefechan had declared that the earth did not move,”—that Carlyle was in essential

sympathy with the Inquisitors who confronted Galileo with the rack, is perhaps the strangest piece of recent criticism extant: for what is his *French Revolution* but a cannonade in three volumes, reverberating, as no other book has done, a hurricane of revolutionary thought and deed, a final storming of old fortresses, an assertion of the necessity of movement, progress, and upheaval? Secondly, every new discovery is apt to be discredited by new shibboleths, and one-sided exaggerations of its range. It were platitude to say that Mr. Darwin was not only an almost unrivalled student of nature, as careful and conscientious in his methods, as fearless in stating his results, but—pace Mr. Carlyle—a man of genius, who has thrown floods of light on the inter-relations of the organic world. But there are troops of serfs, ullius “addicti jurare in verba magistri,” who, accepting, without attempt or capacity to verify the conclusions of the master mind, think to solve all the mysteries of the universe by ejaculating the word “Evolution.” If I ask what was the secret of Dante’s or of Shakespeare’s divining rod, and you answer “Evolution,” ’tis as if, when sick in heart and sick in head, I were referred, as medicine for “a mind diseased,” to Grimm’s Law or to the Magnetic Belt.

Let us grant that Cæsar was evolved from the currents in the air about the Roman Capitol, that Marcus Aurelius was a blend of Plato and Cleanthes, Charlemagne a graft of Frankish blood on Gallic soil, William I. a rill from Rollo filtered in Neustrian fields, Hildebrand a flame from the altar of the mediæval church, Barbarossa a plant grown to masterdom in German woods, or later—not to heap up figures whose memories still possess the world—that Columbus was a Genoan breeze, Bacon a *réchauffé* of Elizabethan thought, Orange the Silent a Dutch dyke, Chatham the frontispiece of eighteenth-century England, or

Corsican Buonaparte the "armed soldier of Democracy." These men, at all events, were no bubbles on the froth of the waves which they defied and dominated.

This, and more, is to be said for Carlyle's insistence that great men are creators as well as creatures of their age. Doubtless, as we advance in history, direct personal influence, happily or unhappily, declines. In an era of overwrought activity, of superficial, however free, education, when we run the risk of being associated into nothingness and criticised to death, it remains a question whether, in the interests of the highest civilisation (which means opportunity for every capable citizen to lead the highest life), the subordination of the one to the many ought to be accelerated or retarded. It is said that the triumph of Democracy is a mere "matter of time." But time is in this case of the essence of the matter, and the party of resistance will all the more earnestly maintain that the defenders should hold the forts till the invaders have become civilised. "The individual withers and the world is more and more," preludes, through over a long interval, the cynic comment of the second "Locksley Hall" on the "increasing purpose" of the age. At an earlier date "Luria" had protested against the arrogance of mere majorities.

A people is but the attempt of many
To rise to the completer life of one ;
And those who live as models to the mass
Are singly of more value than they all.

Carlyle set these notes to Tennyson and to Browning in his *Hero-Worship*—in reality, in thought, and more in action, older than Buddha or than Achilles, but which he first, as a dogma, sprang on our recent times, clenched with the asseveration that on two men, Mirabeau and Napoleon,

mainly hung the fates of the most nominally levelling of Revolutions. The stamp his teaching made is still graven on the minds of the men of light who *lead*, and cannot be wholly effaced by the tongues of the men of words who *orate*. If he leans unduly to the exaltation of personal power, Carlyle is on the side of those whose defeat can be beneficent only if it be slow. Otherwise, to account for his attitude, we must refer to his life and to its surroundings, *i.e.* to the circumstances amid which he was "evolved."