

Carlyle's Agnosticism: An Altar to the Unknown and Unknowable God

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I

In an important article exploring Carlyle's use of language in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), J. Hillis Miller argues that Carlyle sets himself the seemingly impossible task of speaking of that about which one cannot speak, namely, the highest, and thus, by implication, God. In holding that nothing can be said about the highest or the unspeakable yet striving nonetheless to do so, Carlyle, according to Miller, becomes committed to a language that “must necessarily be of the most oblique and roundabout sort” (7). Miller later concludes that “[w]hat Nietzsche calls Carlyle's passionate dishonesty against himself, I am calling the intrinsic, undecidability of his doctrine” (18). Nietzsche's claim about dishonesty closes in on his final point that “[f]undamentally, Carlyle is an English atheist who wants to be honoured for *not* being one” (*Twilight* 85–86). In reconstruing and thereby rebutting this claim of a most serious hypocrisy in terms of the undecidable nature of Carlyle's *doctrine*, Miller seems to be implying that, as evinced in his language, particularly his use of catachresis, Carlyle's overall standpoint is one of undecidability with regard to God. Thus,

if Miller's undecidability thesis is right, then it has important consequences for how one might understand the religious standpoint in Carlyle's doctrine with particular regard to the ontological status and significance of God. If it is correct to describe Carlyle's doctrine concerning the highest or the unspeakable as a doctrine of undecidability, this implies that Carlyle must be committed to holding that people are, in some sense, *incapable* of deciding on the nature and existence of God. Such incapability, as also the term "undecidable" itself, is particularly apt in relation to the standpoint known as agnosticism—in short, contrary to Nietzsche's *ad hominem* charge that Carlyle was a hypocrite in being privately, though not publicly, an atheist, Miller's undecidability thesis suggests that Carlyle's very sincerity and great honesty as a religious believer resulted in a linguistic obliqueness and highly ornamented metaphorical style that so evinces undecidability with regard to the nature and existence of God that he becomes committed to a position somewhere on the spectrum of religious agnosticism, something that seems to be amply well supported by many of the references he made to God throughout his life.¹

The undecidability or agnosticism of Carlyle's doctrine must be to some degree opposed to defining or describing directly the highest, and hence the great task in *Sartor Resartus* (to speak of the "Holy-of-Holies of Man's Soul" [138] and attempt to envision or reveal the "celestial Holy of Holies" [187]) serves to show that God is somehow forever elusively escaping linguistic definition or description. In denying the ability to know God through an insistence that God is linguistically indefinable and thus unknowable, Carlyle's agnosticism implies some form or degree of scepticism. This should not be too surprising, given that agnosticism has so often been regarded as a form of scepticism—at a minimum, agnosticism is a position that calls in doubt knowledge claims concerning God's existence (and thereby agnosticism may be described as a standpoint that necessarily involves some degree of scepticism or doubt). Furthermore, some of the most eminent sceptics have, on occasion, been described as agnostics. For example, David Hume, who in his own day was so famously known as a

most dangerous sceptic, arguably advances a form of agnosticism in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), and Hume's agnosticism can even be detected in one of his much earlier works, the essay "Of Miracles," which is still perhaps his most famous and the most widely read essay in his *Enquiry* (1748). "Of Miracles" caused religious believers in the eighteenth century and in Carlyle's day a great deal of trouble in its seemingly absolute subversion of miracles, which Hume regarded as forming the very foundations of Christianity. However, at the end of the essay Hume seems to allow a form of agnosticism by arguing that, while miracles cannot be rationalized nor considered to be justified true beliefs, believing in a miracle is an act of faith and not of reason (131). As this seems to leave some room for religious belief or faith, one implication is that while one cannot know nor have rational grounds for believing in God's existence and God's power to violate the laws of nature by a miraculous act—hence God's existence itself is unknown—one can nevertheless have *faith* in God. Though this requires further lengthy discussion, particularly since Hume's scepticism is such that it arguably subverts this very act of faith to which he seems to give some support, the point here is simply to highlight that with some justification one of the greatest sceptics of all time can be interpreted as promoting something that might be described as agnosticism, and thus extreme scepticism was at the very root of or at least has been associated with what came to be known during the nineteenth century as agnosticism.

But if an important connection between agnosticism and scepticism exists and if it is not terribly remarkable that it does, what may seem much more surprising is the notion it suggests that Carlyle's doctrine of agnosticism, as inherent in his use of language with regard to the highest, or God, may thus also be a highly sceptical doctrine radically opposed to religious belief or damaging to the viability of holding any religious belief whatsoever. If Carlyle's agnosticism is regarded as an implicit position inherent within his use of language that in some way furthered that deeply sceptical strand in Enlightenment thought that so radically and so successfully challenged or subverted religious belief, orthodox Christianity, the authority of the church, and even the worth

and defeasibility of holding to any notion of spirituality or of a spiritual or even a merely non-material dimension of importance to one's existence, then this should also have important implications for how one ought to understand Nietzsche's damning attack on Carlyle. Was Nietzsche perhaps at least partly right? Following Miller's defense of Carlyle's sincerity and honesty as a writer, though Nietzsche is wrong to charge Carlyle with hypocrisy, was Carlyle, in effect if not in his primary and personal motivations, as dangerous an atheist as some have regarded Nietzsche himself? Indeed, Carlyle emerged from such a rich soil of literary, philosophical, and theological debates concerning scepticism, that perhaps the extracted agnosticism was so subtle and potent that there could be no significant antidote for the poison of Carlyle's agnosticism. Unlike atheism's assertion of God's non-existence (implicitly an invitation to continue dialogue by counter-arguing in defense of religion), Carlyle's agnosticism possibly entered the sinews of religious belief with much more destructive effect. More devastating to the viability of religious belief than the refreshing clarity of declaration that typifies Nietzsche's full frontal attack on bourgeois morality, Carlyle's agnosticism for all its traces of theism, might have been more effectively anti-religious than anything offered for consideration by atheists. Following on from this, was Nietzsche entirely mistaken in the first place in implying that Carlyle was tantamount to being a public theist, just as he also seems to have been mistaken in calling him a private atheist? And yet, was he also mistaken in implying that Carlyle's work, as hypocritical, cowardly, and weak, ought not to be valued for somehow failing to bring about the demise of religious belief, when in fact Carlyle's agnosticism was a more powerful means of doing so than atheism's less sophisticated and less effective assertion of God's non-existence?

It would surely shock many readers of Carlyle, past and present, to think of his work as bearing within it, to change metaphors, a highly infectious sceptical virus (an inherently undecidable or indeterminate mode of discoursing about things not positively known, such as God) which, once internalized or emulated by his readers, may have helped to bring about innumerable personal crises of faith in Victorian Eng-

land and a more general demise of religious belief thereafter. After all, it was Carlyle who, in "Signs of the Times," so strikingly and memorably defined the nineteenth century as the Mechanical Age and lamented as he did so that "[t]his is not a Religious age. Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual, is important to us" (74). It was Carlyle who strenuously strove, though lamenting the apparent impossibility of doing so, "to show forth to the men of these days that they also live in the Age of Miracle!" (*Collected Letters* 7:6). In such utterances one might detect both condemnation and acknowledgment of the success of Enlightenment scepticism. But the satirist's knife cuts both ways at once: by not only condemning but also giving credence to the demise of belief, Carlyle colludes closely with and, unlike the cool sceptics of his Edinburgh acquaintance, puffs up, albeit with straw, his avowed enemies of scepticism, materialism, atheism, and irreligion.

And yet a great many readers understandably and rightly see in Carlyle a writer who unquestionably opposed that scepticism and its associates, not least of all the irreligion and godlessness of his times.² Furthermore, it is clear from Ian Campbell's work on Carlyle that his religious belief was deeply grounded in, but different from, the religious background of his Ecclefechan birthplace, was developed in response to a changing intellectual milieu and world, and was retained in some form throughout his life as a sustaining force; and his struggles with belief were ultimately fruitful since for all his sense of isolation and his retreat into himself as he aged he grew "in power as a religious force throughout the world" ("Carlyle's" 4, 20). But not only was Carlyle a religious force of some standing, his more general literary influence, as Rodger Tarr has recently pointed out, was also nothing short of enormous during the nineteenth century and beyond (xxviii-xxxiv), and the reverence and respect accorded to him during his lifetime was, as Rosemary Ashton elegantly observes, peculiarly outstanding, even in times rather given to author-worship (1-7). With Carlyle's stature as a writer in mind and the incontestable notion that he was indeed a major religious force who did retain some

form of belief in a God (much as Campbell describes him), attempting to assess his standpoint with regard to agnosticism ought to be highly significant for these reasons alone, though it must be noted that this is no easy task and can thus hardly avoid being provokingly controversial and incomplete.

A great many readers of Carlyle are able to provide a considerable amount of evidence from his voluminous work to support the inference that he personally believed in God. Some commentators have attempted with some success to infer the kind of God that Carlyle believed in, and their readings of his work suggest a variety of notions, such as Charles Frederick Harrold's distinction between the god invoked in *Sartor Resartus*, "the lovely and elusive spirit calling to man from the beauty of nature," and the god that Carlyle struggled with in his later years: "a stern, transcendent 'Taskmaster,' whose perfection is a condemnation of all disobedience, all desire for freedom, all hope of individual self-sufficiency" (479-80). One might reasonably and informatively define several such notions of Carlyle's god, and, furthermore, one might even find evidence, particularly in *Sartor Resartus*, for a Pantheistic, immanent god, present in all things though transcendent in his moral authority. To be sure, whatever one might specifically infer from his works, though Carlyle's notion of God does seem to go beyond the simple, Deistical notion of a supreme being, it is more circumscribed than that of most orthodox positions and yet is repeatedly concerned with, as Harrold suggests, wonderment, moral aspiration, awesome power, moral judgment, punishment, and a notion that the universe and the lives of all are governed by the ultimate prevalence of justice. Thus, it seems fair to say that Carlyle actively promoted in his texts some form of religious belief broadly concordant with a notion that God's nature and existence are most important facts of human existence, particularly of moral life.

But if these points are generally true, how can it be at all accurate to describe Carlyle's doctrine as agnostic? If, for all the traces of undecidability with regard to God within the language of Carlyle's texts, he sustained throughout his life a personal belief in God (albeit a god lacking many of the attributes of the God of orthodox Christianity), and if cer-

tain traces of this personal belief can be ascertained from his texts, how is it possible to describe his standpoint as agnostic without somehow ignoring as irrelevant or epistemologically indeterminable what his texts seem to suggest about his privately held belief? But by contrast, a pertinent condemnation of Carlyle for being hypocritical might ensue by inverting Nietzsche's claim: if Carlyle held to a private belief in God (and was not the atheist Nietzsche claims he was), but if he also did manifest through the undecidability of his writing a potent anti-religious and even atheistic tendency, then he might be charged with being every bit as hypocritical as Nietzsche alleges he is, though for quite other reasons.

A helpful distinction that is often made in discussions on agnosticism is between strong and weak forms, the strong agnostic being a person who denies the possibility of knowing whether God exists and the possibility of knowing any of His attributes. By contrast, weak agnostics hold that although God is unknown to man, He *may* be knowable. Although one might regard a particularly assertive type of agnosticism as atheistic, it is probably better to view agnosticism as a range of standpoints which commence with the notion that, though God is in some sense unknowable or incomprehensible, this does not preclude for the agnostic the *possibility* of at least some form of theism or *belief* in God. Bernard Lightman's valuable study of the origins of agnosticism categorizes several of its forms as developed in the nineteenth century, some of which were undoubtedly religious and far from being overtly or intentionally hostile to religious belief. Lightman argues that because one now tends to operate with a notion of agnosticism as anti-religious (since from the latter years of the nineteenth century this is what it increasingly came to be), "we find it difficult to entertain either the notion that there were many vestiges of traditional religious thought embedded in Victorian agnosticism or the possibility that agnosticism originated in a religious context" (4), which, as Lightman shows, was in fact the case (16).

Thus, since there do seem to be some fairly good grounds for claiming that Carlyle personally held to belief in a god and eschewed positively denying God's existence (the position of the atheist), and since his

implicit doctrine with regard to God's existence may be described (*pace* Miller) as a doctrine of undecidability, it seems perfectly tenable to describe Carlyle's overall standpoint as agnostic yet well disposed to religion and deeply committed to the importance of believing in the existence of God. The form of agnosticism to which he personally subscribed was therefore most likely to have been a position that might conveniently and provisionally be described as agnostic theism.

Since Carlyle could be agnostic while yet suggesting belief in a god, there is no inconsistency between his texts' agnostic stance, evinced by this general undecidability, and any particular set of minimal characteristic features pertaining to virtually any of the gods that have been attributed to his personal belief, even though or, rather, particularly since the characteristics of the god he personally believed in no doubt and quite reasonably changed through time. One should probably remember at this stage that in *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle writes, "Christianity and Christendom [is] a Symbol of quite perennial, infinite character; whose significance will ever demand to be anew inquired into, and anew made manifest" (165); so also, one might add, the symbol that is the term "God" demands reinterpretation and redescription, and, thus, it might be better to regard Carlyle's god as a notion inherently changeful and multiplex, despite its seeming paradox. Closer examination of each one of Carlyle's gods in relation to the agnosticism in his writing style would doubtless be an interesting project that would better inform one's understanding of his agnosticism, his literary output, and his influence on literature, philosophy, historiography, social criticism, etc., but such a study would fill volumes. Specifically, here, Carlyle's agnosticism, as a standpoint inferred from the undecidability inherent in the highly metaphorical, often catachrestic style of his writing about the highest or God, is under scrutiny. However Carlyle's own definition of religion is pertinent to qualifying the provisional description given above of his agnosticism as theistic.

But if Carlyle's standpoint may be assessed as at least provisionally approximate to some form of early nineteenth-century theistic agnosticism, which developed out of, was not hostile to, and retained some re-

ligious belief, this does not mean that the standpoint to which he may be said to be personally committed was innocuous to what one might perhaps too conveniently and too simplistically describe as *orthodox* religion. Given that agnosticism came to be thought of as anti-religious towards the end of the nineteenth century, Carlyle's doctrine may even be interpreted as being to some extent hostile to belief in any deity whatsoever. This was the century in which Nietzsche could famously declare that man had killed God such that *now* the end of religion could be pronounced in the phrase, "God is Dead" (Gay 125). Carlyle's doctrine, interpreted as undecidable and therefore agnostic and in this at least potentially hostile to any belief in a god, may well have unwittingly contributed to this killing of God, this destruction of belief *in* God. And yet the influence of Carlyle's work on a great many readers attests, no doubt, as Campbell suggests, to the view that, while he may have had to abandon the religious belief of his parents, he nonetheless became "a religious force throughout the world" ("Carlyle's" 20). However, the influence of Carlyle's work on some eminent Victorian agnostics may still suggest that, irrespective of what he intended and personally adhered to in his life, and regardless of how he may have been interpreted by countless readers (many of whom were no doubt seeking to retain their belief in God within an apparently dominant ethos tending toward irreligion), his work, peppered with objections to materialism and grave concern about the Mechanical Age's displacement of the devotional, religious, God-fearing ethos of former times, continued a highly important aspect of that deeply influential strand in Enlightenment thought, the project directed against religion, religious belief, prejudice, and all other forms of so-called superstition.

II

Some contemporary readers, notable for being agnostics, found in Carlyle's natural supernaturalism an inspiring agnosticism that was to play a role in the demise of their own religious belief or was used to further a similar demise in the religious belief of others. Lightman cites Thomas Henry Huxley (one of the most controversial leading lights of

Victorian agnosticism and generally acknowledged as having invented the term “agnosticism”), William Kingdon Clifford, Leslie Stephen, and John Tyndall as just a few of those deeply influenced by the agnosticism of Carlyle’s work. To illustrate the extent of Carlyle’s influence towards an anti-religious agnosticism, consider the following in which readers of Carlyle will all too easily detect traces of Carlylese, his anti-mechanism, and his delight in the wonders of astronomy. In his *Scientific Memoirs* (1898–1903) Huxley writes,

In traveling from one end to the other of the scale of life, we are taught one lesson, that living nature is not a mechanism but a poem; not a mere rough engine-house for the due keeping of pleasure and pain machines, but a palace whose foundations, indeed, are laid on the strictest and safest mechanical principles, but whose superstructure is a manifestation of the highest and noblest art (1:311).

For his part Stephen observes,

Carlyle has been to some of us, the most stimulating of writers, just because he succeeded in expressing, with unsurpassed power, the emotion which I must be content with indicating—the emotion which is roused by sudden revelations of the infinitudes, the silences and eternities that surround us (1:40),

and later,

To us a star is a signal of a new world; it suggests universe beyond universe; sinking into the infinite abysses of space; we see worlds forming or decaying and raising at every moment problems of a strange fascination. The prosaic truth is really more poetical than the old figment of the childish imagination. (2:185)

According to Lightman, Tyndall regarded matter as mystical and transcendental, something which Carlyle himself had most powerfully

intimated in several places in *Sartor Resartus* (188–91):

Who created it? What is it? The soul yearns over the mystery, retires baffled, but will try again. Encompassed by such thoughts, revelation seems common-place, for who-ever listens with reverential ear will not he also detect the spirit voice speaking in melody to his soul; supernal whispers which, fitly uttered, would be as good and true as any revelation of them all. My experience is precisely that of the most orthodox christian. (Tyndall qtd. in Lightman 149)

As Ruth apRoberts notes, “the Carlylean religion of Wonder was something pretty constant among the main agnostics” (77). But a reverential and indeed neo-romantic attitude toward nature and an identification with the experience of “the most orthodox christian” perhaps bears within it something highly damaging to orthodox Christian religious belief and the established church, kirk, and most, if not all, forms of organized religion. If Tyndall could have such a meaningful experience of wonderment, identical to that of an orthodox Christian, wherein lies the value of organized religion?³

Agnostics such as Huxley, Stephen, and Tyndall, in finding “[t]he prosaic truth . . . more poetical than the old figment of the childish imagination” may be regarded as increasingly appropriating or displacing orthodox Christianity in serving their own non-Christian, scien-

³Just one possible orthodox Christian objection to the quasi-religious experience of Tyndall and other contemporary agnostics might be that, while of great significance to them, such experiences only form a very small part of the full range of often highly social activities provided by organized religion. Christianity, like all other major world religions, construes the religious as being of much broader scope than occasional moments or attestations of rapt awe and wonder. However, as such emotional states might lie at the foundation of many of those religions to a more powerful extent than the miraculous events that Hume takes to be foundational, the agnostics’ appropriation of both the miraculous and the emotional state attendant on perceiving entities and events as miracles or objects of wonderment is nonetheless an appropriation of the very energies underpinning Christian

tific purposes. But, more seriously than this, much as Carlyle had done in casting his gaze upon the meanest hut, the old tattered boots of Samuel Johnson, or the stars above as natural phenomena that may be taken as symbols signifying a mystery integral to their being meaningful, the later nineteenth-century agnostics were seeing a more profound, a more emotionally inspiring and moving, an altogether superior and apparently more sophisticated and thus more satisfying poetry, art, and wonder in Nature commensurate with their adherence to science as the polar opposite or very contradiction of the possibility of belief in a God. If Hume attacked the foundations of the citadel of religious belief by removing all rational basis for acceptance of miracles, and if he also commenced destruction of the outcrops of religious discourse and enthusiasm by de-legitimizing a religious perspective or vantage point through his coruscating attack in "Of Miracles" on human testimony, then nineteenth-century agnostics by appropriating wonderment not only seized the emotional foundations of belief but through their scientific endeavors' material potential and the apparent superiority of the wonderment they invoked began a process of erecting upon the demolition site of religion a new edifice of science and technical achievement that throughout the following century would increasingly submerge belief in God and orthodox religious practice as relics of interest and value only to the intrepid archaeologist, curator, or those almost entirely adrift from power.

Be all that as it may, Carlyle's own views on agnosticism may seem to be at odds with agnostics' quasi-religious reverence for Nature as in some sense superior or "more poetical than the old figment of the childish imagination." As Carlyle once expressed to James Anthony Froude, "The agnostic doctrines were to appearance like the finest flour, from which you might expect the most excellent bread, but when you came to feed on it you found it was powdered glass and you had been eating the deadliest poison" (qtd. in Lightman 147). At first glance this seems to attest to Carlyle's opposition to agnosticism as just one form of dangerous scepticism—the kind of thing Carlyle so conspicuously strove to counter in so much of his work. However, if Froude did accurately report what Carlyle said, it is a fascinating re-

mark since it suggests a much more complex relationship with agnosticism than might at first seem apparent: first, agnostic principles are attractive both in how they appear and also in what they seem to promise; second, having baked this metaphorical bread into something substantial (such as a certain belief system concerning God's ontological status) and having internalized this seemingly good substance, one faces a certain painful (spiritual?) death; third, Carlyle was acutely or by no means trivially aware of the danger of agnosticism to religious belief; and fourth, following a basic trope of all forms of scepticism, appearances can be deceptive, and what is attractive in agnosticism belies something highly unattractive and extremely dangerous.

What is the reader to infer from Carlyle's metaphorical description of some engagement with "agnostic doctrines"? Had he devoured the powdered glass at some stage, leaving him metaphorically dyspeptic, without any belief in God? Was this his way of describing the unspeakable truth of his own position? If his remark about the true nature of agnosticism as poisonous is anything to go by, his personal position seems to have been that "agnostic doctrines" were little better, or perhaps even worse, than scepticism (which he frequently referred to in similar terms). Was he in this remark admitting his realization that, having lost his faith by eating this bread, having consumed a poisonous or lacerating scepticism, he had no possibility of recovering what he had lost, no possibility of recovering his faith? Being thus poisoned, perhaps one could never again eat the bread of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to re-establish one's belief, no matter how aware one might have become that the bread of "agnostic doctrines," once consumed, would prove to be "the deadliest poison." Was Carlyle bemoaning the impossibility of religious redemption and implicitly admitting that he was, albeit with some bitterness, regret, or anguish, irredeemably an agnostic who had lost all or almost all of his former religious belief and that he could no longer believe in the God of orthodox Christianity or even in any god, though painfully aware of the loneliness and anguish of so believing or so losing his belief? Does his remark curiously presage Nietzsche's social concern about the rise of

a new age of barbarism following the demise of religious belief and his lament that “God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves?” (Gay 125).

As Lightman argues (and as Carlyle may have been acknowledging), agnosticism emerged during the nineteenth century as a much more powerful antagonist of orthodox religion than had been eighteenth-century rationalist arguments of the French *philosophes* or even Hume, who, as hinted at earlier and as Lightman claims, was “the Enlightenment thinker most often referred to as an agnostic” (21). Lightman locates the increased potency of agnosticism as a subverter of orthodox religion squarely in the epistemological roots of nineteenth-century agnosticism, especially in the highly sophisticated epistemologies of two philosophers of major importance to Carlyle, Immanuel Kant and Sir William Hamilton (whose epistemological foundations for his influential form of agnosticism were largely, though not exclusively, indebted to Kant):

it was this more sophisticated epistemology, along with other advantages derived from the distinctiveness of nineteenth-century unbelief, that made the agnostic attack on traditional religion far more devastating than the Enlightenment attempt to [in Voltaire’s famous phrase] *écrasez l’infâme* [crush the infamous thing, namely, religion]. (21)

One of Carlyle’s contemporaries, Scottish philosopher Robert Flint, produced *Agnosticism* (1903), a book-length study of agnosticism of considerable sophistication and incisive philosophical criticism. In tracing the origins of nineteenth-century agnosticism and its later development, both Lightman and Flint have much to say about Huxley’s anti-religious agnosticism. But they also discuss at some length one of the main pro-religious conduits of agnosticism, Henry Mansel. As one of the leading lights of nineteenth-century Christian agnosticism, Mansel was deeply involved in religious matters and belief as he pursued an illustrious theological career that culminated in the Deanship of St Paul’s between 1868 and 1871. Mansel’s Christian agnosticism is

closely linked by Flint to the epistemological foundations of agnosticism as articulated first by Kant and later by Hamilton. As both an agnostic and a metaphysician, Mansel unquestionably owed a great deal to Hamilton, whose Edinburgh University lectures he co-edited in the late 1850s with the Scottish philosopher John Veitch, and whose philosophical stance he strongly defended against often misguided but nonetheless successful attacks on Hamilton by that most famous of nineteenth-century English Utilitarians, John Stuart Mill, in his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865). Importantly, Mansel's highly popular Bampton lectures, published as *The Limits of Religious Thought* (1858), reworked an epistemological doctrine of far-reaching importance to Carlyle, namely, Hamilton's Law of the Conditioned. Interestingly, Huxley himself recounts having read Hamilton's "Philosophy of the Unconditioned," declaring that

I devoured it with avidity, and it stamped upon my mind the strong conviction that, on even the most solemn and important of questions, men are apt to take cunning phrases for answers; and that the limitation of our faculties, in a great number of cases, renders real answers to such questions, not merely actually impossible, but theoretically inconceivable. (236)

But while in formulating his pro-Christian form of agnosticism, Mansel drew upon Hamilton's Law of the Conditioned, Huxley was no doubt deeply affected by what he understood in Hamilton's immensely difficult article in a quite different way towards an anti-Christian standpoint, and Hamilton's law can be interpreted as suggesting a form of mysticism which stands counter to orthodox Christian belief and has some important resonances in Carlyle's work, particularly *Sartor Resartus*.

III

Hamilton first promulgated his Law of the Conditioned in 1829 in "Philosophy of the Unconditioned" published in *Edinburgh Review*.

Studied closely by Mansel and read by Huxley as something of a foundational text for their divergent forms of agnosticism, the article shortly after its publication was also read by Carlyle with some admiration at a most important phase in his development as a writer and thinker (Lightman 16; *CL* 5:43, 64). Hamilton's *Law* articulates the epistemological position that underpins his doctrine of *nescience* or learned ignorance as the agnostic starting point for faith in an unknown and unknowable God (Jessop 100–03). He calls attention to the importance of philosophy as that distinctive love of wisdom which consistently and inexhaustibly strives to search for the truth even though the truth may be either comparatively less engaging than the process of philosophizing or searching for it or unknowable, as in the case of anything infinite or absolute. Perhaps importantly for the keen Germanist Carlyle had become during the 1820s and early '30s, in so describing philosophy Hamilton refers to the words of the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (*Discussions* 40). For Hamilton, perhaps the most important thing about philosophy is that in attempting to know or discover the truth about things beyond the scope of experience or abilities to know, one realizes a humbling recognition of the immensity of one's ignorance as a common characteristic of human intellectual abilities (40). Hamilton claims that "a 'learned ignorance' [is] the most difficult acquirement—perhaps . . . the consummation of knowledge" (38). This is a thought, which, according to Hamilton, had a long history, as demonstrated in an Appendix to his *Discussions* (1852) (634–49). But construed as the highest reach of wisdom in the realization or learned knowledge of one's ignorance (a *consciousness* of *nescience*, generated by the discovery of cognitive or epistemological limitations), for Hamilton, as philosophy achieved its end or consummation in "learned ignorance," this marked the beginning of theology (*Lectures* I.ii.34).

The term *nescience*, used by and of importance to Carlyle, as apRoberts points out, is of particular relevance to agnosticism: "if you translate its two Latin elements into the two corresponding Greek elements, you arrive at *agnosticism* and that, of course, became the catchword of the century, the mark of the flowering of ignorance" (75).

Nescience involves a particular type or degree of epistemological scepticism and hence suggests that God is undecidable due to cognitive limitations or cognitive inability to comprehend deity. The content or characteristics of such a god are so severely circumscribed by limited cognitive abilities that specifically orthodox religious belief in God may be utterly displaced, either by a complete absence of belief in the God of orthodoxy or by belief in the existence of a non-orthodox, utterly ineffable god about whom one can say little or nothing that is meaningful, since whatever it is that one can say does not conform to the limitations of language and logic. Both of these possibilities may admit belief in a god or in some non-deific immaterial substance within an otherwise godless universe comprised solely of, for example, natural phenomena. The meaningfulness of natural phenomena within such a godless universe may be held to be possible only by means of reference to or relation with the inexplicable otherness of non-material phenomena, such as one might claim describes the ontological nature of, say, all universal terms or ideas. Hence, although both possibilities arising out of a scepticism of *nescience* largely, if not exclusively, preclude belief in an orthodox god, they do at least somehow seem to permit belief in what one might generally describe as something *other* to material, finite existence and language. Such belief (whether of a god or of the reality of immaterial substance) might be accompanied by or require some feeling of awe, reverence, or wonder which this otherness within natural phenomena seems to inspire naturally. Such feelings with regard to otherness within the universe of experience may be described as religious or quasi-religious, and, hence, a scepticism of *nescience*, inherent in at least one form of agnosticism, may be thought of as to some extent religious and even pro-religious—but, notably, *nescience* itself does not necessitate religious belief, though it may be said to ground an inspiration to faith in something other beyond the limitations of cognitive abilities, language, and logic.

Hamilton's doctrine of *nescience* is grounded upon his Law of the Conditioned, a logical law which draws upon Kant's epistemological framework relating to the limitations of the mind with regard to what it can know and which is also dependent upon two main and generally ac-

cepted rules of logic: the laws of non-contradiction and the excluded middle. Thus, to speculate or to discourse as a philosopher, constrained to the regulative rules of language and logic, about unity, the infinite, the absolute, and pure thought—or any other entity which cannot be positively known in the relation of knowledge that obtains between the knower and the known—is, for Hamilton, strictly speaking, a logical impossibility. That which lies beyond the sphere of limitation as circumscribed by the conditioning one institutes in any single act of perceiving or knowing comprises all that is not available through experience. In short, the unconditional is, for Hamilton, incognizable, unknowable—within the domain of one’s extensive nescience. An important implication of Hamilton’s law—and the doctrine of *nescience*—is that God’s existence and nature (as, say, an infinite or absolute being or a being that is both infinite and absolute) seem to be entirely beyond comprehension or are at least beyond the limits of knowledge, language, and the logical rules that govern language and reasonable argumentation. Thus, of a deity who utterly defies reason and the very logical principles that constrain thought and knowledge to the relative, phenomenal, and conditional, one can say nothing, or at least one can say nothing as a philosopher constrained by the rules of good argumentation and committed to a positivist epistemology (*Discussions* 15).

No brief outline of Hamilton’s Law could satisfy a critic of Hamilton such as Flint who took several of Hamilton’s formulations to task in his highly critical attack on late nineteenth-century agnosticism and its indebtedness to Kant and Hamilton, an attack which pointedly supported orthodox Christian belief and the notion that one could indeed, albeit imperfectly, know God’s attributes (545). Part of Flint’s critique deserves some attention as being important to understanding the agnosticism of Carlyle’s doctrine. One of the points made by Hamilton and criticized by Flint appears in a brief footnote to Hamilton’s “Philosophy of the Unconditioned,” where he claims that “Divinity, in a certain sense, is revealed; in a certain sense is concealed: He is at once known and unknown. But the last and highest consecration of all true religion, must be an altar—*agnó stē ue* —“To the unknown and unknowable God.”

(Hamilton *Discussions* 15n.). Flint claims that the term “*ἄγνωστος θεός*,” which appears in Paul’s address to the Athenians in Acts 17:23, ought to be translated, as in the King James version and other translations of the Bible, as “an unknown God” instead of “the unknown and unknowable God” given by Hamilton. But Flint’s treatment of this alleged mistranslation is too harsh and begs the question in its appeal to Scripture or misunderstands Hamilton’s arguably unorthodox gloss on this part of the Bible. Hamilton is not merely translating but is also making the point that the God of monotheism transcends all attempts to particularize or define Him such that the altar erected to the one true deity must somehow be struck through with a recognition of its very failure to signify what that god is. All other altars, including the Greeks’ altar to the unknown god, are forms of idolatry or profanity, tantamount to misrepresentations of deity since deity is ultimately beyond comprehension. Whatever biblical exegesis might be offered either to defend Hamilton or Flint here, Flint’s point arguably misses its target since Hamilton, immediately before so enjoining his readers to consider “the last and highest consecration of all true religion” to be “an altar . . . *To the unknown and unknowable God,*” does admit that “[t]he Divinity [in accordance with Hamilton’s strictures on epistemological limitation] is *at once known and unknown*” (emphasis added), by which Hamilton may mean that the senses of “know,” as used to say that God may be both known and unknown, are significantly different from one another. For example, God might be *unknowable* in His *essential* being and in the perfections He encapsulates, for such properties are strictly inconceivable—one cannot know or see God, as it were, face to face but must always be excluded from such knowledge. However, in so realizing that no human intelligence can know God directly, one can in a special sense of “know,” know that He exists, the relevant sense being much more akin to “believe with deep conviction.” God’s supposed omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience describe a perfection or purity of each attribute for which one may have terms but which is nonetheless unknowable by finite, limited, human intellectual abilities. Importantly, for Hamilton, learning the extent of ignorance does not entail

the kind of doubt or absolute nihilistic scepticism which he attributes to Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) (*Lectures* I.v.91). Instead, the awareness of *nescience* as grounded on the logical principle or Law of the Conditioned is an inspiration to faith: "by a wonderful revelation, we are thus, in the very consciousness of our inability to conceive aught above the relative and finite, inspired with a belief in the existence of something unconditioned beyond the sphere of all [comprehensible] reality" (*Discussions* 15). But however one may attempt to defend Hamilton against Flint's critique, Flint clearly saw Hamilton's law and his suggestions of agnosticism as significant threats to orthodox Christian belief tantamount to an anti-religious scepticism—and in this Flint may have been perfectly correct.

Although Hamilton may have been relying upon two different senses of the term "know," when he claims that God is both known and unknown, his formulation comes close to an unequivocal sense of "know," and a better way of understanding Hamilton's claim is to regard the senses of "know" as being crucially related to one another. Bringing science (knowledge) and *nescience* (ignorance) into relation, as Hamilton does, suggests that he was relying upon what can be called a meta-principle of correlation which lies at the heart of his Reidian and decidedly non-Cartesian dualist philosophy of Common-sense, renamed and reformulated by Hamilton as *natural dualism/realism* (68). To restrict discussion to the sense in which Hamilton means that God is both known and unknown by virtue of falling under a meta-principle of correlation, the discovery of *nescience* is at once the discovery of science (knowledge of the phenomenal, relative, conditioned domain of rationally governed experience) and *vice versa*. By means of this principle of correlation, science and *nescience* are not seen as contradicting one another but as correlatives which at least always consort with, or are mutually implied in, or are only comprehensible in relation to one another. But if such apparent contradictories of science and *nescience* are held together as correlatives, and if by so regarding them they are assumed to be contraries, unlike contradictories, they are not necessarily mutually subversive of one another. However, so to regard science and *nescience* as correlatives and thereby contrary to, instead of being

contradictory of, one another seems to imply commitment to a philosophical position that is at odds with that rule of logic so crucial to realizing one's *nescience*, namely, the law of non-contradiction which underpins Hamilton's own law. Even if a logical meta-principle of correlation and a logical principle of non-contradiction are not mutually exclusive, to be committed to a principle of correlation implies a way of understanding, of discoursing, of being that is significantly different from an adherence to non-contradiction, since the correlation of opposites as contraries renders the proposition that "one can know and not know God" a meaningful proposition, whereas non-contradiction entails that this proposition is an absurdity or a violation of widely accepted rules of logic and thus also of reason and reasonable philosophic discourse more generally. Engendered or only made possible by virtue of the correlative status of science and *nescience*, a consciousness of *nescience* in some sense implies a correlative knowledge of God as existent, though unknowable. But if the correlative status of science and *nescience* legitimizes the proposition that God is both known and unknown, this runs counter to all reasonable discourse, all philosophical argumentation and science, and a consciousness of *nescience* as achieved by adherence to the very rules of discourse or logic.

As Hamilton's doctrine of *nescience* is described in the oxymoronic phrase, "learned ignorance," which suggests something contradictory within the wisdom Hamilton extols, a meta-principle of correlation seems to be ultimately dependent upon contradicting or breaking free from his law as the logical law which constitutes the epistemological underpinning of becoming conscious of *nescience* in the first place. Another way of grasping this difficult point is to consider that since it is only through a consciousness of one's *nescience* that one may become wise and therefore a true learner in science, it is (contradicting this process) through being a true learner (and not, say, with a nod to Dickens's *Hard Times* [1854], a mere accumulator of "facts") that one becomes conscious of *nescience*. But if such a contradiction within the heuristic process of attaining wisdom (learned ignorance) is removed by regarding science and *nescience* as correlatives and hence *not* contra-

dictory of one another as conformance to the rule of non-contradiction entails that they *do* contradict one another, this seems to commit one to holding that the law of non-contradiction itself and thereby all other rules of logic and rational discourse must be broken, superseded, or transcended in order even to commence the heuristic process of attaining wisdom as the consummation of philosophy. This consummation of philosophy in learned ignorance thus seems to be one in which the contradiction of science and *nescience*, the thesis of knowledge and its antithesis of ignorance, results in the synthesis of science and *nescience* that is the highest wisdom. Such wisdom, as it seems to consist in adherence to a meta-principle of correlation as ultimately overarching all that would be decreed contradictory by the rules of logic, is attained by relying upon the very rules of logic which this wisdom oversets by holding that science and *nescience* with regard to God's existence are in fact correlatives and contraries of one another.

Though Hamilton's ideas here may be interpreted in a variety of rather complex ways, some of which might highlight the realism and possibly the pragmatism of a position that confines knowledge and discourse to both the rules of logic and consciousness as itself circumscribed by these rules, he suggests a transcendent aspect to his philosophy that at least verges on a mystical notion of wisdom as being beyond and yet crucial to knowledge. If so, this is to maintain that belief in otherness is important to the meaningfulness of knowledge. Arguably, so to interpret Hamilton is to locate his philosophy within a characteristically Scottish common-sense philosophical tradition that attempts to combine some degree of mysticism (or reverent belief in otherness) with realism. If for Hamilton it is only possible to know through reason combined with a strict adherence to realism through perception, the attainment of wisdom must entail some discovery of both ignorance and unreason, the irrational, the incomprehensible, and how ignorance, unreason, the irrational, the incomprehensible are themselves the correlatives of knowledge and are thus inexplicably or mysteriously integral to knowledge and reason such that without this consciousness or in some quite indefinable sense of "know," without this knowledge of the unknowable, the unreasonable, the incompre-

hensible, or the irrational, there can be no meaningful, significant, valuable knowledge.

This is like saying that the value of knowledge is crucially dependent upon an awareness not only of the vastness of one's ignorance but also upon an awareness of value as some binding force that confers meaningfulness upon knowledge of facts. Thus, this notion of wisdom may be said to describe a position which insists on an inseparable connection between facts and values. As such, this is a position which may *not* lead to a conspicuously mystical emotional state with regard to fact-value relation—atheists can hold that commitments, beliefs, values, and such like are ultimately indefinable but non-supernatural entities of great importance. But without specifying the sense in which such aspects or correlatives of what can be positively known are indefinable and yet specifically *non-supernatural*, such a notion of wisdom (particularly as expressed in Hamilton's "Philosophy of the Unconditioned") suggests some degree of identification of wisdom with belief in *something* supernatural. Inasmuch as this implies some departure from reason and an injunction to believe in something supernatural or at least in something beyond the comprehensible, it intimates an identification of wisdom with a mysticism originating in or a major corollary of a commitment to an epistemological standpoint that so defines knowledge as to imply not only the reality of one's abilities to know certain kinds of things but also the comparative vastness of one's ignorance, inclining one towards a reverential attitude of humility and wonderment concerning the unknowable. In so suggesting at least some degree of mysticism, Hamiltonian agnosticism does indeed pose a threat to orthodox belief that is every bit as substantial as Flint seems to have thought when attacking the Hamiltonian epistemological foundations of nineteenth-century agnosticism.

Since, according to Hamilton, "the recognition of human ignorance, is not only the one highest, but the one true, knowledge; and its first-fruit . . . is—*humility*," Hamilton's position is at least to some extent reverential—he seems to suggest that feelings of awe, wonderment, and reverence are attendant upon the discovery of one's *nescience* (*Discus-*

sions 634). But though Hamilton's mysticism may not be emphatic or explicit, his invocation of wisdom as the learned realization of the profound depth of one's ignorance and his apparent invitation to some degree of wonderment at one's inability to conceive God do seem to be eminently capable of encouraging mysticism as that condition of wisdom transcending the rules of logic and language. In this there appears to be the promise of a liberation from the dogmas of orthodoxy, the superstition of religious enthusiasm devoted to a single creed, and the rules of logic, reason, and the conditioned nature of knowledge. Thus, Hamilton's Law of the Conditioned itself, as grounding his agnosticism and as grounded in the rules of logic, becomes akin to a rung on the ladder to wisdom that must be kicked away once its use has taken one beyond reason to wisdom. The heuristic process of discovering one's ignorance of deity and of all entities beyond the sphere of conditional and relative knowledge of the phenomena presented to consciousness is one in which reason, as articulated in the rules of logic, is required to ensure that one's knowledge and one's consciousness of one's ignorance are reasonable, and yet the attainment of the wisdom of knowing that one does not know and to some extent or in some sense knowing (or believing or being deeply committed to) what it is that one does not know involves transcending reason or holding to an alternative logic of correlation. Commitment to a meta-principle of correlation in this way may seem to encourage a special kind of knowing and even a certain way of being that lie beyond the norms of one's otherwise regulated and circumscribed experience and language. Hamilton's whole notion of learned ignorance thus suggests that vital to the possibility of any true and worthwhile knowledge is that crucial correlative of the unknowable, an incomprehensibility in which one can only believe. As he writes in "Philosophy of Perception," "all that is comprehensible, hangs from some *revealed fact*, which we *must believe as actual*, but *cannot construe to the reflective intellect in its possibility*" (*Discussions* 63). Such acceptance of the dependence of the comprehensible on the incomprehensible, their implicit correlation, and the dependence of knowledge on some belief in something incomprehensible or unintelligible

(and as such unknowable) is potentially extremely mystical in its invitation to fuse yet considerably blur the boundaries between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, knowledge and belief, and knowledge and ignorance, despite its reliance upon a seemingly rigorous separation of such opposites.

Hamilton's linguistic precision, proto-positivism, legalism, and philosophical erudition and his article's whole endeavor to put Victor Cousin's highly speculative philosophy off-limits could not shield him from the charge of mysticism by at least one of his contemporaries. In a letter to Macvey Napier, dated November 23, 1829, Francis Jeffrey wrote of the "Philosophy of the Unconditioned" that it was "ten times more mystical than anything my friend Carlyle ever wrote, and not half so agreeably written" (Napier 68). Interpreting Hamilton's work as "mystical," though seemingly at odds with the logical rigor of his argumentation, however, does seem to have some justification, if only in that his argument implies that a consciousness of the vastness of one's *nescience* is the only dimension of epistemological abilities which warrants or inspires that special kind of knowledge of or belief in a god "at once known and unknown." Furthermore, another mystical aspect of Hamilton's position is implied in his claim that the only truly pious attitude towards deity, the greatest testament to one's belief in God, "the last and highest consecration of all true religion," the most rational and wisest thing one may produce concerning God "must be an altar . . . 'To the unknown and unknowable God.'" The symbolical representation of a god so *other* that what the altar symbolizes has no, or virtually no, content strongly suggests a mystical god, the ultimate mystery and potential object of profound reverence. Thus, whether symbolizing God by means of some physical thing (as in the cross or altar in a church), or in language (as in the highly self-conscious metaphoricity and symbolical nature of Carlyle's language in *Sartor Resartus*), the symbols most piously produced to consecrate God's existence must somehow bear the telling inscription or in some way fundamentally *mean* that the god, thereby symbolized, is "*the unknown and unknowable God.*" All language used to indicate, hint at, suggest, consecrate, or celebrate any such incognizable entity must therefore be

struck through with the epistemological stricture of a scepticism of *nescience* as negating the possibility of directly describing or knowing God. Thus, Carlyle's language in *Sartor Resartus* is of necessity cat-a-chrestic, perpetually a self-conscious mis-naming and mis-description of deity.

IV

Since deeply inscribed with an acute consciousness of one's cognitive limitations and inherent inability to cognize or know God while yet repeatedly striving to envision God as a mystic or seer might do, *Sartor Resartus* seems both to draw upon and to incorporate a Hamiltonian notion of *nescience*. And by doing so, Carlyle also subscribes to a meta-principle of correlation by means of which a special mystical way of being and seeing is enjoined as the deeply religious mystical companion or correlative of an austere form of scepticism (*nescience*) which seemingly excludes mysticism from philosophical discourse, but which nonetheless in some sense *relies* upon mysticism (a reliance which, intriguingly, Carlyle saw as underpinning, though denied by, the Scottish School of Common Sense ["Novalis" 24]). To subscribe to a meta-principle of correlation enables one to combine a sophisticated epistemological standpoint, informed by a profound knowledge of the ancient history of philosophy and its more recent developments in Kant, with an other-worldly, mystical gaze at and wonderment concerning that which logic and the whole conditioned nature of thought preclude from consciousness and from reasonable philosophic argument or discourse as constrained by the rules of logic. But in holding together as correlatives a doctrine of *nescience* and the faith of a mystic, Carlyle's doctrine can hardly avoid being radically at odds with orthodox faith.

For Carlyle, perplexed concerning his religious belief and the tendencies toward unbelief in the philosophical biases of his times and struggling to retain some belief relevant to the belief of his parents and the Seceders alongside a sophisticated version of an inherited sceptical turn of mind, the high idealism or avowed piety of this agnostic position must have seemed attractive in its very piety (Campbell 4; Carlyle *Remi-*

niscences 2:83). But not only might Hamilton's position have seemed to be peculiarly devout, it also had the allure of being grounded in a highly sophisticated, learned, and realist counter-position with regard to the mechanism, materialism, and destructive scepticism which Carlyle so often generalized as inhering in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy. Containing significant traces of a deeply religious attitude articulated with passion yet without religious enthusiasm and incorporating a massive breadth of learning with a great concession to the otherness of existence and the staggering depth of ignorance which seems to undercut virtually all dogmatism, Hamilton's philosophy, as expressed in his "Philosophy of the Unconditioned," must have contained elements that were immensely intriguing in what they suggested to Carlyle about how he might set about holding together a mystical, wonder-inspiring, highly private belief in God and the miraculous in Nature with an encyclopedic knowledge and sophisticated understanding rooted in a broadly philosophical approach that vaunted its hard-headedness or logical rigor, a position at once realist in being grounded in consciousness and the logical limitation or regulation of a governing rationalism and yet idealist in its suggestions concerning transcending such limitations as the correlative of cognitive limitation without which such epistemological limitation would seem to entail the complete eradication of the dynamic interplay of reason and faith.

The mutual dependency of contradictories construed as correlatives in relation to Hamilton is so important to understanding Carlyle's texts that it is to this principle of the correlative nature of opposites that one must resort if one is to make any significant attempt to grasp the undecidability or agnosticism in *Sartor Resartus* as also in many other Carlyle texts (Sigman 224). Numerous contraries and contradictories are played with in Carlyle's dazzling fiction which as a whole consistently strives in some sense to harmonize dualities, if only by holding them before the reader as being relative or related, as being mutually dependent upon one another for whatever existence they might have. By relying upon a meta-principle of correlation, *Sartor Resartus* reconditions or refashions readers' perspective on the universe and their relation to it. The text en-

courages a major shift in perspective with regard to everything or all things in general as emanating from its Professor of Things in General, Diogenes Teufels-dröckh. The shift in attitude which *Sartor Resartus* demands is highly significant since through its reliance upon a meta-principle of correlation it poses a profound rejection and replacement of the irresolvable mind-body distinction of Cartesian dualism, which has often been regarded as one of the main sources within modern philosophy of wave after wave of extremely damaging forms of scepticism. To alter one's perspective on all things by embracing a principle of correlation over and above the Cartesian reliance upon an apparent contradiction between mind and body implies an alternative way of being with regard to the not-self as well as a new possible direction for philosophical discourse.

Crucially, though often mystifyingly, humorously, preposterously, and poignantly, *Sartor Resartus* uses the grand motif of the correlation of clothing and clothed in Teufelsdröckh's infective "Philosophy of Clothes," a philosophy that extends far beyond his own words in this text within the text that is his fictional Clothes Philosophy. Leaving aside such things as his "strange contradiction" of being both Diogenes (God-born) and Teufelsdröckh (Devil's dung) and the shams and inanities of that clothing which contains, covers, or signifies virtually nothing as just some of the particular problematics which the text strives to resolve, the meditation which it prompts its reader to perform from its very first word to its end uses this metaphor of the dualism of clothing and clothed as the universal condition within which "we are sent into this Earth to live," just as, reflecting this clothes metaphor, one is conditioned by Space and Time (192). The conditions of one's thinking, akin to clothing seen as disguise, within this universe of correlatives suggests a deity both concealed and revealed, unknown and known, but also it implies the pervasiveness of self-other relationships and the importance of otherness as that crucial correlative of all meaningful identities.

Bearing in mind Hamilton's Law of the Conditioned while reading

⁴Cf. Jessop (193).

the “Natural Supernaturalism” chapter of *Sartor Resartus* is highly illuminating. Teufelsdröckh seems to propose a transcendentalism, a seer’s gaze from a god’s-eye view which playfully attempts to imagine through the device of Fortunatus’s space- and time-annihilating hats a magical collapse of this-worldly limitation.⁴ But such linguistic artistry aside—of integral importance though it itself is—Teufelsdröckh also discourses on the conditioned nature of human thought in relation to its obfuscation of the deity:

That the Thought-forms, Space and Time, wherein, once for all, we are sent into this Earth to live, should condition and determine our whole Practical reasonings, conceptions, and imagings or imaginings,—seems altogether fit, just, and unavoidable. But that they should, farthermore, usurp such sway over pure spiritual Meditation, and blind us to the wonder every where lying close on us, seems nowise so. Admit Space and Time to their due rank as Forms of Thought; nay, even, if thou wilt, to their quite undue rank of Realities; and consider, then, with thyself how their thin disguises hide from us the brightest God-effulgences! (192)

According to Teufelsdröckh, “our whole Practical reasonings” are conditioned by space and time, hiding from our view “the brightest God-effulgences.” He seems to argue that cognitive limitation is “fit, just, and unavoidable,” something one has to accept. But if this is the case, then its implied agreement with Hamilton’s law would seem to confine all “[p]ractical reasonings, conceptions, and imagings or imaginings” to spatial and temporal parameters. In other words, according to Teufelsdröckh, intellectual activity in reasoning, conceptualizing, and imaging or imagining is confined to the spatial and temporal domain of limited abilities and must therefore preclude all cognition and even all imagining concerning God. But, interestingly, the above passage presents a brief argument *against* this confinement, this occluding of everything pertaining to God.

Advocating a transcendent perspective in this most transcendental of all chapters in *Sartor Resartus*, Teufelsdröckh trivializes Space and Time by likening them to and metaphorizing them as clothing, as this-

worldly or material conditions which, once understood or perceived in this special way, seem to enable some “vision” of God. And yet what Teufelsdröckh asks his readers to “consider . . . with thyself” is *not* God-disclosed but rather “*how* [the] thin disguises” of Space and Time “hide from us the brightest God-effulgences” (emphases added). Admittedly, Teufelsdröckh rejects as mistaken the notion that the conditional nature of thought, limited as it is to the spatial and temporal, must thereby usurp “pure spiritual Meditation” and thus “blind us to the wonder every where lying close on us.” This is to reject a narrowly construed or wonder-destroying empiricism or positivism which might seem to offer some opposition to Hamilton’s severe restriction of cognition to the point where the unknown God is indeed unknowable such that His existence and more especially his significance are virtually as nothing. However, Teufelsdröckh’s rejection of the conditioned nature of knowledge as something that wrongly blinds “us to the wonder every where lying close” is *not* to reject or deny that cognitive limitations do indeed preclude knowledge of God. Instead, what Teufelsdröckh advances here is that “pure spiritual Meditation” is something by which one might consider with oneself *how* the limited nature of cognitive abilities *does* “hide from us the brightest God-effulgences.”

This meditative considering of the conditions of thought and its inability to perceive God as combined with the numerous highly ornamented ways in which Carlyle makes explicit that his writing is about things unseen yet which may be glimpsed through adoption of a seer’s attitude or perspective that construes obstructions as disguises disguising an unknowable, unspeakable otherness of great importance, this considering or spiritual meditation is exactly on the cusp of a commencement of wonder as arising out of a consciousness of *nescience*. As a position which is closely akin to Hamilton’s, Carlyle’s perspective, not only on God but on all things unseen and not understood or incomprehensible but nonetheless believed in as significant, gives much greater emphasis to the strength of religious feeling or deeply held and largely private commitment to the existence and significance of a god. The phrase “thin disguises” is significant here as it suggests that, for

all that these disguises prevent a full face-to-face knowledge of God, considered *as* disguises, the spatio-temporal limitation of the possibilities of thought enables or conduces towards belief and wonder concerning what these disguises hide or occlude. The action of naming spatio-temporal limitation “thin disguises” brings into intimate relation these very limitations of thought or cognition with what they purportedly preclude or hide from consciousness or knowledge. There is perhaps a minimal similarity between the disguise and what it disguises—something of the disguised may be seen in the disguise itself, and thus one may in a sense or to some extent see through clothes to the naked self within or to the deity forever shrouded from perceptual, cognitive abilities. As correlatives of one another, as only thinkable in relation to one another, the correlatives of disguise and disguised seem to be brought into relation not as contradictories at all but rather as contraries by means of which redescription of the status of their relation, the existence or reality of spatio-temporal limitation (human cognition), and the existence or reality of the spatio-temporally *unlimited* (God) cease to be mutually annihilatory or mutually exclusive, and instead their co-existence becomes possible, though barely intelligible. Wonder, a deeply felt religious attitude to all mundane things, a harmonizing of religious faith with scepticism, and a belief in the otherness of existence with the practical business of science are thus made possible by the overarching meta-principle of correlation which permeates *Sartor Resartus*.

So much for some of the ways in which Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* is permeated by a meta-principle of correlation and thus implicitly relies upon a Hamiltonian doctrine of *nescience* as that form of epistemological scepticism that seems inclined to prompt and promote belief in a god or at the very least in something other beyond all comprehension and yet of deep importance. The reader of Carlyle’s text, inclined towards an anti-religious stance, might find material in it to prompt wonderment at Nature within a godless universe, while the pro-religious reader might find a new source of inspiration to feel the presence of or know the unknowable God of one’s former belief or the new agnostic theism the text seems to hint at. But a scepticism of *ne*

science is by no means the only form of scepticism within *Sartor* nor indeed for that matter within many of Carlyle's other texts. Carlyle seems to have been acutely aware of another form of scepticism, and though *nescience* may seem comparatively benign toward and even supportive of religious belief, this other form of scepticism came directly from the chief enemy of religion, Hume, or, rather more accurately, indirectly since it was Hume's scepticism as defined by Hamilton, a scepticism of uncertainty or indeterminacy.

V

In a second main article for the *Edinburgh Review* entitled "Philosophy of Perception" Hamilton provides a deeply insightful, though briefly stated definition, of Hume's scepticism. Hamilton defines Hume's absolute or nihilistic scepticism in terms of a "mutual antithesis" of "[s]peculation and practice, nature and philosophy, sense and reason, belief and knowledge," which, he argues, resulted in "the uncertainty of every principle" (*Discussions* 94-95). Though many commentators today interpret Hume as advocating some form of mitigated scepticism which he offers for consideration in place of the absolute scepticism he also describes, for Hamilton Hume's philosophy promoted the ultimate or absolute scepticism known as Pyrrhonism after the famous sceptic Pyrrho—a type of scepticism that could be thought of as both describing and in doing so generating a condition of extreme uncertainty. Hume himself describes this scepticism as something that leads to a miserable state of melancholy and complete inertia and that, were it possible to maintain in practice, would entail the cessation of all human existence: "All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence" (*Treatise* 269). Hume's scepticism, according to Hamilton, generates a universal—and thus absolute or extreme as well as potentially devastating—indeterminacy that reduces everything to zero; it is thus quintessentially nihilistic. A scepticism of indeterminacy, therefore, as it seems to be peculiarly conducive toward or even describes nihilism, also seems to be extremely anti-reli-

gious (reducing *everything* to zero must, one may be forgiven for thinking, take with it religious belief or at least all forms of orthodox belief and the structures and organization of established religion)—no small wonder that Hume was so staunchly opposed by so many men of the kirk during and after his lifetime as a dangerous infidel.

The presence of a nihilistic scepticism of indeterminacy or a language of indeterminacy no doubt deserves a great deal of attention in studying Carlyle's works as a way of illuminating the ways in which his positions with regard to numerous topics may be thought peculiarly unstable or inscrutable to the point that his perspective may be seen to vanish to a view from nowhere, a perspective from the wilderness to which Arthur Hugh Clough famously declares Carlyle takes his readers, leaving them there in a state of *aporia* (Chorley 132).⁵ Consider but one instance in *Sartor Resartus* where Teufelsdröckh apparently struggles with and yet incorporates indeterminacy. In the "The Everlasting No" chapter Teufelsdröckh offers action as the principal cure for such scepticism:

Between vague wavering Capability and fixed indubitable Performance, what a difference! A certain inarticulate Self-consciousness dwells dimly in us; which only our Works can render articulate and decisively discernible. Our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, *Know thyself*; till it be translated into this partially possible one, *Know what thou canst work at.* (123)

Teufelsdröckh here asserts that self-knowledge is impossible without reference to what the self does materially or how the self is through ac-

⁵Carol Collins indicates some of the ways in which Carlyle's parodic language in the "Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question" is struck through with ambiguity or irony arising out of or inherent in its polyglossia (36–37). Exemplifying Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic principle as ultimately entailing a "lack of finalization" (26), even this most controversial of all of Carlyle's works in its *apparently* blatant racism disables the possibility

tion related to the not-self. A scepticism of indeterminacy, hypostatized as a condition of stasis, a “vague wavering Capability,” seems to be confined to a “certain inarticulate Self-consciousness” which is unknowable or inarticulate when considered in isolation from works and actions which for Teufelsdröckh can include articulating things in language or discourse. However, though indeterminate or unknowable, the self is to some extent made known by the mirror of works and actions. Notably, however, even the vaunted decisiveness in this passage retains an element of indeterminacy or limitation: the “impossible Precept” may be replaced by a precept that is concrete or grounded in the reality of work, but this new precept—“*Know what thou canst work at*”—is pointedly only a “partially possible one.” Even action, though it might remove the indeterminacy inherent in the self considered in isolation from its relation to the universe, can *not* eradicate entirely a scepticism of indeterminacy (uncertainty) or of *nescience* (ignorance), either of which may be suggested by the precept of being only “partially possible.” For what may be known of the self partially is either an uncertain or an incomplete knowledge of the truth concerning what the self is and what one can do or work at. There is an epistemological difference between an attempt to know the self, considered in isolation from the not-self, and an attempt to know the self by means of reference to what it does and how it acts. But this difference is not a stark distinction: though it describes the precept “*Know thyself*” as impossible, it does not offer in the precept “*Know what thou canst work at*” an absolute contradiction of this impossibility. This seemingly strong counter-position, which will re-emerge in *Past and Present* (1843) and become famous as Carlyle’s doctrine of work, proffers the indubitability of action or work as contrary to but not contradictory of the stasis of uncertainty or indeterminacy (the stasis of not working, acting, discoursing, or of vainly striving to know the self in isolation from its material products and actions as engagements with its environment and universe). Hence, Teufelsdröckh’s strongly worded exhortation to work or act to cure the paralysis of “wavering Capability” is only seemingly absolute, permeated as it is with traces of scepticisms of *nescience* and indeterminacy, and it might even be said that the scepticisms that lurk

within one of the text's more decisive declarations and exhortations are integral to the correlative nature of the relationship that implicitly is being relied upon between the comparative stasis of "vague wavering Capability" and the motion implicit in action or work—it is not just Carlyle's catachrestic style and roundabout manner of discoursing on the Highest or on things unknown that generate undecidability; undecidability is also integral to the text's reliance upon the meta-principle of correlation that reconstitutes apparently contradictory pairings as contraries of one another.

There are numerous examples in *Sartor Resartus* which suggest a deep fascination with the chaotic, the vague, the indeterminate, the indecisive, though most, if not all, of these are related to a language of creation and the achievement of definitude, of wresting out of chaos, clarity, orderliness, intelligibility (*Sartor* 146). Whether the passage above retains a scepticism of *nescience* or of indeterminacy is arguably itself indeterminate, though the term "indubitable" in juxtaposition with "wavering" perhaps suggests a rejection of indeterminacy which implies a scepticism of *nescience* and thereby the possibility of some, albeit limited, indubitable or certain knowledge. However, if *Sartor Resartus* conspicuously strives to oppose a scepticism of indeterminacy with Carlyle's fledgling doctrine of work and in doing so enjoins a scepticism of *nescience*, the text thereby inevitably incorporates indeterminacy, if only as a reality of relevance to definitude or decisiveness—but the whole passage for all its apparent decisiveness contains an inherent undecidability in its inwoven scepticisms.

Emerging out of his Law of the Conditioned, Hamilton's doctrine of *nescience* may have arisen out of a religious background, may genuinely advocate a deep piety, and may be most accurately described as a doctrine or sceptical position that, as it is antithetical to the scepticism of Hamilton's Hume, is pro-religious, as is certainly suggested by Mansel's adoption of its basic epistemological framework in the development of his Christian Agnosticism. But as Hamilton's *nescience* clearly tends toward an extremely mystical position that is out of kilter with orthodox religious belief and as his law provided a highly sophisticated epistemological root for a later nineteenth-

century anti-religious agnosticism, his doctrine of *nescience* and his law may be said to contain a hidden potential danger for anyone who imbibed them as agnostic doctrines. Potentially, the agnosticism implicit in Hamilton's doctrine of *nescience* and his law can be interpreted as culminating in disbelief in a god and against all wishes and desires to the contrary may thereby lead the reader to the position of an atheist, hostile to all religious belief and all theological and metaphysical discourse. And yet Hamilton's doctrine of *nescience* clearly had the potential to be read in a quite different way by Mansel, as an inspiration to faith in the form of his particular form of theistic or Christian agnosticism. Hamilton's agnosticism might thus be said to prompt two opposing tendencies, though neither of these is particularly conducive toward or supportive of orthodox Christian belief.

Though there may be strong indications in Carlyle's work that his own doctrine fairly closely approximates Hamiltonian agnosticism, enjoins a scepticism of *nescience* in doing so, and is thus in some sense pro-religious, rightly or wrongly this form of agnosticism does seem to have encouraged an anti-religious tendency and cannot avoid being to a fairly large extent hostile to the ultimate value of orthodox belief. But as a scepticism of *nescience* is relied upon in several places in *Sartor Resartus*, as a scepticism of indeterminacy is also present in Carlyle's work, and as both contain tendencies toward an anti-religious agnosticism, for some readers, if not all, Carlyle's work could do little to avoid advancing the very disbelief it seemingly purports to oppose. However an absolute, Humean scepticism of indeterminacy and ultimate nihilism might have been taken by Carlyle on occasion as an alternative or additional manifestation of an undecidability, primarily but not exclusively generated by a scepticism of *nescience*, that could also prompt wonderment and faith, an amazement at what extreme scepticism can nihilistically disintegrate the self into: "light-sparkles floating in the æther of Deity" (*Sartor* 43). While the text's undecidability may be read as enjoining a scepticism of *nescience* in opposition to indeterminacy, it may also to some extent encourage the reader to be filled with wonder at indeterminacy and the

very undecidability this indeterminacy determines. However, so to flirt and consort with the nihilism of a scepticism of indeterminacy as also with a scepticism of *nescience* takes Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* dangerously close, as Hamilton's own agnosticism was taken in the hands of later nineteenth-century agnostics such as Huxley, to rejection of the rule-breaking impossibilities of Carlyle's language and thereby to rejection of its attempts to evoke a god and the godlike in man—in short, Carlyle's agnostically driven figurations may prompt both belief and denial, much as he seems to have divided his readership into camps of detractors and disciples.

VI

But if Carlyle's undecidability or agnosticism cannot avoid ending up without belief in a god or, more precisely, cannot avoid collusion with what it attempts to counter and thereby must run the risk of operating as the unwitting conduit of anti-religious Enlightenment thought and in doing so of furthering the Enlightenment onslaught against religious belief in God, this is not to say that this doctrine and the whole body of Carlyle's work must be implicated in a full-blown irreligious tendency. Carlyle's sanctification of work in *Past and Present*, for example, his notions concerning moral duty and the moral law, as also concerning the immateriality of the soul and mind of man, and his numerous intimations of mysticism, transcendentalism, the importance of wonderment, and the great need to find some relation between self and the universe which makes them significant, as in his general treatment of historical facts—these are all aspects of his general standpoint with regard to religion. They all seem to attest to something like a core role for belief that, irrespective of or despite the irreligious tendencies in the agnosticism of his undecidable doctrine, does suggest, perverse readings of his work aside, that his overall position must be one that at least stops short of a full descent into nihilism, eradication of belief, and complete irreligion. This notion of a core role for or adherence to religion or belief as stemming the flow towards an entire abandonment of belief itself seems to be secured by Carlyle's own definition of religion. In contrast to his much less

clearly inferable commitment to the possible competing interpretations of the inherent undecidability of many of his other works in their treatment of God and religious belief, Carlyle notably defines “religion” in a public lecture, the context and manner of which much more strongly suggest his personal commitment to the role of belief and the kind of agnosticism which, much more contentiously, he might be said to have committed himself solely by the undecidability of his linguistic perorations and playful rhetoric.

At the beginning of the first lecture in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), “The Hero as Divinity,” Carlyle asserts that “a man’s religion is the chief fact with regard to him” (4). His explanation is particularly interesting in what it suggests about his understanding of what “religion” truly is:

By religion I do not mean here the church-creed which he professes, the articles of faith which he will sign and, in words or otherwise, assert; not this wholly, in many cases not this at all. We see men of all kinds of professed creeds attain to almost all degrees of worth or worthlessness under each or any of them. This is not what I call religion, this profession and assertion; which is often only a profession and assertion from the outworks of the man, from the mere argumentative region of him, if even so deep as that. But the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough *without* asserting it even to himself, much less to others); the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest. That is his *religion*; or, it may be, his mere scepticism and *no-religion*: the manner it is in which he feels himself to be spiritually related to the Unseen World or No-world; and I say, if you tell me what that is, you tell me to a very great extent what the man is, what the kind of things he will do is. Of a man or of a nation we inquire, therefore, first of all, What religion they had? (4)

His definition or characterization of true “religion” suggests a much wider scope than any of its particular instantiations. Thus, for Carlyle, religion, as a deeply held feeling or conviction that determines what a person does, encompasses both extremes of those who profess strict adherence to a particular religious faith and those who profess the opposite, namely, that they do not subscribe to belief in anything whatsoever. Encompassing the opposing tendencies toward or extremes of both religious enthusiasm and absolute scepticism concerning the ontological status of entities (or a single entity) described as “the Un-seen World,” Carlyle is thus defining religion as a ubiquitous aspect of all individuals. “Religion” for Carlyle is thus an enormous term of wide-reaching significance and value. Importantly, this definition of religion provides a rational justification for his initiation of the study of comparative religion in *Heroes*, a study which has been engagingly given attention by apRoberts. As Carlyle’s religion can only exist in relation to something else such as an individual’s actions, behavior, deeds, achievements, assertions, doctrines, theories, or professed faith or creed, it justifies comparative religion as a study which is arguably dependent upon the existence of some common substratum or core of true religion unifying or making possible all particular religions or creeds.

Carlyle’s definition of religion decidedly gives very strong support to his claim that an individual’s religion is the most important thing to ascertain in attempting to make sense of what he did. As apRoberts insightfully remarks about his claim that “a man’s religion is the chief fact with regard to him,” in the lectures on heroes, “religion seems to be the ‘chief fact’ of history and of literature too” (*Ancient* 51). However, the passage quoted above from *Heroes* relies upon several hidden assumptions to do with the self, the not-self, and their relatedness which collectively indicate what “religion” principally describes, namely, one’s relation to the universe as an agent of change. This implies that for Carlyle religion underpins all human achievement.

Carlyle’s dogma is discernable as the hidden or underlying assumption that, irrespective of all particular theories or religious practices, one’s condition, one’s existential status or nature is such that within all human existence there is a spiritual relation to the universe, that

man, as inscribed in the name of Carlyle's most famous character, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, is both God-born (immaterial mind) and Devil's dung (material body), that all human agents must be the causes of their actions, and that whatever these causes are, they are spiritual or in some sense immaterial. Notably, the term "spiritual" as used by Carlyle need not imply a god but may only signify in this particular case something immaterial such as a person's "vital *relations* to this mysterious Universe." At a stroke Carlyle deems that even extreme sceptics who deny all belief in and knowledge of God (and even the warrantability of belief and knowledge themselves) do have some spiritual relation to the universe that is their religion or that is their belief as the principal motivating force lying behind and making possible their actions. It is worth noting at this stage that, as Campbell observes, since Carlyle could even praise in a letter to John Stuart Mill the Utilitarians (of all people) for advocating belief in their system, he "held *any* belief preferable to the wholly unbelieving, mechanical concepts of his age" ("Carlyle's" 19, emphasis added). It would seem that Carlyle's own definition of religion, notably true religion, is far from being theistic.

Though this may seem to render "religion" at once everything and therefore nothing, perhaps Carlyle would admit that certain extremely nihilistic ways of being, as manifesting, if not complete inactivity, then at least no activity of any significance or worth and hence no discernible relation with the universe, are possible. Indeed, if there is a fair degree of truth in Carlyle's exaggerations concerning the irreligion of his times or the irreligion of Enlightenment France and Scotland, not only is it theoretically possible that some individuals might so exist as detached, disinterested beings, but whole societies might slide into such a non-practical atheism, a sceptical languor or complete indifference to religion, belief, and notions concerning otherness, as to endanger the very life and even the sustainability of these societies. Whether this is right is, of course, highly debatable, but it would seem that for Carlyle so to exist as a comparatively inert, uncommitted, or indifferent nihilist is to deny one's existence as a human or to exist as the appalling atrocity of a half-human automaton, slave to a theory or philosophical standpoint

that enslaves by denying one's relatedness to otherness, a denial of life, freedom, responsibility as residing in or only being possible by means of some relation between the individual self and the not-self.

Though this may seem to pathologize the extreme nihilist and atheist as in some sense sub-human or half-human ("Half-men" [*Sartor* 137]), or as an automaton ("Clothes have made Men of us; they are threatening to make Clothes-screens of us" [*Sartor* 31]), Carlyle seems to provide great scope for what might be called a practical nihilism or atheism to be a sufficient expression or instance of belief as to be deemed in Carlyle's sense religious. In keeping with his notion that an individual's true religion inheres in "the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe," practical nihilism means a nihilism in which nihilists' ways of being and possibly their assertions constitute a significant expression of commitment to or belief in their nihilism. Implicit in Carlyle's notion of an individual's true religion, such a practical nihilism or atheism must be of value, at least to some extent. If only by virtue of the fact that such a practical nihilism is an instance of some correlation between the self and the not-self, i.e., the universe, the value of such a practical nihilism inheres in its being relevant to human existence and the universe.

But those who might to a large extent exist as merely or virtually sentient materialistic elements within a wholly materialistic universe, lacking all significant connection or relatedness to that universe, may only exist theoretically and not in practice. By insisting on some correlation between the self and the not-self as being crucial to a person's having a true religion or belief "that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest," Carlyle must be implying that any instances of existence without some relation to the universe, if only as a theoretical and not a practical possibility, define the boundaries of what "religion" encompasses. Thus, excepting the possibility of some such theoretical or practical instance of existence *unrelated* to the universe, Carlyle so universalizes religion that the opposites of faith and scepticism may both constitute instances of it. Faith and scepticism are thereby themselves brought into relation with

one another as possible alternative standpoints or ways of being concerning what these standpoints hold with regard to the universe. And if the sceptic's and the believer's respective standpoints are both instances of religion, there is nothing to prevent a single individual from subscribing to both, since even though they seem to be mutually contradictory, self-refuting, or self-annihilatory, they may not in fact be so, as long as, so combined, they share at least one thing in common, namely, some relation to the universe which determines action within it. Thus, though seemingly nonsensical or self-contradictory, one could be a sceptic and a believer, one could indeed hold together, perhaps as Carlyle's father did (Campbell "Carlyle's" 6), an acute scepticism with a deeply held faith, or one might become a mystic whose mysticism is grounded upon a consciousness of *nescience* or indeterminacy (the undecidability so elaborately exemplified in *Sartor*), a mystic whose faith is thus closely allied to scepticism. But one can only be or exist in any meaningful way as both a sceptic and a believer if one's combination of these seemingly contradictory tendencies does not thereby make action impossible by entirely removing through a mutual subversion of belief and scepticism the role of belief as the only significant determinant of action. Thus, for Carlyle one cannot exist or do anything in any meaningful sense if one exists as the nihilist or Pyrrhonist of a scepticism of complete indeterminacy such as Hamilton attributes to Hume and which Hume himself regards as the most devastating, the most absolute, form of scepticism.

Thus, this insistence on relation or relatedness implies that extreme nihilism and the utter eradication of belief, which this position entails as it lacks all relation with the universe, though to some extent possible, is not a position that Carlyle's doctrine can in any way endorse or promote. Such nihilism is most staunchly resisted by the core role which his definition of religion accords to belief with regard to action. The residual trace of something spiritual in his definition as being in some sense essential to any meaningful, significant action or sense of self therefore rebuts absolute nihilism, absolute materialism, and absolute idealism. But so excluding a descent into these absolute

positions, the very breadth of meaning which Carlyle attaches to “religion” gives the reader an enormous degree of license to subscribe to orthodox religious belief and/or to its opponents in scepticism, religious enthusiasm (fundamentalism), or mysticism. The great importance to Carlyle’s overall standpoint with regard to religion and belief of a meta-principle of correlation is confirmed by the way in which his definition of religion permits a unifying linkage between dualities such that, excepting the most absolute extremes, it enables faith and scepticism to be brought into relation as contraries instead of as extremes that contradict or mutually annihilate or subvert each other. This is an insistence that unless the universe and everything within it, including existence itself, are naturally dualistic, unless the universe consists of correlatives and is thereby dynamically unified, it is nothing. Such a position in effect implicitly subscribes to Hamilton’s doctrine of natural dualism or natural realism as the only truly effective counter-position to the extreme scepticism of Hamilton’s Hume, a scepticism of indeterminacy posited on, generated by, the prevalence of contradiction, of paradox, and of the mutual subversion of all binary opposites.

This is not to say, however, that Carlyle becomes a mere disciple of Hamilton and his re-invigoration of Reidian, common-sense philosophy, for Carlyle gives much greater emphasis to wonder, mysticism, and the mysterious and even magical nature of all relationships. Furthermore, his highly ornamented linguistic and rhetorical displays exhibit a bias toward a literary art instead of philosophy, a breach with the constraints of rule-bounded philosophic discourse that repeatedly attempts to crack the decorum and grammar of argumentative discourse and in doing so dramatically seeks to liberate the reader from the destructively narrow confines of language, logic, philosophy, and “the logical chain by which Hume,” as Carlyle claims in “Signs of the Times,” “was so coldly towing” the Scottish School of Common Sense “and the world into bottomless abysses of Atheism and Fatalism” (65).

However, if all that Carlyle’s position ends up precluding is the nihilism implicit in an extreme scepticism of indeterminacy, which may itself only ever exist as a theoretical or logical possibility, this leaves

abundant room for rejecting all orthodox forms of belief, all belief in a god, all belief in the existence of anything supernatural. Thus, though one might be committed to some notion that one's existence consists in or is permeated by some immeasurable, indefinable, relation between the self and the not-self, one may end up becoming every bit as antagonistic to religion and belief in God as an anti-religious agnostic or Enlightenment atheist.

But as such a position of antagonism to belief in God is thereby enabled by being encompassed by Carlyle's definition of religion, indifference to religious belief, though excluded by definition, is also potentially given a modicum of encouragement such as the *non*-antagonistic atheism or nihilism of indifference given a certain recognition at various points in *Sartor Resartus* but perhaps most notably in the chapter "Centre of Indifference." Though those who travel from the denial of "The Everlasting No" to the affirmation of "The Everlasting Yea" "must necessarily pass" through indifference, some readers may end at indifference. Carlyle's definition of true religion in *Heroes* and Teufelsdröckh's seeming advocacy of progressing to "The Ever-lasting Yea" in *Sartor Resartus* are in effect a rejection of indifference as either practically irrelevant or merely a necessary phase of spiritual development. However, Teufelsdröckh notably does not insist that the center of indifference is a necessary phase for all: it is necessary only for those who do travel "from the Negative Pole to the Positive" (136). Though this requires further argument, suffice it to say that Carlyle's doctrine may thereby have helped to foster or tolerate the very irreligious attitude which he seems to have rejected and disliked even more than that of Enlightenment scepticism and atheism, namely, a position of complete indifference to all religious belief, a way of being that entirely accommodates itself to materialism and a seemingly lifeless existence lacking the vivacity, sense of significance, and sense of any great purpose, responsibility, or duty to something beyond the prosaic sequentialism of a wholly mundane and mechanical universe. And if it is true that a complete indifference to all religious belief as a result of an extreme materialism is given some encouragement, if only by being present in Carlyle's work, and yet is explicitly or implicitly rejected by

his agnosticism and definition of religion, then it is also true of an extreme idealism which results in a similar indifference to all material existence. Religious belief, that is, true religion, as defined by Carlyle, implicitly relies upon the existence of a relation between the ideal or immaterial and the real or material universe. Though this relation is ultimately indefinable or incomprehensible, to regard both the ideal mind and the real body as correlates of one another in this way seems to rely upon a commitment to the reality of both the unknowable or incomprehensible and the knowable or comprehensible. Once again, in the central role Carlyle gives to some ultimately incomprehensible relation of belief between the self and the not-self, his agnosticism seems to accord with Hamilton's doctrine of natural dualism or natural realism inasmuch as it advocates acceptance of a similarly incomprehensible relation between the knower and the known, dependent upon a correlation of mind and body as disclosed to consciousness in the act of perception, whereby one is "conscious of both existences [the self and the not-self] in the same indivisible moment of intuition" (Hamilton *Discussions* 55).

VII

If Miller's thesis that Carlyle's doctrine is inherently undecidable is right, then with specific regard to the question of God's existence it implies that Carlyle's position in *Sartor Resartus* and many of his other works is fundamentally or inherently agnostic and that his doctrine is therefore largely antithetical to orthodox religious belief but may promote either some degree of mystical, highly private religious belief or even extremely anti-religious belief through, for example, its prompts towards nihilism in its fascination with a scepticism of indeterminacy. Further, Carlyle's commitment, as might be inferred from the undecidability of his language concerning the Highest or things unseen or unknown and unknowable, is a commitment to a form of agnosticism so synonymous with undecidability that the question of his personal commitment to belief in a god or to the rejection of any such belief is itself largely, if not entirely, undecidable. Furthermore, Carlyle might him-

self have objected to any attempt to define his agnosticism as either pro-religious or anti-religious by claiming that since he regarded fiction Platonically as a lying art, his literary output, so pervaded by the fictionalist's art, could only commit him personally to a stance of agnosticism, the implied theism or atheism of which being itself undecidable. The public realm of his literary output may have implied certain commitments to what he wrote or suggested through his art, but since his writing concerning God is in a sense detached from, even as it may have grown out of and explored, his privately held beliefs, his playing on paper (his development of the title of his *Illudo Chartis*), as it identifies itself with undecidability, commits him to the undecidability that is agnosticism but not, or much less so, to either theism or atheism. To put this another way, while much of his writing may have been in some sense pro-religious or theistic in its intention and motivation, its advocacy of any specific religious belief is itself so undecidable that it is not reasonable to infer from this *undecidability* either that he was committed or was not committed to theism. His personal belief in God thus severed, as it were, from his literary effusions and rhetorical encouragements towards faith through and of agnosticism, his texts' prompts towards faith and toward its negation in a nihilism he so daringly consorted with become freed from the dead hand of Carlyle and the painful attempt to discern his intention with any degree of reliability. His agnosticism is thus free to flourish at the hands of his readers and their inclinations toward or away from belief in God.

Early nineteenth-century agnosticism, such as that suggested by Hamilton, grew out of and can be read as attempting to promote belief in a god, while agnosticism of the latter years of the nineteenth century, though arguably rooted in the pro-religious epistemologies of Kant and Hamilton and suggested in the works of Carlyle, increasingly came to be thought of as anti-religious to the point that agnosticism could be regarded as virtually synonymous with atheism or an anti-religious scepticism. Some eminent mid- to late-nineteenth-century atheistically inclined Victorian agnostics such as Huxley, Stephen, and Tyndall seem to have been influenced by Carlyle or recruited to their

own positions his language and his implicit agnosticism. In doing so, they advanced an agnosticism which by the end of the nineteenth century had come to be thought of as a position even more dangerous to religious belief than had been the work of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, in particular Hume and Voltaire (sometimes regarded as the father of agnosticism). Thus, Carlyle's doctrine of agnosticism, irrespective of its religious orientation and obsessions with the dangers of irreligion as evidence of a generally pro-religious stance, intention, or interpretation of his work, can be understood, much as Nietzsche described Carlyle himself, as tantamount to atheism in its anti-religious tendencies or interpretative possibilities. But such a conclusion is too extreme and too radically opposite to how countless readers of Carlyle with more or less justification have tended to regard his work, that is, as in some sense promoting a spiritual dimension to existence and the importance of adhering to belief in a god. Carlyle's agnosticism cannot legitimately be severed from the rhetorical encouragements toward faith and the flirtations with nihilism in his texts, just as it is inappropriate to sever them entirely from his public declaration concerning what religious belief is in the passage from the *Heroes* lecture quoted earlier. His undecidability, his agnosticism, may give readers enormous license to interpret his work as inclining towards or away from religious belief, but he did not leave his readers utterly forlorn and in a wilderness of "anything goes." Still, his commitment becomes thereby a commitment to a non-theistic agnosticism which gives such great license that it is extremely hard to see how belief in God, though just one interpretative possibility, can be said to have any significant or overarching status in Carlyle's work.

A discussion of Carlyle in terms of what several of his texts commit him to seems to render Nietzsche's fallacious *ad hominem* charge of private atheism but public theism as a grossly unfair, though highly interesting, indictment of Carlyle's work, value, and status as a literary artist and thinker. Miller is surely right to assume that Carlyle's honesty as a thinker crucially resulted in the undecidability that he has so powerfully ascribed to Carlyle's texts. But undecidability alone seems to leave those texts in a wilderness of a wide-open agnosticism, committing Car-

lyle only to a stance with regard to religious belief and God that seems destined to end in some form of atheistic agnosticism or indeed atheism. However, when Carlyle speaks publicly in *Heroes* in a face-to-face discourse upon religious belief as the chief or most important dimension to ascertain in reading his heroes as the principal shapers of historical change, he does *seem* personally to commit himself to the particular kind of theistic agnosticism that several of his other texts, but most especially *Sartor Resartus*, arguably embody and enjoin, even if *Sartor* might well have helped to fuel the emotional sense of wonderment of anti-religious agnostics such as Tyndall, Stephen, and Huxley. Certainly, Carlyle's commitment to belief in *Heroes* is nowhere nearly as theistic as one might at first assume. Indeed, his definition of religion comes very close to an endorsement of a non-religious or atheistic agnosticism, and even to atheism itself. Here, too, Nietzsche is wrong: Carlyle's personal predilection toward faith, his pious reticence in advocating atheism, and his implicit and, one might say, highly liberal, pluralistic admission of numerous possible forms of theism along with atheism, as is implicit in the breadth of meaning he attaches to the term "religion," though not a commitment to absolute freedom with regard to belief and though dangerously close to an anti-religious agnosticism and even atheism, are in fact so liberal, a term used in relation to Carlyle that may strike many readers with surprise, that, perhaps rather grudgingly, they give license to a dazzlingly broad array of perspectives on religious belief, so long as whatever it is that given individuals do believe in is something that motivates them or may be said (were one able to discern its content) to explain or account for their actions. Thus, one might say that Carlyle's liberal or pluralistic definition of religion has much more to do with the otherness of belief itself as the basis or crucial principle that may enable a broad array of religious *and* anti-religious practices. This entirely shifts his focus and purpose away from religious matters as one might in more ordinary discourse describe the religious. The ground of debate now radically moves, and instead of Carlyle being praised or condemned for his religiosity, his heterodox system of belief, his atheism, or his agnosticism, the agnosticism of his work, taken by readers in a variety of different directions, becomes a treatise on the im-

portance of otherness, of belief and commitment as integral to action, work, achievement, dialogue, and anything deemed of worth, of the deep value to human life and human societies of being vitalized by retention of at least some shred of wonderment, some sense of something, however undecidable, indeterminate, vague, or silent, that lies both beyond and within and that cannot be measured, rationalized, pinned down, or commodified.

Nietzsche was therefore wrong in his understanding of Carlyle on many fronts, not least of all the significance of his public and more private attestations concerning religious belief as utterances that commit him one way or another with regard to specifically religious belief as ordinarily understood. Nietzsche's attack on Carlyle is wrong, not only because Carlyle was in a highly public way a major participant in the nineteenth-century's discourses away from or against orthodox religious belief but also because the very ground of Carlyle's own discourse had much more to do with opposing the profoundly dehumanizing tendency to eradicate all sense of otherness, wonderment, aspiration, vitality, commitment, and duty to something higher at the very outskirts of imagination. But it must be said that Nietzsche's attack on Carlyle yet deserves a much more extensive discussion, not only because Nietzsche and Carlyle are in several ways interestingly similar, but also because Nietzsche was undoubtedly insightful in assessing the possible implications of the anti-religious tendencies in Carlyle's work, particularly given Nietzsche's own views about what would follow in the wake of the demise of religious belief.

Through Carlyle's work, that deeply sceptical strand of the Enlightenment's project to destroy religion was by no means hampered; rather, it was taken forward and evolved as his texts fostered *aporia*, prompted wonderment, and gave encouragement to the development of new, unorthodox forms of religious practice that occurred in America with the Carlyle-inspired and Emerson-led New England Transcendentalists. As Carlyle so powerfully set out to alert his readers to the dangers of the atheism, materialism, and scepticism of the Enlightenment that he strenuously strove to contest and as his struggles with questions of faith, scepticism, materialism, idealism, and God helped

bring into being his distinctively creative linguistic generation of undecidability or agnosticism, Hume's work silently grew and spread. But if this approximates to an accurate assessment of Carlyle's inherently undecidable doctrine as an agnosticism of potentially greater anti-religious power than the atheistic initiative of the Enlightenment, Carlyle's embellishment of that undecidability bequeathed a most extensive and elaborate literary and philosophical puzzle that ultimately defies all attempts to define his stance in any fully satisfactory way. And yet there can be little doubt that Carlyle encourages and demands at least some trace of belief in the reality and importance of otherness within existence. Anchored in a definition of true religion concerning the significance of belief to action, Carlyle's work is concerned with and insists upon the value, importance, and ontological reality of entities or a single entity that is unknown and unknowable yet is crucial to knowledge and understanding. Yet as this definition only seems capable of excluding the most extreme, largely theoretical, or abstract nihilism of indifference to such otherness as a corollary of an absolute scepticism of complete indeterminacy, Carlyle's definition of true religion becomes capable of accommodating that practical atheism of indifference to religious belief he may have been most anxious to counter. The relativism of his position, as it accommodates the polar opposites of atheism and theism as correlatives involving belief and as it also comes so dangerously close to the very indifference towards belief it arguably abhors, facilitates such divergent strands of interpretation as ultimately to render his position an irresolvable puzzle, massively complicated both by his apparent reliance upon Hamilton's highly sophisticated and complex epistemological framework and by the sheer number of possible connections with religious and anti-religious writers which might be made in attempting to ascertain or comprehend his position. But this is a puzzle, which, as it incorporates such extremely opposed interpretative possibilities, remains perpetually available to inform new understandings both of his work and one's place within a highly mutable universe. In bequeathing to his readers this puzzle concerning the ultimate import of his undecidable or agnostic doctrine, while so clearly insisting on the value of believing

in that which is unknown and unknowable, he perhaps articulates one of the greatest altars to the unknown and unknowable god that a writer could possibly achieve in consecrating the silent religious attitude of wonderment and humility that this puzzle itself encourages.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of a recently deceased colleague, Angus MacKay, who taught philosophy at the University of Glasgow for some thirty years and had particular interests in the philosophy of religion.

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