

“History is a Real Prophetic Manuscript”: Reason and Revelation in

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One legacy of the Enlightenment was a very specific sort of historicism, concerned with a rational and scientific approach and marked by a sharp skepticism about the role of God and religion throughout the ages. Indeed, the works of such historians as Edward Gibbon, David Hume, and William Robertson (all early influences on Thomas Carlyle),¹ with their repudiation of divine agency and religion, made it seemingly impossible for any historian following in their wake to claim revelation as a serious factor in the treatment of history. However, in his early historical writings Carlyle offers a substantial challenge to his eighteenth-century predecessors on the subject of the divine in history, not simply by rejecting their approach wholesale but by meeting them on their own ground of skepticism and reason. Carlyle combines the tools of Scottish skepticism with certain elements of German idealism to develop a fresh understanding of the

¹For a further discussion of the influence of the Enlightenment on Carlyle's thought, see C. F. Harrold's *Carlyle and German Thought: 1819–1834* (1934)

role of God in history.² In so doing Carlyle argues that only by acknowledging the divine as it resides in history and recognizing how this divine force preserves Truth *through* history will the present age rekindle a sense of faith that will result in fertility and fruitful action. With this argument Carlyle becomes an important link between the Hegelian idea of the World Spirit in history and later more nihilistic developments in historicism by the end of the century, namely Nietzsche's critique of the use of history. The possibility that Carlyle offers a vital alternative, even a path missed along the way, is perhaps the most pressing reason to reconsider this now-neglected prophet of history.

The main characteristics of Enlightenment historicism include a sense of detachment and critical distance on the part of the historian; a concern for discerning the rational truth about a given historical period; a commitment to a scientific dissection of the evidence; and an assumption that the present possesses a superior vantage point from which to ascertain the truth. As C. F. Harrold has noted, it was also characterized by a "hostility to all metaphysical, idealistic, [and] religious interpretation of the human record" as evidenced by, for example, "Hume's inability to understand religious principles as anything else than 'sick men's dreams,' or the 'whimsies of monkeys in human shape'" and by "Gibbon's ironic treatment of the rise of Christianity" (154). Indeed, it is the irony regarding revelation—the assumption that sensible people cannot take such apparent superstition seriously—which becomes the most difficult aspect to refute, especially since it is an irony supported by a sense of the reasonableness of their stance and the

²In his perceptive introduction to Carlyle's *Historical Essays* (2003) Chris Vanden Bossche comments that Carlyle's own skepticism is a key element of understanding his approach to history. Vanden Bossche sees this "satiric edge" as representative of Carlyle's "darker view of human nature," and he further notes that it suggests Carlyle's "deep ambivalence about the historical nature of human existence" (xxii, xxiii). This note of skepticism, similar to Voltaire's with its "misanthropy," marks for Vanden Bossche the central difference be-

seeming weight of historical evidence to back them up.³

Carlyle, however, chooses to engage his venerable predecessors on their own battlefield, rather than simply attacking them as part of a Romantic counter-reaction (although he will do that as well, touting the need for imagination and mystery in the telling of history). Thus, his main weapons are those of the Enlightenment: turning a skeptical eye on the process itself of telling history—specifically the Enlightenment’s *faith* in the scientific ordering of evidence and the rational explanation of that evidence. In so doing Carlyle argues that skepticism ultimately turns in upon itself and provides its own undoing—which in turn opens up a new possibility for a renewal of faith. As he says in “Characteristics,” “The fever of Scepticism must needs burn itself out, and burn out thereby the Impurities that caused it; then again will there be clearness, health” (100). He thus confronts the skepticism of his predecessors by offering in his essays “On History” and particularly “On History Again” a brilliant refutation of a scientifically based faith in one’s ability to preserve and interpret the historical record.

In his analysis he first pinpoints the problematic nature of the historical record and specifically suggests that any scientific reading of the text of history will be immediately undermined by the unscientific way history is made and subsequently recorded. As he says in “On History,” before Philosophy can teach by Experience, “the Experience must be gathered and intelligibly recorded” (85). But this is precisely where the problems truly begin for the rational and scientific historian: “let any one who has examined the current of human affairs, and how intricate, perplexed, unfathomable, even when seen into with our own eyes, are their thousandfold, blending movements, say whether the true representing of it is easy or impossible” (85). From there Carlyle moves into the specific difficulties of recording history

³Leo Strauss comments on the Enlightenment use of irony and mockery as the means by which “they tried to ‘laugh’ Orthodoxy out of a position from which no scriptural or rational proof could expel it” (11). It is thus “not just the consequence of a previous refutation of these teachings. It does not express the astonishment of unprejudiced men at the power of plainly absurd

accurately and scientifically. First, he says, the facts are difficult to collect; indeed, “well may we say that of our History the more important part is lost without recovery” (87). Of the facts that are collected, how many are collected poorly, inaccurately, or drenched in bias? Conflicting testimonies of witnesses emerge as a key issue; each witness sees from a different vantage point, both physically and mentally, which in turn obscures any accurate recording of the event. Furthermore, the manner of observing is, as Carlyle remarks, too often that of “mere Onlookers” rather than “seers”; the task of recording events requires a certain type of discerning eye, able to see what is important and what is trivial (88).

But even if one surmounts the problems of witnesses and testimony, there remains the problem of how the events move from the moment of occurrence to recording on the page. The actual retelling of facts and events is derailed because of what Carlyle calls a “fatal discrepancy between our manner of observing these [events], and their manner of occurring” (88). With this Carlyle highlights the particular problem of writing history—all written history is *narrative*, which in no way captures the past as it really happened, for “Narrative is, by its very nature, of only one dimension; only travels forward towards one, or towards successive points: Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*” (88). Narrative can only be “successive,” whereas events tend to happen simultaneously. As a result nothing from the past comes whole and clear-cut. If, as Carlyle says, “History is the Letter of Instructions, which the old generations write and posthumously transmit to the new,” then that Letter “comes to us in the saddest state; falsified, blotted out, torn, lost, and but a shred of it in existence; this too so difficult to read or spell” (“On History Again” 167). Finally, there is the sobering possibility that any number of good and important things have been lost to oblivion; the reality is that “here as elsewhere, what we call Accident governs much; in any case, History must come together not as it should, but as it can and will” (174).

The accidental way history seems to come together, coupled with all the vagaries of evidence, signals for Carlyle the collapse of any pretensions Enlightenment historians had regarding their ability to extract scientifically-determined truths systematically. Thus, to the skeptical eye

the situation appears quite hopeless; the intricate and chaotic web of the past would seem to be completely unknowable since “truly, if History is Philosophy teaching by Experience, the writer fitted to compose History is hitherto an unknown man. The Experience itself would require All-knowledge to record it,—were the All-wisdom needful for such Philosophy as would interpret it, to be had for asking” (“On History” 89).

With this Carlyle exposes the Enlightenment’s pretense of absolute reason and scientific certainty as nothing more than a sort of *faith*. However, this is precisely the point where Carlyle reclaims skepticism from nihilism and turns to his true agenda of restoring revelation to its proper role in history. He pursues Enlightenment skepticism to the depths of its doubt, where paradoxically it becomes its opposite: “It is a disease expelling a disease: the fire of Doubt, as above hinted, consuming away the Doubtful; that so the Certain come to light, and again lie visible on the surface” (“Characteristics” 101). The exposure through skepticism of history as a sort of faith thus is not a *reductio ad absurdum* but a revelation of a deeper sort about history. For, despite the sobering realities of attempts to record and interpret history, history *does* manage to be told, and, what is more, the important elements of the historical record somehow *do* manage to be remembered and retold in ways that benefit both present and future. Somehow, according to Carlyle, humans manage to remember what is true and worth remembering:

Remark nevertheless how, by natural tendency alone, and as it were without man’s forethought, a certain fitness of selection, and this even to a high degree, becomes inevitable. Wholly worthless the selection could not be, were there no better rule than this to guide it: that men permanently speak only of what is extant and actively alive beside them. . . . Thus does Accident correct Accident; and in the wondrous boundless jostle of things (an aimful POWER presiding over it, say rather, dwelling *in* it), a result comes out that may be put-up with. (“On History Again” 110)

Even the most jaded historian will acknowledge that on some level

one assumes the true things will remain—against all odds; otherwise, why persist in the telling of history?

But how can this be? If there is no possibility of accurately apprehending history through purely human methods of science and reason, and yet the true things do seem to be remembered from generation to generation, what makes this possible? How can one even define what is meant by truth—how does one know it when it emerges from the mists of the past? This is precisely the point where faith, exposed through Carlyle's use of skepticism, can find its grounding in a new definition of the divine-in-history.

First, Carlyle distinguishes the merely factual truth which comes from the bits and pieces of recorded history from the Truth (capitalized in the Germanic manner) which possesses both meaning and fruitfulness. This Truth gains its meaning from its emanation from a divine source, and yet it can be apprehended through largely rational methods because one can see its visible presence in the world. What is more, in Carlyle's historicism, *only* with the acknowledgment of the intersection of God and history can meaning emerge for present and future.

For Carlyle, God is not expressed simply as a benevolent spirit presiding passively over largely autonomous, if morally oriented humans. Instead, history and the sense of the divine become largely entangled to the point where history itself becomes a divine force with a mysterious yet definite *telos*. History is for Carlyle a force, divine in nature, which actively shapes the future. What is radical here is that history moves from being something *divinely controlled* to being something *divine in its own right*, as the embodiment of God. History becomes the voice or revelation of God, as John Rosenberg argues:

Underlying Carlyle's many metaphors for history—"an inarticulate Bible," a "real Prophetic manuscript," "an imprisoned Epic," "that divine book of REVELATIONS"—is the image of an Unseen Author speaking through the cryptic tongue of time, unfolding a design at once mysterious and purposeful. The "Prophetic Manuscript" of history presupposes such an Author and the need

for a prophet-historian skilled in deciphering His message.
(49-50)

However, not only is God the author, but He becomes history itself, as Rosenberg further notes:

Through this underlying typological structure Carlyle relocates in history the God who had been displaced from the Divine Authorship of the Bible. Just as he supernaturalizes Nature in *Sartor Resartus*, redeeming it from the “mechanism” of the century he despised, so in *The French Revolution* he divinizes history, redeeming it from the secularism and rationalism of the eighteenth century. (50)

Thus, for Carlyle, the wonder, terror, and mystery of the French Revolution exist precisely because it represents God moving in the whirlwind of history, like a fiery spirit over vexed waters:

Sansculottism will burn much; but what is incombustible it will not burn. Fear not Sansculottism; recognize it for what it is, the portentous inevitable end of much, the miraculous beginning of much. One other thing thou mayst understand of it: that it too came from God; for has it not *been*? From of old, as it is written, are His goings forth; in the great Deep of things; fearful and wonderful now as in the beginning: in the whirlwind also He speaks; and the wrath of men is made to praise Him.—But to gauge and measure this immeasurable Thing, and what is called *account for it*, and reduce it to a dead logic-formula, attempt not! (*French* 223)

In this respect, Carlyle echoes Hegel by locating God in history. Carlyle coincides with the Hegelian description of the World Spirit finding its culmination—“finding itself,” in other words—through the work of history. As Robert Hartman notes, the Idea-in-itself

becomes truly itself only in and through History, [thus] History is, as a modern writer has well characterized it, “the autobiography of

God.” Or, in the words of another modern writer, God for Hegel not only *has* but *is* History. History, for Hegel, is not the appearance, it is the reality of God. . . . God and world belong together; without the world God would not be God. (xxi-xxii)

Hegel also is clear on the purposeful nature of this World Spirit when he states that “the world is not abandoned to chance and eternal accident but controlled by *Providence*” (14). Carlyle concurs, albeit with a stronger emphasis on the miraculous, saying,

Remarkable it is, truly, how everywhere the eternal fact begins again to be recognized, that there is a Godlike in human affairs; that God not only made us and beholds us, but is in us and around us; that the Age of Miracles, as it ever was, now is. (“Characteristics” 102)

However, Carlyle is more resistant to the conclusions Hegel draws concerning the nature of divine meaning and purpose. Hegel states that “the whole business of history, as already observed, is to bring [the idea of Spirit] into consciousness” (30). This in turn shapes the trajectory of world history as a movement towards consciousness, reason, and freedom:

For even though one were not approaching world history with the thought and knowledge of Reason, at least one ought to have the firm and invincible faith that there is Reason in history and to believe that the world of intelligence and of self-conscious willing is not abandoned to mere chance, but must manifest itself in the light of the rational Idea. (12)

Thus, as Hegel concludes,

The truth that a Providence, that is to say, a divine Providence, presides over the events of the world corresponds to our principle; for divine Providence is wisdom endowed with infinite power which realizes its own aim, that is, the absolute, rational, final

purpose of the world. Reason is Thought determining itself in absolute freedom. (15)

Carlyle is reluctant to follow this path for several reasons. First, he is suspicious of Hegel's end goal of "freedom," which to Carlyle sounds perilously close to freedom in a material rather than a spiritual sense. As he says,

Political freedom is hitherto the object of these efforts; but they will not and cannot stop there. It is towards a higher freedom than mere freedom from oppression by his fellow-mortal, that man dimly aims. Of this higher, heavenly freedom, which is "man's reasonable service," all his noble institutions, his faithful endeavours and loftiest attainments, are but the body, and more and more approximated emblem. ("Signs" 53)

For Carlyle, freedom becomes a dangerous buzzword which corresponds to the agenda of liberal democracy, especially in its emphasis on the individual and material gain. But Carlyle's larger concern is Hegel's insistence on Reason and self-consciousness. This emphasis, according to Carlyle, goes beyond not only what one can reasonably expect from history, but also beyond what is fruitful for humans to know. There must remain a mystical element to the God-in-history, or else one would reduce both God and history to the stuff of "instructive Gazetteers" and "cause-and-effect speculators" "with whom no wonder would remain wonderful, but all things in Heaven and Earth must be computed and 'accounted for,'" and who read "the inscrutable Book of Nature as if it were a Merchant's Ledger" ("On History" 62).

As for the idea of the World Spirit unfolding its "rationally necessary course" (Hegel 12), one can almost hear Carlyle give a Scottish snort, for although both he and Hegel agree that the ways of the divine are often hidden from humans, Hegel's sense of the dialectic presupposes a definite *telos* or progress towards a defined goal. Carlyle, however, while conceding the movement forward, is more insistent on the mystery and less on the actual progress:

About the grand Course of Providence, and his final Purposes

with us, we can know nothing, or almost nothing: man begins in darkness, ends in darkness; mystery is everywhere around us and in us, under our feet, among our hands. Nevertheless so much has become evident to every one, that this wondrous Mankind is advancing somewhither; that at least all human things are, have been and forever will be, in Movement and Change. (“Characteristics” 98)

As he also states in this passage, humans are always “in progress,” but in Carlylean terms this means a cyclical progress of proper change according to one’s time rather than a strictly linear or dialectical progress. Truth, for Carlyle, is in the process rather than in the goal, as he states in “Characteristics”:

As Phlogiston is displaced by Oxygen, and the Epicycles of Ptolemy by the Ellipses of Kepler; so does Paganism give place to Catholicism, Tyranny to Monarchy, and Feudalism to Representative Government,—where also the process does not stop. Perfection of Practice, like completeness of Opinion, is always approaching, never arrived; Truth, in the words of Schiller, *immer wird, nie ist*; never is, always is *a-being*. (99)

One critical function of history is to illustrate the cycles and to remind one of the eternal truths residing within the external changes of ideological and temporal clothes: “The Past is a dim indubitable fact: the Future too is one, only dimmer; nay properly it is the *same* fact in new dress and development. For the Present holds in it both the whole Past and the whole Future” (*Past* 37).

From this image of eternal truth encased within a changing exterior, one can better understand why Carlyle emphasizes the prophetic nature of history. In his definition of prophecy Carlyle seems to borrow from what Karl Löwith calls “the Hebrew and Christian view of history” in which “the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful ‘preparation’ for the future” (6). “Prophecy in reverse” is exactly how Carlyle understands the proper use of history, when he

refers to history as a “real Prophetic manuscript” which humans ignore to their peril:

Men believe in Bibles, and disbelieve in them: but of all Bibles the frightfullest to disbelieve in is this “Bible of Universal History.” This is the Eternal Bible and God’s Book, “which every born man,” till once the soul and eyesight are extinguished in him, “can and must, with his own eyes, see the God’s Finger writing!” To discredit this, is an *infidelity* like no other. Such infidelity you would punish, if not by fire and faggot, which are difficult to manage in our times, yet by the most peremptory order, To hold its peace till it got something wiser to say. Why should the blessed Silence be broken into noises, to communicate only the like of this? If the Past have no God’s-Reason in it, nothing but Devil’s-Unreason, let the Past be eternally forgotten: mention it no more; we whose ancestors were all hanged, why should we talk of ropes! (*Past* 231)

But Carlyle’s critical transformation of the Judeo-Christian model, and even of Hegel’s model, comes in his depiction of history as a cyclical force whose meaning emerges precisely out of its own weight. The weight of history, bearing down upon the present, assumes a force and gravity that have the potential to crush or refine the present. Indeed, the modern condition is defined by this overwhelming weight of history, as evident in any number of nineteenth-century writers: Emerson’s “sepulchres of the fathers” (*Nature* 3), Carlyle’s references to “mountains of dead ashes, wreck, and burnt bones” (*Past* 46), Nietzsche’s “dark invisible burden” (“On the Uses” 61).

But to understand better how Carlyle sees history, it helps to draw on an image from the *Sermones* of Saint Augustine, which Löwith quotes. Augustine depicts the world as

an oil press: under pressure. If you are the dregs of the oil you are carried away through the sewer; if you are genuine oil you will remain in the vessel. But to be under pressure is inevitable. Observe the dregs, observe the oil. Pressure takes place ever in the world,

as for instance, through famine, war, want, inflation, indigence, mortality, rape, avarice; such are the pressures on the poor and the worries of the states: we have evidence of them. . . . We have found men who grumble under these pressures and who say: “how bad are these Christian times!” . . . Thus speak the dregs of the oil which run away through the sewer; their color is black because they blaspheme: they lack splendour. The oil has splendour. For here another sort of man is under the same pressure and friction which polishes him, for is it not the very friction which refines him? (Qtd. in Löwith iv)

Carlyle offers a variant of this analogy, except the oil press now is *history* rather than simply the world. Like the oil press, history bears down upon one, and the result, according to Carlyle, is either dregs or fine oil; in other words, either history destroys one, reveals one’s paucities and failures, or refines and brings one to one’s own greatness. Indeed, *only* the weight of this burden can achieve such a result. As Carlyle states in “On History Again,” all the ages of human history, both great and inauspicious, are ultimately refined and compressed to that which is true and worth remembering: “triviality after triviality, as it perishes from the living activity of men, drops away from their speech and memory, and the great and vital more and more exclusively survive there” (110).

Furthermore, it is God-in-history who enforces such compression, despite the vagaries of record-keeping and historical documentation. Divine compression, like the oil press, separates the dregs and the oil and does so according to the fruitfulness of the pressings. The more truthful, and by extension fruitful, an action is, the more likely it will be remembered, since, as Carlyle argues, “men permanently speak only of what is extant and actively alive beside them. Thus do the things that have produced fruit, nay, whose fruit still grows, turn out to be the things chosen for record and writing of; which things alone were great, and worth recording” (110). The dregs will be forgotten, as he asserts in *The French Revolution* (1837): “they become compressed more and more, and finally suppressed in the Annals of Mankind; blotted out as spuri-

ous,—which indeed they are” (12–13).

Accordingly, divine compression acts not only to preserve truth but also to prevent mistaking the dregs—the Dryasdust facts, the “shot rubbish” of the past—for the real thing. Too much history, as Carlyle points out, is as dangerous as too little history, and the modern mania to preserve *all* things historical becomes yet another object of his critique. The God-in-history through the divine oil press provides the history one needs, Carlyle suggests, and the historian’s task is not only to read these truths rightly but also not to obscure them through the dry rubbish of mere facts.

The action of divine compression enables one to understand history rightly and in the proper balance, and for Carlyle the result of such understanding is the restoration of fertility to the present—a fertility grounded in an organic sense of past, present, and future, interconnected by the visible traces of the divine. When one has the history one needs, according to Carlyle, one can put it to its proper use, which is the impetus to action in the present. Indeed, the past throws down the challenge to the present to meet it face to face, and as equals—and now the challenge is tinged with an urgent sense of prophecy. If, as Löwith argues, the lesson of Christianity is to be ultimately saved *from* history (191), for Carlyle the aim is to be saved *through* history. Carlyle emphasizes that the present is called to greatness, and precisely a greatness which can only be achieved by embracing what is clearly for him a divinely intentioned force. Indeed, this is at the heart of his historicism: a certainty that the present needs to re-inculcate in itself a new faith not simply in God but in God-in-history.

For Carlyle, this new faith is achievable by a new encounter with the Bible of history,⁴ wherein one’s own past, and thus the past still living inside the present, embodies the divine principle leading one to future greatness through one’s rightful work—as individual and as

⁴Harrold notes that Carlyle was influenced by Goethe in this sense of faith: “for them both, the faith which makes an epoch great and productive is faith taken in its widest sense: it is the deep, unconscious, creative energy in man which, taken at its bloom, best expresses itself in religious forms” (175).

epoch. Thus, Carlyle offers a faith *in* the past that is capable of inspiring one to new action. In Carlylean terms, the past is not the accumulation of “Dry Rubbish”—in other words, the artifacts and dead facts of the past which can and must be sloughed off over time—but the “True Past” which remains eternally:

The venerator of the Past (and to what pure heart is the Past, in that ‘moonlight of memory,’ other than sad and holy?) sorrows not over its departure, as one utterly bereaved. The true Past departs not, nothing that was worthy in the Past departs; no Truth or Goodness realized by man ever dies, or can die; but is all still here, and recognized or not, lives and works through endless changes. (“Characteristics” 99)

Carlyle continues in the same passage with perhaps his most theological statement on the relation of history to the divine; the essence of the past emerges in a form of soul which is both immortal and transcendental:

If all things, to speak in the German dialect, are discerned by us, and exist for us, in an element of Time, and therefore of Mortality and Mutability; yet Time itself reposes on Eternity: the truly Great and Transcendental has its basis and substance in Eternity; stands revealed to us as Eternity in a vesture of Time. Thus in all Poetry, Worship, Art, Society, as one form passes into another, nothing is lost: it is but the superficial, as it were the *body* only, that grows obsolete and dies; under the mortal body lies a *soul* which is immortal; which anew incarnates itself in fairer revelation; and the Present is the living sum-total of the whole Past. (99)

As this passage indicates, the final upshot of Carlyle’s theology of history is not a message of progress. The Truth of divine soul underneath remains the same regardless of the varying clothes each age throws on top of it. In Carlyle’s estimation, then, one looks to the past to glimpse the truth under the clothes, as it were. Yet the clothes are in themselves

important, as they become the expression of each epoch's understanding of that Truth. Hence, a great age is one which responds to the truth of the divine with the right sort of clothes, i.e., noble action and reverence for the mystery of the divine.

Thus, the challenge in the present is always to adorn the Truth with the best clothes, the best and noblest actions one can manage, rather than settling for the tattered, outworn clothes of other times, or ill-made, cheap clothes of one's own manufacture. This message is the substance of Carlyle's call to his early contemporaries truly to be better tailors and better wearers of clothes. Faith in history thus serves the present and shapes the future in ways which Hegel could not imagine. It also establishes a dynamic and hopeful approach to past truth and future action which still deserves serious attention today.⁵

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