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Has Carlyle still a Message?

THAT Carlyle did have a message, or at least was widely believed to have a message, no one can seriously question. By multitudes he was regarded as a prophet, a man who spoke to his time the essential Word of God. He called men back from the trivial and foolish to think of the higher purposes of life; and if he made frequent use of capital letters in such indefinite terms as the Eternities and Immensities, it was recognized that he was trying to describe the infinite background which alone can give our human existence dignity and value and power. His style was certainly unusual, and it contained a good deal of extravagance, particularly when it expressed condemnation. But it was quickly seen that this was involved in his essential constitution, and (at least in his earlier work) it was due to his very sincerity. He wrote as he felt, and his language took fire from the feeling that consumed him. Men who knew Carlyle admired his forthrightness and honesty of purpose; and if they laughed at the scathing extravagance of some of his judgments, they had an idea, perhaps even an uncomfortable idea, that there was somewhere within the extravagance a good deal of truth that was worthy of serious consideration.

But even in the heyday of Carlyle's reputation, there were people who criticized his message. For instance, James Russell Lowell, the famous American essayist and poet. He wrote a review of Carlyle's *Frederick the Great* which he afterwards incorporated in his book *My Study Windows*, and in it he takes Carlyle to task most faithfully. He criticizes his method of approaching a subject, and still more the anti-democratic character of his teaching. This essay, like all Russell Lowell's critical work, is well worth reading. It is only fair to add, however, that even the most ardent disciple of Carlyle finds it impossible to defend his choice of Frederick the Great as a "hero"; so that Lowell makes his attack from fairly safe ground. But on the other hand, his strictures against Carlyle's treatment of history are somewhat unjust, for, when all is said, Carlyle remains a great prophetic teacher. Another critic of Carlyle in his own lifetime was Justin McCarthy, whose *History of our own Times*, is still a treasure-house of instruction delightfully set out. McCarthy compares Carlyle with Macaulay, greatly to Macaulay's advantage. But it is doubtful whether serious students would accept McCarthy's opinion; for Carlyle, with all his faults, leaves an impression on the mind of a sympathetic reader that is quite beyond Macaulay's power to achieve.

A more recent critic was William Archer, known best to the public for his *Green Eye of the Little Yellow God*, and to the lover of literature as the translator of Ibsen. In an article in the now defunct *T.P.'s Weekly*, he told how his uncle presented him with a complete set of Carlyle's works in the little brick-red volumes that we see on secondhand bookstalls. Carlyle "of course interested, and no doubt helped me enormously", said Archer; "but I rebelled from the first, as I hope everyone rebels now, against his monotonous declamation of a sham philosophy." The phrase is a good one. But it strikes the ear as a little rhetorical, and one asks whether it is quite as true as it sounds. "Monotonous declamation"—in some senses perhaps; especially if you think it "a sham philosophy." But, then, preaching of any sort may be so described, for it consists of constant reiteration of the same fundamental ideas, and the real question is not "Is the preaching 'monotonous'" (in the sense that it dwells on the same ideas), but "Is it sincere?" and deeper still, "Is it true?"

Archer to some extent puts himself out of court as a critic, because he was himself a secularist and not therefore likely to find Carlyle's message very profitable. We shall never understand, or begin to understand, Carlyle properly unless we see that he was essentially a religious man. His creed was perhaps vague, and there was no specific form of faith to which he attached himself. He was not a Christian in the orthodox sense, though he had a deep reverence for Christ, and had a strong hankering after the faith of his fathers. Sometimes his language about conventional religion was so scornful that his friends were puzzled by it. "After all", said Darwin once to Mrs. Carlyle who tells the story, "What is Carlyle's religion, or has he any?" to which Mrs. Carlyle says, "I answered him that I knew no more than himself." This must surely apply to the first part of Darwin's question, because about the second there can hardly be any doubt. The precise brand of "religion" may be uncertain, but the religion itself is unmistakably present, as anyone who reads *Sartor* or *The French Revolution* or *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* can see at a glance.

Carlyle, we must remember, was trained in the best Scottish School, a devout home where religion (with a strongly Calvinistic bias) meant reverence for God, expressed in sound moral character. There was a good deal of the Old Testament in it and the emphasis was prophetic (in the best sense) rather than Christian. Carlyle once described himself as "something savage-prophetic. I am John the Baptist, girt about with a leathern girdle, whose food is locusts and wild honey." The comparison is suggestive, and it is well worth noting.

The central message is God's living reality. "This fair universe," we are told in *Sartor*, "were it in the meanest province thereof, is in very deed the star-domed City of God. Through every star, through every grass-blade, and, most, through every living soul, the glory of a present God still beams. But Nature, which is the time-vesture of God and reveals Him to the wise, hides Him from the foolish."

God reveals Himself to man as a moral authority in conscience whose voice becomes the Everlasting Yea of honest duty. Standing before the Eternities a man realizes his own moral greatness; and as he seeks to live for the highest that God reveals to him, he attains to inward happiness and victory.

The presence of God is everywhere in Nature and experience, but we can see it most clearly in history and it is here that Carlyle made his greatest contribution. He broke with the eighteenth century historians and made history once more, as it was to the Old Testament prophets, the sphere of God's greatest activity.

It is interesting to compare the attitude of Carlyle in this respect with that of so great a man as Dr. Johnson. "We must remember," said Johnson, "how very little history there is—I mean real authentic history. That certain kings reigned and certain battles were fought we can depend upon as true, but all the philosophy, all the colouring, of history is conjecture." "Then, sir," answered Boswell very sensibly, "you would reduce all history to no better than an almanac, a mere chronicle of remarkable events". History of this sort Carlyle rejected with scorn. History is more than a number of beads strung on a thread. It is a living unity, and behind all the events great forces are at work, giving meaning and purpose to all we see. It is the business of the historian to penetrate behind "the mere chronicle of remarkable events" in order to show how the eternal principles that constitute the divine order work themselves out in experience. In other words, the historian must endeavour to trace for his readers the movements of God, that by so doing he may stress the appropriate lessons.

Carlyle himself noted two main aspects of the divine activity in history, the first Judgment, and the second Revelation.

Under the first head we have *The French Revolution*. Lord Acton described it as "one of those disappointing storm clouds that give out more thunder than lightning." In other words, the clear picture of events in sequence is lacking, and the reader is confused where he had expected to be enlightened. There is something in the criticism unquestionably. Probably the man who knows a little about the French Revolution from somebody else will get more good from Carlyle than the man

who comes to it in absolute ignorance. Carlyle's treatment is impressionistic rather than scientific; and one longs to see people and events under a quieter light at times, that so there may come a more distinct understanding of their relation to each other and the whole great drama before us. But, on the other hand, it is doubtful whether Carlyle could have driven home his message in any other way than the one he took. He wrote at white heat, and all his powers were directed to leaving on his reader's mind one vivid, vital impression, the impression of an awful judgment of God going forth against human frivolity and iniquity. Epithet is piled on epithet; scenes are flashed quickly before us; men and women are shown as they essentially are; and over all broods the sense of impending catastrophe, till at last the lightnings of God descend on the sin of Man. "Imposture is in flames, imposture is burnt up. One red sea of fire, wild-bellowing enwraps the world, with its fire-tongue licks the very stars. Thrones are hurled into it and Dubois mitres and Prebendal stalls that drop fatness—And ha! what see?—all the 'gigs' of creation [Carlyle's favourite phrase for social snobbery]—all, all, woe is me."

God judges His world—of that there can be no question. This was Carlyle's favourite message, and no one has ever more effectively used a caustically brilliant pen in the statement of it. Righteousness is the basic fact of the moral order, and whoever ignores it has sooner or later to pay the price.

But judgment is only one side of God's activity in history. The other side is Revelation, God's disclosure of His will in human experience. This is worked out by Carlyle in his doctrine of Heroes. We get the theory in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. Man, says Carlyle, is "the emblem to us of the Highest God", and man at his greatest and best in the Hero is the clearest "emblem" of God we can have. Carlyle discusses this under six categories, the Hero as Divinity, as Prophet, as Poet, as Priest, as Man of Letters, and as King. It is typical of Carlyle that his two examples of kings were not kings in the conventional sense; they are Cromwell and Napoleon.

Cromwell he deals with more fully in the *Letters and Speeches*, and it was the first clear vindication in literature of Cromwell's genius as a statesman. For centuries Cromwell had been denounced as a hypocrite and a charlatan. But ever since Carlyle wrote the world has learned to appreciate and understand him.

Then came *Past and Present* in which Carlyle sought to apply his theory to modern conditions. Carlyle was a true son of the people, and his heart was wrung by the miseries of his time. In the brilliant first half of the book he went back to

history, and showed how the coming of Abbot Samson changed life at Bury St. Edmunds. Find your Abbot Samson, he said, and let him work his will in present economic affairs.

But suppose your Abbot Samson is a tyrant? and suppose his idea of government is the abolition of human rights and the creation of dictatorship? Is even a good dictatorship as valuable for humanity as a bad democracy? This was the crux of the problem, and Carlyle came down on the side of dictatorship. The danger of his theory was manifest from the start in his choice of Napoleon as a hero; then came his attempted justification of the darkest stain on Cromwell's memory, the massacres in Ireland; then came his suggestion in *Past and Present* that working men might be better in the slavery of Gurth the Saxon than in the condition of the freeborn Britisher. Then finally came *Frederick the Great*, a wonderful piece of research but a sad waste of power on a very undesirable character. It is hardly surprising that Carlyle defended Governor Eyre's treatment of the negroes in Jamaica, and to-day he is quoted in connection with the Prussian historian Trutschke as the literary "begetter" of Pan-Germanism and its monstrous child, Adolf Hitler.

What a descent it is from the glorious *Essay on Burns* to *Frederick the Great*! and it is hard to see how the warm-hearted son of Scottish peasantry could become the champion of dictatorship. The best explanation is that of G. M. Trevelyan, our greatest living English historian. He points out that Carlyle's constant stomach-trouble and increasing loneliness in life as he grew older made him more and more depart from his own true self; with the result that we really have two Carlyles, and it is the eager-hearted first, and not the soured and cankered second that really matters.

This paper is already longer than was intended. But, as one who in his student days received undying inspiration from Carlyle, it seemed only fair that something should be said on his behalf at a time when his reputation, for political reasons, is sadly under a cloud. With all his later faults Carlyle was as true a prophet of God as Amos or John the Baptist; and for a world like our own the message of the *French Revolution* is as living as ever. Preachers especially can find much to thrill them in the earlier Carlyle, and if *Frederick the Great* can safely be left alone there are plenty of other things in Carlyle that we can all of us usefully study.

HENRY COOK.