

CARLYLE'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

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J. A. Froude, an English historian writing in 1849 classed Carlyle as one of the two most greatly gifted men then living in England, (the other was Cardinal Newman). R. H. Hutton in his *Essays on some of the modern guides of English thought in matters of faith* published in 1887 wrote:

for many years before his death Carlyle was to England what his great hero, Goethe, long was to Germany, — the aged seer whose personal judgments on men and things were eagerly thought after, and eagerly chronicled and retailed.

(Hutton 1887 : 2).

Carlyle is usually considered a Victorian. His influence in his own lifetime was enormous. It began with the success of *The French Revolution* (first published in 1837) and until his death in 1881 he was revered as a sage. But many critics associate him with the Romantic Age, as he was born in 1795, in the same year as John Keats, and as *Sartor resartus* — Carlyle's early work in which his philosophy is clearly formulated, and which anticipated in all essentials the whole of his later development was written in 1830 - 1831.

Obviously Carlyle has many things in common with Romanticism. First of all, he has a common enemy in the rationalism of the eighteenth century. In the realm of philosophy he attacks rationalism and sensualism, and in all aesthetic matters he stands on the side of Romanticism against the rules, against the rationalistic explanations of the creative process of the artist, against a narrow formalism, against the suppression of imagination, sublimity and wonder. But the first impression is superficial. In every field of human thought Carlyle showed a deep distrust of Romanticism. His philosophy is an extraordinary mixture and the strangest thing about Carlyle is that the man who fought with the problems of the late eighteenth century determined in many ways the thought and the art of the English nineteenth century. As René Wellek says — intellectually Carlyle stands before the time of the real Romanticism and chronologically after the tide of the Romantics — he

illuminates both the roots of English Romanticism and its dying hours (Wellek 1965 : 81).

At the first glance it seems that Carlyle shares the Romantic creed as far as his conception of history is concerned. Carlyle certainly is an idealist, he preaches the freedom of the will, he dreams of a collectivistic organization of society and clings to the belief in poetical inspiration and the metaphysical meaning of art as a revelation of the absolute. He sees in history a divine plan which is nothing but a self-revelation of the will of God, which is violently opposed to the most popular beliefs of the eighteenth century.

It is surprising that each author examining the historical concepts of Carlyle points at a different philosopher and at a different theory as Carlyle's intellectual ancestry in question of historiography and philosophy of history. Hill Shine, for example, sees fundamental affinity between Carlyle's theory of history and that of Saint-Simonians (Shine 1941). Other critics point at Hegel, Herder or Fichte and their arguments seem quite convincing. And I think it is because of the fact Wellek exposed in his *Confrontations*. He says that Carlyle lumped the German philosophy of history together without being interested in individual shades of presentations: he only eliminated anything which seemed to him too far-fetched metaphysics. And it is unlikely that Carlyle met these ideas only in the context of strict philosophies of history. He found them rather scattered and diluted in many German histories and literary histories of the time. For instance many of Herder's ideas on the philosophy of history Carlyle found variously combined and reshaped in Goethe, in the German Romantics and in German and English literary historians he had read in his youth. The idea of periodicity for instance was in the "air" and its particular formulation by Carlyle can hardly be derived from one model (Wellek 1965: 92).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a popular trend in philosophy both in England and in Germany which was neither naturalistic nor idealistic. It has been variously labelled as "historism" or "organology", and one of its branches has been called "historical school". Its main distinguishing features are:

- 1) The stress on individuality (under individuality the characteristic uniqueness of a nation or a period is included).
- 2) The concept of development which is very different from earlier and later naturalistic evolutionary concepts. (It is an unpredictable development with no definite aim in history).
- 3) Its method is unscientific, it is interpretative, intuitive and even divinatory (Wellek 1965: 87).

And we find all these features in Carlyle's writings. He also stresses individuality, the mystery of the individual, his physiognomy, mental and physical, the national character of a literature or the differences among ages. His concept

of development is also similar to that of the "historical school": its stages have no absolute uniformity and its aim is vague and uncertain. Carlyle's method is also consciously nonrational, opposed to causal explanation, divinity and consciously unscientific.

Apart from the features mentioned above Carlyle's conception of history comprised also the idea of historical periodicity, conceived as an alternation of "organic" and "critical" periods and the idea of palingenesis. Carlyle's assurance that a new and brighter day will follow the present darkness rests explicitly on his faith in "the progress of man towards higher and nobler development of whatever is highest and noblest in him" (Carlyle 1899: vol. III, 37). "Under the mortal body lies a *soul* which is immortal; which anew incarnates itself in fairer revelation", he writes in his "Characteristics" (Carlyle 1899: vol. III, 39). He believed in a new birth on another planet, the "palingenesis" of the human soul.

When Carlyle is thought of as a historian the stress is usually laid on his theory of heroes and on such sayings as that "Universal History (...) is at bottom the History of Great Men" (Carlyle 1924: 1). Carlyle really condensed history into biography. Even in *The French Revolution*, where the author has mainly to deal with masses in tumult, he gives most prominence to their leaders. Carlyle's heroes are men of mystical tendencies, of strong dominating passions. His recipe for modern disease was to get a great man, to worship him and render him obedience. His hero-worship was based on the excessive admiration for individual greatness.

The great thing any nation can do, Carlyle says, is to produce great men, listen and worship. If by act of word the hero is a revelation of God, hero-worship is a religion; or more exactly — the basis of all religion. He says in *Sartor resartus*:

Great men are inspired (speaking and acting) Texts of that divine BOOK OF REVELATION wherof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch and by some named History.

(Carlyle 1937 : 177).

But it is rather difficult to understand what Carlyle meant by the term "hero". After reading *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history* the reader still feels that Carlyle's conception is a little confusing and seems not to have been firmly grounded on a clear definition. And that is probably why Carlyle's great men and heroes are sometimes misinterpreted. Some authors speak of them as Nietzschean supermen or think of Carlyle as an early prophet of Fascism. But the more careful reader of Carlyle sees that Carlyle's heroes cannot be even compared to Nietzschean supermen, outside the moral order, beyond good and evil because they are not egotists — they are rather instruments of God's will, executors of a decree which is not of their own choosing

and does not serve their individual purposes. His heroes are always representative men, the "synopsis and epitome" of their age as he calls them in his essay on Boswell. (Carlyle 1899: vol. III. 90). They are the prophets — Buddha, Mahomet, Christ; the poets — Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Burns; the men of letters — Johnson or Rousseau. But they are above all the kings, soldiers and governors: Caesar, Cromwell, Frederick and Napoleon.

The theory of heroes is only one aspect of Carlyle's theory of history which is otherwise, not at all individualistic and atomistic. Carlyle conceives of society as a whole, as a "collective individual". His article on "History" (written in 1830) actually centres on the argument that "battles and wartumults pass away like tavern-brawls" and that real history is made by "all the forgotten train of artists and artisans" who have shaped the "inventions and traditions and daily habits that regulate and support our existence". (Carlyle 1899: vol. II. 86 - 87). At least here Carlyle disapproves of histories which stress only politics and diplomacy and recommends the writing of histories of religion and beliefs, of inventions, philosophy and literature, which alone can be the basis of a future philosophy of history. On the other hand he criticizes some history books for neglecting the real "Life of Man".

As it has already been said before, Carlyle's conception of development is consciously unscientific and even antiscientific. It differs radically from that of modern positivism; Carlyle never attempted to establish laws of historical evolution as, for instance, Comte did. He never thought of a detailed prediction of the future, he had no concept of the aim of history. He rejected the casual and genetic methods of explanation.

The process of development itself is often conceived of on the age-old analogy of human life and its ages. In one of his essays Carlyle also says that "society has its periods of sickness and vigour, of youth and manhood, decrepitude, dissolution and new birth" (Carlyle 1899: vol. II. 82). In *Sartor resartus* Carlyle introduces the metaphor of the phoenix for society (Carlyle 1937: 236).

Carlyle's frequently repeated claims that history has no definite goal and his attitude towards the past in *Past and present* caused that some critics (Hector C. Macpherson 1897 among them) thought that his interpretation of history has no theory of progress. And in fact, *Past and present*, being an attempt to solve the social problem was not a success, though many earnest minded men, captivated by its spirit hailed Carlyle as a social reformer when the book appeared. Carlyle could do no more than tell the modern to return to the spirit of the feudal period, when the people were led by the aristocracy. The book had no message to the world beyond the vaguely declamatory one that those nations which forget God will be turned to hell. (Macpherson 1897: 139). But in his other books and essays Carlyle speaks of progress — we must not forget his idea of palingenesis and his conception of society,

the metaphor of the phoenix, and the underlying message of *Sartor resartus* which is: that change is progress. In one of his essays Carlyle pronounced the view that "in all times, the happiness and greatness of mankind at large have been continually progressive" (Carlyle 1899: vol. III. 37). The slow continuous development of great collective forces seems the central concept of his historical view of the world. He knows no end to history. Certainly Carlyle avoided the pitfalls of the rigid constructions of both Hegel and Comte: he knew no dialectics nor three stages of progress. But occasionally he understands the concept of slow and continuous development and sometimes he thinks of history as interrupted by convulsions and catastrophes, revolutions rather than evolution, out of which society arises anew, completely newmade, like a phoenix (Carlyle 1937: 231 - 238).

As the process of history is an "ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being", the irrational tide of thought and action the historian with his narrative method is at disadvantage. The "causes and effects" make "narrative linear" while all "action is solid". It is "extended in breadth and depth as well as in length" as he says in one of his essays (Carlyle 1899: vol. II. 89). This "mighty tide of thought and action" is ultimately mysterious and because of its mysterious reality, worthy of reverence and acceptance. Carlyle goes as far as to say that "whatsoever has existed has had its value: without some truth and worth lying in it, the thing could not have hung together" (Carlyle 1899: vol. III. 100). The awe of the mere fact that something was once real and true, inspires much of Carlyle's distrust of fiction and reverence for history.

But in his writings Carlyle was never able to keep consistently to the historical point of view. He always introduced a set of ethical standards which are not derived from history itself and which prevent him from judging the individuality of a man or time by its own inherent criteria. The French Revolution is conceived in Carlyle as an outbreak of the daemonic element in man, a struggle of God and the Devil, an illustration of the law of retribution, as an exemplification of God's particular providence (Wellek 1965: 108).

The question of Carlyle's "historical sense" and position as a historian cannot be decided by arguments which show that Carlyle took great trouble to study the sources and was according to the standards of the time an accurate scholar. His lack of historical insight appears in his misinterpretation of the character of Frederick the Great whom he exalted as a hero of truthfulness and faith. It is true that Carlyle's irrational psychology recognizing that man's actions are not solely determined by reason and personal happiness and his divinatory method saved him from the mistakes of much eighteenth century historiography which found everywhere conscious intentions and calculations. But his sense of individuality seems to be too much exaggerated by his enthusiasts. Carlyle rarely enters a man's mind sympathetically: he frequently

is content with sketching his external physiognomy. His narrow range of understanding is in itself a contradiction of the true "historical spirit". It accounts for his adoration of mere power which comes out in his attitude to the Irish or Polish question (approval of partitions in *Frederick the Great*) (Wellek 1965: 109 - 110).

Each of Carlyle's historical books served a definite timely purpose: *The French Revolution* seems to be written to warn England of its time and exhort it to social responsibility, *Cromwell* surely paints the picture of the desired leader, the account of Jocelin of Brakelond in *Past and present* evokes a social utopia, and even Frederick the Great is held up as a model-king and ruler.

Carlyle's own historical writing cannot be said to exemplify his theory of history. In his theory he adopted many of the ideas merely as weapons against the enemy of eighteenth century rationalism, but never assimilated them in his practice. Carlyle's moralistic and dualistic conception of history as a battlefield of God and the Devil which was never absent from his actual practice consequently gained the upper hand in his later writing, but it was never clearly formulated in his theory.

Though many critics deprive Carlyle of a "historical sense" his insight into some features of the historical process may be deeper than that of the professional historians of the nineteenth century. He correctly diagnosed the weaknesses and exposed the hypocrisy of Victorian "democracy", its superficial conception of freedom and its reliance upon laissez faire economics (Willey 1969: 139). Carlyle possessed a visionary power, he had the awareness of the disparities between the ideal and the actual, the real and the illusory. He saw persons, things and events in a spectral and visionary light and from this kind of insight sprang much of the power of his historical work (Willey 1969: 131 - 132).

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