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How Well Do ‘Facts’ Travel?
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a powerful claim for Germany and – by implication, German thought – as the true progenitor of nineteenth-century Victorian moral and political ideology. In this essay, however, I hope to re-direct attention towards two early essays that Carlyle wrote on Diderot and Voltaire which indicate that his evaluation of and response to the French Enlightenment was a good deal more complex than the splenetic bluster quoted above would sugges

literary and philosophical priorities of an idealist kind was at the

are and the demands they make upon human conduct as defined by Carlyle. Here in Goethe is the origin of the “hero” figure or prophet, originally restricted to literary or philosophical figures and only later turned to political ends (and losing its plasticity of embodiment along the way). Ultimately, as we shall see, in later years the despotic monarch is alone considered sufficient to oppose democracy, industrialisation and liberal cant. In the unlikely but necessary figure of “Frederick” the hero becomes a figure capable of resisting the contemporary forces that Carlyle laments. His concept of the hero-figure turns from the literary (Goethe) to the political despot who compels rather than persuades: for only such a person can command and re-direct the “signs of the times.”

But even in the 1820s the image and symbol of Goethe is insufficient on its own: Kant is invoked by Carlyle to offer a vision of a material universe that was still inter-penetrated with spirit. Idealism, for Carlyle, was not a matter of philosophical logic: that was no use to him. Instead it was a way of gaining inward insight into truth and intuitive knowledge. By this means the world could be re-integrated despite the loss of faith into a single consciousness. This reconciled intellect and moral sense, yielding a description of the world as well as a source of prescriptive guidance and lessons. Such a reading of German Idealism gave a priority to literature and history over philosophy because the former crystallised character and event and narrative so as to make the moral point more embedded and accessible to the reader. German Idealism, according to Carlyle, preserved a social role for religion and celebrated the way in which literary and historical truth could assist in realizing the full potential of human nature by teaching, reassurance and interpretation for contemporary citizens.

What matters here, as I have said, is not the accuracy of Carlyle’s reading of the German thinkers, but the eclectic use he made of their insights into the potential for history as a discipline which could interpret the present as well as evoke and bring to life the past. He appreciated

that literary forms were now as valid as philosophical ones as means for discussing epistemological questions, a view that was also strongly influential on George Eliot and George Lewes through Carlyle's example. As George Eliot wrote: "When he is saying the very opposite of what we think, he says it so finely, with so hearty conviction… that we are obliged to say 'Hear! Hear!' to the writer before we can give the decorous 'Oh! Oh!' to his opinions."

historian, who cared about accurate sources, compels him to argue against himself. Methodologically, this is itself of interest as these essays show the beginnings of Carlyle's habit (prefiguring what we've come to call "post-modern") of breaking up the narrative with different "voices" and opinions within his own authorial personality, so tense and taxing does the intellectual navigation become.

And the second general point of interest in both essays is the way in which he tries to blame the eighteenth century for having an inadequate epistemology in its attempt to interpret the world. Drawing on Kant he argues that there is a contrast between "understanding" (*Verstand*) and "reason" (*Vernunft*)' which is recognised by all the German Romantics and never penetrated by the Enlightenment. For Carlyle, "understanding" deals with the capacity to analyse and calculate the outer world of appearances, while "reason" offers insight into the transcendental ideal nature of things and values. The French Enlightenment offered a one-eyed vision of understanding to which

the project on Oliver Cromwell that eventually mutated into the edition of the *Letters and Speeches*.

Thus Carlyle's historiography takes up a position ultimately that stands about as far from the idea of "philosophic history" championed by Voltaire, as it is possible to be: his prophetic use of the "Ancient Monk" episode in *Past & Present* is about as far from eighteenth-century models as it is possible to move: a twelfth-century monastic

publicity and in developing his personal finances is even-handed so that his description of Voltaire displaying “unrivalled expertness of management” which is “in turns imperious and obsequious,” culminating in the final return to Paris in 1778 is perfectly fair; and it is unexceptionable and correct to state that Voltaire in effect “drowns in an ocean of applause.”[8] Carlyle encapsulates his reading in a fine set-piece description of Voltaire’s triumphal if ultimately fatal return to the city and his apotheosis at a production of *Irène*, a vignette that takes the reader to the heart of events with both vividness and panache.

Always one with a keen eye for mixed motives and moral actions undertaken for immoral reasons, Carlyle notes Voltaire’s role as a benefactor of the underprivileged and campaigner for good causes and the correction of miscarriages of justice; for “should the uncharitable even calculate that love of reputation was the sole motive, we can only remind them that love of *such* reputation is itself the effect of a social and humane disposition.”[9] He also offers a much fairer summary of Voltaire’s troubled dealings with Frederick the Great than other commentators, and indeed he himself in his later over-lengthy, point-scoring treatment in the *Reign of Frederick II*. Among his writings Carlyle singles out for praise Voltaire’s *History of the Reign of Charles XII* (which is striking given the way that work had been savaged by Macaulay):

> the clearest details are given in the fewest words; we have sketches of strange men and strange countries, of wars, adventures and negotiations, in a style which, for graphic brevity rivals Sallust. It is a line-engraving, on a reduced scale, of that Swede and his mad life; without colours, yet not without the fore-shortenings and perspective observances, nay not altogether without the deeper harmonies, which belong to a true Picture.[10]

[8] *Ibid.* 390-6.
[9] *Ibid.* 369.
[10] *Ibid*. 402.

for lamps and Eternity as a background.. but a poor wearisome debating-club dispute between the *Encyclopédie* and the *Sorbonne*."[15]

In other words Voltaire remains caught in the world of appearances without access to the transcendent truth; he misses true faith in his concentration on condemnation of doctrine, and thus despite his role as a leader of the Enlightenment, capitulates before the demands of "no higher divinity than Public Opinion." Without the stable moral compass provided by access to the deeper 'reason' of religion, Voltaire prefers "truth but chiefly of the triumphant sort" which is "less the produce of Meditation than of Argument."[16] His first question with regard to any doctrine, perhaps his ultimate test of its worth and genuineness is: "Can others be convinced of this? Can I truck it in the market for power?"[17] To this extent Carlyle actually prefers the philosophy of Rousseau, which was always based on "passion" rather than "prudent calculation."[18]

Now there is obviously a temptation to dismiss this judgement out-of-hand, as purely a product of Carlyle's own determination to do down Voltaire in favour of German thinkers, to find grounds for downgrading the eighteenth

Secondly, and more importantly, Carlyle steps back to a degree from his critique of Voltaire's personality by immediately following his argument with the concession that Voltaire's faults are those of his age as much as of his nature. The lack of transcendence that Carlyle laments in Voltaire is attributed to the exclusion of intellectuals from participation in public policy-making, the decay and corruption of the governing order in France, and the frivolity of the court. Here in its distilled essence we have the argument of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837), which does not blame the Enlightenment *per se* (and in the manner of de Tocqueville) for undermining confidence in the Old

Revolution crystallises around the failures of the ruling class not merely or even mainly the French Enlightenment: moral failure on the part of the society of orders reaps the justified whirlwind. The revolutionary era is seen as a theodicy in which a just Providence is reasserted. The ruling elite is responsible *for* but not *to* the people over which it presides, and is open to divine punishment for neglect of its duties. There is a complex nexus of rights and responsibilities between rulers and ruled that the rulers broke with first. Such a position is tactically useful to Carlyle in that it allows him to retain an admiration for some aspects of Voltaire's work while also placing him on a lower pedestal

them fully rather than hiding behind a contemptible “faint possible theism” which he finds endemic in the political establishment Britain in the 1830s. Again Diderot is seen as simply responding to the “spirit of the age” rather than acting as a main intellectual innovator: “the mouldering down of a Social System is no cheerful business either to form part of, or to look at: however, at length in the course of it, there comes a time when the mouldering changes into a rushing… of all labourers, no one can see such rapid extensive fruit of his labour as the Destroyer can and does.”[22] Despite appreciative portraits of D’Alembert and Rousseau and the enlightened despots, the essay ends firmly in the conviction that the Enlightenment is a destructive rather than creative movement, even though that may not have been its intent.

This critique of the French Enlightenment develops further nuance and detail across his career, and embraces a more detailed examination of Rousseau and other *philosophes* too in *The French Revolution;* but in essence it does not change its contours. Rather it simply becomes more strident. Gradually, in his handling of these authors Carlyle loses the faculty he often demonstrates elsewhere – and especially in his social critic

moral and earnest and pious Protestant Prussia and over the immoral, frivolous and sceptical Catholic France (here the background of diplomatic tensions that later led to the Franco-Prussian War is

Liberal party pantheon too. Now this vision of the French Enlightenment was as much present-centred as Carlyle's had been, but it was also very much a response to the example Carlyle had already offered in using Enlightenment thought to fight contemporary battles.

At the time of writing his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), Leslie Stephen frequently found himself posing this question: "Why had the work of eighteenth-century scepticism to be done all over again in the nineteenth century?" "Why had the work of Hume and Voltaire to be repeated?" In Britain, Stephen and others gave the reason simply as the impact of evolutionary theories of Darwin and of other kinds on the very concept of a metaphysical explanation for the origin of the cosmos, which had been left intact during the Enlightenment, even in the works of Hume and Voltaire. But another part of the answer may lie in the consistent down playing in the Britain of the first half of the nineteenth century of the work of the French Enlightenment, and its place in intellectual historiography. Even when that

preface that social conditions and structure shape the development of ideas, and his actual practice in the book, where he restricts himself to describing the inter-connections and conflicts between the thinkers themselves, with little or no reference to social context. Why does he not follow his stated precepts? Again, it was suggested at the time that Stephen was really trying to apply Darwin to the history of thought, but baulked at the idea of conceding that rationalist and deist thought had actually lost out to the Evangelical revival; that, in other words, the very notions whose history he proposed to write were not winning the evolutionary struggle. Be that as it may, it is hard to see why Stephen would have exposed himself to this contradiction unless he felt that after Carlyle any intellectual historian had to at least flag up the importance of social context in determining the battle of ideas, especially one where the battle between science and theology seemed to revive the confrontation between reason and dogma dramatised by Carlyle in his own history of the era of the French Revolution.

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