CHAPTER VIII

CARLYLE AS MAN OF LETTERS, CRITIC, AND HISTORIAN

CARLYLE was so essentially a Preacher that the choice of a profession made for him by his parents was in some measure justified; but he was also a keen Critic, unamenable to ecclesiastic or other rule, a leader of the revolutionary spirit of the age, even while protesting against its extremes: above all, he was a literary Artist. Various opinions will continue to be held as to the value of his sermons; the excellence of his best workmanship is universally acknowledged. He was endowed with few of the qualities which secure a quick success—fluency, finish of style, the art of giving graceful utterance to current thought; he had in full measure the stronger if slower powers—sound knowledge, infinite industry, and the sympathetic insight of penetrative imagination—that ultimately hold the fastnesses of fame. His habit of startling his hearers, which for a time restricted, at a later date widened their circle. There is much, sometimes even tiresome, repetition in Carlyle's work; the range of his ideas is limited, he plays on a few strings, with wonderfully versatile variations; in reading his later we are continually confronted with the "old familiar faces" of his earlier essays. But, after the perfunctory work for Brewster he wrote nothing wholly commonplace;

occasionally paradoxical to the verge of absurdity, he is never dull.

Setting aside his TRANSLATIONS, always in prose, often in verse, masterpieces of their kind, he made his first mark in CRITICISM, which may be regarded as a higher kind of translation: the great value of his work in this direction is due to his so regarding it. Most criticism has for its aim to show off the critic; good criticism interprets the author. Fifty years ago, in allusion to methods of reviewing, not even now wholly obsolete, Carlyle wrote:—

> The first and most convenient is for the reviewer to perch himself resolutely, as it were, on the shoulder of his author, and therefrom to show as if he commanded him and looked down upon him by natural superiority of stature. Whatsoever the great man says or does the little man shall treat with an air of knowingness and light condescending mockery, professing with much covert sarcasm that this or that is beyond *his* comprehension, and cunningly asking his readers if *they* comprehend it.

There is here perhaps some "covert sarcasm" directed against contemporaries who forgot that their mission was to pronounce on the merits of the books reviewed, and not to patronise their authors; it may be set beside the objection to Jeffrey's fashion of saying, "I like this; I do not like that," without giving the reason why. But in this instance the writer did reck his own rede. The temptation of a smart critic is to seek or select legitimate or illegitimate objects of attack; and that Carlyle was well armed with the shafts of ridicule is apparent in his essays as in his histories; superabundantly so in his letters and conversation. His examination of the *German Playwrights*, of *Taylor's German Literature*, and his inimitable sketch of Herr Döring, the hapless biographer of Richter, are as amusing as Macaulay's *coup de grâce* to

Robert Montgomery. But the graver critic would have us take to heart these sentences of his essay on Voltaire :—[1]

> Far be it from us to say that solemnity is an essential of greatness; that no great man can have other than a rigid vinegar aspect of countenance, never to be thawed or warmed by billows of mirth. There are things in this world to be laughed at as well as things to be admired. Nevertheless, contempt is a dangerous element to sport in; a deadly one if we habitually live in it. The faculty of love, of admiration, is to be regarded as a sign and the measure of high souls; unwisely directed, it leads to many evils; but without it, there cannot be any good. Ridicule, on the other hand, is the smallest of all faculties that other men are at pains to repay with any esteem. . . . Its nourishment and essence is denial, which hovers only on the surface, while knowledge dwells far below, . . . it cherishes nothing but our vanity, which may in general be left safely enough to shift for itself.

We may compare with this one of the writer's numerous warnings to young men taking to literature, as to drinking, in despair of anything better to do, ending with the exhortation, "Witty above all things, oh, be not witty"; or turn to the passage in the review of Sir Walter Scott :—

> Is it with ease or not with ease that a man shall do his best in any shape; above all, in this shape justly named of soul's travail, working in the deep places of thought? . . . Not so now nor at any time. . . . Virgil and Tacitus, were they ready writers? The whole *Prophecies of Isaiah* are not equal in extent to this cobweb of a Review article. Shakespeare, we may fancy, wrote with rapidity; but not till he had thought with intensity, . . . no easy writer he. Neither was Milton one of the mob of gentlemen that write with ease. Goethe tells us he "had nothing sent to him in his sleep," no page of his but he knew well how it came there. Schiller—"konnte nie fertig werden" —never could get done. Dante sees himself "growing lean"

[1] As an estimate of Voltaire this brilliant essay is inadequate. Carlyle's maxim, we want to be told "not what is *not* true but what *is* true," prevented him from appreciating the great work of the Encyclopædists

over his *Divine Comedy*; in stern solitary death wrestle with it, to prevail over it and do it, if his uttermost faculty may; hence too it is done and prevailed over, and the fiery life of it endures for evermore among men. No; creation, one would think, cannot be easy; your Jove has severe pains and fire flames in the head, out of which an armed Pallas is struggling! As for manufacture, that is a different matter. . . . Write by steam if thou canst contrive it and sell it, but hide it like virtue.

In these and frequent similar passages lies the secret of Carlyle's slow recognition, long struggle, and ultimate success; also of his occasional critical intolerance. Commander-in-chief of the "red artillery," he sets too little store on the graceful yet sometimes decisive charges of the light brigades of literature. He feels nothing but contempt for the banter of men like Jerrold; despises the genial pathos of Lamb; and salutes the most brilliant wit and exquisite lyrist of our century with the Puritanical comment, "Blackguard Heine." He deified work as he deified strength; and so often stimulated his imitators to attempt to leap beyond their shadows. Hard work will not do everything: a man can only accomplish what he was born fit for. Many, in the first flush of ambition doomed to wreck, are blind to the fact that it is not in every ploughman to be a poet, nor in every prize-student to be a philosopher. Nature does half: after all perhaps the larger half. Genius has been absurdly defined as "an infinite capacity for taking trouble"; no amount of pumping can draw more water than is in the well. Himself in "the chamber of little ease," Carlyle travestied Goethe's "worship of sorrow" till it became a pride in pain. He forgot that rude energy requires restraint. Hercules Furens and Orlando Furioso did more than cut down trees; they tore them up; but to no useful end. His power is often almost Miltonic; it is never Shakespearian; and his insistent earnestness would run the risk of fatiguing us were

it not redeemed by his humour. But he errs on the better side; and his example is a salutary counteractive in an age when the dust of so many skirmishers obscures the air, and laughter is too readily accepted as the test of truth. His stern conception of literature accounts for his exaltations of the ideal, and denunciations of the actual, profession of letters in passages which, from his habit of emphasising opposite sides of truth, instead of striking a balance, appear almost side by side in contradiction. The following condenses the ideal:—

If the poor and humble toil that we have food, must not the high and glorious toil for him in return, that he may have guidance, freedom, immortality? These two in all degrees I honour; all else is chaff and dust, which let the wind blow whither it listeth. Doubt, desire, sorrow, remorse, indignation, despair itself—all these like hell-hounds lie beleaguering the souls of the poor day worker as of every man; but he bends himself with free valour against his task, and all these are stifled —all these shrink murmuring far off in their caves.

Against this we have to set innumerable tirades on the crime of worthless writing, *e.g.*—

No mortal has a right to wag his tongue, much less to wag his pen, without saying something; he knows not what mischief he does, past computation, scattering words without meaning, to afflict the whole world yet before they cease. For thistle-down flies abroad on all winds and airs of wind. . . . Ship-loads of fashionable novels, sentimental rhymes, tragedies, farces . . . tales by flood and field are swallowed monthly into the bottomless pool; still does the press toil, . . . and still in torrents rushes on the great army of publications to their final home; and still oblivion, like the grave, cries give! give! How is it that of all these countless multitudes no one can . . . produce ought that shall endure longer than "snowflake on the river? Because they are foam, because there is no reality in them. . . ." Not by printing ink alone does man live. Literature, as followed at present, is but a species of brewing or cooking, where the cooks use poison and vend it by telling innumerable lies.

These passages owe their interest to the attestation of their sincerity by the writer's own practice. "Do not," he counsels one of his unknown correspondents, "take up a subject because it is singular and will get you credit, but because you *love* it," and he himself acted on the rule. Nothing more impresses the student of Carlyle's works than his *thoroughness*. He never took a task in hand without the determination to perform it to the utmost of his ability; consequently when he satisfied himself that he was master of his subject he satisfied his readers; but this mastery was only attained, as it is only attainable, by the most rigorous research. He seems to have written down his results with considerable fluency: the molten ore flowed freely forth, but the process of smelting was arduous. The most painful part of literary work is not the actual composition, but the accumulation of details, the wearisome compilation of facts, weighing of previous criticisms, the sifting of the grains of wheat from the bushels of chaff. This part of his task Carlyle performed with an admirable conscientiousness. His numerous letters applying for out-of-the-way books to buy or borrow, for every pamphlet throwing light on his subject, bear testimony to the careful exactitude which rarely permitted him to leave any record unread or any worthy opinion untested about any event of which or any person of whom he undertook to write. From Templand (1833) he applies for seven volumes of Beaumarchais, three of Bassompierre, the Memoirs of Abbé Georgel, and every attainable account of Cagliostro and the Countess de la Motte, to fuse into *The Diamond Necklace*. To write the essay on *Werner* and the *German Playwrights* he swam through seas of trash. He digested the whole of *Diderot* for one review article. He seems to have read through *Jean Paul Richter*, a feat to accomplish which Germans require a special dictionary. When engaged on

the Civil War he routed up a whole shoal of obscure seventeenth-century papers from Yarmouth, the remnant of a yet larger heap, "read hundredweights of dreary books," and endured "a hundred Museum headaches." In grappling with *Friedrich* he waded through so many gray historians that we can forgive his sweeping condemnation of their dulness. He visited all the scenes and places of which he meant to speak, from St. Ives to Prague, and explored the battlefields. Work done after this fashion seldom brings a swift return; but if it is utilised and made vivid by literary genius it has a claim to permanence. Bating a few instances where his sense of proportion is defective, or his eccentricity is in excess, Carlyle puts his ample material to artistic use; seldom making ostentation of detail, but skilfully concentrating, so that we read easily and readily recall what he has written. Almost everything he has done has made a mark: his best work in criticism is final, it does not require to be done again. He interests us in the fortunes of his leading characters: *first*, because he feels with them; *secondly*, because he knows how to distinguish the essence from the accidents of their lives, what to forget and what to remember, where to begin and where to stop. Hence, not only his set biographies, as of Schiller and of Sterling, but the shorter notices in his Essays, are intrinsically more complete and throw more real light on character than whole volumes of ordinary memoirs.

With the limitations above referred to, and in view of his antecedents, the range of Carlyle's critical appreciation is wonderfully wide. Often perversely unfair to the majority of his English contemporaries, the scales seem to fall from his eyes in dealing with the great figures of other nations. The charity expressed in the saying that we should judge men, not by the number of their faults, but by the amount of their deflection from the circle, great or

small, that bounds their being, enables him often to do justice to those most widely differing in creed, sentiment, and lines of activity from each other and from himself. When treating congenial themes he errs by overestimate rather than by depreciation : among the qualities of his early work, which afterwards suffered some eclipse in the growth of other powers, is its flexibility. It was natural for Carlyle, his successor in genius in the Scotch lowlands, to give an account of Robert Burns which throws all previous criticism of the poet into the shade. Similarly he has strong affinities to Johnson, Luther, Knox, Cromwell, to all his so-called heroes: but he is fair to the characters, if not always to the works, of Voltaire and Diderot, slurs over or makes humorous the escapades of Mirabeau, is undeterred by the mysticism of Novalis, and in the fervour of his worship fails to see the gulf between himself and Goethe.

Carlyle's ESSAYS mark an epoch, *i.e.* the beginning of a new era, in the history of British criticism. The able and vigorous writers who contributed to the early numbers of the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews* successfully applied their taste and judgment to such works as fell within their sphere, and could be fairly tested by their canons; but they passed an alien act on everything that lay beyond the range of their insular view. In dealing with the efforts of a nation, whose literature, the most recent in Europe save that of Russia, had only begun to command recognition, their rules were at fault and their failures ridiculous. If the old formulæ have been theoretically dismissed, and a conscientious critic now endeavours to place himself in the position of his author, the change is largely due to the influence of Carlyle's *Miscellanies*. Previous to their appearance, the literature of Germany, to which half of these papers are devoted, had been (with the exception of Sir

Walter Scott's translation of *Goetz von Berlichingen*, De Quincey's travesties, and Taylor's renderings from Lessing) a sealed book to English readers, save those who were willing to breathe in an atmosphere of Coleridgean mist. Carlyle first made it generally known in England, because he was the first fully to apprehend its meaning. The *Life of Schiller*, which the author himself depreciated, remains one of the best of comparatively short biographies, it abounds in admirable passages (conspicuously the contrast between the elder and the younger of the Dioscuri at Weimar) and has the advantage to some readers of being written in classical English prose.

To the essays relating to Germany, which we may accept as the *disjecta membra* of the author's unpublished History, there is little to add. In these volumes we have the best English account of the Nibelungen Lied—the most graphic, and in the main most just analyses of the genius of Heyne, Richter, Novalis, Schiller, and, above all, of Goethe, who is recorded to have said, "Carlyle is almost more at home in our literature than ourselves." With the Germans he is on his chosen ground; but the range of his sympathies is most apparent in the portrait gallery of eighteenth-century Frenchmen that forms, as it were, a proscenium to his first great History. Among other papers in the same collection the most prominent are the *Signs of the Times* and *Characteristics*, in which he first distinctly broaches some of his peculiar views on political philosophy and life.

The scope and some of the limitations of Carlyle's critical power are exhibited in his second Series[1] of Lec-

[1] Though a mere reproduction of the notes of Mr. Chisholm Anstley, this posthumous publication is justified by its interest and obvious authenticity. The appearance in a prominent periodical (while these sheets are passing through the press) of *Wotton Reinfred* is more open to question. This fragment of a romance, partly based on the

tures, delivered in 1838, when (*æt.* 43) he had reached the maturity of his powers. The first three of these lectures, treating of Ancient History and Literature, bring into strong relief the speaker's inadequate view of Greek thought and civilisation:—

> Greek transactions had never anything alive, no result for us, they were dead entirely . . . all left is a few ruined towers, masses of stone and broken statuary. . . . The writings of Socrates are made up of a few wire-drawn notions about virtue; there is no conclusion, no word of life in him.

These and similar dogmatic utterances are comments of the Hebrew on the Hellene. To the Romans, "the men of antiquity," he is more just, dwelling on their agriculture and road-making as their "greatest work written on the planet;" but the only Latin author he thoroughly appreciates is Tacitus, "a Colossus on edge of dark night." Then follows an exaltation of the Middle Ages, as those in which "we see belief getting the victory over unbelief," in a strain suitable to Cardinal Newman's *Grammar of Assent.* In the struggle between the Popes and the Hohenstaufens, Carlyle's whole sympathy is with Gregory and Hildebrand: he refers to the surrender at Canossa with the characteristic comment, "the clay that is about man is always sufficiently ready to assert its rights; the danger is always the other way, that the spiritual part of man will become overlaid with the bodily part." In the same vein is his praise of Peter the Hermit, whose motto was not the "action, action" of Demosthenes, but "belief, belief." In the brief space of those suggestive though unequal discourses the speaker allows awkward proximity to some of the self-contradictions which, even when scattered farther apart, perplex his readers

plan of *Wilhelm Meister*, with shadowy love episodes recalling the manner of the "Minerva press," can add nothing to Carlyle's reputation.

and render it impossible to credit his philosophy with more than a few strains of consistent thought.

In one page "the judgments of the heart[1] are of more value than those of the head." In the next "morals in a man are the counterpart of the intellect that is in it." The Middle Ages were "a healthy age," and therefore there was next to no Literature. "The strong warrior disdained to write." "Actions will be preserved when all writers are forgotten." Two days later, apropos of Dante, he says, "The great thing which any nation can do is to produce great men. . . . When the Vatican shall have crumbled to dust, and St. Peter's and Strassburg Minster be no more; for thousands of years to come Catholicism will survive in this sublime relic of antiquity—the *Divina Commedia*."

Passing to Spain, Carlyle salutes Cervantes and the Cid, —calling Don Quixote the "poetry of comedy," "the age of gold in self-mockery,"—pays a more reserved tribute to Calderon, ventures on the assertion that Cortes was "as great as Alexander," and gives a sketch, so graphic that it might serve as a text for Motley's great work, of the way in which the decayed Iberian chivalry, rotten through with the Inquisition, broke itself on the Dutch dykes. After a brief outline of the rise of the German power, which had three avatars—the overwhelming of Rome, the Swiss resistance to Austria, and the Reformation—we have a rough estimate of some of the Reformers. Luther is exalted even over Knox; Erasmus is depreciated, while Calvin and Melanchthon are passed by.

The chapter on the Saxons, in which the writer's love of the sea appears in picturesque reference to the old rover kings, is followed by unusually commonplace remarks on earlier English literature, interspersed with some of Carlyle's refrains.

[1] It has been suggested that Carlyle may have been in this instance a student of Vauvenargues, who in the early years of the much-maligned eighteenth century wrote "Les grandes pensées viennent du cœur."

> The mind is one, and consists not of bundles of faculties at all . . . the same features appear in painting, singing, fighting . . . when I hear of the distinction between the poet and the thinker, I really see no difference at all. . . . Bacon sees, Shakespeare sees through, . . . Milton is altogether sectarian — a Presbyterian one might say—he got his knowledge out of Knox. . . . Eve is a cold statue.

Coming to the well-belaboured eighteenth century—when much was done of which the nineteenth talks, and massive books were written that we are content to criticise—we have the inevitable denunciations of scepticism, materialism, argumentation, logic; the quotation, (referred to a motto in the Swiss gardens), "Speech is silvern, silence is golden," and a loud assertion that all great things are silent. The age is commended for Watt's steam engine, Arkwright's spinning jenny, and Whitfield's preaching, but its policy and theories are alike belittled. The summaries of the leading writers are interesting, some curious, and a few absurd. On the threshold of the age Dryden is noted "as a great poet born in the worst of times": Addison as "an instance of one formal man doing great things": Swift is pronounced "by far the greatest man of that time, not unfeeling," who "carried sarcasm to an epic pitch": Pope, we are told, had "one of the finest heads ever known." Sterne is handled with a tenderness that contrasts with the death sentence pronounced on him by Thackeray, "much is forgiven him because he loved much, . . . a good simple being after all." Johnson, the "much enduring," is treated as in the *Heroes* and the Essay. Hume, with "a far duller kind of sense," is commended for "noble perseverance and Stoic endurance of failure; but his eye was not open to faith," etc. On which follows a stupendous criticism of Gibbon, whom Carlyle, returning to his earlier and juster view, ended by admiring.

With all his swagger and bombast, no man ever gave a more futile account of human things than he has done of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

The sketch of the Pre-Revolution period is slight, and marked by a somewhat shallow reference to Rousseau. The last lecture on the recent German writers is a mere *réchauffé* of the Essays. Carlyle closes with the famous passage from Richter, one of those which indicate the influence in style as in thought of the German over the Scotch humorist. "It is now the twelfth hour of the night, birds of darkness are on the wing, the spectres uprear, the dead walk, the living dream. Thou, Eternal Providence, wilt cause the day to dawn." The whole volume is a testimony to the speaker's power of speech, to his often unsurpassed penetration, and to the hopeless variance of the often rapidly shifting streams of his thought.

Detailed criticism of Carlyle's HISTORIES belongs to the sphere of separate disquisitions. Here it is only possible to take note of their general characteristics. His conception of what history should be is shared with Macaulay. Both writers protest against its being made a mere record of "court and camp," of royal intrigue and state rivalry, of pageants of procession, or chivalric encounters. Both find the sources of these outwardly obtrusive events in the underground current of national sentiment, the conditions of the civilisation from which they were evolved, the prosperity or misery of the masses of the people.

The essence of history does not lie in laws, senate-houses, or battle-fields, but in the tide of thought and action—the world of existence that in gloom and brightness blossoms and fades apart from these.

But Carlyle differs from Macaulay in his passion for the concrete. The latter presents us with pictures to illustrate his political theory; the former leaves his pictures to speak

for themselves. "Give him a fact," says Emerson, "he loaded you with thanks; a theory, with ridicule or even abuse." It has been said that with Carlyle History was philosophy teaching by examples. He himself defines it as "the essence of innumerable biographies." He individualises everything he meets; his dislike of abstractions is everywhere extreme. Thus while other writers have expanded biography into history, Carlyle condenses history into biography. Even most biographies are too vague for him. He delights in Boswell: he glides over their generalisations to pick out some previously obscure record from Clarendon or Hume. Even in *The French Revolution*, where the author has mainly to deal with masses in tumult, he gives most prominence to their leaders. They march past us, labelled with strange names, in the foreground of the scene, on which is being enacted the death wrestle of old Feudalism and young Democracy. This book is unique among modern histories for a combination of force and insight only rivalled by the most incisive passages of the seventh book of Thucydides, of Tacitus, of Gibbon, and of Michelet.[1]

The French Revolution is open to the charge of being a comment and a prophecy rather than a narrative: the reader's knowledge of the main events of the period is too much assumed for the purpose of a school book. Even Dryasdust will turn when trod on, and this book has been a happy hunting field to aggressive antiquarians, to whom the mistake of a day in date, the omission or insertion of a letter in a name, is of more moment than the difference between vitalising or petrifying an era. The lumber merchants of history are the born foes of

[1] *Vide* a comparison of Carlyle and Michelet in Dr. Oswald's interesting and suggestive little volume of criticism and selection, *Thomas Carlyle, ein Lebensbild und Goldkörner aus seinen Werken.*

historians who, like Carlyle and Mr. Froude, have manifested their dramatic power of making the past present and the distant near. That the excess of this power is not always compatible with perfect impartiality may be admitted; for a poetic capacity is generally attended by heats of enthusiasm, and is liable to errors of detail; but without some share of it—

> Die Zeiten der Vergangenheit
> Sind uns ein Buch mit sieben Siegeln.

Mere research, the unearthing and arrangement of what Sir Philip Sidney calls "old moth-eaten records," supplies material for the work of the historian proper; and, occasionally to good purpose, corrects it, but, as a rule, with too much flourish. Applying this minute criticism to *The French Revolution*, one reviewer has found that the author has given the wrong number to a regiment: another esteemed scholar has discovered that there are seven errors in the famous account of the flight to Varennes, to wit:—the delay in the departure was due to Bouillé, not to the Queen; she did not lose her way and so delay the start; Ste. Menehould is too big to be called a village; on the arrest, it was the Queen, not the King, who asked for hot water and eggs; the coach went rather faster than is stated; and, above all, *infandum!* it was not painted yellow, but green and black. This criticism does not in any degree detract from the value of one of the most vivid and substantially accurate narratives in the range of European literature. Carlyle's object was to convey the soul of the Revolution, not to register its upholstery. The annalist, be he dryasdust or gossip, is, in legal phrase, "the devil" of the prose artist, whose work makes almost as great a demand on the imaginative faculty as that of the poet. Historiography is related to History as the

Chronicles of Holinshed and the Voyages of Hakluyt to the Plays of Shakespeare, plays which Marlborough confessed to have been the main source of his knowledge of English history. Some men are born philologists or antiquarians; but, as the former often fail to see the books because of the words, the latter cannot read the story for the dates. The mass of readers require precisely what has been contemptuously referred to as the "Romance of History," provided it leaves with them an accurate impression, as well as an inspiring interest. Save in his over-hasty acceptance of the French *blague* version of "The Sinking of the Vengeur," Carlyle has never laid himself open to the reproach of essential inaccuracy. As far as possible for a man of genius, he was a devotee of facts. He is never a careless, though occasionally an impetuous writer; his graver errors are those of emotional misinterpretation. It has been observed that, while contemning Robespierre, he has extenuated the guilt of Danton as one of the main authors of the September massacres, and, more generally, that "his quickness and brilliancy made him impatient of systematic thought." But his histories remain the best illuminations of fact in our language. *The French Revolution* is a series of flame-pictures; every page is on fire; we read the whole as if listening to successive volleys of artillery: nowhere has such a motley mass been endowed with equal life. This book alone vindicates Lowell's panegyric: "the figures of most historians seem like dolls stuffed with bran, whose whole substance runs through any hole that criticism may tear in them; but Carlyle's are so real that if you prick them they bleed."

When Carlyle generalises, as in the introductions to his Essays, he is apt to thrust his own views on his subject and on his readers; but, unlike De Quincey, who had a like love of excursus, he comes to the point before the close.

The one claimed the privilege, assumed by Coleridge, of starting from no premises and arriving at no conclusion; the other, in his capacity as a critic, arrives at a conclusion, though sometimes from questionable premises. It is characteristic of his habit of concentrating, rather than condensing, that Carlyle abandoned his design of a history of the Civil Wars for *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches.* The events of the period, whose issues the writer has firmly grasped, are brought into prominence mainly as they elucidate the career of his hero; but the "elucidations" have been accepted, with a few reservations, as final. No single work has gone so far to reverse a traditional estimate. The old current conceptions of the Protector are refuted out of his own mouth; but it was left for his editor to restore life to the half-forgotten records, and sweep away the clouds that obscured their revelations of a great though rugged character. *Cromwell* has been generally accepted in Scotland as Carlyle's masterpiece—a judgment due to the fact of its being, among the author's mature works, the least apparently opposed to the theological views prevalent in the north of our island. In reality—though containing some of his finest descriptions and battle-pieces, conspicuously that of "Dunbar"—it is the least artistic of his achievements, being overladen with detail and superabounding in extract. A good critic[1] has said that it was a labour of love, like Spedding's *Bacon*; but that the correspondence, lavishly reproduced in both works, has "some of the defects of lovers' letters to those to whom they are not addressed." Carlyle has established that Oliver was not a hypocrite, "not a man of falsehood, but a man of truth": he has thrown doubts on his being a fanatic; but he has left it open to M. Guizot to establish that his later rule was a practical despotism.

[1] In *St. James' Gazette*, February 11th, 1881.

In *Friedrich II.* he undertook a yet greater task; and his work stretching over a wider arena, is, of necessity, more of a history, less of a biography, than any of his others. In constructing and composing it he was oppressed not only by the magnitude and complexity of his theme, but, for the first time, by hesitancies as to his choice of a hero. He himself confessed, "I never was admitted much to *Friedrich's* confidence, and I never cared very much about him." Yet he determined, almost of malice prepense, to exalt the narrow though vivid Prussian as "the last of the kings, the one genuine figure in the eighteenth century," and though failing to prove his case, he has, like a loyal lawyer, made the best of his brief. The book embodies and conveys the most brilliant and the most readable account of a great part of the century, and nothing he has written bears such ample testimony to the writer's pictorial genius. It is sometimes garrulous with the fluency of an old man eloquent; parts of the third volume, with its diffuse extracts from the king's survey of his realm, are hard if not weary reading; but the rest is a masterpiece of historic restoration. The introductory portion, leading us through one of the most tangled woods of genealogy and political adjustment, is relieved from tedium by the procession of the half-forgotten host of German worthies,—St. Adalbert and his mission; old Barbarossa; Leopold's mystery; Conrad and St. Elizabeth; Ptolemy Alphonso; Otto with the arrow; Margaret with the mouth; Sigismund *supra grammaticam*; Augustus the physically strong; Albert Achilles and Albert Alcibiades; Anne of Cleves; Mr. John Kepler,—who move on the pages, more brightly "pictured" than those of Livy, like marionettes inspired with life. In the main body of the book the men and women of the Prussian court are brought before us in fuller light and shade. Friedrich himself, at Sans Souci, with his cocked-hat, walking-stick,

and wonderful gray eyes; Sophia Charlotte's grace, wit, and music; Wilhelmina and her book; the old Hyperborean; the black artists Seckendorf and Grumkow; George I. and his blue-beard chamber; the little drummer; the Old Dessauer; the cabinet Venus; Grävenitz Hecate; Algarotti; Goetz in his tower; the tragedy of Katte; the immeasurable comedy of Maupertuis, the flattener of the earth, and Voltaire; all these and a hundred more are summoned by a wizard's wand from the land of shadows, to march by the central figures of these volumes; to dance, flutter, love, hate, intrigue, and die before our eyes. It is the largest and most varied show-box in all history; a prelude to a series of battle-pieces—Rossbach, Leuthen, Molwitz, Zorndorf—nowhere else, save in the author's own pages, approached in prose, and rarely rivalled out of Homer's verse.

Carlyle's style, in the chiaro-oscuro of which his Histories and three-fourths of his Essays are set, has naturally provoked much criticism and some objurgation. M. Taine says it is "exaggerated and demoniacal." Hallam[1] could not read *The French Revolution* because of its "detestable" style, and Wordsworth, whose own prose was perfectly limpid, is reported to have said, "No Scotchman can write English. C—— is a pest to the language." Carlyle's style is not that of Addison, of Berkeley, or of Helps; its peculiarities are due to the eccentricity of an always eccentric being; but it is neither affected nor deliberately imitated. It has been plausibly asserted that his earlier manner of writing, as in *Schiller*, under the influence of Jeffrey, was not in his natural voice. "They forget," he said, referring to his critics, "that the style is the skin of the writer, not a coat:

[1] Carlyle with equal unfairness disparaged Hallam's *Literature of Europe* (containing among other fine criticisms the splendid summary of "Lear") as a valley of dry bones.

and the public is an old woman." Erratic, metaphorical, elliptical to excess, and therefore a dangerous model, "the mature oaken Carlylese style," with its freaks, "nodosities and angularities," is as set and engrained in his nature as the *Birthmark* in Hawthorne's romance. To recast a chapter of the *Revolution* in the form of a chapter of Macaulay would be like rewriting Tacitus in the form of Cicero, or Browning in the form of Pope. Carlyle is seldom obscure, the energy of his manner is part of his matter; its abruptness corresponds to the abruptness of his thought, which proceeds often as it were by a series of electric shocks, that threaten to break through the formal restraints of an ordinary sentence. He writes like one who must, under the spell of his own winged words; at all hazards, determined to convey his meaning; willing, like Montaigne, to "despise no phrase of those that run in the streets," to speak in strange tongues, and even to coin new words for the expression of a new emotion. It is his fashion to care as little for rounded phrase as for logical argument: and he rather convinces and persuades by calling up a succession of feelings than by a train of reasoning. He repeats himself like a preacher, instead of condensing like an essayist. The American Thoreau writes in the course of an incisive survey:—

> Carlyle's . . . mastery over the language is unrivalled; it is with him a keen, resistless weapon; his power of words is endless. All nature, human and external, is ransacked to serve and run his errands. The bright cutlery, after all the dross of Birmingham has been thrown aside, is his style. . . . He has broken the ice, and the torrent streams forth. He drives six-in-hand over ruts and streams and never upsets. . . . With wonderful art he grinds into paint for his picture all his moods and experiences, and crashes his way through shoals of dilettante opinions. It is not in man to determine what his style shall be, if it is to be his own.

But though a rugged, Carlyle was the reverse of a careless or ready writer. He weighed every sentence: if in all his works, from *Sartor* to the *Reminiscences*, you pencil-mark the most suggestive passages you disfigure the whole book. His opinions will continue to be tossed to and fro; but as an artist he continually grows. He was, let us grant, though a powerful, a one-sided historian, a twisted though in some aspects a great moralist; but he was, in every sense, a mighty painter, now dipping his pencil "in the hues of earthquake and eclipse," now etching his scenes with the tender touch of a Millet.

Emerson, in one of his early letters to Carlyle, wrote, "Nothing seems hid from those wonderful eyes of yours; those devouring eyes; those thirsty eyes; those portrait-eating, portrait-painting eyes of thine." Men of genius, whether expressing themselves in prose or verse, on canvas or in harmony, are, save when smitten, like Beethoven, by some malignity of Nature, endowed with keener physical senses than other men. They actually, not metaphorically, see more and hear more than their fellows. Carlyle's super-sensitive ear was to him, through life, mainly a torment; but the intensity of his vision was that of a born artist, and to it we owe the finest descriptive passages, if we except those of Mr. Ruskin, in English prose. None of our poets, from Chaucer and Dunbar to Burns and Tennyson, have been more alive to the influences of external nature. His early letters abound in passages like the following, on the view from Arthur Seat:—

The blue, majestic, everlasting ocean, with the Fife hills swelling gradually into the Grampians behind; rough crags and rude precipices at our feet (where not a hillock rears its head unsung) with Edinburgh at their base clustering proudly over her rugged foundations and covering with a vapoury mantle the jagged black masses of stonework that stretch far and wide, and show like a city of Faeryland. . . . I saw it all last evening when the

sun was going down, and the moon's fine crescent, like a pretty silver creature as it is, was riding quietly above me.

Compare with this the picture, in a letter to Sterling, of Middlebie burn, "leaping into its cauldron, singing a song better than Pasta's"; or that of the Scaur Water, that may be compared with Tennyson's verses in the valley of Cauteretz; or the sketches of the Flemish cities in the tour of 1842, with the photograph of the lace-girl, recalling Sterne at his purest; or the account of the "atmosphere like silk" over the moor, with the phrase, "it was as if Pan slept"; or the few lines written at Thurso, where "the sea is always one's friend"; or the later memories of Mentone, old and new, in the *Reminiscences* (vol. ii. pp. 335-340).

The most striking of those descriptions are, however, those in which the interests of some thrilling event or crisis of human life or history steal upon the scene, and give it a further meaning, as in the dim streak of dawn rising over St. Abb's Head on the morning of Dunbar, or in the following famous apostrophe:—

O evening sun of July, how at this hour thy beams fall slant on reapers amid peaceful, woody fields; on old women spinning in cottages; on ships far out in the silent main; on balls at the Orangerie at Versailles, where high-rouged dames of the palace are even now dancing with double-jacketed Hussar officers; —and also on this roaring Hell-porch of an Hotel-du-Ville.

Carlyle is, here and there, led astray by the love of contrast; but not even Heinrich Heine has employed antithesis with more effect than in the familiar passage on the sleeping city in *Sartor*, beginning, "Ach mein Lieber . . . it is a true sublimity to dwell here," and ending, "But I, mein Werther, sit above it all. I am alone with the stars." His thought, seldom quite original, is often a resuscitation or survival, and owes much of its celebrity to its splendid brocade. *Sartor Resartus* itself escaped the failure that was

at first threatened by its eccentricity partly from its noble passion, partly because of the truth of the "clothes philosophy," applied to literature as to life.

His descriptions, too often caricatures, of men are equally vivid. They set the whole great mass of *Friedrich* in a glow; they lighten the tedium of *Cromwell's* lumbering despatches; they give a heart of fire to *The French Revolution.* Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* attempts and fulfils on a smaller what Carlyle achieved on a greater scale. The historian makes us sympathise with the real actors, even more than the novelist does with the imaginary characters on the same stage. From the account of the dying Louis XV. to the "whiff of grapeshot" which closed the last scene of the great drama, there is not a dull page. Théroigne de Méricourt, Marat, Danton, Camille Desmoulins, Mirabeau, Robespierre, Talleyrand, Louis the Simple, above all Marie Antoinette—for whom Carlyle has an affection akin to that of Mirabeau—so kindle and colour the scene that we cannot pause to feel weary of the phrases with which they are labelled. The author's letters show the same power of baptizing, which he used often to unfair excess. We can no more forget Count d'Orsay as the "Phœbus Apollo of Dandyism," Daniel Webster's "brows like cliffs and huge black eyes," or Wordsworth "munching raisins" and recognising no poet but himself, or Maurice "attacked by a paroxysm of mental cramp," than we can dismiss from our memories "The Glass Coachman" or "The Tobacco Parliament."

Carlyle quotes a saying of Richter, that Luther's words were like blows; he himself compares those of Burns to cannon-balls; much of his own writing is a fusilade. All three were vehement in abuse of things and persons they did not like; abuse that might seem reckless, if not sometimes coarse, were it not redeemed, as the rogueries of

Falstaff are, by strains of humour. The most Protean quality of Carlyle's genius is his humour: now lighting up the crevices of some quaint fancy, now shining over his serious thought like sunshine over the sea, it is at its best as finely quaint as that of Cervantes, more humane than Swift's. There is in it, as in all the highest humour, a sense of apparent contrast, even of contradiction, in life, of matter for laughter in sorrow and tears in joy. He seems to check himself, and as if afraid of wearing his heart in his sleeve, throws in absurd illustrations of serious propositions, partly to show their universal range, partly in obedience to an instinct of reserve, to escape the reproach of sermonising and to cut the story short. Carlyle's grotesque is a mode of his golden silence, a sort of Socratic irony, in the indulgence of which he laughs at his readers and at himself. It appears now in the form of transparent satire, ridicule of his own and other ages, now in droll reference or mock heroic detail, in an odd conception, a character sketch, an event in parody, in an antithesis or simile,—sometimes it lurks in a word, and again in a sentence. In direct pathos—the other side of humour—he is equally effective. His denunciations of sentiment remind us of Plato attacking the poets, for he is at heart the most emotional of writers, the greatest of the prose poets of England; and his dramatic sympathy extends alike to the actors in real events and to his ideal creations. Few more pathetic passages occur in literature than his "stories of the deaths of kings." The following among the less known of his eloquent passages is an apotheosis of their burials:—

In this manner did the men of the Eastern Counties take up the slain body of their Edmund, where it lay cast forth in the village of Hoxne; seek out the severed head and reverently reunite the same. They embalmed him with myrrh and sweet spices, with love, pity, and all high and awful thoughts; con-

secrating him with a very storm of melodious, adoring admiration, and sun-dried showers of tears; joyfully, yet with awe (as all deep joy has something of the awful in it), commemorating his noble deeds and godlike walk and conversation while on Earth. Till, at length, the very Pope and Cardinals at Rome were forced to hear of it; and they, summing up as correctly as they well could, with *Advocatus Diaboli* pleadings and other forms of process, the general verdict of mankind, declared that he had in very fact led a hero's life in this world; and, being now gone, was gone, as they conceived, to God above and reaping his reward there. Such, they said, was the best judgment they could form of the case, and truly not a bad judgment.

Carlyle's reverence for the past makes him even more apt to be touched by its sorrows than amused by its follies. With a sense of brotherhood he holds out hands to all that were weary; he feels even for the pedlars climbing the Hohenzollern valley, and pities the solitude of soul on the frozen Schreckhorn of power, whether in a dictator of Paraguay or in a Prussian prince. He leads us to the death chamber of Louis XV., of Mirabeau, of Cromwell, of Sterling, his own lost friend; and we feel with him in the presence of a solemnising mystery. Constantly, amid the din of arms or words, and the sarcasms by which he satirises and contemns old follies and idle strifes, a gentler feeling wells up in his pages like the sound of the Angelus. Such pauses of pathos are the records of real or fanciful situations, as of Teufelsdröckh "left alone with the night" when Blumine and Herr Towgood ride down the valley; of Oliver recalling the old days at St. Ives; of the Electress Louisa bidding adieu to her Elector.

At the moment of her death, it is said, when speech had fled, he felt from her hand, which lay in his, three slight slight pressures—farewell thrice mutely spoken in that manner, not easily to forget in this world.

There is nothing more pathetic in the range of his

works, if in that of our literature, than the account of the relations of father and son in the domestic history of the Prussian Court, from the first estrangement between them—the young Friedrich in his prison at Cüstrin, the old Friedrich gliding about seeking shelter from ghosts, mourning for Absalom—to the reconciliation, the end, and the afterthoughts:—

The last breath of Friedrich Wilhelm having fled, Friedrich hurried to a private room; sat there all in tears; looking back through the gulfs of the Past, upon such a Father now rapt away for ever. Sad all and soft in the moonlight of memory—the lost Loved One all in the right as we now see, we all in the wrong!—This, it appears, was the Son's fixed opinion. Seven years hence here is how Friedrich concludes the *History* of his Father, written with a loyal admiration throughout: "We have left under silence the domestic chagrins of this great Prince; readers must have some indulgence for the faults of the children, in consideration of the virtues of such a Father." All in tears he sits at present, meditating these sad things. In a little while the Old Dessauer, about to leave for Dessau, ventures in to the Crown Prince, Crown Prince no longer; "embraces his knees," offers weeping his condolence, his congratulation; hopes withal that his sons and he will be continued in their old posts, and that he the Old Dessauer "will have the same authority as in the late reign." Friedrich's eyes, at this last clause, flash out tearless, strangely Olympian. "In your posts I have no thought of making change; in your posts yes; and as to authority I know of none there can be but what resides in the king that is sovereign," which, as it were, struck the breath out of the Old Dessauer; and sent him home with a painful miscellany of feelings, astonishment not wanting among them. At an after hour the same night Friedrich went to Berlin, met by acclamation enough. He slept there not without tumult of dreams, one may fancy; and on awakening next morning the first sound he heard was that of the regiment glasenap under his windows, swearing fealty to the new King. He sprang out of bed in a tempest of emotion; bustled distractedly to and fro, wildly weeping. Pöllnitz, who came into the anteroom, found him in this state, "half-dressed, with dishevelled hair, in tears, and as if beside himself." "These

huzzahings only tell me what I have lost," said the new King. "He was in great suffering," suggested Pöllnitz; "he is now at rest." True, he suffered; but he was here with us; and now —— !

Carlyle has said of Dante's *Francesca* "that it is a thing woven as of rainbows on a ground of eternal black." The phrase, well applied to the *Inferno*, is a perhaps half-conscious verdict on his own tenderness as exhibited in his life and in his works.