

Carlyle and Catholicism, Part II: G. K. Chesterton and *Past and Present*

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As an ordinary lowland peasant, he inherited the really valuable historic property of the Scots, their independence, their fighting spirit, and their instinctive philosophic consideration of men merely as men. But he was not an ordinary lowland peasant. If he had laboured obscurely in his village till death, he would have been yet locally a marked man; a man with a wild eye, a man with an air of silent anger; perhaps a man at whom stones were sometimes thrown.

G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (49)

TO DRAW GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON (1874–1936) INTO ANY discussion of England’s Roman Catholic intellectuals in the half-century after Carlyle might seem obvious and necessary. Yet for most of his life Chesterton was a Roman Catholic fellow-traveler, only converting in 1922. The causes of delay invite speculation, but with little proof. I suspect that 1914–22 marks his inability to accept subordination to Pope Benedict XV (1854–1922, Pope from 1914), who, like the successor who chose his name, was resolute in his devotion to peace. Benedict died on 12 January 1922; Chesterton came in six months later. Chesterton had been as passionate an enthusiast for Britain’s war against Germany as could be found, and unlike many latter-day Carlyleans, had no record of Teutonophilia to conceal. In the period 1905–14 there was a pervasive feeling that Roman Catholicism, though admirable, was somewhat or somehow un-English. Chesterton kept his Anglo-Catholicism

more in harmony with Roman Catholicism than most. He explained his rationale in *Orthodoxy* (1908), a companion to his critique on popular British and Irish thinkers, *Heretics* (1905). His comparable book after embracing Roman Catholicism would be *The Everlasting Man* (1925), a long shadow cast by “The Everlasting No” (Ch. VII) and “The Everlasting Yea” (Ch. IX) chapter-titles in *Sartor Resartus*. The period 1901–05, if less definable, is vital, for it was then that Chesterton initially shaped what he told the world of his view of Carlyle. As was usual with Carlyle’s impact on so many of the audiences, he fascinated before and after his death—and he caught Chesterton young.

The last quarter of 1902 saw publication of Chesterton’s *Twelve Types* and his monograph *Thomas Carlyle*. In *Twelve Types* Chesterton included “Thomas Carlyle” among its essays, a different work from the book, and one slightly altered from its first appearance as “A Re-Reading of Carlyle,” in the liberal *Daily News* (where his column appeared for the first dozen years).¹ The *Daily News* text was published on 26 July 1901. Its first paragraph, like its last, would be deleted from *Twelve Types*:

The large and impressive new editions of the classics of the Victorian era, which publishers are from time to time bringing out, afford an excellent text and opportunity for studying anew the great authors who are too far from us to be familiar, and too near to us to be astonishing. These authors are very little read, to judge by the novelty which is attributed to many contemporary writers, who only raise the questions that they raised and suggest the solutions that they suggested. It is extraordinary to reflect that people are energetically conducting a wearisome argument about ‘ugliness’ and ‘beauty’ in art, as if that immense aesthetic revolution which was called Browning had never occurred. It is extraordinary that a poet as recent as Swinburne should have been hailed as the founder of erotic free speech in English poetry, when both Browning and Carlyle were, when they chose, immeasurably more plain-spoken than he. The new edition of ‘Sartor Resartus’ and ‘Heroes and Hero-Worship,’ which Messrs Macmillan have just brought out, calls our attention to two great theories of human life, which may be right or wrong, but the comprehension of which would enormously simplify the number of current discussions.

Consciously, or otherwise, Chesterton made his first business a tasteful intimation to publishers reading their *Daily News* that he had books in him on Browning and Carlyle that would make them more topical than Swinburne. Macmillan, his obvious target, took the bait by commissioning him the volume of Robert Browning for its famous “English Men of Letters” series begun under John Morley (1838–1923) in 1877. Chesterton’s offering would be the outstandingly successful item in its very popular second set of studies.² Hodder and Stoughton and Cassell would both publish work from him on Carlyle. These books came out, respectively, in 1902, 1903, and 1904. If their author discarded the first paragraph of his first essay on Carlyle when giving the piece such prominence as it could get from book publication, it had done its bit for him. The deleted passage’s resurrection does something for us. Chesterton was a bookman, and however sardonic his reasons for suggesting that Carlyle’s work was no longer read while his name survived, it gives us a serious pause for assessment of Carlyle’s value twenty years after his death.

Carlyle was known more than read: his ideas now percolated independent of his name. Macmillan, Hodder, Cassell, and in the same Edwardian years, Dent (with its Everyman’s Library) were about to find Carlyle a new audience among those dismayed by the formidable spectacle of his collected works. The lower-income Carlylean, a most appropriate figure, was to get necessary impetus.³ But in 1901, insisted Chesterton, the common reader knew Carlyle but not under his own name. Swinburne certainly won credit for shocking when being Shelleyan, so why should he not have flamed in Carlyle’s feathers? Chesterton certainly knew his Swinburne, and arguably his parodies would be better known than Swinburne’s originals. But the shades of his recent marriage to Frances Alice Blogg (1870/71–1938) on 28 June 1901 were closing round the maturing Chesterton. Erotic speech hereafter disappears as a theme from his Carlylean studies.⁴ The conclusion of the *Daily News* article runs:

Unquestionably, [Carlyle] was far more successful when he was writing rather as a poet, that is to say as a man who could not tell how true his own remarks were. In this capacity he really gained possession of a deeper

and older liberty: the placid utilitarians of his day were infuriated and perplexed at the innocence with which he ignored their limitations, at the vagabond ease with which he passed, like a ghost, through their iron doors and water-tight compartments and mechanical sociology. He knew that which was beyond possible human knowledge, and he did not even apologise. While all the other faiths of our century have that solemnity which is the pathos of scepticism, his faith alone bore the genuine blossom of certainty, humour. He cared very little for the derision directed against the comic powers, for he was consumed with the sardonic conviction that they laugh best who laugh last.

The revised text of *Twelve Types* reworked some of this, but not all, and perhaps Chesterton never fully returned to poetics in the thirty-five years of journalism that lay ahead of him. Take the hallmark of a poet as one who is unable to tell the truth of his “remarks.” It may not be a good definition of a “poet”—does a more constructive one exist?—but it is certainly a good definition of a literary phenomenon. Again, what Chesterton called “the faiths of our century” may have been a slip by which the twentieth was confused with the nineteenth. But could Chesterton have meant the faiths of the century of which he and his readers were now taking possession, and asserting that Carlyle was one of these—above all, in its humor? He clearly saw Carlyle’s theism as enduring where later atheism and agnosticism would ultimately disintegrate. So, in his end is our beginning. At the commencement of his literary road to theological conviction, Chesterton was conditioned by Carlyle’s belief in some kind of God, his inability to know the truth of all he remarked, and his humor.

The *Daily News* column followed its opening salvo by a second happy assurance:

The supreme value of Carlyle to English literature was that he was the founder of modern irrationalism. He simply brushed aside all the matters which the man of the nineteenth century held to be incontrovertible, and appealed directly to the very different class of matters which they knew to be true. He induced men to study less the truth of their reasoning, and more the truth of the assumptions upon which they reasoned. Even

where his view was not the highest truth, it was always a refreshing and beneficent heresy.

This last “always” was important for Chesterton’s own development. *Heretics* was one of his most famous proclamations, taking on as it does what he saw as the errors of his contemporaries, such as Kipling, Shaw, Wells, and Yeats, by and large with a charming and not altogether disingenuous courtesy. But this note on Carlyle tells us what was missed by many of the critics of *Heretics*, all the more as Chesterton grew into accord with the much less tolerant Roman Catholicism of his day. His duels with his chosen heretics silently acknowledged that, like Carlyle, many of them might be refreshing and beneficent heretics, possibly even wielders of refreshing and beneficent heresies. He later dismissed Nietzsche, but he was far less ready to dismiss the leading Anglophone Nietzscheans of his day, save in their Nietzscheanism, particularly Shaw and Wells.

Carlyle’s intolerance and the force of his authoritarianism gave him an almost Papal appeal to Roman Catholics real or forming. Yet the tolerance his attractive qualities invited towards himself had something in common with the allowances people on the road to Rome might find themselves making for the harsher face of the Roman Church. Admittedly Chesterton would learn that Rome prided itself on being the Church of Reason, while Carlyle “denied everyone of the postulates upon which the age of reason based itself. He denied the theory of progress which assumed that we must be better off than the people of the twelfth century. Whether we were better than the people of the twelfth century according to him depended entirely upon whether we chose or deserved to be” (*Twelve Types* 129–30). Since the twelfth was a noticeably Catholic century for Europeans, Carlyle impatiently beckoned Chesterton forward towards a new appreciation of Catholicism. Similarly his rejection of Progress was a further if not too kindly light pointing Romeward. Progress ultimately required adhesion to the Whig doctrine by which the Reformation, the Revolution of 1688–1689, and the reform bills of the nineteenth century, made everything better and better. Whatever there might have been to say for twelfth-century Catholicism, it had to be superseded in the name of progress.

Carlyle’s denial of progress gave Chesterton the confidence to make such a denial expedite his own religious progress.

Certainly he would not deny Carlyle's basic Protestantism:

[Carlyle] denied every type and species of prop or association or or support which threw the responsibility upon civilisation of society, or anything but the individual conscience. He has often been called a prophet. The real ground of truth of this phrase is often neglected. Since the last era of purely religious literature, the era of English Puritanism, there has been no writer in whose eyes the soul stood so much alone. (*Twelve Types* 130)

But this recognition implies that Carlyle entertained ideas about religion that went far beyond the traditional confines of Puritanism:

Carlyle was, as we have suggested, a mystic, and mysticism was with Him, as with all of its genuine professors, only a transcendent form of Commonsense. Mysticism and commonsense alike consist in a sense of the dominance of certain truths and tendencies which cannot be formally demonstrated or even formally named. Mysticism and commonsense are alike appeals to realities that we all know to be real, but which have no place in argument except as postulates. Carlyle's work did consist in breaking through formulae, old and new, to these old and silent and ironical sanities. Philosophers might abolish kings a hundred times over, he maintained, they could not alter the fact that every man and woman does choose a king and repudiate all the pride of citizenship for the exultation of humility. If inequality of this kind was a weakness, it was a weakness bound up with the strength of the universe. (*Twelve Types* 130–31)

Chesterton was hardly ready to explain that Christian mysticism was at its happiest in the contemplation of the supreme hero, or ultimate king, God, or God on earth as Christ. It would take another twenty-four years before he could acknowledge this truth in *The Everlasting Man*. In 1901 he was telling the *Daily News* readers why they should want to read the new Carlyle reprints, and how they—Liberal, anti-imperialist, and “pro-Boer”—should feel about hero-worship, at least of the variety once preached by Carlyle and now sold by Macmillan. Chesterton evidently realized that he had work to do. He shared his audience's dislike for bullies at home or in South Africa:

About hero-worship, indeed, Carlyle's lectures on which form the second item of this volume, very few critics have done the smallest justice to Carlyle. Misled by those hasty and choleric passages in which he sometimes expressed a preference for mere violence, passages which were a great deal more connected with his temperament than with his philosophy, they have finally imbibed the notion that Carlyle's theory of hero worship was a theory of terrified submission to stern and arrogant men. As a matter of fact, Carlyle is really inhumane about some questions, but he is never inhumane about hero worship. (*Twelve Types* 132)

And it is a luminous indication of Chesterton's extremely benign attitude towards Carlylean hero-worship in 1901 that he was prepared to overlook the inclusion of Oliver Cromwell in the pantheon of great men. For Chesterton, Carlylean hero-worship contains a strong Christian element:⁵

His view is not that human nature is so vulgar and silly a thing that must be guided and driven; it is, on the contrary, that human nature is so chivalrous and fundamentally magnanimous a thing that even the meanest have it in them to love a leader more than themselves, and to prefer loyalty to rebellion. When he speaks of this trait in human nature Carlyle's tone invariably softens. We feel that for the moment he is kindled with admiration of mankind, and almost reaches the verge of Christianity. (*Twelve Types* 132-33)

Once again, Carlyle's guidance seems to lead Chesterton to a Catholicism visible within that Christianity to whose "verge" Carlyle had nearly reached. Yet Chesterton, who had read omnivorously far beyond those of his contemporaries who, unlike him, had been university educated, was more alert than them to the signs of his own times. He faulted Carlyle for contributing to the pernicious modern habit of "Going the whole hog," and for "making one's philosophy, religion, politics, and temper all of a piece, of seeking in all incidents for opportunities to assert and reassert some favourite mental attitude" (*Twelve Types* 134). With a firm grip, Chesterton grasped the greatest of Carlylean nettles:

It was this species of insane logic which led him into his chief errors, never his natural enthusiasms. Let us take

an example. Carlyle's defence of slavery is a thoroughly ridiculous thing, weak alike in argument and in moral instinct. The truth is that he only took it up from the passion of applying everywhere his paradoxical defence of aristocracy. He blundered of course because he did not see that slavery has nothing in the world to do with aristocracy, that it is, indeed, almost its opposite. The defence which Carlyle and all its thoughtful defenders have made for aristocracy was that a few persons could more rapidly and firmly decide public affairs in the interests of the people. But slavery is not even supposed to be a government for the good of the governed. It is a possession of the governed avowedly for the good of the governors. Aristocracy uses the strong for the service of the weak; slavery uses the weak for the service of the strong. (*Twelve Types* 135–36)

The idea of aristocracy requires definition which Chesterton here left to his readers. Is the hero, then, as defined by Carlyle in a variety of definitions, another way of saying “aristocrat”? In the most literal sense, this is certainly true. In the original Greek—and one benefit Carlyle derived from his university education at Edinburgh was his knowledge of Greek—“aristocrat” comes from “the best” and “to rule.” It would seem Chesterton had some Greek as well, and took the readers of the *Daily News* to possess a sufficient amount to follow his argument. Though he had aristocratic friends, such as the Roman Catholic convert Maurice Baring (1874–1945), and the poet, essayist, and enthusiastic associate of aristocrats Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), Chesterton was not especially taken with the principle of aristocracy. In *Heretics* he dismissed Carlyle's “pathetic belief” in the “wise few” with a sharp rejoinder: “There are no wise few. Every aristocracy that has ever existed has behaved, in all essential points, exactly like a small mob” (167–68).

Carlyle's “bad influence” on the modern mind lay in his failure to admit that aristocracy shared more in common with the “small mob” than either group recognized. This was the most baneful aspect of his “whole hog” mentality:

Out of [Carlyle] flows most of the philosophy of Nietzsche, who is in modern times the supreme maniac of this moon-struck consistency. Though Nietzsche and Carlyle were in reality profoundly different, Carlyle

being a stiff-necked peasant and Nietzsche a very fragile aristocrat, they were alike in this one quality of which we speak, the strange and pitiful audacity with which they applied their single ethical test to everything in heaven and earth. The disciple of Nietzsche, indeed embraces immorality like an austere and difficult faith. He urges himself to lust and cruelty with the same tremulous enthusiasm with which a Christian urges himself to purity and patience; he struggles as a monk struggles with bestial visions and temptations with the ancient necessities of honour and justice and compassion. To this madhouse, it can hardly be denied, has Carlyle's intellectual courage brought many at last. (*Twelve Types* 137–38)

It was on this somber note, struck when Chesterton and his subject were at extreme loggerheads, that the author of *Twelve Types* left Carlyle. It was a very different tone from the genial final paragraph with which took leave of the *Daily News* for that 26 July 1901.

Chesterton added new material to his article on Carlyle in *Twelve Types*. His opening paragraph was deliberately Carlylean, involving paradox in method and message, as well as mime:

There are two main moral necessities for the work of a great man: the first is that he should believe in the truth of his message; the second is that he should believe in the acceptability of his message. It was the whole tragedy of Carlyle that he had the first and not the second. (*Twelve Types* 120)

This could be George Bernard Shaw, already sufficiently famous for readers to make the association; it could also be Oscar Wilde, still too infamous for readers to want to make the association. In an article on “English Poetesses” in 1888, Wilde had headed his list of masters of prose with Carlyle, but he said that he “should not be imitated” (qtd. in Edwards, *Fireworks* 96). What the three writers shared in common was Carlyle's courage, and his belief in the “truth of his message.” What they rejected was his failure to believe in the “acceptability of his message.” Setting aside the accuracy or otherwise of Chesterton's judgment on Carlyle, let us witness his belief in it, and its lessons. Carlyle's first message for Wilde, Shaw, and Chesterton was to conquer London as he had, far though they

may rove from his various creeds. Carlyle stood first and foremost as proof that the self-made literary man could succeed, all the better having forced his audience to struggle through his prose—or paradox.

Like Wilde and Shaw, Chesterton conscripted the sublime and the ridiculous and treated those two imposters just the same. In *Twelve Types* he enjoyed himself showing how criticism of Carlyle so easily became criticism of the critics, “for every one of us it is surely very difficult to say precisely where our honest opinions end and our personal predilections begin.” In the process, Chesterton sorted out some of his own ideas on God with Carlyle’s assistance:

Carlyle believed in himself . . . in God . . . [and] failed in belief in other people. It is not enough for a prophet to believe in his message; he must believe in its acceptability. Christ, St. Francis, Bunyan, Wesley, Mr. Gladstone, Walt Whitman, men of indescribable variety, were all alike in a certain faculty of treating the average man as their equal, of trusting to his reason and good feeling without fear and without condescension. It was this simplicity of confidence, not only in God, but in the image of God, which was lacking in Carlyle. (*Twelve Types* 122–23)

But Carlyle’s failure was not without abundant compensation for his readers. Chesterton emphasized what he believed was the redemptive feature of Carlyle’s writing—his humor. It was easy to cast Carlyle into the role of the dour Scottish Calvinist, and the cliché had served as an all-purpose receptacle since the publication of Froude’s biography. By stressing Carlyle’s humor, Chesterton showed up this mindless pigeon-holing for what it was. His choice of Carlyle’s belief in God as an expression of his humor was especially delicious:

The profound security of Carlyle’s sense of the Cosmos is like that of a Hebrew prophet; and it has the same expression that it had in the Hebrew prophets—humour. A man must be very full of faith to jest about his divinity . . . to the Hebrew prophets their religion was so solid a thing, like a mountain or a mammoth, that the irony of its contact with trivial and fleeting matters struck them like a blow. So it was with Carlyle. (*Twelve Types* 123–24)

Chesterton saluted Carlyle for seeing “the elemental and eternal in a joke,” and savors his description of the death of Louis XV in “The Diamond Necklace” (1837) as an example of his comic genius. Quoting a “Court chronicler” who describes the King as “falling asleep in the Lord,” Carlyle remarks, “we go onward, if not to less degrees of beastliness, yet, at least and worst, to cheering varieties of it” (“Diamond Necklace,” *Historical Essays* 102; *Twelve Types* 125). Chesterton follows up his version of this allusion with a hymn in praise of modern irrationalism, and credits Carlyle with its foundation. It was he who “startled men by attacking not arguments but assumptions” (*Twelve Types* 129).

Chesterton’s essay went through various editions. He reworked its ideas for the *Bookman* in May 1902, and later in the same year Hodder and Stoughton published the work, co-authored with J. E. Hodder Williams, with forty pages of text and illustrations.⁶ In fine Hegelian fashion Chesterton now offered “the French Revolution and the Positivist philosophy” as “the last great Rationalistic synthesis,” with Carlyle following as the “Inevitable Irrationalist” (*Bookman* 2). He played elegantly with a metaphor, more Sartorish than sartorial, of humanity’s hat. Carlyle had responded to Shelley and Rousseau’s “absolute principle of equality” by pointing out that they had knocked off humanity’s head rather than its hat. According to Chesterton, Carlyle “did think many people a great deal better than himself, and very many people a great deal worse. Thus, then, as the asserter of the natural character of kingship against the natural character of equality, it is that Thomas Carlyle primarily stands twenty-two years after his death” (*Bookman* 6–7). Chesterton felt that Carlyle never “understood the true doctrine of equality,” but that his egalitarian critics “have never done the least justice to Carlyle’s doctrine of hero-worship” (*Bookman* 9). He acquitted Carlyle of any belief in “a race of arrogant strong men, brutally self-sufficient and brazenly indifferent to ethical limits”—the hero as a guardian of lunatic asylums. Finally, Chesterton reiterated Carlyle’s theory of the hero in more Christian terms. Men followed the hero from love, not fear, and Chesterton himself agreed with Carlyle’s comparison between love of God, and “rightly or wrongly” (*Bookman* 9), love of the great man.

Chesterton was a Carlylophile rather than a Carlylean. He acknowledged that “Carlyle’s view of equality does not happen to be mine.” Carlyle was entitled to his views, but his major flaw was that “to the end of his days he never understood any gospel except [his own] gospel.” Chesterton found Carlyle’s “main characteristic . . . a lack of . . . spiritual patience,” though he saluted the author of *Frederick the Great* for having “produced a colossal epic . . . on the dullest of all earthly subjects—Germany in the eighteenth century” (*Bookman* 20–21). Politically, Carlyle was difficult to pinpoint: “He was something of a Tory, something of a Sans-culotte, something of Puritan, something of an Imperialist, something of a Socialist; but he was never, even for a single moment, a Liberal. He did not believe as the Liberal believes, first indeed in his own truth, which in his eyes is pure truth, but beyond that also in that mightier truth which is made up of a million lies.” Carlyle’s signal achievement was as a historian: “No historian ever realised so strongly the recondite and ill-digested fact that history has consisted of human beings, each isolated, each vacillating, each living in an eternal present” (*Bookman* 22–23, 25).

One consequence of Carlyle’s approach was that he saw through those who tried to fathom the supposedly inexorable “laws” of history.⁷ Chesterton’s criticism of Carlyle here becomes akin to a fair critique of John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx:

It is the glory of Carlyle that he did realise that the intellectual impartiality of the rationalist historian was merely emotional ignorance. . . . He conceived the mediaeval period in Europe as a barbaric verity, “a rude, stalwart age”; he did not realise what is more and more unfolding itself to all serious historians, that the mediaeval period in Europe was a civilisation based upon a certain scheme of moral science of almost unexampled multiplicity and stringency, a scheme in which the colours of the lacquey’s coat could be traced back to a system of astronomy, and the smallest bye-law for a village green had some relation to great ecclesiastical and moral mysteries. . . . The Middle Ages were a rival civilisation, based upon moral science, to ours based upon physical science. Most modern historians have abused this great civilisation for being barbarous:

Carlyle had made one great stride beyond them in so far that he admitted it for being barbarous. (*Bookman* 34–35)

Chesterton regretted Carlyle's perpetual denunciations of "shams," shrewdly observing that "if a man goes on a tearing hunt after shams . . . it is probable that he will find little or nothing real. He is tearing off the branches to find the tree" (*Bookman* 35). Ironically, this argument would apply to Chesterton himself, particularly in the period following his conversion to Rome when he was drawn into elbow-jerk dismissals of Protestant heroes and Jewish victimization. It would also lead him at times to belittle Carlyle in his attacks against Catholicism—which is why Chesterton's early work on Carlyle is the more rewarding as well as the far fuller. Chesterton proved this point admirably by letting Carlyle and Catholicism strengthen one another in the last paragraph of *Thomas Carlyle*:

I have said all that is to be said against Carlyle's work almost designedly: for he is one of those who are so great that we rather need to blame them for the sake of their own fame. He came and spoke a word, and the chatter of rationalism stopped, and the sums would no longer work out and be ended. He was a breath of Nature turning in her sleep under the load of civilisation, a stir in the very stillness of God to tell us He was still there. (*Bookman* 36)

Cassell's National Library had launched itself on the ambitious but indigent public in 1903 at a pocket size, but meaner in type and format than its rivals. *Sartor Resartus*, with Chesterton's introduction, was the forty-seventh title. *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* had been the fifth, and Carlyle's essays on Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott the thirty-fifth. The series would later be obliterated by Dent's Everyman Library, under Ernest Rhys, Nelson's Classics under John Buchan, and the World's Classics, ultimately taken over by Oxford University Press. But Cassell was in any case more interested in their magazines, such as the *Quiver*, *Little Folks*, *Cassell's Family Magazine*, and the *Story-Teller*, the last two of which would carry most (though not all) of the Father Brown stories beginning in 1910. Cassell itself republished all the Father Brown stories in book form, with omnibus editions carrying the first four collections, the first five, and the

five plus the posthumous “The Vampire of the Village.” Signing up Chesterton for *Sartor Resartus* was thus more of an event in Chesterton than in Carlyle bibliography.⁸

Chesterton began his introduction to *Sartor* (the text of which follows as an appendix to this essay) by using his opening salvo—and credential—to link Carlyle with “fun” in contrast to the sober-sided John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and George Eliot: “What these people lacked, and what Carlyle really had, was something that can only be called fun—that is, fantasticality, a sense of the grotesque, pushed to the beautiful borderland of folly. He brought back humour and extravagance into the prophetic function” (5). The final sentence of his highly tactical first paragraph turns the tide from shallows to deeps with the mention of a further name, Elijah: “Carlyle was called a gloomy fellow because he laughed as well as swore, like Elijah, at the prophets of Baal” (5). Chesterton was quite right. Elijah’s antics to discredit Baal and his priests (1 Kings 18) are pure “fun,” wetting the sacrifice and piling up the odds against himself with the clear conviction that God would see the joke and provide its climax. That both Elijah and Carlyle were deadly serious in their “fun,” that of being taken seriously, only adds to the genius of their humor. Chesterton had demonstrated that this was humor employed as a weapon, not as a luxury.

It is notable that Chesterton, for all of his conviction of the omnipresence of heresies and the rarity of orthodoxy in Edwardian England, assumes his audience will readily identify St. Paul as the “great Christian rhetorician [who] instinctively used [the clothes philosophy] when he spoke of a man putting on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation and the shield of faith” (7). Carlyle might have presumed in like manner that his readers would promptly recognize the allusion to Ephesians 6: 14–17, at least in his early days in London. After a lifetime in the place he might have been less certain, given the rapid growth of secularization. Chesterton does get round to admitting that Carlyle evinced an anti-Catholic side in his reference to “the great Catholic ritual ‘a triple-hatted chimera’” (8). Carlyle himself is plain enough here, although not at the highest point of his wit. The Pope’s triple crown becomes a triple hat, the three hats suggest three heads, and the three

heads recall the chimera killed by Bellerophon mounted on Pegasus. But Chesterton's allusion to the Pope as a "ritual" is odd in itself. Or is it the triple crown that is a ritual? Perhaps only fairly, Chesterton seeks revenge for the Papal tiara by insisting that "Carlyle was too bald, too naked, so to speak, to interpret all forms and fashions."

But the fencing with Max Beerbohm, the extraction on Chesterton's trick from Carlyle's old hat, the discovery that the "subject of Carlyle's great allegory is allegory itself" (7), are all perfect in themselves. Combined, they constitute a great moment. *Sartor Resartus* is exquisite creative writing, beyond the line drawn in the dust, where the pedant dries. And it invites us to ask whether the book influenced Chesterton's own creative writing, particularly his first novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904). Once the question is asked it seems to impose its affirmative, as Carlyle so emphatically delighted Chesterton by his optimistic outlook. We must in fact seek the positive in the positive: where is the Everlasting Yea? The answer is not hard to find. Whether as a boy (a damn wain?) confronting Auberon Quin with passionate infant combat, or as the only London district leader to embrace the challenge of Quin's medieval pageantry passionately, or as the master strategist who defeats his foes on Campden Hill, or as the giant apparently slain by his enemies as he slays them—Adam Wayne is a magnificently Carlylean hero.

If anything, he is a little too latter-day Carlylean for Chestertonian comfort. His infant bellicosity more resembles the youthful Frederick the Great about to rape Silesia than Cromwell taking his first command or Napoleon unloosing his whiff of grapeshot. Quin is humorless, but then he is not Carlyle. Carlylean humor seems present in Quin's apparent proclamation of the absurd, all the more so because Quin himself is partly drawn from the character of Max Beerbohm—whose criticism of Carlyle Chesterton invited the audience to take seriously in his introduction to *Sartor*. Critics have assumed that when after a human slaughter as wholesale as Rossbach, Naseby, or Austerlitz, Quin and Wayne—against all probability—return to life and speak for the first time with full frankness to one another and walk off-stage in accord, these are two parts of Chesterton's personality returning to harmony in his single

person.⁹ It may be so, whether he knew it or not, but it seems more likely that he was writing not of himself, but of Carlyle, making his curtain-call a matter of Carlyle confronting his own “hero as king,” admitting a sense of humor such as his creations of Cromwell, Napoleon, and Frederick had never credited in their creator, and then letting them go off into their innumerable editions.

Carlyle had brought Chesterton along the road to Catholicism, as he would seem to have brought significant others, but Carlyle now proves of help in our periodization of Chesterton, for the latter’s receptivity to Carlyle in 1901–05 would be followed by 1905–14, when the more nebular condition of Chesterton’s Catholicism hardened into English Catholicism, less the highest point of Anglicanism than something more like Roman Catholicism without Rome. The distinction might appear artificial in many cases. In Chesterton’s, it does not, and one might please him by the suggestion that Shakespeare often seems to be that kind of “English Catholic,” with due allowances for the three hundred years between them. Yet Carlyle’s clear place in helping Chesterton locate God brought its reaction. Readers captivated by Carlyle often go through this process: enchantment, new perspectives, reappraisal, with the reappraisal being more disenchanting by the effect of the new perspectives Carlyle had given the readers.

Reappraisal arose in the most obvious fashion, new enchantment by a disciple whose own loyalties and rebellions from the initial master invite their own critical response. Chesterton wrote a short book on Charles Dickens and accepted Ernest Rhys’s commission to introduce all the works of Dickens in Dent’s “Everyman’s Library” published in 1907–08. These introductions were later collected in a single volume, *Appreciations and Criticisms of Charles Dickens* (1911), with a long introduction by Chesterton. Initially, Rhys may have sought the chronological order in which the series was set. *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), dealing as it does with the anti-Catholic Gordon riots of 1780, was a Carlylean subject, and Chesterton seems to have read it more as a Carlylean than as a Catholic. Indeed, he found the Catholic issues rather dull. Had he been a little deeper in Catholicism, he might have commented on their dignity, a quality notably absent from popular English images of Roman Catholicism

from Restoration drama to Monk Lewis. What initially attracted Chesterton to *Barnaby Rudge* was the highly Carlylean figure of the revolutionary apprentice, Sim Tappetit, who was morally indefensible but effectively captivating. Such persons must have been very important historically, and the historian who cannot document them should be cautiously grateful to the novelist who invents them. Dickens felt obliged to punish Tappetit by leaving him a cripple, just as in *Oliver Twist* (1837) he must sentence the Artful Dodger to transportation. Tappetit may depart with Chesterton's surreptitious affection, albeit with less than the Dodger.

A Tale of Two Cities (1859) is famous for its debt to Carlyle. Chesterton begins his work by rhapsodizing what he styled "the great Cockney" (*Appreciations* 189), but having set Dickens up thus he begins to engage in paradox: "He wrote a book about two cities, one of which he understood; the other he did not understand. And his description of this city he did not know is almost better than his description of the city he did know" (*Appreciations* 192). Chesterton then settles down to an assessment of Carlyle's "example and influence": "[Carlyle] undoubtedly discovered for Englishmen the revolution that was at the back of all their policies and reforms. It is an entertaining side joke that the French Revolution should have been discovered for Britons by the only British writer who did not really believe in it." Chesterton knew that "the most authoritative and the most recent critics" (his friend Hilaire Belloc, strengthening control over Chesterton's historical perceptions) had acknowledged the profound value of Carlyle's history:

Carlyle had read a great deal about the French Revolution. Dickens had read nothing at all, except Carlyle. Carlyle was a man who collected his ideas by the careful collation of documents and the verification of references. Dickens was a man who collected his ideas from loose hints in the streets, and those always the same streets; . . . he was the citizen of one city. Carlyle was in his way learned; Dickens was in every way ignorant. Dickens was an Englishman cut off from France. Carlyle was a Scotsman, historically connected with France. And yet, when all this is said and certified[,] . . . Dickens's French Revolution is probably more like the real French Revolution than Carlyle's. (*Appreciations* 193)

Chesterton was judging Carlyle's and Dickens's achievements by the standards Carlyle had proclaimed and shown. To filch a weapon from Chesterton's hand, he had read few other histories of the French Revolution by which to judge either, apart from Belloc, of course, and this criticism was not Belloc's. If Carlyle undervalued Louis XVI and Robespierre, sidelined Carnot, and minimized the revolutionaries in the battlefield (as Belloc thought), Dickens is no corrective. But Carlyle might have snarled an acknowledgment that Chesterton met him in the realm of emotion, and who else has? In Chesterton's view, Carlyle's rendition of the Revolution is too dour:

One note of the Revolution was the thing which silly people call optimism, and sensible people call high spirits. Carlyle could never quite get it, because with all his spiritual energy he had no high spirits. That is why he preferred prose to poetry. He could understand rhetoric; for rhetoric means singing with an object. But he could not understand lyrics; for the lyric means singing without an object; as every one does when he is happy. Now for all of its blood and its black guillotines, the French Revolution was full of mere high spirits. Nay, it was full of happiness. (*Appreciations* 194)

This is open to the objection also applicable to the great slaughter ending *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, that it is splendid provided it is only the toy theater which Chesterton enjoyed, and no doubt the happiness of the thing may have eluded Louis XVI and Robespierre in their final moments. But the objection, while obvious, does not rule out an occasional spirit of elevation, nor the thought that Carlyle may have described its operation without that definition. Chesterton thinks he knows why Carlyle missed the "high spirits" of the Revolution:

This actual lilt and levity Carlyle never found in the Revolution, because he could not find it in himself. . . . Carlyle half believed in a hundred things; he was at once more of a mystic and more of a sceptic. Carlyle was the perfect type of the grumbling servant; the old grumblind servant of the aristocratic comedies. He followed the aristocracy, but he growled as he followed. He was obedient without being servile, just as Caleb Balderstone [in Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*] was obedient without being servile. (*Appreciations* 194–95)

The analogy might seem slightly condescending until one recalls that Caleb Balderstone, however eccentric, perverse, and ludicrous, is far the most admirable among the leading characters of his novel, and whose last action is to watch his beloved aristocrat be engulfed by quicksands. Chesterton bore the second name "Keith" in honor of his mother's Scottish family (including the Marshal loved by Frederick the Great), which made his Scottish judgments sure-footed, if not necessarily sure. One might say the same for Chesterton's peroration in his essay on *A Tale of Two Cities*:

Splendid and symbolic as are Carlyle's scenes of the French Revolution, we have in reading them a curious sense that everything that happens is happening at night. In Dickens even massacre happens by daylight. Carlyle always assumes that because things were tragedies therefore the men who did them felt tragic. Dickens knows that the man who works the worst tragedies is the man who feels comic; as for example, Mr. Quilp. (*Appreciations* 195–96)

Or, for example, Hébert.

Chesterton's conclusion betrays provincial elements in his own outlook:

The French Revolution, was a much simpler world than Carlyle could understand; for Carlyle was subtle and not simple. . . . Carlyle must always find something mystical about the cruelty of the French Revolution. The effect was equally bad whether he found it mystically bad and called the thing anarchy, or whether he found it mystically good and called it the rule of the strong. In both cases he could not understand the common-sense justice or the common-sense vengeance of Dickens and the French Revolution. . . . Carlyle had written the story of the French Revolution and had made the story a mere tragedy. Dickens writes the story about the French Revolution, and does not make the Revolution itself the tragedy at all. . . . In this book, as in history, the guillotine is not the calamity, but rather the solution of the calamity. The sin of Sydney Carton is a sin of habit, not of revolution. His gloom is the gloom of London, not the gloom of Paris. (*Appreciations* 195–96)

In a way, since Carton's sin was alcoholism, Chesterton was showing objectivity in fixing the "habit" in London. But in another way, he was revealing a blemish of his own, not much on view outside World War I: chauvinism. The ultimate chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*, "The Footsteps Die Out Forever," gives Carton his gallant self-sacrificing and thus self-saving. Readers can be gratified at the gallant Englishman who redeems himself so that the Frenchwoman he loves and the French husband she loves are both saved. It is a more gratifying image than Pitt paying rebels to influence events in la Vendée. But in the penultimate chapter, "The Knitting Done," Miss Pross, specifically attributing her own constancy to her permanently being "an Englishwoman," kills Madame Defarge and deafens herself in defense of her French employer. Symbolically, "England" at a cost to herself destroys the French Revolution. Carlyle told the story of France in its own right, and unlike most of his fellow islanders, did it with no pretence of Britain's role being anything more than an inept and self-interested sideshow. He did not mind saying Cromwell played "The Hero as King" better than Napoleon. But he was not prepared to reduce the French people's tragedy to a backdrop for an English thriller, however successful Dickens may have been in making non-English readers identify happily with Miss Pross and her brave Englishness.

Chesterton argues that Dickens, unlike Carlyle, "was the type of man who might really have rebelled instead of grumbling. He might have gone out into the street and fought, like the man who took the Bastille. It is somewhat nationally significant that when we [English] talk of the man in the street it means a figure silent, slouching, and even feeble. When the French speak of a man in the street, it means danger in the street." Whatever be the merits of this thesis—considerable, I suspect—it is Carlyle who taught it to Chesterton. The danger-filled streets of Revolutionary France may threaten in darkness, but the creative writer must return to Carlyle, since Dickens can only give us what Carlyle taught him. And Chesterton pitched *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) into high points of English solitude—the hero Syme, the policeman who recruits him, the first anarchist to be unmasked (Gogol, Tuesday), above all the apparently utterly feeble Professor

de Worms (Friday), who surfaces in street after street—after which the action crosses to France where the streets teem with supposedly revolutionary crowds.

The introduction to *A Tale of Two Cities* was not published until 1909, since its first Everyman edition had appeared before Chesterton had been commissioned to introduce each volume in the series. It was therefore probably written after publication of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, but was hanging in Chesterton's mind during the composition of his novel. In Chesterton's work, it is in France where the respectable doctor and the aristocratic colonel successively defect to the anarchist enemy. It is a French setting where (in the words of one chapter) "The Criminals Chase the Police"). And it is in France where the police agents behold, in the words of another, "The Earth in Anarchy." These things will prove misapprehensions. But the spectacle is essentially Carlylean, with pillars of society pulling society down, and with hostile mobs seeming to take shape from nowhere. Chesterton purloined Carlyle's French Revolution and turned it into a traveling show, which proved to be a theater of illusion. Even that last was not inconsistent with much of Carlyle's epic.

Circumstances delayed Chesterton's formal encounter with *Past and Present*, the work by Carlyle that most clearly seems to cry to him for a rendezvous. No historical work by Carlyle, or, it may be said, by anyone else, drives its reader into communion with the medieval world, with inevitable impact on Chesterton's developing neo-medievalism. Grant Richards had published Chesterton's *The Wild Knight and Other Poems* in November 1900. Around the same time Richards was planning his own series of cheap reprints, majestically entitled "The World's Classics." *Sartor Resartus* was Richards's nineteenth volume, issued in 1902. The sixty-second volume—*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*—was the next admission of Carlyle to global classicism. It was also described as "Works of Thomas Carlyle II." But troubles broke out over Richards's head, and both *The Wild Knight* and the World's Classics had to look elsewhere for later life. Henry Frowde (1841–1927) had managed the Oxford University Press's London office since 1874, and was styled "Publisher to the University of Oxford" since 1883. He saw Richards's misfortunes as Oxford's chance to enter the reprinted classics battleground.

Frowde took over the series. He promptly proclaimed *The French Revolution* as “Works of Thomas Carlyle III–IV” and produced a two-volume edition of the history in 1907 that was uniform with Richards’s previous items, but that now bore an introduction by Charles Robert Leslie Fletcher. Fletcher’s scholarly edition of the same history, published by Methuen in 1902, had been roughly treated by Hilaire Belloc in the 1906 Everyman edition. Frowde may have seen an opportunity to improve on Richards’s series. Having availed himself of Fletcher’s promiscuous services, Frowde was ready to make the most of London men of letters as well as ineffectual Oxford dons. William Hale White (1831–1913), better known as the novelist Mark Rutherford, wrote an introduction to “Volume V,” *The Life of John Sterling* in 1907. Chesterton opened the sixth volume of Carlyle’s “Works” in the World’s Classics, but not until September 1909. This was two years after Fletcher and Hale White, but evidently Frowde had been obliged to slow down the rate of production that had so swiftly brought the World’s Classics into full frontal competition with Everyman and Nelson. He may have needed to catch his own breath; he would retire four years later, in 1913, at the age of 72.

Chesterton himself showed no sign of catching his breath. Between 1907 and 1909 he produced Everyman introductions to *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, a selection of Thackeray, a monograph on Shaw, and yet another collection of his journalism, *Tremendous Trifles* (1909). It is safe to assume that during this period, he had not forgotten Carlyle. Perhaps in his introduction to *Past and Present*, Chesterton aimed to address Lord Acton’s remark in 1910 that in this work, “[Carlyle] gave what was the most remarkable piece of historical thinking in the language” (Acton 358).¹⁰ His “response” to Acton, whether intended or not, was worthy of the finest historian: “[Carlyle] could only be accurate when he was excited” (*Past and Present* xi). Chesterton’s argument is that Carlyle’s quality of insight depended on “vision,” which “is . . . a thing splendid and even inspired but still personal and liable to error.” By “vision,” Chesterton does mean the word in the modern jargon-ridden sense, to tart up a proposal or an ambition. Instead, he shares the medieval idea of vision as a supernatural power. To that extent he accepts Carlyle as a prophet, but as a prophet endowed

with the ability to behold beyond the limits imposed on the rest of us. Chesterton was ready enough in the introduction to proclaim Carlyle's anti-Catholicism—"he happened to dislike, or rather not to understand, the religion of the Middle Ages" (*Past and Present* ix)—while making it the necessary converse of his Catholic status as saint, prophet, mystic, and visionary.

According to Chesterton, Carlyle's grasp of the present is as sure as his understanding of the past. He salutes him for his perception that "poverty was very much more of a fact in the streets than it was a fact in the books of political science" (*Past and Present* x). Carlyle is a "socialist," in the sense that he "has . . . almost all the qualities of the Socialists, their strenuousness, their steady protest, their single eye, also something of their Puritanism and their unconscious but instinctive dislike of democracy" (*Past and Present* xi). The remark is pertinent to Shaw, about whom Chesterton had written a year earlier. Whether Shaw would have been flattered by the comparison between himself and Carlyle remains an open question. But Chesterton himself was all too accurate in referring to the Socialist "instinctive dislike of democracy." There have been, and one hopes will be, socialists who have loved and furthered democracy, but Shaw was not one of them. Chesterton realized that Carlyle was accurate, not only about Shaw in particular, but about too many socialists in general in the ensuing century. It was Carlyle who "called in political inequality to remedy economic inequality, but he will not be the last" (*Past and Present* xi). Thus Chesterton took "present" beyond Carlyle's time, and beyond his own, which certainly is where Carlyle would want us to take it. Finally, Chesterton took "present" whither it belongs among prophets and visionaries, Catholics and Carlyles—to eternity: "[Carlyle] is a power eternally opposing certain social facts to certain necessary political fictions, and as such he will have honour for ever" (*Past and Present* xii).

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Notes

1. In his bibliography, John Sullivan lists all the *Daily News* articles known to have been included in Chesterton's books, and gives them volume destinations, but does not include the many more uncollected in book form (125–28).

2. See John Gross 123 and Philip J. Waller 208.

3. If Carlyle was unread in 1901, he was available to be unread in many editions. Chapman and Hall had their 30-volume edition since 1896–99. *Sartor Resartus* appeared from ten separate publishers on its own between 1888 and 1898, and *On Heroes* from nine between 1888 and 1900. *Sartor Resartus*, *On Heroes* and one or two other works were published in one volume by four separate publishers between 1888 and 1900. Chesterton was thus giving Macmillan rather too much credit for the novelty of its idea and edition, probably quite innocently.

4. For Chesterton's parodies of Swinburne, see his "Dolores Replies to Swinburne" and "Variations on Air . . . After Swinburne" (*Collected Poems* 42, 48–49). The "Air" is "Old King Cole," whose other supposed new stylists include Browning, Tennyson, Whitman, and Yeats, originally published as *Old King Cole* (1920).

5. In *The Victorian Age in Literature*, Chesterton refers to Carlyle's disciples, and includes Charles Kingsley, John Ruskin, Alfred Tennyson, George Bernard Shaw, and Rudyard Kipling. Somewhat more reluctantly, he mentions James Anthony Froude, who "carries far beyond Carlyle the practice of worshipping people who cannot rationally be called heroes. In this matter that eccentric eye of the seer certainly helped Carlyle: in Cromwell and Frederick the Great there was at least something self-begotten, original or mystical: if they were not heroes they were at least demigods or perhaps demons. But Froude set himself to the praise of the Tudors, a much lower class of people" (60–62).

6. Sullivan notes that the first of the "Bookman" pamphlets was followed by three more, on Stevenson, Tolstoy, and Dickens, all with Chesterton as part-author and all in 1903 (91). The series was reissued as "*The Bookman*" *Biographies* in November 1903 with further volumes, Chesterton contributing to those on Tennyson and Thackeray.

7. A point that Alexander Herzen recognized in his Carlylean-inspired *From the Other Shore* (1850); see Sorensen, 44–47.

8. See Sullivan, 39, 44, 61, 68, 82–83, 122, 146, 150, 152–53, and 173. Cassell's National Library was begun under the literary editorship of Henry Morley (1822–94) in 1886–90. It may have languished for a decade as regards new titles, but its individual volumes at threepence

or sixpence (£0.125 and £0.150 in present-day currency) sold at 50,000 to 100,000 per volume (Waller 28–29). Carlyle thus helped bring Chesterton's name before an enormous public.

9. Maisie Ward asserts that “Auberon Quin and Adam Wayne are the most living individual in any of his novels—just because they are the two lobes of his brain individualised” (155).

10. For Lord Acton, see my “Carlyle and Catholicism, Part I: Hilaire Belloc and *The French Revolution*,” 86–87.

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