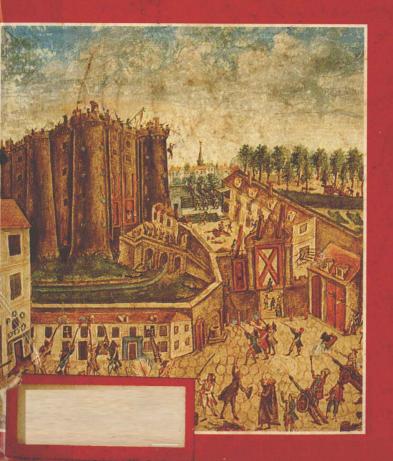
THE WORLD'S CLASSICS



THOMAS CARLYLE

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



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The French Revolution A History

Edited by

K. J. FIELDING and DAVID SORENSEN

Μέγα ὁ ἀγῶν ἔστι, θεῖον γὰρ ἔργον ὑπὲρ βασιλείας ὑπὲρ έλευθερίας, υπέρ ευροίας, υπέρ άταραξίας. ΑππιαΝυς *

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THE WORLD'S CLASSICS THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

THOMAS CARLYLE was born in 1795 in Ecclefechan, a small market village in Dumfriesshire. He studied for the ministry, enrolled in law classes, and taught briefly before deciding on a career as a writer. During the 1820s, his essays and translations helped to introduce German literature and thought to a British audience, Sartor Resartus, his one full-scale work of imaginative fiction. was first published periodically in 1833-4. In 1826 Carlyle had married Iane Welsh. In 1834 they moved from Scotland to London and settled at Chevne Row, Chelsea. It was here that Carlyle wrote the works that confirmed his position as the most influential of the Victorian cultural leaders: The French Revolution (1837), On Heroes and Hero-Worship (1841), Past and Present (1843), Latter-Day Pamphlets (1850), and the six-volume history of Frederick the Great (1858-65). His Reminiscences were published shortly after his death, in 1881.

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Arabian tales and Southey's Thalaba. Louis the Bien-aimé appalled Carlyle when he first read about 'the five Mademoiselles of Nesle' in Lacretelle's Histoire de France bendant le dix-huitième siècle, noting that 'The Swine had four of them for mistresses, partly in succession, partly simultaneously. The Chateauroux was the last . . . a fifth refused him. Pompadour, Du Barry, the Parc-aux-cerfs: how strange is all this!' Louis 'took to debauchery, and let the Devil do his own way with everything." Yet though at the start he flings down information, he challenges us to make sense of it. Newton and his dog Diamond probably saw a similar 'pair of Universes' (i.7), but understood them differently!-'For ours is a most fictile world; and man is the most fingent plastic of all creatures' (i.8); philosophers assure us that even the material world is, strictly speaking, 'made by these outward senses of ours'; and just as Church and King, for example, are among countless 'realised ideals' or symbols made by men (i.8), so are all religions, including the Old Testament, which are the product of men's art as well as their beliefs (i.10).

Yet if history is essentially fictitious, how can it be told, how does 'accuracy' matter, and why should we take pains with it? There are several answers, but two belong to Carlylean orthodoxy. The first is that if everything perceived is a matter of appearances, this only increases the need to seek the reality behind them: all of which had just been expounded in Sartor Resartus, still buried for most readers of

 2 J. C. D. de Lacretelle (Paris, 1819) ii.182-92, cf. FR i.6, and Journal. After this references to FR and Works are bracketed in the text. For

abbreviations, see ii.455.

³ Explained throughout TC's writings, as: 'How impressive the smallest historical fact may become, as contrasted with the grandest fictitious event' ('Biography' xxviii.54); 'Truth, Fact, is the life of all things, "fiction" . . . is certain to be death' (Latter-Day Pamphlets, xxi.325), '"Imagination" . . . except as the vehicle for truth, or fact of some sort,—which surely a man should first try other ways of vehiculating, and conveying safe,—what is it?' (Past and Present, x.46); 'I am very anxious to be perfectly accurate' (CL, viii.25); 'I grow daily to honour Facts more and more . . . A Fact seems to me a great thing; a Sentence printed if not by God, then at least by the Devil' (CL viii.336).

1837 in back numbers of Fraser's Magazine. The second, related problem, is that perhaps we can see the ultimate reality of God repeated in recorded events, for 'Is not Man's History . . . a perpetual Evangel?' (i.202). As Carlyle was to write later, 'All History . . . is an inarticulate Bible . . . The loud-roaring Loom of Time, with all its French Revolutions, Jewish revelations, "weaves the vesture thou seest Him by" '(xx.325-6). So whatever 'facts' can be recovered from the past have an almost sacred value, though necessarily subject to interpretation. There is therefore a duality in Carlyle's thought and writing in The French Revolution; and his effort to combine a searching sense of actuality with a distrust of appearances made strong demands on his technique.

His style was always provocative. His old friend, Lord Jeffrey, had steadily advised against it, complaining it was unlike that of 'my friend Macaulay' who, with 'several others', though 'struck with the force and originality of the writing', had rightly 'laughed at' Carlyle's brilliant essay 'Characteristics' and 'some of the ravings about the ravings of your German novelists'. Jeffrey's reception of the new work was the same: his admiration for its 'Genius' struggled with disapproval of 'the style ... too odd, broken and ostentatiously irregular—But what I most object to, is the tone of mockery—and Mephistophelic humour." The manner of the 'dignified' historians of the Enlightenment was not to be mocked. History, as they taught, should be abstract and inductive; a historian must avoid details, 'vulgarity' and first-person documentation, and (as Sir James Mackintosh once explained) be neither 'a jester or a satirist', 'sneer or laugh at men', or 'jest at human nature', but maintain 'the dignity of man'.5 His aim should be to show 'philosophy

In his review of J. C. L. Sismondi, Histoire des Français, 3 vols. (Paris

and London, 1821) in the Edinburgh Review, 35 (1821), 491.

⁴ Jeffrey's earlier remarks come from letters to TC of 1 Mar. 1830 and 16 May 1831 and, on receipt of the FR, 18 May 1837, MS:NLS. In spite of his good nature, his letters to TC (many unpublished) often show an aloof superior whiggism which makes TC seem mild and humane.

teaching by experience', 6 to instruct rather than amuse, and show the record of man's gradual progress, which was thus subject to history's retrospective judgement. 7

Such history often had the drawback of being suffocatingly dull: yet Carlyle objected less to this than to the way that the result was untrue to life. For if history lies largely in subjective record, then the way it was seen and felt at the time it happened was itself 'fact'. Details were essential to give the sense of what happened, and often best conveyed through personal accounts, hard as such records might be to reconcile. Because it involved a whole people, the French Revolution introduced almost a new kind of history, involving named participants of every class. The very doctrine that there was an accepted superior style and tone to be adopted by judicious historians was one Carlyle scorned with a ferocity based on principle even more than on his personal tone and feeling. Hence, he made himself a verbal 'terrorist', 8 and joined new movements challenging the old. Even his friend John Sterling criticized the language of Sartor as a 'lawless defiance', often 'barbarous and repulsive', questioning Carlyle's use of such words as 'environment', 'visualized', and 'talented' (a 'newspaper and hustings word'); while Carlyle—already writing The French Revolution-replied, 'do you reckon this really a time for Purism of Style . . . with whole ragged battallions of Scott's-Novel Scotch, with Irish, German, French, and even Newspaper Cockney . . . storming in on us, and the whole structure of our Johnsonian English breaking up from its foundations-revolution there as visible as anywhere else!' (CL, viii.135).

⁶ Bolingbroke's remark, taken from earlier writers, borrowed by later historians, often anathematized by TC; also found in Livy ('in history you behold the lessons of every kind of experience', preface Bk. 1), French school-texts, and French historians.

⁷ A deep distrust of this widespread faith in progress and often ridiculous hope of perfectibility is probably the chief underlying preconception of the FR.

⁸ G. H. Hartman's expression, *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980), 151; but hardly 'unconscious', as he suggests.

Before long Carlyle's public was to learn how to read him without too much difficulty; but, for the moment, Sterling's warning that Carlyle's language would turn readers against him was justified. It was not only staider reviewers, such as Herman Merivale in the Edinburgh Review, who disliked Carlyle for 'his bastard English'. In the Athenaeum the popular novelist, Lady Morgan, attacked Carlyle's 'whimsical coxcombry', inexcusable in what she called an 'English writer', however understandable in misguided revolutionary French and Germans. Thackeray was fairer in The Times, clearly fascinated by Carlyle's language, though aware that it was offensive to 'those who love history as it gracefully runs in Hume, or struts pompously in Gibbon'. He was unwilling to involve himself with the 'philosophy', but found that the work showed 'most extraordinary powers', if 'disfigured by grotesque conceits and images'.

It is not necessary to give many examples of Carlyle's linguistic 'barbarity', which is obvious enough, though his aim may be misunderstood. Yet it can be curiously 'vulgar' at times, including the grotesque Anglicizing of French and clumsy French intrusions accompanied by indifference to what the reader can make of lengthy epigraphs in untranslated Greek and German. They are 'shock tactics', as in the strange irruption into World History of 'Mrs. Momoro', temporary Goddess of Reason in spite of her bad teeth (ii.358) or the landlady of the *Bras D'Or* at Varennes, the fair, young 'Mrs. Le Blanc' who takes to the woods like the Scotch Bessy Bell (ii.142) before the advance of the Duke of Brunswick. Yet most contemporary readers were well aware that Carlyle first won a reputation as an accomplished translator.

In a similar fashion the headlong narrative forces us, in an egalitarian way, to mix with as varied an assortment as Anarchasis Clootz's 'tag-rag-and-bobtail' specimens of le

⁹ Thomas Carlyle, The Critical Heritage, ed. J. P. Seigel (1971), from the Athenaeum, 20 May 1837; Edinburgh Review, 71 (1840), 411-45; The Times, 3 Aug. 1837.

Genre Humain (i.354-6). To some extent this is an inescapable feature of Revolutionary history itself, with its basis in bureaucratic archives, memoirs, and newspapers, and is common to many histories of the period. But Carlyle seizes on this feature and exploits it, re-enacting the experience of the Revolution through details, names, occupations, and characteristic touches as of the weather and all kinds of personal observations. It is both foreign and familiar, and everything is based on reported but not unquestioned fact.

There are other shocks. Though the French Revolution

was a popular subject, it was often gently handled. Hedva Ben-Israel is in fact wrong in saying that Mignet does not refer to the guillotine in his History, 10 but Mignet and others play it down while Carlyle brings it to the fore. His account of the massacres is as unpleasant as the subject. It is true that he may not explain what the bloody grands-lèvres were (ii.152), but they are not expurgated; Danton's language is softened; and Carlyle does not directly say what unmentionable diseases various figures suffered from, but they are mentioned after all. His account is disinfected with irony. But though we are often asked to compare The French Revolution with Scott's novels, in this respect they belong to different worlds. Carlyle's work was deliberately bold: for ourselves, he wrote authorially, it means 'the open violent Rebellion, and Victory, of disimprisoned Anarchy against corrupt worn-out Authority . . . till the frenzy' burn 'itself out' and 'the Uncontrollable be got, if not reimprisoned, yet harnessed' (i.221). He told Sterling, 'It is a wild savage Book, itself a kind of French Revolution ... born in blackness whirlwind and sorrow' (CL, ix.116).

However much we may want, like Thackeray, to shun the philosophy of historical narrative, it is essential to an understanding of Carlyle's method. For though Carlyle read widely to authenticate his history, he was constantly aware that in the nature of things no account could ever exactly correspond with the events. He frequently speaks

¹⁰ English Historians on the French Revolution (Cambridge, 1968), 60; a valuable and important study.

about this; and though it may worry us when we find discrepancies in his accounts from time to time, as it worried Carlyle, it may matter less than we think. He has often been blamed for relying too much on personal memoirs (with all their drawbacks) written soon after the Revolution, but he knew perfectly well that they were biased and possibly mistaken; that even contemporary reports were not authentic; and that recorded speeches in whatever form are almost certainly unreliable.

His point is that, with all their faults, such records are broken reflections of reality. In fact, Carlyle had a particular attraction to half-legendary or flawed accounts even in contemporary history. Historians, for example, have disputed whether de Sombreuil's daughter was forced to drink 'Aristocrats' blood' to save her father (ii.153), but Carlyle accepted it—as a report; it is the same with the tanned human skins of Meudon (ii.376); and even the 'whiff of grapeshot', now apparently dubious. They were attempts at the truth and, if possibly mistaken, were once believed and often acted on. Carlyle is usually careful, by current standards, to note the kind of sources he is using, as in such instances as these; and though, after 150 years, his account is no substitute for a modern history—and is not just different in detail but of a different kind-it is essentially true.

So, when he discovered that the story of the sinking of the Vengeur (see ii.371 and the Note on the Text) was just a French propaganda victory, the fact was briefly mentioned in the next edition but dealt with in detail only in an article for Fraser's Magazine in June 1839. It proved his point: the tale was 'Founded, like the World itself, on Nothing'. He made only a minimal addition to the text. It is like Admiral Nesham's sword (i.323), where he kept the wrong name in his narrative with no more than a footnote explanation: that was how 'history' had told it, and necessary corrections were just footnoted in passing.¹¹

¹¹ As the Note shows this had to be added in 1857. TC's practical and theoretical method can be contrasted with C. L. R. Fletcher's, who edited

Although we can admit some laziness in Carlyle's reluctance to revise, it fitted into his general scheme. Nowhere can this be seen more remarkably than in the curious ending. From time to time throughout his work Carlyle introduces self-quotation, again perhaps to show that we are reading a fallible writer rather than a dispassionately accurate observer. But at the end of The French Revolution he returns to a fictitious 'discourse', put into the mouth of his favourite imposter Cagliostro (see i.59). Without explanation, it is taken from the end of Carlyle's account of 'The Diamond Necklace', in which though Cagliostro was an historical figure his speech declaring that 'Reality rests on a dream' is entirely Carlyle's invention. This is rather like the opening of The French Revolution, but if this comes with the assurance of an archliar, is it meant to be true?

It can hardly be so. It is part of the 'duality' in his outlook on history. Yet we may note that the most remarkable alteration to later editions was the addition of a long, closely-printed 'Chronological Summary' in 1857. It was as if he believed that once readers had discovered how to read his work, he also wanted them to accept it as a genuine history of the revolution as faithful as could be expected. Though replaced in the present edition by a shorter version, the chronology made for Carlyle was precise and closely keyed into the text. His riddle remains, therefore, of how history should be told.

There are other peculiarities which may present problems, among them Carlyle's use of images with a classical colouring. It was not meant as a dignified veneer but in ironic mockery, echoing the inflated rhetoric of the *philosophes* and revolutionaries. He satirizes their naïve longing for a lost 'age of gold' (i.31, 33, 358–64), or for the time of Astraea

TC's history with painstaking corrections, which are often wrong. But TC's system later broke down with revisions for later editions of his *Cromwell*, which he had unfortunately claimed would give a complete and accurate collection. For TC's general accuracy see John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Oxford, 1985), 41, 103.

Redux when truth and justice will return (i.28–35, 46–50). He ridicules the Rousseauistic classical festivals of Reason and the Supreme Being (ii.395–7). He ironically describes the adoption of new names, like the Parisian section of Mutius-Scaevola presided over by someone with the same legendary name (ii.335); the way that Tallien can whisk out a dagger—'the Steel of Brutus we call it' (ii.409); the revolutionary red nightcaps (ii.59); and the affectation of simple ways of speech (ii.132). Yet this is authentically historical, and except in selection never merely Carlylean.

Other references run alongside, less obviously absurd but made faintly ridiculous by repetition: like those to Lafavette. curiously styled 'Scipio Americanus' by contemporaries, who retires 'Cincinnatus-like' (ii.10) in a contemporary cliché borrowed by Carlyle; or his exaggerated fantasy that France confronted by democracy was like the nymph Semele consumed by fire in the presence of Jove (ii.189). There are the chapters on 'Loménie's Thunderbolts', 'Mercury de Brézé', and 'Broglie the War God'. Simpler classical allusions may be half serious and yet often made tongue-in-cheek. For there is an underlying scorn for the manner in which the classical historians themselves, such as Plutarch, had withdrawn from unpleasant reality, and the way the French had gone even further in transforming ancient heroes into virtuous abstractions. Carlyle was also not alone in noticing how the Romans imitated by the revolutionaries had never existed outside Livy. 12

Yet these fictions are shadowed by myths, such as the war of the Titans, the destructive passions of the Maenads, the abyss of Tartarus, and possibly by Christian myth, as in Louis' supper of bread and wine after his recapture at Varennes, which express profound truths through their serious resonance. And distinct from all these is the use made of Homer and, to a lesser extent, Greek tragedy.

¹² See Harold T. Parker, The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries (New York, 1965). TC's 'heroes' are never classical, but were to be such figures as Odin, Mahomet, Dante, Burns, and even Rousseau: men who saw into the nature of reality.

Homer's influence and the use Carlyle made of him came from a deep enjoyment of his epic power and poetry, his account of great events, and the way he went 'to the heart of human nature'. Homer, too, though he may have believed 'his story to be a fiction' had 'no doubt of its truth', repeating 'what survived in tradition and records', and expecting 'his hearers to believe them as he did'. Carlyle's own epic consciously imitates Homer and Greek tragedy, not only through allusive phrases, but by attempting to convey their 'depth of feeling' in the same way, the success of which partly depends on our seeing his intention. ¹³ His letters show how clear about it he was, and readers and reviewers such as Emerson and Mill were quick to see the work as a Homeric epic, 'the history of the French Revolution, and the poetry of it, both in one' (Seigel, 52, 219). Hence the attempt to note such allusions in the present edition.

With some misgivings we have included many of Carlyle's allusions to the Bible. With Milton and Shakespeare it was the only source in common culture he could rely on readers to recognize; but the allusions can be misleading. As a general rule the truth of the Bible was like Homer, with which he often compared it. It gave general truths of men and nature, both mythical and based on human traditions, intensely believed. But it should not be thought that the familiar echoes imply a literal belief in a personal God. Carlyle rejected ordination in the Church and his parents' religion, held aloof from family prayers, and gave up attending church. Nor is it to be supposed that we can sensibly classify him as a kind of 'Calvinist' except in a peculiar national sense. In particular, references to God's judgement are mythical or metaphorical: any idea that Carlyle really believed that a Hebrew Jehovah punished innocent victims of the Terror for misconduct at the court of Louis the Bien-aimé would be absurd. To Carlyle, God's judgement, Nemesis, and the Aeschylean

¹³ See his Lectures on the History of Literature, ed. J. Reay Greene (1892), given 1838, 20-5.

'Furies', are all parts of a belief in the necessary consequences of human action; though he, perhaps wrongly, leaves this for the reader to deduce.

Readers who are historians are sometimes puzzled by Carlyle's use of the dramatic present tense, but this is another device to bring events into prominence, as Archibald Alison recognized in his History of Europe from the Commencement of the French Revolution ([1833], i.427–8): 'the intellect, all powerful in reviewing the past, is seldom felt in judging of the present' which is ruled by passion, so that a true account should show not only what happened but also men's feelings as part of the happening. The present tense allows this, giving a running commentary on the conflict, and a dramatic form to the action, which is essential to Carlyle's method as he described it to Sterling: a method not of 'hearsays' but of 'recording the presence, bodily concrete coloured prescence of things' (CL, ix.15). It is a method triumphantly justified by such great scenes as the taking of the Bastille, Louis' execution, and Danton's trial.

Always present is Carlyle's voice, or 'voices' if we allow for the flexibility and variety of tone which take their authority from his energy, style, and apparent confidence. There is no need for Sartor's array of narrative personae, its Teufelsdröckh, the Hofrath, Editor, and Sauerteig. It was the first book to be published over his name, and, as well as being his own act of revolution, rings with an aggressively personal Scottish accent, much as in his lectures, 'gollying', or roaring, in what he called his 'Annandale voice' (CL, viii.94). The vocabulary deliberately includes such words as 'shifty' (active), brool, dirl, cadger, melly, and whinstone. Scottish characters figure in the allusions: Knox, Wallace, Douglas Bell-the-Cat, the Covenanters, Renwick, the Cameronians, the Western Scotch Whigs, the Lords of the Articles, and Bessy Bell. And Carlyle uses this voice to comment, for example, on the topicality of the work: how current British radicals are mere Girondins, how the factory child is worse off even than the Dauphin in the Temple prison, how 'starvation is starvation' in Ireland as in France, how democracy is on the march, and how revolution and counter-revolution will go on. Within the account there is discussion of the causes of the Revolution, the extent and nature of the Terror, about the Sansculottes, the French themselves, debate about leading figures, and the morality of men's actions, which to Carlyle's contempt were so often passed over by historians such as Thiers. His techniques are all means to an end. Though provoking, he is thought-provoking, and he wants us to understand as well as to experience.

Two hundred years after the fall of the Bastille, most readers will judge for themselves whether the book is fair about the ideals of the French Revolution, and whether they really lead to liberty, equality, and fraternity. We are asked to decide in the conflict between reality and idealism, representation and responsibility. Here, too, Carlyle speaks for himself—if we allow him to. There is prejudice against him, some of which he brought on himself; yet it was his misfortune not his fault to have provided, in *Frederick the Great*, a work with which Goebbels tried to console Hitler in the Berlin bunker.

The French Revolution has nothing to do with this. Its teaching can be as well be linked with two very different companions, Joseph Conrad and Bertrand Russell. Deeply impressed by Conrad, Russell wrote of his 'philosophy':

I felt... that he thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths. He was very conscious of the various forms of passionate madness to which men are prone, and it was this that gave him such a passionate belief in the importance of discipline. His point of view ... was the antithesis of Rousseau's: 'Man is born in chains, but he can become free.' He becomes free, so I believe Conrad would have said ... by subduing wayward impulse to a dominant purpose ... Conrad adhered to the older tradition, that discipline should come from within. He despised indiscipline, hated discipline that was merely external.¹⁴

¹⁴ Portraits from Memory (1956), 83.

All Carlyleans will recognize the thin volcanic earth-rind, man's inner madness, and the scorn for mere idealism and sentiment; they may see a likeness in their regard for duty and the work ethic, for action rather than talk, and in their ironic disbelief in absolutes. The dualities in the insight of such writers may also remind us that *The French Revolution* is not only 'a history', but as Carlyle says a vision of 'the depth and height . . . revealed in man', and an inspired attempt to confront and contemplate it, 'with just sympathy and just antipathy, with clear eye and open heart' (ii.443).

Edinburgh

K. J. F.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The work was published, in three volumes, on 9 May 1837, in an edition of 1,000 copies, by James Fraser; then in an edition of three volumes, and 1,000 copies, prompted by Emerson, published by Little and Brown, of Boston, 25 December 1837. There were further editions before one of two volumes, in 1857, published by Chapman and Hall in Carlyle's Collected Works. It is this edition from which the two-volume World's Classics edition (Oxford University Press, 1907) was taken, with an introduction by C. R. L. Fletcher. The text of the present edition is reproduced from that of 1907, less the introduction and a 'Chronological Summary', of seventeen pages added in 1857, and with a new chronology and new and more complete index. The 1857 chronology was apparently added by Vernon Lushington as 'Philo', to whom Carlyle wrote: 'I remember feeling, when the Book first came out, that it wd be better for a Chronological Summary: ("Book I, Chap. 1", and then the main points it handles, dated, clearly signified, and with extreme brevity, the chaff ALL blown away): Suppose you considered this a little?' (K. J. Fielding, 'Vernon Lushington: Carlyle's Friend and Editor,' Carlyle Newsletter 8 [1987]:10). The second edition (James Fraser: 1839), first briefly corrected the story of the sinking of the Vengeur (ii.371-2). As Carlyle's accuracy has wrongly been questioned by such historians as G. P. Gooch, it should be noted that an Admiral Griffiths had written recalling the actual event in which he had taken part, and that his remarks were widely discussed in the press. Carlyle wrote about it for Fraser's Magazine (July, 1839); and his 'On the Sinking of the Vengeur' was added to his Miscellanies (1840); see Works, xxix.208-25, and CL, x.236-40. Notes were added on Admiral Nesham (i.323) in 1857, and on Frederick I (i.296) in 1868, though the text was otherwise unchanged. Much can be learned about the actual writing