

The Riverside Literature Series

ON HEROES, HERO-WORSHIP,
AND
THE HEROIC IN HISTORY

BY
THOMAS CARLYLE

EDITED FOR STUDY

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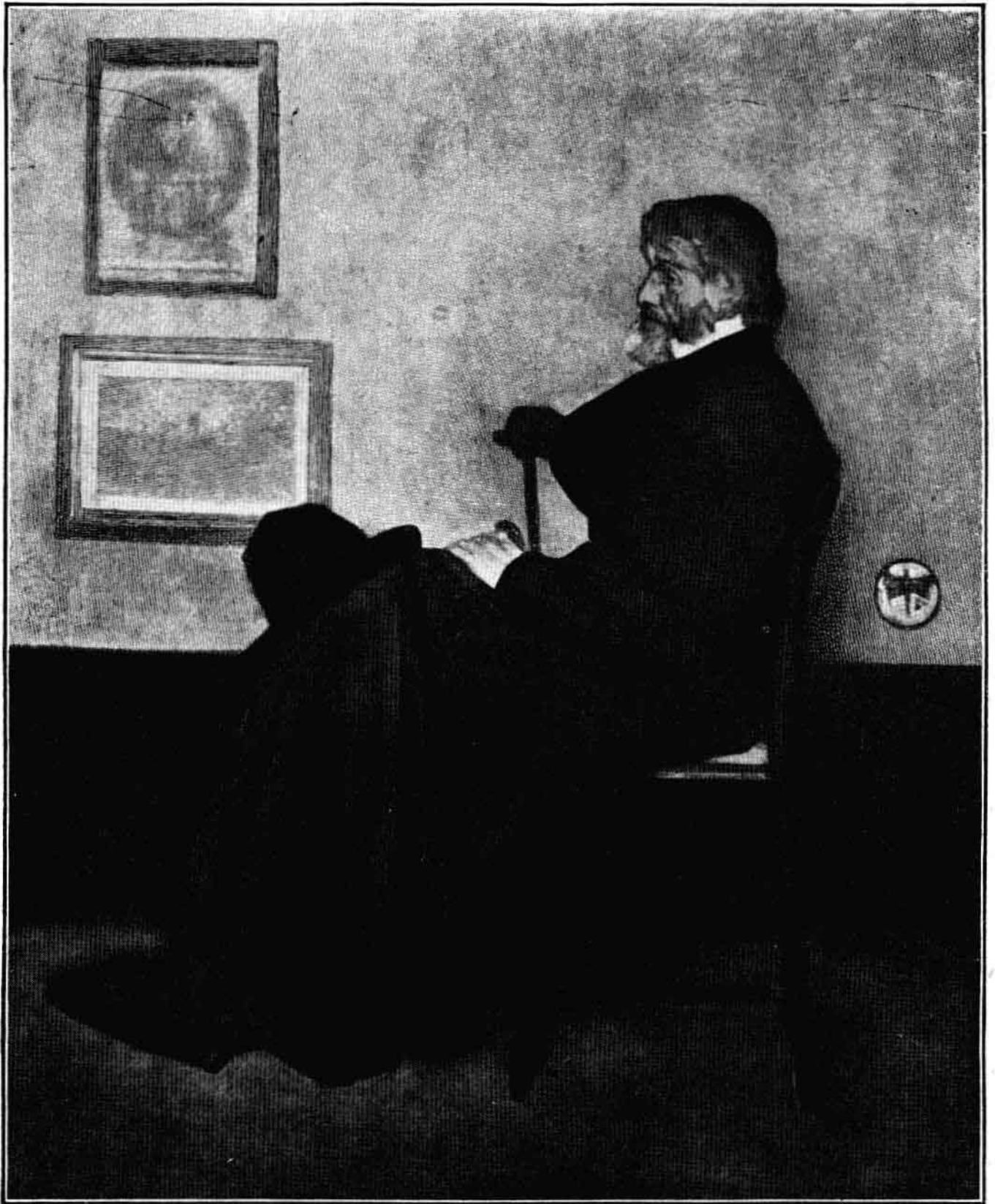


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THOMAS CARLYLE

From the portrait by J. A. McNeill Whistler

PREFATORY NOTE

THIS edition of "Heroes and Hero-Worship" is intended for the beginner, not the experienced Carlylean. It is important, therefore, that he should have all the time available to study Carlyle's thought and style, and be relieved of the need of hunting over dictionaries and encyclopedias for mere information. An attempt has been made in the footnotes to supply such mechanical apparatus as would be useful to a student of the last years in the High School or of Freshman or Sophomore year in college in gaining a verbal understanding of the text. The "Additional Notes" contain suggestions for his more deliberate and careful study of Carlyle's teaching. The editor has not felt any obligation to stand over the author with a rod of correction for the occasional petty slips of his memory or the imperfect scholarship of his generation; for the value of the book consists primarily in its power to stimulate mind and heart and soul, rather than in the amount of historical or other knowledge that one may gather from it.

The text is that of the Library Edition of Carlyle's works, London, 1869-71, of which the People's Edition, the only later one issued during Carlyle's life, was a cheap reprint.

INTRODUCTION

I

LIFE OF CARLYLE

IN a small country village in southwestern Scotland, toward the latter part of the eighteenth century, there grew up five brothers, who by their character and occupation earned the title of the “five fighting masons,” — “a curious sample o’ folks, pithy, bitter-speaking bodies, and awful fighters.” The second of these concerns us here, James Carlyle, a steady, abstemious, self-reliant, hard-working, thorough-working, devout-minded man, living in a house built by his own hands. A stone bridge of his building was regarded with pride by his famous son as a more honorable work than any of his own books. When James Carlyle died in 1832, his son Thomas, unable to return home to see his burial, found consolation in writing down “Reminiscences” of him: “In several respects I consider my father as one of the most interesting men I have known, . . . of perhaps the very largest natural endowment of any it has been my lot to converse with. None of you will ever forget that bold glowing style of his, flowing free from his untutored soul, full of metaphors (though he knew not what a metaphor was), with all manner of potent words. Nothing did I ever hear him undertake to render visible which did not

become almost ocularly so. Emphatic I have heard him beyond all men. . . . His words were like sharp arrows that smote into the very heart. . . . Let me write my books as he built his houses, and walk as blamelessly through this shadow world. . . . We all had to complain that we durst not freely love him. . . . Till late years I was ever more or less awed and chilled by him."

His wife was of a more tender, approachable nature. She it was that taught Tom at an early age to read, though her own equipment did not enable her to go far with him. When he grew up she learned to write that she might keep better in touch with him in his absence. To her in later years he wrote constantly of his doings and thinkings. She encouraged him by her confidence in his powers, and studied his books with loving pride in his accomplishment. And as long as she lived it was one of his chiefest joys to return from the society of the distinguished literary world to the talk of her "with whom alone my heart played freely," as they smoked their pipes together by the hearth in simple peasant fashion.

Of James Carlyle and Margaret Aitken, his wife, Thomas was the eldest child, born December 4, 1795, in the village of Ecclefechan in Dumfriesshire. His education began early in the home. To the reading taught him by his mother, the father added a scanty supply of arithmetic. At the age of five he began to attend school. At seven he was pronounced "complete in English,"—in some ways almost a foreign tongue to the Annandale peasant boy. Two years later he added further to his knowledge, if not to his

happiness, by being sent to the Annan Grammar School six miles away, to be prepared for the University. How Carlyle fared there is reflected in "Sartor Resartus"¹ in the account of Teufelsdröckh's experiences at the Hinterschlag Gymnasium: "My Teachers were hide-bound Pedants, without knowledge of man's nature, or of boy's; or of aught save their lexicons and quarterly account-books. Innumerable dead Vocables (no dead Language, for they themselves knew no Language) they crammed into us, and called it fostering the growth of mind. . . . The Professors knew syntax enough; and of the human soul thus much: that it had a faculty called Memory, and could be acted-on through the muscular integument by the appliance of birch-rods."

In November, 1809, Carlyle walked the eighty and odd miles across the country to Edinburgh University. His career there was not distinguished, except perhaps inwardly, by a more than usually strenuous conflict of irrepressible personality with institutional conventions. "Had you, anywhere in Crim Tartary," says Teufelsdröckh,² "walled-in a square enclosure; furnished it with a small, ill-chosen Library; and then turned loose into it eleven-hundred Christian striplings, to tumble about as they listed, from three to seven years: certain persons, under the title of Professors, being stationed at the gates, to declare aloud that it was a University, and exact considerable admission-fees, — you had, not indeed in mechanical structure, yet in spirit and result, some imperfect resemblance of our High Seminary." "What I have found the Uni-

¹ II, iii.

² *Ibid.*

versity did for me, was that it taught me to read in various languages and various sciences, so that I could go into the books that treated of these things, and try anything I wanted to make myself master of gradually, as I found it suit me.”¹ He was more than ordinarily proficient in mathematics, but the University gave him little Latin and less Greek. For two years after his departure (in 1814), without a degree, he was mathematical tutor at Annan, and the following two years at Kirkcaldy. The teaching had been undertaken as a temporary means of support until he should be ready for ordination as a minister of the Kirk of Scotland, the goal of his parents’ ambition for him. But theological uncertainties caused him to feel the impossibility of ever preaching from a pulpit, — though preacher he was to the end of his days. The change was a bitter disappointment to his father and mother and a bitter grief to himself for their sakes.

Convinced that “it were better to perish than to continue school-mastering,” in 1818 he returned to Edinburgh to attend law lectures. The law soon showed itself no more satisfactory than other professions; and while he supported himself by teaching private pupils and writing articles, distinguished by no trace of individuality of thought or style, for the “Edinburgh Encyclopedia,” he dragged through the three most wretched years of his life. His frugal and irregular living in university days, in an attempt to spare as much as possible the family supply of oatmeal, had rendered him a victim to unutterable torments of dyspepsia: “A

¹ Inaugural Address, *On the Choice of Books*.

rat was gnawing at the pit of my stomach." To this continual agony was added "eating of the heart, misgivings as to whether there shall be presently anything else to eat, disappointment of the nearest and dearest as to the hoped-for entrance on the ministry, and steadily-growing disappointment of self — above all, wanderings through mazes of doubt, perpetual questionings unanswered." A pretty complete list of woes! Carlyle had been brought up in the strict Scotch Calvinistic faith and practice; the practice he held to always, the faith was struggling for existence. His wide reading and thinking had opened to him visions of truth far wider than were possible to the Ecclefechan stone-mason and his wife. He felt himself drifting toward materialism, — a belief, or "no-belief," which he had been taught to consider tenable only by one possessed of the Devil, and of which he continued to the end to hold essentially the same opinion. It was the completest upheaval of his inmost nature, and he suffered as a man suffers only when the deepest feelings of his heart are torn up by the roots. How, in June, 1821, he won the decisive battle of the campaign against the "Everlasting No" is told in the chapter so entitled in "*Sartor Resartus*." His great helper in the struggle was Goethe, to whom he wrote, "It can never be forgotten that to you I owe the all-precious knowledge and experience that Reverence is still possible: that instead of conjecturing and denying, I can again believe and know." Financial aid came to him successively by his appointment as a tutor in a wealthy family, and by the success of his "*Life of Schiller*" and his translation of "*Wilhelm Meister*;" but the dyspepsia

clung closer than a brother for the rest of his life, though relenting a little after his eightieth year.

In June, 1821, Carlyle had met Miss Jane Baillie Welsh (born 1801). Her father was a successful physician of the town of Haddington. He alone, and not always he, could control the merry, mocking, keen-witted, and sometimes sharp-tongued maid with raven locks and sparkling black eyes. He died in 1819. Her mother was of the sort excellently qualified for spoiling such a daughter. From the first there was no doubt of Jane Welsh's unusual intellectual gifts. At the age of ten her admiration for the heroes of ancient Rome — she had been reading Vergil — led her to abjure her dolls, which were surrendered to the flames in humble imitation of Dido of Carthage. Her literary tastes and aspirations formed a strong bond of sympathy between her and Carlyle in the beginnings of their acquaintance. In spite of his peasant awkwardness of person and manners her quick penetration discovered the promise of his genius. Their letters were at first of things literary ; then the personal note began to be heard. Their courtship — “ a sore fight : but he won it,” as Carlyle says of Knox's life — was marked by many advances and retrogressions, declarations and recantations, and has been represented in many different lights. Professor Norton is the present guardian of their letters, and has told how they impress him, in the Appendix to his edition of the “ Early Letters of Thomas Carlyle,” vol. i. They were married in October, 1826.

Carlyle's character as a husband has been one of the battle-grounds of literature. If we were to take at full

value everything which Mrs. Carlyle said about their married life to her friends, or wrote in her letters and journal, and everything that Carlyle wrote in his grief-stricken, remorseful “Reminiscences” after her death, we could hardly avoid the conclusion that he was a veritable ogre, and that she led one of the most wretched lives recorded in books. During most of their married life she suffered from varying degrees of ill health, — sometimes being so unstrung nervously as to be hardly herself, and hardly responsible for her bitter words. Under such conditions trifles easily became tragedies in her judgment, and her husband had too much of the same tendency to be able to restore the balance. At times both seemed, as Hume said of Rousseau, to have been “born without a skin.” Carlyle’s entire absorption in his work and consequent thoughtless neglect of his wife’s comfort when a book was in process of creation, as well as his occasional violent bursts of temper while under the exhausting strain of steady writing, were matters which doubtless every one will agree with Mrs. Carlyle in wishing otherwise. And no doubt one also wishes that her talent for enduring much hardness had been mated with a better talent for consuming her own smoke, and a softer tact in bringing her husband’s real tenderness to the surface. But after the worst has been told, as it has been most abundantly, it is still visible to the discriminating eye that the love between them was far too deep and strong for any temporary irritations and misunderstandings to extinguish. “Oh! if I could but see her once more,” he wrote, in his loneliness after her death, “were it but for five minutes, to let her know that I always loved her through

all that! She never did know it, never!" But I believe she did know it, nevertheless.

After living a year and a half just out of Edinburgh, Carlyle writing for the reviews, they gave up the financial struggle and retired to a farm far out in the country at Craigenputtock, "Hill of Hawks," belonging to the Welshes. It was not an ideal spot for a vivacious and high-spirited society belle, but Mrs. Carlyle's life was not, as some would persuade us, one of unrelieved gloom and unthanked drudgery; her nature had other sides, and she was above all things desirous, now and all her life, with unflinching loyalty, of doing whatever would promote Carlyle's effectiveness in his literary work. Here, with a brief sojourn in London and another in Edinburgh, he battled on for six years, with Jane Welsh's help, writing numerous miscellaneous essays (including "Burns") and "Sartor Resartus," — of all his books the most completely expressive of the author, and containing the germ of almost all his later teachings. The manuscript of "Sartor" was at first refused by all the publishers — by some more abruptly than by others; it was finally published serially in "Frazer's Magazine," 1833-4, and provoked a storm of ridicule and disgust. Mrs. Carlyle pronounced it "a work of genius, dear;" but Emerson, in America, and one Father O'Shea, of Cork, seemed to be the only "Public" that essentially disagreed with the reviewer who pronounced it "a heap of clotted nonsense." Not long before Carlyle's death thirty thousand copies of a cheap edition were sold in a few weeks.

Meanwhile Carlyle, seeing that Craigenputtock was in various respects ill suited to his needs as a literary

man, determined to burn his ships and seek his fortune in London. He himself went on ahead to engage a house, and in June, 1834, they settled at No. 5 (now 24) Cheyne Row, Chelsea, their home for the rest of their lives. Poverty still dogged his heels. "It is now some three-and-twenty months," he writes, in February, 1835, "since I have earned one penny by the craft of literature. . . . I have been ready to work, I am abler than ever to work, . . . yet so it stands." By about the end of the month the first volume of the "French Revolution" was finished. It represented five months of the most exacting labor, besides a great deal of earlier reading and thinking. The manuscript, having been lent to Carlyle's friend Mill, was carelessly exposed to the ravages of a serving-maid, and, "except four or five bits of leaves, irrevocably annihilated." "Well, Mill, poor fellow, is terribly cut up," were Carlyle's first words to his wife, when Mill left their house after reporting the calamity; "we must endeavor to hide from him how very serious this business is to us." He braced himself manfully for the effort of re-writing, and the entire work was published early in 1837, winning immediate and enthusiastic recognition. "Everybody," said Thackeray, who reviewed it for "The Times," "is astonished at every other body's being pleased with this wonderful performance." But Carlyle always felt, contrary to Mrs. Carlyle's opinion, that the re-written first volume was inferior to the original. The same year saw Carlyle's first appearance on the platform in a successful course of lectures on "German Literature," — followed in successive years by other courses, ending with "Heroes

and Hero-Worship," 1840. The lean years were over, and his "place and subsistence" were thenceforth assured.

Carlyle had read much on Cromwell before treating him in "Heroes," and was already hard at work on the book which was to finish the work of vindication begun in the lecture, when he turned aside for a few weeks, in the first months of 1843, to write "Past and Present." "Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches" appeared in 1845, and established a new reputation for Carlyle as an original historian. His deep scorn and distrust of contemporary political and economic methods were expressed in the denunciatory "Latter-Day Pamphlets" of 1850. "He wrote in his study, alone with his anger, his grief, and his biliousness." But the atmosphere was clear and serene in his "Life of Sterling," 1851.

The Carlyles entered "the valley of the shadow of Frederick" the next year, Carlyle making a trip to Germany to collect materials, though the first volumes did not appear until 1858. As time went on the book became an increasingly intolerable burden to him: "A task that I cannot do," he wrote to Emerson, "that generally seems to me not worth doing, and yet that must be done. No job approaching to it in ugliness was ever cut out for me; nor had I any motive to go on, except the sad negative one, Shall we be beaten in our old days?" The final volumes appeared in 1865. For vivid realistic picturing and story, and for completeness and accuracy of detail, "The History of Frederick II, commonly called the Great" is one of the greatest of historical works.

In 1865 the students of Edinburgh University elected Carlyle Lord Rector, and the following April he fulfilled the sole duty of that honorary office in the delivery of the most famous of all Lord-Rectorial addresses, "On the Choice of Books." It was heard with tremendous enthusiasm, the students thronging about him at the close with hearts deeply moved. "A perfect triumph," Professor Tyndall telegraphed to Mrs. Carlyle. Her pride and delight in her husband's success were unbounded. While all the land was still reëchoing praise of the address there came to him, in the North, a telegram announcing Mrs. Carlyle's death. She had died suddenly, of heart failure, while riding in Hyde Park. The next day Carlyle received her last letter, full of affectionate anticipation of his return. On her tomb at Haddington are inscribed the following words, written by Carlyle: "In her bright existence she had more sorrows than are common, but also a soft invincibility, a capacity of discernment, and a noble loyalty of heart that are rare. For forty years she was the true and loving helpmate of her husband, and by act and word unweariedly forwarded him as none else could in all of worthy that he did or attempted. She died at London, 21st April, 1866, suddenly snatched from him, and the light of his life is as if gone out."

During the remaining years of his life Carlyle produced a few essays, but no great work. His latest writings were dictated, for the palsy of his hand prevented his writing himself. Honors showered in on him from his own country and from abroad. He was persuaded to accept the Prussian *Ordre pour le Mérite*; and was offered the Grand Cross of the Bath,

which he declined. He died on the 4th of February, 1881, and was buried, according to his own request, beside the graves of his own kin in the Ecclefechan kirkyard, though offer was made, as he had foreseen it might be, of a place in Westminster Abbey.

Carlyle's was far too great and too complex a nature to be disposed of in a few paragraphs of an Introduction, but the main traits were clearly marked. To the reader of "Heroes" one fundamental characteristic of its author is evident on every page, — his uncompromising love of truth. Whether or not his judgments in specific cases were right or wrong, it is clear to even the most unsympathetic that they were delivered earnestly by one of the most genuinely sincere of men. From the beginning to the end he waged ceaseless war with all forms of shams and conventionalities, — "simulacra" and "formulas." His intensity was like that of his Hero-poet, Dante. He demanded of others the same sterling honesty of purpose which was exemplified in himself; and his indignation, provoked by any sort of injustice or hypocrisy, uttered itself in blasting denunciation or ridicule, according to his mood. But in conversation his keen sense of humor often got the better of his indignation, and "he would dissolve his fiercest objurgations and tumults of wrath," says Professor Masson, "in some sudden phantasy of the sheerly absurd, and a burst of uproarious laughter."

"A man who does not know rigor, cannot pity either," writes Carlyle in his characterization of Dante. Of Carlyle's quick sympathy and generosity

the stories are innumerable, — toward his family first of all and always, to old friends of Ecclefechan days, to London street beggars, and to charitable and philanthropic causes of all sorts, to which in the later years of prosperity he gave bountifully and usually anonymously. “His only expensive luxury was charity.” “All the bitterness is love with the point reversed,” was Mrs. Browning’s interpretation of his occasional seeming harshness. Similar is Harriet Martineau’s comment: “His excess of sympathy has been, I believe, the master-pain of his life, . . . and the savageness which has come to be a main characteristic . . . is, in my opinion, a mere expression of his intolerable sympathy with suffering.” “I believe,” wrote Leigh Hunt, who lived near him in Chelsea, “that what Mr. Carlyle loves better than all his fault-finding, with all its eloquence, is the face of any human creature that looks suffering and loving and sincere.” The emphasis that Carlyle lays upon these qualities in several of his *Heroes* reflects their presence in himself.

A third trait of character revealed in “*Heroes*” is his deep religiousness. Carlyle’s creed was not Christian, if “Christian” implies belief in the miraculous elements of the New Testament story; and no form of church organization or creed won more than tolerance from him. But as deep and unshakable as a man’s could be, was his belief in the reality of an unseen, spiritual universe, — infinite, eternal, mysterious, yet touching the world of men intimately at all points. To his faith there was no dividing line between the natural and the supernatural: all was miraculous. That communion of the spirit of man with the “In-