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**Carlyle and the French Enlightenment:
Transitional Readings
of Voltaire and Diderot**

T. J. Hochstrasser

© Tim Hochstrasser
Department of International History
London School of Economics

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Series Editor:

Dr. Jon Adams
Department of Economic History
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London, WC2A 2AE

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7955 6727
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7955 7730

Carlyle and the French Enlightenment: Transitional Readings of Voltaire and Diderot

T. J. Hochstrasser

Abstract

Thomas Carlyle's writings are an important conduit for the transmission of French and German ideas into England during the nineteenth century – and Carlyle's antagonistic relationship with the French Enlightenment would have a significant and durable effect upon Victorian attitudes to French thought. But although his antagonism was assumed to be inveterate, in fact, a variety of opinions can be isolated in his writings which indicate a more nuanced reading. This is especially the case in early essays on Voltaire and Diderot, which reveal a much more positive set of interpretations that are never refuted in his subsequent writings, even though later Victorian writers took their intellectual bearings from Carlyle's later works. The reintegration of these texts allows for a better understanding both of the growth of Carlyle's admiration of late-eighteenth century German culture and his vexed and contradictory relationship with its French counterpart.

* * *

To me the 18th century has nothing grand in it except that grand universal suicide, named French Revolution, by which it terminated its otherwise most worthless existence with at least one worthy act – setting fire to its old home and self; and going up in flames and volcanic explosions in a truly memorable and important manner.¹

As many scholars have noted (most recently and eloquently, Brian Young), Thomas Carlyle's final large-scale historical work expresses massive disapproval for the French eighteenth century and its intellectual products.² Although in part a deliberate self-conscious Gothic ruin itself, Carlyle's *The History of Frederick II of Prussia* makes

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *The History of Frederick II of Prussia, called Frederick the Great*. 8 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1897, orig. 1858-65) vol.1.8-9

² Brian Young. *The Victorian Eighteenth Century. An Intellectual History*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), esp chs. 1 & 2.

a powerful claim for Germany and – by implication, German thought – as the true progenitor of nineteenth-century Victorian moral and political ideology. In this essay, however, I hope to re-direct attention towards two early essays that Carlyle wrote on Diderot and Voltaire which indicate that his evaluation of and response to the French Enlightenment was a good deal more complex than the splenetic bluster quoted above would suggest. These writings reveal a much more subtle relationship on his part with the Enlightenment, and if we are to understand the full range of his thought in this area the early essays of the 1820s and 1830s, written well before the grand-scale histories of the French Revolution and the Reign of Frederick the Great, and even before *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4), deserve further scrutiny. Once built into the trajectory of his thought we can see that his range of responses to the culture of eighteenth-century France was both more varied and sympathetic than is often thought.

This is the period of Carlyle's literary apprenticeship in which he moves from what is essentially the hack work of the biography of Schiller through to a mature set of essays which revolve around studies of Goethe, Jean-Paul, and other contemporary German literary and philosophical writers. The best known is perhaps the essay "The state of German Literature" of 1827, but he also translated the *Wilhelm Meister* novels, and began one of his own, *Wooton Reinfred*, in the same vein, abandoned unlamented by author and public at chapter eight. Less well known are the studies of Voltaire (1829) and Diderot (1833), which provided a parallel and countervailing interpretation of the French Enlightenment which cannot be understood outside the broader interpretative framework that his study of German philosophy had provided for him.³

³ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*. 3 vols. (London, 1869), Voltaire, vol. 1: 355-417 [originally a review of rival memoirs in *Foreign Quarterly*, 6

Carlyle's autodidactic pursuit of German language, literature and philosophy had begun initially as an attempt to gain access to new developments in continental scientific writings, which were the basis of his original research interests before literary and historical priorities asserted themselves and he committed himself to German Romanticism as a whole, possibly under the stimulus of reading Mme de Stäel. The influence of Coleridge's writings on Germany are also cited by some authorities, but the evidence for this is thin, and in any case Byron's suggestion, in *Don Juan*, that Coleridge's reading of German idealist philosophy and literary criticism deterred as much as encouraged interest in the Britain of the 1820s. Clearly key contributions were made by Julius Hare, John Sterling and the combination of GH Lewes and George Eliot, but other less likely figures should also be mentioned, such as the genial Sydney Smith, who gave the first series of lectures on Kant's philosophy as early as 1804, while cheerfully admitting that he really only felt equal to expounding Kant's ideas on aesthetics. Despite some distinguished studies of the mediating of individual authors, including Carlyle himself, the study of the reception of German thought in the early nineteenth century in Great Britain still awaits its modern author.⁴

Whatever the sources, the new focus on German ideas and authors brought with it two important consequences: firstly the new emphasis on German materials carried with it an explicit or implicit downgrading of the French Enlightenment and its values in which Carlyle was the most notable and influential exponent, but by no means alone in his views. The concept of the Counter-Enlightenment is not often applied to England, but in a real sense the development of new

(1829)]; Diderot, vol. 2: 403-73. [originally a review of Diderot's works in *Foreign Quarterly Review*, 22.1 (1833)]

⁴ For Carlyle's relationship with German thought and culture see esp. Elizabeth M.Vida. *Romantic Affinities: German Authors and Carlyle: A Study in the History of Ideas* (Toronto, 1993) and Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought, 1800-1860*. (Cambridge, 1980).

literary and philosophical priorities of an idealist kind was at the expense of the dominant figures of the French Enlightenment, already under attack from Burke and Gibbon in different ways in the 1790s. Reception in newly accessible form of the works of Kant, Goethe, Fichte, Richter, Schiller and Novalis, to name only a few, promoted a form of philosophical transcendentalism that was almost always accompanied by a critique of the rationalism, scepticism and alleged atheism which were associated with the thinkers of the French High Enlightenment. Secondly, we need to note that often what mattered most in this process of assimilation was not the accuracy or plausibility of the reading of the intentions of the German thinkers, but rather the fashion in which their ideas were compounded so as to address a set of concerns that were local and not necessarily shared by the German thinkers themselves.

Carlyle, for example, is often and rightly criticised for never properly understanding the range and implications of Kant's philosophy; but that criticism essentially misses the point that he was seeking to use elements from Kant to support intuitions that he had already identified in Goethe. His concerns were focused on finding a way of rescuing the social force of religious belief from scepticism so that traditional moral nostrums would not lose the power of religion to act as social cement. German writers could be deployed to provide a theoretical apparatus that would enable an "affirmative yea" to be maintained, and inhibit the kind of decay of the society of orders in Britain that that the French Revolution had brought about on mainland Europe.

So, in brief summary, Fichte was invoked to provide an idea of the man of letters who could act as the prophet of a transcendental order. Goethe then is interpreted as the embodiment of how this is to be done, and becomes Carlyle's own model. Throughout, the reading of Goethe is highly selective, restricted mostly to *Wilhelm Meister* and sections of *Faust*. His role is to show what the transcendental values

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

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

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

that literary forms were now as valid as philosophical ones as means for discussing epistemological questions, a view that was also strongly influential on George Eliot and George Lewes through Carlyle's example. As George Eliot wrote: "When he is saying the very opposite of what we think, he says it so finely, with so hearty conviction... that we are obliged to say 'Hear! Hear!' to the writer before we can give the decorous 'Oh! Oh!' to his opinions."⁵

The essays on Voltaire and Diderot, were written against the background of Carlyle's escape through German Idealism from the crisis of faith that he experienced at the end of his education at Edinburgh. Part of that process of re-orientation required him to repudiate as a set of polar opposites the very views and heroes that he had previously revered. So he presents a view of the Enlightenment that selects, stresses and condemns empiricism in philosophy, scepticism towards revealed religion, a primarily utilitarian view of morals, a scepticism towards traditional forms of authority (especially the "society of orders"), hostility to enthusiasm and a preference for "common sense" and the world of observed fact. This is further reinforced in the 1830s by his growing hostility to Benthamite utilitarianism where he argued that all human relations were being reduced to mechanical interactions and the "cash nexus." These themes are retrospectively projected back onto the eighteenth century, and Diderot and Voltaire are the most eminent targets of this guilt by association (though the critique is extended to Scotland too).

Yet, there is rather more to these essays than the creation of a myth of villainy and ascription of responsibility for the evils of the French Revolution. Firstly, Carlyle is unable to stick to his task of repudiation and is honest enough as a historian to find all sorts of points at which he can admire Diderot and Voltaire; where his honesty as an intellectual

⁵ G.Eliot, *The Leader* 6 (27 Oct 1855).

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

And the second general point of interest in both essays is the way in which he tries to blame the eighteenth century for having an inadequate epistemology in its attempt to interpret the world. Drawing on Kant he argues that there is a contrast between "understanding" (*Verstand*) and "reason" (*Vernunft*) which is recognised by all the German Romantics and never penetrated by the Enlightenment. For Carlyle, "understanding" deals with the capacity to analyse and calculate the outer world of appearances, while "reason" offers insight into the transcendental ideal nature of things and values. The French Enlightenment offered a one-eyed vision of understanding to which German philosophy was the antidote. There is a case to be made that this is the most consistent and lasting influence on Carlyle's historical method drawn from Germany. Though there is not much reference to individual German Romantics after the 1830s in Carlyle's books, this contrast between the world of appearances and the world of real rational truth is one that provides a golden thread of interpretation down to *Past & Present* (1843), *Cromwell* (1845), and *Frederick II* (1858-65).

It explains, for example, his continuing interest in theodicies, and the palpable existence of divine punishment for sin – for there must be a return and the breakthrough of the Real into the web of corruption cyclically bred in different societies. True Reason corrects the defects of understanding. Political and social revolutions, on this account, deserve the attention of the historian because they provide a moral reckoning for the achievements and failures of societies, and a providential accounting for them before God. This was indeed the impetus behind

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

Thus Carlyle's historiography takes up a position ultimately that stands about as far from the idea of "philosophic history" championed by Voltaire, as it is possible to be: his prophetic use of the "Ancient Monk" episode in *Past & Present* is about as far from eighteenth-century models as it is possible to move: a twelfth-century monastic community in Bury St Edmund's becomes the embodiment of the moral ideal of an intact community of reciprocal values, which is capable of valorization in the present, even if its trappings are no longer relevant. Bonds of community not the "cash nexus" and individualism tie this monastery, and a responsible hero, Abbot Sampson, directs it. What for eighteenth century historians could only be a Gothic nightmare, is for Carlyle a moral lesson that aims to redeem the 1840s by rebuking the eighteenth century.

Before scrutinising the essays on Voltaire and Diderot in detail, two more general contextual observations are appropriate. We need to remember that Carlyle's focus as a mature historian is two-fold: he certainly wishes to offer accurate history, so far as he can, and is concerned to find and use the best sources where possible; but ultimately the point and justification of history for Carlyle, is not accuracy or the truth for its own sake, but rather the use of the past to influence the shape of the present. Partly this was driven by a sense of the challenge of the times in which he lived, and the difficulty inherent in a post-revolutionary era of finding a shared discourse of moral authority to inhibit a recurrence in Britain of the apocalypse – as he saw it – of France. But it was also driven by a philosophical belief, drawn from the German Romantics, that truth as *Vernunft* revealed itself above all in symbolic form. The highly charged emotive rhetoric that became known later as "Carlylese" was justified in his view, not just or even mainly as a literary experiment, but as a way of showing where truth lay in a

symbolic form that all readers could thereby have access to and inhabit. To modern readers that ambition can all too often topple over into what reads as a hyperbolic ranting (reminiscent of the worst excesses of Herman Melville, on whom Carlyle had exerted a formative influence⁶). But, at its best, Carlyle's symbolism shows that a historiographical balance can be achieved between deploying the full resources of imagination and not stretching the background facts unreasonably. His best work allows for multiple levels of meaning to operate across his work, both explicitly and implicitly, that amount to an imaginative recreation of the topic both as history and as a source of explicit parallels between the France of the mid-eighteenth century and Britain in the 1830s. Those of us who pay lip-service to the importance of imagination in historical writing, should pause before condemning Carlyle for attempting a genre where the line between success and failure is inevitably as narrow as one metaphor that tips from well-judged evocation into abysmal attention-seeking.

Near the start of the essay on Voltaire, which is ostensibly a review of a series of conflicting contemporary memoirs of him, Carlyle concedes that he is dealing with the figure, who with the single exception of Luther, has developed a reputation and influence that is truly European in scope: he deserves treatment "neither from the parish belfry, nor any Peterloo platform; but if possible from some natural and infinitely higher point of vision."⁷ Accordingly, Carlyle begins with a careful reading of the available memoirs and accounts of Voltaire's life, and remarks fairly enough that his career had always been controversial and divided contemporary opinion. He acknowledges what he calls Voltaire's *adroitness* in managing his career, and while this may be damning with faint praise, his account of Voltaire's skill in seeking out

⁶ See, for example, A. Welsh, "A Melville Debt to Carlyle," *Modern Language Notes*, 73.7 (1958): 489-91.

⁷ Carlyle. *CME*. I, 365.

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

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

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

⁸ *Ibid.* 390-6.

⁹ *Ibid.* 369.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 402.

Overall he finds his history-writing both well-ordered and clearly structured – “not a mere show-room of curiosities, but truly a museum for purposes of teaching; every object is in its place and there for its uses.”¹¹

Moreover, Voltaire’s *contes* receive high praise as products of both wit and shrewd observation. *Candide* offers, says Carlyle, “the sharpest glances, though from an oblique point of sight, into at least the surface of human life, into the old familiar world of business... and yields store of ridiculous combinations. The Wit, manifested chiefly in these and the like performances.. has been often and duly celebrated.”¹²

However, it is at this point with the invocation of Wit and its tendency to develop into ridicule, scoffing, and lack of earnestness that the argument of the piece begins, for the first time, to turn into a negative critique. Carlyle views Voltaire’s wit as a purely destructive instrument that “earns abundant triumph as an image-breaker, but pockets little wealth.”¹³ Here the importance of Carlyle’s philosophical idealism begins to reveal itself as he goes on to condemn Voltaire because “he sees but a little way into Nature: the mighty All, in its beauty, and infinite mysterious grandeur, humbling the small *Me* into nothingness, has never for moments been revealed to him.”¹⁴ He fails above all to understand the social importance of religion: “the Divine Idea, that which lies at the bottom of Appearance” was never more invisible to any man. He reads History not with the eye of a devout seer, or even of a critic, but through a pair of mere anti-Catholic spectacles: “It is not a mighty dream, enacted on the theatre of Infinitude, with Suns

¹¹ *Ibid.* 400.

¹² *Ibid.* 402.

¹³ *Ibid.* 371

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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

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

Now there is obviously a temptation to dismiss this judgement out-of-hand, as purely a product of Carlyle’s own determination to do down Voltaire in favour of German thinkers, to find grounds for downgrading the eighteenth century in preference to his own; but before we do so we should acknowledge two points in Carlyle’s favour. Firstly, his pin-pointing of the awkward and unstable relationship between the *philosophes* and public opinion (should they lead it or be led by it? Where is true reason to be assessed before its tribunal? should there be a set of shared values among the “party of humanity,” and if so, who should define it?) is one that is still very much part of the current historiographical agenda of the French Enlightenment. Carlyle is not entirely off target here.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 371-2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 375.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Although in *The French Revolution* this characterisation of Rousseau provides the basis for a stinging and constant critique, here he is content to designate him as ‘half-sage, half maniac’.

Secondly, and more importantly, Carlyle steps back to a degree from his critique of Voltaire's personality by immediately following his argument with the concession that Voltaire's faults are those of his age as much as of his nature. The lack of transcendence that Carlyle laments in Voltaire is attributed to the exclusion of intellectuals from participation in public policy-making, the decay and corruption of the governing order in France, and the frivolity of the court. Here in its distilled essence we have the argument of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837), which does not blame the Enlightenment *per se* (and in the manner of de Tocqueville) for undermining confidence in the Old Regime, but instead sees it as part of a larger crisis in the governing capacity and moral will of the social elite – an argument very similar to Burke's in *Reflections*, though there it is not clear that that Carlyle ever seriously grappled in detail with Burke's case. The *philosophes* use a 'merely argumentative Logic' to pursue their case, and are excluded from governance by those who cannot even defend themselves with logic and seek refuge in the defunct weapons of persecution – "in such a state of things there lay abundant principles of discord.. for there is no conducting medium to unite softly these hostile elements; there is no true virtue, no true wisdom on one side or the other."¹⁹

The essay ends with a long statement of how Voltaire's faults were those of the "spirit of the age," that the collapse of the French state bore some comparison with the decline of the Roman Empire, save that the survival of the institutions of Christianity after the Terror had preserved hopes of maintaining public and private virtue intact in one form or another. What Carlyle is doing here for the first time in his work, is stating that social forces and circumstances determine thought rather than arguing that ideas shape social outcomes. The position where he comes to rest in this essay and in his later work on the French

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 373-4.

Revolution crystallises around the failures of the ruling class not merely or even mainly the French Enlightenment: moral failure on the part of the society of orders reaps the justified whirlwind. The revolutionary era is seen as a theodicy in which a just Providence is reasserted. The ruling elite is responsible *for* but not *to* the people over which it presides, and is open to divine punishment for neglect of its duties. There is a complex nexus of rights and responsibilities between rulers and ruled that the rulers broke with first. Such a position is tactically useful to Carlyle in that it allows him to retain an admiration for some aspects of Voltaire's work while also placing him on a lower pedestal than the German Romantics; but it also remains a key general strategy throughout his historical writings, whether on the revolution in France, the Puritan Revolution analysed in *Oliver Cromwell*, or *Frederick*. As we shall see this was one of the most important and problematic aspects of his legacy to later Victorian intellectual historians, and it began in his handling of the French Enlightenment.

The second essay, *Diderot*, echoes several of the themes set out in its predecessor but is altogether less impressive as a piece of intellectual history. Diderot matters less to Carlyle as a "hero and anti-hero" than Voltaire and is more of a peg on which to hang a general essay on the evils of eighteenth-century French atheism. Moreover, Carlyle was writing at time when many of the works that we now admire most in Diderot's canon, were not available or even known. Carlyle recognises this problem and indulges in some witty by-play at the expense of the chaos of the sources:

from time to time some asterisk attracts us to the bottom of the leaf, and to some printed matter subscribed "editors," but unhappily the journey is for the most part in vain; in the course of a vol. or two we learn all too well that nothing is to be gained there; that the Note, whatever it professedly treat of, will, in strict logical speech, mean only as much as to say: "Reader! Thou perceivest that we Editors, to the number of at

least 2, are alive, and if we had any information would impart it to thee!"²⁰

Carlyle clearly prefers Diderot's father, the knife grinder, to Diderot the philosopher, and there follows a long encomium on "cutlery" and its manufacture, which bows the knee before the sanctity of manual labour in Carlyle's moral lexicon.

Continuing in this vein it is Diderot's labours on the *Encyclopédie*, spread over two decades, that attract Carlyle's highest praise, though he also finds space to admire *Jacques le fataliste* and *Le Neveu de Rameau* among Diderot's personal writings. (It is no accident that these were the texts by Diderot that Goethe most admired too.) It is genuinely surprising to see how appreciative Carlyle is of Diderot's art criticism, where the conventional view holds that his *Salons* reviews were neglected until the twentieth century. However, given Carlyle's own predilection for the use of historical imagination to recreate the symbolic essence of an event, perhaps we should not find it remarkable that he responded to Diderot in these glowing terms:

...we find the freest recognition of whatever excellence there is; nay an impetuous endeavour, not critically, but even creatively, towards something more excellent. Indeed, what with their unrivalled clearness, painting the picture over again for us, so that we too see it, and can judge it; what with their sunny fervour, inventiveness, real artistic genius, which wants nothing but a *hand*, they are, with some few exceptions in the German tongue, the only Pictorial Criticisms we know of worth reading.²¹

Carlyle parts company with Diderot in exactly the same areas as he did with Voltaire: his support for materialism and mechanism evokes a fear in Carlyle of the social consequences of these philosophical commitments. For Carlyle there are no half-measures: such beliefs necessarily imply atheism and he gives Diderot credit for embracing

²⁰ Carlyle, *CME*. II, 419.

²¹ *Ibid.* 470.

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

This critique of the French Enlightenment develops further nuance and detail across his career, and embraces a more detailed examination of Rousseau and other *philosophes* too in *The French Revolution*; but in essence it does not change its contours. Rather it simply becomes more strident. Gradually, in his handling of these authors Carlyle loses the faculty he often demonstrates elsewhere – and especially in his social criticism – of showing the trade-offs and tensions between beneficial and harmful intellectual positions. Thus his reading of Voltaire in particular becomes cruder and more simplistic as his career progresses. This is most evident in his *History of Frederick the Great*, long judged a failure, and still of interest as the end-point of Carlyle’s engagement with Germany and France, and with the thought-world of the eighteenth century. Frederick is depicted as an authentic heroic national leader who displays realism and freedom from hypocrisy together with hard work and respect for facts that mark him off from the Enlightenment, though that is still blamed for his religious scepticism. Providence manifests itself in military victory for Frederick on behalf of a

²² *Ibid.* 417.

moral and earnest and pious Protestant Prussia and over the immoral, frivolous and sceptical Catholic France (here the background of diplomatic tensions that later led to the Franco-Prussian War is important). Voltaire is presented as a tiresome tempter who seeks to take the ruler away from his work and allotted task in pursuit of the fripperies of French culture. The best that Carlyle can find to say of each ultimately is that “Voltaire was the spiritual complement of Friedrich. What little their ‘poor Century... *did*, we must call Friedrich; what little it *thought* Voltaire. They are, for want of a better, the two Original Men of their Century.”²³ Truly, as Jane Carlyle remarked, this final foray into the eighteenth century was a “journey through the valley of the shadow of Frederick” that added little of note to Carlyle’s existing interpretation of the Age of Reason, and little of prophetic insight for the Europe of the 1860s and 1870s.

However, Carlyle’s gradual eclipse as both historian and social prophet did not mean that the influence of his reading of the Enlightenment declined. Far from it. Victorian England remained in thrall to his readings for some time to come, as we can see from a brief examination of the biography of Voltaire published by John Morley in 1872 and Leslie Stephen’s foray into the history of rationalist thought in England published in 1876.²⁴

One indicator of Carlyle’s success in occluding the importance of the French Enlightenment in general and of Voltaire in particular is the absence of general handling of the topic in English after Carlyle’s interventions. Up to the 1830s, Voltaire was celebrated as an apostle of toleration above all, but between Lord Brougham’s essay on this theme and the presentation of Voltaire in Lecky’s *History of Rationalism* (1865), there are few treatments, and even in Lecky, the scope

²³ Carlyle. *Frederick the Great*. Vol.3.177-8.

²⁴ John Morley. *Voltaire* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1872); Leslie Stephen. *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder 1876).

assigned to Voltaire and other French thinkers is trifling in comparison with that given to Locke and English Deism. In further confirmation of this point, Morley's biography suggests that the key formative phase in Voltaire's career is his residence in England in the 1720s, which shaped his political thought and support for religious toleration ineradicably.²⁵ There is no attempt to recreate a separate conceptual space for a French Enlightenment alongside German idealism and English empiricism.

Now of course the corrosive impact of Carlyle's writings is not the sole explanation of this pattern of interpretation. As Morley points out in the preface to his volume, during this same period that Carlyle is writing both liberals and utilitarians, who are perhaps most likely to be sympathetic commentators on the French Enlightenment, are engaging chiefly with the thought of Saint-Simon and Comte. For the latter thinkers Voltaire was an unsystematic and uncreative mind, not worthy of the "spirit of system," and thus this dismissive view prevailed from the other side of the political divide too. As Morley explains, it was only when liberal commentators escaped both their reliance on Comte and also no longer regarded Carlyle's critique of Voltaire's "irreligion" as a disqualification that a new reading of Voltaire and of the French Enlightenment as a whole could appear. Morley, following Carlyle's focus on social forces a stage further, argued that Voltaire had been compelled by the circumstances of censorship and persecution by church and *parlements* to a stronger critique of the social role of religion than was justified; and in the circumstances he had no choice. This, however, did not in any way undermine his role, newly presented by the Gladstonian Liberal Morley, as a champion of the rights of man and the role of reason in promoting practical social reform.²⁶ Indeed Morley went on to write studies of Burke and Rousseau enrolling them in the

²⁵ Morley. 1872, ch.2.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 36-42.

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

At the time of writing his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), Leslie Stephen frequently found himself posing this question: "Why had the work of eighteenth-century scepticism to be done all over again in the nineteenth century?" "Why had the work of Hume and Voltaire to be repeated?" In Britain, Stephen and others gave the reason simply as the impact of evolutionary theories of Darwin and of other kinds on the very concept of a metaphysical explanation for the origin of the cosmos, which had been left intact during the Enlightenment, even in the works of Hume and Voltaire. But another part of the answer may lie in the consistent down playing in the Britain of the first half of the nineteenth century of the work of the French Enlightenment, and its place in intellectual historiography. Even when that place was restored in the later nineteenth century much of the intellectual scope of the French Enlightenment, as it was understood by Gibbon, Hume and Smith, was omitted or truncated. We have only to think of the rich French context that John Pocock has recovered for Gibbon's Enlightenment to see how that contemporary sense of a shared intellectual project between England, Scotland and France had totally gone by the early nineteenth century.²⁷ In that explanation Carlyle's work, with its wide-ranging literary impact, and its promotion of German thought over French, surely played an important role.

Finally, the long shadow cast by Carlyle's reading of the French Enlightenment may help to explain one of the more puzzling aspects of Stephen's *History* – namely the conflict between the statement in his

²⁷ See, for example, J.G.A.Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion. I: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1763-4*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), Part 2.

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

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