Goethe had said of Carlyle that he was fortunate in having in himself an originating principle of conviction, out of which he could develop the force that lay in him unassisted by other men.1 Goethe had discerned what had not yet become articulately clear to Carlyle himself. But it is no less true that this principle of conviction was already active in his mind, underlying his thoughts on every subject which he touched. It is implied everywhere, though nowhere definitely stated in his published writings. We have arrived at a period when he had become master of his powers, when he began distinctly to utter the "poor message," as he sometimes called it, which he had to deliver to his contemporaries. From this time his opinions on details might vary, but the main structure of his philosophy remained unchanged. It is desirable, therefore, before pursuing further the story of his life, to describe briefly what the originating principle was. The secret of a man's nature lies in his religion, in what he really believes about this world, and his own place in it. What was Carlyle's religion? I am able to explain it, partly from his conversations with myself, but happily not from this source only, into which alien opinions might too probably intrude. There remain among his unpublished papers the fragments of two unfinished essays which he was never able to complete satisfactorily to himself, but which he told me were, and had been, an imperfect expression of his actual thoughts.
We have seen him confessing to Irving that he did not believe, as his friend did, in the Christian religion, and that it was vain to hope that he ever would so believe. He tells his mother, and he so continued to tell her as long as she lived, that their belief was essentially the same, although their language was different. Both these statements were true. He was a Calvinist without the theology. The materialistic theory of things—that intellect is a phenomenon of matter, that conscience is the growth of social convenience, and other kindred speculations, he utterly repudiated. Scepticism on the nature of right and wrong, as on man's responsibility to his Maker, never touched or tempted him. On the broad facts of the Divine government of the universe he was as well assured as Calvin himself; but he based his faith, not on a supposed revelation, or on fallible human authority. He had sought the evidence for it, where the foundations lie of all other forms of knowledge, in the experienced facts of things interpreted by the intelligence of man. Experienced fact was to him revelation, and the only true revelation. Historical religions, Christianity included, he believed to have been successive efforts of humanity, loyally and nobly made in the light of existing knowledge, to explain human duty, and to insist on the fulfilment of it; and the reading of the moral constitution and position of man, in the creed, for instance, of his own family, he believed to be truer far, incommensurably truer, than was to be found in the elaborate metaphysics of utilitarian ethics. In revelation, technically so called, revelation confirmed by historical miracles, he was unable to believe—he felt himself forbidden to believe—by the light that was in him. In other ages men had seen miracles where there were none, and had related them in perfect good faith in their eagerness to realise the divine presence in the world. They did not know enough of nature to be on their guard against alleged suspensions of its unvarying order. To Carlyle the universe was itself a miracle, and all its phenomena were equally in themselves incomprehensible. But the special miraculous occurrences of sacred history were not credible to him. "It is as certain as mathematics," he said to me late in his own life, "that no such thing ever has been or can be." He had learnt that effects succeeded causes uniformly and inexorably without
intermission or interruption, and that tales of wonder were as little the true accounts of real occurrences as the theory of epicycles was a correct explanation of the movements of the planets.

So far his thoughts on this subject did not differ widely from those of his sceptical contemporaries, but his further conclusions not only were not their conclusions, but were opposed to them by whole diameters; for while he rejected the literal narrative of the sacred writers, he believed as strongly as any Jewish prophet or Catholic saint in the spiritual truths of religion. The effort of his life was to rescue and reassert those truths which were being dragged down by the weight with which they were encumbered. He explained his meaning by a remarkable illustration. He had not come (so far as he knew his own purpose) to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them, to expand the conception of religion with something wider, grander, and more glorious than the wildest enthusiasm had imagined.

The old world had believed that the earth was stationary, and that sun and stars moved round it as its guardian attendants. Science had discovered that sun and stars, if they had proper motion of their own, yet in respect of the earth were motionless, and that the varying aspect of the sky was due to the movements of the earth itself. The change was humbling to superficial vanity. “The stars in their courses” could no longer be supposed to fight against earthly warriors, or comets to foretell the havoc on fields of slaughter, or the fate and character of a prince to be affected by the constellation under which he was born. But if the conceit of the relative importance of man was diminished, his conception of the system of which he was a part had become immeasurably more magnificent; while every phenomenon which had been actually and faithfully observed remained unaffected. Sun and moon were still the earthly time-keepers; and the mariner still could guide his course across the ocean by the rising and setting of the same stars which Ulysses had watched upon his raft.

Carlyle conceived that a revolution precisely analogous to that which Galileo had wrought in our apprehension of the material heaven was silently in progress in our attitude towards spiritual phenomena.
The spiritual universe, like the visible, was the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, and legends and theologies were, like the astronomical theories of the Babylonians, Egyptians, or Greeks, true so far as they were based on facts, which entered largely into the composition of the worst of them—true so far as they were the honest efforts of man's intellect and conscience and imagination to interpret the laws under which he was living, and regulate his life by them. But underneath or beyond all these speculations lay the facts of spiritual life, the moral and intellectual constitution of things as it actually was in eternal consistence. The theories which dispensed with God and the soul Carlyle utterly abhorred. It was not credible to him, he said, that intellect and conscience could have been placed in him by a Being which had none of its own. He rarely spoke of this. The word God was too awful for common use, and he veiled his meaning in metaphors to avoid it. But God to him was the fact of facts. He looked on this whole system of visible or spiritual phenomena as a manifestation of the will of God in constant forces, forces not mechanical but dynamic, interpenetrating and controlling all existing things, from the utmost bounds of space to the smallest granule on the earth's surface, from the making of the world to the lightest action of a man. God's law was everywhere: man's welfare depended on the faithful reading of it. Society was but a higher organism, no accidental agreement of individual persons or families to live together on conditions which they could arrange for themselves, but a natural growth, the conditions of which were already inflexibly laid down. Human life was like a garden, "to which the will was gardener," and the moral fruits and flowers, or the immoral poisonous weeds, grew inevitably according as the rules already appointed were discovered and obeyed, or slighted, overlooked, or defied. Nothing was indifferent. Every step which a man could take was in the right direction or the wrong. If in the right, the result was as it should be; if in the wrong, the excuse of ignorance would not avail to prevent the inevitable consequence.

These in themselves are but commonplace propositions which no one denies in words; but Carlyle saw in the entire
tone of modern thought, that practically men no longer really believed them. They believed in expediency, in the rights of man, in government by majorities; as if they could make their laws for themselves. The law, did they but know it, was already made; and their wisdom, if they wished to prosper, was not to look for what was convenient to themselves, but for what had been decided already in Nature’s chancery.

Many corollaries followed from such a creed when sincerely and passionately held. In arts and sciences the authority is the expert who understands his business. No one dreamt of discovering a longitude by the vote of a majority; and those who trusted to any such methods would learn that they had been fools by running upon the rocks. The science of life was no easier—was harder far than the science of navigation: the phenomena were infinitely more complex; and the consequences of error were infinitely more terrible. The rights of man, properly understood, meant the right of the wise to rule, and the right of the ignorant to be ruled. “The gospel of force,” of the divine right of the strong, with which Carlyle has been so often taunted with teaching, merely meant that when a man has visibly exercised any great power in this world, it has been because he has truly and faithfully seen into the facts around him; seen them more accurately and interpreted them more correctly than his contemporaries. He has become in himself, as it were, one of nature’s forces, imperatively insisting that certain things must be done. Success may blind him, and then he mis-sees the facts and comes to ruin. But while his strength remains he is strong through the working of a power greater than himself. The old Bible language that God raised up such and such a man for a special purpose represents a genuine truth.

But let us hear Carlyle himself. The following passages were written in 1852, more than twenty years after the time at which we have now arrived. Figure and argument were borrowed from new appliances which had sprung into being in the interval. But the thought expressed in them was as old as Hoddam Hill when they furnished the armour in which he encountered Apollyon. They are but broken thoughts, flung out as they presented themselves, and wanting the careful
touch with which Carlyle finished work which he himself passed through the press; but I give them as they remain in his own handwriting.

The primary conception by rude nations, in regard to all great attainments and achievements by man, is that each was a miracle and the gift of the gods. Language was taught man by a Heavenly Power; Minerva gave him the olive, Neptune the Horse, Triptolemus taught him Agriculture, etc. etc. The effects of optics in this strange camera obscura of an existence are most of all singular! The grand centre of the modern revolution of ideas is even this. We begin to have a notion that all this is the effect of optics; and that the intrinsic fact is very different from our old conception of it. Not less "miraculous," not less divine; but with an altogether (totally) new (or hitherto unconceived) species of divineness, a divineness lying much nearer home than formerly. A divineness that does not come from Judea from Olympus, Asgard, Mt. Meru; but is in man himself, in the heart of every living man. A grand revolution indeed; which is altering our ideas of Heaven and of Earth to an amazing extent in every particular whatsoever. From top to bottom our spiritual world, and all that depends on the same, which means nearly everything in the furniture of our life outward as well as inward, is as this idea advances undergoing change of the most essential sort,—is slowly getting "overturned," as they angrily say; which in the sense of being gradually turned over, and having its vertex set where its base used to be, is indisputably true; and means a "revolution" such as never was before, or at least since letters and recorded history existed among us never was.²

So far Carlyle had written, and then threw it aside as unsatisfactory, as not adequately expressing his meaning, and therefore not to be proceeded with. But a very intelligible meaning shines through it; and when I told him that I had found and read it, he said that it contained his real conviction, a conviction that lay at the bottom of all his thoughts about man and man's doings in this world. A sense lay upon him that this particular truth was one which he was specially called on to insist upon, yet he could never get it completely accomplished. On another loose sheet of rejected manuscript I find the same idea stated somewhat differently:

Singular what difficulty I have in getting my poor message delivered to the world in this epoch: things I imperatively need still to say.

1. That all history is a Bible—a thing stated in words by me more than once, and adopted in a sentimental way; but nobody can I bring fairly into it, nobody persuade to take it up practically as a fact.
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2. Part of the “grand Unintelligible,” that we are now learning spiritually too—that the earth turns, not the sun and heavenly spheres. One day the spiritual astronomers will find that this is the infinitely greater miracle. The universe is not an orrery, theological or other, but a universe; and instead of paltry theologic brass spindles for axis, &c., has laws of gravitation, laws of attraction and repulsion; is not a Ptolemaic but a Newtonian universe. As Humboldt’s “Cosmos” to a fable of children, so will the new world be in comparison with what the old one was, &c.

3. And flowing out of this, that the work of genius is not fiction but fact. How dead are all people to that truth, recognising it in word merely, not in deed at all! . . .

Old piety was wont to say that God’s judgments tracked the footsteps of the criminal; that all violation of the eternal laws, done in the deepest recesses or on the conspicuous high places of the world, was absolutely certain of its punishment. You could do no evil, you could do no good, but a god would repay it to you. It was as certain as that when you shot an arrow from the earth, gravitation would bring it back to the earth. The all-embracing law of right and wrong was as inflexible, as sure and exact, as that of gravitation. Furies with their serpent hair and infernal maddening torches followed Orestes who had murdered his mother. In the still deeper soul of modern Christendom there hung the tremendous image of a Doomsday—Dies irae, dies illa—when the All-just, without mercy now, with only terrific accuracy now, would judge the quick and the dead, and to each soul measure out the reward of his deeds done in the body—eternal Heaven to the good, to the bad eternal Hell. The Moslem too, and generally the Oriental peoples, who are of a more religious nature, have conceived it so, and taken it, not as a conceit, but as a terrible fact, and have studiously founded, or studiously tried to found, their practical existence upon the same.

My friend, it well behoves us to reflect how true essentially all this still is: that it continues, and will continue, fundamentally a fact in all essential particulars—its certainty, I say its infallible certainty, its absolute justness, and all the other particulars, the eternity itself included. He that has with his eyes and soul looked into nature from any point—and not merely into distracted theological, metaphysical, modern philosophical, or other cobweb representations of nature at second hand—will find this true, that only the vesture of it is changed for us; that the essence of it cannot change at all. Banish all miracles from it. Do not name the name of God; it is still true.

Once more it is in religion with us, as in astronomy—we know now that the earth moves. But it has not annihilated the stars for us; it has infinitely exalted and expanded the stars and universe. Once it seemed evident the sun did daily rise in the east; the big sun—a sun-god—did travel for us, driving his chariot over the crystal floor all days: at any rate the sun went. Now we find it is only the earth that goes. So too all mythologies, religious conceptions, &c., we

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begin to discover, are the necessary products of man's godmade mind.³

I need add little to these two fragments, save to repeat that they are the key to Carlyle's mind; that the thought which they contain, although nowhere more articulately written out, governed all his judgements of men and things. In this faith he had trampled down his own "Spiritual Dragons."⁴ In this faith he interpreted human history, which history witnessed in turn to the truth of his convictions. He saw that now as much as ever the fate of nations depended not on their material development, but, as had been said in the Bible, and among all serious peoples, on the moral virtues, courage, veracity, purity, justice, and good sense. Nations where these were honoured prospered and became strong; nations which professed well with their lips, while their hearts were set on wealth and pleasure, were overtaken, as truly in modern Europe as in ancient Palestine, by the judgement of God.

"I should not have known what to make of this world at all," Carlyle once said to me, "if it had not been for the French Revolution."⁵