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Counter-Cultural Scepticisms of the Long Enlightenment: Hume, Reid, Hamilton, Carlyle, Dickens and Beyond?

Ralph Jessop

What a poor piece of work [is a puppet] compared with the body of a man, whose structure the more we know, the more wonders we discover in it, and the more sensible we are of our ignorance! (Reid, 103).[1]

Loath to admit that our science is at best the reflection of a reality we cannot know, we strive to penetrate to existence in itself; and what we have laboured intensely to attain, we at last fondly believe we have accomplished. But, like Ixion, we embrace a cloud for a divinity. Conscious only of,––conscious only in and through, limitation, we think to comprehend the Infinite; and dream even of establishing the science––the *nescience* of man, on an identity with the omniscience of God. (Hamilton, 37–8).[2]

We sit as in a boundless Phantasmagoria and Dream-grotto; boundless, for the faintest star, the remotest century, lies not even nearer the verge thereof … Then, in that strange Dream, how we clutch at shadows as if they were substances; and sleep deepest while fancying ourselves most awake! Which of your Philosophical Systems is other than a dream-theorem; a net quotient, confidently given out, where divisor and dividend are both unknown? … they only are wise who know that they know nothing. (Carlyle, *SR*, 42).[3]

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[1] All references in this form are to Thomas Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid*, preface, notes, and supplementary dissertations by Sir William Hamilton (Edinburgh and London, 1846).

[2] All references in this form are to Sir Willam Hamilton, *Discussions, Works of Sir William Hamilton*, with an introduction by Savina Tropea, 7 vols (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2001), vol. 1. Page numbers correspond to, *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform*, 2nd edn (London and Edinburgh, 1853).

[3] All References in this form are to Rodger L. Tarr and Mark Engel (eds), Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (Berkeley, 2000).

Both indirectly and directly Thomas Carlyle refers to Thomas Reid.[4] But if Reid *influenced* Carlyle and he in turn transmitted to his much more extensive readership elements of Reid's thought, tthis suggests numerous literary-philosophical genealogies beyond Reid – connections between Reidian philosophy and the vastly broader cultural spectrum of the nineteenth century. This is an exciting and daunting prospect because it involves the development of new critical narratives of the philosophical / intellectual history of Scotland during the nineteenth century within a more extensive international and interdisciplinary sphere of discourse. But tracing some of the countless strands within the unbounded 'beyond' of such a post-Enlightenment literary mediation of Reid's philosophy to discover or enable the extent to which Scottish thought permeates the broader fabric of literature and culture, one is immediately confronted by the problem of a prevailing indifference towards this subject. Pioneering work has certainly begun on recovering the evolving story of Scottish philosophy during the nineteenth century.[5] But it will take an enormous effort to redress the cultural and historical deficit in Scotland and reverse the current ignorance about the history of the after-effects of Scottish Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy, even though such work temptingly promises to evolve Scottish thought as a phenomenon of continuing international relevance. Not only are most of the leading figures of Scotland's intellectual life during the nineteenth century names that virtually no-one knows or cares about (such as Sir William Hamilton), but even Carlyle, one of Scotland's most internationally influential writers, has been relegated to the outer margins. As Paul Kerry rightly points out, Carlyle 'is threatened with marginalization within [recent] Victorian studies discourse'.[6] Yet, for a sustained period Carlyle was astonishingly famous and the huge extent of his influence was widely acknowledged, even though he was often regarded with suspicion as one who wrote from the wilderness in a highly idiosyncratic style against some characteristic aspects of modernity.

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[4] For example, see Ralph Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought* (Basingstoke, 1997),119 – 21; Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays,* Vol. 2, in H.D. Traill (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Centenary Edition, 30 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896 – 99), vol. 27, 56 – 82 at 64 – 5.

[5] For example, see Gordon Graham, 'The Nineteenth-Century Aftermath', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment,* ed. by Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.338 – 350; Cairns Craig, *Intending Scotland: Explorations in Scottish Culture since the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

[6] Paul Kerry, 'Editor's Preface', *Literature and Belief*, 25 (1&2), (2005), ix – xi (p.ix). Kerry is referring to an observation made by Dinah Birch of the University of Liverpool.

Recent assessments of Carlyle's influence amply demonstrate some of the ways in which his work deeply permeated the literature and culture of Britain and several other countries, but such assessments suggest that there is still a great deal of work to be done to discover the fuller extent of his legacy in Britain, America, Canada, the European Continent, India, and China.[7] Furthermore, as the projected 45-volume publication of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* approaches its end (with well over 30 volumes currently available online),[8] and as the definitive, scholarly Strouse edition gradually establishes selected Carlyle texts, his cultural significance may re-emerge through the enhanced possibility of reassessments that could interrelate his work with some of the strong currents of intellectual debate that run through that long Enlightenment period from the seventeenth century to the present day. In France, where surprisingly (given Carlyle's great interest in French literature and history) his work did not flourish during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Catherine Heyrendt has recently argued, there may be some potential for this situation to change in the future. She claims that were the 'French dimension of his maturation and work better known, it would become clearer that Carlyle's thought is by no means a vindication … of authoritarianism, elitism, or German supremacy', which have been among the main reasons for Carlyle's marginalization since before the Second World War.[9]

Though Carlyle's reputation waxed and waned during his lifetime, he was accorded recognition in at least one Scottish-led tribute when in 1875, to celebrate his eightieth birthday, a substantial number of eminent scholars and writers presented him with a medal struck by Jacob Boehm and a rather effusive statement commemorating his status.[10] A fair proportion of the 119 signatories on that birthday tribute were philosophers, many of them

[7] For example, see, Michael K. Goldberg, 'Introduction', in Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (Berkeley, 1993), xxi–lxxx, at lxii–lxxx; Rodger L. Tarr, 'Introduction', in Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, xxi–xciv, at xxviii–xxxiv; Chris R. Vanden Bossche, 'Introduction', in Chris R. Vanden Bossche, Joel Brattin, and D.J. Trela (eds), Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Berkeley, 2005), xix–lxix, at xliv–lxii.

[8] *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (Durham, North Carolina, 1970–); *The Carlyle Letters Online* [*CLO*]. 2007. <http://carlyleletters.org>.

[9] Catherine Heyrendt, ' "My books were not, nor ever will be popular": Reappraising Carlyle In and Through France', in Paul E. Kerry and Marylu Hill (eds), *Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle's Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism* (Madison, NJ, 2010), 170–86; see especially 182–3 and 172–6.

[10] Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought,* 15–16; K.J. Fielding, 'Carlyle's Eightieth Birthday Tribute', in *KM 80: A Birthday Album for Kenneth Muir, Tuesday, 5th May 1987* (Liverpool, [1987?]), 47–8. The list is displayed in Carlyle's house at Cheyne Row, and at his birthplace at Ecclefechan.

Scottish: John Caird and Sir Alexander Grant (the Principals of Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities), Alexander Bain, Edward Caird, Henry Calderwood, Robert Flint, Alexander Campbell Fraser (author of a short biography of Reid), James Hutchison Stirling, and John Veitch (biographer and editor of the works of Sir William Hamilton and professor of Logic and Rhetoric at Glasgow). A few of these Scottish philosophers expressed specific indebtedness to Carlyle.[11] For example, Stirling (author of *The Secret of Hegel*) declared that 'neither Hume nor Voltaire, nor any other, ever strook through his contemporaries with such light and lightening as Carlyle. … he is Carlyle the Only.'[12]

If it is the case that Carlyle is as influential, as the points above loosely indicate, then his relationship to the Scottish philosophical tradition is of critical importance and the fact that he was a friend of Hamilton, who from 1830 was Reid's most forceful advocate, is without doubt significant. But do aspects of Carlyle's response to or adaptations of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy permeate nineteenth-century literature and culture? This is far too big a question to tackle in a single discussion; influence is rarely simple, and only genuinely interesting when understood in its complexity. However, provocatively: if Reid influenced at least some aspect of Carlyle's work and if Carlyle influenced Charles Dickens (as he undoubtedly did), has something of Reid's philosophical stance been transmitted into the novel explicitly dedicated by Dickens to Carlyle, *Hard Times*? As Hilary Schor asserts, '*Hard Times* is the Dickens novel that asks most clearly to be read not as a mere fictional world but as a commentary on a contemporary crisis' and its connection with Carlyle's work is in a number of respects fairly evident.[13] However, just as, when millions of nineteenth-century viewers looked in wonderment at the pre-Raphaelite representation of Christ in William Holman Hunt's famous painting 'The Light of the World', they were unknowingly gazing upon a modern representation of Carlyle's face (since he had been the unwitting sitter for Hunt), is it the case that countless readers of Dickens have been conditioned by certain attitudes, values, and beliefs informed by Dickens's

[11] For example, see Edward Caird, 'The Genius of Carlyle', in *Essays on Literature and Philosophy,* 2 vols (Glasgow, 1892), Vol.1, 230–67, at 232–35 and 256.

[12] James Hutchison Stirling, *Thomas Carlyle's Counsels to a Literary Aspirant: And what Came of them* (Edinburgh, 1886); *The Secret of Hegel: Being the Hegelian System in Origin, Principle, Form, and Matter*, 2 vols (London, 1865).

[13] Hilary Schor, 'Novels of the 1850s: *Hard Times, Little Dorrit,* and *A Tale of Two Cities,*' in John O. Jordan (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens* (Cambridge, 2001), 64–77, at 67.

close friend Carlyle, who in turn was re-presenting elements of Scottish thought traceable to Reidian philosophy?[14]

Though Carlyle does not say much about Scottish philosophers directly, there are certain strong suggestions that he was acutely aware of the prodigious intellectual and social significance of the Scottish Enlightenment, and of the presence of its legacy during the third decade of the nineteenth century. This is abundantly evident in a pronouncement made by a character in his unfinished novel, 'Wotton Reinfred': 'everywhere, disguise it as we may — in the senate, the press, the pulpit, the parlour, and the market — David Hume is ruler of the world'.[15] Written in 1827 but only published posthumously in 1892, this declaration seems to be echoed by James Hutchison Stirling in 1864: 'Hume is our Politics, Hume is our Trade, Hume is our Philosophy, Hume is our Religion–it wants little but Hume were even our Taste'.[16] If, as Cairns Craig asserts, Stirling's remark indicates something of the pervasiveness of Hume's influence around the middle of the nineteenth century, it is also significant that Carlyle penned such a remark some 37 years earlier. However, publicly, yet more elusively, he uses a similar rhetorical formula for referring to Hume's scepticism when he writes, in 'Signs of the Times' (1829), of how the laws of mechanism (that Carlyle identifies with the Lockean theory of ideas and with Hume's damaging effect on Reidian philosophy) predominate 'in the closet, in the marketplace, in the temple, by the social hearth'.[17]

These references to Hume's scepticism in Carlyle's writing occur shortly before Hamilton's tempestuous critique of Brown and his intensive, critical defence of Reid in his 'Philosophy of Perception' (1830) (for example, see Hamilton, 43–5; 56–7). For Hamilton, Humean scepticism was, in a sense, flourishing, largely due to Brown's misinterpretations and excessive popularity. Since there were more obvious targets (such as John Wilson), perhaps Hamilton's attack on Brown as the principal cause of the return of Hume's scepticism needs to be thought of as a mark of respect for Brown's ability and the great extent of his influence.[18] However, evidently there was a lot at stake

[14] Michael W. Hancock, 'Hunt, William Holman', in Mark Cumming (ed.), *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (Madison, 2004), 232–233.

[15] 'Wotton Reinfred', in *Last Words of Thomas Carlyle*, with an introduction by K.J. Fielding (London, 1892; repr. Farnborough, 1971), 1–147 at 53–4).

[16] James Hutchison Stirling, 'Introduction,' *The Secret of Hegel* (Bristol: Thoemmes Antiquarian Books, [1864], 1990), lxxiii–lxxiv. Also quoted in Craig, *Intending Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2009), 88.

[17] Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', 79–80.

[18] For example, though clearly a barbed comment and part of Hamilton's double-edged

in Hamilton's judgment that Scotland had failed to maintain and develop the Reidian answer to Hume (for example, see Hamilton, 43–5). In 'Philosophy of Perception' Hamilton regards the deplorably inept and complacent state of British philosophical competence – the pervasive 'indifference' towards metaphysics – as having been *caused* by Brown's failure at a most fundamental level to understand and defeat Hume's scepticism (Hamilton, 43; 56–7; 86; 88; 94). Carlyle effectually agrees with Hamilton's judgment that, by the late 1820s, Hume's scepticism was prevailing over the intellectual impoverishment at the heart of the demise of British metaphysics and moral philosophy. But Carlyle's implicit agreement with Hamilton in his unpublished 'Wotton' re-emerges a few years later in his much more famous *Sartor Resartus,* in which Hume's presence, though more thickly disguised, is nonetheless more potent as Carlyle absorbs Hamilton's unforgiving definition of Hume's scepticism as the most extreme form – Pyrrhonism.

As briefly suggested by Hamilton, Hume's Pyrrhonism is a scepticism that defeats *everything* by admitting as equally powerful all directly opposing standpoints – the position of equipollence (Hamilton, 94–5). This is a form of scepticism that entails nihilism. To be sure, the extreme, equipollent sceptic may claim that, if for every proposition there is some negation of it that has equal strength, this results in a condition of calmness and relief from the anxiety of having to maintain a particular standpoint. However, against such an attempt to claim a beneficent consequence of equipollence, the position of complete indeterminacy is, arguably, pessimistic since, for example, it destroys the possibility of virtually any form of *productive* argumentation; there can be no preferred conclusion and (thinking of a dialogic model of argumentation), there can be no satisfactory, albeit provisional, resolution of some original conflict of opinion – all discourse, compacts or agreements, activity, and thereby all human life are put in jeopardy by the prevalence of an absolute Pyrrhonism explicitly defined in this way. Equipollence may not *imply* such inertia in fact, but it is at least hard to see how a genuine commitment to act in such and such a way could exist, or how we might be thought of as being bound to adhere to such and such an agreement, and so on. Hume certainly claims that were the Pyrrhonist's principles to obtain this would entail stasis and the end of all human life. But then, quite suavely, he seems to reject this

rhetorical strategy to demolish Brown, he mentions 'the high ability and higher authority of Dr Brown' (Hamilton, 43–4). On the extent of Brown's influence and popularity, see Thomas Dixon, 'Introduction', in Thomas Dixon (ed.), *Thomas Brown: Selected Philosophical Writings,* (Exeter and Charlottesville, 2010), 1–30, especially 1–6).

possibility by saying that 'so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle'.[19]

However, it seems that Hamilton did not take this on face value. Hume's admission that 'Nature is always too strong for principle' arguably equates humanity with the merely animal half of Aristotle's famous definition of man as a rational animal. Something of this is present in Reid when he says in the *Inquiry* that while we have certain powers:

> in common with the brutes, and which are necessary to the preservation of the individual, or the continuance of the kind. There are other powers, of which nature hath only planted the seeds in our minds, but hath left the rearing of them to human culture. It is by the proper culture of these, that we are capable of all those improvements in intellectuals, in taste, and in morals, which exalt and dignify human nature; while on the other hand, the neglect or perversion of them makes its degeneracy and corruption. (Reid, 98).

If by 'Nature is always too strong for principle' Hume means that the powers we have in common with the brutes – mere survival instincts, or the impulsions of lust – will always be too strong for principle, then this may be read as an encoded indictment of humanity, the articulation of a powerfully *ironic* assertion of (brute) Nature's superiority (albeit one that is perhaps overly ungracious towards brutes and the lusts of the flesh that we share with them in common). A few sections further on from the above quotation, Reid refers to certain philosophical positions, most notably including the sceptical subversion that indicts the senses and mental faculties as fallacious. Of such a philosophical theory – and Hume is clearly being referred to here – Reid gives a strong hint of his awareness of Hume's irony: 'It can have no other tendency, than to shew the acuteness of the sophist, at the expense of disgracing reason and human nature, and making mankind Yahoos' (Reid, 102).

Reid's reference to Yahoos significantly brings Hume's *Treatise* into close relation with the very archetype of eighteenth-century irony: Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, one of the most rhetorically brilliant, humorous, yet profoundly bleak satires of mankind and reason ever written. Following Reid's insightful lead, *Gulliver's Travels* can be read as the literary precursor to its philosophical counterpart, Hume's *Treatise*. The synergy between these

[19] L.A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), David, Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, (Oxford: 1975; 3rd edn, repr. 1979),160.

literary and philosophical texts, that to his credit Reid here initiates, intimates something of the pivotal role of Reid's great concern for human dignity and the inherent threat to this within Hume's scepticism. The Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels* are utterly deplorable, repulsive, sub-human slaves to their insatiable bodily appetites, and to their masters' cold controlling reason and sheer physical superiority. Reid's reference to 'Yahoos' is a highly condensed way of communicating the idea that Hume's metaphysical/epistemological argument is effectually re-writing the human condition as atrociously absurd. But, to link Hume with Swift in this way also suggests that Hume's use of language is pervasively ironic, thereby tainting every assertion or move in his argumentation as unstable. Reid's allusion to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* hints at an acutely insightful grasp of the astonishing brilliance *and* destructiveness of Hume's Pyrrhonical scepticism, while simultaneously subverting his position as unreliably ironic.

In *Gulliver's Travels* the Yahoos appear to symbolise humankind degraded to a sub-human condition, stripped of all dignity, and utterly foul in their degeneracy and selfishness (for example, see *GT*, 237–8; 244–5; 277–9).[20] Importantly, Gulliver is in several places likened to a Yahoo, much to his own disgust, and he also comes to regard human beings as Yahoos (*GT*, 316–17). Of equal importance, Gulliver discriminates between himself and the Yahoos as inferior to him, and he describes the enslavers of the Yahoos, the horse-like Houyhnhnms, as his and mankind's superiors. But Gulliver therefore stands *between* Yahoo and Houyhnhnm. Swift's pervasive irony and stark contradictions between the Yahoos's bestial impulsiveness and the steely coldness and unfeeling callousness of their Houyhnhnm masters is tantamount to an absolute condemnation of the human condition. For, Gulliver is not a Yahoo but rather he finally stands hopelessly, insanely, deluded in his division between the two states or conditions of existence represented by the degenerate, bestial, purely instinctual Yahoo slaves, and the icily rational, passionless, amoral Houyhnhnm masters. Preposterously mimicking horses in his speech and deportment and, like the greatest of clowns, unaware of how this signifies his ridiculousness and insanity, Gulliver latterly fancies himself much closer to the Houyhnhnms than to his wife or his fellow man (*GT*, 298; 306; 310–311). This injects the severity of Swift's satirical and irrefutable, inescapable and viral irony. Gulliver is, like the most excellent caricatures, a practical impossibility, a wholly theoretic or linguistic construction, and his

[20] All references in this form are to Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels,* with an introduction by Pat Rogers (London, 1991).

profound unreliability as a narrator sows doubt in the reader that has the potential to become absolute. The embodiment of humanity's self-deluded, self-subverting, and thereby entirely doomed and hopeless or impossible condition, this caricature nevertheless seems to be conveying a deep and inescapable truth – therein the fallacy, therein the seductive persuasiveness that makes the fallacy potentially dangerous.

According to Reid, Hume sets Reason in direct conflict with common sense (for example, Reid, 101; 139; 183). The warfare of Reason and Common Sense that Reid refers to might otherwise be described as that nihilistic absolute scepticism of equipollence; Reason undermines Common Sense and *vice versa*. And this is virtually how Hamilton defines Hume's scepticism – as a system of mutually undermining opposites resulting in absolute uncertainty or indeterminacy (Hamilton, 94–5). Though neither Reid nor Hamilton explicitly identifies Hume's irony as being of a piece with his equipollent or Pyrrhonical scepticism, it is a simple step to take to read Hume's numerous ironical remarks as rhetorical devices consistent with the equipollence of the mutually subverting or contradicting Reason and Common Sense that describes his Pyrrhonism. Once the reader sees irony deeply infused into Hume's argumentation, the phrase in his objection to the practical possibility of Pyrrhonism – 'Nature is always too strong for principle' – is transformed to a merely apparent objection to Pyrrhonism. It thus no longer functions as a satisfactory move in an argument supporting a mitigated scepticism. Instead of operating as a premise in support of what later looks like Hume's advocacy of mitigated scepticism, Hume's irony turns 'Nature is always too strong for principle' into an *intensification* of the concept that the true state of affairs for the human condition is one in which there can be no escape from the deadly indeterminacy – the equipollence – of mutually subverting reason and common sense; humanity is thereby convicted of self-delusion, pivoted in stasis on the moment of equilibrium. This is, for Hamilton, the very essence of *uncertainty*.

Carlyle is often a great purveyor of uncertainty. All too often thought of disparagingly as a dogmatist, on closer inspection he is rather a generator of *aporia*.[21] Challenging his reader to realise the complexity of existence, eschew complacency, and become an active participant in generating or perceiving the great manifold of meaning in existence, Carlyle's writing seems to have a peculiar affinity with Hamilton's definition of Hume's absolute scepticism as

[21] Ralph Jessop, 'Shooting the Enlightenment: A Brave New Era for Carlyle?', in *Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle's Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism*, 62–84 at70, 78–9).

Carlyle repeatedly positions his reader within the chaos of competing ideas and in struggle with the apparently inescapable dominance of prevalent ideology.[22] However, in response to the dilemmatic nature of the human condition that he characterises, Carlyle resorts to a reiteration of the importance of human agency to break free from the 'chains of our own forging' and thereby reclaim the soul's connection with the 'fair heavenly country' from which mechanism and materialism have isolated us.[23] He raises the spectre of Hume and the paralysing condition of Enlightenment scepticism as the nightmare haunting humanity in the early post-Enlightenment period of rapidly advancing industrialism and materialism. But, he counters such scepticism as a truth of the human condition, or as a propædeutic consciousness that we must acknowledge or assimilate, yet strive to overcome or sublate.

At times Carlyle seems to have regarded the eighteenth century as an epoch largely defined by its scepticism and materialism, a godless age of atheism or unbelief in which humanity had shrunk to something mean and unheroic:

> The Eighteenth was a *Sceptical* Century; in which little word there is a whole Pandora's Box of miseries. Scepticism means not intellectual Doubt alone, but moral Doubt; all sorts of *in*fidelity, insincerity, spiritual paralysis … Heroism was gone forever; Triviality, Formulism and Commonplace were come forever …
>
> How mean, dwarfish are their ways of thinking, in this time … [24]

In characterising scepticism as 'paralysis', Carlyle was following the lead of a number of other Scottish writers, including Hume and Reid, who could at times portray extreme/absolute scepticism as leading to a profound state of melancholia or depression. For example, in the *Inquiry*, Reid claims that certain sceptical theories of human nature 'tend to slacken every nerve of the soul, to put every noble purpose and sentiment out of countenance, and spread a melancholy gloom over the whole face of things' (Reid, 127). Similar utterances can be found in several of Carlyle's works – for example (and as noted earlier, referring to Hume) in 'Signs of the Times' he writes: '"The deep meaning of the Laws of Mechanism lies heavy on us;" and in the

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[22] For example, see Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought,* 155–8; Lowell T. Frye, 'History as Biography, Biography as History', in *Thomas Carlyle Resartus*, 133–47 at 134.

[23] Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', 80–1.

[24] Carlyle, 'The Hero as Man of Letters,' *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (Berkeley, 1993), 133–67 at 147.

closet, in the marketplace, in the temple, by the social hearth, encumbers the whole movements of our mind, and over our noblest faculties is spreading a nightmare sleep'.[25] More dramatically, in *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle figures scepticism as having become so absolute in its destructive effects on the text's principal character, that Teufelsdröckh declares: 'To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb.'(Carlyle, *SR*, 124).

But, while Carlyle emphasises the apocalyptic implications of the absolute scepticism of the eighteenth century, in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* he also stresses the *perennial* nature of the tension between scepticism and belief as an integral aspect of the human condition: 'the battle of Belief against Unbelief is the never-ending battle!' Furthermore, he goes on to assert the comparatively *temporary* nature of scepticism's paralysing effects: 'Scepticism, as sorrowful and hateful as we see it, is not an end but a beginning'.[26] Though such an optimistic notion of scepticism leading to a new beginning is also present in the earlier *Sartor Resartus*, and can be traced in both Reid's *Inquiry* and Stewart's *Dissertation*, Carlyle seems to have been acutely conscious of the power of Hume's scepticism.[27] He writes in his review article on Sir Walter Scott in 1838 of 'the colossal Scepticism of a Hume'.[28] This acknowledgement of the 'colossal' dimensions of Hume's scepticism may be an acceptance of its great overshadowing power, a gigantic force impervious to the attacks by Carlyle's predecessors such as the philosophers of the Scottish School of Common Sense, and Kant.

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[25] Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', 79–80.

[26] Carlyle, 'The Hero as Man of Letters,' *Heroes and Hero-Worship*,148.

[27] For example, see Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 120; Reid, 142; Sir William Hamilton (ed.), Dugald Stewart, *Dissertation*, *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, 11 vols (Edinburgh, 1854–60), Vol. I, 440; and see 439–45.

[28] Carlyle, 'Sir Walter Scott,' *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Vol. 4, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle,* (London, 1896–99), Vol. 29, 43. Often a highly allusive writer and thoroughly familiar with Shakespeare's plays, perhaps Carlyle was referring to lines in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* when Cassius, addressing Brutus, declares of Caesar:

> Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
> Like a Colossus, and we petty men
> Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
> To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
> Men at some time are masters of their fates:
> The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
> (*Julius Caesar*, I.ii.135–41)

Carlyle's distinctly *indirect* response to Hume involves an *assimilation* of Humean nihilistic scepticism in *Sartor Resartus*, that *deflects* scepticism to generate, out of the paralysis of Pyrrhonism, the very thing that he regards Hume's project as tending to destroy, namely, wonder. That is to say, in Carlyle's hands, the atomistic assumption of Hume's science of man, seen by both Carlyle and Reid as tending towards darkness, despair, and the annihilation of our humanity, is not subjected to an attempted refutation but rather deflected or transformed by Carlyle into a renewed source of fascination and wonderment. An example of this occurs in 'The World Out of Clothes' chapter of *Sartor Resartus* where one of Teufelsdröckh's musings on metaphysics includes the peroration: 'WE are—we know not what;—light-sparkles floating in the æther of Deity!' (Carlyle, *SR*, 43). This comes shortly after a possible allusion to the principle of contiguity referred to in Hume's famous example of billiard balls.[29] Carlyle may be alluding to Reid's *Inquiry* where Hume's *Treatise* is described as 'the forbidden tree of knowledge; I no sooner taste of it, than I perceive myself naked, and stript of all things, yea even of my very self. I see myself, and the whole frame of nature, shrink into fleeting ideas, which, like Epicurus's atoms, dance about in emptiness'. (Reid, 103).[30] Though there is arguably more than a hint of fascination in Reid's description, Carlyle's 'light-sparkles floating in the æther of Deity!' is altogether more spiritual, magical, wonderful, expansive. It is as though Carlyle has transformed Reid's more foreboding description of what Humean scepticism leads to by re-crafting the inherently chilling thought of complete disconnection and isolation into an aesthetically beautiful image concerning our *ignorance*—'WE are—we know not what'. In several places close to Reid's mention of Epicurus's atoms he also insists on the limitation of our knowledge, and elsewhere in Reid's work there is a distinct reliance upon or recourse to ignorance or cognitive limitation to rebut the legitimacy of theorising about what lies beyond our ken.[31]

There may be more traces from Reid's *Inquiry* in Carlyle's work, such as his reference in 'Signs of the Times' to Jacques de Vaucanson's puppet and digesting duck, where he also refers to Martinus Scriblerus, a pseudonym of Alexander Pope, from where Carlyle derives the phrase (which he attributes to Swift) to describe man with satirical humour in *Sartor Resartus,* as a 'forked straddling animal with bandy legs' (Carlyle, *SR*, 44; 284n). In the *Inquiry* Reid

[29] L.A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, 1978, 2nd edn; repr. 1983), 164.

[30] Compare, Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought,* 187.

[31] See Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought,* 95–9.

refers to a puppet being quite inferior to the deep complexity of a human being and it seems very likely that he is alluding to Vaucanson's once famous attempted mechanical replication in the late 1730s of animal functions (Reid, 103).[32] A few pages before this, Reid also describes man as 'The two-legged animal that eats of nature's dainties' (Reid, 98). But whether Carlyle is re-working materials found in Reid or in sources they shared in common in eighteenth-century literature, he seems to be bringing together two types of scepticism, the first Humean and the second Reidian.

Carlyle's understanding of scepticism in these two forms probably came from talking with and reading the work of his friend Hamilton, whose definition of Hume's Pyrrhonical scepticism, coupled with Reid's linkage of Hume with Swift, as discussed above, suggests reconsiderations of Hume's scepticism in relation to the devastating indeterminacy of equipollence as rhetorically reinforced or *realised* by Hume's irony. But if the ironic, equipollent scepticism of Hume and of Swift's satire before him, can be read as counter-cultural forms of scepticism that challenge dogmatism, religious and moral principles, and the century's vaunted faith in Reason, by contrast with such a discourse of extreme scepticism, Hamilton resurrects an alternative counter-cultural form of scepticism that was also present in eighteenth-century literature and philosophy. In Hamilton's Law of the Conditioned he provides the epistemological theory that underpins his important doctrine concerning the extreme limitation of human cognition, a doctrine of *learned ignorance* or of developing a consciousness of one's *nescience*. Hamilton attempts to demonstrate in his later work that a long tradition of thinkers, ancient and modern, subscribed to this notion (see Hamilton, 634–49). Intriguingly, the second of Hamilton's quotations illustrating the notion of learned ignorance had been used before him by Carlyle, the quotation from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which Carlyle gives as: 'We are such stuff/ As Dreams are made of, and our little Life/ Is rounded with a sleep!' (Carlyle, *SR*, 195; Hamilton, 634).[33]

Hamilton at no point indicates that this doctrine of *nescience* is a *sceptical* doctrine. Rather, he describes it as a heuristic process, the eventual accomplishment of which is a *learned ignorance*, 'the consummation, of knowledge' (Hamilton, 38). And yet, to insist on cognitive limitation and the extremely small domain of direct perceptions *is* a highly sceptical position. But what the Hamiltonian doctrine of *nescience* appears to avoid and attempts

[32] On Vaucanson, see Margaret A. Boden, *Mind as Machine: A History of Cognitive Science,* 2 vols (Oxford, 2006), 1, 82–5.

[33] Compare, Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.I.156–8.

to displace is Hume's Pyrrhonism. It is as though Hamilton, in attempting to counter extreme German Rationalism, the eclectic philosophy of Victor Cousin, and (due to Brown's misrepresentation of Reid) the return of Hume's scepticism as manifested in a dangerous indifference towards metaphysics, is so beleaguered by lethal metaphysical positions that he needs to be almost as extremely sceptical as Hume in order to defeat such philosophically and socially disastrous theories of the mind. However, Hamilton's scepticism deftly slips by undetected, under the guise of that pious wisdom of learning and of acknowledging, with humility, and as a result of the most arduous philosophical study, the great extent of one's ignorance through the realisation of humanity's cognitive limitation.

Hamilton's agnostic move runs against the overly-ambitious philosophical trends he identifies in the philosophy of Victor Cousin, the German extreme Rationalists, and the absolute uncertainty of Hume's Pyrrhonism. However, Hamilton's agnostic move comes close in its potential severity to the Humean form of scepticism, which is disastrous for philosophical (reasonable) discourse, and which is theoretically inadmissible because it entails a condition of stasis that profoundly threatens all action and vitality. But, by comparison with the extreme *uncertainty* of equipollent Humean Pyrrhonism (as defined by Hamilton), Hamilton's emphases on *nescience* appear to avoid the disastrous consequences of the absolute, nihilistic character of Pyrrhonism. So understood, it would seem that, as Hamilton attempts to resurrect Reidian philosophy, he implicitly, if not conspicuously, resurrects Hume's Pyrrhonism as a philosophical position of continuing danger. But, if Hamilton's Reid-inspired metaphysical definition of Humean absolute scepticism (as a system of equipollence or self-refuting valences), in *theory* determines the complete annihilation of humanity, such an understanding of Hume as the gravest threat to discourse, to civilisation, and to the viability of human existence itself, interestingly morphs in the middle of the nineteenth-century into a similarly distressing scientific theory of thermodynamics that predicted the end of the universe, the end of all existence.

Craig has recently argued that in the mid-nineteenth century the new science of thermodynamics implied 'a dissipation of the universe's energy which would inevitably result in its disintegration to a condition in which energy was equally spread across space, and activity of all kinds would cease'.[34] Commenting on this new scientific theory, Carlyle's close friend, David

[34] Craig, *Intending Scotland*, 101.

Masson (who pointedly linked Carlyle and Hamilton),[35] sketched the scene of universal death that the new science foretold by using the chilling phrase of a resultant 'indistinguishable equilibrium of ruin'.[36] This equilibrium is perhaps best thought of as a temporally extensive process of equilibration ending in equilibrium, and hence in the stasis of energy that equates with universal death. Completely contrary to Christian belief, this new theory of thermodynamics foretells the end of the entire universe, the physically inevitable destruction of God's creation. However, in the previous century, Hume had enounced a similar stasis, implying the more or less rapid but finally absolute end of all human existence. Though Hume's theoretical point was not applied to the physical universe, but instead to human existence, some such notion – of a ruinous equilibrium, or fatal stasis – is projected by Hume in the first *Enquiry* as the ultimate consequence of the absolute scepticism of Pyrrhonism:

> [A Pyrrhonian] must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence.[37]

If Hamilton had taken the sentence that follows this – Hume's assertion that 'Nature is always too strong for principle' – as a sufficient negation of Hume's Pyrrhonism, then he would not have defined Hume's scepticism as the placing of 'Speculation and practice, nature and philosophy, sense and reason, belief and knowledge … in mutual antithesis, [to] give, as their result, the uncertainty of every principle' (Hamilton, 95). Carlyle also seems to have shared this view that the equipollence of absolute Humean scepticism implied a fatal stasis and a resultant extinction of existence. For example, in one place he describes scepticism as applied to the moral domain as 'a chronic atrophy and disease of the whole soul'.[38]

The gloomy prognoses surrounding Hume's scepticism had fatally introduced a corded discourse of notions concerning humanity's woefully unstoppable self-annihilation originating in a self-division of mutually

[35] David Masson, *Recent British Philosophy: A Review with Criticisms including some Comments on Mr Mill's Answer to Sir William Hamilton* (London, 1877, 3rd edn), 69. Also quoted by Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought,* 9; and see Craig, *Intending Scotland,* 86–7.

[36] Quoted by Craig, *Intending Scotland*, 102.

[37] Hume, *Enquiries*, 160.

[38] Carlyle, 'Hero as Man of Letters,' *Heroes,* 150.

destructive valences. But if the theoretical co-ordinates that pattern Hume's Pyrrhonism are the same or closely similar to the newfound notion of everything running down and ending in an 'indistinguishable equilibrium of ruin', then it seems likely that Carlyle and Hamilton played an important part, albeit unintentionally, in extending Scottish philosophical traditions concerned with Humean scepticism to inform how the implications of equilibration inherent in the new science of thermodynamics would be understood. As regarded by Reid, Hamilton, Carlyle, and wittingly or unwittingly translated by Masson into an explication of the thermodynamic theory's implications of universal death, Humean scepticism can of course be traced into many other spheres as uncertainty grew and indeterminacy increasingly became one of dominant notions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But, if Hume, Reid, Carlyle, and Hamilton can be read as playing key roles in shaping a language, of mutual annihilation or self-cancelling equipollence, for envisioning a cataclysmic end of existence through an equilibrium of energies, Reid's response to Hume's scepticism and the part played by both Hamilton and Carlyle also shaped another counter-cultural strand of discourse that similarly flourishes in unexpected quarters. By renewing an alternative discourse of *nescience,* inherent in Reid and yet with both ancient roots and more modern articulations, Carlyle and, more explicitly, Hamilton, articulated a standpoint or fundamental principle concerning the vast limitation of our knowledge that at once enjoins humanity's dependence on faith/trust and the critical importance of the virtue of humility with regard to human cultivation and learning. For Carlyle, the notion of *nescience* clearly became profoundly important and it permeates a great deal of his work.[39]

Much has yet to be written about the role that a particular emphasis on *nescience* plays in Reid and the Scottish philosophical tradition, in the work of Hamilton, Carlyle, in the rise of agnosticism during the nineteenth century, in its pre-Reidian literary manifestations in, for example, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man,* and in the work of numerous authors inspired by Carlyle.[40] As a broadly counter-cultural scepticism of the long enlightenment, the stance or attitude that stresses cognitive limitation and in turn the vastness of human

[39] For example, see Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought*, 187–95; Ruth apRoberts, 'Carlyle and the History of Ignorance', *Carlyle Studies Annual*, 18 (1998), 73–81at 77; 'The Historian as Shandean Humorist: Carlyle and Frederick the Great', in David R. Sorenson and Rodger L. Tarr (eds), *The Carlyles at Home and Abroad* (Hampshire, UK, 2004), 15–26 at 15.

[40] For example, see Alexander Pope, 'An Essay on Man,' John Butt (ed.), *The Poems of Alexander Pope* (Suffolk, 1963; repr. 1985), 'Epistle I', lines 17–32 (pp.504–5).

ignorance, stands in opposition to a number of cultural trends including the rising power of materialism, an increasingly exaggerated faith in scientific knowledge and material progress, an absolutist assumption of the possibility of human omniscience, and the tendency of Humean scepticism and of some Romantic literature towards nihilism. Expressed by Carlyle as, 'they only are wise who know that they know nothing' (Carlyle, *SR,* 42), if the Hamiltonian renewal of the assertion of *learned ignorance* played some such counter-cultural role, it begins to bring Carlyle, Hamilton, and thereby that critical strand in Enlightenment thought of Reidian philosophy, into meaningful relationship with much broader cultural tendencies, inter-textual connections spanning centuries, and the cultural politics involved in literature and art in depicting humanity as noble, wondrous; 'the paragon of animals' that Hamlet so famously pauses to consider as he upholds the wonder of man that for him has been whelmed by the gloom of his sceptically-induced melancholia – 'What a piece of work is a man! […] And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?'[41]

The Enlightenment legacy curiously involved a double helix of counter-cultural sceptical positions integral to the battle of the two philosophies of Hume's Pyrrhonism and Reid's common sense, interlocked in fraught tension with one another, but both running against certain prevailing values and beliefs. Hamilton's long list of others who to varying extent subscribed to the importance of knowing that we not only *cannot* be omniscient but rather that we exist largely in an inescapable condition of ignorance, amply demonstrates that a doctrine of ignorance/*nescience* is by no means an exclusively Scottish philosophical notion. However, the emphasis given to this by Hamilton and Carlyle certainly suggests that the reawakening to *nescience* that occurred during the nineteenth century was given a new impetus by these two thinkers, both of whom had been strongly drawn to the literature and philosophy of Germany, and in particular to Kant. Hamilton quotes Kant as testament to the notion of cognitive limitation (more specifically the relativity of knowledge), adding 'And a hundred testimonies to the same truth might be adduced from the philosopher of Koenigsberg, of whose doctrine it is, in fact, the foundation.' (Hamilton, 647). So, bearing in mind something of the complexity of transnational connections involved in tracing comparative emphases on *nescience*, while excluding these simply to focus on the Reidian aspect, to return to the question raised earlier: has something of Reid's philosophical stance been transmitted into Dickens's *Hard Times*? The answer is 'yes'.

[41] See Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* Act 2, Scene 2, lines 292–309.

Involving a fond celebration of the grubby reality of human imperfection, *Hard Times* fosters belief in the basic moral goodness of ordinary people and the social dangers of indoctrinating knowledge in a school obsessed with utilitarian definition and an absolute regulation of life by 'fact' (HT, 7; 9; 30–1).[42] Sleery's boozy management of the symbolically alternative world of entertainment and the circus, and his warm humanity and moral worth is brought into conflict with the deadening effects of monotony, uniformity, and mechanical regulation in the workplace, society, and, crucially, in education. Through these characteristics of the text, Dickens portrays not merely a grim industrial townscape but a condition of being that is utterly choked and doomed by Coketown's symbolic embodiment of *indifference,* the identification of radically dissimilar facets of human life into a deathly/heartless unity, and such a complete balancing out and subjugation of human freedom and vitality as to render the existence of almost all of the characters desperate if not utterly impossible – 'The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else … and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery' (*HT*, 21). However, if these aspects of the text are to some extent informed by the new horror of an 'indistinguishable equilibrium of ruin' (or by the somewhat older dread of the stasis of the Enlightenment's legacy of 'spiritual paralysis' or 'mechanical impartiality'),[43] *nescience* also plays a highly significant role in *Hard Times* concerning the whole utilitarian or rigorously instrumental and thus overly constricted and deeply inhumane educational and economic system that the text brilliantly caricatures. The infamous Gradgrind thinks everything must be analysed into discrete units of knowledge, that only what is quantifiable, rationalizable, and capable of being systematized and controlled, constitutes knowledge – a knowledge of objective facts, the value of which resides merely in their enforcement by Gradgrind. Dickens's text relentlessly mocks the idiocy and inhumanity of this utilitarian approach to knowledge and education, but as the narrative progresses Gradgrind is forced to acknowledge the damage that his system has inflicted on his own daughter, Louisa, who has been dehumanised, de-moralised, emotionally lobotomised, and rendered unimaginative. As the complete failure of Gradgrind's system dawns on him, the narrator comments:

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[42] All references in this form are to Fred Kaplan and Sylvère Monod (eds), Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York and London, 2001, 3rd edn).

[43] Thomas Carlyle, 'Burns', *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 1, *Works*, vol. 26, 258–63 at 289.

> In gauging fathomless deeps with his little mean excise-rod, and in staggering over the universe with his rusty stiff-legged compasses, he had meant to do great things. Within the limits of his short tether he had tumbled about, annihilating the flowers of existence with greater singleness of purpose than many of the blatant personages whose company he kept. (*HT*, 167).

The banality of Gradgrind's evil inheres in his grotesquely over-reaching blind confidence in the importance and possibility of quantifying everything to accumulate only useful knowledge. Through Gradgrind's complete failure to know his own limits and to know the limited condition of human knowledge more generally, he has transformed education into a cruelly ambitious mechanical system that inevitably defeats itself and subverts any claims it might have made concerning its good intentions and its practical worth – though, with bleak realism, the implosion of this educational atrocity only occurs after it has already inflicted great harm.

Dickens's 'rusty stiff-legged compasses' in the above quotation probably has some reference to Carlyle's use of that similar phrase referred to earlier, that in turn alludes to Alexander Pope's *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* – this is surely a fitting glance back to eighteenth-century satire and the Enlightenment from whence the Gradgrindian educational system emerged. In addition, Dickens's use of the figurative 'excise-rod' (which may allude to Carlyle's 'Burns'), is akin to Carlyle's use in his 'Novalis' of the metaphor of the nautical line for gauging the depth of an ocean.[44] The notion that one's knowledge is bounded by a fathomless unknown, which this metaphor illustrates, was used by John Locke, Reid, Thomas Brown, Dugald Stewart, no doubt by several others, and is fundamentally a highly apt metaphor for Hamilton's doctrine of ignorance/nescience.[45] In addition, in the second edition of his *Discussions,* published one year before *Hard Times* (1854), Hamilton provides a quotation from Locke as one of his testimonies concerning learned ignorance, in which Locke advocates the wisdom of stopping when the mind is 'at the utmost extent of its tether' (Hamilton, 642).

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[44] Carlyle, 'Novalis', *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays,* 2, *Works,* 27, 54.

[45] A.D. Woozley (ed.), John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* (Glasgow, 1964, 5th edn; repr. 1984), I.i, 65; Reid, 324; Thomas Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, with a memoir of the author by David Welsh and a preface to the Lectures on Ethics by Thomas Chalmers (London, 1860, 20th edn), iii. 13; Stewart, *Elements, Works*, Vol. 4, 377. Also discussed in Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought,* 138–9.

Dicken shares in the counter-cultural scepticism of human *nescience*, agreeing with Reid 'that the line of human understanding is too short to reach the bottom of' certain subjects (Reid, 324), or that 'There is a deep and a dark gulf between [… mind and body] which our understanding cannot pass' (Reid, 187). The notion of cognitive limitation in Reid's philosophy was explicitly and much more prominently used by Carlyle and Hamilton as fundamental to a satisfactory answer to Humean scepticism. Hamilton's sceptical doctrine of learned ignorance/*nescience* with regard to the ultimately unknowable or incomprehensible 'fountain of all comprehensibility' (consciousness), thus inaugurates a counter-cultural stance against the advancing legacy of Hume's scepticism (Hamilton, 63). Though foundational to the rise of agnosticism[46] and initially articulated in opposition to Victor Cousin and German extreme/absolute Rationalism (Hamilton, 5–7; 13; 37–8), the Hamiltonian emphasis on *nescience*, translated into a broader literary public sphere, also becomes more conspicuously opposed to the expanding materialism, mechanism, and inanity of modernity. This stance against the utilitarian, mechanistic, absolutist appropriation of a dream of omniscience and its implicit displacement of the wisdom of learning one's ignorance provides Dickens with the theoretical coordinates for his immensely sceptical critique of the hard times imposed upon the human condition through an educational system misguidedly complicit with some of the most deeply flawed characteristics of industrialism. *Hard Times For These Times,* to give the novel its full title, dramatises Dickens's opposition to the industrialised wasteland of an entirely counterproductive, mechanically ordered, and crushingly regulated system. It may have several sources or affinities beyond the more immediate tributaries of Carlyle and Hamilton but at least one of these can be traced in Reid's profound social concerns for protecting human dignity from a descent into degradation, the critical role of human cultivation, and for developing a consciousness of the *nescience* of humankind as inescapably integral to any genuine, worthwhile process of that fundamental of societal well-being–education.

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[46] Ralph Jessop, 'Carlyle's Agnosticism: An Altar to the Unknown and Unknowable God', *Literature and Belief*, 25: 1&2 (2005), 381–433 at 394–400).