

performed piece of music, as a natural operation which reveals in a very high degree the peculiar powers given to man, will thus always glorify God whatever the intention of the performers may be. But that is a kind of glorifying which we share with 'the dragons and great deeps', with the 'frosts and snows'. What is looked for in us, as men, is another kind of glorifying, which depends on intention. How easy or how hard it may be for a whole choir to preserve that intention through all the discussions and decisions, all the corrections and disappointments, all the temptations to pride, rivalry and ambition, which precede the performance of a great work, I (naturally) do not know. But it is on the intention that all depends. When it succeeds, I think the performers are the most enviable of men; privileged while mortals to honour God like angels and, for a few golden moments, to see spirit and flesh, delight and labour, skill and worship, the natural and the supernatural, all fused into that unity they would have had before the Fall. But I must insist that no degree of excellence in the music, simply as music, can assure us that this paradisaical state has been achieved. The excellence proves 'keenness'; but men can be 'keen' for natural, or even wicked, motives. The absence of keenness would prove that they lacked the right spirit; its presence does not prove that they have it. We must beware of the naive idea that our music can 'please' God as it would please a cultivated human hearer. That is like thinking, under the old Law, that He really needed the blood of bulls and goats. To which an answer came, 'Mine are the cattle upon a thousand hills', and 'if I am hungry, I will not tell *thee*'. If God (in that sense) wanted music, He would not tell *us*. For all our offerings, whether of music or martyrdom, are like the intrinsically worthless present of a child, which a father values indeed, but values only for the intention.<sup>1</sup>

[1. Before this article was written, Lewis was invited by the Rev Mr Erik Routley to become a member of the panel of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland to whom new hymns are submitted in order that their merit might be assessed. As could be expected, Lewis refused. However, his answers to the request are published (with Mr Routley's letters) as 'Correspondence with an Anglican who Dislikes Hymns', *The Presbyter*, VI, No. 2 (1948) pp. 15-20. (The two letters from Lewis, dated 16 July 1946 and 21 September 1946, are printed over the initials 'A.B.')

## Historicism

*'He that would fly without wings must fly in his dreams.'*

—Coleridge

I GIVE THE NAME *Historicism* to the belief that men can, by the use of their natural powers, discover an inner meaning in the historical process. I say *by the use of their natural powers* because I do not propose to deal with any man who claims to know the meaning either of all history or of some particular historical event by divine revelation. What I mean by a Historicist is a man who asks me to accept his account of the inner meaning of history on the grounds of his learning and genius. If he had asked me to accept it on the grounds that it had been shown him in a vision, that would be another matter. I should have said to him nothing. His claim (with supporting evidence in the way of sanctity and miracles) would not be for me to judge. This does not mean that I am setting up a distinction, to be applied by myself, between inspired and uninspired writers. The distinction is not between those who have and those who lack inspiration, but between those who claim and those who do not claim it. With the former I have at present no concern.

I say an *inner meaning* because I am not classifying as Historicists those who find a 'meaning' in history in any sense whatever. Thus, to find causal connections between historical events, is in my terminology the work of a historian not of a historicist. A historian, without becoming a Historicist, may certainly infer unknown events from known ones. He may even infer future events from past ones; prediction may be a folly, but it is not Historicism. He may 'interpret' the past in the sense of reconstructing it imaginatively, making us feel (as far as may be) what it was like, and in that sense what it 'meant', to a man to be a twelfth-century villein or a Roman *eques*. What makes all these activities proper to the historian is that in them the conclusions, like the premises, are historical. The mark of the Historicist, on the other hand, is that he tries to get from historical premises conclusions which are more than historical; conclusions metaphysical or theological or (to coin a word) *atheo-logical*. The historian and the Historicist may both say that something 'must have' happened. But *must* in the mouth of a genuine historian will refer only to a *ratio cognoscendi*: since A happened B 'must have' preceded it; if William the Bastard arrived in England he 'must have' crossed the sea. But 'must' in the mouth of a Historicist can have quite a different meaning. It may mean that events fell out as they did because of some ultimate, transcendent necessity in the ground of things.

When Carlyle spoke of history as a 'book of revelations' he was a Historicist. When Novalis called history 'an evangel' he was a Historicist. When Hegel saw in history the progressive self-manifestation of absolute spirit he was a Historicist.



When a village woman says that her wicked father-in-law's paralytic stroke is 'a judgement on him' she is a Historicist. Evolutionism, when it ceases to be simply a theorem in biology and becomes a principle for interpreting the total historical process, is a form of Historicism. Keats' *Hyperion* is the epic of Historicism, and the words of Oceanus,

'tis the eternal law  
That first in beauty should be first in might,

are as fine a specimen of Historicism as you could wish to find.

The contention of this article is that Historicism is an illusion and that Historicists are, at the very best, wasting their time. I hope it is already clear that in criticizing Historicists I am not at all criticizing historians. It is not formally impossible that a Historicist and a historian should be the same man. But the two characters are in fact very seldom combined. It is usually theologians, philosophers and politicians who become Historicists.

Historicism exists on many levels. The lowest form of it is one that I have already mentioned: the doctrine that our calamities (or more often our neighbours' calamities) are 'judgements'; which here means divine condemnations or punishments. This sort of Historicism sometimes endeavours to support itself by the authority of the Old Testament. Some people even talk as if it were the peculiar mark of the Hebrew prophets to interpret history in this way. To that I have two replies. Firstly, the Scriptures come before me as a book claiming divine inspiration. I am not prepared to argue with the prophets. But if any man thinks that because God was pleased to reveal certain calamities as 'judgements' to certain chosen persons, he is therefore entitled to generalize and read all calamities in the same way, I submit that this is a *non sequitur*. Unless, of course, that man claims to be himself a prophet; and then I must refer his claim to more competent judges. But secondly, we must insist that such an interpretation of history was not the characteristic of ancient Hebrew religion, not the thing which sets it apart and makes it uniquely valuable. On the contrary, this is precisely what it shares with popular Paganism. To attribute calamity to the offended gods and therefore to seek out and punish the offender, is the most natural thing in the world and therefore the world-wide method. Examples such as the plague in *Iliad A* and the plague at the opening of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* come at once to mind. The distinctive thing, the precious peculiarity, of Scripture is the series of divine rebuffs which this naive and spontaneous type of Historicism there receives; in the whole course of Jewish history, in the Book of Job, in Isaiah's suffering servant (liii), in Our Lord's answers about the disaster at Siloam (Luke xiii, 4) and the man born blind (John ix, 13). If this sort of Historicism survives, it survives in spite of Christianity. And in a vague form it certainly does survive. Some who in general deserve to be called true historians are betrayed into writing as if nothing failed or succeeded that did not somehow deserve to do so. We must guard against the emotional overtones of a phrase like 'the judgement of history'. It might lure us into the vulgarest of all vulgar errors, that of idolizing as the goddess History what manlier ages belaboured as the strum-

pet Fortune. That would sink us below the Christian, or even the best Pagan, level. The very Vikings and Stoics knew better.

But subtler and more cultivated types of Historicism now also claim that their view is especially congenial to Christianity. It has become a commonplace, as Fr Paul Henri lately remarked in his Deneke lecture at Oxford, to say that Judaic and Christian thought are distinguished from Pagan and Pantheistic thought precisely by the significance which they attribute to history. For the Pantheist, we are told, the content of time is simply illusion; history is a dream and salvation consists in awaking. For the Greeks, we are told, history was a mere flux or, at best, cyclic: significance was to be sought not in Becoming but in Being. For Christianity, on the other hand, history is a story with a well-defined plot, pivoted on Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Judgement. It is indeed the divine revelation *par excellence*, the revelation which includes all other revelations.

That history in a certain sense must be all this for a Christian, I do not deny. In what sense, will be explained later. For the moment, I submit that the contrast as commonly drawn between Judaic or Christian thought on the one hand and Pagan or Pantheistic on the other is in some measure illusory. In the modern world, quite plainly, Historicism has a Pantheistic ancestor in Hegel and a materialistic progeny in the Marxists. It has proved so far a stronger weapon in our enemies' hands than in ours. If Christian Historicism is to be recommended as an apologetic weapon it had better be recommended by the maxim *fas est et ab hoste doceri* than on the ground of any supposedly inherent congeniality. And if we look at the past we shall find that the contrast works well as between Greek and Christian but not as between Christian and other types of Pagan. The Norse gods, for example, unlike the Homeric, are beings rooted in a historical process. Living under the shadow of Ragnarok they are preoccupied with time. Odin is almost the god of anxiety: in that way Wagner's Wotan is amazingly true to the Edda original. In Norse theology cosmic history is neither a cycle nor a flux; it is irreversible, tragic epic marching deathward to the drum-beat of omens and prophecies. And even if we rule out Norse Paganism on the ground that it was possibly influenced by Christianity, what shall we do with the Romans? It is quite clear that they did not regard history with the indifference, or with the merely scientific or anecdotal interests, of the Greeks. They seem to have been a nation of Historicists. I have pointed out elsewhere that all Roman epic before Virgil was probably metrical chronicle;<sup>1</sup> and the subject was always the same—the coming-to-be of Rome. What Virgil essentially did was to give this perennial theme a new unity by his symbolical structure. The *Aeneid* puts forward, though in mythical form, what is precisely a reading of history, an attempt to show what the *fata Iovis* were labouring to bring about. Everything is related not to Aeneas as an individual hero but to Aeneas as the Rome-bearer. This, and almost only this, gives significance to his escape from Troy, his *amour* with Dido, his descent into Hades, and his defeat of Turnus. *Tantae molis erat*: all history is for Virgil an immense parturition. It is from this Pagan source that one kind of Historicism descends to Dante. The Historicism of the *De Monarchia*, though skilfully, and of

[1. 'Virgil and the Subject of Secondary Epic', *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford, 1942), p. 32ff.]



course sincerely, mortised into the Judaic and Christian framework, is largely Roman and Virgilian. St Augustine indeed may be rightly described as a Christian Historicist. But it is not always remembered that he became one in order to refute Pagan Historicism. The *De Civitate* answers those who traced the disasters of Rome to the anger of the rejected gods. I do not mean to imply that the task was uncongenial to St Augustine, or that his own Historicism is merely an *argumentum ad hominem*. But it is surely absurd to regard as specifically Christian in him the acceptance of a *terrain* which had in fact been chosen by the enemy.

The close connection which some see between Christianity and Historicism thus seems to me to be largely an illusion. There is no *prima facie* case in its favour on such grounds as that. We are entitled to examine it on its merits.

What appears, on Christian premises, to be true in the Historicist's position is this. Since all things happen either by the divine will or at least by the divine permission, it follows that the total content of time must in its own nature be a revelation of God's wisdom, justice, and mercy. In this direction we can go as far as Carlyle or Novalis or anyone else. History is, in that sense, a perpetual Evangel, a story written by the finger of God. If, by one miracle, the total content of time were spread out before me, and if, by another, I were able to hold all that infinity of events in my mind and if, by a third, God were pleased to comment on it so that I could understand it, then, to be sure, I could do what the Historicist says he is doing. I could read the meaning, discern the pattern. Yes; and if the sky fell we should all catch larks. The question is not what could be done under conditions never vouchsafed us *in via*, nor even (so far as I can remember) promised us *in patria*, but what can be done now under the real conditions. I do not dispute that History is a story written by the finger of God. But have we the text? (It would be dull work discussing the inspiration of the Bible if no copy of it had ever been seen on earth.)

We must remind ourselves that the word *History* has several senses. It may mean the total content of time: past, present, and future. It may mean the content of the past only, but still the total content of the past, the past as it really was in all its teeming riches. Thirdly, it may mean so much of the past as is discoverable from surviving evidence. Fourthly, it may mean so much as has been actually discovered by historians working, so to speak, 'at the face', the pioneer historians never heard of by the public who make the actual discoveries. Fifthly, it may mean that portion, and that version, of the matter so discovered which has been worked up by great historical writers. (This is perhaps the most popular sense: *history* usually means what you read when you are reading Gibbon or Mommsen, or the Master of Trinity.) Sixthly, it may mean that vague, composite picture of the past which floats, rather hazily, in the mind of the ordinary educated man.

When men say that 'History' is a revelation, or has a meaning, in which of these six senses do they use the word *History*? I am afraid that in fact they are very often thinking of history in the sixth sense; in which case their talk about revelation or meaning is surely unpalatable in the extreme. For 'history' in the sixth sense is the land of shadows, the home of wraiths like Primitive Man or the Renaissance or the Ancient-Greeks-and-Romans. It is not at all surprising, of course, that those who stare at it too long should see patterns. We see pictures in the fire. The more inde-

terminate the object, the more it excites our mythopoeic or 'esemplastic' faculties. To the naked eye there is a face in the moon; it vanishes when you use a telescope. In the same way, the meanings or patterns discernible in 'history' (Sense Six) disappear when we turn to 'history' in any of the higher senses. They are clearest for each of us in the periods he has studied least. No one who has distinguished the different senses of the word *History* could continue to think that history (in the sixth sense) is an evangel or a revelation. It is an effect of perspective.

On the other hand, we admit that history (in Sense One) is a story written by the finger of God. Unfortunately we have not got it. The claim of the practising Historicist then will stand or fall with his success in showing that history in one of the intermediate senses—the first being out of reach and the sixth useless for his purpose—is sufficiently close to history in the first sense to share its revealing qualities.

We drop, then, to history in Sense Two: the total content of past time as it really was in all its richness. This would save the Historicist if we could reasonably believe two things: first, that the formidable omission of the future does not conceal the point or meaning of the story, and, secondly, that we do actually possess history (Sense Two) up to the present moment. But can we believe either?

It would surely be one of the luckiest things in the world if the content of time up to the moment at which the Historicist is writing happened to contain all that he required for reaching the significance of total history. We ride with our backs to the engine. We have no notion what stage in the journey we have reached. Are we in Act I or Act V? Are our present diseases those of childhood or senility? If, indeed, we knew that history was cyclic we might perhaps hazard a guess at its meaning from the fragment we have seen. But then we have been told that the Historicists are just the people who do not think that history is merely cyclic. For them it is a real story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. But a story is precisely the sort of thing that cannot be understood till you have heard the whole of it. Or, if there are stories (bad stories) whose later chapters add nothing essential to their significance, and whose significance is therefore contained in something less than the whole, at least you cannot tell whether any given story belongs to that class until you have at least once read it to the end. Then, on a second reading, you may omit the dead wood in the closing chapters. I always now omit the last Book of *War and Peace*. But we have not yet read history to the end. There might be no dead wood. If it is a story written by the finger of God, there probably isn't. And if not, how can we suppose that we have seen 'the point' already? No doubt there are things we can say about this story even now. We can say it is an exciting story, or a crowded story, or a story with humorous characters in it. The one thing we must not say is what it means, or what its total pattern is.

But even if it were possible, which I deny, to see the significance of the whole from a truncated text, it remains to ask whether we have that truncated text. Do we possess even up to the present date the content of time as it really was in all its richness? Clearly not. The past, by definition, is not present. The point I am trying to make is so often slurred over by the unconcerned admission 'Of course we don't know *everything*' that I have sometimes despaired of bringing it home to other people's minds. It is not a question of failing to know everything: it is a question



(at least as regards quantity) of knowing next door to nothing. Each of us finds that in his own life every moment of time is completely filled. He is bombarded every second by sensations, emotions, thoughts, which he cannot attend to for multitude, and nine-tenths of which he must simply ignore. A single second of lived time contains more than can be recorded. And every second of past time has been like that for every man that ever lived. The past (I am assuming in the Historicist's favour that we need consider only the human past) in its reality, was a roaring cataract of billions upon billions of such moments: any one of them too complex to grasp in its entirety, and the aggregate beyond all imagination. By far the greater part of this teeming reality escaped human consciousness almost as soon as it occurred. None of us could at this moment give anything like a full account of his own life for the last twenty-four hours. We have already forgotten; even if we remembered, we have not time. The new moments are upon us. At every tick of the clock, in every inhabited part of the world, an unimaginable richness and variety of 'history' falls off the world into total oblivion. Most of the experiences in 'the past as it really was' were instantly forgotten by the subject himself. Of the small percentage which he remembered (and never remembered with perfect accuracy) a smaller percentage was ever communicated even to his closest intimates; of this, a smaller percentage still was recorded; of the recorded fraction only another fraction has ever reached posterity. *Ad nos vix tenuis famae perlabitur aura*. When once we have realized what 'the past as it really was' means, we must freely admit that most—that nearly all—history (in Sense Two) is, and will remain, wholly unknown to us. And if *per impossibile* the whole were known, it would be wholly unmanageable. To know the whole of one minute in Napoleon's life would require a whole minute of your own life. You could not keep up with it.

If these fairly obvious reflections do not trouble the Historicist that is because he has an answer. 'Of course', he replies, 'I admit that we do not know and cannot know (and, indeed, don't want to know) all the mass of trivialities which filled the past as they fill the present; every kiss and frown, every scratch and sneeze, every hiccup and cough. But we know the important facts.' Now this is a perfectly sound reply for a historian: I am not so clear that it will do for the Historicist. You will notice that we are now already a long way from history in Sense One—the total story written by the finger of God. First, we had to abandon the parts of that story which are still in the future. Now it appears we have not even got the text of those parts which we call 'past'. We have only selections; and selections which, as regards quantity, stand to the original text rather as one word would stand to all the books in the British Museum. We are asked to believe that from selections on that scale men (not miraculously inspired) can arrive at the meaning or plan or purport of the original. This is credible only if it can be shown that the selections make up in quality for what they lack in quantity. The quality will certainly have to be remarkably good if it is going to do that.

'The important parts of the past survive.' If a historian says this (I am not sure that most historians would) he means by 'importance' relevance to the particular inquiry he has chosen. Thus, if he is an economic historian, economic facts are for him important: if a military historian, military facts. And he would not have

embarked on his inquiry unless he had some reason for supposing that relevant evidence existed. 'Important' facts, for him, usually do survive because his undertaking was based on the probability that the facts he calls important are to be had. Sometimes he finds he was mistaken. He admits defeat and tries a new question. All this is fairly plain sailing. But the Historicist is in a different position. When he says 'Important facts survive' he must mean by the 'important' (if he is saying anything to the purpose) that which reveals the inner meaning of History. The important parts of the past must for a Hegelian Historicist be those in which Absolute Spirit progressively manifests itself; for a Christian Historicist, those which reveal the purposes of God.

In this claim I see two difficulties. The first is logical. If history is what the Historicist says—the self-manifestation of Spirit, the story written by the finger of God, the revelation which includes all other revelations—then surely he must go to history itself to teach him what is important. How does he know beforehand what sort of events are, in a higher degree than others, self-manifestations of Spirit? And if he does not know that, how does he get his assurance that it is events of that type which manage (what a convenience!) to get recorded?

The second difficulty is obvious, if we think for a moment of the process whereby a fact about the past reaches, or fails to reach, posterity. Prehistoric pottery survives because earthenware is easy to break and hard to pulverize; prehistoric poetry has perished because words, before writing, are winged. Is it reasonable to conclude either that there was no poetry or that it was, by the Historicist's standard, less important than the pottery? Is there a discovered law by which important manuscripts survive and unimportant perish? Do you ever turn out an old drawer (say, at the break-up of your father's house) without wondering at the survival of trivial documents and the disappearance of those which everyone would have thought worth preservation? And I think the real historian will allow that the actual *detritus* of the past on which he works is very much more like an old drawer than like an intelligent epitome of some longer work. Most that survives or perishes survives or perishes by chance: that is, as a result of causes which have nothing to do either with the historian's or the Historicist's interests. Doubtless, it would be possible for God so to ordain these chances that what survives is always just what the Historicist needs. But I see no evidence that He has done so; I remember no promise that He would.

The 'literary' sources, as the historian calls them, no doubt record what their writers for some reason thought important. But this is of little use unless their standards of importance were the same as God's. This seems unlikely. Their standards do not agree with one another nor with ours. They often tell us what we do not greatly want to know and omit what we think essential. It is often easy to see why. Their standard of importance can be explained by their historical situation. So, no doubt, can ours. Standards of historical importance are themselves embedded in history. But then, by what standard can we judge whether the 'important' in some high-flying Hegelian sense has survived? Have we, apart from our Christian faith, any assurance that the historical events which we regard as momentous coincide with those which would be found momentous if God showed us the whole text



and deigned to comment? Why should Genghis Khan be more important than the patience or despair of some one among his victims? Might not those whom we regard as significant figures—great scholars, soldiers, and statesmen—turn out to have their chief importance as giving occasion to states of soul in individuals whom we never heard of? I do not, of course, mean that those whom we call the great are not themselves immortal souls for whom Christ died, but that in the plot of history as a whole they might be minor characters. It would not be strange if we, who have not sat through the whole play, and who have heard only tiny fragments of the scenes already played, sometimes mistook a mere super in a fine dress for one of the protagonists.

On such a small and chance selection from the total past as we have, it seems to me a waste of time to play the Historicist. The philosophy of history is a discipline for which we mortal men lack the necessary data. Nor is the attempt always a mere waste of time: it may be positively mischievous. It encourages a Mussolini to say that 'History took him by the throat' when what really took him by the throat was desire. Drivel about superior races or immanent dialectic may be used to strengthen the hand and ease the conscience of cruelty and greed. And what quack or traitor will not now woo adherents or intimidate resistance with the assurance that his scheme is inevitable, 'bound to come', and in the direction which the world is already taking?

When I have tried to explain myself on this subject in conversation I have sometimes been met by the rejoinder: 'Because historians do not know all, will you forbid them to try to understand what they do know?' But this seems to me to miss the whole point. I have already explained in what sense historians should attempt to understand the past. They may infer unknown events from known, they may reconstruct, they may even (if they insist) predict. They may, in fact, tell me almost anything they like about history except its metahistorical meaning. And the reason is surely very plain. There are inquiries in which scanty evidence is worth using. We may not be able to get certainty, but we can get probability, and half a loaf is better than no bread. But there are other inquiries in which scanty evidence has the same value as no evidence at all. In a funny anecdote, to have heard all except the last six words in which the point lies, leaves you, as a judge of its comic merits, in the same position as the man who has heard none of it. The historian seems to me to be engaged on an inquiry of the first type; the Historicist, on one of the second. But let us take a closer analogy.

Suppose a lost Greek play of which fragments totalling six lines survive. They have survived, of course, in grammarians who quoted them to illustrate rare inflexions. That is, they survive because someone thought them important for some reason, not because they were important in the play as a play. If any one of them had dramatic importance, that is simply a lucky accident, and we know nothing about it. I do not condemn the classical scholar to produce nothing more than a bare text of the fragments any more than I condemn the historian to be a mere annalist. Let the scholar amend their corruptions and draw from them any conclusions he can about the history of Greek language, metre or religion. But let him not

start talking to us about the significance of the play as a play. For that purpose the evidence before him has a value indistinguishable from zero.

The example of a defective text might be used in another way. Let us assume a mutilated MS, in which only a minority of passages are legible. The parts we can still read might be tolerable evidence for those features which are likely to be constant and evenly distributed over the whole; for example, spelling or handwriting. On such evidence a palaeographer might, without excessive boldness, hazard a guess about the character and nationality of the scribe. A literary critic would have much less chance of guessing correctly at the purport of the whole text. That is because the palaeographer deals with what is cyclic or recurrent, and the literary critic with something unique, and uniquely developing throughout. It is possible, though not likely, that all the torn or stained or missing leaves were written by a different scribe; and if they were not, it is very unlikely that he altered his graphic habits in all the passages we cannot check. But there is nothing in the world to prevent the legible line (at the bottom of a page)

Erimian was the noblest of the brothers ten

having been followed on the next and now missing page, by something like

As men believed; so false are the beliefs of men.

This provides the answer to a question which may be asked: Does my canon that historical premises should yield only historical conclusions entail the corollary that scientific premises should yield only scientific conclusions? If we call the speculations of Whitehead or Jeans or Eddington 'scienticism' (as distinct from 'science') do I condemn the scientist as much as the Historicist? I am inclined, so far as I can see my way at present, to answer No. The scientist and the historian seem to me like the palaeographer and the literary critic in my parable. The scientist studies those elements in reality which repeat themselves. The historian studies the unique. Both have a defective MS but its defects are by no means equally damaging to both. One specimen of gravitation, or one specimen of handwriting, for all we can see to the contrary, is as good as another. But one historical event, or one line of a poem, is different from another and different in its actual context from what it would be in any other context, and out of all these differences the unique character of the whole is built up. That is why, in my opinion, the scientist who becomes a scientist is in a stronger position than the historian who becomes a Historicist. It may not be very wise to conclude from what we know of the physical universe that 'God is a mathematician': it seems to me, however, much wiser than to conclude anything about His 'judgements' from mere history. *Caveas disputare de occultis Dei iudiciis*, says the author of the *Imitation*. He even advises us what antidotes to use *quando haec suggerit inimicus*.

It will, I hope, be understood that I am not denying all access whatever to the revelation of God in history. On certain great events (those embodied in the creeds)



we have what I believe to be divine comment which makes plain so much of their significance as we need, and can bear, to know. On other events, most of which are in any case unknown to us, we have no such comment. And it is also important to remember that we all have a certain limited, but direct, access to History in Sense One. We are allowed, indeed compelled, to read it sentence by sentence, and every sentence is labelled *Now*. I am not, of course, referring to what is commonly called 'contemporary history', the content of the newspapers. That is possibly the most phantasmal of all histories, a story written not by the hand of God but by foreign offices, demagogues, and reporters. I mean the real or primary history which meets each of us moment by moment in his own experience. It is very limited, but it is the pure, unedited, unexpurgated text, straight from the Author's hand. We believe that those who seek will find comment sufficient whereby to understand it in such degree as they need; and that therefore God is every moment 'revealed in history', that is, in what MacDonald called 'the holy present'. Where, except in the present, can the Eternal be met? If I attack Historicism it is not because I intend any disrespect to primary history, the real revelation springing direct from God in every experience. It is rather because I respect this real original history too much to see with unconcern the honours due to it lavished on those fragments, copies of fragments, copies of copies of fragments, or floating reminiscences of copies of copies, which are, unhappily, confounded with it under the general name of *history*.

## The Psalms

THE DOMINANT IMPRESSION I get from reading the Psalms is one of antiquity. I seem to be looking into a deep pit of time, but looking through a lens which brings the figures who inhabit that depth up close to my eye. In that momentary proximity they are almost shockingly alien; creatures of unrestrained emotion, wallowing in self-pity, sobbing, cursing, screaming in exultation, clashing uncouth weapons or dancing to the din of strange musical instruments. Yet, side by side with this, there is also a different image in my mind: Anglican choirs, well laundered surplices, soapy boys' faces, hassocks, an organ, prayer-books, and perhaps the smell of new-mown graveyard grass coming in with the sunlight through an open door. Sometimes the one, sometimes the other, impression grows faint, but neither, perhaps, ever quite disappears. The irony reaches its height when a boy soloist sings in that treble which is so beautifully free from all personal emotion the words whereby ancient warriors lashed themselves with frenzy against their enemies; and does this in the service of the God of Love, and himself, meanwhile, perhaps thinks neither of that God nor of ancient wars but of 'bullseyes' and the Comics. This irony, this double or treble vision, is part of the pleasure. I begin to suspect that it is part of the profit too.

How old the Psalms, as we now have them, really are is a question for the scholars. I am told there is one (No. 18) which might really have come down from the age of David himself; that is, from the tenth century B.C. Most of them, however, are said to be 'post exilic'; the book was put together when the Hebrews, long exiled in Babylonia, were repatriated by that enlightened ruler, Cyrus of Persia. This would bring us down to the sixth century. How much earlier material the book took in is uncertain. Perhaps for our present purpose it does not greatly matter. The whole spirit and technique and the characteristic attitudes in the Psalms we have might be very like those of much older sacred poetry which is now lost. We know that they had such poetry; they must have been already famous for that art when their Babylonian conquerors (see No. 137) asked them for a specimen. And some very early pieces occur elsewhere in the Old Testament. Deborah's song of triumph over Sisera in Judges V might be as old as the battle that gave rise to it back in the thirteenth century. If the Hebrews were conservative in such matters then sixth century poems may be very like those of their ancestors. And we know they were conservative. One can see that by leaping forward six centuries into the New Testament and reading the *Magnificat*. The Virgin has something other (and more momentous) to say than the old Psalmists; but what she utters is quite unmistakably a psalm. The style, the dwelling on Covenant, the delight in the vindication of the poor, are all perfectly true to the old model. So might the old model have been true to one