ABSTRACT:
This paper will offer a historical perspective on the nexus of ‘political science practices’ and the powers of imagination. It focuses on the themes of politics, the literary arts, and the emergence of modern social knowledges, specifically that of ‘statistics,’ in Thomas Carlyle's invention of “the condition of England question” in Chartism, a widely circulated & repeatedly reprinted pamphlet of 1840. The paper counters Mary Poovey’s inclusion of Carlyle among Victorian moralizers antipathetic to statistics — but more broadly, by attending to the “signs and fables, figures and emblems” of Carlyle’s distinctive prose style, it aims to capture the contemporaneity of his call for “new inquirers and methods” in whose hands statistics, as he put it, might eventually “be good for something.”

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Perfection of Practice, like completeness of Opinion, is always approaching, never arrived. Truth, in the words of Schiller, *immer wird, nie est;* never is, always is *a-being.*

Thomas Carlyle

An “atheist who makes it a point of honor not to be one,” Thomas Carlyle was guilty of “a passionate dishonesty against himself.” The words are Nietzsche’s, pithy phrases not of dismissal but of why Carlyle “is and remains interesting.”¹ The same could be said today, if differently, as the descriptor “post-secular” surfaces — doubtfully, as is perhaps its due — into topicality as a theoretical term of art. What links these three moments — Carlyle’s, Nietzsche’s, and our own — is an insistent gesture to that which is beyond knowing, that which eludes or escapes, even defies cognition as a matter of rational, logical, empirical, or in any now available sense demonstrable truth. My purpose here, however, is not to track the historical vicissitudes of the transcendental, the rubric under which Carlyle nestled his art,² nor is it to place Carlyle in what some would see as the history of unreason. Rather than walking such highwires of contemporary controversy, I mean to pursue the more ostensibly earthbound themes of politics, society, and the emergence of modern social knowledges, specifically that of ‘statistics,’ in Carlyle’s engagements with “the condition of England question” in his pamphlet *Chartism.*³

This simple frame is less comforting than it seems, for Carlyle’s transcendentalism can be a veritable Antaeus, strengthened by contact with even the humblest of soils. As testimony to

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² Carlyle linked the ‘transcendental’ to the otherwise politically diverse endeavors of Kant, Fichte, Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, and Emerson, among others. For the pertinence of a possible genealogy, one might consider the renewal of interest in the term, albeit augmented by the qualifier ‘quasi-’, in Derrida’s *Glas* (pub data) and Rodolphe Gasché’s *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). In terms duly intelligible not only to the novice but to actual readers among the hostile, Derrida returned to this theme in his “Remarks on Pragmatism and Deconstruction” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism,* ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

³ *Chartism* (London: James Fraser, Regent Street, 1840):
this mingling of contraries, consider a review of *Chartism* in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, a relatively inexpensive Radical periodical in the print-scramble of the nineteenth-century public sphere. Characterizing it as “in many respects a remarkable Essay,” which by inciting readers to think “must do good,” the review situates Carlyle’s effort in a broader context of public uncertainty:  

At present, it is a doubt with many, whether the insecurity and peril which, at this dark crisis, threaten the stability of social order in England, arise from real misery, or chiefly from speculative and imaginary causes. Mr. Carlyle appears a believer in the real existence of those social ills, whose origins and presence he intimates by signs and figures, fables and emblems, as if proclaiming — ‘He that hath an ear to hear let him hear.’

It seems his philanthropic purpose to suspend a few filaments of truth over this fermenting chaotic mass, around which its weltering elements may take form, order, and lucidity; but although the presence of these slender filaments cannot altogether miss the intended effect, they are not always immediately perceptible to ordinary optics. This is a fair specimen of the perplexity Carlyle’s contraries visited upon their readers, and more particularly upon those convinced that practical attention to the “real existence of social ills” required, above all else, accurate empirical representations. To believe in the reality of social distress, it would appear, is one thing; to represent it adequately is another. And on the latter count, *Chartism*’s recourse to “signs and figures, fables and emblems” challenged the capacities of “ordinary optics” devoted to such representations, not least among which were the ‘figures of arithmetic’ generated by statistical inquiries.

Alongside the “ordinary optics” invoked by Carlyle’s reviewer,” in what follows I will suggest the effectivity of the “extraordinary optics” through which Carlyle’s early political essays unfolded the “condition-of-England question” as a site of political investment that long outlived the particularities of its original incitements. How this was so, and why it might still

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bear consideration, are the questions that drive the account to follow. In pursuing them, however, my interest is less in Carlyle as a political philosopher (whatever that might entail) than as a political writer, a public intellectual, as it were, in a time and place for which that mattered. Speak he did to a number of topics central to academic political theory in both its normative and historical variants: governance, rights, authority, democracy, and revolution, to note but a few. Here, however, I will stop short of such things to focus, rather, upon such aspects of his political writing as might highlight his less appreciated proximity to the then-developing quantitative tools of what have become the disciplines of social science.

**Reading Carlyle: Chartism and elsewhere**

Carlyle’s political essays bristle with opinions less than congenial to contemporary democratic sensibilities. He has little pleasant and much unpleasant to say about various nationalities, ethnic and racial groups, and women. Neither do Constitutions, Parliaments, political parties, or formal rights and liberties fare much better; indeed, not infrequently, they fare much worse. For these and other reasons, it would be futile to call him a democratic theorist. He was, however, something of a theorist of democracy — a witness and observer, critic and historian of many of the transformations of thought and action that, since the middle of the nineteenth century have been understood as hallmarks of ‘the democratic revolution.’ His early writings invite attention in these terms, particularly “Signs of the Times” and “Characteristics,” *Sartor Resartus, The History of the French Revolution, Past and Present,* and *Chartism.* It is principally the last of these that will concern us here, though we will have occasion at times to draw on others as well.

No less than the Chartists themselves, *Chartism* framed “the Condition-of-England Question” as a topic of political investment and controversy. Of Carlyle’s invention, the phrase
caught on and in various forms bubbled through the periodical press, pamphlet literatures, and publick houses of early Victorian England, eventually to appear on the floor of Parliament. First published in 1840, the essay was reprinted regularly in both Britain and the United States until the end of the century. Viewed retrospectively from the standpoints of such theorists as Arendt and Habermas, the agitations it addressed were elements of ‘the rise of the social,’ understood either as the eclipse of ‘the political’ by the demands of the body or as the entering wedge for the colonization of the life-world by the instrumentalities of administrative rationality.

Contemporaries of the period, however, were bereft of such categories (though they had others in abundance), and it’s salutary to recall that vocabularies of political contestation relate more usually, if often promiscuously, to the terms of art that precede them than to those favored by scholars of a later time. Though distant from the schemas of later social theory, various elements of Chartist idioms have indeed persisted, either as counters in continuing contestation (in particular, constitutionalist emphases on rights and political representation) or objects of historical rediscovery (their invocations of the ‘ancient constitution,’ for example). It would be fair to say, however, that few of Carlyle’s characteristic formulations, many of which were at odds with those of the Chartists themselves, have enjoyed a similar fate.

It is not only the modern reader, though, to whom Carlyle’s language is strange. No small number of his contemporaries, too, found it unusual. As Tait’s anonymous reviewer put it, “we do not at all times understand Mr. Carlyle, and we are far from being satisfied that he perfectly understands himself.”5 Among many of the critical responses to Carlyle’s early writings, this was charitable. Others inveighed, more or less courteously, against its

5 Ibid., 166.
Scottishisms, its Germanisms or its “bastard English.” Still others assailed its “poetical jargon” or “German Mysticism and affectation.” Whatever its debts, Carlyle’s prose had no whiff of sociology, but leaned consistently rather to the motifs and techniques of transcendental literature. “Society” there is, but not “civil society” by way of contrast to “the State.” “History,” too, is a central concern, but it carries no suggestion of structure or orderly development. Beyond this, and unlike his German sources, Carlyle’s prose is generously if oddly salted with the term “fact,” not infrequently elevated typologically to “Fact,” occasionally accompanied by the modifier “Eternal.” In these respects, among others, to read Carlyle’s political writings today is not simply to encounter a puzzle of the past, but to confront a puzzle made all the more difficult by its singularity even in its own time.

The portion of that puzzle to be taken up here is a seemingly small one: the themes of politics and society in relation to the emergent disciplines of social science. My point of departure in this corner of the Carlyle puzzle is Mary Poovey’s late ‘90s contribution to the history of the social sciences, A History of the Modern Fact, a work that well deserves more readers among social scientists than it has thus far found. Though characterized by Poovey as an “implicit argument,” the central challenge of the book is one that should interest disciplines

6 On Scottishisms, see Thomas De Quincey’s review of Carlyle’s translation of Goethe, “Goethe’s ‘Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship,’” London Magazine, 10 (1824). On Germanisms and ruptured English see Lady Sydney Morgan, unsigned review, Athenaeum (20 May, 1837) and Herman Merivale, unsigned review, Quarterly Review (July 1840), both reprinted in Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage, 46-51 and 76-87 respectively.


8 Carlyle was drawn in particular to Goethe, Schiller, Richter, Novalis, and Fichte, among others. Even in this context, the most recent scholar of that connection concludes that Carlyle didn’t merely import his German sources wholesale, but rather reworked and selectively applied the images and phrases, humor and emblems of his favored authors, absorbing and reshaping “the new materials to suit his own vision.” Elizabeth M. Vida, Romantic Affinities: German Authors and Carlyle (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 199. More recently, Carlyle’s relation to Scots philosophical writing — particularly that of Reid and Hamilton — has been admirably elaborated by Ralph Jessop in Carlyle and Scottish Thought (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1997).

recurrently at odds with themselves over the relative merits of formal, quantitative, qualitative and sundry other approaches to political studies. Elaborated through analyses of knowledges ‘of wealth and society’ from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and attentive to the representation of such knowledges in the emergent modern genres of the novel and social scientific tracts, that argument suggests “that numerical representation has always had more in common with figurative language than the champions of the former tend to admit.” At issue here, however, is not what Poovey says of Carlyle. Rather my curiosity has to do with, dare I say, the fact that — frequent recourse to ‘fact’ and ‘Fact,’ even occasionally to ‘FACT’ notwithstanding — Carlyle’s writings have little place in this ‘history of the modern fact,’ and that only by way of opposition to such modern, and especially statistical knowledges as can or could be understood to have displaced the centrality of moral knowledge for political understanding and judgment.

This, given Poovey’s frame, I’m inclined to regard as a just estimation. But to reverse the lens for the purposes of political theory, its concern with the history of epistemology, the problem of induction, and the representation of social reality in scientific and novelistic genres seems but one piece in the Carlyle puzzle. Grasping for another and turning it from side to side to discern other possibilities, we might consider an account of Carlyle by another of his contemporaries, a novelist of no small repute and one whose literary endeavors eventually included a fictional account of the Chartist agitations. Penned by George Eliot, it is, in the leisurely mode of nineteenth century criticism, a long extract — and for this I apologize — but its sense and point would be lost if presented in snippets and paraphrase: 11

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10 Ibid., 26. For Poovey’s views of Carlyle’s purchase on the history of the modern fact, see pp. xxiv, 279, 302, and 315.
11 Eliot’s Felix Holt, the Radical numbers among the many novels on ‘the hungry forties’ that took their cues from Carlyle’s critical writings on the phenomenon of Chartism and ‘the condition of England question.’ The unsigned
It has been well said that the highest aim in education is analogous to the highest aim in mathematics, namely, to obtain not results but powers, not particular solutions but the means by which endless solutions may be sought. He is the most effective educator who aims less at perfecting specific acquirements than at producing that mental condition which renders acquirements easy, and leads to their useful application; who does not seek to make his pupils moral by enjoining particular courses of action, but by bringing into activity the feelings and sympathies that must issue in noble action. On the same ground it may be said that the most effective writer is not he who announces a particular discovery, who convinces men of a particular conclusion, who demonstrates that this measure is right and this measure is wrong; but he who rouses in others the activities that must issue in discovery, who awakens men from their indifference to the right and the wrong, who nerves their energies to seek for the truth and live up to it at whatever the cost. The influence of such a writer is dynamic. He does not teach men how to use sword and musket, but he inspires their souls and sends a strong will into their muscles. He does not, perhaps, enrich your stock of data, but he clears away the film from your eyes that you may search for data to some purpose. He does not, perhaps, convince you, but he strikes you, undeceives you, animates you. You are not directly fed by his books, but you are braced as by a walk up to an alpine summit, and yet subdued to calm and reverence as by the sublime things to be seen from that summit.

“Thomas Carlyle,” she avers, “is such a writer.” 12 This, it would appear, belongs to a different corner of the Carlyle puzzle than that which secures his antipathetic relation to statistics. Read not in the character of a novelist or social scientist but simply as a writer, Eliot’s Carlyle puzzle piece glimmers with different hues and patterns than those that mark attention to the career of the modern fact. As an “effective educator” doesn’t try to make students “moral by enjoining particular courses of action,” neither does the “effective writer” necessarily proclaim discoveries, demonstrate the rightness or wrongness of particular measures, convince readers of specific conclusions or “enrich their stock of data.” Both, however, enliven their audience to the

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12 Eliot review, in Seigel., 409.
task at hand. The writer, in particular, energizes them to their own discoveries, stirs them from indifference, and “undeceives” them that they “may search for data to some purpose.”

Here, Carlyle’s prose is not a vexation to ‘ordinary optics,’ but a force for relieving them of their scales. It is not for knowing but for thinking and, more importantly, for doing, that it has its significance. In this respect, to be “undeceived” is not to be “disillusioned.” Where the latter can descend, via skepticism perhaps, to nihilism, the former suggests a movement elsewhere — less a matter of clarification than a clearing of the decks, as it were, for action. This, I take it, is the point of Eliot’s closing gesture to the sublimity of alpine vistas, sources not of knowledge but of perspective — a perspective that involves not the scrutiny of details but the situating of observers amidst an immensity that extends immeasurably beyond them. This perspective, with all its tincture of the sublime, aptly captures what I’ve called Carlyle’s ‘extraordinary optics.’ In Eliot’s reference to “data,” however, it makes contact with ‘ordinary optics,’ rubs up with and against them rather than abandoning them to their own devices.

There is much here that invites attention. But as our interests are politics, society, and the disciplines of social science, we might restrict our attentions to the curious appearance of “data” in Eliot’s review. This, I would suggest, can be taken as a token for the problem of statistical knowledge as it appears in Carlyle’s Chartism. Read in these terms, it suggests something rather more complicated than antipathy, as it implies the not inconsiderable question of what statistical data is for, what purpose its collection and public distribution can be understood to serve. Could it be that Carlyle’s criticism of the statistical projects of his time aimed not to reject them but to direct them elsewhere? If his belief in “the real existence of social ills” could be read in

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13 John Stuart Mill says much the same thing of Carlyle, noting that “the good his writings did me, was not as philosophy to instruct, but as poetry to animate.” Autobiography (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1873): 175.
14 Carlyle elaborates this difference in the novel Sartor Resartus, Book II, chapters 7, 8, and 9, titled respectively, “The Everlasting No,” “Centre of Indifference,” and “The Everlasting Yea.”
Chartism’s “signs and figures, fables and emblems,” how might we understand the relationship between his extraordinary optics and their more ordinary cousins?

**Danaides Sieves and ‘the Condition-of-England Question’**

An obvious place to start is with the figure deployed in Chartism to characterize statistical labors. Having examined “various statistic works, Statistic-Society Reports, Poor-Law Reports,” and pamphlet literatures dealing with the condition of the “Working Classes” in England, Carlyle grunted dissatisfaction. “Assertion swallows assertion,” he observed, and “according to the old Proverb, ‘as the statist thinks, the bell clinks!’” Their tables are “like the sieve of the Danaides; beautifully reticulated, orderly to look upon, but which will hold no conclusions” (Chartism, 9). A figure of speech for the figures of arithmetic, this image of Danaides reticulations likened statistics to the endless labors of the daughters of Danaus, consigned to the Underworld to ladle water into jars with only sieves for tools. Another puzzle piece, and one that invites closer scrutiny.

Considered simply as an image of futility, the figure may indeed seem to betray antipathy to statistics as such, yet the broader resonance of the myth suggests more complex filiations. The futility of the Danaides’ labors is their doom, a sentence visited upon them by the gods; their task, though impossible, is at once their condition and their fate. For the length of eternity, their sieves are the tools they have, the waters and jars await them — and ladle they do, as best they can. Like Tantalus, fated to see his desires ever recede from his grasp, their mythic impossibility is not mocked but remembered; yet, unlike that son of Zeus their pathos has to do not with desires impossible to fulfill, but with labors impossible to complete. As a figure for statistical inquiries this adds a new dimension to our puzzle, for it directs attention not merely to the laborers and their tools, to statists/statisticians and their tables, but to their task as well — here
characterized as coming to “conclusions.” What eludes statistical laborers, what trickles through their tabular reticulations, orderly and beautiful though these may be to look upon, is conclusive knowledge, the certainty of an answer to “the condition of England question.”

Carlyle, as it happens, was not the only writer to use the Danaides myth to figure the possibility of the impossibility of certain knowledge. In “Philosophy of the Unconditioned,” an *Edinburgh Review* essay of 1829 with which Carlyle was well-acquainted, his friend Thomas Hamilton had deployed it to suggest the lingering “spectre” of the Absolute in German philosophy from Kant through Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, and others. But where Hamilton used it to problematize knowledge of the infinite, Carlyle adapted the figure to question statistical claims to represent such national particularities as “the condition of England.” It is between these two impossibilities that Carlyle’s *Chartism* suspended “the Condition-of-England Question” as a question for which an answer was at once a practical imperative and, in significant respects, beyond knowing for the ordinary optics of statistical representation. In this context the dilemma presented by statistical inquirers was not that they didn’t know the answer but that, believing what they imagined they knew, they were ignorant of their ignorance. So construed, the task taken up by *Chartism* was to ‘undeceive’ both the practitioners of ‘statistic inquiries’ and their larger public. Understood in these terms, the essay’s extraordinary optics of “signs and figures, fables and emblems” were various species of prose devices — the only tools, after all, available to a writer — deployed to attune its readers to the invisible springs and surging meanings of the waters that statistical sieves failed to capture.

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15 Kant, he argued, “had slain the body, but had not exorcised the spectre, of the Absolute; and this spectre has continued to haunt the schools of Germany even to this present day.” The writings of numerous philosophers of the period, he insisted, including those “of Fichte, of Schelling, of Hegel, and of sundry others, are just so many endeavors, of greater or of less ability, to fix the Absolute as a positive in knowledge; but the Absolute, like the water in the seives of the Danaides, has always hitherto run through as a negative into the abyss of nothing.” Quoted by Jessop, p. 42.

16 This is not to suggest that Carlyle imagined universals any the more knowable: on this, as on much else, he appears to have concurred with Hamilton. See Jessop, esp. Chs. 3, 9, and 10.
To say this is to suggest that Carlyle lays a claim to what may as well be called political truth. A strange sort of truth — as our encounter with Eliot suggested, a sort more consonant with powers of discernment than with concrete results — but a sort not unlikely for one to whom both the infinite and empirical generalizations were unavailable as objects of cognition. To explore this possibility, however, we’d do well to begin again, this time at the beginning, with the prose artifact we have in the essay Chartism. The pamphlet is short, a mere hundred and thirteen pages subdivided into ten brief chapters. The chapter sequence follows no obvious conceptual architecture through which successive topics might be construed as parts of a philosophical system. In rhetorical terms, however, it nonetheless hangs together. Oscillating internally between optics ordinary and otherwise, each chapter orchestrates and builds on observations and dilemmas that at once refer back to its predecessors and lead on to those that follow. In effect, across its ten chapters the essay unfolds as a movement from the level of disturbing facticities (I-IV: Condition-of-England Question, Statistics, New Poor Law, Finest Peasantry in the World), to various elaborations of their symbolic dimensions (V-IX: Rights and Mights, Laissez Faire, Not Laissez Faire, New Eras, Parliamentary Radicalism), followed by a partial return to facticities and two practical modes of address circulating at the time (X: Impossible).17 Carlyle’s explicit attention to statistics develops in the first of these clusters,

17 This, of course, is a matter of construal and interpretation. To the extent that we might call the essay structured at all, that structure is susceptible to multiple descriptions: a movement from the definition of a problem through criticisms of proffered solutions to a preferred resolution; a movement from local conundra first to their broader significance then to possible modes of address; or alternatively, as I’ve put it here, a movement from the level of disturbing facticities to an invocation of their symbolic dimensions, followed by a return to facticity in the way of possible modes of address. Each, in its own way, is a credible characterization, and others are doubtless possible depending on readerly protocols, sensibilities, and predilections. Any characterization, however, chooses not only its vocabulary, its sentences and concepts, but the images, associations, and filaments of meaning with which mere words are persistently infused. It elects, as it were, its participation in one or another language game, and thereby declares if not its allegiance at least its affinity to one among other modes of construing the work with which it is concerned. Here I have favored the last of the descriptions in part because it seems to me to resonate more vibrantly with Carlyle’s own language — and this not only in the ‘hieroglyphs’ and ‘veracities’ that stud the more vatic passages of Chartism, but also in his explicit articulation of “Symbols” in the chapter thus titled in the third book of Sartor Resartus.
disappears utterly in the second, and returns but once, and that briefly, in the last. Rather than collect these appearances into a seamless image of Carlyle’s antipathy to statistics, easy enough if one selects sentences as representatives of his ‘opinion,’ the next section will follow their several appearances in the broader dynamics of the essay. By way of preliminary, though, we’d do well to engage the admixture of optics that initiates the “Condition-of-England Question” in the first place.

Without preface or introduction, that question titles Chartism’s opening chapter. For some years previous, the reports of various public commissions, interested individuals, and voluntary societies had contributed volumes to what Ian Hacking has dubbed “the avalanche of printed numbers” through which the factual condition of European nations found various forms of numerical and tabular representation. In Chartism, however, the question of England’s condition arrives in the first sentence as a question of political action: “A feeling very generally exists that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it.” Ordinary optics, a reference to Chartist agitations, follow immediately, linking that feeling to doings in the world: “surely, at an epoch of history when the ‘National Petition’ carts itself in waggons along the streets, and is presented ‘bound with iron hoops, four men bearing it,’ to a Reformed House of Commons; and Chartism numbered by the million and a half, taking nothing by its iron-hooped Petition, breaks out into brickbats, cheap pikes, and even into sputterings of conflagration, such general feeling cannot be considered unnatural.” This issue of the “condition and disposition of the Working Classes,” Carlyle marks as “the most ominous of all practical matters whatever: a matter in regard to which if something be not done, something will do itself one day, in a fashion that will please nobody.” It is, however, not simply something to be

known, as if from the outside, but something to be ‘acted in’: “The time verily is come for acting in it; how much more for consultation about acting in it, for speech and articulate inquiry about it!” (Chartism, 1).

Newspapers reported that “the chimera of Chartism” had been defeated. Carlyle half-agreed: “it is indeed the ‘chimera’ of Chartism, not the Reality, which has been put down,” its “distracted embodiment” rather than its “living essence.” That ‘essence’ lay below the visible phenomena of the petition for “The People’s Charter” and its popular parade through the streets of London, as it lay below the pikes and brickbats that appeared when Parliament rejected it. These were but surface manifestations, eruptions into visibility, of a “long-standing” and “melancholy fact” of meaning: “a bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England” (Chartism, 2). But calling it mad, Carlyle insisted, was of no avail. Neither would military and judicial coercions address anything more than symptoms. Though itself invisible, that sad fact will find new ways “of announcing that it continues there, that it would fain not continue there.” The surface turmoil, however, would not be without purpose “if it forced all thinking men of the community” to address the question, “Is the condition of the English working people wrong; so wrong that rational working men cannot, will not, and even should not rest quiet under it?” (Chartism, 3). If this were the case, no coercion would stop it. And were it not the “condition,” but the “disposition,” the “thoughts, beliefs and feelings” of the working people that were wrong, if there were indeed a “general madness of discontent,” that disposition would require measures other than police. Absent “sanity,” coercion itself is unable to coerce (Chartism, 4).

Government meanwhile, on Carlyle’s view, did nothing. Mired in routine debates and noisy quarrels — “Canada question, Irish Appropriation question, West India question, Queen’s
Bedchamber question; Game Laws, Usury Laws; African Blacks, Hill Coolies, Smithfield cattle, and Dogcarts” — Parliament spoke of everything but the “Condition-of-England question.” And this a Reformed Parliament, with Radical Members, “friends of the people” (Chartism, 5). What Parliaments should, might, or could do; what their limits and capacities and culpabilities might be: these matters invited “long investigation” not to be offered here. But unaddressed by “the Collective Wisdom of the Nation,” the question cannot be left to its “Collective Folly.” In Parliament or out of it, “darkness, neglect, hallucination must contrive to cease in regard to it; true insight must be had.” For the people in the streets, with their iron-ringed petition and their pikes and brickbats, do mean something, “some true thing, withal, in the centre of their confused hearts.” Heaven-created hearts, “to the Heaven it is clear what thing; to us not clear” (Chartism, 6-7).

Here it is. Devoutly non-creedal, unchurchly Carlyle’s “passionate dishonesty” against what Nietzsche took as his unacknowledged atheism. A worldly battle rages, a contest of might for “the obscure image of a right.” “Clear undeniable right, clear undeniable might”: since all “battle is a confused experiment to ascertain one or both of these,” could either but be known the battle would cease (Chartism, 7). Immeasurable questions, these; beyond knowing, stuff for fabled riddle-solvers: “He were an Oedipus ... who could resolve us fully.” The conflict that divides the classes, what Disraeli was to call England’s two nations, “will end and adjust itself as all other struggles do and have done, by making the right clear and the might clear; not otherwise than that.” Clear to Heaven now, to us only when the struggle is done. But there are “measurable questions,” too, and sparse-yielding “researches and considerations” of Carlyle’s own that demand public utterance. Posed here at the end of Chartism’s opening salvo on the real existence of social ills, are the questions for which the triplet of chapters to follow - “Statistics,”
“New Poor Law,” and “Finest Peasantry in the World” - will consider some answers: “Why are the Working Classes discontented; what is their condition, economical, moral, in their houses and in their hearts, as it is in reality and as they figure it to themselves to be; what do they complain of; what ought they, and ought they not to complain of?” (Chartism, 8).

**Statistics**

If our earlier reading of the Danaides myth is fitting, we should expect Carlyle’s perspective on statistics to entail something more complicated than antipathetic rejection, something attuned as much to the immensity of the task as to the weakness of the tools. Criticism of statistics, of course, was widespread in the period, even among those involved in their production. Satire there was, too, and Chartism shared some of that impulse. Yet Carlyle’s chastening of statistics, barbed and sometimes ironic though it may be, differs in tone and tenor from the sheer ridicule launched by others.19 Statistical tables may be “Danaides reticulations,” may “hold no conclusion,” but they are not thereby rendered ludic. Fate is still fate, beyond knowing. The waters are still surging, unfathomable. But measurable questions have now been posed. Optics ordinary and extraordinary converge — hovering in the register of faith and belief — but not, for all that, necessarily useless. As Carlyle put it, the dilemma is this: statistical representations “are abstractions, and the object a most concrete one, so difficult to read the essence of.” Factualities abound, yet essences are elusive. There are circumstances without

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19 See, for example, Charles Dickens’ earlier send-up of statistics in his “Full Report of the First Meeting of the Mudfog Association for the Advancement of Everything,” Bentley’s Miscellany 2 (1837): 397-413. This can still provoke a giggle, despite the fact that many of its referents are now obscure to all but Victorianists. That for Dickens statistics and ethics stood in a relation of mutual antagonism is clearly the case in a number of his novels as well, most memorably perhaps in Hard Times (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, U.K: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1969) David Craig, ed. There, Sissy Jupe, a child of the circus taken in by a family of the middling sort, refers to statistics as “stutterings” and finds herself stupified by her lessons in political economy. See esp. chapter 9, “Sissy’s Progress,” 95-98.
number, and any neglected particular “may be the vital one” on which all around it depends (Chartism, 9).

In this, Carlyle confronted statistical attempts to know the present with the dilemma that, in an earlier essay, he ascribed to historians’ attempts to know the past. There, however, the difficulty of discerning “vital” particulars of society in the present was used to problematize philosophies of history. Let anyone, he said, who has seen with their own eyes the “thousandfold blending movements,” the “intricate, perplexed, unfathomable” character of human doings, “say whether the true representing of it is easy or impossible.” This dilemma of ‘true representation’ afflicts the dimensions of both outward condition and inward disposition. Regarding the first, as “Social Life is the aggregate” of all the lives that “constitute society,” so history is “the essence of innumerable Biographies.” Yet even a single biography, even our own biography, however we might examine it, is shot through with the unintelligible. “How much more these million, the very facts of which, to say nothing of the purport of them, we know not and cannot know.”20

Vital things, of both outward condition and inward disposition, continually escape cognition, continually elude representation. “The inward condition of Life, ... the conscious or half-conscious aim of mankind, so far as men are not mere digesting-machines, is the same in no two ages; neither are the more important outward variations easy to fix on, or always well capable of representation” (“On History,” 231). Argue we may about great deeds and high politics, but much that is unnoticed by historians, philosophical and otherwise, resounds across the vasty deep of Carlylean time. “Laws themselves, political Constitutions, are not our Life, but only the house wherein our life is led.” Pushing the metaphor, these are not just walls, but “bare

walls.” All of the “essential furniture, the inventions and traditions, and daily habits that regulate and support our existence,” are the doings not of famous politicians but “of Phoenician mariners, of Italian masons and Saxon metallurgists, of philosophers, alchemists, prophets, and all the long forgotten train of artists and artisans; who from the first have been jointly teaching us how to think and how to act, how to rule over spiritual and over physical Nature” (“On History,” 231-2). The high political moments upon which historians hinge epochal change have no necessary relationship to the deeper, sometimes melancholy, sometimes ebullient world of facts a-doing: “Our clock strikes when there is a change from hour to hour; but no hammer in the Horologe of Time peals through the universe, when there is a change from Era to Era.” We never see the “real historical Transaction.” It is only “some more or less plausible scheme and theory,” or perhaps the “harmonised result of many such schemes, each varying from the other, and all varying from the truth, that we can ever hope to behold” (“On History,” 233).

Things “vital” in this image of society are irreducible to the needs or condition of the body. They inhere in the doings of the hand, the inventions of intelligence, the affects and dispositions of the soul. No wonder, perhaps, that statistics’ “abstractions” of the condition of England - their numerical and tabular representations of population, mortality rates, occupational groups, wages, rents, commodity prices, strikes, lockouts and the like - are so far from the ‘essence’ of Chartist struggles that Carlyle would have his readers “read.” On the other hand, as history need not be written in its ‘dry-as-dust’ mode, neither are statistics beyond redemption. The problem is that such inquiries have been caught up in the mechanistic fervors and ‘Benthamee’ calculations of the age. Like historical writing, however - indeed, like theory and all other schemes that struggle to put insight into language - statistical inquiry is not reducible to its lesser lights. Rather, it “is a science which ought to be honorable, the basis of many most
important sciences; but it is not to be carried on by steam ...; a wise head is requisite for carrying it on.” Absent such wisdom, “conclusive facts are inseparable from inconclusive” (Chartism, 9).

Carlyle recounts numerous examples of such unwisdom as well as their stultifying effects for those seeking insight into the “condition and disposition” of the laboring classes in England. The reader may have already discerned the difficulty of attempting to summarize Carlyle’s prose; but I think it fair to say that his criticisms of statistics were of two sorts, one of which had to do with their use in political argument, the other with their merits (or, as later social science might prefer to say, their validity). In each, what I’ve here characterized as ordinary and extraordinary optics are made proximate; yet in each, as well, ordinary optics survive, chastened perhaps, but not rejected.

Of the two, and related to what we’ve already noted about their assimilation to the mechanistic penchant for cause-and-effect thinking, the use of statistics is the first to appear. Whatever their merits, statistics have a practical effect on public discussion. To figure the difference between statistical pursuits attended by or bereft of wisdom, Carlyle recurs to the Lydian river, Pactolus, whose gold-flecked sands were the fabled result of Midas’ bathing away of his curse. Sent to those shores the blind/purblind/unwise fill their baskets with gravel, “the seer and finder alone” reaps the value of the trip. But, returning, the purblind insist that their gatherings are precious. Moving to the ordinary, Carlyle linked the sense of this imagery to the comportment of the passionately statistic in political argument. With “serene conclusiveness,” members “of some Useful-Knowledge Society” silence their interlocutors “with a figure of arithmetic” — as if that “extracted the elixer of the matter, on which nothing more can be said.” Mingling ordinary and extraordinary alike in a brief narrative, Carlyle then recounts having
heard “the lamentations and prophecies of a humane Jeremiah, mourner for the poor, cut short by a statistic fact of the most decisive nature”—namely, that English longevity had increased. If life lasts longer, or so the inference goes, “it must be less worn upon, by outward suffering, by inward discontent, by hardship of any kind.” Poor Jeremiah is left amuddle, admitting that his own observations otherwise were “overset without remedy.”(Chartism, 10).

It is not simply this use of statistics that draws Carlyle’s fire, for he questions their merits as well. The “‘proof’” given for Jeremiah’s muddle is a recent pamphlet from Charles Knight and Company, publisher of the Journal of the London Statistical Society, drawn from data on “Registers of the Parish of all Saints from 1735 to 1780,” eight years of tables from Carlisle City, and “the calculations founded on them” generated by another scholar, all of which were reported “satisfactory by men of science in France.” This, of course, is a fact in its way, but a fact of print culture, not to be mistaken for a “true representation” of the England which it purported to represent. Extraordinary optics arrive to undeceive the credulous: is this not “as if some zealous son of Adam had proved the deepening of the Ocean, by survey, accurate or cursory, of two mud-plashes on the Coast of the Isle of Dogs?”(Chartism, 11). Wiser now in a way, if not necessarily by Carlyle’s means, we have developed professional languages to mark and categorize this as an external validity problem. The proffered proof of England’s improved condition, we might say, were merely case studies, not even critical case studies informed by empirical theory, unduly and inappropriately generalized by Jeremiah’s enthusiastic interlocutor.

Written in 1839, Chartism had not the benefit of later statistical sophistication, though it would be difficult to say that such improvements have altered its function in political discussion in the hands of enthusiasts. In any case, it is not surprising that Carlyle treated such “proofs” as inadequate to the challenge of “the Condition-of-England Question.” In the face of this,
however, he turned first not to the extraordinary, but to the most ordinary of ordinary optics, to that which one can “ascertain” with one’s “own eyes.” This, he noted, is the only “method” for such things, though its imperfections resemble those besetting the zealots of statistics. Because each observer tends to what might be called the synechdochal fallacy, taking the part of what they see for the whole of what might be, disagreements proliferate. 21 But this, in view of Eliot’s remarks on the superiority of powers to results, is as much an appreciation for the undecidable as a lament about the unknowable. Indeed, it is to decision that the essay, at this precise point, refers the dilemmas of disagreement. Argument may jostle with argument, but “when Parliament takes up ‘the Condition-of-England Question’ ... much may be amended.” For this, however, on Carlyle’s view, “Statistic Inquiry” is hampered by its “limited means,” its “short vision,” and its “headlong dogmatism.” Ignorant of its ignorance, it casts “not light, but error worse than darkness” (Chartism, 12). The pretenses of “Useful-Knowledge-Societies” aside, statistics has slim claim on the sorts of insights crucial to public discussions of ‘the Condition-of-England Question.’

Yet even this is not a repudiation of statistics. “Inquiries wisely gone into,” Carlyle suggests, “will yield results worth something, not nothing.” 22 Statistics might be improved, in particular, by acknowledging its limits. The truism that the condition of a country is the condition of its people challenges statistics to begin differently, with the question “What constitutes the well-being of a man?” Statistical inquiry, he noted, pursued important aspects of that question by investigating wage rates and the price of bread, but went no further. Yet even

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21 “Each man expands his own handbreadth of observation to the limits of the general whole; more or less, each man must take what he himself has seen and ascertained for a sample of all that is seeable and ascertainable. Hence discrepancies, controversies, wide-spread, continued; which there is at present no means or hope of satisfactorily ending.” Chartism, 11.

22 As he put it earlier in the essay, “[s]tatistics, one may hope, will improve gradually, and become good for something” (Chartism, 10).
were wage rates the principal facts to be gleaned, the quite ordinary optics of common sense and observation suggested room for improvement: Again stressing the limits of statistical practice in “its present unguided condition,” Carlyle generated a barrage of research tasks that might bolster its credibility and validity. Average wage rates, for instance, are not “correctly ascertained for any portion” of the country, so comparisons necessary for judgments of improvement are as yet impossible. Not only the past, more or less recent, but “the present itself is unknown to us.” The “constancy of employment,” too, might be considered, as well as the difficulty of finding it and, presumably in various trades, its “fluctuation” by seasons or years. Such things can be ascertained, calculated, enumerated as quantities — as we might say, collected and represented as empirical data.

These, however, were not Carlyle’s only suggestions as to how statistical inquiry might find the guidance that its peculiar variant of ordinary optics lacked. It might profit, in particular, from the qualitative concerns of its neighbor in ordinariness, common observation, articulated here as if from the life-tasks and perspective of the laborer. Are wages “constant, calculable ... or fluctuating, incalculable, more or less of the nature of gambling?” Can the worker, “by thrift and industry hope to rise to mastership,” or is such hope precluded? What is the character of workers’ relation to their employers? Are they linked “by bonds of friendliness and mutual help; or by hostility, opposition, and chains of mutual necessity alone?” In these sorts of questions, the essay moves from the issue of “outward condition” to that of “inward disposition,” to laborers’ “contentment” in their condition. This, Carlyle notes, may be small enough when outward conditions are straitened, but is not necessarily great in conditions of plenty. What these qualitative dimensions tap, he argues, “is the laborer’s feelings,” and, more significantly, “his notion of being justly dealt with or unjustly.” How, Carlyle asks, “shall figures of arithmetic
represent all this? So much is still to be ascertained; much of it by no means easy to ascertain!” (Chartism, 12-13).

Read as a rhetorical question, the seemingly obvious answer to this is that statistical inquiry as such is a failure, hence all the buzz about Carlyle’s antipathy to the enterprise. But we might linger at this question a bit, might read it with a different intonation. Instead of “how shall figures of arithmetic represent all this,” as if the dilemma were one of accuracy and empirical scope, what if the emphasis lay elsewhere? What if we were to read it as “how shall figures of arithmetic represent all this?” Understood in these terms, the repetition of that which might be ascertained courts an unstable difference along a quantitative/qualitative divide: quantitatively, much still invites statistic inquiry; qualitatively, concerned with ‘feelings’ and ‘hope’ and ‘notions of justice and injustice,’ much may elude its devotion to numerical representation.

What appears here, then, may be less an opposition between statistical knowledges and traditional morality than a disquietude about any claim to know the energies invisible beneath visibilities, to grasp or “ascertain” that which is ‘always a-being.’ Outward and inward are not linked mechanically in chains of cause and effect; that which lies beyond statistic knowing is not its failure but its limit. Statistics’ possibilities, properly discerned, wisely guided, might thus improve with “quite a new set of inquirers and methods” (Chartism, 13).

The suggestion is a brief one, unconnected to debates over statistical methods that riddled Carlyle’s time no less than our own. Though it lay perhaps in his capacities, Carlyle never pursued the sort of second-order reflections that might have made his contrarian optimism about statistic inquiry accessible either to the Gradgrinds of Victorian days or to scholars of political theory in our own.23 The closing remarks, however, of this second chapter of Chartism perform

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23 Though one would hardly know it from much of the literature on Carlyle, mathematics was one of his early delights. For an informative account of this see Carlisle Moore, “Carlyle and Goethe as Scientist,” in John Clubbe
in prose an alternative course for statistic inquiry. There is, it turns out, “one fact” of the Condition-of-England Question “which arithmetic is capable of representing”: “[w]hether the labourer, whatever his wages, is saving money?” Not so strange a fact, in our modern myriad facticities that correlate savings rates to any number of other financial and economic indicators. But in Chartism this ascertainable fact fractals elsewhere, inward to feelings and ‘dispositions’ rather than outward to other statistically quantifiable and representable facticities. Rather than a ‘variable’ a la mechanism, dependent and determined or independent and determining, for Carlyle such a fact points beyond numerical representation.

Quantitatively, savings rates can be well or worse counted, well or worse correlated with other quantifiable facticities. Statistics, Carlyle notes, tote up “Savings Bank Accounts” and pronounce thrift to be “increasing rapidly.” Ordinary optics, aware of the newness of such institutions, discern merely the possibility that such savings as there are do resort to them, “but the question, Is thrift increasing? runs through the reticulation, and is as water spilled on the ground, not to be gathered here.”24 This, too, could be improved, for what makes savings a pertinent fact for the ‘Condition-of-England Question’ is its qualitative dimension. Ordinary optics again deliver the point. When the laborer is saving money, he proves that his condition, painful as it may be without and within, is not yet desperate; that he looks forward to a better day coming, and is still resolutely steering towards the same; that all the lights and darknesses of his lot are united under a blessed radiance of hope, — the last, first, nay one may say the sole blessedness of man (Chartism, 13).

For Carlyle, we might say, savings are pertinent not simply in their outward facticity but in their inner meanings. They invite, even demand, articulation otherwise, not as representations but as

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24 Chartism, 14. This, as social scientists would put it, tapped the internal validity question of how to operationalize “thrift.”
signs, and on Carlyle’s reading what they signify is social hope — or hopelessness, as the case may be.

Adequately gathered and duly understood, Carlyle argues, such facts would have illuminated aspects of the ‘Condition-of-England Question’ that, finally, illustrated themselves in Chartist torch-meetings (Chartism, 14). Reading them not only as facts but also as signs, “wise heads” might have discerned something *a-being* in the feelings and disposition of the working classes, might have grasped that issues of justice and injustice were at stake in the ‘Condition-of-England Question’ before that something announced itself in other ways. Failing that, statistics had been as good as useless; but this criticism pertained to statistic inquiry as it was, not as it might be. I take it, then, that when Carlyle expressed hope that statistics “will improve gradually, and be good for something,” the comment was not wholly ironic. For that to happen, though, statistics had to reach beyond the collection of facts to consider the operation of signs and the process of signification, for it was only there that the ‘vital particulars’ of surface visibilities could be articulated.

By its inattention to such things, statistic inquiry had left Parliament “legislating in the dark.” And legislate Parliament had in the New Poor Law of 1834, which replaced parish-based outdoor relief with a national system of Poor Unions and workhouses. Untouched by either statistic research or Parliamentary curiosity, on Carlyle’s view the “fundamental” but still apparently measurable question underlying Chartist agitations yet remained unaddressed: can one “who is willing to labour find work, and subsistence” by it? Absent evidence on this count, Carlyle ironized, the New Poor Law was perhaps “only intended as an *experimentum crucis*” — if so, Chartism was “an answer, seemingly not in the affirmative”(Chartism, 14-15).

**Invisibles**

24
Statistics do not disappear at this point in Carlyle’s essay. Instead, in the chapters titled “New Poor Law” and “Finest Peasantry in the World,” they reappear as provocations, crystallized as signs demanding to be articulated otherwise than the cause-and-effect workings of a social machine. For those fluent in Foucauldian parlance, however, the invisibles that they signified were not the unseen systematicities of “Life, Labour, and Language” that, on Foucault’s account, signaled the exhaustion of the Classical regime of representation at the turn of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the “science” they pertained to never met the threshold of scientificity that came to be associated with the modern episteme, but rather continued to circulate in the difficult and for Carlyle irremediably dualistic orbit of the transcendental. They had to do, more specifically, with the dynamics that, in “Signs of the Times” (1829), he contrasted to the things and thinking of mechanism. The former, as he characterized it there, was “a science which treats of, and practically addresses, the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and infinite character.” But however these invisibles may have been criticized as ‘mysticism’ in Carlyle’s earlier works, in Chartism they were hinged to the polemical phrasing and practical immediacy of the “Condition-of-England Question” — and thereby, to statistic inquiry, both as it was and as it might yet be.

In this opening cluster of chapters that I’ve characterized as Chartism’s ‘disturbing facticities,’ the convergence of ordinary and extraordinary optics on statistic inquiry introduced friction at the mechanical core of emergent social science. Generated, as it were, rhetorically and poetically rather than logically or philosophically, this friction insistently invoked the boundary

of the knowable as the limit not of political doings and action but of ordinary optics of all sorts.\textsuperscript{27}

A large claim, this, for which a few examples will have to suffice, all of which begin with statistics as it then was to generate broader inferences in the register of signs and signification.

The chapter titled, “New Poor Law,” for instance, brings extraordinary optics to bear on reports of the Poor Law Commissioners. The law’s ‘refusal of outdoor relief’ as the solution to England’s distress finds both Classical and Biblical imagery wrapped around the conventional metaphor of the body politic:

   England lay in sick discontent, writhing powerless on its fever-bed, dark, nigh desperate, in wastefulness, want, improvidence, and eating care, till like Hyperion down the eastern slopes, the Poor-Law Commissioners arose, and said, Let there be workhouses, and bread of affliction, and water of affliction there!(\textit{Chartism}, 16).

The mundane reality figured here was the so-called ‘lesser eligibility’ principle by which the conditions of the new workhouses were made inferior to those of the least remunerative available employment as an incentive for workers to prefer paid labor to public provision. Carlyle’s view of the reports testifying to the consequent reduction both of poor rates and of the numbers of the poor was skeptical. The claim “of ‘all the labour of the country being absorbed into employment’” was particularly problematic, as labor’s complaints to the contrary went unheard. “That misery and unemployed labour,” he observed, “should ‘disappear’ in that case is natural enough; should go out of sight, — but out of existence?” It was indeed known that the poor rates had been reduced, though, and as yet there were no statistical reports of “much increase of death by starvation.” If these were to be the indicators “for the absorption of all the labour of the country, then all the labour is absorbed”\textit{(Chartism, 17-18)}.

Here — wryly, in the voice of public irony — visible facts and invisible existences rub shoulders. Of little consequence in the making of the law, statistic inquiry marked some of its

\textsuperscript{27} [contrast, Graham Burchell, “The System of Natural Liberty” in the \textit{Foucault Effect}]
thus far visible effects; but Carlyle would have the meaning of such things, the frictions between such things, articulated further. What this cause-and-effect rendering signified, with the help of optics other than ordinary, was a mechanistic rewriting of the very notion of fate. Once attributed to a “blind goddess,” success and failure in worldly terms now appeared “in fact the work of a seeing goddess or god, and require only not to be meddled with.” With its ‘Laissez faire, laissez passer’ the new poor law insisted that “ours is a world that requires only to be well let alone” — in effect, left to the newly-naturalized mechanics of supply and demand.

Collapsing high and low, past and present, extraordinary optics arrive to figure the “chief social principle” asserted by this view:

Scramble along, thou insane scramble of a world, with thy pope’s tiaras, king’s mantles and beggar’s gabardines, chivalry-ribbons and plebian gallows ropes, where a Paul shall die on the gibbet and a Nero sit fiddling as imperial Caesar; thou art all right and shall scramble on even so; and whoever in the press is trodden down, has only to lie there and be trampled broad (Chartism, 18).

This Carlyle refuses to believe, but he does not thereby condemn the Poor-Law Commissioners. Messengers of the god they serve, they are but “men filled with the idea of a theory.” While “heretical and damnable as a whole truth,” their mechanistic theory was nonetheless “orthodox laudable as a half-truth” because it refused the opposite social principle asserted by the old Poor-Law, namely, “that Fortune’s rewards are not those of Justice” (Chartism, 18-19).

Statistics, like the ordinary optics to which it was kin, in both cases could report effects, and Carlyle here repeats a current commonplace by characterizing the old law as “a bounty on unthrifty, idleness, bastardy, and beer-drinking” (Chartism, 19). Statistic inquiry, though, was indifferent to the question of such ‘social principles’ as might be manifested in its numbered facts. Carlyle’s recourse to “Justice” prods that limitation by recalling an invisible previously linked to signs and signification rather than to factual representations of outward conditions.
Here, however, it is not laborers’ feelings and ideas of being dealt with justly or unjustly that is invoked, but something that claims the force of essential truth: “he that will not work according to his faculty, let him perish according to his necessity; there is no law juster than that.” This is “the Law of Nature which the Law of England would vainly contend against in the long-run.” Anyone who “will not work, and save according to his means,” is on this view beyond redemption, “doomed either to quit these habits, or miserably to be extruded from this Earth, which is made on principles different from these” (*Chartism*, 19-20). Unattuned to reading facts for the social principles they might illuminate, statistics as they were failed to grasp the discordances of both the old law and the new with what, for Carlyle, was the ontological necessity of human labor. While the former rewarded idleness and improvidence and spawned social ills of one sort, the latter spawned others by blindly presuming that work was always available.

This, of course, was one of the questions that Carlyle previously proposed for the improvement of statistical research. Posed again at the opening of the chapter titled “Finest Peasantry in the World,” it is used to articulate another aspect of the “Condition-of-England Question.” While the New Poor Law announced that “whosoever will not work ought not to live,” statistical inquiries have no answer to the question of whether the poor who are “willing to work” can always find it and live by it. Yet “Legislation presupposes the answer — to be in the affirmative”(*Chartism*, 24). Statistics, however, have provided one fact from which significant inferences can be drawn: the fact that “Ireland has near seven millions of working people, the third unit of whom, it appears by Statistic Science, has not for thirty weeks each year as many third-rate potatoes as will suffice him.” As Carlyle put it, this “is a fact the most eloquent that was ever written down in any language, at any date of the world’s history” (*Chartism*, 25).
What it spoke to was not the multitude of other facts about Ireland that might be rendered visible by tabular representation, but the quality of English governance of the place over five centuries. Bluntly put, it was “the fruit of fifteen generations of wrong-doing” (*Chartism*, 28). The inference Carlyle drew from it welded it firmly to the condition of England. Coupled with the facts of a common language and cheap passage to English ports, the “mournful fact of the third Sanspotatoe” signified Irish immigration and all its attendant consequences for England: an increase of laborers seeking work, an increase of population in poorer quarters, declining wages for unskilled labor, and escalating unemployment in English cities and countryside alike. Such facts could be represented by table and number, but Carlyle suggested that statistics “may as well fold up her Danaides reticulations ... and conclude, what every man who will take statistic spectacles off his nose, and look, may discern in town and country” (*Chartism*, 32). All this, too, was consistent with statistical reports of rising wages for skilled labor, yet this remained but the smallest proportion of the working population.

To attach political meaning and significance to such things, Carlyle launched a new series of extraordinary devices. The image of an Irish laborer, ground down outwardly and inwardly by English injustice and misgovernance, appears as the “sorest” of English evils:

In his rags and laughing savagery, he is there to undertake all work that can be done by strength of hand or back; for wages that will purchase him potatoes. He needs only salt for condiment; he lodges to his mind in any pighutch or doghutch, roosts in outhouses; and wears a suit of tatters, the getting off and on of which is said to be a difficult operation, transacted only in festivals and the hightides of the calendar (*Chartism*, 28).

Though beset, Carlyle’s British are pictured otherwise. They have a “methodic spirit, of insight, of perseverant well-doing.” They have “a rationality and veracity which Nature with her truth does not disown”; but in their hearts, below all the layers wrought by civilization, is a “Berserkir
rage” that will choose “destruction or self-destruction” rather than submit to the conditions that have ruined the Irish:

Deep-hidden it lies, far down in the centre, like genial central-fire, with stratum after stratum of arrangement, traditionary method, composed productiveness, all built above it, vivified and rendered fertile by it: justice, clearness, silence, perseverance, unlasting unresting diligence, hatred of disorder, hatred of injustice, which is the worst disorder, characterise this people; their inward fire we say, as all such fire should be, is hidden at the centre. Deep-hidden; but awakenable, but immeasurable; — let no man awaken it! (Chartism, 30)

Numerous facts brought these figures together in actuality. New Poor Law, refusal of outdoor relief, workhouse afflictions, declining wages, Irish starvation and immigration: such things have orchestrated Irish and British alike into a “common cause.” Ireland and England are now “embarked in the same boat, ... to sail together, or to sink together” (Chartism, 30).

Behind all this is nothing so calculable as the domain we now call the economy, but rather ‘industrialism,’ a word of Carlyle’s coinage for visibilities whose ‘vital particulars’ demanded further figuration. That statistics show increasing wages for skilled labor is no surprise: “the giant Steamengine in a giant English Nation will here create violent demand for labour, and will there annihilate demand” (Chartism, 32). While the extent of the whole in all its complexity is beyond human capacities to know, to figure it is not impossible:

English Commerce stretches its fibres over the whole earth; sensitive literally, nay quivering in convulsion, to the farthest influences of the earth. The huge demon of Mechanism smokes and thunders, panting at his great task, in all sections of the English land; changing his shape like a very Proteus; and infallibly at every change of shape, oversetting whole multitudes of workmen, and as if with the wavening of his shadow from afar, hurling them asunder, this way and that, in their crowded march and course of work or traffic; so that the wisest no longer knows his whereabouts (Chartism, 32).

Such ‘unstatistic’ observations re-sound, as if from the infinite depths of a world a-being, the lament of the ‘humane Jeremiah’ we met earlier. His ordinary observation, now augmented by
extraordinary optics of ‘signs and figures, fables and emblems,’ is no longer silenced: “it seems a cruel mockery to tell poor drudges that their condition is improving” (*Chartism*, 32).

The attentive reader will perhaps have noticed that precious little in all this has been said about Chartism. By the end of these four chapters’ disturbing facticities, however, Carlyle’s extraordinary optics and statistical frictions together have signified no small something of the ‘living essence’ and ‘vital particulars’ underlying the condition and disposition of Britain’s laboring classes. In the final paragraphs of the last of these, hitherto elusive Chartism reappears, again at the juncture of optics ordinary and otherwise. It is, Carlyle notes, an “ascertainable” fact, and one only surprising on the surface, “that it is the best-paid workmen who, by Strikes, Trades-unions, Chartism and the like, who complain the most.” This, he insists, again gesturing elsewhere, “leads us into still deeper regions of the malady” (*Chartism*, 33).

The question raised earlier as a suggestion for the improvement of statistic inquiry — the question of what constitutes “well-being” — returns in Carlyle’s reading of the significance of this fact. Here, again, he begins with current statistical representations, works through their possible factual permutations, then invests them figuratively with broader significance. “Wages,” he suggests, are apparently “no index of well-being to the working man: without proper wages there can be no well-being; but with them also there may be none.” Invoking the statistic ratios of “an intelligent humane inquirer” named Symmons, Carlyle notes that in different regions of the country wages “vary in the ratio of not less than three to one” (*Chartism*, 33-34). And though, taking earnings of both parents and children into account, some trades like cotton-spinning may appear well-paid, “there seems little question that comfort or reasonable well-being is as much a stranger in these households as any” (*Chartism*, 34). Possessions and outward things they might have, but the volatility of the trade leaves them bereft of “inward things”: 
Economy does not exist among them; their trade now in plethoric prosperity, anon extending into inanition and ‘short time,’ is in the nature of gambling; they live by it like gamblers, now in luxurious superfluity, now in starvation. (Chartism, 34)

Buffeted by such fluctuations, their dispositions sink downward, toward the ‘rage’ that Carlyle’s readers were earlier warned of: “[b]lack mutinous discontent devours them; simply the miserablest thing that can inhabit the heart of man” (Chartism, 34). An earlier extraordinary optic here returns in short form to heighten the point and signify its source:

English Commerce with its world-wide convulsive fluctuations, with its immeasurable Proteus Steam-demon, makes all paths uncertain for them, all life a bewilderment; sobriety, steadfastness, peaceable continuance, the first blessings of man, are not theirs. (Chartism, 34)

Even encouraging statistics of wages, it turns out, may fail to tap ‘vital particulars’ of meaning, but articulated as signs they might yet undeceive. Stinted of inward aspects of well-being, the best-paid of factory operatives are no less beset than the worst:

with reason or unreason, ... they do in verity find the time all out of joint; this world for them no home, but a dingy prisonhouse, of reckless unthrift, rebellion, rancour, indignation against themselves and all men. (Chartism, 35)

The depths to which the laboring classes were driven are “visible in the statistics of Gin,” upon which Carlyle lavishes Dantean images of degradation to arrive at the closing question of these disturbing facticities:

If from this black unluminous unheeded Inferno, and Prisonhouse of souls in pain, there do flash up from time to time, some dismal wide-spread glare of Chartism or the like, notable to all, claiming remedy from all, — are we to regard it as more baleful than the quiet state, or rather as not so baleful?

Condition-of-England Question, Statistics, New Poor Law, Finest Peasantry in the World, optics ordinary and extraordinary alike: all arrive, finally, here. The condition and disposition of the working classes has been diagnosed, rendered significant. Strangely encouraging, Chartism is a
an ominous but positive symptom: “the disease ... becomes acute, has crises, and will be cured or kill.”

**New Inquirers and Methods?**

Carlyle’s *Chartism* at this point takes leave of statistics for the world of symbols — of truth-telling French-Revolution hieroglyphs for injustices wrongfully righted, of dire warnings and scathing invective for readers oblivious to the register of the symbolic. Canon-encrusted by our preference of philosophy to polemics, historically inflected political theory has yet to engage this sort of writings save by distilling from them its favored categories of concepts, discourses, ideologies, languages, traditions, and the like. Theory, so read, is ever a thing, rarely *a-doing*. That said, and by way of concluding, rather than follow Carlyle into the byways of the symbolic — a path that would rush us headlong into his equivocal relationship to democracy — let us backtrack a bit and return to the ostensibly more mundane question of his relationship to statistics. This, too, I would suggest, is not a thing but something *a-doing*. Manifested in prose, perhaps its significance lies not in its referents but elsewhere, not simply in its rhetorically powerful dissatisfactions with statistic inquiry as it then was but also, and more importantly, in its similarly powerful allusion to what statistic inquiry might then yet become.

In attending to the corner of the Carlyle puzzle that has to do statistics, I’ve suggested that the conventional positioning of *Chartism* as an instance of antipathy is far too simple, pleasurable though it might be to latter-day humanists, quasi-humanists, and post-humanists for whom the statistical dimensions of modern social science are the rituals of an alien culture. The statistical science of our day, however, is not the statistical science of Carlyle’s, and in many respects it has addressed most of the empirical criticisms advanced in *Chartism*. Data collection, by both governmental and non-governmental agencies, far exceeds what even the most devout
admirer of statistics in 1840 might have imagined possible. More complexly, statistics has been fundamentally transformed since then by its investment in mathematical sophistication and rigor, by its attentions to dilemmas of validity and inference, and — perhaps most importantly in terms of the philosophical edge of Carlyle’s criticisms — by its abandonment of vulgar notions of mechanical causality for probabilities, correlations, and Bayesian inference. In these and other respects, at least in its most sophisticated professional and academic forms, the statistical side of much social science has abandoned the task of representing ‘social reality’ in favor of ‘representing’ various species of invisibles underlying the visibles, countables, and enumerables that populate its data.28

In all likelihood, the Carlyle conjured here would not have been displeased with these historical transformations, but neither would he have been satisfied or contented. “Statistic inquiry” has become something quite different than that which irked him so in the first third of the nineteenth century, something more attuned to invisibles than that which he challenged to become other than it was. In this respect the leading heads of statistically informed political science are far wiser than those that bore the brunt of his empirical criticism. Yet their invisibles are not his invisibles. His were linked to things beyond knowing, to infinitudes that defied mimetic representation; theirs remain intelligible to cognition as probabilistic patterns and orderings, their proximity to the unintelligible insulated and made safe by method. Probabilities, however, are not certainties — and it might well be wondered whether this aspect of modern social science has won free of Carlyle’s criticism less by the accumulation of knowledge

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28 Read rhetorically, for instance, the social scientific question of how to operationalize such variables as alienation, political efficacy, civic culture and the like by measuring phenomenal particulars might be rendered kin to the tropes of metonomy and synecdoche that signify wholes by visibly shared parts or particulars. That ancient rhetoric could figure the character of a fleet by reference to its masts or sails (many or few, billowed or tattered, etc.) is in this regard not so distant from notions of civic culture operationalized as voting, letter-writing or, for that matter, participation in bowling leagues.
conventionally attached to the notion of scientific progress than by admitting the impossibility of distinguishing, as a matter of certainty, between “conclusive” and “inconclusive” facts into its very practice of inquiry. In effect, we might say, quantitative social science has come to embrace — or, perhaps more curiously, to literalize through the rigors of methodology — the figure of “Danaides reticulations” that Chartism so adeptly deployed to signify the impossibility of certainty in a world always a-being.29

If this characterization smacks of plausibility, it is by no means to the discredit of social scientists devoted to their craft. Like Danaus’ daughters, ladle they do — charged with a task now admittedly impossible to complete. Devoted to methods aimed to discipline and regulate their inferences — and thereby to distinguish their ‘ordinary optics’ from those of individuals’ ordinary observation — they do what they must with such materials as they find at hand or, in the best cases, what they can with such procedures as they are capable of inventing. To invoke a term of much contestation, however, such ‘objectivity’ as they muster in their probabilities has to do not with the finality of closure, not with the cognizable totality of a world-object awaiting their knowing gaze, but with the accountability of their claims to such professionalized and institutionalized communities of inquirers as they acknowledge as their peers and ‘fellows.’

Political theorists have long excoriated such inquiries as politically conservative, as metaphysically and ontologically misguided, as epistemologically corrupt and normatively negligent. All this criticism is not for nothing, yet what something it might be for is by no means apparent. Still, we might regard Chartism’s engagement with statistics otherwise than the dead letters of a distant past. Its challenge to political theory lies, I think, in its pungently dualistic

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29 Poovey’s closing reflections on the uneven displacement of the “modern” fact by its “post-modern” successor are nothing if not suggestive. Her attentions to historical and literary articulations of ‘the modern fact.’ however, do not engage the epistemological debates and methodological conundra of the contemporary social sciences. See A History of the Modern Fact, 325-28.
relationship to the empirical pursuits that our reflexive, pluralistic, and more or less respectfully agonistic community has generally defined itself by refusing. Carlyle’s refusal of that refusal gives him a provocative contemporaneity, for his boisterously equivocal relation to the career of the modern fact may serve as a reminder that effective political writing can proceed otherwise than in dutiful obedience to the fact-value dichotomy and the academic division of labor it so often undergirds. The “signs and figures, fables and emblems” of his extraordinary optics were not oppositional alternatives to the ordinary optics of statistical inquiry. Rather, they directed such observations elsewhere, augmented them with the arts of writing, and proffered them to publics and counter-publics alike. Recast as signs, articulated as signifiers of vital invisibilities, statistic facts were transvalued but not thereby repudiated. Though Carlyle never wrote an essay on ‘the use and abuse of statistics for life,’ Chartism’s disturbed yet enlivened facticitites might nonetheless be recollected among the possibilities opened by that phrase.