

Appendix:
G. K. Chesterton's 1904 Introduction to
Sartor Resartus

SARTOR RESARTUS IS PROBABLY THE MOST BRILLIANT OF CARLYLE'S books; certainly it is the most Carlylean. It is a curious and rather misleading thing that Carlyle is commonly presented to the popular imagination as an austere and gloomy figure, the unsmiling Sage of Chelsea. As a matter of fact, of course, and of literary history, the element for which Carlyle stands, the thing he really introduced, is the element of exuberance and fantasy; even, in a sense, the element of laughter. The philosophers that stood around him—such men as John Stuart Mill or Herbert Spencer—were quite as sincere as he, and quite as serious as he. Huxley felt quite as deeply as Carlyle the bracing sadness of nature. George Eliot was quite as certain as Carlyle that righteousness exalteth a nation. What these people really lacked, and what Carlyle really had, was something that can only be called fun—that is, fantasticality, a sense of the grotesque, pushed to the beautiful borderland of folly. He brought back humour and extravagance into the prophetic function. Browning brought them back into the poetic. Browning was called a sullen metaphysician because he mixed up beauty and buffoonery, as Shakespeare did. Carlyle was called a gloomy fellow because he laughed as well as swore, like Elijah, at the prophets of Baal.

And of all Carlyle's works, *Sartor Resartus* is that which is most marked and filled with this quality of wild fancy, which was his real contribution to the letters of the Victorian time. Every element in the book combined to bring it out. The very plan of the book is a joke: the criticism of a non-existent volume, the biography of a non-existent man; this alone led the author's genius to depth within depth of mystification and even

playfulness. The subject is ostensibly what would be called a frivolous one—the subject of clothes. And in this wild hoax on this trifling topic came out, as they came out nowhere else, the solemn genius and the burning convictions of Carlyle.

This intimate connection between laughter and religion is, of course, a very old and practical though mysterious affair. Browning, the other nineteenth century man who had this grotesque instinct, was the only one of the great nineteenth century men who had a positive religious view. What that age lacked, what Herbert Spencer and George Eliot lacked, what even Huxley lacked and G. F. Watts lacked, was not Carlyle's seriousness, but Carlyle's gaiety. It was not his wisdom that God sent into the world, but his folly. For laughter consists of the necessity in the incongruity between something common in things and something sublime in them; therefore the man who sees nothing sublime cannot have any laughter at all. He is the cynic, the driest of men. A man who regards a pair of trousers flippantly is simply a dull and ordinary man; he regards them flippantly, and therefore quite heavily, prosaically, and sadly. It is only by regarding a pair of trousers solemnly and religiously that the nerve of humour can be hit. This *Sartor Resartus* is a book of which the object is to regard a pair of trousers solemnly and religiously; consequently, it is one of the most humorous books in the world.

If any demur is to be made to the work, it is perhaps in the direction of saying that Carlyle did not take clothes quite seriously enough. All that is really valid in any reaction against Carlyle has been excellently expressed by Mr. Max Beerbohm. Mr. Max Beerbohm has one quality in a greater measure perhaps than any other living critic—a real worship of intellectual honesty. Thus he felt the reaction against Carlyle long before most other people felt it, and he expressed it with a courage that must have seemed to most people impudence, and a truth that would have appeared to almost anyone as frivolity. His criticism consisted in asking how a man who was so badly dressed as Carlyle dared to write a book about the symbolism of clothes. "The key to that empty book ('Sartor Resartus') I found in a cupboard in Chelsea; it was Carlyle's hat." To many I shall appear impertinent in quoting such a criticism upon such a book. It seems to me, however, that this criticism is right

and therefore serious—at least in its general suggestion. *Sartor Resartus* is, of course, very far from being an empty book; but in so far as there is here and there any emptiness in it, the key of it really is to be found in Carlyle's old hat. That is to say, Carlyle saw a splendid subject, he carried it out splendidly, but he was not quite the man to carry it out to all its most delicate applications.

The subject of Carlyle's great allegory is allegory itself. It is the position, nature, and necessity of symbolism that he discusses here. And as a perfect example of symbolism, he admirably selects the matter of Clothes. Clothes are, of course, a standing example of the need of symbolism—that is, of the impossibility of mere nakedness, whether of the flesh or of the spirit. The great Christian rhetorician instinctively used this form when he spoke of a man putting on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation and the shield of faith. If the truth of what Carlyle said were only a little understood, a man might use all vesture in that sense. We might talk of the waistcoat of righteousness and the hat of salvation and the umbrella of the spirit. But there is one great point to be remembered; that if once we did see this noble symbolism in clothes, if once we did see a waistcoat as allegorical as a breastplate, an umbrella as allegorical as a sword, at that moment we should try to make a waistcoat as beautiful as a breastplate, an umbrella as beautiful as a sword. The moment we see the symbolism of clothes, we ought to make clothes as beautiful as other symbols. We ought to try and make our clothes express our characters; and if they did that, how lovely they must necessarily be! So that, after all, we come back to the conviction that there was a truth in the saying of Mr. Max Beerbohm that Carlyle's old hat showed the he had not quite understood the problem. If Carlyle had ever thought, as he walked down the street, that he was carrying a blazing allegory on his head, he would have looked at that allegory before he hung it up on the peg in Chelsea.

It was the great moral and intellectual defect of Carlyle that he had no patience. For many purposes this fact was not only a hindrance, but was a rather rousing merit. That Carlyle had no patience with pedantry and meanness of mind and pompous frivolity, that he had no patience with the unfathomable corruption and cowardice of our civilisation and every civilisation,

that he had no patience with the Corn Laws and the Game Laws and the Honourable Mr. This and the Right Honourable Mr. That, in all such cases his impatience will scarcely be counted to him for a weakness. But if there is one thing in the whole world that does not suffer being treated with impatience, it is symbolism. You might be impatient if you like in asserting the evil that things do, you must not be impatient in expressing the good and evil that things mean. We can all understand the hot and hasty exponent, the revolutionary exponent of a revolution; but who can endure the hot and hasty exponent of a ceremonial, the revolutionary exponent of a pure convention? Carlyle was not sympathetic enough to interpret many symbols perfectly. He called the great Catholic ritual "a triple-hatted chimera." He could not understand the April hope and hilarity that lay behind the festivals and calendars of the young French Republic. Above all, he could not understand that even modern dandyism, if it be a humorous and humane dandyism, may symbolise something, may symbolise sweetness and light and the social instinct. This, then, may legitimately be said against the completeness of this wonderful book that Carlyle was too bald, too naked, so to speak, to interpret all forms and fashions. Nothing else can be said against it.