

'Sartor Resartus': Still in Fashion? A Rather One-Sided Conversation with Carlyle

Late one Christmas evening, as Tennyson and I are talking, his old friend Carlyle enters the room and sits down in a chair, brooding darkly, studiously avoiding my gaze. I have lately been re-reading his philosophical manifesto.



1.

Let me be frank, my dear Carlyle:

Sartor Resartus is a bore.

Your mouthing metaphysics, your
Unkempt grotesqueries of style

Quite try one's patience. Ah, but as
For *The French Revolution*, there's
A masterpiece! Whilst *Sartor* wears
Less and less well as the years pass.

There's more Philosophy of Clothes
In Edgar's scene with Lear, whose rage is
Pure poetry, and lasts three pages,
Than is in all your lumbering prose.

Yet it revived Romanticism,
Spurred Emerson to fill the abyss
Left by Utilitarianism
With lofty Transcendentalism.

And your great clothing metaphor
Serves as an inexhaustible
Symbol of the exhaustible,
A myth, a theory and a lore

Of theory growing down-at-heels,
Of lore outmoded, myth outworn.
Yes, symbols fade, they can be torn
Or soiled, the Social Body feels

A need for symbols of divine
Authority, for the Infinite,
You say, but language tends to split
Along the 'seems,' it takes a fine

*Carlyle snorts derisively, picks up a boo,
and pretends to become absorbed in it.*

Tailor indeed to patch and sew
Back into decent semblance the
Sacred images history
And social change are bound to throw



Jane Carlyle.

Into a dreadful disarray
From time to time. For every Nero
We need a Bonaparte, a hero,
A prophet, like Mohamet, say,

Or a great poet, Dante, for
Example. Such men *can* or *ken*;
These are, or give us, now and then,
In words or action's semaphore,

Unveilings, bringings-to-the light.
Ah, but what lies behind the veils?
More veils, more symbols, other tales.
Revelation is infinite.

2.
What is the Self? It is a nest
Of under-selves (each with its little
Dream, each a glory, jest, and riddle);
They moult like birds, and without rest

Weave through each other, and weave themselves
Into the world, as cunningly
As threads of silk, as randomly
As ivy. Ah, how deeply delves

Your symbol into the superficial!
Both microscope and telescope,
This infinitely subtle trope,
Organic and yet artificial,

Takes in the world's great surfaces
Of industry and institution,
But, at the finest resolution,
The grain and the interstices

It also knows: the haunts of cells,
Of souls, of selves. (Self is the West
End of the soul, which we invest
With richer attire, whilst the soul dwells

In woods and meadows, country cousin
To Self, Soul's worldly counterpart.
Say Soul is Nature, and Self, Art.)
But what Self reckons by the dozen

*It may forget the value of.
If Soul's a holy simpleton,
Self's a sweet cynic. To make one
These twain takes more than Art, takes Love.*

Love that unites as well divides,
Kills or is lost. It heals, and brings
A sword among us; dies, and sings
Against the thorn, and so abides.

4.
The symbol-making power is tough.
It knows itself, it can say 'I'.
It weaves what it is woven by,
The self: loom, weaver, clothes, and stuff

That dreams are made of. Mere appearance,
The visible, is life's true mystery,
At least in this phase of our history.
In cities what are we but mere ants

Unless we individuate?
Beauty is Darwinism in
The realm of style. A dull chagrin
And disappointed hopes await

The one who can't create himself
In the image of a great idea,
Like any art work, whether it be a
Pose or a book upon a shelf.

As Verlaine says, *De la musique*
Avant toute chose! Give life your best,
To literature give the rest.
Or the reverse. What you must seek

Is to be always, or to make,
The thing that you would be or see.
There's the challenge, the Mystery,
The art of joy, joy for Art's sake.

*Tennyson speaks for the taciturn Carlyle,
admonishing me in his milder idiom.*



*Wellerism-of-the-Day:
'Sometimes I feel so marginal',
said the Annotation to the Text.
Textual innuendo, exegetes?*

Create, create! Or the stress to
Conform will flatten all your angles,
Rent you, as 'twere, the cheapest spangles,
Hand-me-downs with which most make do;

Or else heredity, Nemesis
Without her mask, last of the Fates
And the most terrible, awaits
Her hour, who aims, and does not miss,

Who tolls you back to your sole self,
The un-particular worn sole
Of an old shoe, cursed with a hole
And hang-dog tongue. On the top shelf,

The double-decker bourgeois novels
Sell us instructions how to wear
This worn ware almost anywhere,
And how to house our selves in hovels

Of not the greatest expectations.
But the gratuitous gifts of Art
Subvert exchange. What soothes the heart
Disrupts business negotiations,

And the old are at war with the young.
These question, with new ways of seeing,
The look of things. It has its being,
The fabricated self, among

Textile, texture and text: costume,
The subtle brain's daedalian tissues,
Scripture and Thought, and all their issues,
The social ties that bless and doom

Our hearts to lives of troubled love,
Spin from one complicated loom
Whose nature we should not assume
We can define the nature of,

Because it may be that its nature
Is not to have a nature, rather
To be a thing without a father
Or mother, and mock our nomenclature.



5.

The world was void and without shape.

Let there be light! And from the slime
Evolved the human form sublime,
Creation's apex, the ex-ape,

Player of such fantastic tricks

Before high Heaven, of an essence
Glassy, and filled with evanescence,
And so adept at politics!

Whatever nature there once was

To worship, in terms pagan or
Christian, by now is urban lore,
One buzz amid a general buzz.

The city is a sort of hive

Half-mental, half-political,
Murmuring with innumerable
Beings multiple motives drive.

The modern body politic

Must regulate a politics
Of bodies. Some cells may not mix.
The immune system sniffs out sick

Cells and destroys them or expels them.

Let cold-eyed social scientists
And wild-eyed revolutionists
Reflect on how this power propels *them*,

Too! For we cells are sellers all.

Each one must individuate
And wiggle its qualities like bait
To lure the custom to its stall.

To set up a successful travel

Bureau for new experiences,
One must be versed in all the senses,
How to knit up what stresses ravel

The sleeve of care with dreams and revels

That make the theatre of life
Theatrical, not a mere strife
Of commerce fought by colourless devils.



A balding, bearded, bespectacled man, about my age, wanders into the group. I psychically divine that he is a Berliner named 'Schlimmel' ('Simmel'?) Apparently our dreams have intersected. Strange.

Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care.

– Macbeth II ii [Mr V]

6.

Life wants to be Art. London is
The heart of England, but the heart
Of London is a brain. Like Art,
The soul of the metropolis

Exists along its surfaces
If it exists at all. Not play
But interplay consumes the day.
The eye must move through images

Like an unfazed Odysseus,
Keenly aware, but not absorbed
Too much by any sight. Enorbed
In spectacle that can nonplus

Or fix the gaze, one lets distraction
Ward off distraction in environs
Crowded with singing, gesturing Sirens.
One learns to enjoy dissatisfaction,

In lightened doses, as one savours
A cigarette (when smoker and smoked
Conspire in brief, doomed pleasure cloaked
As consummation), like the favours

Of an accomplished courtesan,
Which to have known is greater cause
For gratitude, when she withdraws
Them, than for grief that they're withdrawn.

In cities we have all become
The politicians of our hearts;
We play the world's performing arts.
(But the world is a broken home.

The embattled and divided self
Negotiates, both day and night,
Between its parties, black and white,
Two hostile halves of the one Guelph.)

Issued an in-borne uniformity,
Let each self dye its livery
The colour of its sovereignty
And run the risk of that enormity!



7.

*I know no dandy who has shown
Such mortal fear of understanding
Himself. On cat-paws you liked landing
Wherever by impulse you were thrown.*

*I think your epitaph should be:
'Sic jacet Oscar, Man-About-
Town, who in life grew rather stout
Yet knew himself but slenderly'.*

*For you, like Cromwell, got to where
You wished to go by not quite knowing
Whither it was that you were going,
If small with great I may compare.*

*It's true you found a novel path
To Hell. You Irish are so feckless!
But there's a reckoning for the reckless,
The choicest vintage of the Wrath.*

Tennyson:

*Forgive my friend, he's rather dour,
With a dyspeptic disposition
Given to truculent derision.
At heart he isn't such a boor.*

At last, Carlyle deigns to speak.

