

The Science of Things in General Carlyle as *whole* critic

an extract from a talk on *Sartor Resartus* given at the Carlyle Conference, Dumfries, September 2008
Sartor Resartus is quoted from the edition of J. A. S. Barrett (1897) 1916.

The phrase I propose for Carlyle is *general critic*. Henry James called Matthew Arnold a “general critic” but Carlyle got there first. He is the first British writer *explicitly* to try a judgement of the whole culture. Coleridge did it inadvertently, and Johnson implicitly, as a natural thing from within. Carlyle’s relation to the *Zeitgeist* (his word, like *Philistine*, before Arnold popularised them¹) is what he calls one of *internecine warfare*, which is just right. He cannot be Johnson, the commentator from within; on the other hand he is not a detached external observer. The dilemma makes him do the original work on how to criticise the Time Spirit.

He knows what he is doing as early as the so characteristically entitled “Signs of the Times” and right down to the “Inaugural Address”. “Signs of the Times” is a centrally Carlylian title. (Biblical, prophetic, but of the modern age.) Earlier writers and thinkers certainly do give signs of the times: Shakespeare’s profound treatment of the crisis in royal fatherly authority, for instance, but Carlyle does it explicitly and has to find the means of expression for so doing.

Carlyle’s general criticism, as *internecine warfare* with the *Zeitgeist*, almost as a new *genre*, demanded a new expression—without which he would not have realised what he was trying to say. Excuse my using yet again one of the best-known tags of T. S. Eliot, but I think its significance is far from exhausted. “Sensibility alters from generation to generation in everybody, whether we will or no, but expression is only altered by a man of genius.”² The first sign of unusual intelligence in Carlyle as a literary artist was that he recognised this as clearly as the romantic poets had recognised that they must get out of the strait-jacket of Augustan verse.

Emerson raised the question “Did ever wise and philanthropic author use so defying a diction?”³ Naturally, it had already been raised, better, in *Sartor Resartus* itself, by the absurdly academic Editor. “Singular Teufelsdröckh, would thou hadst told thy singular story in plain words! . . . Why perplex these times, profane as they are, with needless obscurity . . . ?”⁴ Emerson’s question is from a less original mind, though he went on to an intelligent guess, endorsed by Carlyle, “Can it be that his humor proceeds from a despair of finding a contemporary audience?” Rather: expression in any mode expected by that audience would be a falsification. Singular stories cannot be told in plain words; the obscurity is not needless. Carlyle is acting on the observation that became standard in the criticism and even the philosophy of the twentieth century, that to say a thing in the wrong way is not to say the thing.

For you are to know, my view is that now at last we have lived to see all manner of Poetics and Rhetorics and Sermonics, and one may say generally all manner of *Pulpits* for addressing mankind from, as good as broken and abolished . . . and so one leaves the paste-board coulisses, and three unities, and Blair’s Lectures, quite behind; and feels only that there is *nothing sacred* then, but the *Speech of Man* to believing men.⁵

But that is to state the problem of expression, not to answer it. John Sterling raised much the same question, and to him Carlyle remarked on “the whole structure of our Johnsonian English breaking up from its foundations”.⁶ So how to express himself in prose? is to some extent the same question as How to discover what really has to be said.

1 “Genesis”; “Romance”, *Sartor*

2 “Johnson’s *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*”, 1930, *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* IV (1982) 1991, pp. 228–9. This formulation may itself be indebted to *Sartor*: “For it is man’s nature to change his Dialect from century to century; he cannot help it though he would.” (“The Everlasting Yea”, *ed. cit.*, p. 230) And, by the way, Eliot’s once universally known image of the poet’s mind as a catalyst derives directly from *Sartor*, though Carlyle puts it to a less dubious use: “As in some chemical mixture, that has stood long evaporating, but would not crystallise, instantly when a wire or other fixed substance is introduced, crystallisation commences, and rapidly proceeds, till the whole is finished, so it was with the Editor’s mind . . .” (“Editorial Difficulties”, *ed. cit.*, p. 55) In *Sartor* the Editor does learn, but the chemical image is not exempt from irony.

3 The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson 1834–1872, 1883, I, p. 13

4 “The Everlasting Yea”, *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 226–7

5 Correspondence with Emerson, pp. 22–3. Wordsworth is not for the last time more present to Carlyle than he realises.

6 Letter 4 June 1835, J. A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: a History of his Life in London 1834–1881* (1891) I, p. 43

Carlyle's answer to the problem of expression was of the kind (though they are all necessarily different) given by any original artist. The manner of *Sartor*, which anybody would call extraordinary, is not the result of a definite choice to insinuate otherwise unacceptable meanings under the cloak of a comedy sometimes Sternian and sometimes positively Rabelaisian; he had to invent this expression because otherwise he would have been like Prospero's idea of the native Caliban: he would not have known his own meaning, though not by being a thing most brutish but by accepting the conventional expression of a world where judgement was going hollow. It is not enough for Carlyle to write Teufelsdröckh, he has to give him the context of the contemporary world, the inane Editor's remark that

Of his sentences, perhaps not more than nine-tenths stand straight on their legs; the remainder are in quite angular attitudes, buttressed-up by props (of parentheses and dashes), and ever with this or the other tagrag hanging from them; a few even sprawl-out helplessly on all sides, quite broken-backed and dismembered.¹

The perception that Johnsonian English is breaking up from its foundations is itself one of the most important elements in Carlyle's judgement of the spirit of his own times. He simply couldn't get his work done in anything like that prose—any more than could his disciple Dickens. Only in the framework of the absurdly pompous academicism of Hofrath Heuschrecke and the Editor of these Pages, that is, by the exuberant destruction of academic prose by way of parody, can the Clothes Philosophy (itself inherently comic and ambiguous) get anything said—anything as simple, for instance, as “Love not pleasure, love God.” It *needs* that whole context of elaborate rhetoric and many-layered irony. This is a way of saying without which whatever Carlyle was trying to say would have been obscure. But then: “Quand je voy ces braves formes de s'expliquer, si vifves, si profondes, je ne dis pas que c'est bien dire, je dis que c'est bien penser.”²

Carlyle's thinking about language must go together with his own practice as a writer. He preaches metaphor and symbol (“An unmetaphorical style you shall in vain seek for”³), and he practises what he preaches. Carlyle's understanding of symbol is, in the England of the 1830s, a profound criticism of the whole philosophy of language of the Aristotelian tradition as that was developed by the British empiricists, in particular Locke and Hume, and directly contradicts the empiricist concentration on propositions. The Aristotelian notion, right down to Saussure, is always one way or another that language and meaning are two separate entities. In Saussure the signifier and the signified are two sides of the same coin but not the same thing: and then of course Derrida, Foucault, Barthes tried to split word and meaning altogether.

Carlyle practising expression as essentially not simple factual statement, corrects the Aristotelian tradition, and at the theological level to which he aspired. For Aristotle, a symbol is always distinct from what is symbolised: here the symbol, there the sense. Sometimes the deepest moves in philosophy are the simplest. Carlyle saw that the symbol and the symbolised are one. It isn't that *there* (where?) is eternity, here an object somehow symbolising eternity, but the symbol is what Blake called “eternity in an hour”.⁴

One of the novel-like developments in *Sartor* is that the Editor of these Pages, practitioner of a parody of Johnsonian prose in its dotage, is partly educated by Teufelsdröckh, so that, for instance, the beginning of “The Dandiacal Body” is actually by the Editor not by Teufelsdröckh. The Everlasting Yea is amongst other things a release into an idiom that permits Carlyle to get his work done.

I can't help making the comparison with T. F. Powys, the century after Carlyle, who tried prophecy straight (in the Edwardian era!) but learned that if God is to be presented to a modern reader it must be in the form of a wine-merchant or a wandering tinker.

The amazing *life* of *Sartor*! I sometimes think it is the most brilliant book in English. Who else would have been able to come so close, in anticipation, to Wittgenstein's imagined work of philosophy consisting entirely of jokes?—on which Sterne was a considerable influence? What other serious critic in the immediate post-Romantic decade could have gone for inspiration to the absurdist shadow of the Age of Reason as found in Swift and the Scriblerus Club?

The achievement of what amounts to a new genre in literature by way of a new style amounts to genius.

“Genre” is defensible because Carlyle sets a pattern for something peculiarly English (though Emerson tried to imitate), giving a model not only for Arnold, but D. H. Lawrence and then Leavis, who had no idea how Carlylian his notion of criticism was. Even the style, so individual, had its effect for

1 “Characteristics”, *Sartor* 2 Montaigne, *Essais* III.liii 3 “Prospective”, *Sartor*

4 This is theological for instance in its direct application to the great Reformation controversies about the Real Presence. It may have been the Calvinism of his boyhood that enabled Carlyle to see that to call something symbolic is *not* the same as to call it unreal.

instance on *Friendship's Garland*. Lawrence of course has his own voice, but the reworking of the American essays into the (amongst other things) extremely funny *Studies in Classic American Literature* was probably easier for Lawrence with *Sartor* very much one of the books everybody knew. And the *Studies* too is about the *Zeitgeist*, the (in that case American) spirit of the age and its development, as much as “Signs of the Times” or *Shooting Niagara—and After?*¹

The formula used in titles of papers in the Cambridge English Tripos, “English Literature, Life and Thought”, embodies a conception of literary criticism that would not have been possible without Carlyle. The implicit notion of *history* is his. He was a new sort of historian because he admitted the *Zeitgeist*. His history differs from Hume’s as much as his philosophy. Hume shows in his *History of England* a very sharp political sense, but has no sense that for instance the presuppositions and assumptions of the different parties in the English Civil War might have been different from those of the party leaders of his own day. The great achievement of Carlyle’s *French Revolution* (like Scott’s historical novels) was to show one form of life to another.

Leavis thought he was a literary critic, that pure comment on works of literary art was his centre, but his explicit rejection of *literary values* was one of the signs that he too was a general critic, as became increasingly apparent in his later years.

The neglect of Carlyle by our present literary establishment has come about because the English tradition of criticism itself, which he inaugurated, is, in the Henry James phrase, “very much in abeyance”.

Which leaves us, of course, with the big question, mercifully beyond the scope of this paper: why Carlyle was so sure of his judgements of the *Zeitgeist*, a question that also has to be asked about Leavis.² Carlyle’s very ambivalent relations to the Christian tradition raise the question: what belief if any is at the bottom of his judgements? Truth without faith? Carlyle’s being simultaneously inside and outside (outside the Church as well as the Utilitarian establishment) gave rise not only to his original style of criticism, but to this insoluble dilemma.

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1 I think there is direct influence from *Sartor* on Bertrand Russell’s “Freeman’s Worship” but Carlyle should not be held responsible. Carlyle: “To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb.” (“The Everlasting NO”) Russell: “Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way . . .” (*Mysticism and Logic* (1918), 1954, p. 59)

2 It is treated a little in my book *The English Prophets*.