

Sage, Hero, Ironist: Sublimity and Irony in Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and *Lectures on Heroes*

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Scottish essayist, philosopher, and historian Thomas Carlyle was one of the most outspoken Victorian cultural critics voicing the ambitions and anxieties of his age. Within his vast, mostly non-fictional legacy, *Sartor Resartus*, a philosophical essay with strong elements of autobiography, satire, and literary mystification, occupies a unique place.¹ This paper analyzes the tensions between the explicitly ludic form of the text and Carlyle's philosophy by reading the essay along with *Lectures on Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), in which Carlyle delineates his value system in a coherent and direct way. More particularly, I look at the fraught relationship between Carlyle's repeated employment of such notions as "immediacy," "intensity," and "truth," and Romantic views of the sublime also informing his work. I contend that *Sartor Resartus* foregrounds the uneasy relation between the sublime and language because it points, in an ambiguous way, both to the subjective aspiration for the transcendental (sublimity) and to the limiting conditions of linguistic and historical conventions (irony).

Although both *Sartor Resartus* and *Lectures on Heroes* belong to Carlyle's early period, their receptions were vastly different. *Sartor Resartus* was first published in the London *Fraser's Magazine* between 1833 and 1834, also appearing in a separate volume, in 1836, with the help of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the United States. While it found a most sympathetic readership over the Atlantic, in Britain, it failed to bring Carlyle the critical acclaim he had longed for. His lectures on heroes were delivered seven years later, after the success of *The French Revolution* (1837), and the publication that soon followed established Carlyle's reputation as an influential man-of-letters by the early 1840s.²

G. K. Chesterton's *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913), one of the first critical studies of Victorian literature and one of the first critical discussions of Carlyle, highlights the role of humor and irony in Carlyle's literary achievement, thus, it gestures at the ironic discrepancies in his oeuvre I explore here. Chesterton's work is unique among modernist reactions to Victorianism, since it was written from a Christian perspective. His evaluation of Carlyle, both sympathetic and critical, reveals a conspicuous paradox.³ The strength of the Victorian thinker lies in his convinced idealism opposing the utilitarian and mechanical views of his time, and advocating social reform, even though not from a leftist, but from a conservative position. Thus,

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according to Chesterton, Carlyle joins Dickens, Newman, and Ruskin in the battle between faith/spirit and skepticism. Chesterton further argues that Carlyle's idealism also accounts for his power as a seer-historian, who can "guess right like a child" (Chesterton 51). He points out, however, a number of limitations in Carlyle's ideology: "a heavy Teutonic idealism, absurdly unaware of the complexity of things" (53), "a sort of heathen Puritanism: Protestantism purged of its evidences of Christianity" (54), and a suspicious "direct historical worship of strength" (60). As for Carlyle's use of humor, Chesterton notes that "he had it in his very style, but it never got into his philosophy" (53). Though Chesterton mentions *Sartor Resartus* only in passing, describing it as "an admirable fantasia" (55), his remarks concerning Carlyle can serve as a starting point, even though the potential of language for indirectness and ambiguity that Chesterton calls "humour" I will address in terms of "irony."

As Walter E. Houghton has observed in his classical study on Victorian culture, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870* (1963), *Lectures on Heroes* responded to the deep enthusiasm of Carlyle's contemporaries for heroism (305). The pantheon suggested by Carlyle for veneration, however, was rather unexpected in a Protestant Victorian context, both with respect to whom and why they were chosen. A specific concern that runs through the series of lectures is a repeated insistence on earnestness. The Scandinavian god Odin is characterized by "a certain homely truthfulness and rustic strength, a great rude sincerity" (Carlyle, *Works* 19). Dante, "for depth of sincerity, is like an antique Prophet too; his words, like theirs, come from his very heart" (*Works* 99). Even more rhapsodic a praise is reserved for Martin Luther, who is portrayed as "great, not as a hewn obelisk; but as an Alpine mountain,—so simple, honest, spontaneous . . . ! Ah yes, unsubduable granite, piercing far and wide into the Heavens; yet in the clefts of it fountains, green beautiful valleys with flowers! . . . a true Son of Nature and Fact" (*Works* 142). Dr. Johnson is represented as "a man of truths and facts," who spoke "sincere words" and "meant things by them" (*Works* 180). The life of Robert Burns is summed up in terms of "a great tragic sincerity," "a sort of savage sincerity" (*Works* 192). Even Rousseau is conceded "the first and chief characteristic of a Hero: he is heartily in earnest," despite his own vices and the vices of his century, "barren, artificial, thick-quilted with Pedantries" (*Works* 185). Carlyle also praises his heroes for their capacity for a "heart-to-heart inspection of the things" (*Works* 19), for their perspicacity and shrewdness, the ability to see through "shows" (*Works* 55, 81, 85, 116), "garnitures" (*Works* 126, 164) and "semblances" (*Works* 126, 134, 204) into the "primal reality of things" (*Works* 46), and "cooperate with the real Tendency of the World" (*Works* 63).

Carlyle's emphasis on sincerity as an essential "heroic" virtue can function as a gateway into his thought, since he uses it not only as a moral, but also as an epistemological concept: it suggests that the world is radically split into false and misleading "appearance" and truly-existing "reality." According to Carlyle, the contemporaneous crisis in the world was provoked by an obsession with appearances which, on a philosophical level, became manifest in a belief in the power of individual reasoning independent from transcendental authority or tradition (skepticism), and in a conception of social and intellectual life as a set of mechanical relations of cause and effect (utilitarianism). "Reality," however, was envisioned by Carlyle as the living principle binding the natural and historical worlds in a mystical organic unity, and was described by him variably as "Inner Fact of Things" (*Works* 45), "the Great Deep of Nature" (*Works* 62), "the great heart of the Universe" (*Works* 62), "Musical Idea" (*Works* 105), and "Inner Harmony" (*Works* 105). Although the contradiction between the static notion of "Fact" and the dynamic concept of "Music" is conspicuous, all these labels suggest that the living principle forming the core of Carlyle's thought is the spiritual sublime. "Reality," conceived in terms of the spiritual sublime, renders conventional relations and values false, and holds the potential for a new beginning. Since it surpasses reason and operates beyond ordinary experience, limited human nature reacts to its presence by feelings of terror, awe, and wonder. Carlyle's heroes enjoy a privileged access to the "awful realities of things" (*Works* 123), the "awful truth of things" (*Works* 212), due to their double virtue of sincerity and perspicacity. These qualities dissolve the opposition between the subject and the object, mind and nature, appearance and reality, rendering the hero a perfectly transparent medium of the "Divine Idea" (*Works* 80, 158), who can, thus, redeem the "fallen" world.

The same sublime principle animates the world in *Sartor Resartus*, where the genuine "celestial ME" (*Works* 191) and the "everlasting NOW" (*Works* 192) assume multi-layered sensual appearances. The immortal soul of man adopts the *a priori* forms of time and space, the words and concepts of language, different traditions and institutions, in order to dwell in the imperfect world of decay and illusion. Reduced to timely "rags" (*Works* 49-50), man is no more than an empty "Scarecrow" dressed in old clothes (*Works* 48).

Since both in his lectures and in *Sartor Resartus* the empirical world proves to be an unreliable appearance, true reality is accessed in the act of vision, a capacity that unites philosophers and men of action, turning them into "Seers" (*Works* 23, 42-43). The true act is almost unconscious; it is not active reflection that matters, but faith as a practical attitude to life, a "true

business of heart.” Thus, Carlyle presents the old idea of the exemplary biography in metaphysical terms. At the same time, almost all heroes of Carlyle’s pantheon bequeathed to posterity an influential book—in Odin’s case, it was even the gift of language itself—an achievement that agrees quite well with Carlyle’s claim that literature is “an apocalypse of nature” (*Works* 84, 163). Thus, heroes (seers) merit worship for their subjective lives, as well as for their objective creations. It follows the internal logic of the sublime that invades the world of limited human condition overcoming the subject-object division.

It can be argued that the style of Carlyle’s lectures is isomorphic to his sublime message. They neatly fit into the pattern that George Landow called “sage-writing” in his illuminating study, *Elegant Jeremiahs* (82-98). The sage adopts the stance of a biblical prophet who communicates essential truths to his age, but reaches his listeners from the periphery, at once questioning their values and appealing to their credibility. He is a master of definitions because he knows the true relation of language to reality, and a master of interpretations because he can turn both famous historical events, like the Diet of Worms, and apparently trivial facts, such as Dr. Johnson’s leather shoes, into highly meaningful “Signs of the Times.”⁴ Confident of his clear view of things, he addresses his audience with prophetic warnings and visionary promises, building his emotional argument with image and analogy rather than logic and evidence.

Although on the whole well-received by the British public, Carlyle’s contemporaries were not unanimously receptive to his disquisition on “hero-worship.” Criticism was directed at him from diverse idealistic positions. Margaret Fuller remarked, after visiting Carlyle in 1846, that “all Carlyle’s talk that evening was a defense of mere force,—success the test of right (sic!);—if people would not behave well, put collars round their necks; —find a hero and let them be his slaves. It was very Titanic, and anticelestial [. . .]” (qtd. in Froude 402). William Thomson, the future Archbishop of York, accused Carlyle of idolatry—substitution of Hero-worship for God-worship—and pugnacity, pointing also to the stylistic impropriety of the book:

With such elements of poetry, the wonder is, that this book has taken the guise of prose lectures, instead of that of an Orphic song. . . . [I]f this book be meant for a prose treatise, if it be not perhaps a translation of a German poem, done into prose after the manner of Macpherson’s Ossian, we complain of the suspension of the author’s logical faculty.

(qtd. in Seigel 176)

In *Sartor Resartus*, the sublimity of philosophical truth is embedded in an explicitly fictional setting: it is contained in a book called “The Philosophy of Clothes,” allegedly written by a German professor. The moral, as well as the cognitive, essence of “the Philosophy of Clothes” lies in discerning the true spiritual essence of man both from his decaying “Garments of Flesh” (Carlyle, *Sartor* 50), and from his social identities and relations as a “ragfair” (166, 174). The message of redemption is supported by the story of the spiritual progress—in Bunyan’s terms—of Professor Teufelsdröckh, its author. A series of temptations by the vanity of worldly affairs and the superficiality of rational knowledge constitute his difficult path to the ultimate vision. Before Teufelsdröckh looks deeply into the workings of the “Great Loom,” which weaves the garment of Time and Space around the Spirit, he experiences a number of revelations. While the metaphor identifying the course of time with weaving has a long history, in this particular case, the immediate source is Goethe, whom Carlyle openly acknowledged as his spiritual father. The lines Carlyle quotes from Goethe’s tragedy belong to the Spirit of Earth, conjured up by Faust in his existential anxiety for meaningful action. They explicitly link the clothes metaphor to idealistic philosophy:

In Being’s floods, in Action’s storm,
I walk and work, above, beneath,
Work and weave in endless motion!
Birth and Death,
An infinite ocean;
A seizing and giving
The fire of Living:
‘Tis thus at the roaring Loom of Time I ply,
And weave for God the Garment thou seest Him by. (*Sartor* 43)

Though akin to Faust in his search beyond the boundaries of existing knowledge, Teufelsdröckh is no alchemist or occult scholar. His sublime revelations indicate the presence of the divine in nature, and, as can be observed in a passage in the second book of chapter six, his textual procedures are highly indebted to a century-long tradition of mountain descriptions from Addison and Burke, to Wordsworth and Shelley.

The mountain-ranges are beneath your feet, and folded together: only the loftier summits look down here and there as on a second plain; lakes also lie clear and earnest in their solitude. . . . But sunwards, lo you! how it towers sheer up, a world of Mountains, the diadem and centre of the mountain region! A hundred and a hundred savage peaks, in the last light of Day; all

glowing, of gold and amethyst, like giant spirits of the wilderness; there in their silence, in their solitude, even as on the night when Noah's Deluge first dried! . . . He gazed over those stupendous masses with wonder, almost with longing desire; never till this hour had he known Nature, that she was One, that she was his Mother and divine. And as the ruddy glow was fading into clearness in the sky, and the Sun had now departed, a murmur of Eternity and Immensity, of Death and of Life, stole through his soul; and he felt as if Death and Life were one, as if the Earth were not dead, as if the Spirit of the Earth had its throne in that splendor, and his own spirit were therewith holding communion. (*Sartor* 115)

The key word is, obviously, the Wordsworthian "communion," which substitutes organized church ritual with a solitary mystical experience face to face with the natural world.⁵ This world is repeatedly described as "wild" and "savage" to reinforce the immediacy of contact with the divine traditionally portrayed as superhuman and supernatural. The intensity of its presence is conveyed through images of size ("giant," "lofty," "hundreds of peaks," "stupendous masses"), and royalty ("diadem"). The sublime effect is achieved through the temporal suspension of rational thinking: linear time is substituted by mythical simultaneity—between the present moment and that immediately after the Deluge—and opposite categories merge into a primordial unity—death and life, part and whole.

Both the philosophical and the personal arguments in *Sartor Resartus*, however, are built in a highly complex fashion, with the effect of rendering the famous "Everlasting Yea" a question rather than an affirmation. The chosen names themselves make the protagonist an object of thinly veiled satire. "Teufelsdröckh" in German literally means "Devil's shit," and the toponyms allude to the illusory nature of his existence: he lives in the German town of Weissnichtwo (I-Do-Not-Know-Where), on a street called "Wahngasse" (Alley of Dreams). Thus, the central persona that is supposed to transmit the sublime revelation becomes potentially unreliable and, it is my contention, this characterizes the style of the text in general. The ironic nature of the whole composition is suggested by a textual echo of Lawrence Sterne's novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-1767), in the very subtitle of the book: *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*. Carlyle adopts a procedure similar to Sterne's, in whose novel the foregrounding of the experience of writing occludes the message.⁶ The significant difference consists in the fact that the main adventures of *Sartor Resartus* take place in the process of commenting rather than in creative writing. Teufelsdröckh's book is presented in a fragmented translation, mixed with autobiographical passages, confused references to other sources, and

often puzzling editorial commentary. The linguistic procedure of translating from German assumes an intricate mediating role: on the one hand, it is difficult to communicate an intimate religious experience, and, on the other, to explain the speculative “metaphysics” of a German mind to a more commonsensical British audience.

Discussing the Longinian sublime, Philip Shaw reaches a conclusion pertinent for my own account of the formal sophistication of Carlyle’s essay: the discourse on the sublime has traditionally been concerned “with the concealment of language. For the sublime to arise, and for it to be sustained, speech must appear natural and unmotivated” (28). As soon as one concentrates on the medium and condition in which the elevation of the soul occurs, it is likely to split into artifices and effects. The speech in *Sartor Resartus* is far from what Shaw defines as “natural”: the sublime revelation is never quite independent from the questions of “why,” “how,” and “who” pronounces it. As George Levine points out, “a fiction such as *Sartor* inevitably shifts attention away, at least in part, from the substance to the point of view from which it is being related,” thus highlighting the role of the Editor, who surpasses his moderate functions (74). My contention is that “the substance” of *Sartor Resartus* is the life of a privileged Carlylean figure, a “hero” and “seer” worthy to join the exemplary sequence represented in *Lectures on Heroes*, but “the point of view” constructed through the introduction of another figure puts the sublime message into doubt.

The Editor’s perspective neither coincides with, nor radically differs from that of Teufelsdröckh. On the one hand, the Editor appears to be sincerely sympathetic to the philosopher, as he maintains the same bitterly satirical stance towards “our present advanced state of culture,” when “the Torch of Science has been brandished and borne about” (*Sartor* 3). On the other hand, the Editor repeatedly gives voice to his skepticism and distances himself from the “author.” He complains about the incomprehensibility of the “author’s” often all too pompous and dark style, he entertains strong doubts about the authenticity of autobiographical documents, and is at pains to point out Teufelsdröckh’s inconsistency, partial blindness, and lack of mental balance—see, for example, an account of Teufelsdröckh’s routine and habits revealing his eccentricity (*Sartor* 18-20). Passages on the purifying effects of the French Revolution and on the London Old-Clothes Market functioning as visual metaphors for the Day of Judgment have strong connections with Carlyle’s own thinking, but they appear in a very specific context. A passage on hero-worship from the end of chapter seven, book three may provide a telling illustration:

But thou as yet standest in no Temple; joinest in no Psalm-worship; feelest well that, where there is no ministering Priest, the people perish? Be of comfort! Thou art not alone, if thou have Faith. . . . Their heroic Sufferings rise up melodiously together to Heaven, out of all lands, and out of all times, as a sacred Miserere; their heroic Actions also, as a boundless everlasting Psalm of Triumph. Neither say that thou hast now no Symbol of the Godlike. Is not God's Universe a Symbol of the Godlike; is not Immensity a Temple; is not Man's History, and Men's History, a perpetual Evangel? Listen, and for organ-music thou wilt ever, as of old, hear the Morning Stars sing together. (*Sartor* 186)

The passage is typically “Carlylese,” to use Levine’s term. Engaging rhetoric with strong homiletic undertones, archaic structures, capitalization of key words and, above all, metaphors that operate both on the level of style and content could make it easily fit into *Lectures on Heroes*. The central metaphor serves here to naturalize the essential elements of the Christian ritual, such as temple, psalms, priesthood, *Miserere*, organ, and Evangel. It is, however, not Carlyle, but Teufelsdröckh who is speaking, and a number of strategies are employed to mark the ironic distance. First, the whole passage on hero-worship is immediately preceded by Teufelsdröckh’s suggestion to shoot the rebels from lower classes to check their aggressive instincts—an idea which raises moral doubts in the Editor concerning his author. Second, the passage itself is introduced with a good deal of doubt on the Editor’s part, as if he were trying to mitigate the puzzlement of the reader: “Here, looking round, as was our hest, for ‘organic filaments,’ we ask, may not this, touching ‘Hero-worship,’ be of the number? It seems of a cheerful character; yet so quaint, so mystical, one knows not what, or how little, may lie under it. Our readers shall look with their own eyes” (*Sartor* 184). Third, the Editor’s attitude to the reader is rather tolerant, in stark contrast to the intolerance typical of Teufelsdröckh and, in many cases, of Carlyle himself. Instead of trying to persuade his readers that they should abandon their “wrong” opinions in favor of the “right” ones, the Editor constantly urges them to judge for themselves.

Prudent disclaimers and cautious remarks accompany Teufelsdröckh’s writings throughout the essay, and the continuous reflection upon particular editorial problems leads to the general conclusion that one is afforded limited possibility to know the “Other.” It is a problem that moves beyond human sympathies and scholarly difficulties, and accounts for the Latin title of the essay. The literal translation of “Sartor Resartus” is “Patched Tailor”—a name that makes the author’s and the Editor’s perspectives overlap because both Teufelsdröckh and his Editor engage in sewing and patching together. In philosophical terms, the idea of “re-patching the tailor” makes the subject its

own object in an act of open-ended reflection. In Carlyle's explicit logic, the Great Tissue stands for all kinds of man-made symbolic forms that exist in a perpetual state of revision, interpretation, and debate, thus art, humanities, and social reform represent different practices of fixing the old texture and weaving it anew. Teufelsdröckh, as a tailor, aims to mend the fragmented actual knowledge of nature, culture, and the spirit of man, and, at the same time, he himself needs a tailor who would fit his chaotic fragments together. The concept of limitation has played a key role in defining Romantic irony, as Robert Chodat, locating Carlyle, Melville, and Thoreau within a common ironic paradigm, noted: "the defining trait of irony is a constant awareness of human limitation, an acknowledgment of the perimeters restricting knowledge and the impossibility of capturing the incessant motion of absolute reality in any human-created form" (8).

Thus, Teufelsdröckh's association with Goethe's Earth Spirit, whose song is quoted above, becomes deeply ironic. Both are concerned with the same sublime mission: to mediate between the partiality of human nature and human knowledge, and the fullness of the divine. This metaphysical enterprise is represented via the metaphor of weaving and sewing. Teufelsdröckh, however, lacks the superhuman energy and the direct knowledge of God given to the Earth Spirit, and is constantly confronted with his own limitation as a human being.

John McGowan's seminal study on Victorian worldview and aesthetics—addressing the relationship of three key concepts, "representation," "revelation," and "realism"—opens with a discussion of Carlyle pertinent for my inquiry in that it also addresses the question why Carlyle was less self-assertive in his early years than in his later career. According to McGowan, Carlyle shared the common Victorian epistemology of doubt concerning the nature of "reality." "Reality," in Carlyle's view, could be accessed through symbolic representation, but, unlike Coleridge, one of his literary fathers, he was more reluctant to trust nature, which remains for him, to a great extent, a show, an appearance (McGowan 61-62). Carlyle's idea of the symbol relies on opposites (revelation and concealment, representation and silence) and, McGowan argues, Carlyle is at his strongest when he keeps the dialectics alive and does not retreat into static contrasts (61-62). Thus, *Sartor Resartus* becomes an outstanding "exercise in humility and patience," when "irony is humility, the admission of symbol not being the thing itself" (McGowan 61-62). Levine, likewise, contends that later on in life, Carlyle "willed the certitude of his fictions to be his own and was no longer, as he was in *Sartor*, his own best critic" (78). I share the two scholars' conclusion that *Sartor Resartus* demonstrates a tolerance towards ambiguity and plurality of

meaning, in contrast with the more self-assertive postures that Carlyle would assume in his later career.

I would further argue, however, that the ironic perspective that frames both Teufelsdröckh's spiritual progress and his philosophical work represents a characteristic Romantic move: the sublime genius, with his privileged access to the mystical forces of the universe, is not introduced as sovereign but is mirrored by, or measured against, a more conventional type of consciousness. European and American Romanticisms abound in such examples: Coleridge framed the demonic adventures of the Ancient Mariner with glosses by a pious Medieval scholar ("The Rime of Ancient Mariner"); E. T. A. Hoffman deliberately mixed the biography of his alter-ego, Johannes Kreisler, the musician, with the autobiography of a learned cat (*The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr, together with a Fragmentary Biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler on Random Sheets of Waste Paper*); Emily Brontë provided an account of Heathcliff's life through the eyes of an old nurse and a shallow rake (*Wuthering Heights*); Edgar Allan Poe sent an anonymous young gentleman to face the final stages of Roderick Usher's insanity ("The Fall of the House of Usher"); while the violent mania of captain Ahab is counterpointed by the benevolent skepticism of Ishmael (*Moby Dick, or the White Whale*).

One can also mark a crucial trend in the evolution of Romantic thinking eloquently represented in *Sartor Resartus*. Romantics, in general, were indebted to a specific and initially optimistic reception of Kant. Instead of bewailing the impossibility of knowing the "Thing-in-itself," they celebrated the opportunity to construct a whole world out of the workings of their own consciousness. Self-knowledge seemed to be the key to knowing the world. This exalted subjectivity, however, soon discovered that, in many instances, it remained uncontrollable and opaque to itself. As the French scholar of Romanticism, Christian La Cassagnère lucidly remarks, "beyond the self-transparent, self-knowing ego of the Cartesian *cogito* ('I think'), the Romantic mind thus experiences a much deeper and mightier *cogitor* ('I am thought'), and, through it, an 'It thinks,' whose echoes or emergences are contemplated" (239).

The sublime and the ironic played an important part in the way the Romantic consciousness defined itself. Romantics owed much to the general revision of the concept throughout the eighteenth century, namely, to the development of the sublime from confronting grand external objects, material or spiritual—like awe-inspiring natural phenomena, or the Christian God—to conjuring up strong psychological effects.⁷ Shaw highlights the Romantic approach by comparing, for instance, passionate descriptions of Gothic architecture by Addison and Coleridge:

[W]here Addison retains a correspondence theory of the relations between objects, ideas, and internal sensations . . . with Coleridge, there is greater insistence on the sublime as an effect of consciousness. . . . the overall impression is of a translation of object into subject, of the Gothic church transformed by an operation of mind into a fit emblem of the eternal and thus, by sleight of hand, into a symbol of the unbounded power of imagination. (97)

Discovering this power proved to be a crucial point because it contested even the sublimity of nature, as Geoffrey Hartman's reading of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* has convincingly demonstrated (45-46).

Within the Romantic frame of mind, irony expanded the linguistic ambiguity between explicit and implicit meanings into an artistic strategy. The artist should avoid becoming his own dogma and, in doing so, he is almost obliged to contradict and negate himself. Thus, while the sublime insists on the sweeping powers of transformative experience, and irony is concerned with the ability to see shrewdly through any kind of pathos, both signal the liberation of subjectivity and, subsequently, become the symptoms of its eminent self-destruction. The different literary *personae* in *Sartor Resartus* and in the other literary instances mentioned above enact the inner drama of the Romantic consciousness. The drama consists in the limited ability of the Romantic subject either to speak or to act for itself in order to know itself completely: its knowledge is prejudiced or fictitious, its speech is fragmented, and its actions are in conflict with its motives.

In order to better understand the complexity and ambiguity of Carlyle's rhetoric, and its embeddedness in Romantic epistemology, it may be useful to consider *Sartor Resartus* in relation to Melville's *Moby Dick*, where the rich potential of this double structure is developed to the full.⁸ Both *Sartor Resartus* and *Moby Dick* are built around an all-encompassing metaphor—clothes making and whale hunting, respectively—that ultimately points to the limits of human understanding and to the collision between secular and sacred modes of interpretation. In Melville's world, however, the sublime is present in a much more palpable way. If Ahab's enterprise is open to ironic re-reading, the might and majesty of the White Whale is no illusion, and whale hunting itself is a revelation of "the interlinked terrors and wonders of God" (Melville 109). The Carlylean sublime, by contrast, remains on a much more speculative level, an object of discussion rather than "an awful reality of life." Thus, the central metaphor of the "Patched Tailor," in spite of its association with Goethe's Earth Spirit, points in the opposite direction. It refers to the

historical and secular world, where cultural values are endlessly (re-)negotiated, or, in Carlyle's words, "thatched anew" (*Sartor* 44) in such a way that the sublime reality of the spirit is never fully disclosed.

By way of conclusion, I return to my initial question about the continuity between Carlyle's lectures on hero-worship and *Sartor Resartus*. Both texts reveal a yearning for the transcendental that is contrasted to the illusory, the historical, and the relative—the "ragged" and "tattered" "things of Time"—and rely on a sublime cognitive act that Carlyle defines as "heroic vision." The heroic experience is privileged in the sense that its subject deserves quasi-religious worship, and is universal because of the truth that it immediately and convincingly reveals. While the lectures, however, are centered on affirming the sublimity of heroic vision—also rendered by the lofty style of the text—in *Sartor Resartus*, the sublime is inescapably haunted by irony, suggesting that it is not only difficult to attain the ideal, but may be downright impossible to do so.

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Notes

¹ I will use the term "essay" for the sake of brevity, though it should always be taken into consideration that it does not fully describe the generic complexity of the text.

² On the critical reception of Carlyle, see Seigel's *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage*.

³ Chesterton also has an earlier essay on Carlyle. I chose to highlight his *Victorian Age in Literature*, as it locates Carlyle in a wider Victorian context.

⁴ Carlyle's own expression, dating back to his 1829 collection of essays "Signs of the Times."

⁵ For a classical account of Wordsworth's Romantic adaptation of religious patterns of thinking in *The Prelude*, see Abrams (71-146). See also Shaw's comments on Wordsworth, with a particular relation to the discussion of the sublime (99-100).

⁶ For an overview of the philosophical implications of Sterne's literary technique in *Tristram Shandy*, see the still relevant studies of Traugott and Swearingen, for particular links to Carlyle, see Stewart and Trowbridge.

⁷ For an insightful study of how, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the sublime became gradually transformed from a mostly rhetorical category into an empirical, psychological, and dynamic phenomenon, see Cora's "From the Rhetoric of Longinus to the Poetics of John Dennis: The Role of Terror in the Theories of the Sublime in the 18th Century."

⁸ As Carlyle's fame spread very early in the United States, it can be assumed that his and Melville's works had strong historical links. See, for instance, Leon Howard's *The Unfolding of Moby-Dick*.

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