

The only way to write a popular history, as we have already remarked, would be to write it backwards. It would be to take common objects of our own street and tell the tale of how each of them came to be in the street at all. And for my immediate purpose it is really convenient to take two objects we have known all our lives, as features of fashion and respectability. One, which has grown rarer recently, is what we call a top-hat; the other, which is still a customary formality, is a pair of trousers. The history of these humorous objects really does give a clue to what has happened in England for the last hundred years. It is not necessary to be an aesthete in order to regard both objects as the reverse of beautiful, as tested by what may be called the rational side of beauty. The lines of human limbs can be beautiful, and so can the lines of loose drapery, but not cylinders too loose to be the first and too tight to be the second. Nor is a subtle sense of harmony needed to see that while there are hundreds of differently proportioned hats, a hat that actually grows larger towards the top is somewhat top-heavy. But what is largely forgotten is this, that these two fantastic objects, which now strike the eye as unconscious freaks, were originally conscious freaks. Our ancestors, to do them justice, did not think them casual or commonplace; they thought them, if not ridiculous, at least ro-coco...

It will not be fanciful to see a certain oriental touch in trousers, which the later Romans also regarded as effeminately oriental...

In the carnival of the Regency, a few fools got into fancy dress, and we have all remained in fancy dress. At least we have remained in the dress though we have lost the fancy.

G. K. Chesterton