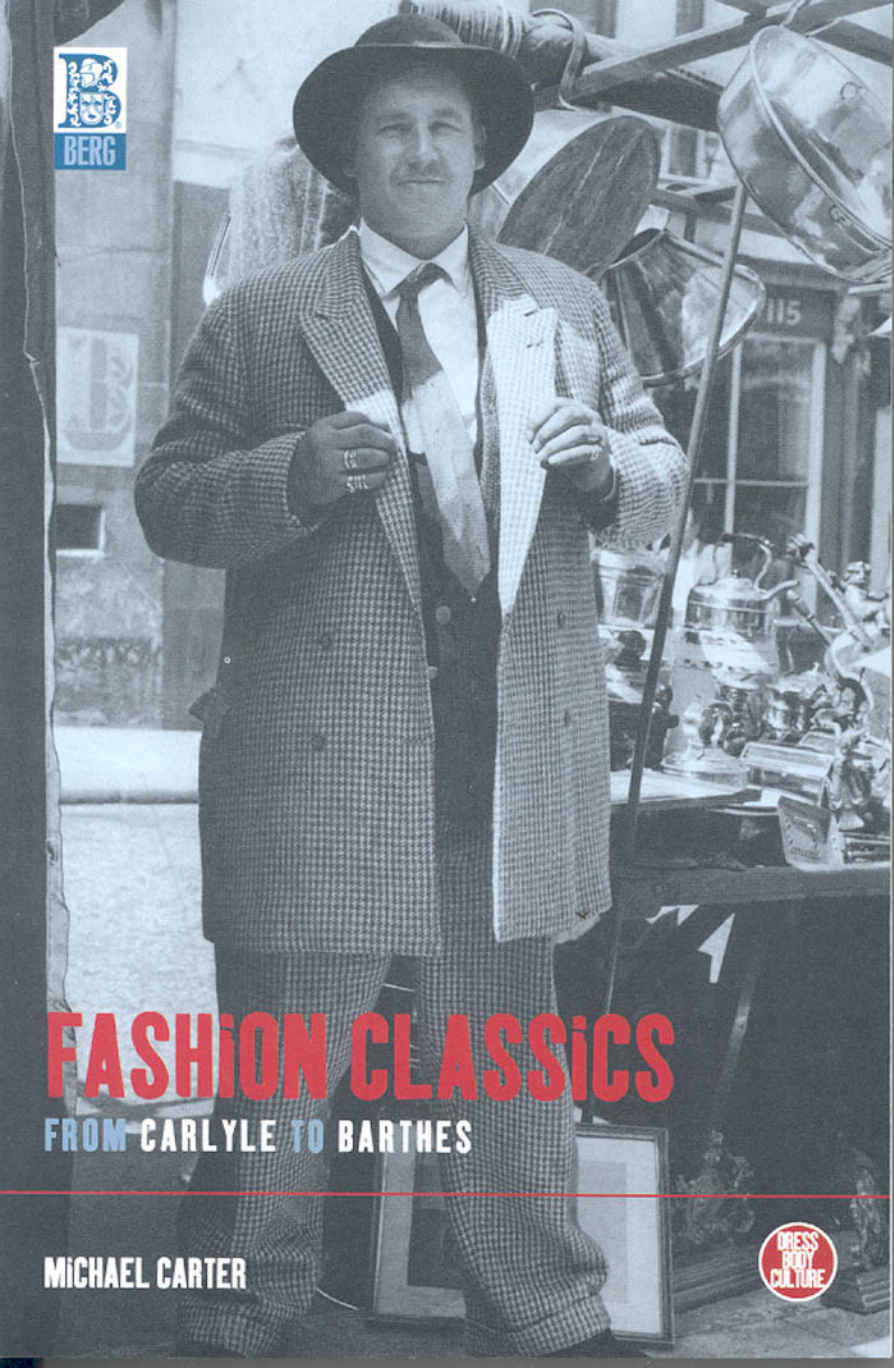
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MICHAEL CARTER
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DRESS, BODY, CULTURE

Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes

Michael Carter

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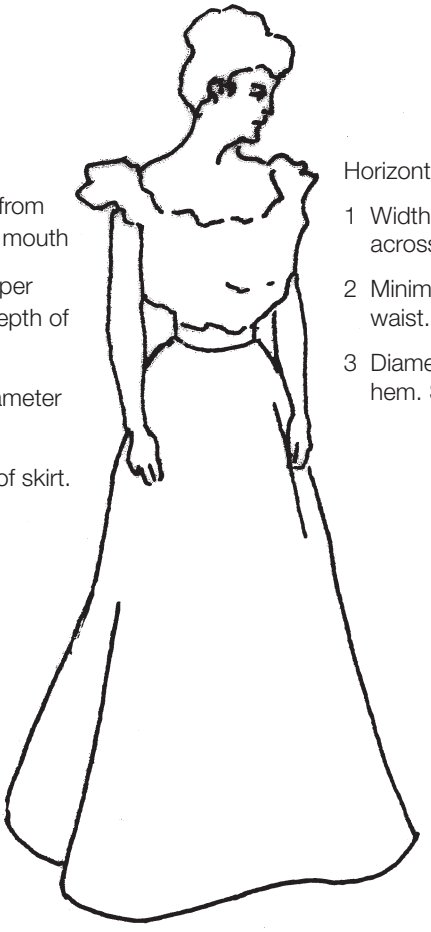
For my parents, Mary and Bob Carter

Verticals
All measurements taken from the middle of the figure's mouth

1 Mouth to middle of upper corsage front edge. Depth of decolletage

2 Mouth to minimum diameter of waist. Waist height

3 Mouth to centre front of skirt. Skirt length



Horizontals

1 Width of decolletage across the shoulders

2 Minimum diameter of waist. Waist length

3 Diameter of skirt at its hem. Skirt width

Diagram: Kroeber's measurements of evening dresses

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Preface

Sooner or later any area of study that develops sufficient critical mass will begin to scrutinize itself. Specifically, it will become aware that its patterns of concerns, anxieties and intellectual dispositions, have a history. While these may not add up to a 'discourse', or even a 'tradition', there comes a moment when the normal channels of operation shed their cloak of familiarity and start to become visible. It was just such a moment of intellectual estrangement that precipitated this book. I encountered a mildly dismissive remark about Thomas Carlyle and *Sartor Resartus* – nothing unusual about that, the history of costume is littered with such criticisms. Mentally I nodded in agreement and continued reading. Of course, I had not read *Sartor*. Or rather, I had picked it up, glanced at a few pages and dropped it in fright. However, on this occasion I sat down and read it in one sitting. So much was familiar in Carlyle's ironic observations about clothes. So many later voices could be heard in his declarations on our habits of dress and dressing. Either he was a glorious, but isolated, interpreter of our clothed condition or he was the first in a line of thinkers that might add up to a tradition. My conclusion, after rereading a few of the standard texts of fashion theory, was that there was such a tradition and that an apt name for it might be 'Fashion Classics'. The only novel feature that I can claim for this book is that it is the first time that a systematic study has been made of those figures, and texts, normally regarded as central to the study of clothing and fashion. There have been a number of critical glances at the intellectual history of fashion theory, such as those of Wilson (1985), Davis (1992), Barnes and Eicher (1992). Those writings concerned exclusively with the intellectual roots of fashion and dress studies, works such as Keenan's ground-breaking reappraisal (2001) of the significance for dress studies of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, together with the excellent study of fashion and modernity, *Tigersprung* by Lehmann (2000), have appeared only very recently and were too late for adequate consideration in this book. It is within this growing desire for a clearer picture of the intellectual history of the subject that I want to situate the present volume.

The selection of texts in the book was made, initially, on pragmatic grounds. There were the texts that I constantly returned to for clarification and intellectual refreshment. Then there were the texts that others working in the field

regularly cited – authors such as Veblen, Simmel, Kroeber, Flügel and Laver. These were the ones that most commonly corresponded to the status of 'classics'. Finally, there were the authors that subsequently were revealed to be important to those already on the list. The big discovery (for me) was the importance of Herbert Spencer. Apart from Barthes, all the writers considered here were greatly indebted to his work. For James Laver it was Flügel, and then Veblen (via Quentin Bell), who provided the intellectual impetus that sustained him after the Second World War. Barthes was a great admirer of Alfred Kroeber and John Flügel. So, from Spencer onward a deal of mutual cross-referencing is taking place in the writings of these thinkers. All that remained to complete the 'set' was to locate a totemic figure responsible for bringing the tradition into being – the obvious candidate here was Carlyle/Teufelsdröckh – together with a 'terminator'. The fact that Barthes engaged with the figures in the tradition with the expressed purpose of reforming their approach to costume and fashion made him an ideal person with which to close the book.

At various points it proved useful for me to deploy the label 'Fashion Classics Tradition' as a form of intellectual shorthand. Each time this phrase is used there is a tendency for that being named to acquire an ever greater degree of internal coherence. I want to disturb this picture by outlining what I consider to be the main features of this 'tradition'. I should also make it clear that, with the possible exception of Spencer, the authors and texts examined in the book do not always fully match the ideal type of the tradition that I sketch below.

Most of the writers I discuss make a sharp distinction between clothes and fashion. Indeed, there is little trace of the current assumption that clothes are fashion and that fashion is clothes. The manner in which these two phenomena are distinguished from one another and the relative weight that is accorded to them by each author varies considerably, but all are taxed by questions about clothes? What are clothes? Why do we wear clothes. How, and when, did clothes come into being? Fashion in the modern sense of the term does not start to make an appearance until the end of the tradition, and even then the fashion being discussed is hardly recognizable as the fashion with which we are familiar today. One of the pleasures of following these threads across such a stretch of time is to observe how slow the contemporary notion of fashion is in arriving. One thing to be drawn from this is that too sharp an identification of fashion with modernity can lead to serious problems. Time and again, with all these writers, there is a feeling that they are trying to grasp something that is constantly metamorphosing. At some point this 'thing' was given the name *fashion,* but whatever it was that was so named, and at whatever historical moment it was so designated, it is clear from reading these authors that this is not what we have on our hands today. To simply equate 'fashion' with modernity leaves us with no means of naming those regimes of vestimentary

change that existed before the arrival of full modernity. If we do this then all that remains before modernity are the repetitions of that old standby 'traditional society'.

Something similar exists in the way that all the writers examined in this book are agreed that clothes and fashion are social phenomena. The problem is that the meaning given to the word 'social' varies from author to author. Clothing was seen as a universal, but non-biological, phenomenon. This kind of universality is often thought of as being 'social' in that it is a species-wide manifestation. It is this that accounts for the tenacity that the three 'fundamental motives' of modesty, protection and decoration have as explanations. They are trying to account for the sheer existence of garments and, since they appear to be universal among human beings, the most obvious explanation is that there is some kind of inner disposition within the members of the species that lead to the 'invention' of clothes. But 'social' could also refer to features of human behaviour that are clearly 'group-specific': for instance, the fact that the forms and styles of clothing seem to be closely aligned with group membership, and the fact that changes in styles over time are likewise aligned to the internal dynamics of social groups. It is this visible *collective* clothing dynamic that is referred to as 'fashion' by the fashion classics tradition and its explanatory focus is on collective dress similarities and collective dress differences. This is why so much time and effort is expended by Spencer, Veblen, Simmel and Flügel, on producing a theory of imitation and differentiation. These two processes that were, at the same time, both collective and individual were seen as the only conceivable answers to the problem of how clothing styles circulated among defined populations. In this instance costume studies took a long time to free itself from the argument between cultural diffusionists and the supporters of independent invention that had split nineteenth-century anthropology. The final acceptance of something like Durkheim's notion of a 'social fact' was slow in coming. It is easy to overlook the fact that 'social' in the fashion classics tradition rarely refers to a set of social norms with their own specific density capable of shaping individual intentions and making social action possible. This is what makes Kroeber an exception because his ideas about the power of the 'superorganic' are pushing into an area very similar to that occupied by the idea of the 'social fact'.

The most characteristic feature of the tradition is its overwhelming concern with the passage of time. I hesitate to name this 'historicism' because there seems to be more at work here than just a respect for history. It is part of that nineteenth-century movement in which, as Michel Foucault puts it, history is defined as the 'very mode of being of empiricity'. The history that appears within the fashion classics tradition has the form of a narrative. Clothing begins. It has an origin. Fashion, too, starts at some determinate point in the

past. There is a story to be told of its journey over time – this is the 'middle' – and the method for assembling the events of this middle passage in their correct order is the 'comparative method'. There was also an end to the story and this could be discovered in the evolutionary destiny of clothing and fashion. Spencer was the first to locate clothing and fashion within a set of historically determined conditions and, given that such determinants were contingent and not fixed, it followed that the current clothing regimes would be subject to development and change. There was to be regular speculation in the tradition on the possibility of clothing and fashion being superseded, either because of the direction taken by evolutionary developments to the human body, or by the social order demanding a radically different relationship between the body and its cultural significance.

I want to end by asking the reader, where interest and availability coincide, to go to the original texts. There is much sustenance still to be drawn from them. That is why they are fashion classics.

1

Thomas Carlyle and 'Sartor Resartus'

perhaps only a german savant could do the subject full justice.

James Laver

One night, at some point early in the nineteenth century, a rather strange individual called Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh stands at his study window high above the German city of Weissnichtwo. Teufelsdröckh is the hero of Thomas Carlyle's book *Sartor Resartus* and at this particular moment he is looking down on the sleeping city which is visible to him below, where 'Upwards of five hundred thousand two-legged animals without feathers lie round us . . . their heads all in nightcaps, and full of the foolishest dreams'. His is a good vantage point from which to study the affairs of humans situated, as it is, midway between the 'life-circulation' of the town's citizens below and the eternal stars of the heavens above. Indeed, it is partly from his musings upon the city below that the good professor has formulated his novel vision of the universe and of our place in it, which he calls the 'Clothes-Philosophy'. That all might not be as it seems in this scene may be surmised from the fact that 'Weissnichtwo' translates as 'Know-not-where'; that the professor's lodgings are sited on the 'Wahngasse', or 'Fantasy Lane' and that his surname translates variously as 'Devil's Shit', 'Devil's Dirt' or 'Devil's Dust'.[1]

Sartor Resartus is Thomas Carlyle's first book-length publication and the one in which many of the major themes of this most Victorian of writers are first discernible. After its initial appearance in serial form in 1833, the book gradually gained in popularity and fame until it became recognized as one of those magical texts that seems to embody the entirety of an epoch's interests and aspirations. While the work is, and has been, cited within the context of the study of dress and costume history, such references range from the exceedingly brief to the exceptionally dismissive. Certainly, *Sartor Resartus* is unlike any of the other classic texts examined in this book. Its booming prose, the fact that it is, ostensibly, a work of fiction together with its overt religiosity makes sure of that. And yet, it is my contention that *Sartor Resartus* may be

seen as a founding text, one that imaginatively prefigures the discourse on dress that follows.[2]

Before we look at the details of Professor Teufelsdröckh's clothes philosophy, something has to be said about the nature of Carlyle's book as a whole as well as his relationship to its overt theme. *Sartor Resartus*, though a work of fiction, is quite unlike other English novels of the nineteenth century. It is not a 'realistic' story if, by that, is meant the unfolding of a tale in which recognizably human characters interact in recognizably real situations. *Sartor Resartus* is a drama of ideas and these ideas are placed before the reader often with little regard for the creation of realistic contexts. Nor may the book be said to be a scientific or philosophical treatise in which the writing style is subservient to its information. The book steadfastly refuses a simple and open proclamation of its message, preferring instead to adopt a number of oblique approaches such as satire, caricature and irony. Everything that happens in the book, everything that is proclaimed by the principal protagonists, has to be interpreted for its 'other' meaning. At the centre of this complex shuffling of the explicit and the metaphorical lies Carlyle's extraordinary notion of clothing. A sense of just how flavoursome the clothes metaphor is for Carlyle comes very early on when the character of the English editor launches into one of the book's many rolling observations on the nature of clothing:

> that . . . grand Tissue of all Tissues, the only real Tissue . . . the vestural Tissue, namely, of woollen or other Cloth; wherein his whole other tissues are included and screened, his whole Faculties work, his whole Self lives, moves, and has its being.[3]

Metaphor this may be, but there is something about the relish with which the speaker elaborates upon, and returns to, his subject that suggests that it is aspiring to be more than just a simple figure of speech. As the book unfolds the reader is quickly made aware that the author has meditated for a long time upon what the importance of this 'vestural tissue' might be.

The use of clothes as metaphor is hardly original. Ever since Adam and Eve covered their sensitive parts, clothing has served as a rich allegorical resource. Clothes had proven to be a vivid means with which to dramatize our complex natures. There is something about the way in which clothing and the human body flow into each other that enables metaphorical correspondences between the two to acquire a particular force. Most importantly, it becomes (certainly in the West) one of the prime ways of making tangible the differences between a determinate order of nature and the non-natural dimensions of human existence. Indeed, at one point Teufelsdröckh defines humans as 'two-legged animals without feathers'.[4] As well, clothing has been regularly cast in the role of either a screen, or a sensitive register, of what lies within.[5]

Carlyle's use of clothes as metaphor is more complex than this well-worn path. The first thing to strike the reader is that it is not just garments that Carlyle lights upon as a way of formulating his philosophy. Each stage of the 'social life' of clothing seems to present him with equally rich sources of metaphorical suggestion. Cloth in general as well as its material variability is returned to repeatedly. Cloth's mode of production – that is, spinning and weaving and crucially the transformation of these processes into mechanized factory production – became for Carlyle one of the most important ways in which he could give shape to the blight of 'materialist externality'. Just prior to the publication of *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle had published his great essay 'Signs of the Times' (1829) in which he highlighted the consequences of industrialization for the traditional weaver. This seems to have suggested to Carlyle a way of particularizing the misery of mechanization.

> On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster.[6]

This is a critical moment in human affairs. When the animate is displaced by the inanimate our souls are changed and if the soul changes, so too will those 'vestural tissues' that enfold our bodies and our being. This fascination with clothing is carried through to their decomposition into rags. At the end of their lives as garments Carlyle again senses that more is happening than just the decay of matter. Now the metaphor can be turned, with devastating effect, on the otiose social institutions Carlyle sees all around him. Here he is 'ragging' established religion.

> For the last three centuries, above all, for the last three-quarters of a century, that same Pericardial Tissue . . . of Religion, where lies the Life-essence of Society, has been smote at and perforated, needfully and needlessly; till now it is quite rent into shreds.[7]

Toward the end of the book he will describe the plight of the Irish poor and their spiritual condition as the 'Shock of Rags'.[8]

Soul, Body, Clothes

We have seen that one of the distinctive characteristics of Carlyle's use of the clothes metaphor is the breadth and the intensity with which he pursues it. One of the most convincing descriptions of Carlyle's uniqueness in *Sartor Resartus*

is that advanced by G.B. Tennyson.[9] Rather than settling on any fresh content in Carlyle's deployment of the clothes metaphor, Tennyson tries to identify the source of the metaphor's extraordinary power, a power that is capable of supporting a whole book. Tennyson's answer is that what Carlyle glimpses at the beginning of the metaphor is a way of meshing together the three grand generalities of vesture (clothes), body and spirit:

> the meaning with which Carlyle began *Sartor* appears as the clothes metaphor itself; just as clothing covers the body, which in turn houses the soul, so the visible world covers an invisible one, which has as its animating spirit the mind of God. What gives *Sartor* an organism to grow on also gives it dynamism. *Sartor* in operation is the expansion of the clothes metaphor to analogy, the elaboration of an initial perception of *likeness* to a detailed working out of similarities in *relations*.[10]

Starting from an observation that one line of relations can be used to illuminate a second line of relations, Carlyle erects a complex structure embracing each of its terms in a web of multiple interrelationships. With this insight in place he can elaborate, imagine and organize his vision of the universe and our place in it. One of Carlyle's favourite ways of dramatizing this metaphorical structure is to snap one the many possible relational permutations between clothes, body and spirit to see what eventuates. As we shall see in a moment, this produces some of the book's most startling passages.

Carlyle, at least early in his career, was a radical critic not simply of industrialization and mechanization but of the spiritual conditions that encouraged these new social tendencies to flourish and become a blueprint for life in general. Whatever name put to the disease ailing Britain – utilitarianism, materialism, functionalism, 'mere externality' or the 'Age of Machinery' – for Carlyle the cause was always the same; a degradation in the quality of religious faith. Without religious faith, soul (or spirit) is absent from the hearts of men and as a consequence they would build a world in which humans were imagined to be nothing more than complicated pieces of machinery. As Carlyle remarks, 'Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand'. There is a moment in the story of Teufelsdröckh's coming of age when, trapped inside a mood of crushing despondency, he has a vision of the universe without faith and it is hellish.

> 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. O the vast, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death![11]

For Carlyle, the world around him was full of concrete situations where the proper relations between soul, clothing, and spirit had come unstuck, and the

author of *Sartor Resartus* delights in bringing these to our attention by grotesquely manipulating clothing. In another of his moments of illumination, Teufelsdröckh has a vestimentary epiphany, suddenly seeing clothes as pure unmediated materiality severed from any inner significance.

> It was in some such mood . . . that I first came upon the question of clothes. Strange enough, it strikes me, is this same fact of there being Tailors and Tailored. The Horse I ride has his own whole fell: strip him of the girths and flaps and extraneous tags I have fastened around him, and the noble creature is his own sempster and weaver and spinner: nay his own bootmaker, jeweller and man-milliner; he bounds free through the valleys, with a perennial rainproof court-suit on his body; wherein warmth and easiness of fit have reached perfection . . . While I – Good heaven! – have thatched myself over with the dead fleeces of sheep, the bark of vegetables, the entrails of worms, the hides of oxen or seals, the felt of furred beasts; and walk abroad a moving Rag-screen, overheaped with shreds and tatters raked from the Charnel house of nature, where they would have rotted, to rot on me more slowly![12]

The extraordinary power of this passage comes from its ability to see us, and our 'stuff', through the eyes and mind of an alien. It is a sort of anti-transcendentalism where any kind of elementary sublimation has failed to take place.

Carlyle repeats this strategy of illumination-through-negation when Teufelsdröckh meditates upon the importance of clothing to the lives of humans as social beings, that is, the relationship of clothes to politics. In a remarkably contemporary assertion the character of the English editor observes that 'Teufelsdröckh, though a Sanscullottist, is no Adamite'. The professor will have nothing to do with the notion that if we were to strip off our outer casings truth, equality and justice would blossom. He knows that social being is 'clothed-being' and drives this point home by asking us to imagine the political order naked.

> Often in my atrabiliar moods, when I read of pompous ceremonials, Frankfort coronations, Royal Drawing-rooms, Levees, Couchees; and how the ushers and macers and pursuivants are all in waiting; how Duke this is presented by archduke that, and Colonel A by General B, and innumerable Bishops, Admirals, and miscellaneous Functionaries, are advancing gallantly to the anointed presence; and I strive, in my remote privacy, to form a clear picture of that solemnity, – on a sudden, as by some enchanter's wand, the – shall I speak it? – the Clothes fly off the whole dramatic corps; and dukes, Grandees, Bishops, generals, Anointed Presence itself, every mother's son of them, stand straddling there, not a shirt on them; and I know not whether to weep or laugh.[13]

Who hasn't, at some point, wished something similar on the rich and powerful? Remove these external emblems of our communality and what eventuates is

farce, not truth. It must be stressed, however, that this is no unthinking endorsement of the *status quo* on Carlyle's part. Always the three elements of his vision need to be kept in touch with one another otherwise the relation between an emblem and its life-source becomes distorted. Take the spirit out of clothes and the bodies inside them and they can still hold power over us long after their occupants have any claims to political legitimacy. These emblems of defunct authority eventually die and decay, no longer possessed by an inner spirit, but there are times when this dying can take an age. Nowhere is Carlyle more frightening, and more savage than when he attacks the established Church for its lack of spirit.

> Meanwhile, in our era of the World, those same Church-Clothes have gone sorrowfully out at the elbows: nay, far worse, many of them have become mere hollow shapes, or Masks, under which no living figure or Spirit any longer dwells; but only spiders and unclean beetles, in horrid accumulation, drive their trade; and the Mask still glares on you with its glass-eyes in ghastly affectation of Life,- some generation and a half after religion has quite withdrawn from it, and in unnoticed nooks is weaving for herself new vestures, wherewith to reappear, and bless us, or our sons or grandsons.[14]

Clothes, literal and metaphorical, have proved fruitful for Carlyle. Bodies without wrappings become entities devoid of signs of human order and this is because clothes are the outward manifestation, the external condition, of our sociality, our ideals, or what Carlyle would call our 'spirit'. Dead emblems may command obedience but they will never inspire reverence.

Clothes, their Origin and Influence

We first encounter the clothes philosophy in the *magnum opus* of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh entitled *Die Kleider ihr Werden und Wirken* or *Clothes, their Origin and Influence*.[15] (Hereafter referred to as *Die Kleider*.) Some clarification of the structure of *Sartor Resartus* is necessary in order to distinguish between the several voices that are in play at various times in the book. In Book One a fictional 'English editor', whose name and biographical details remain unspecified, introduces his English readers to the professor and his book, *Die Kleider*. Most of what the reader encounters at this stage are comments made by the editor on Teufelsdröckh's eccentric project, together with numerous extracts from the book itself. Throughout, the English editor maintains an ambivalent attitude toward the ideas being put forward by the professor. Admiration there certainly is but also a healthy scepticism toward what he regards as the excesses of German thought. In Book Two a more complex

fictional conceit is let loose. We learn some of the details of Teufelsdröckh's life, in particular those experiences which lead him to formulate the clothes philosophy. An acquaintance of the professor from Weissnichtwo, Hofrath Heuschrecke, responds to a request from the English editor for details of the life of the author of *Die Kleider*. Some time later, six paper bags arrive in England. Each bag is marked with a zodiacal sign and consists of 'miscellaneous masses of Sheets, oftener Shreds and Snips' all written in Teufelsdröckh's hand. The account we are given of his life is one that the editor himself has compiled from the disordered material found in the six bags. The final volume assumes a more straightforward form. The English editor at last opens *Die Kleider* and, by way of extensive quotation, discusses in detail the ideas to be found therein. If the present context of writing were one of a work of literary criticism then it would certainly be important to distinguish between the voices of all these characters as well as that of the author Carlyle. While the prospective reader should be aware of the existence of these numerous characters, most of the explicit 'clothing ideas' that are looked at here derive from the Book-within-the-Book. The exact contents of *Die Kleider* are never fully spelt out by the English editor; however, the book's subtitle 'their origin and influence' gives a good indication of how the topic of clothing is generally organized and discussed. I begin with origin and for simplicity's sake refer simply to Carlyle.

Carlyle was never much taken with the notion that clothing was something secondary to the essence of human being. 'Nature is good but she is not the best'.[16] Take clothing off our backs and you also remove that which is the emblem of our unity. '*Man is a Spirit*, and bound by invisible bonds to *All Men . . . he wears clothes* which are visible emblems of that fact.'[17] He refers to this belief in a state of clothesless primal beneficence as 'Adamitism' and his disagreements with this philosophy show just how contrary to established religious ideas this advocate of spiritual renewal had become. Christian Europe had had its own explanation of the origin of clothes in the story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Carlyle unequivocally rejects this view of pre-lapsarian naked perfection:

> Nay, now when the reign of folly is over, or altered, and thy clothes are not for triumph but for defence, hast thou always worn them perforce, and as a consequence of Man's Fall; never rejoiced in them as in a war immoveable House, a Body round thy Body, wherein that strange THEE of thine sat snug, defying all variations of Climate?[18]

Clothes do not derive, argues Carlyle, from shame, modesty, or any of the other sexual anxieties supposed to have arisen as a consequence of the Fall. Instead,

he advances an explanation that single-handedly establishes the genre of the dress studies in a manner which persisted well into the twentieth century.

> The first purpose of Clothes, as our Professor imagines, was not warmth or decency, but ornament.[19]

In that simple statement can be found perhaps the most seminal clothes idea in the whole of *Sartor Resartus*. Not functionality, since that would make of clothes 'mere externalities'. Not the empty dogmas of established religion, but ornament. "Decoration', Carlyle asserts is 'the first spiritual want of a barbarous man' and in making this claim he turns the scrutiny and comprehension of clothing into a matter for anthropology; a move that would be more than confirmed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

History and Style

One element, remarkable for its almost complete absence from *Sartor Resartus*, is clothings' figurative cousin, fashion. One reason for this is that our contemporary sense of the meaning of fashion contains a strong, perhaps dominant, sense of time's passage. Fashion is equated with the sequence of clothing styles that have characterized Western dress since the end of the Middle Ages. Put specifically, fashion is that dynamic force that propels changes in clothing, come what may. When fashion is discussed in *Sartor* – as happens in the famous chapter on Dandies – it is used in the sense of 'being in fashion'; that is, being dressed *á la mode* with the emphasis falling on modish conformity rather than rapid and arbitrary changes in clothing styles over time. This might lead us to assume that the element of time is absent from Carlyle's musings on clothes but this is not the case.

It should be remarked, if the reader has not already guessed, that Carlyle was a rare specimen in the British intellectual scene of his day. One source of this distinctiveness was his fluency in German, to the extent that he produced some of the first translations of Goethe in English. As well as his familiarity with the German language he was also an admirer of contemporary German literature and thought and, crucially, of German Idealist philosophy. This intellectual debt shaped Carlyle's thinking about clothes in two ways. First, he comprehends that the changes that happen over time to human 'stuff' are unitary in character. Change there may be, but it is change that, beneath the surface, partakes of a profound coherence and is never just a set of events isolated from one another. When the English editor attempts to describe what is going on in *Die Kleider* he cites, in support of his argument, the extraordinary

diversity of costumes over space and time. He is of the opinion that it is the manner in which Teufelsdröckh attempts to explain this diversity that constitutes the most notable feature of the professor's method.

> Walking by the light of Oriental, Pelasgic, Scandinavian, Egyptian, Otaheitean, Ancient and Modern researches of every conceivable kind, he strives to give us in compressed shape . . . an *Orbis Vestitus*, or view of the costumes of all mankind, in all countries, in all times.[20]

What Carlyle has absorbed from German philosophy is a belief that historical time needs to be distinguished from clock time. To understand human life is to understand that it eventuates within a temporal continuum that is both cumulative and progressive. This means that the human species is never fully present to itself at any one moment but is in a constant process of 'becoming itself.'[21] Time, therefore, is of the essence. Another strong debt to German thought can be detected in Carlyle's notion of the unity and distinctiveness that typifies human making. This idea, namely that what issues forth from human manufacture is neither unmediated functionality nor 'mere accident', is of course the sense carried by the idea of style. Style, together with the notion that historical time has quite specific characteristics, became the foundation of what, later in the nineteenth century, became known in German thought as 'Geisteswissenschaften' or 'human sciences'. Although Carlyle does not use the word 'style', preferring instead the phrase 'an Architectural Idea', the manner in which this is subsequently elaborated leaves little doubt that it is 'style' that he has in mind. The section of *Die Kleider* where the notion of the 'Architectural Idea' undergoes elaboration is worth examining in some detail as it could stand as a manifesto for the study of dress almost up until the present day.

Teufelsdröckh begins with a plea for there to come into being an *Esprit de Costumes* which would match in the seriousness of its intent Montesquieu's *Esprit de Lois*. Clothing is no longer to be the province of the anecdotal, of the dilettante, or of indifference – what he later refers to as 'a comfortable winter-evening entertainment'. This desire to institute a proper study of clothing is possible because of certain crucial characteristics that mark all human endeavours, the most notable being that of 'patterning' or of a certain constant manner of form. This 'styling' would be the proper object of study because 'neither in tailoring nor in legislating does man proceed by mere Accident, but the hand is ever guided on by mysterious operations of the mind'.[22] By the time of the publication of *Sartor Resartus*, mind, spirit or *Geist* had become one of the key concepts of German Romantic thought. Zygmund Bauman has observed that 'what had been the individual *Seele* (Soul) turned into a collective

Geist and later *Kultur*'.[23] Each *Geist* struggled to discover a distinctive material embodiment for this collective mental entity. 'Style' was the name given to the specific patterns that emerged within material 'stuff' as it was appropriated by *Geist* for its expressive ends. Carlyle exactly reiterates this notion of style. Inside, animating the products of human labour, 'lurks' the architectural idea. If we are to understand the bewildering variety of human 'Modes and habilatory endeavours' it is to this inner impulse that our eyes and minds must be turned. As the professor remarks later in this passage 'every snip of the Scissors has been regulated and prescribed by ever active Influences'.[24] 'Ever active', but also ever changing. This constant shifting in the inner disposition of the human collective is what causes such diversity in human ways of living. At this point we get another of Carlyle's wonderful rolling comparisons.

> Whether he flow gracefully out in folded mantles, based on light sandals; tower up in high headgear, from amid peaks, spangles and bell-girdles; swell out in starched ruffs, buckram stuffings and monstrous tuberosities; or girth himself into separate sections, and front the world an agglomeration of four limbs, – will depend on the nature of such Architectural Idea[25]

The task of the Clothes-Philosopher is to describe and to tabulate the variety of 'habilatory modes' but he, or she, must also be able to move into the heart of the product, or work, if they are to locate the source of its distinctiveness. That is, they must approach, and enter, *Geist*. As Carlyle comments 'If the Cut betoken Intellect and Talent, so does the Colour betoken temper and heart'.[26]

Dandies and Drudges

The final topic that I want to discuss is the notorious chapter entitled 'The Dandiacal Body'. I have left this until now as a way of countering some of the misconceptions that have formed about Carlyle's ideas about clothing. These, I suspect, have arisen due to this chapter being interpreted in isolation.

On the whole Carlyle's attack upon dandies has not received a sympathetic hearing. Typical is the comment made by that very minor talent, Max Beerbohm, that 'anyone who dressed so very badly as did Thomas Carlyle should have tried to construct a philosophy of clothes has always seemed to me one of the most pathetic things in literature'.[27] James Laver castigates Carlyle for his moralism:

> If Carlyle had really been an 'Inquirer in to Clothes', and not merely concerned to emphasize the scandalous difference between the luxury of a dandy and the poverty

> of an Irish peasant he might have found meat for meditation in the pages of Pelham, as well as in those of another young author who was just coming into prominence.[28] (Here Laver is referring to Disraeli.)

Even Ellen Moers, whose account of the anti-dandiacal movement of the 1830s is otherwise fair and balanced, misinterprets the clothes-philosophy of *Sartor Resartus* when she states:

> In Carlyle's morality it was not enough to value the soul over the exterior . . . True merit lay in the renunciation of surface adornment altogether.[29]

Moers's statement is contradicted by what Carlyle has to say in his essay about Jean-Paul Friederich Richter, a figure he much admired. Richter was a German thinker and scholar and at a certain point in the late Eighteenth century he began to deviate quite seriously from the dress codes of his contemporaries. Carlyle is quite explicit about both his fascination with, and his admiration for, Richter's odd behaviour and in a comment, particularly telling for his 'anti-dandy' attitude, he remarks that 'It was a species of pride, even foppery, we will admit; but a tough, strong limbed species . . .'[30] *Sartor Resartus* was never a renunciation of clothes, or even a criticism of elaborate costume. It was a manifesto for authenticity, a plea for the outer 'vestural tissue' to become the true embodiment of spiritual and social renewal: 'blessed he who has a skin and tissues, so it be a living one, and the heart-pulse everywhere discernible through it.'[31] Much more is being articulated in 'The Dandiacal Body' chapter than a dismissal of Regency 'fancy pants'.

The circumstances of how and why that chapter came to be written have been more than adequately covered by scholars such as Moers, Tennyson and Kaplan. It must be admitted that there is undoubtedly an element of personal animosity, as well as intellectual disagreement, fuelling Carlyle's anti-dandy manifesto.[32] But having said this, the reasons for the dispute becoming personal fade away when one realizes that what was happening in this instance was just one small example of the revolution taking place in the social mores and intellectual convictions of a whole section of the nation. Daily life for the British middle and upper classes was changing and changing fast. Part of this change was the rejection, and then demonization, of the values and manners associated with George IV and William IV. What was coming into being was Victorianism with its, at least, overt espousal of personal abstemiousness, social and individual improvement, hard work and earnest desire to be useful and do good. One further matter somewhat complicates things. The ostensible cause of the chapter being written was the encounter that Carlyle had had with Bulwer-Lytton's dandy novel, *Pelham*.[33] In fact, Carlyle includes in his chapter an

extract from that novel – the section titled 'Articles of Faith' – which are a list of rules by which the hero organizes his daily life. They are very funny and are in the tradition of camp humour which stretches (at least) from Beau Brummel, through to Wilde, and up to the present day. Carlyle's response at the end of the list is anything but po-faced. To assertions such as 'THERE IS SAFETY IN A SWALLOW TAIL!' he replies, 'All of which propositions I, for the present, content myself with modestly but peremptorily and irrevocably denying.'[34]

Carlyle's argument with the dandiacal philosophy and the class with which it was associated – what G.B. Tennyson somewhat abruptly dismisses as 'the do-nothing aristocracy' – is that they invert the principal tenet of the clothes-philosophy. Others 'dress to live', the dandy 'lives to dress'.[35] But having established their fundamental difference to the normal relationship between life and clothes, Carlyle sets out to explore the nature of this 'Poet of Cloth' and in so doing unravels the vernacular philosophy at work in the appearance and demeanour of the dandy. He might not like what he finds but his ability to put before the reader dandyism's 'Architectural Idea' ranks with Charles Baudelaire's comments on dandyism in his essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' and Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp'.[36] Like the latter two critics, Carlyle senses that the emergence of the dandy is related to the arrival of novel historical circumstances, in particular the decline of a collective religious sense. Teufelsdröckh puts it so:

> In these distracted times when the Religious Principle, driven out of most Churches, either lies unseen in the hearts of good men, looking and longing and silently working there towards some new revelation; or else wanders homeless over the world, like a disembodied soul seeking its terrestrial organisation, – into how many strange shapes, of Superstition and Fanaticism, does it not tentatively and errantly cast itself![37]

Dandyism arises, therefore, to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of the sea of faith. Only on the body of the dresser and its immediate vicinity can the world be given any reliable meaning. However, within this narrow horizon Carlyle glimpses all the usual attributes of the cult.

> . . . these people, animated with the zeal of a new Sect, display courage and perseverance, and what force there is in man's nature though never so enslaved. They affect great purity and separatism; distinguish themselves by a particular costume . . . and, on the whole, strive to . . . keep themselves unspotted from the world.[38]

Carlyle's problem is that the group he is talking about are drawn from the ruling class as well as the ruling-class-in-waiting and it is his opinion that these

are not at all the sorts of disposition that will be adequate for the world that is coming into existence. For Carlyle beautiful, futile retreat is simply not a good enough philosophy for those who would claim political legitimacy. It is at this point that he starts to draw a comparison between the dandies and the poor.

Carlyle fails to match his sensitivity to the subtleties of the dandy idea when he attempts to grasp the 'Architectural Idea' of the poor. What might have been witty and amusing when applied to the wealthy loses its humour when turned upon the 'Bogtrotters', 'White-Negroes', 'Ragged-Beggars' or 'Poor-Slaves'; all names he uses to describe the (Irish) poor. Assertion substitutes for elucidation: '. . . the original Sect is that of the *Poor-Slaves*; whose doctrines, practices, and fundamental characteristics, pervade and animate the whole Body, howsoever denominated or outwardly diversified.'[39] Carlyle then launches into one of his grotesque descriptive passages as he tries to do justice to the unruly combination of materials and styles that constitute the typical appearance of the 'Poor-Slave Sect'.

> Their raiment consists of innumerable skirts, lappets, and irregular wings, of all cloths and of all colours; through the labyrinthic intricacies of which their bodies are introduced by some unknown process. It is fastened together by a multiplex combination of buttons, thrums, and skewers; to which frequently is added a girdle of leather, of hempen or even straw rope, round the loins . . . In head-dress they affect a certain freedom: hats with partial brim, without crown, or with only a loose, hinged, or valved crown, they sometimes invert the hat, and wear it brim uppermost . . . with what view is unknown.[40]

While Carlyle recognises that there can be a style in – and of – poverty, the final admission of defeat in the quotation above would suggest even Teufelsdröckh is unable to go beyond the banal observation that grinding penury is awful, that it leaves no time or energy for the elaboration of the faculties and that those who suffer from this condition tend to lead lives of resentful obedience punctuated by outbreaks of savage destruction. What is important here is not the accuracy of Carlyle's reading of the appearance of the poor, although a great deal of what he says confirms Engels in his study of the Manchester working class.[41] What we have here is the birth of an important trope through which the class divisions of Britain will be played and replayed over the next hundred years. In the differences between these two 'Sects', Carlyle discerns a possible future for the nation and it is not a comforting one: 'I could liken Dandyism and Drudgism to two bottomless boiling whirlpools that had broken out on opposite quarters of the firm land.'[42] This is the beginning of the idea of the 'two nations' that, if left in their divided state, will eventually result in the kind of biological apartheid envisioned by H.G. Wells in his book *The Time*

Machine. At the back of this criticism of dandyism a fight is being conducted, not just about the redefinition of ruling-class masculinity, but about what being a ruling class in this new order means. Not least of these considerations is to discover an appropriate external form that could embody the new high seriousness imposed by the duties of government and the leadership of civil society.

The Legacy of the Clothes-Philosophy

It may seem a perverse decision to start these studies with a text where it is not even clear whether the author is serious about what he is saying in regard to clothes. Apart from the ten or so pages (out of two hundred and twenty) that deal with dandyism it cannot be said, with any confidence, that Carlyle's book exerts a great influence on any of the thinkers that we look at subsequently. Other than the specialised literature on dandyism, *Sartor Resartus* is, now, seldom cited in dress studies. Yet the book, I believe, can be regarded as the founding text for the emergence of the serious and organized study of clothing.

It would not be difficult to demonstrate that, in *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle's concept of clothes is modern, just as it would not be difficult to argue that his concept of clothing is also archaic. The 'archaic' element is that aspect of Carlyle's text that is 'pre-social', or better perhaps, 'pre-sociological'. While there is a strong sense of clothing and its styles being collective, there is little indication on Carlyle's part that this collectivity is subject to 'social laws'. It takes the work of Herbert Spencer, whose ideas we examine in the next chapter, to place this idea centre stage. But in one respect what Carlyle is doing is transparent to the modern reader and that is his vision of the world, but especially the human world, as being a conjoining of spirit and matter which can only be grasped by the labour of interpretation, not measurement. Given his enormous debt to German Idealist philosophy could we say that Carlyle is engaged in a kind of hermeneutic activity? If we allow that this is happening, then much of what Carlyle is up to in *Sartor Resartus* becomes comprehensible. Although not overly influenced, or impressed, by Hegel, I find it worth noting that the latter's *The Philosophy of History* was published in 1837.[43] In the 'Introduction' to that work Hegel advances the idea of the 'Spirit of a People' and a 'Spirit of a Time' existing in the form of a pervasive ethos which imparts to both a people, and an historical epoch, a distinctiveness. These non-material aspects of culture, those supra-individual entities that infuse the lives of a nation press with equal intensity upon all elements within a particular life-world. Remember that Diogenes Teufelsdröckh's official position within the University of Weissnichtwo is the 'Professor of Things-in-General' and we should read that title as meaning the study of the particular *in light of* the

universal, as well as someone whose curiosity encompasses the trivial, the mundane and the everyday. I am tempted to claim that many of the elements that make up today's Cultural Studies are present in that summary, but perhaps that is going too far. Certainly, much of what might be termed the 'German antecedent' to Cultural Studies – thinkers such as Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin – would be happy with a great deal of that characterization, but that is not quite what I claiming for *Sartor Resartus*.

The reader should recall that *Sartor Resartus* is a work of fiction, albeit an unusual one. We also saw that there was nothing at all novel in the way the author used the idea of clothes as a metaphor for human life. Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* is not strictly speaking the founding text of an 'Esprit des Costumes': it is Teufelsdröckh's *Die Kleider ihr Werden und Wirken* that can claim this title. It was perhaps only in a work of fiction that could summon up the imaginary spaces in which the professor and his book could appear. Carlyle takes a clichéd trope – clothes as metaphor for human life – and distends it into a luxuriant analogy. In one of the clearings that opens up in the complex structure of *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle engages in some further elaboration in which analogy becomes (almost) scientific discipline. *Sartor Resartus* founds dress studies not because it causes what comes later but because it is the first to imagine what comes later.

Notes

1. The derivation of Teufelsdröckh's name is still a matter of dispute among Carlyle scholars. One possibility is suggested by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (London, 1892). At one point while describing the poor quality of clothing available for working men he remarks 'And, if a working-man once buys himself a woollen coat for Sunday, he must get it from one of the cheap shops where he finds bad, so-called "Devil's-dust" cloth manufactured for sale and not for use, and liable to grow threadbare in a fortnight . . .'. p. 101 This would certainly enable Carlyle to remain within the metaphor of clothing. For a useful discussion of Carlyle's visit to Manchester in 1838 and the effects that his encounter with the textile industry had upon him see Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class*, Random House, New York, 1975, pp. 32–6.

2. At the time that sentence was written the author was under the impression that he was the sole representative from dress studies to be a member of the Carlyle Appreciation Society. He has since discovered that he was not alone. See William Keenan's excellent 'Introduction: *Sartor Resartus* Restored: Dress Studies in Carlylean Perspective', in W.J.F. Keenan (ed.), *Dressed to Impress: Looking the Part*, New York and Oxford: Berg, 2001.

3. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, eds K. McSweeney and Peter Sabor, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 4.

4. Ibid., p. 18.

5. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, New York: Avon, 1980, p. 445. This text has an extremely useful discussion of the various tropes that use clothing. See pp. 444–54.

6. Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', in Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 1, Boston and New York, Colonial Press, n.d., p. 465. Orig. pub. 1829.

7. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 176.

8. Ibid., p. 212.

9. G.B. Tennyson, *Sartor Called Resartus: The Genesis, Structure and Style of Thomas Carlyle's First Major Work*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965.

10. Ibid., p. 166.

11. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 127.

12. Ibid., pp. 44–5.

13. Ibid., p. 48.

14. Ibid., p. 164.

15. Tennyson *Sartor*, pp. 186–7, has reconstructed the contents of *Der Kleider,* as far as possible, in the following way:

'*Die Kleider Ihr Werden und Wirken*
Part 1. *Werden*
Chapter 1. 'Paradise and Fig-leaves'.
Several historical chapters
c. Chapter 5. 'Aprons'.
Several historical chapters
c. Chapter 8. Medieval and Renaissance clothing
Several historical chapters up to the nineteenth century
Part II *Wirken*
Chapter 1. 'World out of Clothes'
Chapter 2. 'Adamitism'
Chapter 3. 'Pure Reason'
Probably several other chapters
c. Chapter 6. 'Perfectibility'
c. Chapter 7. 'Church-Clothes'
Chapter 8. 'Symbols'
Chapter 9. 'Organic Filaments'
Chapter 10. 'Natural Supernaturalism'.

For some reason Tennyson omits from this schema the last two chapters of *Sartor*, 'The Dandiacal Body' and 'Tailors'.

16. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 47.

17. Ibid., p. 48.

18. Ibid., p. 46.

19. Ibid., p. 30.

20. Ibid., pp. 29–30.

21. The Carlyle scholar John Holloway has summarized the notion of time held by Carlyle and the German Idealist school of thought in the following manner:

1. the universe is fundamentally not a inert automatism, but the incarnation of a cosmic spiritual life;
2. world history is the expression of spiritual life analogous to that of the individual consciousness;
3. the principle of cosmic life is progressively eliminating from the universe everything inimical to its inner purpose;
4. man's duty is to further this process, even at the cost of his own immediate happiness.

John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, New York: Norton, 1965. Quoted in Jerry A. Dibble, *The Drunken Pythia's Song: Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus and the Style Problem in German Idealist Philosophy*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978, p. 42.

22. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 28.

23. Zygmund Bauman, *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, London: Hutchinson, 1978, p. 24.

24. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 28.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Max Beerbohm, 'Dandies and Dandies', in *The Incomparable Max Beerbohm,* London: Icon, 1964, p. 18.

28. James Laver, *Dandies*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968, p. 50.

29. Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1960, p. 181.

30. Carlyle, 'Jean Paul Friederich Richter', first published in the *Edinburgh Review*, 1827. See Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Vol. III, London, 1872, p. 27.

31. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1906, p. 109.

32. Tennyson, *Sartor*, Moers, *Dandy*, Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography,* New York: Cornell University Press, 1983.

33. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Pelham or the Adventures of a Gentleman*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1972. See 'Maxims' pp. 177–80.

34. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 212.

35. Ibid., p. 207.

36. Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists,* trans. P.E. Charvet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972; Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' in Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Laurel, 1969.

37. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 208.

38. Ibid., pp. 209–10.

39. Ibid., p. 212.

40. Ibid., p. 213.

41. See Engels, *Condition of Working Class* and Marcus, *Engels, Manchester*.

42. Carlyle, *Sartor*, p. 216.

43. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, New York: Dover, 1956. See 'Introduction', pp. 52–3.

2

Herbert Spencer's Sartorial Protestantism

If we go back far enough we find that . . .

Herbert Spencer

Other than by specialists in intellectual history, the work of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) is seldom read these days, yet the writings of those whom he influenced, thinkers such as Durkheim, Veblen, Weber and Simmel, are read and reread as classics of social theory. Even before his death Spencer's intellectual system (of which more later) appeared to many as *passé,* but there can be little doubt that, with the exception of Roland Barthes, his influence permeates the work of all the later fashion classics.

Spencer's biography makes fascinating reading, as it is the type of life that the contemporary institutionalization of the intellect has rendered almost unimaginable. His formal education was an 'enthusiastic' experience rather than a rigorous one and ended in his late teens. Soon after leaving school Spencer began work as a surveyor for one of the new English railway companies and it was here that he acquired an interest in geology and biology which he added to his concern with politics and what would now be called 'social issues'. By this time he had already begun to publish pamphlets dealing in a wide variety of topics.[1] In 1853 his father died and an inheritance enabled Spencer to devote himself to writing. His first venture into the topics of dress and fashion occurs as early as 1854 in his insightful essay 'Manners and Fashion', but it is not until Volume II of *The Principles of Sociology*, originally published in 1879, that he attempts a comprehensive explanation of the two phenomena.[2] However, it is not just the encounter with his writings on dress that proves so influential for the writers of the fashion classics tradition, but as well the broader framework within which he places them. From 1850, with the publication of his first large-scale work *Social Statics*, Spencer is engaged in a monumental project aiming to produce a synthesis of all human knowledge then current about the workings of nature, (both animate and inanimate); of the physical and spiritual make-up of Humanity; of our actions as individuals

as well as our lives within the 'Superorganic' collectivity called society.[3] It is the contents of this synthesizing vision that exercised such a powerful influence upon both his contemporaries and the following generations. Spencer's influence was felt in France, Germany, North America, Japan and Russia as well as the United Kingdom and, as will become clear in later chapters, is still to be detected in the work of James Laver as late as the 1950s and early 1960s. If we are to understand Spencer's ideas about clothing and fashion, and why his ideas created such a powerful intellectual consensus among the writers of the fashion classics tradition, we need to grasp the main features of his general system.

Although quite different from his predecessor Thomas Carlyle, Spencer has one thing in common with Carlyle and that is a strong metaphysical disposition. Both were renegades from the philosophical tradition of British empiricism. Spencer was simultaneously a child of this tradition and a dissenter from it. His grand organizing generality is evolution but it is a conception of evolution encompassing a great deal more than Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and the discovery that biological species are malleable. What makes Spencer such an awkward character is that his sublime vision of the processes animating the universe is at the same time linked to an obsessive desire for fact accumulation and a strong commitment to science. A great deal of his working life is taken up with publishing volumes of the *Descriptive Sociology* sequence. This is a vast compendium of facts drawn from a wide variety of geographical locations and historical epochs. Spencer's intention for this work was that it should constitute a foundation of empirical evidence for his general principles about evolution.[4] At this point, readers should be assured that this journey into the intricacies of Spencer's system will pay dividends. Not only will it enable us to get a firmer grasp on Spencer's specific ideas about dress, it will also lead to an appreciation of why it is that so many of his general ideas constitute an all-embracing climate through which these specific topics are discussed. Three aspects of Spencer's general synthesis are discussed here. First, his assertion that social life is governed by laws. Then, his conception of evolution as being the 'law of laws'. Finally, the influence Spencer had upon the body of ideas that came to be known as 'the theory of Social Evolution'.

Social Life and Science

Through Spencer's long association and direct contact with the natural sciences he harboured none of that suspicion toward science and technology that are such a feature of Carlyle's thinking. Spencer is optimistic about the new forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution and in one of his earliest essays he sets

out his belief that the social life of human kind is governed by laws in the same way that nature is governed by the laws being discovered by science and applied with such success by technology. In his essay 'The Proper Sphere of Government' Spencer declares that 'Everything in nature has its laws'. His list of the dimensions of the universe that are law-bound is comprehensive; 'inorganic matter', 'organic matter', 'animate beings', 'Man as an animate being', 'Man spiritually', 'Man individually (Psychology)', 'man socially'.[5] To assert that human life is 'law-bound' is not an original statement. However, it is *how* Spencer conceived of these 'laws' that marks him off from earlier generations. Immediately after tabulating the many law-governed dimensions of nature, Spencer makes the following observation:

> As with man individually, so with man socially. Society as certainly has its governing principles as man has.[6]

A number of things in this remark need to be noted. First, Spencer identifies 'society' as the object and sphere in which human collective life takes place. But 'society' cannot be simply equated with 'human'. Once individuals congregate into groups a qualitative change takes place among them and a 'something' emerges that is more than sum of its individual parts. This entity, or 'society', brings into being a novel reality, replete with a unique set of 'governing principles' inside of which the affairs of the species now unfold. (Later Spencer refers to this social dimension as the 'Superorganic'.) It is for this reason, namely the identification of society as a distinctive object of study and the belief that this object could be understood by using something similar to the methods of science, that Spencer is regarded as one of the founders of Sociology.[7] Although we do look at Spencer's ideas on fashion in more detail later, there are a number of consequences that his interpretation of society has for the comprehension of human behaviour, such as fashion, that need to be registered here. Until Spencer 'sociologized' it, fashion was seen as an outcome of 'conscious' choices made by individuals enabling them to conform to a specious, and highly variable, set of clothing styles. Since being *à la mode* appeared to override all other considerations – in particular those of morality and taste – it seemed reasonable to assume that the causes of fashion lay in an enduring set of human follies and vices. Vanity, snobbery, weakness of character, inability to think for oneself and downright stupidity were all pressed into service as explanations of fashion at one time or another.[8] While elements of this type of explanation are to be found in Carlyle's attack upon dandyism in *Sartor Resartus*, that author at least recognizes that some sort of collective disposition is at work *before* the moral dispositions of the individuals involved are engaged. Spencer is not ready to relinquish the moral option in his approach to fashion

either, yet there is a noticeable shift in the tone he adopts toward it. Curiosity, close observation, and a desire to discover fundamental collective processes now vie with mockery and moralizing.[9] Spencer is one of the first of the modern thinkers to accept and to explore, in detail, the ramifications of granting to human collective life its own specific autonomy. However, despite Spencer's asserting the existence of laws operating not just within society, but at every level of the universe, what the nature of these laws is and whether they vary according to the different dimensions of nature is not clear. Spencer's answer to these questions is sweeping and direct. Evolution is a universal principle active throughout nature. Its internal dynamic, its logic, is unchanged and independent of any variations in empirical context.

Evolution as a Universal Principle

Spencer's interest in evolution seems to have begun during his time as a railway surveyor: 'Rambles along the raw cuttings of the line led Spencer to an interest in palaeontology and geology . . .'[10] 'Evolution' referred not just to Darwin's theory of natural selection (his *On the Origin of Species* did not appear until 1859) but to a broad family of ideas, scientific and non-scientific, in circulation from the 1840s. Spencer wrote in his *Autobiography* of the moment when, after reading Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–33), he was confirmed in the belief that evolution is a general principle of nature:

> From boyhood there was in me a need to see, in more or less distinct way, how phenomena, no matter of what kind, are to be naturally explained. Hence, when my attention was drawn to the question whether organic forms had been specially created, or whether they have arisen by progressive modifications, physically caused and inherited, I adopted the last supposition . . .[11]

Spencer quickly broadened out the scope of his new insight and came to see the process of evolution as 'the course of procedure throughout things at large . . . and my belief in it never afterwards wavered'.[12] But just what does Spencer mean by 'evolution' and what are the implications it is to have for the study of dress?

Recent revisions to the intellectual history of nineteenth-century Britain has changed the view that Spencer, acting directly under the influence of Charles Darwin, simply applied the idea of natural selection to human social life. Such a view was enshrined in the fact that Spencer's social and political philosophy came to be known as 'Social Darwinism'. Sustaining this view is difficult once

it is remembered that Spencer uses the word 'Evolution' before Darwin and it is he who first coins the phrase 'the survival of the fittest', a phrase signifying the tendency whereby those things best adapted to their external conditions are the entities most likely to persist. Current scholarship has begun to reveal the great diversity of ideas that existed in the nineteenth century under the heading of 'Evolution'. Indeed, an intellectual map of great complexity is beginning to be uncovered in which Darwin is just one among a number of thinkers who contributed to this idea.[13] Spencer, as we have seen, uses the idea of evolution to explain human being as well as the order of nature. Not surprisingly, an idea whose intention is to embrace such a breadth of phenomena must, inevitably, be pitched at a somewhat abstract level. So it proves with Spencer, although he is remarkably consistent in applying his generalities to specific human phenomena. No matter what he is engaging with, the principles that make up the process of evolution remain the same. Evolution exists because 'things' are not possessed of fixed natures and because of the constant modification of entities brought about by changes in their external environments. The process of evolution is 'progressive' because, with the passage of time, 'things' are becoming better and better adapted to their environments. There is a 'progressivist' direction to everything in the universe so that eventually there will come into being a perfect balance between the internal composition of an entity and its external environment. This universal end-state Spencer names the 'Social State'. All evolutionary processes involve a movement from states of homogeneity toward states of heterogeneity. The universe, at both a 'micro' and a 'macro' level, will exhibit a progression from a state of original, undifferentiated unity to one in which there is greater degree of definiteness, internal coherence and individuation of phenomena.[14]

These ideas proved to be a remarkably seductive schema, capable of being applied to many situations. All things, human and non-human, appear to exhibit a tendency to set out from a condition of unified simplicity and undergo elaboration into a set of multifarious and highly differentiated forms. For instance, in the 1890s, the then Director of the Royal College of Music, Sir Hubert Parry, became enamoured of Spencer's theory of evolution.

> His book of 1896 *The Evolution of the Art of Music* . . . proved to be very influential well into the present century. For Parry, music historiography was the study not of a few 'great names' but of the gradual organic development of music, with the movement from homogeneity to heterogeneity given pride of place.[15]

But the most important deployment of Spencer's evolutionary schema for the comprehension of clothing and fashion is the role it plays in the formulation of the theory of social evolution.

Social Evolution

A contemporary reader of Spencer will be struck by the regularity with which he sets out to locate the origin of a particular piece of social behaviour by re-constructing the circumstances that were supposed to have existed 'at the dawn of time'. He then tracks the way in which the contemporary social fact has evolved out of this primordial environment. But it wasn't just Spencer who favoured this kind of explanation. By the 1870s most current thinkers dealing with human behaviour subscribed to this idea of social evolution and regarded 'the search for origins' as self-evident as the vernacular Freudianism, which we regularly reach for today.

Spencer's declension of the idea of social evolution is a localized version of his broader notion of 'Universal Evolution' and, as such, differs from many other versions of the theory in circulation in his time. Spencer's notion of social evolution derives from a number of a priori assumptions about fundamental reality. Many of the other versions of the theory of social evolution more closely resemble intellectual responses to the challenges created by the emergence of novel empirical data and, while there is no doubt that Spencer was a diligent collector of these new facts, his contemporaries often noted that his selections are mostly in the service of his broader system.[16] Spencer's journey back in time is guided by his desire to see how the complexities of contemporary society developed out of the simplicities of early social life, and this is a version of his belief in the inevitability of the progress from undifferentiated homogeneity to a condition of intense specialization and individuation. An apt metaphor for Spencer's version of social evolution would be of a tree's branches, but other versions of the social evolution theory tend to conceive of it as resembling a series of steps, or developmental stages, up which every society is required to climb in order to attain the condition of civilization.[17] Whatever the differences between the various proponents of social evolution, by the end of the 1870s a degree of agreement emerges as to the theory's essentials. The fundamental element in this consensus is the idea of a 'Primitive Society' located 'back there' and out of which contemporary humanity emerges. Adam Kuper provides an excellent account of how this primitive human condition had been conceived of by the proponents of social evolution theory. All agreed that this embryonic social order was singular and so similar conditions were thought to obtain worldwide. Following the lead given by Spencer, the elemental form of this 'society' was conceived as an undifferentiated whole which 'split into two or more identical building blocks'.[18] Spencer's version of this is to posit an original condition in which all the members of the group are at the mercy of a 'strong man' and subject to his tyranny. Applying his logic of development Spencer describes the subsequent stages of social evolution so:

> In conformity with the law of evolution of all organized bodies, that general functions are gradually separated into the special functions constituting them, there have grown up in the social organism for the better performance of the governmental office, an apparatus of law courts, judges, and barristers; a national church with its bishops and priests; and a system of caste, titles, and ceremonies, administered by society at large.[19]

Kuper argues that the consensus between the various wings of the social evolution theory was about what were the main features of this early form of society. He lists the following:

1. The most primitive societies were ordered on the basis of kinship relations.
2. Their kinship organization was based upon descent groups.
3. These descent groups were exogamous and were related by a series of marriage exchanges.
4. Like extinct species, these primeval institutions were preserved in fossil form, ceremonies and kinship terminologies bearing witness to long-dead practices.
5. Finally, with the development of private property, the descent groups withered away and a territorial state emerged . . . These ideas were also likened to a theory of primitive religion . . . 'animism', a belief that natural species and objects had souls and should be worshipped.[20]

According to the theory of social evolution this was how humanity was supposed to have first lived and the task of the theory was to determine how progress had been made from these beginnings to the realities of contemporary (European) life. In order to understand either dress or fashion, it is necessary for Social Evolutionists to trace a line of development back to their origins in the crude institutions of that first social order. How that line of development was to be traced and what importance was to be ascribed to it came to be known as the 'Comparative Method'.

Spencer and writers of the Social Evolution School such as Edward Tylor and James Frazer tend to cram their texts with examples of human behaviour drawn from a bewildering variety of geographical and historical locations. A.E. Crawley reaches the pinnacle of this in the area of dress studies in 1919 with his encyclopedia entry on 'Dress'. An excerpt taken at random from this entry illustrates my point. Here Crawley is writing about different treatments of human hair and head-dress

> The Karens wear a head-dress in order to please the *tso*, the soul which resides in the head. The Javanese wear nothing on the head, which is regarded as holy. A Zambesi rain-maker never cuts his hair, for fear the familiar spirits may desert him.[21]

'Karens', 'Javanese', 'Zambesi rain-makers' – in some instances the list of examples can seem interminable and few are presented with reference to the cultural context in which they occur. Modern readers tend to regard societies and their cultures as integral wholes and have absorbed the teachings of modern anthropology which state that a single social element can only be fully understood if it is seen in the context in which it lives and breathes. The operations of the Comparative Method are, obviously, based upon a very different set of assumptions.

In all of Spencer's writing there is nothing that would compare to a modern in-depth study of a single society or culture. We find, instead, lists of developmental 'strings' stretched over time and space in which the basic units are not 'a society', or 'a culture', but social institutions such as marriage, dress, art, religion, fashion, law and language. These strings are composed from examples culled from travellers' tales, missionary reports, local history, myth and custom, and are assembled to support particular empirical claims. From the perspective of social evolution these empirical claims are of two kinds. The first is to determine how a particular social element has originated and the second is to establish the sequence of the stages through which an element, say, dress, passed on its journey to the present day. Taking as an example the problem of how clothing originated, the comparative method would argue that, to answer this question, it is necessary to test the truth of any assertion against as many empirical examples as could possibly be found. The discussion about the origin of clothing is a famous example of the comparative method in operation. Recall Carlyle's dismissal of the biblical claim that humans wore clothes because they were ashamed of their nakedness. Later writers supported this view and drew upon the examples of the Andaman islanders and Australian Aborigines, both of whom were thought to have habitually gone naked. The protection hypothesis, namely that clothing was created to provide the human animal with a shield against the elements, seems to be contradicted by the famous encounter between inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego and the members of the *Beagle* expedition in 1830. Charles Darwin describes how, despite the presence of snow and a bitterly cold wind, the Fuegians wore minimal clothing.[22] As the comparisons accumulate so, in theory, would certainty about an origin increase. However, once a specific social institution came into being the process of social evolution did not proceed uniformly. Some societies progressed more rapidly than others, while different dimensions of collective life within a single society could be at different stages of development. There were, as well, those 'contemporary primitives' of the colonial empires, regarded as invaluable living fossils, and who could tell the anthropologist a great deal about how the original 'historical primitives' lived. Finally, even among the populations of Europe there were 'survivals', archaic details of custom, let

alone the lives of the populations of internal 'savages' who had somehow escaped the grand evolutionary sweep of progress.[23] A favourite example of a 'survival' for the fashion classics writers are the details of European hat etiquette that, in their signs of deference and their apparently irrational ability to command observance, seem to be survivals from an earlier and very different social order. All this evidence was brought together so that a precise evolutionary sequence for a particular social institution could be determined. It is this view that licensed social evolutionists, like Spencer, to draw their evidence from such an eclectic range of sources. George W. Stocking has admirably summarized the bases of the comparative method so:

> in the absence of adequate historical data these stages (of social development) may be reconstructed by a comparison of contemporary groups; and that the results of this "comparative method" can be confirmed by "survivals" in more advanced societies of the forms characteristic of lower stages.[24]

This is the intellectual and methodological framework within which Spencer sets out to explain the phenomena of clothes and fashion.

The Origin of Clothes

Recall that in *Sartor Resartus*, Professor Teufelsdröckh put forward his own explanation for the origin of clothes:

> Miserable indeed . . . was the condition of the Aboriginal Savage, glaring fiercely from under his fleece of hair, which with the beard reached down to his loins, and hung round him like a matted cloak; the rest of his body sheeted in its thick natural fell . . . without implements, without arms, save the ball of heavy flint, to which . . . he had attached a long cord of plaited thongs; thereby recovering as well as hurling it with deadly unerring skill. Nevertheless, the pains of Hunger and Revenge once satisfied, his next care was not for Comfort but Decoration (*Putz*) Warmth he found in the toils of the chase . . . but for Decoration he must have clothes. Nay, among wild people, we find tattooing and painting even prior to Clothes. The first spiritual want of a barbarous man is Decoration; as indeed we still see among the barbarous classes in civilised countries.[25]

Once again the anticipatory element in *Sartor Resartus* is uncanny. Carlyle is not usually regarded as an exponent of the theory of social evolution but here in essence is a form of explanation that, in all of its essentials, will constitute an intellectual consensus for the following eighty years, even down to that final flourish of the comparative method in the reference to 'the barbarous classes in civilised countries'.

Spencer's explanation of the origin of clothes occurs in Volume II of *The Principles of Sociology*, published in 1879. This was a huge work in three volumes and appeared between 1876 and 1897. The discussions of 'costume' and 'fashion' are to be found in volume two in the section entitled 'Ceremonial Institutions'.[26] Spencer regards ceremonial observances, or customs, as the earliest forms of collective control. As always, he proceeds by way of backward extrapolation in which elements separate and distinct in contemporary society gradually coalesce into a common form the further back their lineages are traced. Thus, Spencer sees in custom the original form of government out of which are to develop the distinctive spheres of political, religious and social control. His evidence for this is that in

> the daily intercourse among the lowest savages, whose loose groups, scarcely to be called social, are without political or religious regulation, is under a considerable amount of ceremonial regulation.[27]

Ceremony, since it is the simplest and most ubiquitous form by which humans govern their daily affairs, must, according to Spencer's law of evolution, precede those forms of government which rely upon the actions of specialized castes of priests, lawyers, and bureaucrats. This primordial impulse towards some sort of regulation of daily life persists even after those more specialized forms of administration have come into being. They are to be found in even that most advanced example of social development, the railway traveller:

> And in the presence of a stranger, say in a railway-carriage, a certain self-restraint, joined with some small act like the offer of a newspaper, shows the spontaneous rise of a propitiatory behaviour such as even the rudest of mankind are not without.[28]

These actions are not as spontaneous as Spencer intimates here because, as he states later, 'ceremony originates from fear'. Ceremony is what humans do in the absence of all those familiar social arrangements for controlling human behaviour found in more complex social orders. Custom on its own is an imperfect arrangement and at some point its anarchic fragility is finally undone by the rise of (male) individuals whose prowess, either as hunters or warriors, outshines those around them. At this point, argues Spencer, what was previously a simple transgression of custom is transformed into an act of insubordination. This general and all-pervasive injunction to obey custom starts to be supplanted by a set of rules and regulations governing the relations between the strong and the weak, and it is in this early form of political power that Spencer locates the origin of clothes.

According to Spencer, the first set of distinctions to emerge within the simple primordial social order derives from the superior talents of certain, again male, individuals to hunt and to repel enemies. How better to display and prove one's prowess in these areas than to exhibit trophies from the hunt or from war?[29] Such trophies, be they the skins or body parts of feared animals, or portions of the defeated enemy, were best displayed by being placed upon the body of the hero. Not only would they act as evidence of the bravery involved in their acquisition but the person to whom they were attached would absorb their original qualities. Spencer asserts that these trophies would 'give their owner some influence over those around him . . . a vague kind of governing power accrues to him' and their continual visibility would ensure a degree of continuity to their power. From this point onward, Spencer's account of the origin of clothing is primarily about analysing the marks of superiority and domination placed on the bodies of the powerful, and the marks of submission and inferiority found upon those of the weak. Clothing, when it does finally make an appearance, is a thing of status, of social distinction; it is a counter to be deployed in a game of power, a means of control or, in the hands of the weak, a weapon of subversion.

Spencer opens his explanation about clothing by iterating the threefold causal separation we encountered in Carlyle:

> Civilized usages obscure the truth that men were not originally prompted to clothe themselves by either the desire for warmth or the thought of decency . . . dress, like the badge, is at first worn from the wish for admiration.[30]

There is a subtle shift in the manner in which Spencer construes this trope. Carlyle implies that clothing sprang from a desire for decoration on the part of 'Barbarous Men' and this desire was a 'spiritual' want, some thing, or activity, that would enable early humans to lift their eyes up and away from the burdens of survival. Carlyle even seems to intimate that somewhere in the origin of clothing may be detected some sort of 'proto-aesthetic' activity. Not so with Spencer who draws the story back into a primordial struggle over power. (The consequences of this secularization of dress are still being felt today.) Trophies, medals, badges, insignia, ornaments, emblems, and clothing are a closely related family of objects crucial to the process whereby benign differences between individuals are transformed into a codified set of laws, defining varying degrees of political authority. Dress not only assists at the birth of this system of rank and status, it continues to mark and reinforce it as it becomes ever more complex. Prestige and status are accumulated within families. Rank is inherited and society can become divided into two stable parts, the controllers and the controlled. Differences between groups can persist

and these differences of rank 'naturally come to be marked by differences in dress'. Spencer has finally deposited us at the door of the (almost) contemporary world in which class distinctions are picked out through a myriad of variations in a population's patterns of dress.

The Start of Fashion

Buried at the end of his discussion of trophies and the origins of clothing Spencer turns his attention briefly to the propensity of marks of distinction to spread beyond those to whom they legitimately belong. His explanation as to why this happens ranks in importance and influence with Carlyle's threefold division of the origin of clothes. Spencer observes apropos the spread of emblems:

> In this case it is rather that the lower grades have sought to raise themselves into the grades above, by assuming their distinctive mark . . .[31]

Despite the existence of sumptuary laws, despite laws forbidding the wearing of certain sorts of garments, the dress of the upper grades of society are attractive to those of the lower orders precisely because they are the clothes of persons with power and authority. These clothing styles will inevitably spread out of their points of origin because others will desire to imitate them. From this point on, imitation becomes one of the central elements in all theories of fashion. When imitation is linked, as it always is, with a class hierarchy the result is the classic mechanism that has come to be known as the 'trickle-down theory'. Spencer is among the first to grasp the importance of combining these elements into a unified theory of fashion:

> How this diffusion of dresses marking honourable position and disuse of dresses marking inferiority has gone among ourselves is shown in almost every household. On the one hand we have the fashionable gowns of cooks and housemaids; and on the other we have the dwarfed representative of the muslin caps, which, once hiding the hair, was insisted upon by mistresses as a class distinction, but which, gradually dwindling, has now become a small patch on the back of the head:[32]

But, as always, all this is located too far down the evolutionary pathway for Spencer and when, later in the *Principles of Sociology*, he returns to the topic of fashion he is keen to track it back to an original source.

Before we look at his conclusion, it has to be stressed that what Spencer has in mind when he uses the word 'fashion' is something very different to its

contemporary meaning. The reader of Spencer will be struck by how little attention he pays to specific clothing styles, or to the details of individual garments. Such matters as these are, for Spencer, unimportant in comparison with what dress-in-general is doing within the collectivity. We should also note that fashion, in the sense of regular changes in style linked to season or occasion, is the province of a minuscule section of society living in large metropolitan centres. For most people it is a thing to be observed rather than a thing in which to participate and the dissemination of dress styles via mass imagery is still only in its infancy in Spencer's day. However, there are examples of what we might call 'non-fashionable' changes in dress such as autonomous regional styles or local inflections of metropolitan fashions. There is a deal of ambiguity in Spencer's writing – as there is in a number of the fashion classics – when it is not easy to decide whether he is referring to fashionable changes among an elite or something closer to shifts in custom.

It is clear from Spencer's comments about fashion that he finds it an awkward subject to understand. His conclusion is that, like clothes, it is a social form that originated within the early forms of ceremony and custom, which means that it too has its origins in political power. For Spencer, fashion is primarily about social control. However, it exhibits a startling difference from those ceremonial usages such as trophies, badges and costume. In these latter forms Spencer observes that 'we see enforced, not likeness between the acts of higher and lower, but unlikeness'. Fashion is different:

> But in those modifications of behaviour, dress, mode of life, &c., which constitute Fashion, likeness instead of unlikeness is insisted upon. Respect must be shown by following the example of those in authority, not by differing from them.[33]

Fashion repeats the emergence of clothing by first appearing in a set of socio-historical circumstances in which there is a strict differentiation between the powerful and the weak. The ruled propitiate the rulers by observing a set of strict customs through which the differences between the two groups are stressed. In the case of fashion, however, propitiation is achieved by *copying* the actions and equipment of the powerful. But Spencer wants to do more than simply frame fashion as 'reverential imitation'. As we saw earlier imitation, for Spencer, consists of a number of different impulses in which propitiation of one's 'betters' exists alongside competition with those of a higher status. There is 'a desire to assert equality' with the powerful by showing them that they are not as special as they might like to think. This latter mode of imitation Spencer calls 'competitive imitation'. Neither of these forms of imitation precedes the other but they do prove to have very different historical implications. Remember that Spencer always regards fashion as a compound of both

reverential and competitive imitation. It is when he draws all these strands together that he produces his definitive description of the dynamics of fashion:

> And the motive thus coming into play early in social evolution, and making equals vie with one another in display, similarly all along prompts the lower to vie, so far as they are allowed, with the higher. Everywhere and always the tendency of the inferior to assert himself has been in antagonism with the restraints imposed on him: and a prevalent way of asserting himself has been to adopt costumes and appliances and customs like those of his superior.[34]

Perhaps the only important modification to be made to this description over a period of ninety years following Spencer's words was to be the historicization of this process and its localization within the phenomenon called 'modernity'. Even here, Spencer makes a number of intriguing observations on the consequences that modern life was having on fashion.

The End of Fashion

One of the most crucial implications of Spencer's evolutionary framework is the belief that all social institutions undergo progressive transformations as they travel along their particular developmental pathways. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Spencer's notion of evolution is a total one, stretching from the most abstract and universal of formulations through to ever more specific and localized contexts. He conceives of the evolution of human sociality as a journey across a number of distinct types of social organization; the earliest of these is a form of society in which only a minimal degree of internal specialization has occurred. (For instance, the division of labour being almost non-existent.) This is followed by a form of society that he calls 'Militant Society' and this, in turn, is succeeded by 'Industrial Society'. Spencer classifies societies and their institutions according to the kinds of power that dominated daily life and the types of social aggregation that result from these different types of political regime. These broad classificatory principles he characterizes as 'the forms of cooperation under which their [society's] labours are carried on'. Militant societies are societies in which compulsion is the dominant form of power and warfare their typical activity. Industrial societies are characterized by social aggregations of a voluntary nature committed to an increasingly comprehensive satisfaction of human needs through peaceful means. 'Industrial' and 'Militant' become, in Spencer's system, ways of designating broad organizing principles to which every aspect of social life is subordinate. Peel summarizes the militant–industrial distinction so:

> Militancy and industrialism are exemplified in a series of paired opposites: status vs. contract, vertical ranking vs. functional role, tradition vs. innovation, the ritual and ceremonial vs. the matter-of-fact, the figurative vs. the literal, subordination vs. equality, guilds and the command economy vs. the free market, deliberation vs. spontaneity . . .[35]

To Peel's list might be added collectivism vs individualism, authoritarianism vs democracy and the past vs the future.

Ceremony, the crucible out of which clothing has emerged, is characteristic of militant society where a subordinate caste labours to propitiate the powerful by the observance of taboo, or by reverential imitation. Either way, the rules obeyed by the weak are enforced, ultimately, by violence. An individual wears something because that is the rule, or refrains from wearing something because it is exclusive to the powerful. A good example of what Spencer has in mind here is, once again, male hat etiquette. In Militant societies, those failing to raise their hats in the presence of a superior were likely to lose the heads upon which the hats rested. In Industrial society, argues Spencer, the means of enforcing custom are different. It is public opinion – what he calls 'unembodied opinion' – that will be mobilized to ensure adherence to the forms of behaviour rather than the force of law or abrupt violence. Spencer gives the reader the following example taken from hat custom:

> in our day, a wealthy Quaker, refusing to wear the dress worn by those of like means, refuses also to take off his hat to a superior, we commonly regard these non-conformities as the same in nature; we are shown that they are not, if we go back to the days when the salute to the superior was insisted upon under penalty, while the imitation of the superior's dress, so far from being insisted on, was forbidden.[36]

Spencer argues that fashion is unlike this because it contains an element of competitive imitation where the imitators try to make themselves the equal of the imitated and it is this reason that leads him to conceive of fashion as something more typical of Industrial Society than of Militant Society. In Industrial Society, dress behaviours are not subject to 'the authority of class-rule, which once dictated such obeisances' but are insisted upon by 'the authority of social opinion, which thinks non-conformities in dress imply inferior status'.[37] At this stage of his argument Spencer's opinion of fashion is a remarkably sympathetic one because his diagnosis is political rather than aesthetic. In the play between adherence to custom and individual innovation present in contemporary fashion, Spencer senses a resemblance to the progressive political forms of industrial society:

> As now existing, Fashion is a form of social regulation analogous to constitutional government as a form of political regulation: displaying, as it does, a compromise between governmental coercion and individual freedom.[38]

This is not yet the end of the evolutionary road for either clothing or fashion, just as Spencer does not regard the political arrangements of his time as an end-state for the process of political progress. Evolution had more to deliver.

The final paragraph of Spencer's discussion provides an excellent summary of his overall view of fashion's evolutionary pathway.

> Imitative, then from the beginning, first of a superior's defects, and then, little by little, of other traits peculiar to him, Fashion has ever tended towards equalization. Serving to obscure, and eventually to obliterate, the marks of class-distinction, it has favoured the growth of individuality; and by so doing has aided in weakening Ceremonial, which implies subordination of the individual.[39]

In the earlier essay, 'Manners and Fashion', Spencer traces a line of evolutionary development for fashion that goes much further than his treatment of the subject in *The Principles of Sociology*. In particular he begins to speculate upon a condition of clothing beyond the 'compromise' of coercion and freedom. What might clothing look like, he asks, if the increases in individuality succeed in abolishing all traces of ceremonial subordination?

Spencer opens up these speculations by observing that there is a 'connexion between democratic opinions and peculiarities of costume'. Anyone attending a 'Chartist meeting', or 'a lecture on socialism', he remarks, cannot fail to be struck by the great variety of dress styles displayed by those in attendance.

> One gentleman on the platform divides his hair down the centre, instead of on one side; another brushes it back off the forehead . . . a third has long forsworn the scissors, that his locks sweep the shoulders . . . This non-conformity in hair is countenanced by various non-conformities in dress, shown by others of the assemblage. Bare necks, shirt collars *à la* Byron, waistcoats cut Quaker fashion, wonderfully shaggy great coats, numerous oddities in form and colour, destroy the monotony usual in crowds.[40]

Spencer contrasts the condition of 'personal singularity' to be found in democratic societies, or those individuals of democratic disposition, with those of conservative leanings:

> it is no less a fact that those whose office it is to uphold established arrangements in State and Church, are also those who most adhere to the social forms and observances bequeathed to us by past generations . . . Wigs, such as we see depicted in old

> portraits, may yet be found on the heads of judges and barristers. The Beefeaters at the Tower (of London) wear the costume of Henry VIIth's bodyguard. The University dress of the present year varies but little from that worn soon after the Reformation.[41]

Thus it is that the great struggle taking place between the past and the future in nineteenth-century Europe can be read in the details of the various dress regimes favoured by different political factions. Spencer's law of evolution which states that all things evolve from a state of homogeneity to one of differentiation even manifests itself in the highly individuated hats worn by men of a 'progressive' turn of mind. Such variety of appearances cannot be explained by 'mere personal caprice' but rather is the result of men being 'emancipated from dead custom'. At this point in Spencer's argument it might be useful to consider what the consequences are of his presumption that individual freedoms in dress will expand at the expense of its regulation by the codes of ceremony. If this process is extrapolated forward then the elementary building blocks of fashion must start to vanish. Remember Spencer's dictum that 'All fashion is imitative' depends upon the fact that all social aggregations, up until the present, have been divided into those groups who rule and those who are ruled. Imitation in dress, be it propitiatory or competitive, is a consequence of these differences of power. If differential political authority were to vanish then what price the existence of that institution called fashion? Spencer's position in the 1854 essay is more radical than the later discussion in that he argues that progress, that consequence of social evolution, will eventually produce the utopia of the 'Social State'. This condition he describes so:

> The causes that have produced past modifications are still in action; must continue in action as long as there exists any incongruity between men's desires and the requirements of the social state; and must eventually make them organically fit for the social state . . . Along with growth of human nature into harmony with the moral law, there will go decreasing need for judges and statute-books; when the right course has become the course spontaneously chosen, prospects of future reward or punishment will not be wanted as incentives; and when due regard for others has become instinctive, there will be no code of ceremonies to say how behaviour shall be regulated.[42]

If, in the 'Social State', no regulation of dress, either informal or statutory, is necessary it is hard to envisage what kinds of principle would be operative on clothing. As discussed below in Chapter 4, Simmel's argument is that fashion ceases to exist in situations where either of its components is allowed to dominate at the expense of the other. Complete conformity of dress means uniform not fashion. However, if everyone is permitted to dress in his or her

own personal manner then fashion once more disappears in a swarm of utterly unique ensembles. It is hard to imagine how absolute individuality in dress would look. If, as Spencer seems to imply in the above quotation, humans eventually, instinctively, choose 'the right course', how does that aid the individual faced with the problem of whether to choose trousers with, or without, turn-ups? It is at this point that Spencer is finally driven to consider the question of clothes and aesthetics.

Spencer's problem with regard to the dissolution of fashion can be summarized as follows. He denies that the increase in the individuality in dress styles characteristic of Industrial Society is an expression of a person's taste, what he refers to as a matter of 'personal caprice'. At the same time he argues that the need for 'a code of ceremonies to say how behaviour should be regulated' will drop away as Militant forms of society recede. The result is that the question of clothing's forms, of what might constitute even a basic sartorial literacy, vanishes in the gap between the two. He (Spencer) needs to locate something that will do the job of dress form, something that will enable that 'right course' to be available to the individual 'spontaneously' or 'instinctively'. For Spencer, the process of evolution can complete the work of social reform by itself. Humans can participate in the process but only after they grasp that all aspects of the social order are undergoing reform according to the dictates of 'equity and reason'. With this knowledge as one's guide, reform of such social institutions as the divorce laws, the electoral laws, or the rules governing the freedom of religious worship is a relatively easy task. But what about that area which we call 'culture'? What are the implications of the principles of 'equity and reason' for dress? At first, Spencer argues that there are no substantial differences between the reform of political and legal institutions and cultural ones. The reformist urge operates by

> putting rectitude above legality, achieves periodical instalments of political liberty, inaugurates Protestantism and works out its consequences, ignores the senseless dictates of Fashion and emancipates men from dead customs.[43]

There is still no hint, on the part of Spencer, as to what the 'sensible dictates of fashion' might be or how they might be recognized. A little further on he argues that the actions of any individual can be altered for the better if one is able to demonstrate to that person that he or she is engaged in activities that are 'essentially inconvenient or *inelegant*, essentially irrational, unjust, or ungenerous' (my italics).[44] Here, at last, we have an aesthetic category – the (in)elegant – to help us discriminate between the value of the various dress options available to the wearer. 'Elegance' becomes the aesthetic representative of equity and reason in sartorial matters, but why this is the case, why it is

that elegance rather than any other aesthetic quality is privileged, Spencer nowhere explains. Even if fashion were to vanish tomorrow, declares Spencer, the 'Social State' 'would still make them careful of their personal appearance – would still induce them to seek admiration by making themselves ornamental'.[45] Returning to the subject of fashion reform later in the essay, the objections he puts forward for change – and there are many – are of an economic and social nature. Again, any aesthetic grounds for reform are missing.[46]

It could be argued that these criticisms are unfair to Spencer since we are, after all, exploring the outer limits of his ideas. It is precisely here, however, that we can discern a problem that will recur in a number of the fashion classics. Spencer's strong emphasis upon the social and political aspects of dress and fashion is very influential on later thinkers. But it has to be said that these emphases are always present at the expense of aesthetic considerations, those aspects that are usually referred to as beauty, elegance and ugliness. Spencer, Veblen, Simmel and Flügel all realize that fashion is responsible for making us wear sartorial abominations as well as providing ensembles that are elegant and beautiful. In different ways they all seem to attempt to envisage a state where the 'aesthetic irrationalities', or the absurd and the ugly, will vanish and good taste will reign supreme. But they are all (with the exception of Simmel) conceptually bereft as far as an aesthetic of dress is concerned. When a conscious desire for dress reform begins to surface we find that it is the aesthetics of modernist functionalism that is adopted unwittingly as the embodiment of equity and reason. We even get a whiff of this with Spencer when he observes that: 'The time is approaching, then, when our system of social observances must pass through some crisis, out of which it will come purified and comparatively simple.'[47] The persistence of 'fashionable follies' and the apparent inability of any political regime, be they 'progressively democratic' or totalitarian, to eradicate, surpass, progress beyond, or render obsolete these irrationalities among their populations, are a continuing theme taken up in the subsequent fashion classics.

Notes

1. Between 1842 and 1860 Herbert Spencer wrote essays on such topics as Government, Manners and Fashion, Parliamentary Reform, Railway Policy, the Genesis of Science, Population Theory, General Evolution and Progress, among many other topics. See J.D.Y. Peel, *Herbert Spencer: the Evolution of a Sociologist*, London: Heinemann, 1971, Select Bibliography, pp. 319–20.

2. H. Spencer, 'Manners and Fashion' originally published in 1854; also *The Principles of Sociology*, 'Ceremonial Institutions', orig. pub. 1883.

3. H. Spencer, *Social Statics: or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of them Developed*, London, 1850.

4. H. Spencer, *Descriptive Sociology: or, Groups of Sociological Facts, Classified and Arranged*, 8 vols, London, 1873–81.

5. See Spencer, 'The Proper Sphere of Government', in H. Spencer, *Political Writings*, ed. John Offer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 4–5.

6. Ibid., p. 5.

7. For a discussion of Herbert Spencer's role as one of the founders of sociology see Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought*, New York: Harcourt, 1971. See chapter 3, 'Herbert Spencer: 1820–1903', pp. 89–127.

8. There is an excellent example of the 'pre-scientific' approach to fashion in the essay by William Hazlitt, 'On Fashion'. This is a mixture of astute insights into the nature of fashion where Hazlitt pre-empts the trickle-down theory by about seventy years, coupled to a splenetic fury about the stupidity involved in 'the race of appearances'. See H. Barnes (ed.), *Essays Old and New*, Sydney: Australian Publishing Company, 1951, pp. 88–94.

9. In 'Manners and Fashion', p. 46, Vol. XV, *The Works of Herbert Spencer*, Herbert Spencer remarks that 'life *à la mode*, instead of being conducted in the most rational manner, is life regulated by spendthrifts and idlers, milliners and tailors, dandies and silly women'. See Spencer, 1854, pp. 29–30.

10. Spencer, *Political Writings*, 'Introduction'.

11. H. Spencer, *An Autobiography*, (orig. pub. 1904), Vol. XX, *The Works*, pp. 176–7. Lyell (2 vols, London, 1830–3.) Lyell himself was not an evolutionist but his *Principles of Geology* seems to have edged intellectuals, such as Spencer and Charles Darwin, along the evolutionary pathway. See Michael Ruse, *The Darwinian Revolution: Science Red in Tooth and Claw*, 2nd edn, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999. See esp. chapter 3, 'Beliefs: Geological, Philosophical and Religious.'

12. Spencer, *Autobiography*.

13. For an excellent summary of the differences between Darwin's notion of evolution and that of Spencer see Peel, *Evolution of a Sociologist*, pp. 141–6. Perhaps the most telling difference between the two is that Darwin's theory contains no *necessary* direction to the evolution of species while Spencer sees evolution as having a progressive direction.

14. For a comprehensive summary of Spencer's ideas about evolution see J. Rumney, *Herbert Spencer's Sociology*, New York, 1966. See ch. 1, 'The Scope of Sociology'. This is a reprint of the original edition published in 1934.

15. Spencer, *Political Writings*, 'Introduction', p. xix.

16. These 'new' facts are (a) the wealth of new information reaching Europe about the colonial peoples of the rapidly expanding overseas empires, and (b) the evidence provided by the first forms of serious archaeology that started to shed light on the prehistory of Europe.

17. For a discussion of the differences between Spencer's branching version of social evolution and the developmental step version see George W. Stocking Jnr, *Victorian Anthropology*, New York: Free Press, 1987, ch. 5, 'The Darwinian Revolution and the Evolution of Human Culture'.

18. In this description of primitive society I have relied heavily upon Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*, London: Routledge, 1988. See chapter 1, 'The Idea of Primitive Society'.

19. Spencer, 'Manners and Fashion', Vol. XV, *The Works*, p. 23.

20. Kuper, *Invention*, pp. 6–7.

21. A.E. Crawley, 'Dress', in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, New York, 1912, vol. V, p. 48.

22. See *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary*, Richard Darwin Keynes (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1988. For a full account of the extraordinary story of the encounter between the Fuegians and Robert Fitzroy, the captain of the *Beagle*, see Nick Hazlewood, *Savage: The Life and Times of Jemmy Button*, London, 2000, Hodder & Stoughton.

23. George Stocking Jnr. has drawn attention to the similarities between Victorian notions of exotic 'savage' and the 'internal' savages of the British Isles such as the working class and the Irish. See Stocking, *Victorian*, chapter 6, 'Victorian Cultural Ideology and the Image of Savagery', pp. 186–237.

24. Stocking, *Victorian*, p. 170.

25. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 30–1.

26. Spencer, *Principles*.

27. Ibid., p. 4. For all of my fellow Australians I can't resist quoting his next sentence: 'No ruling agency beyond that arising from personal superiority characterizes a horde of Australians'.

28. Ibid., p. 6.

29. Hunters and gatherers they may be, but Spencer has little to say about the gathering (female) side of this primitive group's daily life. Paradoxically, the source of clothing's origins lies with masculine activities. It is only when we reach Veblen that we encounter a sustained attempt to answer the question of the differences between clothing for males and females.

30. H. Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology* (orig. pub. 1879), Vol. VII, *The* Works, p. 180.

31. Ibid., p. 187.

32. Ibid., p. 188.

33. Ibid., p. 203.

34. Ibid.

35. Peel, p. 207.

36. Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, Vol. VII, *The Works*, p. 209.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., p. 210.

39. Spencer, 'Manners and Fashion', Vol. XV, *The* Works, p. 1. This picture of the 'picturesque variety' of dissenting appearance is remarkably similar to the descriptions of Bohemian dress that were coming back from Paris. In 1840, Thackeray published *The Paris SketchBook* in which can be found a description of the French artistic scene of the 1830s: 'As for the beards, there is no end to them; all my friends the artists have beards who can raise them; and Nature, though she has rather stinted the bodies and limbs of the French nation, has been very liberal to them of hair. Fancy these heads

and beards under all sorts of caps – Chinese caps, Mandarin caps, Greek skull caps, English jockey caps, Russian or Kuzzilbah caps, Middle-Age caps . . . Spanish nets, and striped worsted nightcaps. Fancy all the jackets you have ever seen, and you have before you, as well as pen can describe, the costumes of these indescribable Frenchmen.' W.M. Thackeray, 'The Paris Sketch Book', in *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1882, p. 33.

40. Spencer, 'Manners and Fashion', p. 1.
41. Ibid., p. 3.
42. Ibid., p. 30.
43. Ibid., p. 31.
44. Ibid., pp. 31–2.
45. Ibid., p. 34.
46. Ibid., pp. 36–46.
47. Ibid., p. 46.

3

Thorstein Veblen's Leisure Class

'Oh! They just took it.'

Karl Marx

The North American economist, Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), whose book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was published in 1899, remains our contemporary in ways that neither Carlyle or Spencer have been able to.[1] Like the writings of Marx, Freud and Simmel, Veblen's contributions to our understanding of dress are still regularly cited in modern scholarship and cited not as some ancestor whose time was but is no more, but as a thinker whose ideas are immediately relevant. While both Carlyle's and Spencer's contributions to the study of clothing remain marginal and largely unread, those of Veblen have almost from the first moment of publication exerted much influence over Western concepts of clothing and, to a lesser extent, fashion. His ideas have entered academic discourse and have also acquired a vernacular familiarity owing to their dissemination by journalists, 'pop' sociologists, and the like. Quite why Veblen remains with us and the others have moved into the shadow is not easy to answer. Veblen's dry ironic style, as against the florid Carlyle and the loquacious Spencer, readily connects to a modern sensibility. But Carlyle thundered with equal venom against the ruling order and Spencer's distinction between 'Militant' and 'Industrial Society' provided Veblen with the foundation for his idea of the 'Leisure Class'. One reason for the persistence of Veblen's ideas is that even when much of their evolutionary framework is stripped away there is still a coherent set of ideas capable of application to many kinds of contemporary social behaviour. With Spencer, however, take away the framework and all that remains is a series of disconnected insights into clothing and fashion. Spencer may have provided Veblen with a platform upon which to base his ideas, but the intensity with which Veblen was able to press his case was all his own.

In chapter 2 we saw how central the growth of anthropology was to the ways in which dress and fashion were construed during the second half of the nineteenth century. Veblen shares, and participates in, the intellectual ferment caused by the rise of theory of Social Evolution. He takes from Spencer the idea that all things, be they of the natural world or of the human, are part of

a universal evolutionary process. He also shares the belief of the Social Evolutionists that the study of the past enables the origins of human institutions to be understood, as well as revealing the journey which these institutions have travelled along to reach their present states. Veblen – influenced, like most of his contemporaries, by Darwin – conceives of human institutions as resembling natural species. Like natural species, social entities change and develop by means of the responses and adaptive strategies they make to challenges originating in their external environments. This means that, for Veblen, a social fact such as dress might derive from an impulse far removed from its apparent source in contemporary reality. Not only this, it may have reached its present form only after passing through numerous variations, deviations, and chance responses. But there is another concept of development over time that Veblen is heir to, even if he does not subscribe to the optimistic version. This is the idea that time is not just the arithmetical accumulation of moments, but is the medium in which human history unfolds. That notion – that historical time is not the same as chronological time – had undergone its most sophisticated elaboration within nineteenth-century German thought. It had, as its basic premise, the idea that human being, in both its individual and collective forms, is not fully present at any one moment but is something in the process of realizing itself over time. History is the story of this realization of our complete humanity. Together, time and history constitute a one-way street down which the human species is being frog-marched toward its ultimate goal. In other words there is a 'point' to human history. It would be wrong to regard Veblen as an historical optimist – there is no requirement that the 'point' of human history has to be a benign one – but, as I want to argue later, there is in Veblen's ideas about clothing definitely a trace of the idea that movement forward through time is ultimately a progressive journey.

What becomes evident to the reader of Veblen is that his sense of the primacy of collective being over that of individual being has deepened and grown subtler when compared with the notions of Spencer. Veblen is just one of a number of thinkers who realize that it is futile attempting to explain the whole of human behaviour, society and history using an idealized Robinson Crusoe-like human individual who, in the event of being isolated from the rest of the human race, could single-handedly recreate the totality of human society. Veblen observes that:

> The scheme of technological insight and proficiency current in any given culture is manifestly a product of group life and is held as a common stock, and as manifestly the individual workman is helpless without access to it.[2]

Social context here has a number of implications, all of which are crucial to Veblen's understanding of dress and fashion. First, human activities are grounded

in, and upon, the collective nature of human life. There may be individual 'dialects' or personal inflections but the essence of these activities and processes is that of their being shared. Clothing cannot be derived from a quasi-genetic element lodged inside each human person. We might dress in the privacy of our bedrooms each morning, but so does everyone else. However, 'social context' also means something similar to pattern, regularity, system or the non-arbitrary. For thinkers like Veblen, human collective behaviour is part of an organized whole. Social life is not just shared, it is also patterned. This means that something such as dress is always *systematic* behaviour and can only be grasped in the light of this, no matter how much the conceptions of this social order might vary. Patterns of group clothing arise out of the interactions between members of a society, and Veblen will exploit this principle to great effect when he sets about analysing the differences between men's and women's clothing.

One final thing that needs to be remembered about Veblen is that, before all else, he is an economist. While his work on the 'Leisure Class' always has implications beyond the confines of economics, he sees his explanation of dress and fashion as primarily an 'economic' explanation. It is just that his conception of economics happens to be radically different from that of those around him. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to learn that he is greatly influenced by the work of Karl Marx. The exact nature of this influence is still in dispute but there is little doubt that, for dress and fashion, the Marxist notion of an economic base, upon which rests a cultural superstructure, provided a powerful template for Veblen's thinking. In this model, the 'superstructure' functions as a kind of displaced arena in which economic competition is acted out by individuals unaware of their 'real' motivations, and it is this that was such an important principle for Veblen. There are some real similarities between the classic Marxist strategy of 'unmasking' the latent class interests at work in the field of ideology and what Veblen is attempting in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. But, there are some important differences from Marxism. Veblen locates the 'heart of the matter' in a society's pattern of consumption, not in the struggle to possess its means of production. This is why, I suspect, for dress and clothing, there are no fashion classics from the tradition of Marxism, and it is also why Veblen's work and ideas often serve as Marxism's surrogate in this area. In both instances the distinction made between the level upon which unconscious or semi-conscious actions are performed and that other level where these actions are represented and given what Veblen calls 'spiritual meaning' end up in remarkably similar positions. The analyst becomes an 'unmasker', a 'demystifier', someone capable of reading through or behind the surfaces of human appearance to the truth. This is why Veblen, like Marx, like Carlyle and like Swift, is a great exponent of satire and sarcasm. Between the

base motives of human actions and their sublime representation lie folly, self-interest, and viciousness. Despite their profound scepticism about the claims Western civilization made for itself, both Marx and Veblen still speculate upon a time when the conditions underpinning this collective hypocrisy would disappear.

The 'Leisure Class'

At one point when he is discussing the tastes of the 'Leisure Class', Veblen examines the significance that the well-groomed lawn has for this group. He begins by observing that the lawn 'appeals so unaffectedly to the taste of the Western peoples'. While he is willing to acknowledge that such an object 'unquestionably has an element of sensuous beauty' and is therefore capable of giving pleasure 'to nearly all races and classes', his main concern lies in prising out the more localized elements that make it such an object of veneration among the peoples of Western Europe and North America. Veblen's explanation and subsequent analysis of the lawn, like all of his dissections of 'Leisure Class' tastes, flickers between the straight-faced and the ironic. The lawn, he argues, is most highly prized among those peoples 'whose inherited bent it is to readily find pleasure in contemplating a well-preserved pasture or grazing land'.[3] The lawn, when traced back to its origin, is revealed to have been the central component in the way of life of pastoral peoples. In other words, at some point in its past it was useful. In order to become an object of beauty it has been deprived of its utility and transformed into something that is either 'useless', or 'useful' only as a place of recreation. Veblen abruptly reminds his readers as to the true nature of the lawn: 'For . . . the lawn is a cow pasture.' If this is the case, why are lawn owners forbidden to let a cow graze on it to keep it close-cropped? Veblen's answer is that to do this would be to shift the lawn back toward the pole of utility, or at least toward an appearance of utility, and so deprive it of its 'futile sublimity'. As he observes, 'The vulgar suggestion of thrift, which is nearly inseparable from the cow, is a standing objection to the decorative use of this animal.' However, it is permissible – and in fact will increase in attractiveness – if the owners employ a small army of gardeners to maintain it in a condition of non-utilitarian splendour. Almost all the elements of Veblen's notion of the 'Leisure Class' and its 'pecuniary way of life' are present here. With almost no alteration, it is possible to apply a similar form of the analysis to the pleasures of an immaculate tablecloth, or the spotless linen of a gentleman's shirt. What, then, does Veblen have in mind when he talks about the 'Leisure Class'?

What disgusts Veblen about the world in which he finds himself in is that everything seems to be the wrong way around. Those men and women who

perform useful tasks, or make useful things, are regarded as inferior to those persons who, by birth or wealth, are able to exempt themselves from what he calls 'the industrial process'. Those who consume without producing seem always to be held in the highest regard. Certainly they have a higher standing than those whom necessity requires to engage in a careful balancing of income against expenditure. And why is it, asks Veblen, that an object which is ugly, but fashionable, is preferred to one which is useful but mundane? At a later point in this chapter we examine Veblen's account of how such a world came into existence, but first let us look at how Veblen characterizes the main features of this 'pecuniary' way of life.

Veblen, unlike Spencer, is not convinced by the claims modernity is making for itself, namely, that it is progressive, rational and meliorative. In fact, Veblen sees much of modern society as just a latter-day form of barbarism engaged in an irrational orgy of waste and futility. The only change from barbarism's earlier forms is the advent of mechanized production, which enables the owning classes to squander a great deal more and on a much grander scale. Defining precisely what Veblen means by the 'Leisure Class' is not easy. It is something of an amalgam of the rich, the hyper-rich, the owning class, the ruling class, the upper class, the business class, the aristocracy, the *nouveau riche*, and high society. He is much clearer when he starts to describe the social and economic principles that dominate the way of life of this 'Leisure Class'. Theirs is an existence given over to the maintenance, or the acquisition, of social status through competition. They engage in these forms of rivalry because this is the way that human beings express their excellence in what Veblen calls 'honorific society'. The basic units engaged in these struggles for superiority are households that make their claims to social status through public displays of consumption. But this is not crude consumption, such as a person sitting in a restaurant cramming as much caviar into his or her mouth as possible, and Veblen's strength lies in the manner in which he is able to trace the various subtle ways in which resources are used up to further the standing of the household and its individual members. The forces driving this hierarchy of expenditures Veblen called the 'pecuniary system'.

Dress and the 'Leisure Class'

Dress is selected by Veblen as a particularly rich field with which to demonstrate the principles of the pecuniary way of life.

> It will be in place, by way of illustration, to show in some detail how the economic principles so far set forth apply to everyday facts in some direction of the life process.

> For this purpose no line of consumption affords a more apt illustration than expenditure on dress.[4]

Dress is 'apt' for Veblen for a number of reasons. First, dress is a public phenomenon and to be in public is, by necessity, to be clothed. Clothes are on show and, therefore, the wearer's 'pecuniary repute' as manifest in his or her apparel 'is always in evidence and affords an indication of . . . pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance'. The added advantage of this is that dress, being a universal item of consumption, makes it difficult for anyone to absent him- or herself from the game of competitive emulation. As Veblen comments, 'at probably no other point is the sense of shabbiness so keenly felt as it is when we fall short of the standard set by social usage in this matter of dress'.[5] Because dress is a universal public phenomenon, it enables a set of rich competitive strategies to be engaged in simultaneously. This means that, within one's own class, status can be asserted in relation to that of one's peers in a game of individual competition. At the same time, the superiority of one class over another can be evidenced by the greater quantity and quality of clothing resources the 'Leisure Class' can mobilize against those of its 'inferiors'. Veblen argues that only a small part of clothing is to do with protection and bodily comfort . . . 'it is by no means an uncommon occurrence, in an inclement climate, for people to go ill clad in order to appear well dressed'.[6] When seen from the perspective of use, function, or survival, dress is almost wholly 'surplus'. Like for the rest of a society's goods the crucial questions start to appear when the fate of all the stuff 'surplus to requirements' begins to be raised. It is this high level of non-utility that inclines goods, such as clothing, to be deployed in systems of consumption, such as fashion, where the overriding aim is display that, for Veblen, is always about social status. Within this system of 'pecuniary repute', Veblen explores two aspects of dress in particular. The differences in, and the relationships between, the appearance of men and women and the mechanics of the system of fashion.

One of the most striking characteristics in the appearance of the sexes in Veblen's day is the enormous disparity between the dress of men and that of women. Not only do they look as if they belong to separate species, they could well originate from different planets. Perhaps nowhere else can Veblen's famous three principles of pecuniary culture – conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste, and conspicuous leisure – be so clearly seen. Despite the enormous differences between the sexes, Veblen is able to demonstrate that the forces of pecuniary culture are at work on them both. Veblen argues that male elegance, a quality prized among the 'leisure class', is not a self-evident, first-order aesthetic category but a judgement exercised within an overlapping field, consisting of economic, social and psychological dimensions. To be in

the presence of elegance may mean an experience of pleasure but Veblen would have us scrutinize what is going on here. What exactly is 'elegance' in clothing for men? Some of the specifics he identifies are 'neat and spotless garments', 'the patent-leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous cylindrical hat, and the walking stick, which so greatly enhance the native dignity of a gentleman'.[7] The first target of his explanation is the idea that elegance is a quality intrinsic to the garments:

> it may be remarked that, considered simply in their physical juxtaposition with the human form, the high gloss of a gentleman's hat or patent-leather shoe has no more of intrinsic beauty than a similarly high gloss on a threadbare sleeve . . .[8]

The difference between the acceptability of the glossy hat and shiny shoe and the 'inelegance' of a shiny sleeve is that the latter results from the work of the coat's wearer while the sheen on the other objects are the result of the 'useless' practices of elegance.[9] Veblen argues that an elegant appearance is always about more than just appearing to be aesthetically composed. Neatness, cleanliness, and the difficulties involved in manipulating a walking stick also 'convey the impression that the wearer does not habitually put forth any useful effort'. He summarizes the complexities of meaning caught up in our notions of elegance so:

> Elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance not only in that it is expensive, but also because it is the insignia of leisure. It not only shows the wearer is able to consume a relatively large value, but it argues at the same time that he consumes without producing.[10]

Carlyle sees Dandies as almost pathological figures whose obsession with their appearance places them at a tangent to most 'normal' men. As far as Veblen is concerned, the dandy is distinguishable only by the *degree and intensity* with which his appearance incorporates economic and social principles already at work in the male population at large.

The first duty of dress among the 'leisure class', therefore, is to show to the world that the wearer is not engaged in any manual, or useful, (industrial) labour. This sartorial demonstration of conspicuous leisure, or as Veblen more sarcastically puts it, a 'sagacious restriction of output', takes both a positive and a negative form. The more the style and construction of a person's clothes indicates a complete unsuitability for work, for instance the ornate, fragile, and complex clothes of the male aristocracy, the greater would be the 'reputability' of their wearer. But this repute of the wearer, as we saw earlier, also depends upon an absence of any signs of work. Shiny elbows, stains of sweat,

overtly occupational dress and certain sorts of fabrics could all damage the wearer's social standing. Women's dress differs from that of men, Veblen argues, because it 'goes even farther in the way of demonstrating the wearer's abstinence from productive employment'. In support of this he cites the following examples:

> . . . the more elegant styles of feminine bonnets go even farther towards making work impossible than does the man's high hat. The woman's shoe adds the so-called French heel to the evidence of enforced leisure afforded by its polish; because the high heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work extremely difficult. The like is true even in a higher degree of the skirt and the rest of the drapery which characterises woman's dress. The substantial reason for our tenacious attachment to the skirt is just this: it is expensive and it hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion. The like is true of the feminine custom of wearing the hair excessively long.[11]

Veblen's immediate question is 'Why is it that the contemporary dress of women more intensely embodies the principles of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous waste and conspicuous consumption than that of men?'

Veblen was part, albeit an awkward part, of the movement for social reform that swept Europe and North America in the latter part of the nineteenth century. And, if he observed the principles of sexual equality only intermittently in his own life, there is little doubt that he found the social and political inferiority of women odious. The gross disparities between the social standing of the sexes is the fulcrum around which his analysis of male and female dress turns. He is the first thinker in the fashion classics tradition to systematically ask why it is that there are such enormous differences between the dress of the sexes. Veblen's answer is that women are not free agents but are the property of the household and, in particular, the property of the male head of the household. In the pecuniary system of the 'leisure class' this means that they can be used by these powerful men as counters in competition for social status. Women become surrogates for the male head of the household and so act as pecuniary representatives to the world at large. Thus, while it is possible for the men of the household to exempt themselves to some extent from the rigours of the pecuniary lifestyle, this can be compensated for by assigning an additional duty upon the women of the unit to waste conspicuously. Thus, the crinolines get wider, the dresses become more ornate, the fabrics and accessories more luxurious. The logic of all this, argues Veblen, is that an 'idle' wife, requiring a very high level of maintenance, and appearing to spend freely herself, brings credit to the husband who becomes known as a person of 'substance', able to withstand the onslaughts that his wife and family make upon his resources.

Fashion

In his analysis of dress in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and in his earlier and shorter essay 'The Economic Theory of Women's Dress', Veblen lists the three principles governing dress in the 'Pecuniary System'. They are the expensiveness of garments, the ineptitude that they inflict upon their wearer, and the novelty of the ensemble. This final principle is the one that Veblen elaborates into an explanation of fashion while integrating it to the principles of conspicuous waste and conspicuous consumption. Here he is commenting upon the motive force driving fashion.

> This requirement of novelty is the underlying principle of the whole of the difficult and interesting domain of fashion. Fashion does not demand continual flux and change simply because that way of doing is foolish; flux and change and novelty are demanded by the central principle of dress – conspicuous waste.[12]

We see Veblen now at his most modern, shunning explanation dependent upon individual moral worth and instead searching for a collective, authorless social process.

Veblen begins his exploration of the fashion process by dealing with the obvious, namely that it is, to some extent, implicated in the pecuniary principle of conspicuous waste. Fashions change 'constantly from season to season' and so provide an excellent opportunity for those of the 'leisure class' to parade and to demonstrate their pecuniary power. But Veblen finds such an explanation too easy:

> This is as good as far as it goes, but it is negative only . . . all that this consideration warrants us in saying is that the norm of conspicuous waste exercises a controlling surveillance in all matters of dress, so that any change in the fashions must conform to the requirement of wastefulness; it leaves unanswered the question as to the motive for making and accepting a change in the prevailing styles, and it also fails to explain why conformity to a given style at a given time is so imperatively necessary as we know it to be.[13]

Here then is Veblen's intellectual agenda with regard to fashion. He must explain why it exercises such a force over us, a force he sees as urging us to be always 'dressing in the latest accredited manner'. In this sense, he is Spencer's true heir, seeing the diffusion of fashion as largely a matter of imitation. Then there is the problem of what Spencer has called 'innovation'; why and how such changes in clothing styles are initiated at all. The 'mystery' of fashion is thus construed as first innovation, invention and change, followed by acceptance, conformity, and a subsequent spreading out among the population at large. It is in framing fashion in this way that Veblen draws most deeply upon

the anthropological heritage of the nineteenth century and, in particular, the disputes about how these cultural traits come into being and are dispersed from culture to culture. Fashion is nothing more than a particularly vivid example of the theory of cultural diffusion. This notion of fashion, which is essentially about innovators and imitators, of leaders and lead, will persist up until the present day.

It comes as something of a surprise, on reading the chapter devoted to dress in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, to find that Veblen does not take up the relation between social classes and fashion until the last page of the chapter and he then spends little time elaborating what is regarded as the classic explanation of fashion; the trickle-down theory. In fact, he hardly spends any more time on it than did Spencer. In his version of the theory fashion is, initially, an intra-class affair. The changes in clothing styles that do happen are mainly about impressing the 'select circle whose good opinion is chiefly sought'. Fashion becomes a matter of inter-class rivalry only when the 'leisure class' begins to expand and fragment into old money and *nouveau riche* factions. The newcomers imitate the styles of the original 'leisure class' but get them wrong, or are too eager to advertise their newly acquired pecuniary power to those below, and fall into the sin of 'loud dress'. The upper 'Upper' classes respond to this competitive imitation of their styles by increasing the variety of ways they advertise their superiority by resorting to what Veblen calls, 'delicate variations' and 'subtler contrivances'. If the process of wealth generation continues unabated, more and more individuals will be inducted into the principles of this pecuniary system.

> And as this upper class sets the pace in all matters of decency, the result for the rest of society also is a gradual amelioration of the scheme of dress. as the community advances in wealth and culture, the ability to pay is put in evidence by means, which require progressively nicer discrimination in the beholder.[14]

When everyone is adequately clothed and fed it is no longer the mere possession of a garment that will guarantee one's prestige. Those who would be on the right side of the invidious comparison must become masters of ever more arcane distinctions. Not just silk shirts, but shirts made from silk spun from silk worms gathered only from the highest branches of the mulberry tree. And so on ad infinitum.

The Past and Clothes

Recall that Veblen regarded the world he lived in as one in which men and women order their lives by way of a very peculiar set of values: what appears

to be objectively useful is regarded as demeaning and unworthy while behaviour that is profligate, selfish and short-sighted is seen as honourable and reputable (even beautiful). Having set out the major principles at work in pecuniary culture, he wants to give an explanation as to how this strange state of affairs has come into being. As Coser observes, he goes about this by way of an evolutionary economics:

> Human evolution, Veblen argued, involved above all the invention and use of ever more effective technologies. 'The process of cumulative change that is to be accounted for is the sequence of change in the methods of doing things – the methods of dealing with the material means of life.' Hence, 'the state of the industrial arts' ultimately determined the state of adaptation of man to his natural environment. Technology, moreover, likewise determined man's adjustment to his social environment.[15]

Like many of his contemporaries, Veblen believes that human development is a matter of progressing through a number of technological stages, and that for each of these stages there is a characteristic cultural correlative. The order taken by these stages is:

- the peaceful savage economy of pre-Neolithic times[16]
- a predatory barbarian economy in which the institutions of warfare, property, masculine prowess and the 'leisure class' originate
- pre-modern handicraft economy
- the modern era of mechanized, industrial capitalism

This is Spencer's 'militant/industrial' distinction with a few extra stages added and, as with Spencer, the accuracy of these stages is not at issue. But they are crucial to an understanding of Veblen's notion of human history of which dress constitutes a not unimportant element.

Pecuniary culture, argues Veblen, was not the expression of a fixed and universal human nature. It came into being, and then flourished, at the expense of an earlier form of human society. What it displaced is an 'Edenic' form of collective life in which there was only minimal internal differentiation between the males and females of the collective. The division of labour was rudimentary and the surplus generated by the group's productive activities only small. Ownership and property are non-existent. Clothing is not as it becomes later and at this stage is merely an extension of the body and soul of the wearer – what Veblen calls 'the quasi-personal fringe of facts and objects' – something comparable to their shadow, nail parings, or their hand and footprints.[17] All this is changed by what Marx would call 'an expansion in the forces of production'. That is, new ways of doing things produce more wealth and the collectivity is faced with what to do with the increased surplus. It is the ways

in which the goods and wealth, beyond what is necessary for survival, get used up that ushers in the whole panoply of the 'leisure class' and pecuniary culture. This is not the place to track the complexities of Veblen's account of the emergence of this way of life; all we need to grasp in this context is that the great inversion happens at that moment when human beings are faced with the question of 'unnecessary expenditures'. Veblen describes the emergence of this new form of life so:

> With the growth of industry comes the possibility of a predatory life; and if the groups of savages crowd one another in the struggle for subsistence, there is provocation to hostilities, and a predatory habit of life ensues . . . This predatory culture shows itself in a growth of suitable institutions. The group divides into a fighting and a peace-keeping class, with a corresponding division of labor. Fighting, together with other work that involves a serious element of exploit (warfare, government, sports and religion), becomes the employment of able-bodied men; everyday work of the group falls to the women and the infirm.[18]

The activities and values of the social order are distinguished from one another by what Veblen calls the 'invidious distinction'. This elevates the male domain of exploit, danger, violence, and competition at the expense of all those daily activities that sustain the group such as growing food, cooking, the care of children, and the like; activities, in other words, that are thought of as women's work. On one side lies the world of the 'honorific' in which the gaining and retention of status is all that matters. On the other side sits the 'unworthy' world of drudgery, industry and utility. This is the kind of world in which clothing (now transformed, in Veblen's terms, into dress) emerges as a key component of the pecuniary way of life.

Veblen opens his discussion of the origin and the development of clothes with the familiar menu of options, though in this instance protection, modesty and decoration are reduced to two, protection and decoration. (Veblen makes no mention of sex and eroticism in relation to dress.) From here on his account of the origins of 'apparel' is eccentric. The conventional account argues that the earliest phase of human development, the pre-lapsarian peaceable savage economy, is characterized by a utilitarian form of clothing, devoted solely to protection and to the provision of physical comfort. Veblen, perverse as always, rejects this argument. Here he is setting out his conception of the origins of clothing:

> In human apparel the element of dress is readily distinguishable from that of clothing. The two functions – of dress and of clothing the person – are to a great extent subserved by the same material goods, although the extent to which the same material serves both purposes will appear very much slighter on second thought than

> it does at first glance. A differentiation of materials has long been going on, by virtue of which many things that are worn for the one purpose no longer serve . . . the other. The differentiation is by no means complete. Much of human apparel is worn both for physical comfort and for dress;[19]

But, having asserted the presence of these two dimensions to apparel, Veblen dismisses the element of 'clothing' as minor:

> Of these two elements of apparel dress came first in order of development, and it continues to hold the primacy to this day. The element of clothing, the quality of affording comfort, was from the beginning, and to a great extent continues to be . . . some sort of afterthought.[20]

Those dimensions of clothing such as protection and the provision of physical comfort can be thought of in the same way as tools and can be treated as just one more element within the complete spectrum of human technology. What is more, this can be judged and evaluated by an objective set of criteria involving mechanical efficiency. However, like Spencer before him, Veblen finds that it is not so simple to account for the 'aesthetic' dimensions of decoration and adornment. His argument is that, while the source of dress might have originally lain with 'the principle of adornment' this was a 'point of departure . . . rather than the norm for its development'. In fact, adornment can no longer be regarded as a factor of significant importance in modern dress. As he remarks, 'adornment, in the *naive* aesthetic sense, is a factor of relatively slight importance in modern dress'. Ornament, decoration or adornment only become part of the pecuniary system when they 'function as an index of the wealth of its wearer – or, to be more precise, of its owner, for the wearer and owner are not necessarily the same person'.[21] Veblen charts the transformations leading to the emergence of dress so:

> The line of progress during the initial stage of the evolution of apparel was from the simple concept of the adornment of the person by supplementary accessions from without, to the complex concept of an adornment that should render the person pleasing, or of an enviable presence . . . In this latter direction lies what was to evolve into dress. By the time dress emerged from the primitive efforts of the savage to beautify himself with gaudy additions to his person, it was already an economic factor of some importance . . . What constitutes dress as an economic fact, properly falling within the scope of economic theory is its function as an index of the wealth of its wearer . .[22]

Remember that a major consequence of the rise of the male honorific values is to render women into goods owned by households. They become living

indexes of the household's pecuniary strength, emblems to be thrust into the faces of the opposition whose only response is to attempt to outdo the sumptuousness of the opposition's female clothes-horses. This means that it is the element of *dress* that gets distended in the apparel of the women of the 'leisure class' until it threatens to completely absorb the dimension of clothing. Men, being the owners of women, have been able to withdraw, to some extent, from direct competition among themselves while the dress of women – especially during Veblen's lifetime – becomes ever more complex, ornate and cumbersome.

The Future

Veblen's biographer, Joseph Dorfman, relates an anecdote about the thinker's taste in clothing toward the end of his life.

> The clothes he wore at home were so coarse they would almost stand alone. 'The heaviest of work-shoes purchased from Sears, Roebuck, served him for everyday wear in the house.' He bought much from the mail order houses, because he liked the rugged utility of the goods.[23]

As Dorfman observes, it would be wrong to ascribe this penchant for clothing of a rugged, utilitarian nature to either an ascetic or straightforwardly philistine disposition on the part of their wearer. Veblen's love of simple clothing is as much to do with the nature of their production as it is to do with their style. Veblen does not share in the technological pessimism so common among contemporary critics of industrial capitalism. He sees the machine-made clothes he favours as part of a process that will clear away the values of the pecuniary economy.

> The machine takes no cognizance of conventionally established rules of precedence; it knows neither manners nor breeding and can make no use of worth. Its scheme of knowledge and of inference is based on the laws of material causation, not on those of immemorial custom, authenticity, or authoritative enactment. Its metaphysical basis is the law of cause and effect.[24]

Veblen's unremitting attack upon the values of pecuniary culture should not blind us to the fact that he also has a strong sense of what has been put in jeopardy by the rise of the 'leisure class' and its culture. In particular, he was offended by the aesthetic disasters caused by our use of artefacts, and ourselves, as agents for the acquisition of status.

We saw that Veblen criticizes his contemporary reality on the grounds that it has an inverted set of values. The invidious distinction that turned the useful into the unworthy and the useless into the honourable suggests to him that somewhere in the realm of the unworthy lies the fragments of a world the 'right way up'. Veblen looks in two places for this corrective principle, or 'the instinct of workmanship' as he calls it. Like the good nineteenth-century thinker he was, he goes searching for it in the past and, in particular, in the earliest stages of human development that he has characterized as 'peaceable savagery'. His other location lies in contemporary reality and also, I would argue, in a possible future that Veblen senses to be latent inside that reality. The past first.

Of all the dimensions of human life considered by Veblen, there is no doubt that it is the aesthetic activities of human beings that cause him the most intellectual difficulty. It would be easy for him to dissolve aesthetics into 'a screen for economic interests' but, to his credit, he refuses to take this easy way out. Nor does he regard aesthetic activity as something that 'came late' in the course of human evolution and so could be placed in the category of the nonessential: something that appears only after the essentials of life have been guaranteed. He does not consign clothes simply to one side or the other of the division between the useful and the inessential. Given this, it becomes clear that what Veblen is attempting to discover in his 'state of savagery' is a situation where the useful, the good and the beautiful can be found in a harmonious alignment rather than in the perverse and fragmented forms that this trinity takes in pecuniary culture. It is true that, in a world of immediate functionality, clothing would be determined in the same manner as tools, but Veblen always insists on the 'early' presence of an aesthetic element at work in clothing, a presence that is not susceptible to a judgement on the grounds of mechanical efficiency. What this means is that Veblen wants to include the dimension of the aesthetic within the instinct of workmanship and make of it something more than a mechanical equation. But what exactly is this 'instinct of workmanship?' In the *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen summarizes it like this:

> . . . man is an agent . . . an agent seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end. By force of being such an agent he is possessed of a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort. He has a sense of the merit of serviceability or efficiency and of the demerit of futility, waste or incapacity. This aptitude or propensity may be called the instinct of workmanship.[25]

In other words, it is an intrinsic abhorrence of everything valued by pecuniary culture. If this is the case, Veblen has to subsume and incorporate the aesthetic into his idea of serviceability, and it is in his discussion of fashion that we get

an idea of how this is to be done. We have already seen that Veblen derives the aesthetic dimension of clothing from 'the motive of adornment':

> For a creative principle, capable of serving as motive to invention and innovation in fashions, we shall have to go back to the primitive, non-economic motive with which apparel originated – the motive of adornment.[26]

The motive of adornment is propelled by the same force as all the other elements that constitute the instinct of workmanship, namely improvement. Veblen expresses it thus:

> . . . it may be stated broadly that each successive innovation in the fashions is an effort to reach some form of display which shall be more acceptable to our sense of form and colour or of effectiveness, than that which it displaces.[27]

This means that the stylistic restlessness that is such a feature of fashion is not a straightforward expression of the principles of conspicuous waste and conspicuous leisure. It arises out of the persistence of the principles of the 'instinct of workmanship' in the realm of beauty and their perpetual frustration by the pecuniary culture of the 'leisure class'. If the contradiction could be abolished what would emerge would not be 'clothing' in Veblen's sense of mere tools for producing physical comfort. What would appear would be something like the 'relatively stable costumes' of Greece, Rome, China and Japan. These are costumes that have been worked out 'under circumstances where the norm of conspicuous waste asserts itself less imperatively than it does in the large modern civilised cities . . .'[28] With the pressures of 'pecuniary emulation' eased, these stable costumes have been able to more nearly approach aesthetic resolution. Veblen comments that such costumes 'are in most cases adjudged by competent critics to be more becoming, more artistic, than the fluctuating styles of modern civilised apparel'.[29] But Veblen is not nostalgic and realizes that, while these exotic forms of costume might provide clues as to what a rejuvenated dress aesthetic might produce, it is to the new forms of industrial production that one must look to for a modern manifestation of the 'instinct of workmanship'.

Veblen was greatly influenced by the utopian novel *Looking Backwards* written by Edward Bellamy and published in 1888. Unlike many other writers in this genre, Bellamy gives the reader very little idea as to what the inhabitants of the 'rational' future will wear. All we are told is that in the future fashion will have ceased and in its place something approaching Veblen's 'stable costumes' will have taken its place. Although Veblen does not directly refer to the future of clothes, he does provide his reader with a clear indication

of the general principles he has in mind, as well as why they should be seen as 'progressive'. The evolutionary bent of so much thinking at this time, particularly that of reforming radicals such as Veblen, means that a temporal dimension is fundamental to how they conceive of the political, cultural and aesthetic ideals that they are advocating. While radicals such as Veblen might scrutinize the past for confirmation of their notions of what *had* been progressive, it is the future where these ideals would be realized by the onward march of progress. Veblen sees in the technological revolution of machine production something that would counter the foolishness of the 'leisure class' and be an important force in re-establishing the 'instinct of workmanship' as the dominant organizing principle of the social order. Machines are indifferent to the irrationalities of 'honorific' values; their 'metaphysical basis is the law of cause and effect'. How this rationalized, non-pecuniary future would manifest itself in the domain of clothing is never spelt out by Veblen, but others are not so restrained in their sartorial predictions. The idea of the rational in clothing is often translated into mass uniformity, based upon an intensification of the simplifying tendencies, which have so changed men's appearance during the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994.
2. Thorstein Veblen, 'Ownership and the Industrial Arts', in *The Portable Veblen*, ed. Max Lerner, New York: Viking Press, 1964, p. 306.
3. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, p. 134.
4. Ibid., p. 167.
5. Ibid., p. 168.
6. Ibid., p. 167.
7. Ibid., pp. 170–1.
8. Ibid., pp. 131–2.
9. '. . . footmen, and courtiers and Scottish highlanders, and the corps de ballet, draymen too, have legs, and staring legs, shapely enough. But what are they for? not the modulated instrument we mean – simply legs for leg-work, dumb as brutes. Our cavalier's is the poetic leg, a portent, a valiance.' (George Meredith, *The Egoist*, London: Constable, 1922, p. 14)
10. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, p. 171.
11. Ibid.
12. Veblen, 'The Economic Theory of Women's Dress', in *Essays in Our Changing Order*, ed. Leon Ardzrooni, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1964, p. 72.
13. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, p. 173.

14. Ibid., p. 187.

15. Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, New York: Harcourt, 1971, p. 265.

16. Veblen summarizes the main features of this state of savagery so: 'This savage mode of life, which was, and is, in a sense, native to man, would be characterised by a considerable small group solidarity within a relatively small group, living very near the soil, and unremittingly dependent for their daily life on the workmanlike efficiency of all members of the group. The prime requisite for survival under these conditions would be a propensity unselfishly and impersonally to make the most of the material means at hand and a penchant for turning all resources of knowledge and material to account to sustain the life of the group.' in Thorstein Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts*, 1914. Quoted in *The Portable Veblen*, ed. Max Lerner, New York: Viking, 1964. p. 323.

17. Thorstein Veblen, 'The Beginnings of Ownership', in *Essays*, ed. Ardzrooni, pp. 36–7.

18. Thorstein Veblen, 'The Barbarian Status of Women', in Ardzrooni, p. 51.

19. Thorstein Veblen, 'The Economic Theory of Women's Dress', in Ardzrooni, p. 65.

20. Ibid., p. 66.

21. Ibid., p. 67.

22. Ibid., p. 66.

23. Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and his America*, New York: Viking, 1934, p. 498.

24. Thorstein Veblen, 'The Discipline of the Machine' in *The Portable Veblen*, (1964) pp. 338–9. This is Veblen's reworking of Spencer's notion of the move from the metaphorical to the literal that characterized the shift from militant society to industrial society. In a footnote on the effects of the machine upon 'the forms of intelligence', he comments: 'If, e.g., he takes to myth-making and personifies the machine or the process and imputes purpose and benevolence to the mechanical appliances, after the manner of current nursery tales and pulpit oratory, he is sure to go wrong.' in *The Portable Veblen,* p. 337.

25. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, p, 15.

26. Ibid., p. 173.

27. Ibid., p. 174.

28. Ibid., pp. 175–6.

29. Ibid., p. 175.

4

Georg Simmel: Clothes and Fashion

> Fashion is haughty, trifling, affected, servile, despotic, mean and ambitious, precise and fantastical, all in a breath – tied to no rule, and bound to conform to every whim of the minute.
>
> William Hazlitt

German sociologist and social philosopher Georg Simmel (1858–1918) published his major work on fashion, *Philosophie der Mode*, in 1905.[1] He spent most of his adult life in the artistic and intellectual milieu of Berlin and was famous for being a charismatic public lecturer as well as an inspiration to many German intellectuals of the generation below him. Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Wilhelm Worringer and Siegfreid Kracauer all openly acknowledged the importance of Simmel's thought to their development. Georg Simmel and his wife Gertrude (a philosopher in her own right) were famous hosts and their home was a centre for the Berlin intelligentsia. One visitor to their home described it so:

> The large high study on the ground floor with the view into the garden was covered with valuable old Persian carpets . . . Everywhere in cupboards or in the open stood vases, bowls from the far east, exquisite Buddha figures . . . I will never forget the distinctive fragrance which one encountered upon entering Simmel's house; a mixture of the smell of hand picked apples and very expensive cigarettes.[2]

For a number of years Simmel was a member of the intellectual circle grouped around the poet Stefan George who was famous for wearing clothing he had designed himself.[3] These are not individuals for whom dress, style and personal tastes were matters of little import.

The favoured literary form for Simmel, with his immersion in, and love of, the experience of metropolitan life, was condensed, subtle dissections of the daily encounters that are the stuff of city life. Simmel's acute analytical eye arises out of the centrality he accords to art and to aesthetics. As well as writing

books on Rembrandt and Rodin, Simmel produced numerous essays and articles exploring artistic themes.[4] But his concern with art and aesthetics goes much deeper than mere art appreciation. In the structure of the artwork, and our experience of it, Simmel finds a template by which to guide his analysis of the social order in general. David Frisby has argued that one of the most distinctive qualities of Simmel's ideas, as well as his style of expressing them, is that he 'adopts an aesthetic perspective in the articulation of his social theory'.[5] What I think Frisby is implying here is that Simmel sees in works of art and our encounters with them something close to the core of what it is to be human. Aesthetics pervades the whole of human life. Indeed, aesthetics *is* life and so has an especial significance for how human activities and institutions are thought of at a general level. Simmel puts it thus:

> For us the essence of aesthetic observation and interpretation lies in the fact that the typical is to be found in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance of things in the superficial and transitory.[6]

The handle of a jug, an earring, a picture frame or the pattern that food assumes on a plate can all be places where the generalities of social life are as insistently present as in the broad social trends thought to constitute the summits of collective life. The source of this sense of the general in the particular, of the presence of the whole in the fragment, comes out of the tradition of German art history which, since the work of Winckelmann at the end of the eighteenth century, had been developing an increasingly sophisticated conceptual lexicon for analysing works of art. At the heart of this enterprise is the idea of style which, by the time Simmel encounters it, has become a notion whose remit goes way beyond the borders of high art.[7] As with works of art, human artefacts were regarded as unique in the ways in which their material (their particular) and spiritual (their universal) dimensions are joined within the internal economy of the object. As he observes in the above quotation, this encounter in the human artefact is one where the typical can be found in the unique. Unlike his contemporary, Veblen, Simmel does not see social phenomena, and in particular the material forms of the clothes we use to transform ourselves, as screens for 'unworthy motives', or simply the ideological tools of a powerful leisure class.[8] Each point, instance or particularity in social life is a momentary resolution of numerous and, very often, conflicting forces. A social fact can appear, but it can just as easily disappear, if there is an alteration in the alignment of forces upon which it rests. Frisby observes that in Simmel's social theory 'the notion of substance is dissolved to that of threads'.[9] One might also add that these threads are constantly unravelling and ravelling anew. Paradoxically, if his pervasive 'aestheticism' encouraged what has been referred

to as Simmel's 'sociological impressionism', it also alerts him to the importance of registering the precise forms and materialities of the physical environment in which we live. Aestheticism may elevate the mundane into the sublime but it also plunges the interpreter into the heart of an object's physical make-up, its formal composition and the sensual impact these have upon their perceiver. As a thinker, Simmel never rushes to 'overcome' the sensuous presence of objects and just as he entitles one of his essays 'The Sociology of the Senses' one might also claim that much of what concerns him is a 'Sociology of Material Form'.[10] It is this 'aesthetic' sensibility which he brings to bear with such wonderful results on the social phenomena of clothing and fashion.

Clothes

Simmel makes a sharp distinction between fashion and clothes and sees no intrinsic link between those objects nominated as 'clothing' and the broad social phenomena of 'fashion'. In fact, he declares that fashion is a process capable of appearing in areas of life other than clothing:

> the domination of fashion is most unbearable in those areas which ought to be subject only to objective decisions: religiosity, scientific interests, and even socialism and individualism have all been the subject of fashion.[11]

Simmel deals with clothing in his short essay 'Adornment'.[12] Like Spencer and Veblen, he follows the nineteenth-century anthropological convention in deriving clothes from 'a decorative impulse'. He even tracks across the same ground as Spencer when he claims that clothing emerges from within a primitive matrix in which the individual's possessions, his or her bodily ornamentation and his or her sense of self have undergone a minimum of internal differentiation.

> Among primitive peoples, it is reported, women's private property generally develops later than that of men and, originally, and often exclusively, refers to adornment. By contrast, the personal property of the male usually begins with weapons.[13]

Simmel is never at his best when indulging in anthropological speculation of this kind and observations such as these are quickly put to one side once he begins to elaborate his 'real' theory of adornment, namely that adornment is an attempt on the part of the individual to extend the force field of his or her ego. As always, Simmel begins his analysis by positing a social fact, in this instance adornment, brought into being the through the interplay of two, logically opposed forces. These he describes in the following way:

> Man's desire to please his social environment contains two contradictory tendencies, in whose play and counterplay in general, the relations among individuals take their course. On the one hand, it contains kindness, a desire of the individual to give the other joy; but on the other hand, there is the wish for this joy and these 'favours' to flow back to him, in the form of recognition and esteem . . .[14]

The nature of these forces is such that the presence of each becomes the condition for the realization of them both. The powerful need the weak because without their recognition the game of competition would never have come into being in the first place.

> Pleasing may thus become a means of the will to power: some individuals exhibit the strange contradiction that they need those above whom they elevate themselves by life and deed, for their own self-feeling upon the subordinates' realization that they *are* subordinate.[15]

A concrete and immediate vehicle for carrying the assertive drives of the ego out into the world is the body and its accoutrements. Simmel argues that a person may give pleasure to others by making him- or herself pleasing through adornment. This 'debt to pleasure' will be returned to its originator in the form of esteem, envy and recognition. Clothing, he argues, appears within that set of objects and activities in which the individual strives to extend the power of the will over others by manipulating attractive body supplements. If the argument were to break off at this point there would not be much to differentiate Simmel's argument from that of Veblen. It is only as Simmel starts to elaborate upon this line of thinking that the differences between the two become clear.

Simmel's argument is that clothes are located midway between those bodily adornments that are engraved directly onto the wearer's body – that is, tattoos and those things most 'distant' from the wearer's body, such as 'accessories' and jewellery. The latter items can be distinguished from body adjustments such as cosmetics because they can stand apart from their wearer. The manner of 'wearing' adornments such as tattoos and cosmetics necessarily requires them to be intimately implicated in the body of *that* individual; they are so irrevocably fused with the particularities of that person's movements that, despite any impersonal traits that may be carried, for instance, by the designs of the tattoo, they will inevitably be overwhelmed by their physical location on that body. Creases on the skin will disrupt the formal coherence of the design and no matter how intense is the application of make-up, individual facial incident cannot be completely eliminated. Personal distinctiveness, however, will not impinge upon, or disrupt, the formal coherence of jewellery. Simmel

sees clothing capable of inclining in both these directions: 'Between these two stands dress, which is not so inexchangeable and personal as tattooing, but neither so unindividual and separable as jewellery . . .'[16] Clothing can create a sphere of significance around the body where the general is able to appear without being utterly divorced from, and indifferent to, the personal qualities of their wearer. It is at this point that Simmel begins to discuss the aesthetic effects created by new clothes, and he too raises the familiar question, 'What is (male) elegance?'

Elegant is one of number of style adjectives such as 'smooth', 'svelte', 'cool', 'hip', 'cute' and 'camp' where there is a blurring of the characteristics of physical matter with the mental and spiritual condition of a human individual. For instance, to be 'cool' is at one and the same time to be of a certain mental attitude and emotional disposition as well as to assume a distinctive physical condition. That this is not just a case of metaphorical displacement is borne out by the fact that the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* is explicit in declaring 'elegant' to be an adjective applicable both to a person – 'someone who dresses tastefully' – and also to an object or situation 'characterized by grace of form, style, or movement'. Once more, a comparison between Simmel, Veblen and their respective explanations of this sartorial-cum-spiritual adjective is illuminating.

Both men accept that the notion of male elegance is always more than an objective description of certain sorts of male garments. Elegance has a social dimension in the sense that it is a term of approval on the part of those who behold the ensemble and its wearer. Elegance, in other words, requires an audience. As Simmel observes 'elegance . . . is something for the "others", a social notion deriving its value from general respect'.[17] Veblen agrees with Simmel, similarly locating male elegance as a quality that exists, and is apprehended, within a relation between the perceiver of the elegance and its physical embodiment. Veblen remarks, '. . . what passes *in popular apprehension* for elegant apparel . . .' (my italics).[18] From this point their understandings begin to diverge. The reader will recall that Veblen argues that the aesthetic judgements we make on clothes and their wearers rest on what he calls the 'Pecuniary Canons of Taste'. The approval and the envy packed into the adjective 'elegant' constitute recognition on the part of the person making the judgement of the 'pecuniary strength' of the wearer of the clothes. Veblen puts it so:

> A detailed examination of what passes in popular apprehension for elegant (male) apparel will show that it is contrived at every point to convey the impression that the wearer does not habitually put forth any useful effort. It goes without saying that no apparel can be considered elegant, or even decent, if it shows the effect of manual labour on the part of the wearer, in the way of soil or wear. The pleasing

> effect of neat and spotless garments is chiefly, if not altogether, due to their carrying the suggestion of leisure-exemption from personal contact with industrial processes of any kind.[19]

Veblen recognizes that 'elegance' has a material form that has sensuous effects but he is loath to accord to these forms any influence in their own right. Any aesthetic pleasure experienced by the perceiver of 'neat and spotless garments' will always be contingent upon what they have to say about the pecuniary position of their wearer. Simmel, however, places this aesthetic dimension into the very heart of his understanding of the phenomenon of elegance.

> What is really elegant avoids pointing to the specifically individual; it always lays a more general, stylized, almost abstract sphere around man – which, of course, prevents no finesse from connecting the general with the personality. That new clothes are particularly elegant is due to their being still 'stiff'; they have not yet adjusted to the modifications of the individual body as fully as older clothes have, which have been worn, and are pulled and pinched by the peculiar movements of their wearer – thus completely revealing his particularity.[20]

The truth of elegance is not to be revealed simply by scraping off the 'alibis' so as to reveal the economic truths operating behind the aesthetic judgement. The physical forms assumed by clothing, like all of our artefacts, merge into and participate in a collective ordering and interpretation of the world's 'stuff'. Absorption into the general relieves the individual of the burdens of differentiation. 'Being formal' then becomes an activity that has a precise sartorial correlative, namely absorption by, and into, a form. 'Informality', on the other hand, suggests a set of clothes more able to register the nuances of our individual actions and less likely to follow the strictures of form. Once again the differences between Veblen and Simmel are apparent. Remember that Veblen's interpretation of the deterioration in the degrees of elegance exhibited by a particular outfit was the appearance upon its 'spotless' surfaces of traces of productive activity, interpreted by the perceiver as signs of the wearer's pecuniary weakness. Simmel's interpretation draws directly upon his reading of the tradition of European aesthetics. The more aesthetically autonomous the adorning object, argues Simmel, the more it approaches the work of art.

> The work of art cannot, in principle, be incorporated into another life – it is a self-sufficient world . . . The essence of stylization is precisely the dilution of this individual poignancy, this generalization beyond the uniqueness of the personality.[21]

Elegance is destroyed when too much of the particular or the exceptional starts to appear in the clothing of the wearer. Sartorial stylization, again like the work

of art, can invoke the general by controlling the incidence of the particular without resorting to a brutal uniformity.

Simmel begins his explanation of clothing by repeating the conventional anthropological wisdom that clothes originated as expressions of a motive of self-decoration, or adornment. What he presents in the few pages of this essay is the embryo of a properly aesthetic engagement with clothing. Simmel refuses to erase, overlook or ignore the fact that clothing is material that has been 'worked' for the benefit of our senses. The stages in the journey from the particular and personal through to the impersonality of a general beauty have implications for how clothes are made, what they are made from and how they are shaped, coloured and patterned. Simmel refers to these forms in which clothing presents itself to us as 'the material means of its social purpose'. His acute sensitivity to the domain of social sensation leads him, inevitably, to pay particular attention to the physical forms of these apprehensions.

Fashion

Simmel's essay on fashion, 'The Philosophy of Fashion', was published in Berlin in 1905. It is a work of considerable length, consisting of some forty paragraphs and all of them rich in content. As well as setting out a general explanation of fashion, much of Simmel's essay investigates many kinds of fashionable behaviour. It is not possible to do justice to all of the various themes which Simmel raises. The aspects of the essay that I have chosen to explore are:

- the philosophical basis of his theory of fashion
- the definition of fashion
- the relationship between fashion and social class
- the relationship between fashion and gender
- the relationship between fashion and time
- the notion of a classic and the limits to fashion.

As in his 'Adornment' essay, Simmel begins 'The Philosophy of Fashion' by setting out the force field within which the phenomenon of fashion is to appear. Like the former essay, the relevant forces are pared down to just two, in keeping with Simmel's dualistic inclinations. The sociologist Lewis Coser observes that for Simmel 'sociation always involves harmony *and* conflict, attraction *and* repulsion, love *and* hatred'.[22] Perhaps nowhere is this sense of how opposite forces can be simultaneously at work to constitute a distinctive social reality to be seen more clearly than in his essay on fashion. What appears to be a unified social fact, in this instance 'fashion', and what is experienced by the

individual as an aspiration to be 'in fashion', is the product of far deeper social energies. The kinds of forces constitutive of the institution of fashion are of the same order as those that impress themselves upon social life in general.

> The first . . . is provided by the physiological foundation of our nature: the latter requires motion as well as rest, productivity as well as receptivity. Continuing this analysis into the life of the mind, we are directed, on the one hand, by the striving for the general, as well as by the need to grasp the particular; the general provides our mind with rest, while the particular causes it to *move* from case to case. And it is no different in emotional life: we seek calm devotion to people and things just as much as energetic self-assertion against them both.[23]

These general forces are the foundation upon which Simmel begins his journey 'up' toward the lived reality of fashion. Mediating between these basic strivings and those operating in fashion are the patterns of life inside of the social group(s) in which human affairs are conducted. Again, two fundamental principles are at work in every aspect of group existence. The first is 'adaptation to the social group' and the second its opposite, 'individual elevation from it'. The former principle is manifest in a multitude of social forms such as heredity, tradition, socialism, generality and uniformity while the latter represents, at different moments, qualities such as variation, individualism, motion, unfettered change free of tradition, newness and the particular.

> Within its own sphere, every essential form of life in the history of our species represents a unique way of unifying the interest in duration, unity and equality, and similarity with that in change, particularity and uniqueness.[24]

Simmel locates the mental embodiment of these opposites in the psychological disposition to imitate but, in accordance with his dualism, imitation will always be accompanied by its opposite in the form of a desire for individual differentiation – that is, a desire to constitute oneself as a particularity. It is these two forces that are brought together in the institution of fashion and it is they that create its 'facticity'.

Simmel scholar Donald N. Levine notes that, in construing fashion as a form whose inner articulation is made up of two opposing forces, Simmel is simply iterating his wider fascination with the subtle interactions between elements that on the surface appear to be contradictory.[25] But 'inner articulation', points out Levine, can take different forms in Simmel. One of the senses in which he construes fashion is to see it as a form that synthesizes oppositions so that two contradictory aims may be secured at the same time. In this way, a single fashionable action, for instance the buying of new shade of lipstick, can simultaneously adhere to the general norm governing the appearance of women in

public but can also inflect these rules by introducing an element of individual differentiation by the novelty of the lipstick's colour. Another way Simmel has of relating his contradictory forces is to see social forms as consisting of varying amounts of the elements in opposition. Simmel adopts this strategy when he describes his gallery of fashion types. The 'dandy', the 'bohemian', in fact what has become known as cultural sub-groups, can be differentiated by specifying the precise ways, and amounts, in which opposite tendencies are brought together. For instance the 'dandy' achieves an increase in the degree of individual differentiation by intensifying the rules of dress that are the norm within the group while the 'bohemian' may attempt differentiation by violating such rules. But the violation of these rules of appearance is not singular because the 'violators' imitate one another. This is borne out by the ease with which it is possible to discriminate between the dress of an eccentric and the styles of the bohemian.

No matter how these opposite forces are related, be it as compromise or synthesis, both have to be present for fashion to come into existence. Simmel's insistence upon their co-presence is something that tends to be omitted from the many précis of his theory scattered across costume studies. What is seized upon is fashion as group imitation, and it is left to novelists, poets and journalists to appreciate the subtleties of individuation that the pleasures of conformity can open up. Indeed, Simmel warns about the dangers that can result from a one-sided view of fashion. If one of the opposing forces is absent, or has been almost 'overcome' by its other, Simmel argues that fashion will cease. If the desire for uniformity and imitation could reach fulfillment there would be no such thing as fashion, only mass similarity. Indeed, mass uniformity in appearance has been a recurrent theme in Western utopian visions of the fashionless society. Just as we saw with Spencer's notion of 'absolute' differentiation, an exacerbated individualism would also spell the end of fashion since 'the desire for integration' must be absent in a situation where self-assertion is so dominant.

The final general feature of Simmel's theory of fashion to be highlighted here is his insistence that fashion is not to be just equated with changes in dress styles over time. Fashion is a set of relations, not a set of contents. In other words, what is important in fashion is adherence to the demands and inner promptings of the institution of fashion. Simmel is explicit in stressing that 'meaning', in the sense of being able to ground and to derive the minutiae of fashion changes from external sources, is impossible (and pointless).

> That fashion is . . . a product of social needs is perhaps demonstrated by nothing stronger than the fact that, in countless instances, not the slightest reason can be found for its creations from the standpoint of an objective, aesthetic or other expediency.[26]

Since what we see unfolding within fashionable clothing cannot be exclusively anchored to any specific objective functions of dress there are no inherent reasons why fashion-as-a-process might not manifest itself in areas of life other than clothing. Simmel hints in this essay that not only has fashion been present in areas other than dress but that it is in the process of broadening its remit aided and abetted by the forces of modernity.

> The break with the past which, for more than a century, civilized human kind has been labouring unceasingly to bring about, concentrates consciousness more and more upon the present . . . so to that degree will it turn to fashion in all fields, and by no means merely with regard to clothing. Indeed, it is almost a sign of the *increased* power of fashion that it has overstepped the bounds of its original domain, which comprised only externals of dress, and has acquired an increasing influence over taste, theoretical convictions, and even the moral foundations of life in their changing forms.[27]

Follow this prediction through to its logical end and fashion becomes the historical destiny awaiting modern capitalism. From being a game of competition in the restricted area of appearance, fashion expands to become the dominant organizing principle for a whole civilization.

Fashion and Class

Differentiation and imitation constitute the bedrock of fashion and, with these in place, Simmel sets out to explore a number of the objective and subjective dimensions that structure the actions of the participants in the fashion drama. The first, and most important, of the objective frameworks is that of social class.

> Fashions are always class fashions, by the fact that the fashions of the higher strata of society distinguish themselves from those of the lower strata, and are abandoned by the former at the moment when the latter begin to appropriate them.[28]

Simmel repeats this explanation of the relation between fashion and social class later in the essay.

> Just as soon as the lower strata begin to appropriate their style – and thereby overstep the demarcation line which the upper strata have drawn and destroy the uniformity of their coherence symbolized in this fashion – so the upper strata turn away from this fashion and adopt a new one, which in turn differentiates them from the broad masses. And thus the game goes merrily on.[29]

This, in essence, is what has come to be regarded as Simmel's most distinctive contribution to the theorization of fashion. It is known as the 'trickle-down theory' since any element of dress originating with the upper class should eventually, via the process of class imitation, come to rest within the lower classes. But, as we saw from the earlier discussions in chapters 2 and 3, the bare bones of this notion of fashion dynamics had been in circulation for a number of decades before it surfaced in Simmel's essay.[30] Simmel was not the originator of the trickle-down theory, nor did he ever claim to be; he was just one of a number of thinkers who had played around with it in the hope of better accounting for fashion's unceasing changes of style. As readers of his fashion essay will discover for themselves, the 'trickle-down theory' occupies only a very small part of Simmel's commentary. Just why this element of his theory has overshadowed the rest of his thought on this topic is unclear. One reason might be that it is the one section of his account of fashion that most clearly adheres to a 'predictive' model of theory. It suggests a regularity and coherence to the workings of fashion that would be attractive to those agencies of mass marketing, and their academic counterparts, keen to divine some sort of order in one of the most 'unpredictable' of consumer choices.

One of the more unfortunate effects of this dilution of Simmel's theory of the relation between social class and fashion is that there has been a consequent simplification of the way in which he conceived of the 'inner articulation' between the opposing tendencies of imitation and differentiation. Commentators have tended to place imitation somehow logically before differentiation within the class model so that it is the action of imitation of the upper class by the lower class that initiates the fashion cycle. It is only when there is a 'threat from below' that the upper class acts to reassert its sartorial differentiation, which is then followed by a reciprocal imitative action by the lower class, and so on, and so on. But this is to overlook the fact that Simmel's ideas of class and fashion are much more discriminating than such a version allows. Simmel's notion of fashion's inner articulation is one in which imitation and differentiation can be expressed *at the same time*, within a *single* fashionable act or object. All fashion, whether it be the actions of a group such as social class or those of the individual, is about ways of keeping these two forces in play, albeit in a variety of combinations. Even when an intense regime of exclusion is being practised it is rare for intra-group differentiation to be forbidden absolutely or not resorted to by those attempting to assert some individuality within a rigidly enforced dress code. Rather than schematizing Simmel's notions of fashion and class into a mechanical model of sequential imitation, it is much more interesting (and fruitful) to assume that neither of the major principles of fashion is logically before the other but that they are in play simultaneously. All choices in the arena of clothing are both positive

and negative and aim to declare the wearer is *not* something as much as they declare the positive quality of 'I am'. This is a better way of conceiving what Simmel is getting at with his class model rather than some kind of mass game of 'chase and flight' in which imitation and differentiation neatly follow one another.[31]

Fashion: Women and Men

Another of the objective social frameworks across which the process of fashion is played out is that of gender. Simmel was writing against a backdrop of the struggle for women's rights that can be roughly equated to the suffragette movement. He took a close interest in the activities and philosophy of this movement in both Germany and the rest of Western Europe and it is clear from his writings that the progress made towards female emancipation was one of his central political and intellectual concerns. A considerable portion of the fashion essay is devoted to analysing the different combinations of imitation and differentiation available to the sexes in the organization of their appearances. All the more intriguing is the fact that Simmel adopted a different approach to the one he used to explain the relation of fashion to social class.

Simmel's discussion of fashion and of gender opens by taking issue with the conventional assertion that those who participate in fashion are the victims of their 'weak sensibilities'. What is so impressive about Simmel's demolition of this moralizing argument is that he accomplishes it without himself having to leave the field of the moral. That our fashion strategies harbour a series of ethical dispositions he agrees with, but he also argues that they are far more complex than the crude equation of 'strength' with individual differentiation and 'weakness' with unthinking adherence to the latest mode.

> it may also be due to a weak sensibility, which causes individuals to fear that they will be unable to maintain their little piece of individuality if they adopt the forms, tastes and customs of the general public. Such opposition to the latter is by no means always a sign of personal strength. On the contrary, personal strength will be so conscious of its unique value . . . that it will be able to submit without any unease to general forms up to and including fashion. Rather, it is precisely in this obedience that it will become conscious of the *voluntariness* of its obedience and of that which transcends obedience.[32]

It soon becomes clear why Simmel approaches the relation between gender and fashion in this way.

> If fashion both gives expression to the impulse towards equalization and individualization, as well as to the allure of imitation and conspicuousness, this perhaps explains why it is that women, broadly speaking, adhere especially strongly to fashion.[33]

It had been customary to explain the close bond between women and fashion as a result of their 'weak sensibilities': that is, their vanity, superficiality and so on. Simmel extends this idea of a 'weak sensibility', not by its outright dismissal, but by redefining the central idea of 'weakness' to mean 'the weakness of the social position to which women were condemned throughout the greater part of their history'.

Simmel has a distinctive way of construing the social and individual being of the sexes, one that differs from our contemporary notion of gender in which male and female form a sexual binary in which women are represented as the negative term in the social and symbolic construction of the sexes. This difference from current notions of gender does not mean Simmel is insensible to the gross imbalances that existed in the social and political standings of men and women.

> it is important to affirm at the outset the fact that human culture, even as regards its purely objective contents, is not asexual . . . It is rather the case that, with the exception of a very few areas, our objective culture is thoroughly male.[34]

But having said this, there is no doubt that he is not of the opinion that female emancipation consists primarily in taking possession of a set of 'cultural goods that already existed and to which they had merely been denied access'. Simmel sees masculinity and femininity as '*being* male' and '*being* female'. Sexual identities are 'forms of life', or 'existential totalities', that are incommensurable. The contents, but more particularly the forms of these male and female cultures, are quite different from one another and it is for this reason that the modalities of fashionable behaviour for men and women are seen as quite distinct.

Simmel begins his discussion of women and fashion with the assertion that 'Women were especially strong adherents to fashion'. If this is to become more than a banal commonplace we need to ask what, precisely, he means by this statement. The traditionally weak social and cultural position occupied by women leads Simmel to argue that they will tend to conform to the general and the typical as a way of ensuring security. The weak 'lose themselves' in the acceptable and so avoid any trouble that might arise from acting and appearing different to that which is sanctioned by custom.

> For those who are weak steer clear of individualization; they avoid dependence upon the self, with its responsibilities and the necessity of defending oneself unaided. Those in a weak position find protection only in the typical form of life . . .[35]

But fashion, as we saw earlier, cannot exist as pure imitation and Simmel, ever the dualist, cannot imagine any human situation in which the dynamism of forces is ever finally settled, least of all in the dynamics of fashion.

> Just as in the case of individualism and collectivism, so there exists between the uniformity and the variety of the contents of life a definite proportion of needs, which is tossed to and fro in the different spheres and seeks to balance the refusal in one by consent however acquired, in the other.[36]

Paradoxically, it is the very necessity placed upon women to conform to 'approved forms of existence' that makes them such enthusiastic participants in fashion. It is in fashion that we find a socially approved form of individuation, albeit one that is severely restricted in its reach. Here lies an opportunity for women to allow themselves a degree of visibility that is forbidden elsewhere.

> Fashion offers them (women) this very combination to the most favourable extent, for we have here, on the one hand, a sphere of general imitation, the individual floating in the broadest social current, relieved of responsibility for their tastes and their actions, and yet, on the other hand, we have a certain conspicuousness, an individual emphasis, an individual ornamentation of the personality.[37]

Although Simmel sees this as constituting the normal operating conditions for women there had been, at certain periods in the past, situations where the social position of women had enabled them 'free play for individual development'. During these periods female investments in fashionable behaviours and objects were diminished considerably. Likewise, the modern movement for female emancipation had produced women whose insertion into the processes of fashion more nearly approximated to that of men. They signalled their absorption into the public sphere by, not just an indifference to fashion, but also by reworking male clothing into appropriate female forms.

Men and Fashion

Simmel may argue that men have a different relationship to fashion than women, but he never argues that men are absent from it, or have somehow been able to inoculate themselves against its attractions. His analysis of fashion is not one that depends upon the existence of identifiable 'fashion institutions',

for example a garment industry, or upon a collection of clearly recognizable 'fashion objects'. The forces that are impressing themselves upon, and being experienced by, men were the same ones that are at work on women. The difference is that they experience and respond to them through the structures of male culture.

Simmel argues that one of the sources for women's 'strong adherence' to fashion is in the high degree of integration (compared to men) of female being.

> For if there is any sense in which the distinctive psychic quality of woman's nature can be expressed symbolically, it is this: Its periphery is more completely integrated into the whole than holds true for male culture.[38]

What Simmel seems to suggest by this is that in female culture the outside, in the form of clothing, is only partially differentiated from the inside. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be split into external, objective dimensions against an intense personal subjectivity. Clothing for men is not a vehicle for the totality of their being but is an element taken from, and appropriate to, their participation of the objective formations of the social order. This means that, in theory at least, the external appearance of the male is more 'detached' from his inner life than is the case for women, and Simmel traces a number of consequences which this objectification of the male has for both the style of his clothing and the manner in which he inhabits the garments.

It hardly needs to be said that Simmel's analysis of men's relation to fashion has as its backdrop the state of European men's clothing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, it was the style of clothing that was consequent to the bourgeois political and cultural revolution in men's dress that began in the nineteenth century. This meant a restricted use of materials; very limited colours; tailored construction; a radically simplified set of surfaces; standardization stopping just short of uniformity and a form related to occupation only in the abstract. The complex of forces that went into the making of this costume of male modernity are still not fully understood, but Simmel is surely correct in seeing in its restraint and remarkable stability an ensemble that crystallized all the complex aspects of the new configurations of work and politics that was the bourgeois public sphere. It was a new form of dress for a new form of citizenship. As opposed to the circumstances of women's dress, men's appearance *seemed* to be beyond the pressures of fashion because

> . . . the lack of acceptance of changes in external fields, the indifference towards fashion in outward appearance are specifically a male quality, not because a man is more uniform, but because he is the more many-sided creature, and for this reason, can exist without external changes.[39]

The high level of uniformity and relative stability of male bourgeois dress is a badge indicating the intensity with which he is able to pursue his vocation in the objective realm of the public sphere. His life is purged of the necessity to display personal qualities through his dress because of the power and status which membership of a professional group imparts to the individual member. But male appearance, particularly inside of the novel social arrangements of the modern metropolis, is not 'evenly flat and grey in tone'. Just as women compensate for the necessity for them to adhere to the typical by pursuing individuation, so certain male metropolitan types, in order to gain the attention of the social world are tempted to adopt 'the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice of fastidiousness . . .'[40] Simmel singles out two types of male defectors from bourgeois sartorial normality. These are the dandy and the bohemian, and both strategies can result in radical departures from what is regarded as normal appearance for the respectable bourgeois male. Simmel's term for the dandy is *modenarren,* or 'slave to fashion'. He is an individual who gains conspicuousness by the intensity with which he follows fashion, and Simmel makes much of the fact that he is a 'follower', not an originator, of fashion. As Simmel observes, *modenarren* are to be distinguished from eccentric dressers because, unlike the latter, they are not violators of current dress codes but their militant servants. The contempt which is a common feature of these dedicated followers of fashion is reserved for those unwilling, or unable, to follow the mode with the *modenarren*'s commitment. The structural opposite of the dandy is the bohemian, an individual whose appearance is determined by his or her opposition to fashion. In a paragraph that can stand comparison with Carlyle and Baudelaire's dissection of the philosophy of the dandy, Simmel skewers the transgressive integrity of the bohemian:

> it becomes evident that the same combination which extreme obedience to fashion acquires can also be won by opposition to it. Whoever consciously clothes themselves in an unmodern manner does not attain the consequent sensation of individualization through any real individual qualification of his or her own, but rather through the mere negation of the social example . . . The deliberately unmodern person accepts its (modernity) forms just as much as does the slave to fashion, except that the unmodern person embodies it in another category: in that of negation, rather than in exaggeration.[41]

Again, Simmel urges us to distinguish these bohemian types from the 'true' eccentrics. The oft-remarked-upon conformity in the dress styles of rebellion is caused by there being a 'pattern of negation' – that is, a consistent set of refusals which in turn are formed by the characteristics of the figure they are negating. Bohemian dress is the sartorial equivalent of a Black Mass.

Fashion, Time and Modernity

A matter of dispute among Simmel scholars is the extent to which his work can be regarded as a fully conscious critique of modernity. David Frisby has cogently argued that it is in Simmel's sensitivity to the impact which 'the break with the past' had upon time and its experience that he can be seen engaged most closely with the modern.[42] While the present author is loathe to collapse Simmel's exploration of fashion into a theory of modernity, there is no doubt that Simmel sees it (fashion) as something which gains its present significance and intensity within the social and mental conditions brought about by the arrival of the modern. No aspect of fashion is more redolent of these 'modern times' than the rather odd temporal structure it seems to exhibit.

In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel, while repeating, in two short sentences, his trickle-down theory of fashion, also suggests that the arrival of the new social and economic constellation in Europe has brought about a number of radical changes in the operation of fashion in comparison to earlier historical periods. For instance:

> Yet the social changes of the last hundred years have accelerated the pace of changes in fashion . . . contemporary fashions are much less extravagant and expensive and of much shorter duration than those of earlier centuries . . . fashion now originates in the wealthy middle class . . . Consequently, the spreading of fashion, both in breadth as well as speed, appears to be an independent movement, an objective and autonomous force which follows its own course independently of the individual.[43]

The new forms taken by fashion seem uncannily similar to that general sense of time engendered by the arrival of the modern. For instance there is a preference for the new over the traditional; an emphasis upon the present as a moment disconnected from any other point in time and a sense that time consists of fleeting moments rather than a continual flow. And within each of these moments there is a preference for a romantic notion of fashion as 'expressive individuality' rather than for its role of group imitation. So, while not making fashion into a wholly modern phenomenon, Simmel is certainly arguing for a more precise description of its contemporary form. Fashion seems to thrive most readily in the modern metropolis where the money economy has reached a certain level of penetration of daily life and where there is a high degree of social mobility. Just as Simmel's analysis of fashion and class seems to imply a spatial dimension in that the game of imitation and differentiation is played out by groups that are physically adjacent to one another, so also is there a time dimension. Fashion changes are arranged chronologically with a 'founding' style or starting-point being implied before the start of the game of 'flight

and chase'. It is the combination of modern notions of *both* space *and* time that adds subtlety to Simmel's conception of the peculiarities of 'fashion time'.

Fashion never happens at any fixed point in time or space – that is, individuals and groups are never fully fashionable but are always in the process of becoming fashionable or descending into unfashionability, and, in all probability, doing both at the same time. Fashion is a striving to overcome the spatial divide between classes, to overcome the invidious comparison between 'them and us', to catch up and to overtake the 'in crowd'. In other words, what it would like to do is to abolish the very incline that enables the fashion dynamic to exist. Simmel, I think, senses the presence of this contradiction and presents the reader of his fashion essay with two notions of fashion time. There are the (not very successful) attempts to locate the exact historical and geographical locations of these 'fashion moments'. But the processes of fashion do not fit easily into mechanical co-ordinates such as these. The time of fashion is multiple, fragmented and, most importantly, dispersed across the entire social fabric. It is a process that sits within and without the visual image and it is not until we reach the work of Roland Barthes that the consequences of this spatial, temporal and representational multiplicity are examined with any degree of rigour. To declare that fashion is perpetual becoming and an aspiration is to align it with modernity's 'melting' of all that is 'solid'. But in this case, rather than being a reflex from change, it is an embracing of it as an organizing principle in its own right. Fashion is not a move from an unstable *situation A* to a state of resolution encompassed by *situation B*. It is being in a state of 'forever moving on'. Simmel is particularly astute in that he realizes that the promises of a stable order beyond the 'break with the past' are an illusion and that what is coming into being is a never-ending process of change, change, and more change. He rightly understands that, for fashion, this leads to two apparently different fashion times. The first is an acute sense of 'nowness'.

> By reason of this play between the tendency towards universal acceptance and the destruction of its significance, to which this general adoption leads, fashion possesses the peculiar attraction of limitation, the attraction of a simultaneous beginning and end, the charm of newness and simultaneously of transitoriness.[44]

But the awareness of the momentary nature of the fashionable action or object has the paradoxical effect of lifting the moment of fashion out of its temporal and social continuum. Time does not so much slow down as become a succession of *tableaux vivants* in which the fashionable individual gains a fleeting glimpse of fullness. This means that fashion is not an ordered and measured process of evolution in which an immanent principle slowly realizes itself over

time, rather it is a series of abrupt jumps with very little being carried over from one moment to the next. It is this, I think, that leads Simmel to observe later in the essay 'that each individual fashion to a certain extent makes its appearance as though it wished to live forever.'[45] Every instance in fashion time is one that appears to be autonomous and replete within itself; this is the condition typifying one sort of fashion photograph in which the picture emits an overwhelming sense of a world and its inhabitants being in a secular state of grace where neither a past or a future is necessary. Baudelaire senses this too as he writes, in a manner not that dissimilar to Simmel's, that fashion is the form of modern beauty *par excellence* in that it is:

> made up, on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable . . . on the other, of a relative circumstantial element, which we may like to call successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion.[46]

But not all the contents of the world are equally inclined toward being colonized by fashion, and it is to Simmel's notion of the limits of fashion that we must now turn.

The Classic and the Limits of Fashion

Throughout the essay on fashion Simmel suggests that aesthetics and fashion have distinct spheres of operation, but it is only in the final few paragraphs that their relationship is explored in any sustained way. We have already seen that Simmel makes a categorical distinction between clothing and fashion. He does not regard the former as a set of counters that the latter is able to move around at will. Clothing, Simmel intimates, unlike fashion, can be grounded in certain grand externalities. In fashion, 'not the slightest reason can be found for its creations from the standpoint of an objective, aesthetic or other expediency. Whereas in general our clothing . . . is objectively adapted to our needs'.[47] Simmel never states precisely how clothes are so adapted, but it is significant that he places the dimension of the aesthetic among those objective expediencies which are exerting pressures upon clothes. Fashion, however, eschews any such concessions, something borne out by the way in which it delights in ignoring all forms of objective appropriateness:

> there is not a trace of expediency in the method by which fashion dictates, for example, whether wide or narrow skirts, short or long hair styles, or coloured or black ties should be worn.[48]

At this point in his argument, Simmel echoes Veblen's complaint about the ugliness of so much that is fashionable, but in Simmel's case this fact is used to emphasize the power that these objectified forms of social life can have over the individual:

> Judging from the ugly and repugnant things that are sometimes modern, it would seem as though fashion were desirous of exhibiting its power by getting us to adopt the most atrocious things for its sake alone.[49]

If Simmel had left the argument at this point he might be accused of issuing just another jeremiad against modernity. However, unlike some of the later critics working under his influence, he places limits upon fashion's ability to absorb everything it encounters. What intrigues him is the classic; those forms that 'put up an inward resistance' to fashion and which are matched by those forms which have a 'special disposition to live themselves out as fashion'. There is no doubt in what follows that Simmel had the work of art at the forefront of his thinking. He had already explored something similar to this problem in his 1901 essay, 'The Aesthetic Significance of the Face', where he asked the question '. . . does the face have certain intrinsic aesthetic qualities that account for its significance as a subject in art ?'[50] The answer that he gives, in both this essay and that on fashion, is that the classic has an internal formal coherence that is capable of repelling all attempts made to dismantle it: 'the classical possesses something collective, which does not offer so many points of attack, as it were, from which modification, disturbance and destruction of the balance might emanate.'[51]

What Simmel is doing is not that dissimilar to Veblen's admiration for what he calls 'stable costumes' which he regards as 'more pleasing' because they have achieved some kind of formal coherence in which is embodied a balance of inner and outer forces. Simmel's argument could be profitably used to engage with those clothing forms that have not succumbed to fashionable destruction, forms such as the male suit, the 'little black dress' and the jeans + T-shirt combination, an ensemble that has resisted modification for more than 50 years. The question that such examples raise – and it is an important one to draw from Simmel's distinction between clothes and fashion – is that not all sartorial change is fashion. Not all clothing sits within the fashion system equally. Why is it that 50 years after the famous photographs of James Dean and Marlon Brando wearing T-shirts, these clothing styles are still current, still not open to parody? Something that Simmel knew is that some forms are 'more classic than others'.

Notes

This chapter should be read in conjunction with Ulrich Lehmann's *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (2000), Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, chapter 3.

1. *Philosphie der Mode*, Berlin: Pan Verlag, 1905. This was reprinted in G. Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur* (2nd edn), Leipzig: Kroner, 1919.

2. Magarete Susman quoted in D. Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism: A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory*, New York and London, Routledge, 2nd edn, 1992, p. 20.

3. 'His (Stefan George) dress, though departing sufficiently from the regular mode of male fashion to make him a somewhat conspicuous figure, was likewise severe and formal.' E.K. Bennett, *Stefan George*, Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1954, p. 12.

4. Useful bibliographies of Simmel's work can be found in the following texts: Kurt H. Wolff (ed.), *G. Simmel, Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959, pp. 376–81; Guy Oakes (ed.), *Georg Simmel, On Women, Sexuality and Love*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984, pp. 61–2; David Frisby, *Simmel and Since: Essays on Georg Simmel's Social Theory*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 201–11; David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds), *Simmel on Culture*, London: Sage, 1997, pp. 30–1.

5. David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity, 1985, p. 49.

6. Simmel, 'Sociological Aesthetics', quoted in Frisby, *Fragments*, p. 57.

7. See Simmel's essay, 'The Problem of Style', in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, pp. 211–17.

8. Veblen and Simmel were contemporaries but it would be hard to find two more contrasting individuals. Veblen's biographer, Joseph Dorfman, provides a rather bleak picture of his subject's teaching style. While at Stanford University Veblen 'appeared colourless and unimpressive, with clothing that just escaped shabbiness, a carriage that barely missed being slouchy, and a voice that spoke in a low monotone, without accent on any phrase'. Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and His America*, New York: Viking, 1934, p. 249. Compare this to: 'it was on the lecture platform that he showed his real greatness . . . His lectures were not only learned, they were an inspiration. He combined a clear, logical analysis with an artistic, impressionistic approach. A beautiful voice, an excellent diction, an appealing personality, all contributed to the charm of his address' (Nicholas Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel*, Aldershot: Greg Revivals, 1992, p. xxxv). The sophistication of the Simmel household contrasts vividly with life at the Veblens's, where 'Dishes were washed only when the total supply had been exhausted. They were stacked in a tub, and when all of them had been used the hose was turned on them, and after the water had been drained off they were allowed to dry by themselves' (Dorfman (1966 edn), p. 306).

9. Frisby, *Fragments*, p. 56.

10. See Simmel, 'The Sociology of the Senses', in R.E. Park, and E.W Burges, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921, pp. 356–61.

11. Georg Simmel, 'The Philosophy of Fashion', in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, p. 190.

12. Georg Simmel, 'Adornment', in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, pp. 206–11.

13. Kurt Wolff has noted that: 'Anthropology occupies a very small place in the total body of Simmel's writings. His attention to certain biologistic notions of the age and his speculations on primitive culture and evolutionary stages are little more than concessions to currently popular trends' (Wolff, *Essays*, p. 179).

14. 'Adornment', Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, p. 206.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 208.

17. Ibid.

18. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, London: Penguin, 1994, p. 170.

19. Ibid., pp. 170–1.

20. 'Adornment', Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, p. 208.

21. 'Adornment', Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, p. 209. See also my discussion the formality of make-up in 'Facials: the aesthetics of cosmetics and make-up', *Literature and Aesthetics*, 8, October 1998, pp. 97–112.

22. Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought; Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, New York: Harcourt, 1971, p. 184.

23. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 187.

24. Ibid., p. 188.

25. Donald N. Levine, 'The Structure of Simmel's Social Thought', in Wolff, *Essays*, pp. 12–13.

26. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 189.

27. Ibid., p. 193. Jean Baudrillard has taken this argument to its extreme limit. See his essay, 'Fashion, or The Enchanting Spectacle of the Code' in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, London: Sage, 1993, pp. 87–100.

28. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 189.

29. Ibid., p. 190.

30. There is a remarkable similarity between Simmel's précis of the trickle-down theory and that put forward by Ernst Grosse in his book *The Beginnings of Art,* New York and London: Appleton, English trans., 1914, 'Fashion always moves from above downward. A certain style is worn first only in the highest stage of society, and thus serves as a mark of class or rank. But for this very reason the lower ranks strive all the more earnestly to acquire elegant dress, and in the course of time the dress of rank becomes the dress of the nation. The higher classes, who are still desirous as they were before to distinguish themselves from the lower, then invent or adopt another special form of dress, and the game is begun anew.' (p. 113) The book originally appeared in German in 1893.

31. This phrase is used by Grant McCracken in his discussion of Simmel's theory of fashion. See McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990.

32. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 196.
33. Ibid.
34. Simmel, 'Female Culture', in Oakes, *Simmel on Women*, p. 67.
35. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 196. This desire for absorption into the typical could also apply to lower-class men: 'The Englishman was always scared . . . When he went to buy a suit, his approach was negative. He didn't want to look conspicuous or exciting; he just wanted not to look silly . . .' in Nik Cohn, *Today There Are No Gentlemen*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971, p. 14.
36. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 197.
37. Ibid., p.196.
38. Simmel, 'Female Culture', in Oakes, *Simmel on Women*, p. 73.
39. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 197.
40. Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in Donald N. Levine (ed.), *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, p. 336.
41. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 195.
42. Frisby, *Fragments*.
43. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. T. Bottomore and D. Frisby, London: Routledge, 1978, p. 461.
44. 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 192.
45. Ibid., p. 203.
46. Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 392.
47. Simmel, 'Philosophy of Fashion', p. 189.
48. Ibid., pp. 189–90.
49. Ibid., , p. 190.
50. Georg Simmel, 'The Aesthetic Significance of the Face', in Wolff, *Essays*, p. 276.
51. Simmel, 'The Philosophy of Fashion', p. 205.

5

Alfred Kroeber and the Great Secular Wave

. . . there are , in fact, no people in Kroeber's ethnology . . .

Thomas Buckley

One of the ironies of including Alfred Kroeber (1876–1960) in this book is that although he is the only 'proper' anthropologist in our fashion classics his work draws little sustenance from the anthropological tradition so far presented in this study. Indeed, in the last paragraph of the précis he published of the 1940 study of women's dress he explicitly distances himself from what he calls the 'stock explanation':

> We have deliberately avoided explanations of our phenomena in terms of psychological factors such as imitation, emulation, or competition, which are a stock explanation: the leaders want to surpass the mass, so they keep going one step farther, until a physical or psychological limit is reached, when they turn about and head the procession back. We do not deny that such psychological motivations may be operative. We do believe that as explanations they are conjectural and scientifically useless . . .[1]

More than just a set of ideas about clothing and fashion is being brushed aside here. Kroeber is rejecting the broader intellectual framework within which these ideas had been formulated and which had provided the basis for the serious study of human society and culture from Spencer onwards.

Kroeber's reputation in the area of dress studies rests upon his work measuring and analysing the long-range changes in the dress shapes worn by Western women. His interest in this topic starts in 1899 during a visit to Paris. However, it is not until 1919 that the fruits of this research first appear. In that year the *American Anthropologist* publishes his essay 'On the principle of order in civilization as exemplified by changes of fashion'.[2] In 1940, in collaboration with his doctoral student, Jane Richardson, he returns to the topic publishing the essay 'Three centuries of women's dress fashions: a quantitative analysis'.[3]

In 1952 a précis of this study appears in his collected essays *The Nature of Culture*.[4] As well, the topics of fashion, fashion change and the nature of cross-cultural dress styles are discussed in his extremely popular textbook, *Anthropology*.[5] Kroeber's interest in this area continues for the entire sixty years of his working life. It should not, therefore, come as a surprise to discover a considerable amount of variation in the way he construes these themes. As his fellow anthropologist Ralph Beals observes, 'his publications appeared over a period of sixty years, and he rarely bothered to note changes in his views'.[6] It is as if Kroeber used the topic of fashion as a personal touchstone through which he was able to gauge regularly where he stood within the discipline of Anthropology, a discipline that had transformed itself during his lifetime.

The 1919 Essay

The full title of the 1919 essay, 'On the principle of order in civilization as exemplified by changes in fashion', gives an indication of the broad significance that its author had in mind for it and, although the emphasis in his later writings on fashion altered somewhat, the desire to understand what it is that constitutes 'the order of civilization' remains constant. But Kroeber's concern in these essays is just as much about *how* that 'principle of order' might be discovered as it is about *what* that order might turn out to be. This interest with method is signalled in the first sentence of the essay when, paraphrasing the French social thinker Gustave LeBon, he observes 'that most social phenomena are expressible by nearly similar and presumably simple geometrical curves'.[7] This admiration for the use of statistics in the human sciences was no mere affectation with Kroeber. Two years earlier, in one of the earliest and most thorough explications of his general view of culture, he both acknowledged and criticizes the influence of Francis Galton and LeBon.[8] What he admires is the way in which they use statistics as a means of imparting objective muscle to their explanations of social and cultural facts. What criticisms he has are directed at their continuing use of vague assertions and conjectural categories such as 'the soul of the race', the 'spirit of the times' and even 'evolution', all of which, as raw and unjustified assertions, are in Kroeber's opinion insupportable. It is clear from the many remarks Kroeber scatters throughout this essay that he sees his task as one of transforming the whole discipline into one where vague abstractions can be supplanted by 'law-like' principles, objectively established.

What Kroeber does in the first section of the 1919 essay is to enact the opening observation that 'social phenomena are expressible by nearly similar

and presumably geometrical curves' in detail. To do this he moves from anecdote to proof via statistics. The anecdotal he takes from the rich, quasi-mythological ideas that abound in the West about the patterns of 'rise and fall' that appear to characterize all aspects of human civilization. This grand historical narrative had reached its most codified form in the history of art and it is to the example of art that Kroeber initially turns:

> The classic French drama, that of Spain, of ancient Athens . . . Greek sculpture – and, we might add, philosophy – each of these isolable movements has been traced through a similar course of origin, growth, climax, decline, and either death or petrifaction . .[9]

If progress had been the assurance that nineteenth-century Europe comforted itself with, then racial degeneration and cultural decadence are two of its most common 'frighteners'. Kroeber grew to intellectual maturity with these sorts of topic common in both popular and academic discourse. German had been his first language and he had inherited from his highly educated family a familiarity with contemporary German intellectual life. It is worth recalling that anxiety about the life cycle of civilization was particularly strong within the German-speaking intelligentsia. For instance, Nietzsche elaborated his ideas about European spiritual decadence with an intensity that was hard to ignore.[10] For decades, German art history had been fascinated with discovering the laws governing the historical unfolding of art styles. Oswald Spengler was about to publish his enormously popular book *The Decline of the West* while Max Nordau had published his similarly influential work on cultural degeneration.[11] But while Kroeber is fascinated by the articulation of civilization and time, he is not simply an anthropological representative of the 'decline and fall' school of thought.

Having established his intention to submit this 'rise-and-fall' notion to more rigorous scrutiny, Kroeber sets off on a chain of reasoning that eventually leads him to select women's dress as his exemplar of 'the principle of order in civilization'. The problem, as Kroeber sees it, is twofold. First, the exercise is a worthwhile one if only to confirm his suspicion that what is at stake here is 'a generic principle', something that is absolutely central to the dynamic of civilization over time. The second part of the problem he frames so:

> we are obviously hovering above a latent principle embodied in these phenomena, its expression in exact form, capable of successful application in the resolution of other events of human history, is difficult; chiefly because the variability of the phenomena is qualitative, whereas a workable law or deterministic principle must be quantitative in its nature.[12]

It is not only the qualitative nature of the material that dismays Kroeber but the complexity involved in 'measuring' vast collective institutions such as nation states, empires and religious movements. It is for this reason that he lights upon material objects as a way of solving his difficulties. Human artefacts are just as steeped in the principles of civilization as are the collective institutions within which they circulate because civilization has an equality of impress upon everything that it touches. One thing German art history had been insisting upon throughout the nineteenth century was that culture and art were not collections of isolated elements but patterned and integral stylistic wholes. The fragment could allow access to the whole because civilization is equally present in all the products of human endeavour. Another advantage is that artefacts 'can be accurately and easily measured' and so can provide the required series that enables precise data to be extracted. Ornamental objects are to be preferred to 'utilitarian pieces' as the latter have certain limits imposed upon the variability of their forms by the requirements of function. Decorative objects, being relieved of the demands of utility, are in a potentially more malleable condition and so register more easily the rates of change which the objects are undergoing. The final consideration that Kroeber cites for selecting articles of dress is the fact that they are represented visually.

> Still more promising are decorative or semi-decorative things of which satisfactory illustrations are available in numbers, in place of concrete specimens themselves: articles of dress . . . as represented in fashion magazines. Such journals have existed for over a century; they are exactly dated; and they bring together in each volume a considerable number of examples to which rule and callipers can be applied without hindrance. That the actual wear of average men and women lags somewhat ineffectually behind the incisive models or pictures, is immaterial. A knowledge of the course followed by the ideals of dress is quite as valuable, as a contribution to the understanding of civilization, as knowledge of real dress . . .[13]

One last set of limitations that Kroeber applies to his material is apparently strategic. He relates how an earlier attempt to get the project under way floundered because 'pivotal points seemed hard to find in the eternal flux'.[14] Too much seems to change too rapidly and so he introduces a set of strategic limitations to render the exercise manageable. First, restrict it to illustrations of women's dress. (He never fully explains why he prefers women's dress over that of men.) Second, restrict it to illustrations of women's full evening-wear because 'this has served the same purpose for more than a century' and so enables him to maintain a stricter equivalence between the comparative data.

There is little point repeating here the details of Kroeber's method and the nature of his findings. The essay provides ample statistical documentation of

both. However, some sense of the methods he employs is necessary to grasp the importance of the more general intellectual assertions he makes in the concluding paragraphs of the essay.

The fashion illustrations from which Kroeber's measurements were taken cover seventy-five years, from 1844 to 1919, and include French and North American publications. Six key measurements were made from these fashion plates – initially there were eight but two are subsequently dropped. (see frontispiece diagram) His justification for using these measurements at the expense of other characteristics such as colour, texture, 'superficial additions', trimmings and pattern is that it is only shape or proportion that can provide the long series necessary for a valid statistical survey. Those other characteristics such as seasonal changes of colour, trimming styles and so on are too volatile and fluctuate too rapidly for any patterns to appear, let alone be measured. Kroeber's results have become part of the lore of dress studies. Studying the data, Kroeber finds that each of the dress features that he tabulates seems to display a distinctive wavelength in which the measured feature reaches an extreme point in one direction, only to return to the mean and then head off in the opposite direction. The phrase he uses to describe these swings is 'the crest and trough of the great secular wave' and he summarizes his findings so:

> We have, I think, now found reasonable evidence of an underlying pulsation in the width of civilized women's skirts, which is symmetrical and extends in its up and down beat over a full century; of an analogous rhythm in skirt length, but with a period of only about a third of the duration; some indication that the position of the waist line may completely alter, also following a 'normal' curve, in a seventy-year period; and a possibility that the width of shoulder exposure varies in the same manner, but with the longest rhythm of all, since the continuity of tendency in one direction for seventy years establishes a periodicity of about a century and a half, if the change in this feature of dress follows a symmetrically recurrent plan.[15]

At this stage in Kroeber's thinking the dynamics of dress shape are conceived of as a series of separate traits (the measurements) each of which behaves like a pendulum but with some taking longer than others to complete their swings. It is at this point that Kroeber, having stepped back to take stock his findings, returns to the realm of the qualitative to articulate a vision of history's sublimity.

> There is something impressive in the largeness of these lapses of time. We are all in the habit of talking glibly of how this year's fashion upsets that of last year. Details, trimmings, pleats and ruffles, perhaps colors and materials, all the conspicuous externalities of dress, do undoubtedly alter rapidly; and it is in the very nature of fashion to bring these to the fore. They are driven in to our attention, and soon leave a blurred but overwhelming impression of incalculably chaotic fluctuations, of

> reversals that are at once bewildering and meaningless, of a sort of lightning-like prestidigitation to which we bow in dumb recognition of its uncontrollability. But underneath this glittering maze, the major proportions of dress change with a slow majesty, in periods often exceeding the duration of human life, and at least sometimes with the regularity of an enormous pendulum . . . There is something in these phenomena, for all their reputed arbitrariness, that resembles what we call law: a scheme, an order on a scale not without a certain grandeur.[16]

In many ways Kroeber's 1919 essay is as remarkable for what it does not say as it is for what it does. Despite his being a professional anthropologist when it was written, there is no mention of 'primitive society', or of 'origins'. There is little suggestion that Spencerian evolution is a factor in his thinking nor, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, is there any wish to ascribe any 'external' function to dress. Nor is he concerned with dress and fashion as being 'symbolic' of anything. For the contemporary reader the last section of the essay subtitled, 'Conclusions as to Change in Civilization', will come as something of a disappointment, being concerned as it is with a debate whose outcome would appear to have been settled for decades. Yet these final comments provide some of the most novel and important findings in the context of the then current anthropological thinking. Kroeber sets out his position in the first sentence of his conclusion:

> The fact of regularity in social change is the primary inference from our phenomena. The amplitude of the periodicities is of hardly less importance. Their very magnitude dwarfs the influence which any individual can possibly have exerted in an alteration of costume.[17]

To understand why this diminution of the role of the individual and of his or her mental processes in the dynamics of 'civilization' and in 'history' are so important to Kroeber we need to set the 1919 essay back into its immediate intellectual context, which was the struggle to establish anthropology as a serious academic discipline in North America.

A hint of what is going on just below the surface can be found in Kroeber's statement that he selected dress because it displays variations that are 'purely stylistic'. One of the most important tasks that any new intellectual discipline needs to do is to establish that it has a novel and legitimate object of study. (Methods are more promiscuous.) For a number of years Kroeber had been attempting to define just what it was that was specific to anthropology, as well as how it should be going about studying this special province. Like many of his generation he had taken his cue from the British anthropologist E.B. Tylor who in his book *Primitive Culture,* published in 1871, had offered a radically new definition of culture and how it should be approached.

> Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action. On the one hand, the uniformity which so largely pervades Civilization may be ascribed, in great measure, to the uniform action of uniform causes: while on the other hand its various grades may be regarded as stages of development or evolution, each the outcome of previous history, and about to do its proper part in shaping the history of the future.[18]

In 1915, Kroeber's essay 'Eighteen Professions' goes much further in differentiating the special dimension that Tylor has identified as 'the capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. One repercussion of his revision of Tylor is that it propels him out of the intellectual universe of the social and racial evolutionism of the nineteenth century still strongly evident in the references Tylor makes to 'stages of development or evolution'. In three of the 'Professions' Kroeber breaks, in spectacular fashion, with the prevailing anthropological orthodoxies of the nineteenth century:

> 11. *Selection and other factors of organic evolution cannot be admitted as affecting Civilization* . . . Civilization obviously introduces an important factor which is practically or entirely lacking in the existence of animals and plants . . .
> 12. *The so-called savage is no transition between the animal and the scientifically educated man.* All men are totally civilized . . . There is no higher or lower in civilization for the historian. The ranging of the portions of civilization in any sequence, save the actual one of time, place and connection, is normally misleading and always valueless. The estimation of the adult savage as similar to the modern European child is superficial . . .
> 13. *There are no social species or standard types or stages.* A social species in history rests on a false analogy with organic species. A stage in civilization is merely a preconception by arbitrarily selected facts.[19]

This is a remarkable series of assertions to be making in 1915 and they largely explain why it is that Kroeber abjures resorting to 'primitive origins' as an explanation for clothing and fashion. Likewise, phrases such as 'an instinct for . . .' or 'all men when faced with . . .' are absent from his thinking. Culture is not biology; it is not psychology; it cannot be reduced to, and therefore explained by, the mental constitution of the individual. In the present context, 'profession' number six is pertinent:

> 6. *The personal or individual has no historical value save as illustration.*
> Ethnological genealogies are valuable material. So are the actions of conspicuous

> historical personages. But their dramatic, anecdote or biographical recital is biographic or fictional art, or possibly psychology, not history.[20]

Culture, or civilization, is an autonomous order which Kroeber, for once following the lead of Spencer, calls the 'Superorganic'. This is an entity with specific characteristics and a particular structure which is not to be confused with 'its impulses', that is, biology. We can perhaps now see why Kroeber is so drawn to women's dress fashions and their fluctuations. He needed to isolate cultural phenomena that are free from the impress of biology, functionality and the psychology (the will) of the individual, and to this end the seemingly 'free' pulsations of dress proportions are perfect:

> Their[(the dress periodicities'] very magnitude dwarfs the influence which any individual can possibly have exerted in an alteration of costume. Were each rhythm confined to a few years, it might be thought that a mind, a particular genius, was its motivating impulse; and the claim would certainly be asserted by those who like to see history as only a vast complex of biographies. But when a swing of fashion requires a century for its satisfaction, a minimum of at least several personalities is involved.[21]

Nowhere is Kroeber's vision of 'a succession of human beings' serving the imperatives of the 'Superorganic' more clearly demonstrated than in the fluctuations of these dress styles.

The 1940 Essay

In the introduction to the précis version of the 1940 essay, Kroeber suggests that the 1919 essay should 'be read as an introduction to the present one'. Although the two essays are usually treated as if they are the same, there are considerable differences between the two. By 1940, Kroeber's own concept of culture has undergone considerable change. As well, he has been involved in a number of debates with colleagues about the legitimacy of his implacable assertions concerning the autonomy of the cultural in his essay 'The Superorganic'. For these reasons I propose to stress the differences between the two essays here; but, as anyone who reads them both will discover, there is much overlap between them. In the 1919 essay Kroeber hints that his findings could be improved upon if the number of years over which the measurements could be taken were increased.

> In fact it would have been desirable if the range of investigation could have been extended from 75 years to 125. The net result of a larger series of cases would

> therefore have been a probable smoothing and increased regularity of the plotted curves expressive of the course of fashion; and some segregation of the present irregularities into historically true ones and others that represent only statistical inadequacy.[22]

As the full title of the 1940 essay indicates – 'Three centuries of women's dress fashions: a quantitative analysis' – the first thing that Kroeber and Richardson do is extend the range of the data from 75 years to 300 years. The new series now stretches from 1787 to 1936. One result of this is that the later essay is much more about interpreting those 'irregularities' mentioned in the above quotation than it is with repeating the findings about the lengths of the various dress-shape periodicities.[23]

A sense of how much Kroeber's conception of the project had changed since 1919 can be gained from the essay's opening sentence where he declares, 'This study is an attempt to define stylistic changes in an objective and quantitative manner.'[24] Style, only mentioned once in the first essay, now occupies centre stage and absorbs that general dimension which he had referred to as 'the principle of order in civilization'. How the idea of style had come to occupy such an important position, not only in Kroeber's thinking but in North American anthropology as a whole, cannot be dealt with in this context. But there is no doubt that North American anthropology inflected what was primarily an aesthetic category into one encompassing collective life as a whole.[25] By the time of the 1940 essay, Kroeber is using 'style' as a preferred synonym for the older term 'civilization'. The most important relationship has become the one between 'style' and 'culture'. Culture is conceived of as a lateral set of style traits grouped together into 'configurations' or 'patterns'. The terms are interchangeable for Kroeber. These configurations are not thought of as being arranged in a hierarchical order, so there is no sense of the base/superstructure division of Marxism, or of the social structure/social values distinction to be found in British anthropology. This is why so much of what we normally think of as dress analysis appears to be absent from Kroeber's work. Fashions, and clothes, neither 'express' nor 'symbolize' anything of a more profound nature nor 'reflect' other, more profound, orders of collective life. Style has come to have a quite distinct meaning for Kroeber. Style patterns are conceived of as autonomous and interrelated wholes. This is certainly a shift from the earlier essay where 'cultural traits' were studied in isolation. In the later essay there is much more investigation of the correlative relationships between the various dress dimensions. Stylistic traits, and the configurations they are grouped into, exist in time and can only be grasped if the pattern of their development over time, as well as their distribution in space, is analysed. Kroeber may define style as 'a system of coherent ways or patterns of doing certain things' but that

system never reveals itself fully in just a single moment. His motto always is 'It takes time'.

A new factor to emerge out of the improved statistical methods of the 1940 essay is the presence of periods of relative instability in the traits of dress shapes. Kroeber, aware of the presence of these irregularities in the earlier essay, refrains from trying to account immediately for their significance. It is clear that these movements nag away at him and coalesce with a number of the other criticisms that have been directed at his notion of the 'Superorganic'. The 1917 essay of that name elicited several critical responses from colleagues whose views he respects. Edward Sapir, for instance, criticizes the manner in which Kroeber banishes the individual and his or her works from the domain of the cultural. 'I find it', Sapir says, 'utterly inconceivable to draw a sharp and eternally valid dividing line between them. Clearly, then, "individual" reactions constantly spill over into and lend color to "social" reactions.'[26] Sapir worries that, in his desire to establish the legitimacy of the cultural dimension, Kroeber overplays his hand:

> No matter how much we minimize exaggerated claims, I fail to see how we can deny a determining and, in some cases, even an extraordinarily determining cultural influence to a large number of outstanding personalities . . . One has only to think seriously of what such personalities as Aristotle, Jesus, Mahomet, Goethe, Beethoven mean in the history of culture to hesitate to commit oneself to a completely non-individualistic interpretation of history.[27]

Kroeber's response to this is somewhat abrupt:

> An Aristotle or Goethe needs predecessors, a Genghis Khan or Napoleon only a constellation.[28]

The problem for Kroeber is this: if the 'Superorganic' is such a distinct and autonomous entity, if it is 'untouched' by the actions of the individual, if the irregularities in the dress periodicities are not just standard statistical variations, then just what is causing these disturbances to the normal curves? The first task was to isolate the scope and nature of this variability. Kroeber and Richardson did this by making a further set of refinements to the data. The first is 'a year by year comparison of the standard deviations of the means for each trait'.[29] The second is 'to compare each annual average with the trend or moving average for the same year'.[30] The findings are that variability is high when the fashion of one year differs considerably from that of the year before; it is more so when a series of particular dresses, all of the same year, differ considerably from one another. Rather than finding that the basic pattern of

the dress lies somewhere between the two extremes – the median point – what seems to be happening is that there is one shape which seems to be 'the ideal or saturation point' of the basic dress shape. At the other extremity is its antithesis, almost as if there were an almost wilful desecration of the former by the latter. This ideal dress pattern is defined so:

> we can construct a basic or ideal pattern of Occidental women's evening wear or formal dress during the past 150 years. It has a long skirt, ample at the bottom; an expanse of bare breast and shoulders, as deep and wide as possible, although for mechanical reasons only one diameter can well be at maximum at the same time; as slender a waist as possible; a middle or natural waist-line position . . .[31]

The authors find that while 'several proportions (of the ideal pattern) are attacked and distorted at somewhat different times' there are periods when an all-out assault upon the basic pattern gets underway. They identify the years 1785 to 1835 and 1910 to 1936 as two such periods. In trying to explain why these years are particularly unstable, Kroeber once again takes up the problem of cultural causality.

His first task in trying to account for these periods of stylistic ferment is to provide an explanation for the existence of the ideal pattern against which the reactive swings appear to be defining themselves. As much as he tries to avoid it, Kroeber is finally driven to mentioning the historical 'content' of these periods of dress instability, but only after a deal of explanatory bluster and downright obscurantism gets thrown around. An example of this is to be found in the introduction to the 1952 version of the essay:

> The finding is that in matters of fashion, and perhaps in other domains of cultural flow as well, causality is less of a one-to-one, stimulus-reaction, reflex-arc type as between specific elements, and more a matter of adjustive relations between basic patterns of different segments of culture.[32]

Having attempted to fudge the whole issue Kroeber slips back into his old combative mode by criticizing those 'symbolizing' explanations of dress styles:

> One would have said that the imitation of classic dress during and after the Directoire was a novel idea, symbolizing, perhaps the beginning of a new and 'natural' life. Instead we see that the clinging skirts are merely the culmination of a drift that had its inception fifty years before.[33]

And here he is sweeping aside all the standard 'social' explanations for the changes in women's dress that happened after the First World War. Apropos of short skirts he remarks:

> Glib explanations of the acting forces range through such things as wartime emergency, relaxing sex morals, driving of motor cars, a passing tendency towards non-femininity to emphasize equality with men.[34]

One can almost hear the doors banging shut as the audience gets up and leaves. Kroeber is in a more discriminating mood when attempting to account for the ideal dress pattern of Western women. There is no explanation, says Kroeber, of *why* the West has *this* ideal dress shape. Nor is it possible to give any explanation as to why different civilizations have different basic clothing patterns. All that can be said is that these basic patterns exist; they are not the outcome of volitional decisions and they constitute the 'configurations' around which dress fashions fluctuate through adherence to, or violation of, the ideal. But the historical location of these periods of instability is hard to ignore and he cannot resist having yet another attempt to accommodate social explanations of fashion within his stylistic model:

> It may well be that unsettled times make for unsettled styles. Revolution, Napoleonic and world wars, struggles over the rights of man, communism and fascism, the motor and jazz may contribute to fashion's trying to stretch and disrupt its fundamental stylistic pattern. But while such an influence is easily conjectured, it is difficult to prove.[35]

He is willing to concede that 'what is specifically characteristic of the agitated periods is not so much extremes of dimension, as extremes of high variability . . .'[36] His final observation on fashion, causality and context, and one that draws appreciative comments from Roland Barthes, is something that all those intrigued by the intricacies of dress styles should constantly recall:

> it would be absurd to say that the Napoleonic wars, or the complex set of historic forces underlying them, specifically produced high-waisted dresses, and [First] World War low-waisted ones. They both probably did produce an unsettlement of style which . . . resulted in extremity of high and low-waistedness respectively.[37]

The argument depends upon how to interpret that phrase 'specifically produced'. Certain cultural forms Kroeber regards as *sui generis*; they just are, and what is called 'fashion' is merely the set of very minor adjustments that we humans occasion to the 'great secular wave'.

Conclusion

Although these essays are consistently present in the bibliographies of fashion and costume texts it cannot be said that Kroeber's work inspired many to

follow in his path.[38] The insistence upon a strict notion of cultural autonomy and the enforced limitations he places upon what is, and is not, a legitimate explanation, prohibits him from engaging with how all the changes in fashions that he is studying mesh with the daily lives of the women wearing them and the men who are looking at them wearing them. In all of the work that he undertook on the dress fashions there is no hint of the context of their wearing. Only toward the end of the 1940 essay is there a remark that the ideal dress shape may be capable of producing aesthetic and erotic satisfactions.[39] Kroeber's is not an exercise to determine the meanings which the dresses he so carefully measures have for their wearers. The trends he is after are both unobserved and unobservable. They are 'the basic features of style . . . which being taken for granted at any given moment are largely unconscious in the sense that they are felt as axiomatic . . .' His message is a salutary one asking us to question and identify precisely what it is that changes within fashion.

Notes

1. A. Kroeber and J. Richardson, 'Three centuries of women's dress fashions: a quantitative analysis' in Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1952, p. 372.
2. A. Kroeber, 'On the principle of order in civilization as exemplified by changes of fashion', *American Anthropologist*, 1919, 21(3), pp. 235–63.
3. A. Kroeber and J. Richardson, 'Three centuries of women's dress fashions: a quantitative analysis', *Anthropological Records*, Berkeley, 1940, vol. V, pp. 111–53.
4. See note 1.
5. A. Kroeber, *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948, pp. 245–7 and pp. 390–3.
6. Ralph Beals, *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Shills, New York: Macmillan, 1968, vol. 8, p. 456.
7. Kroeber, 'On the principle of order', p. 235.
8. A. Kroeber, 'The superorganic', *American Anthropologist*, 19(2), April–June 1917, pp. 184–7 and pp. 189–92.
9. Kroeber, 'On the principle of order', p. 236.
10. Kroeber appears to be rejecting the implications of Nietzschean nihilism when, in his 1917 essay, 'The superorganic' he comments: 'Civilization, as such, begins only where the individual ends; and whoever does not in some measure perceive this fact, though as a brute and rootless one, can find no meaning in civilization, and history for him must be only a wearying jumble, or an opportunity for the exercise of art' (Kroeber, 'The superorganic', p. 193).
11. Max Nordau, *Entartung*, 1892 [Eng. trans. *Degeneration* (1898)].
12. Kroeber, 'On the principle of order', p. 236.
13. Ibid., p. 238.

14. Ibid., p. 239.
15. Ibid., pp. 257–8.
16. Ibid., p. 258.
17. Ibid., p. 260.
18. E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, 2 vols, intro. Paul Radin, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958, vol. 1, p. 1.
19. A. Kroeber, 'Eighteen professions', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 17, 1915, pp. 286–7.
20. Ibid., p. 285.
21. Kroeber, 'On the principle of order', p. 260.
22. Ibid., p. 242.
23. For those readers who may be daunted by the full data see the 1952 précis version, ref. note 1, and then read the full 1940 version.
24. Kroeber and Richardson, 'Three centuries', p. 111.
25. One of the key texts in this transformation was Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1935. The connection with the earlier German tradition of style thought is explicitly made by Benedict, who mentions the art historian Wilhelm Worringer, the philosopher of *Weltanschauung* Wilhelm Dilthey, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler.
26. Edward Sapir, 'Do we need a "superorganic"?', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 19, 1917, p. 442.
27. Ibid., p. 443.
28. Kroeber, 'On the principle of order', p. 238.
29. Kroeber and Richardson, 'Three centuries', p. 137.
30. Ibid., p. 137.
31. Ibid., 1940, p. 145.
32. Ibid., 1952, p. 358.
33. Ibid., 1940, p. 128.
34. Ibid., p. 129.
35. Ibid., p. 147.
36. Ibid., p. 148.
37. Ibid., p. 148.
38. See the following: A. Brooks Young, *Recurring Cycles of Fashion: 1760–1937*, New York, 1966; D. Robinson, 'Fashions in shaving and trimming the beard: the men of the Illustrated London News, 1842–1872', *American Journal of Sociology*, 8, March 1976, pp. 1133–9; Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. R. Bienvenue, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 21–4. Perrot's linking of Kroeber and Braudel in this context is a telling one. Braudel had analysed the long-term changes in European dress styles in Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, London, 1981: see pp. 311–33. Much is to be gained from a comparative reading of the Kroeber essays and Braudel's essay 'History and the Social Sciences: the '*Longue Durée*' in Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, see pp. 25–54.
39. Kroeber and Richardson, 'Three centuries, p. 148.

6

J.C. Flügel and the Nude Future

> It seems that the two human needs – to disclose oneself and conceal oneself – would be combined in the female psyche in quite a different way than in the male.
>
> Georg Simmel

When J.C. Flügel (1874–1955) died, Ernest Jones observed in his obituary that Flügel's most famous book, *The Psychology of Clothes,* seemed 'to have been inspired by a personal foible, a dislike of conventional starched clothing and a keen interest in Dress Reform . . .'[1] There is something apt about this mingling of the external and the 'rational' with the internal and the mildly perverse, since it is with Flügel's extensive study of clothing that we first encounter the influence of Freud and psychoanalysis. Beginning with his 1927 essay 'Sexual and social sentiments', Flügel had, by 1939, become the foremost writer on clothes and fashion from the perspective of psychoanalysis or, as he often referred to it, 'psychology'.[2] Of all the authors covered in these fashion classics, Flügel was perhaps the most publicly engaged. Everything he wrote, but particularly his publications about clothing, were part of a set of beliefs about the necessity for social reform. Any attempt to illuminate his major work, *The Psychology of Clothes*, must necessarily give the reader some picture of the political and intellectual milieu of 'advanced thought' in Britain during the inter-war years.

Like Havelock Ellis, Marie Stopes and George Bernard Shaw, John Flügel was one of those characters whose life encompassed many of the concerns that preoccupied 'progressive thought' during these years. When the final map of that epoch is drawn there is little doubt that the perambulations of J.C. Flügel will be central to determining the questions of who, where and when. A start can be made with the publication in 1934 of *Manifesto: Being the Book of the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals*.[3] Edited by another prominent reformist, Professor C.E.M. Joad, the book was intended to act as an umbrella organization for the numerous, but divided, groups that made up the movement for social reform. A closer look at the *Federation of Progressive*

Societies and Individuals and its principles sheds a great deal of light upon Flügel's treatment of dress.

By 1934 things were not going well for the reformers. The worldwide depression seemed to confirm the irrationality of an economic system that, despite being technologically advanced, was incapable of doing anything about mass unemployment. The internationalist optimism that had seen the establishment of the League of Nations in 1920 was beginning to unravel with the collapse of the Disarmament Conference in 1934. Worst of all, a Fascist counter-revolution seemed to threaten the existence of progress and its reformist vision. The *Manifesto* consists of a series of essays in which various authors elaborate upon a single issue drawn from the federation's broader policies.[4] Flügel's essay, 'A psychology for progressives – how can they become effective?', is the final chapter and takes the form of a meditation upon the psychological foundations which the struggle between reformers – the 'progressives' – and the 'forces of conservatism' is being conducted. He begins by setting out what he feels being a 'progressive' entails psychologically:

> Progress implies change in a desirable direction, but when it comes to social affairs, the changes usually contemplated are such as are likely to encounter the disapproval and opposition of conservatively minded persons. Our conception of 'progress', in fact, implies a revolt against certain existing conventions, interests, or ideals, as a glance at the principal items on the Federation's programme will immediately reveal.[5]

Psychoanalysis, argues Flügel, at last enables us to understand what sort of forces are in play within the conservative disposition. His target is the superego, which he defines as 'the moral factor (conscious and unconscious) in the mental life of man'. The position of the superego within the internal economy of the human psyche lies at the heart of Flügel's reformist urges and surfaces time and again in his meditations upon clothing:

> the troubles that we experience in adjusting ourselves to civilized social life seem to be due, not merely, as earlier moralists had supposed, to the strength of our a-social instincts, but also, in no inconsiderable degree to the power of the primitive moral factors embodied in the super-ego. For the unconscious morality in question is a rigid and archaic one, which adapts itself only with the utmost difficulty to the changing conditions of modern life.[6]

As he had observed in an earlier discussion of the problem it is an excess of morality, not its deficiency, that is the source of our individual and social troubles. The conservative mind diagnosed by Flügel is one in which the superego is far too strong and plays far too aggressive a role both inside the psyche and outside in the world at large. When the superego dominates the

individual and society the results are a permanent sense of guilt; a harsh and strictly enforced legal and moral code; a stress upon tradition and an unquestioning obedience to external and internal authority; and, if we follow the strict Freudian letter, an epidemic of constipation. To question the legitimacy of the rules, the conventions and the ideals of one's society is to put oneself in the position of the naughty child and this is a comparison that does not go unnoticed by Flügel.

> In demanding freedom to use our faculties to the full, we necessarily to a large extent side with the id rather than the super-ego; and, in so doing, we identify ourselves with the aspirations of children rather than with the authority of parents.[7]

Flügel sees psychoanalysis as a curative science because not only does it cure the neuroses of individuals, it does this by dispelling the unreason that lies at their origin. Unreason, or what he called 'automatic loyalties', are the product of an overactive superego and, just as it is the task of individual therapy to replace neurotic darkness with the clear light of psychological understanding, so it is the task of 'progressive thought' to replace blind obedience to archaic rules with a rational and psychologically fulfilling social order.

> The 'progressive' aims at the establishment of a world order in which science, reason and individual freedom of thought and action, together with the tolerance and understanding that these imply, shall take the place of blind reliance on outworn loyalties, conventions, and taboos, or on their modern communist or fascist-coloured substitutes. Stated in terms of the individual mind, the goal of the pyscho-analyst is much the same; for the forces of conservatism are also those of conscience, which is but the more conscious portion of the super-ego. And, just as the progressive believes that tradition or prejudice must give place to reason, if the world of society is to become a pleasanter and safer place, so does the psycho-analyst find that the process of enabling the individual conscious ego to achieve a greater measure of control over the whole personality regularly implies some considerable reduction in the power and demands of the super-ego.[8]

Almost every aspect of Flügel's intellectual and political endeavours is to be found in that programme. Superstition is to be replaced by science and this transformation has, for Flügel, a distinct set of aims. These include the Eugenics Movement, the propagation of birth control and the reform of the laws outlawing homosexuality. His internationalist beliefs lead him to learn Esperanto and to participate in the World League for Sexual Reform. Last, but not least, his desire to temper the dominance of the superego on the physical body sees him as an advocate for the reform of men's dress, as a sympathetic fellow-traveller of the nudist movement and as a broadcaster of the good news about the sun through The Sunshine League.

The Psychoanalytic Foundation

Nowhere in Freud's writings is there a fully articulated theory of clothing, although references to clothes can be found in the 1927 essay 'Fetishism', which had appeared in an English translation in 1928, together with several references in *The Interpretation of Dreams* about the propensity for items of clothing to symbolize human genitalia.[9] While both these sources are cited by Flügel and undoubtedly entered into his thinking about clothing, it has to be said that the themes of clothes fetishism and what might be called the 'classical' Freudian interpretation of the sexual symbolism of individual garments are not central to his ideas about dress. This is because Flügel drove the fact of clothing much deeper into the internal economy of the psyche than had been previously attempted. As he remarks, 'Clothes . . . though seemingly mere extraneous appendages, have entered into the very core of our existence as social beings.'[10] One fruitful consequence of this deep location of clothing is that Flügel always keeps it in touch with the body upon which it is situated. Indeed, one of his great strengths is the way in which he charts the patterns of absorption and alienation that characterize our being-in-clothes.

Flügel's model of the human psyche, into which his ideas on clothing are incorporated, is a relatively straightforward adaptation of Freud's tripartite division of the mind into id, superego and ego. Flügel defined the id as the dimension of 'primitive instinct and desire' or 'the reservoir of the instincts, the ultimate propelling forces of the organism'. The superego is seen as 'an almost equally primitive inhibitory mechanism in the human mind' that operates as a crude controller of the desires of the id. Between these two antagonistic dimensions lies the ego, which he characterizes as follows:

> A third aspect of the mind, according to the Freudian psychology, is to be found in the ego, which is the conscious personality, in virtue of which we perceive the outer world, reason according to the laws of logic and generally adapt ourselves to our environment. The ego has allotted to it the difficult task of endeavouring to strike a compromise between the demands of the three hard task-masters, who are often enough at cross-purposes with one another: the instincts (the id), the super-ego and the outer world (human or otherwise).[11]

Flügel's psychoanalysis consists, mostly, of an examination of the internal dynamics between these three elements. Any situation in which humans are involved, from the most intimate and individual to the most public and shared, rests upon the particular configurations assumed by these three elements and, as we have already seen when looking at the progressive milieu in which Flügel operated, it is the superego which is the focus of his reformist concerns and it is into this critique of the superego that his theory of clothes is inserted.

Clothes and Psychoanalysis

In the years before the appearance of *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) Flügel published a number of essays in which it is possible to see the gradual elaboration of his ideas on dress. In the essay of 1927, 'Sexual and social sentiments', his first-published comments upon clothing appear in the context of a discussion about the psychological differences between men and women and the consequences such differences have for their social behaviours. Commenting upon 'the greater Narcissism of women', in contrast to 'the much more widespread occurrence and much greater cultural influence of associations between men', Flügel observes

> Moreover it seems quite probable that the difference between the sexes that is here in question is not so strongly marked in primitive cultures as in civilized and sophisticated conditions . . . Certain changes that have taken place during the last hundred years or so point to a remarkable repression of Narcissism amongst men – a repression that has at any rate not taken place to a corresponding extent among women. Modern clothing, for instance, allows few outlets for personal vanity among men; to be dressed 'correctly' or in 'good taste' is the utmost that a modern man can hope for; all originality or beauty in clothing (to say nothing of the even more direct gratification of narcissism in actual bodily exposure) being reserved for women.[12]

It is clear from this early comment that Flügel's notion of clothing is fundamental to an individual's overall somatic disposition, as well as a crucial mediator in the internal drama of the psyche. This becomes clearer in his 1929 study, 'On the mental attitude to present day clothes: report on a questionnaire', in which he attempts to set up a typology of personality types on the basis of the responses received to his questionnaire.[13] (See appendix.) From the data which emerges from this study Flügel identifies a distinct set of differences among his respondents as to their attitudes toward clothing. Some see clothes as equivalent to the outermost layer of their selves and so incorporate them into their life-world with little difficulty. Others locate their clothing almost wholly within the external environment; clothing is 'other' to their sense of themselves. The latter are closet nudists who 'appear to be at heart rebels against all forms of clothing'. Clothing personalities such as these strain to have done with clothes altogether, or at least to keep them to a minimum. At the other extreme are those whose being is caught up in the clothes they are wearing and not just clothes in general, but clothing of a certain kind.

> In the 'supported' type clothes have more than a merely protective function. The individual of this type feels strengthened, more efficient and more competent in virtue of his clothes.[14]

In this type of dress personality the pleasures of keeping warm by wearing a great deal of clothing extend beyond the maintenance of body temperature. Security, protection, general well-being are all dependent upon the presence of the right amount of clothing. Flügel reports that other respondents appear to value the feelings of 'support' and 'containment' that the outer surface of their dress (or the invisible underpinnings) impart to their sense of self, while still others see the 'stiffness' of the classic male working attire as indicative of an authoritarian stance in matters political, preferring softer materials and looser dress configurations.

In 1928 Flügel was asked to give a number of radio talks on the topic of dress. From the transcripts of these broadcasts it is clear that his concept of clothing was well on the way to becoming fully integrated into his general theory of human development.

> The mind is not simple, and the motives of human beings and of human societies are often so involved that we cannot study them psychologically without taking into account this factor of ambivalence . . . but nowhere I believe is ambivalence more far-reaching and of greater import than in just this matter of our clothing. If we are to understand the motives that lead to different kinds of clothing, to changes in our clothing and to the changes in our whole attitude towards clothes, we shall have to be constantly on the look out for changes in the manifestations of these two fundamental conflicting tendencies, the one proudly to exhibit the body, the other modestly to hide it.[15]

The key to understanding not just the extraordinary variety of human clothing but the reason for its existence is to be found in the drama played out between exhibitionism and modesty. This is a drama that, while it may vary from individual to individual, from place to place, from garment to garment and from one fashion ensemble to another, is always at work in some form as long as humans continue to require clothing.

It would seem that, for Flügel, the journey from naked infant to clothed and 'civilized' adult is an evocative metaphor enabling him to understand, both cognitively and imaginatively, what has been involved in our journey from nature to culture. Like Freud, he considers that the route the infant takes in growing up is also the one travelled by the mind in arriving at its final structure of id, superego and ego. Clothing, in Flügel's theory, emerges as an important component in drawing the infant out of the primary, id-dominated condition. This is because, in the psychoanalytical model of development, the infant has to be *actively* moved out of the condition of narcissistic self-love, since human development is neither an automatic nor a natural process. If this transformation were not achieved generally by *homo sapiens* then the domain of culture

would never appear. Flügel, elaborating upon a couple of sentences in Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality*, suggests that the primal condition of the infant is one in which two forms of pleasure, the narcissistic and the auto-erotic, dominated the feelings of the child. The narcissistic element

> consists in the tendency to admire one's own body and display it to others, so that others can share in the admiration. It finds natural expression in the showing off of the naked body and in the demonstration of its powers, and can be observed in many children in the nude dancings and prancings in which, if allowed, they will indulge . . .[16]

The second pleasure, Flügel calls 'skin-erotism' and 'muscle-erotism'. These seem to be more fundamental forms of sensual pleasure since they do not depend upon sight, or on the presence of the eye of the other. Skin-erotism is concerned primarily with the pleasure of natural skin stimulation – 'the play of air, wind, and sun upon the surface of the body' – while muscle-erotism:

> is derived from the free-play of the muscles. The sensory elements involved are partly derived from deep sensations directly caused by the muscular contractions, partly from cutaneous sensations due to stretching and relaxing of the skin that necessarily accompanies such contraction. Both these classes of sensation can be best appreciated when the body is naked . . .[17]

At first sight none of these 'component instincts' would appear to be suitable in providing a platform for the emergence of clothing. However, in this instance, Flügel is not strictly trying to explain the origin of clothes. It is 'clothes ambivalence' that intrigues him and this is not to be derived from a single source. It would be correct to say that Flügel's object of study is not clothes ambivalence in the sense that some 'thing' has come into being about which we feel ambivalence, more that clothes are ambivalence incarnate.

Clothes, as we understand them, would not have arisen unless some prohibition was placed upon the pleasures the infant gained from his or her body. The name Flügel gives to this prohibition is 'modesty' and some confusion surrounds his use of the term, since it can refer to everything from general prohibitions emanating from the superego through to conscious strategies aimed at hiding the form of the body from the eyes of another. Flügel regards modesty as something which, if not genetically determined, is certainly a process buried deep within the human animal. Display and modesty are the fundamental antagonists *out of which* clothing emerges, and become foundational terms for Flügel's entire concept of human life. 'The two opposed tendencies in dress correspond to two basic traits of human character, the self-assertive and the submissive'. Neither of the fundamental motives can eliminate

its opposite and human dress becomes the site *par excellence* where the unresolvable dialectic between the two is carried on.

At first, the primary motive of modesty has an advantage since it is part of the process of socialization which has to take place if the infant is to enter culture. To paraphrase the Bible, 'in order to become a man it is necessary to put away childish things' and the most important of those childish things to be 'put away' is the infant's body. Adults mediate this primary prohibition to the child in their insistence that the child be clothed and it is because of this that clothing, from this moment on, becomes embroiled in morality, generational conflicts and politics. However, this opening onslaught of modesty is tempered as the child grows up. The motive to display is allowed to re-emerge by being displaced onto clothing. In this way, the initial aim of modesty is turned around and re-emerges as a sublimated love of the effects produced by wearing clothes. The elements of skin and muscle erotism are not so easily sublimated, but even here modesty regimes may be relaxed beneath all kinds of rationalizations, such as hygiene, and climate. What emerges out of this developmental drama is the 'compromise-formation' that is clothing. It is something that ceaselessly renegotiates the balance between the various component instincts whose initial irreconcilability constituted the ground out of which this extraordinary 'invention' arose in the first place. Flügel succinctly sums up his notion of clothes-ambivalence in the following way:

> The exhibitionistic instinct originally relates to the naked body, but in the course of individual development it inevitably (in civilised races) becomes displaced, to a greater or lesser extent onto clothes. Clothes are, however, exquisitely ambivalent, in as much as they both cover the body and thus subserve the inhibiting tendencies that we call 'modesty', and at the same time afford a new and highly efficient means of gratifying exhibitionism on a new level . . .[18]

'Clothes', Flügel observes, 'resemble a perpetual blush on the surface of humanity.'

The Psychology of Clothes

Anyone who has been reading the fashion classics in the order that they appear in this book will find the opening chapters of *The Psychology of Clothes* familiar. Despite being a friend of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, the influence of nineteenth-century ideas about the 'primitive' remains strong. Flügel continues to draw upon the work of Herbert Spencer and seems unaware of the new sorts of anthropology emerging in both Britain, with Malinowski,

and in North America, with individuals such as Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber.[19] Like Freud, Flügel subscribed to a psychoanalytical version of the theory of social evolution made up of the following assumptions:

- The development of the human species is repeated in the development of the individual.
- The child, emotionally and intellectually, resembles Primitive Humans and their contemporary counterparts, 'Savages'.
- The origins of human institutions often lie in archaic and primitive instinctual dispositions.
- To understand the present is to trace the threads connecting these 'later' civilized dimensions of human life to their primitive, instinctual origins.

One of the more dramatic of these narratives about the 'rise of civilization' is the story of our journey from naked to clothed. As metaphor, it neatly aligns the maturation of infant into adult with that of primitive to civilized. By telling the story of clothing, Flügel can tell at the same time the story of our accession to the human. It is impossible to cover every aspect of this highly entertaining book, so I have chosen to continue exploring themes already raised in earlier chapters. These are:

- the influence of anthropology upon Flügel's ideas about clothing
- his theory of fashion
- sexual differences and clothing
- his interest in dress reform and nudism.

The first five chapters of *The Psychology of Clothes* are dominated by Flügel's engagement with the legacy of nineteenth-century anthropology. His overt influences here are Spencer's discussion of fashion and clothing in *The Principles of Sociology* and Edward Tylor's 1892 publication, *Anthropology.* In that work, Tylor had used the standard trio of 'motives' to explain the origins of clothing:

> It has first to be noticed that some low tribes, especially in the tropical forests of South America, have been found by travellers living quite naked. But even amongst the rudest of our race, and in hot districts where clothing is of least practical use, something is generally worn, either from ideas of decency or for ornament.[20]

Like many before him, Flügel cites the indigenous inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego and the Andaman Islands as evidence that 'the propensity to beautify the body with ornaments belongs to human nature as low down as we can

follow it'. Flügel's journey through these 'fundamental motives' is a divided attempt to reconcile psychological functions with these ethnographic speculations on origins. So, while he is prepared to accept that 'There is general agreement among practically all who have written on the subject that clothes serve three main purposes – decoration, modesty, and protection', he is, as we saw earlier, convinced that there is a more archaic and fundamental, instinctual drama at work than the one postulated by anthropology.[21] In 'civilized' society all three of these motives are in play simultaneously and Flügel's ambivalence about what he is up to in this section of the book can be seen in the way he regularly slips from referring to 'origins', in the sense of nineteenth-century anthropology, to using non-historical terms like 'motives', 'functions' and 'purposes'. Part of his task in the early part of the book is to translate the three categories of modesty, decoration and protection into terms compatible with the developmental model of psychoanalysis. Despite this tension between the discussion of origins – whether modesty, protection or decoration came first – and the psychoanalytical model of human development, Flügel goes to some length in these opening chapters to trace a number of instinctual lines of descent between the 'fundamental motives' and the categories of contemporary lived experience. So, the propensity toward exhibitionism finally surfaces in the experiential realities of sexual display, political rivalry, ceremonial costume, assertion and the drive to accumulate social status. Modesty, being a more labile instinct, can vary the object(s) of its prohibitions. It may be directed toward the self or toward others, or it may be found at work in constantly shifting patterns embedded in differing sartorial regimes. The last of these clothing motives, protection, is dealt with by Flügel as a secondary characteristic, capable only of latching onto clothing to supplement for deficiencies in other areas of an individual's life. In a reworking of Spencer's idea that clothing begins with the wearing of protective charms, Flügel argues that clothes can be used as:

> a protection against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole; or, expressed more psychologically, a reassurance against a lack of love. If we are in unfriendly surroundings, whether human or natural, we tend, as it were, to button up, to draw our garments closely round us.[22]

This is a notion of clothing close to the one propounded by Gerald Heard and later by Bernard Rudofsky that clothes are a form of personal mobile architecture providing the wearer with comforts very similar to those of hearth and home.[23]

Men's and Women's Clothing

In every age and in every place men and women are born naked and yet everywhere they go about clothed. Not only that, but what they wear is almost always different. Sexual difference is central to the question of clothing and it is a centrality made critical by the weight given by psychoanalysis to our acquisition of sexual identities. Flügel starts his analysis from this basic position.

> If, as most authorities have maintained, sexual factors have been elements of great importance . . . in the origin and development of dress, it is not surprising that the differences between the sexes should find expression in distinctions of habit and convention with regard to dress.[24]

Having situated sexual difference at the heart of his examination of dress, Flügel begins his explanation of male and female clothing with the familiar Freudian belief that the human infant enters the world in a condition of bisexuality, or to be more accurate, it comes into the world sexually undifferentiated.

> The notion of bisexuality . . . always implies that in every human being a synthesis takes place between masculine and feminine traits – a synthesis which may be more or less harmonious, more or less well integrated.[25]

Masculinity and femininity, rests upon of a complex set of developmental processes whose aim is to produce the different 'mixtures' of exhibitionism and modesty that are sexual identity. Each sex emerges from its insertion into culture with distinctive mental structures, part of which consists in acquiring different ways of inhabiting dress. I choose my words carefully here because the great strength of Flügel's account of this process is that he makes clothes part of the reality of sexual difference, not just vehicles, or symbols, for its expression.

Flügel sees the key to understanding the sartorial differences between the sexes as residing in that crucial period during which the infant is drawn out of its state of primal narcissism and auto-erotism. The journey that men and women make through the initial prohibitions of modesty seems to result in them having different combinations of modesty and of display. I say 'seems' because Flügel is rather flexible in his explanation of how femininity and modesty intersect and of how masculinity and display relate to one another. One argument he presents as to why modesty seems to be stronger in women is that it is related to the social response to female biology:

> Modesty . . . is more frequently seen among women, and is probably connected, in a good many cases, with the various taboos which affect the female sex at certain times (e.g. child-birth, menstruation). This difference is apt to affect the relative quantity of clothing worn by the two sexes.[26]

This quasi-biological explanation is not developed and Flügel relies more upon a social and historical argument to account for the differential distribution of modesty between the sexes.

> *Our present society expects and encourages* a greater amount of narcissism in women than in men. In women we cheerfully tolerate a degree of preoccupation with personal appearance that we should regard as foppish and effeminate in a man. (my italics)[27]

The obverse of this question is 'Why is it that men (generally) have a greater element of exhibitionism in their make-ups?' Flügel's explanation is that men's elementary narcissism undergoes a greater degree of transformation (and, therefore, acquires a legitimacy) by being displaced from the body onto the clothing attached to the body and this makes men's dress more 'eye-catching' in traditional societies. This, argues Flügel, is the normal situation encountered in 'the majority of animal species' where 'the male is more ornamental than the female' and also among 'savages' where the male is almost always the more 'adventurous and decorative' in his dress. As to why this is the case, why it is that men experience a more intense sublimation/displacement of their primal narcissism, is not clear. Flügel remains ambivalent, unable to decide whether it is a necessary requirement for men to be able to enter and to participate in the public sphere where individual and immediate gratification has to be suspended, or whether elaboration of dress is a compensation for the aforesaid repression, and subsequent relinquishment, of self-love.[28] The awkward problem facing Flügel as he surveyed contemporary reality is that the complete opposite of these normal sartorial operating conditions seemed to be in existence. To explain this paradoxical situation in the West, Flügel sets out his reformist version of the psycho-history of European costume.

Flügel sees European women from the end of the Middle Ages onward as being engaged in an initially covert, but latterly overt, struggle to emancipate themselves from the claims of the Christian myth of Eve and her destruction of innocence. Under the eyes of the Church and the State, women had been able to invent and to improvise a mode of dress that, by the twentieth century, was relatively successful in satisfying the three fundamental motives of costume: decoration, modesty and protection. This had been achieved without violating the fundamental sexual constitution of women, or to use Simmel's terminology, was a product of an authentic female culture. The chief of these was:

> the introduction of the first *décolleté*. Women thereby introduced the principle of the deliberate mutual reinforcement of the attractions exercised by clothes and nakedness, a principle that has, to some extent, guided women's dress ever since, and has further differentiated it from male costume.[29]

Aside from abolishing a few lingering archaisms and the reduction in the rapidity with which fashionable styles succeed one another, the principles of contemporary women's dress provides an admirable contrast to the sorry state of men's appearance.

Western women succeeded in dismantling the excesses imposed upon them by the prohibitions of modesty, but men moved in the opposite direction and willingly dressed themselves in a form of costume that Flügel likens to 'corporal punishment'. This process, or the 'Great Masculine Renunciation', as he called it, began toward the end of the eighteenth century and resulted in the classic dress of the bourgeois male, the three-piece suit. I look at how Flügel proposed to reform this type of male costume in the final section of this chapter; for the moment I want to examine his explanation as to why this change came about.

Flügel relates the radical changes in men's apparel to an amalgam of French revolutionary politics (republicanism) and British industrial capitalism and philosophical utilitarianism. He sums up this complex knot of social change and sartorial reorganization so: 'Man abandoned his claim to being considered beautiful. He henceforth aimed at being only useful.'[30] What Flügel means by this compressed assertion is that men's appearance was withdrawn from the old aristocratic economy of ceremony, conspicuous consumption and an aesthetic of sumptuousness associated with displays of social rank. That was the negative dimension, but at the same time as this was taking place male dress was being inserted into a modernizing political, economic and aesthetic order. Flügel argues that the slogan of the French revolution 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' had a series of sartorial consequences for participation in the new social order. These were 'uniformity' and 'simplification'. Men's dress became more uniform because:

> The new social order demanded something that expressed . . . the common humanity of all men . . . a uniformity achieved particularly by the abolition of those distinctions which had divided the wealthy from the poor, the exalted from the humble.[31]

Simplification of dress is a logical adjunct of this democratic urge since simple clothing could be available to all ranks, but there is another aspect to these changes that Flügel raises after he has considered the political dimension and this is the need for a new form of male dress that is appropriate to the new forms of work. Neither occupational costumes, nor the play clothes of

ceremonial, fit the metaphysics of the new work: 'a man's most important activities were passed, not in the drawing-room, but in the workshop, the counting-house, the office. . .'[32] Flügel is arguing that male bourgeois dress is more to do with the state of the wearer's soul than it is to do with fitness for a specific task, and as we shall see by the 1920s the heroic period of capital accumulation was over and it was time for the superego to relax its hold on the bodies and minds of men.

Fashion

Flügel, unlike Simmel, did not see in fashion a process that could manifest itself in any set of objects. For him, fashion is about the historical changes that take place *to clothes*, not a general theory of how objects can, and do, alter over time. But, having said this, it is clear that Flügel very quickly comes up against a similar problem to that identified by Kroeber. In the psycho-history of European clothing it is clear that there are at least two levels of change taking place. There are the short-term shifts in the 'trimmings' that Kroeber identified as 'La Mode' and were the result of the conscious intentions of a 'designer'. However, the most important changes are those distributed over much longer timescales and these changes Flügel sees as symptomatic of shifts taking place in the psychological dynamics between the sexes. These latter changes, because they could take generations to fully realize their aims, have of necessity to be driven by unconscious forces and are likely, therefore, to be susceptible to psychoanalytic investigation. Flügel never really identifies his interest in clothing with what he calls 'the writers in the technical journals of *La Mode*' who 'preach as true believers'.[33] One reason for this only emerges at the end of the book when it is clear that part of his interest in male dress reform are his proposals to replace the creations of fashion's 'true believers' with something like a series of state-sponsored clothing ensembles which would be designed precisely to overcome 'the unsuitability' of so much 'modish attire'.[34] Flügel's discussion of fashion is divided into the three questions of 'the why', 'the how' and 'the what'?

Strictly speaking, Flügel's discussion of 'the why' of fashion owes almost nothing to psychoanalysis. His model here is Spencer and his idea of fashion as a form of social competition conducted through the medium of imitation:

> At the stage of social development in question, those in a given social stratum have learnt not only to admire, but as a rule to envy also; they therefore tend to imitate; and what more natural, and, at the same time more symbolic, than to start the

> process of imitation by copying their clothes, the very insignia of the admired and envied qualities?[35]

Flügel even inherits Spencer's vision of fashion's eventual demise with the spread of democratic equalization. Social and individual aspiration, and therefore fashion, will not happen when the order of things is secure: 'So long as the system of 'fixed' costume prevails, each social grade is content to wear the costume with which it is associated.'[36] However, with the arrival of modernity a pervasive criticism of those 'automatic loyalties' associated with tradition and convention starts to get under way. Once it is possible to imagine that things can be ordered differently, then the pursuit of the lower orders for the insignia and costumes of their 'betters' begins. The response of the upper strata is to change their clothing styles and, to quote Simmel, 'the game goes merrily on its way'. Unlike Simmel though, Flügel does imagine a time when fashion will finally vanish:

> with attainment of complete democracy, the conditions become once again less favourable for fashion. When every man is as good as his fellows, there are no superior social strata left to imitate, and it would seem as though the race of fashion must end, once those behind have definitely caught up with those in front.[37]

Spencer's 'death of fashion' was part of the inevitable tendency of the social order to move toward greater and greater individuation; what he called 'Cultural Protestantism'. In Flügel's version of the end of fashion it is 'democratic equalization', rather than absolute individuation, that will cut the ground from under fashion's incline.

There are two peripheral components of Flügel's account of fashion in the modern world worth examining because of the prominent roles they play in subsequent developments in the study of dress. Social class and, in particular, the simple vertical stack of upper, middle and lower, had become the most important *idée reçue* of fashion theories. Differentiation and imitation are overwhelmingly about the relations between social 'superiors' and 'inferiors' and little attention has been paid to the importance of fashion dynamics for marking *lateral* differentiations. It is to Flügel's credit that he senses the increasing presence of these forces in modern-day fashions.

> In most countries today it is no longer entirely an aristocracy of nobility or wealth [who drive fashion] . . . they are supplemented by further varied elements to which the demi-monde, Bohemia, the world of sport and motoring all furnish contributions.[38]

Flügel is very close to seeing the dynamics of modern fashion as being driven increasingly by the desire to exhibit membership of a subculture through one's

appearance. There is another element that Flügel associates with modern fashion, and he is the first of the Fashion Classics writers to draw attention to it. This is the capitalization of fashion: by this Flügel means not just the industrialization of clothes production with the subsequent rise in the quantity of clothing, but the penetration of the populace by the image and spectacle of fashion whose task is to keep the possibility of sartorial variety permanently in front of the consumer. Flügel remarks in passing that 'a multitude of special journals has sprung up, all aiming at the stimulation of interest in these changes', and there is a sense that he is beginning to engage with the sort of modern 'Fashion System' that occupies Roland Barthes, as discussed in the final chapter of this book.[39]

Flügel's attempt to explain 'the how' of fashion is not the strongest part of the book. What he really means by the word 'how' is 'author', certainly something like 'source', 'agency', or 'originator'. In a suprisingly modern construal of the problem, though, Flügel rejects the notion that 'a fashion' is just the outcome of a simple arithmetical calculation of producers plus consumers:

> fashions cannot be entirely accounted for either in terms of individuals, either on the side of the producers or the wearers. For a new style of dress to become fashionable, it must in some way appeal to a large number of people.[40]

Beneath the conscious actions of individuals lies a realm of collective ideals, aspirations and emotional dispositions that have acquired, in the tradition of German thought, the appellations *Zeitgeist* or *Weltanschauung*. The presence of this shared entity ensures that a distinctive set of forms, both material and mental, would be in circulation at any particular moment, and it is this entity that shapes the style of any social group. To understand the significance of any fashion requires that it be related to the deep structures buried within the 'style-field'. Flügel's attempts to undertake such analyses are half-hearted and could be ignored if it were not for a particular repercussion it had on another author in the Fashion Classics tradition. At one point in his account of why women's dresses shortened so dramatically after the First World War, he remarks that:

> It is easy to understand that . . . that the short skirt was something in the nature of triumphant gesture of freedom on the part of women (who had achieved an unprecedented self-confidence and an unexampled admiration as workers during the war).[41]

There seems little doubt that it was passages such as this which incensed Kroeber when he came to extend his research on women's dress fashions. His response, as we saw in the last chapter, was abrupt and dismissive.

> Glib explanations of the acting forces range through such things as wartime emergency, relaxing sex morals, driving of motor cars, a passing tendency towards non-femininity to emphasize equality with men.[42]

That short skirts may have acquired connotations of freedom might just be permitted by Kroeber, but that they were *caused* by a desire for freedom was, as far as he was concerned, an utter absurdity. To Flügel, with his much more optimistic belief in the capacity of humans to intervene in, and direct, their own affairs, it was equally evident that for women to shorten their skirts was just another step in their centuries-long rejection of a male-imposed modesty regime.

Flügel regains his optimism when he starts to examine 'the what?' of fashion, and this is because he returns to the familiar ground of psychoanalysis. He defines 'the what?' as 'the more specific forms through which it [fashion] manifests itself'.[43] What eventuates is a closer engagement with the details of specific clothing configurations than that undertaken in his previous chapters. Once again, what he is explaining is not fashion in the sense of the consciously engineered annual variations issuing from a 'Fashion Industry'. As he observes in the earlier chapter, much of this variety fails to be taken up by the public; therefore only that which is adopted is suitable for the sorts of analysis Flügel wishes to employ. The fact of adoption means that a particular fashion, or style element, has engaged with, and is being driven by, those more profound psychological dynamics that he sees at work in clothing as a whole. To uncover these deeper levels he disaggregates the unity of the clothed figure into a set of component variables which are grouped into a number of polarities. Any particular garment, or period style, displays its own combination of these various elements, as well as a distinctive set of psycho-sartorial dispositions, made up of various combinations of modesty and display.

There are some remarkable similarities between what Flügel is doing here and Kroeber's measurements of women's evening dresses. In both cases the authors are attempting to devise a method to enable an accurate picture to emerge of the actual changes affecting clothes. For Kroeber, the most important characteristic to plot is the oscillation of the dress shape, and the subsidiary factor of the ratio of exposed flesh to covered flesh. Flügel, beginning with his major binary of modesty and display, argues that variations in clothing according to time and place can be mapped out across a number of polarities.[44] These are:

Display	Modesty
Decoration	Plain
Body	Clothes
Phallic	Uterine
Past	Future
Part	Whole
Youth	Maturity

Different body parts stressed either positively or negatively

I can take the example of the shortening of women's skirts in the period after the First World War to illustrate the way his method is intended to be used. The first task is to separate the chosen garment into the 'component variables' of Flügel's list. If we look at the skirt-shortening in terms of the polarity of modesty and display it appears, at first sight, that we have a radical reorganization of the female modesty regime. There is little doubt that this is one of things that was taking place, but Flügel also points out that what is happening is a much more complex set of operations than straightforward female emancipation: 'Modesty has not so much been dethroned . . . as promoted to a (literally) higher region.'[45] Compared with that of Edwardian period, women's *décolletage* in the late 1920s was relatively modest. The emphasis in the classic 1920s fashion is placed upon the female limbs and, in particular, the legs. Each of Flügel's remaining polarities makes it possible to draw out ever more significant dimensions from this particular dress ensemble. A mechanical application of every one of the variables might lead us to ascribe 'deep' psychological significance to every changing detail but, again, Flügel's point is subtler. While he sees these changes as part of the long process of women's assertion of their freedom, he is aware that opposite political tendencies could be at work in the same ensemble. Reaction was in the air and for Flügel this means only one thing, the reassertion (aided by the Fashion Industry) of the superego and a stricter modesty regime.

> Considerable alarm has been expressed, as the inroads upon youthfulness and freedom have been realised. Though there is some very real delight in the increased luxuriance of material after the skimpiness of recent years, there is little enthusiasm about the prospect of appearing older and more dignified.[46]

Thus, an increase in modesty may arrive, not just by an insistence upon wearing more clothing, but by shifting what is regarded as appropriate and proper for 'mature' males and females. A fashion which emphasizes youth may license a

regression on the part of its wearer, but may encourage the 'mature' beholder to penalize the individual so dressed with concrete political and social penalties. ('That irresponsible child needs discipline!') Flügel is, however, an eternal optimist and is convinced that in the long run the world is going the way of the progressives, and it is to his vision of the future of clothes that we now turn.

Reform and Beyond

With the resurgence in the 1980s of the suit as standard working dress for male white-collar workers, it is sometimes forgotten the extent to which, in the 1920s and 1930s, the suit became an object of scorn in the sorts of progressive political circles within which Flügel moved. For 'progressives' like Flügel, the 'Great Male Renunciation' had created a situation in which the superego played a much-too-dominant role in the sorts of clothing men were permitted to wear and the attitudes that they were encouraged to have toward them. Indeed, Flügel is of the opinion that no better example of the conservative cultural disposition is to be found than the 'quasi-neurotic asceticism of men's dress'. From the 1920s onward Flügel engages in a practical critique of the superego through his writings and activities in support of the cause for reforming men's dress.[47] The final section of *The Psychology of Clothes* is taken up with what Flügel calls 'The Ethics of Dress', and it is in these last chapters that he deals with the question of what constitutes good and bad dress and tries to formulate practical policies, based on the outcomes of his meditation. His programme of reform consists of three parts: the reform of male and female costume; the reform, or 'rationalization', of fashion; and a final chapter speculating upon the future of dress. I discuss the first and the last topics only.[48]

Flügel's programme of dress reform is integral to his optimistic estimation that the reformist tendencies have the weight of history behind them. Democratic political structures, a utilitarian ('rational') system of values, and the enlightening powers of science were leading to the abolition of any 'irrational' differences in dress. The only differences that appear to have any basis in reason are those of age and of sex. Allowances are to be made for these sex differences on the grounds that they are an essential source of erotic stimulation. Much more important for the cause of reform is to rationally evaluate the strengths and the weaknesses of the two major forms of dress to discover which mode is best serving the needs of its wearers. Here, Flügel has no doubt that it is women's dress that has transformed itself into the superior sartorial style and that it is time for men's dress to change in accordance with the progressive principles displayed by female clothing. On almost every count, aesthetic,

psychological, hygiene, and convenience, men's clothing is regarded as inferior, but it is the manner in which men wear their clothes that is the real target of Flügel's criticisms. It is the 'severe clothes-morality' laid upon men which enforces conformity, drabness, and the wearing of unhygienic garments. Lift the hold that the superego has on men and the changes suggested by Flügel become possible. But how to get men to do this? Pitted against the relaxation of male-clothing habits are the forces of cultural conservatism who value obedience to the 'automatic loyalties' of class and sex over the bodily rewards that the progressives promise. Flügel's answer to this is a simple one. Sex. If heterosexual men are 'to dress a little more to please women', rather than striving for respectability from their fellow males, some very concrete pleasures would result. It must be said that the reformed costumes produced by the Men's Dress Reform Movement now strike us as amusingly eccentric but, in many ways, the clothing ideals upon which they are based are a prefiguration of the principles of men's casual wear which emerged after the Second World War. Many of the advantages of female costume, such as a greater variety of colour, a greater variety of materials, more personal choice and a greater exposure of the body, are evident in the post-war men's casual wear revolution.

One of Flügel's most perceptive insights is his realization that the reasons we put clothing on are intimately connected to the reasons we take them off. Anyone who spends time reading Flügel's writings on clothing will know that human nakedness and the Nudist Movement play a not inconsiderable role in his theory of clothing. Apart from reasons of protection – a motive that plays a minor role in Flügel's explanation of why we wear clothes – the reasons for us going about clothed are largely 'neurotic', 'irrational' and derived from our inability as a species 'to allow ourselves an undistorted recognition of our bodies'.[49] 'What if' asks Flügel, 'these neuroses could be cleared away? What would we be like then?' Modesty, he argues, is not fundamental to the existence of clothing and 'once its essentially ambivalent nature is recognised, it can interpose no reasonable obstacle to nudity'. Protection will fade away 'as the control of the environment e.g. by the heating engineer increases'. Decoration, or the 'aesthetic taste' will 'as it develops, tend to become reconciled more and more to the natural human form and seeks to set off and reveal its beauties rather than hide its deficiencies, or to substitute other beauties of a kind that are foreign to anatomy . . . Complete reconciliation with the body would mean that the aesthetic variations, emendations, and aggrandisements of the body that are produced by clothes would no longer be felt necessary or desirable'.[50] Flügel has seen the future and it is nudist.

Notes

1. Jones, 'Obituary: J.C. Flügel', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, no. 37, 1956, p. 194.

2. J.C. Flügel, 'Sexual and social sentiments', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, no. 7, 1927. Also in J.C. Flügel, *Men and Their Motives*, London: Kegan Paul, 1934.

3. C.E.M. Joad (ed.), *Manifesto: Being the Book of The Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1934.

4. The vice-presidents of the federation were Oliver Baldwin, Kingsley Martin, Gerald Barry, A.S. Neill, Vera Brittain, Beverly Nicols, Lionel Britton, Harold Nicholson, Professor Cyril Burt, Bertrand Russell, Professor J.C. Flügel, Olaf Stapledon, Dr. Norman Haire, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Geoffrey West, Julian Huxley, Rebecca West, David Low, Leonard Woolf, Miles Malleson, Barbara Wootton. The preliminary declaration of the manifesto gives a very clear picture of how embattled the 'progressive forces' were feeling by 1934.

> The Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals exists to promote contact and cooperation between societies and individuals working towards social and economic reconstruction, with a view to increasing the effectiveness of their efforts.
>
> The chaos of international relations, the failure to balance production and consumption, the nationalist policies pursued by governments with their appeals to fear, greed and self-interest under the guise of patriotism, must, unless arrested, inevitably lead, through social demoralization and tariff and military wars, to the breakdown of civilization.
>
> One of the most alarming features of the present drift of affairs is that while the forces of reaction are compact, well organized, and well disciplined, those which stand for rational progress are scattered, disorganized, and impotent. A large number of separate societies, insignificant in size and limited in scope to this or that particular object, cannot hope to produce much effect on public opinion when confronted with the wealthy and powerful interests which control the platform, the pulpit, and the press. (Joad, *Manifesto*, pp. 21–2)

5. J.C. Flügel, 'A psychology for progressives – how can they become effective?', in Joad, *Manifesto*, p. 294.

6. Ibid., p. 296.

7. Ibid., p. 304.

8. Ibid., p. 302.

9. See S. Freud, 'Fetishism', in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977. Also Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 473.

10. J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, London: Hogarth, 1930, p. 16.

11. Joad, *Manifesto*, p. 301.

12. Flügel, *Men and Their Motives*, p. 65.

13. J.C. Flügel, 'On the mental attitude to present-day clothes', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, vol. 9, 1929, pp. 97–149.

14. Ibid., p. 147.

15. Unpublished transcript of a talk given by J.C. Flügel on BBC Radio on 26 June, 1928. Talk 3, p. 1.
16. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, p. 86. On the presence of that 'if allowed' hinges Flügel's interest in Dress Reform. The passages that appear to influenced Flugel's ideas about skin and muscle erotism occur in the chapter 'Infantile sexuality', pp. 120–2 in Freud, *Three Essays*.
17. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, p. 88.
18. Flügel, *An Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1932, p. 120.
19. Herbert Spencer, A.E. Crawley and E.B. Tylor are all cited in the bibliography of Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, but no mention is made of James Frazer.
20. E.B. Tylor, *Anthropology*, 2 vols, London: Watts & Co., 1930, vol. 1, p. 6.
21. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, p. 16.
22. Ibid., p. 77.
23. See Gerald Heard, *Narcissus: An Anatomy of Clothes*, London: Kegan Paul Trench & Trubner, 1924 and Bernard Rudofsky, *The Unfashionable Human Body*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971.
24. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, p. 103.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 103.
27. Ibid., p. 128.
28. This question of male dress being more 'eye-catching' is further complicated by a remark Flügel made before the publication of *The Psychology of Clothes*. In the essay 'Sexual and social sentiments' he observes that: 'Up until recently in human history, men were dressed as gaudily and were allowed as much individuality in clothing as were women, and among primitive peoples it seems to be the men rather than the women who have the leisure and opportunity for personal adornment' (Flügel (1934), p. 65). This picture of men at their leisure brings Flügel much closer to Veblen than he might at first appear.
29. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, p. 106.
30. Ibid., p. 111.
31. Ibid., p. 112.
32. Ibid., p. 113.
33. Ibid., p. 137. The only fashion designer named by Flügel is Jean Patou.
34. Ibid., p. 221.
35. Ibid., p. 138.
36. Ibid., p. 138.
37. Ibid., pp. 140–1.
38. Ibid., p. 141.
39. Ibid., p. 142.
40. Ibid., p.147.
41. Ibid., p. 151.
42. A. Kroeber and J. Richardson, 'Three centuries of women's dress fashions: a quantitative analysis', *Anthropological Records*, Berkeley, vol. V, 1940, p. 129.

43. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, p. 155.
44. Ibid. See chapter X, 'The Vicissitudes of Fashion'.
45. Ibid., p. 162.
46. Ibid., p. 165.
47. For accounts of the Male Dress Reform Party see B. Burman and M. Leverton, 'The Men's Dress Reform Party, 1929–1937', *Costume*, no. 21, 1987. Also B. Burman, 'Better and brighter clothes: the men's dress reform party, 1929–1940', *Journal of Design History*, 8(4), 1995 and Michael Carter, 'Dressed for paradise' in *Putting a Face on Things: Studies in Imaginary Materials*, Sydney: Power Publications, 1997.
48. Many of Flügel's suggestions for the reform of fashion were instigated in the United Kingdom during the Second World War with the programme of rationing and the Utility clothing scheme.
49. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, p. 234.
50. Ibid., p. 235.

7

James Laver, the Reluctant Expert

Clothes are inevitable.

James Laver

James Laver (1899–1975) is the only member of the Fashion Classics tradition to be a full-time student of dress. In 1922 he became Assistant Keeper in the Print Room at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and worked in that institution until his retirement in 1959. As he explains in his autobiography 'My study of fashion had, originally, a purely technical and utilitarian purpose. I wanted to date the pictures.'[1] He quickly tired of this instrumental relationship to dress and 'Having studied the What and the When, I began to wonder about the How and the Why.'[2] His curiosity about these latter questions led him to become one of the most prolific authors in the English-speaking world on dress and fashion. Not only did he recast the conventional stories of European high fashion, he was also intrigued by those forms of attire outside of fashion, such as school uniforms, children's dress, military uniforms, theatrical costume and sporting clothes.

Before he published his first substantial work on fashion, Laver had established a minor reputation in literary and theatrical circles. Novels, biographies, plays, short stories and light (pastiche) verse all speak of an ambition to become a literary figure; an ambition that was, unfortunately, never to find fulfillment.[3] I would love to report that my journey through Laver's literary *oeuvre* uncovered many forgotten masterpieces. Sadly, Laver's writings are all examples of what their author would have called 'children of Time'; writings destined to remain forever in their own time 'as flies in amber'. Two relevant concerns, however, do emerge from these efforts. The first is Laver's love of allegory and, in particular, of classical allegory. He seems to regard the bizarre figures of allegory as some final resting point in 'common humanity's' attempt to understand 'the profounder questions of human existence'. Beyond allegory, understanding is forced to resort to the technical languages of professional philosophers and experts, of which he always remained suspicious. Laver seems

to conceive of the forms taken by clothing as three-dimensional material allegories that are, in some ways, vernacular answers to these 'profounder questions'. The other theme to emerge from these literary efforts is the fondness Laver has for the device of temporal disjunction. This often takes a form of a pagan past erupting into a contemporary context; that context is one in which scepticism and rationalism are the order of the day. The consequence of these confrontations is that the hero (or heroine), after an interval of confusion and panic, undergoes a profound enlightenment and comes to respect the wisdom of the senses. Laver is fascinated by the effects that the passage of time has upon human beings and their works but what is perhaps less well known is his paganism and the seriousness he accords to matters occult. He never regards the Past, the Present or the Future as distinct and separate dimensions. Accompanying the regular turnover of calendar time are other patterns, hidden regularities and slippages between the temporal orders. In the rhythms of fashion Laver comes to see something that approaches what the occult tradition has variously called 'clairvoyance' or 'premonition'. As he remarks, 'the difference between a museum official and an astrologer is so slight that you would hardly notice it'.[4] It is views such as these that ensure Laver never became an accepted member of the British academic establishment. Historical veracity, though a consideration, is never his overriding concern. His wider intellectual dispositions always remain too strong an influence to suppress his desire for interpretation and generalization.

The Move Towards Fashion

It was not until the late 1930s that Laver published his first book wholly devoted to dress and fashion.[5] However, in 1933, he published an essay entitled 'The Triumph of Time' which reveals, possibly for the first time, the stages of his intellectual journey from 'time-philosopher' to dress historian.[6] Laver devotes most of the essay to the not unfamiliar theme of time's dissolution of 'all that is solid' in Western society. To be fair to Laver, his argument deals not strictly with time itself, but with the growing awareness among the populations of the West of the effects and significance that time's increasingly swift passing was having upon their way of life. Everything once thought to lie outside of time, such as immortality, the gods and the absolute, had proved to be susceptible to the 'ravages of time'. 'Time devours his own children and . . . everything passes away' and, since everything is a child of time, it follows that all things must change and must keep on changing. Laver describes 'time's victory' as a complex mixture of objective social tendencies and the philosophical and social ideologies through which Western men and women have tried to comprehend

them. Darwin, Marx, Bergson, Einstein, Croce are all cited as agents of the new 'time-consciousness' while natural evolution, Hegelian dialectics and the theory of relativity are all attempts to register the arrival of this new deity, time.

Laver uses the final part of the essay to explore some of the consequences that the onset of Modernity has had on the daily lives of Westerners. He sees place as being the greatest casualty of modern time-consciousness.

> Every construction implies a Place, but Time is the great leveler. Even in the visible aspect of things Time is now victorious, so that there is less difference between (shall we say) New York and Chicago, than between New York in 1900 and New York in 1930.[7]

In other words, time is becoming the dominant medium of human existence and nothing has furthered this conquest more than the increase in the speed at which all aspects of existence are now being lived. So

> To be in London for breakfast and Paris for lunch is to blur still further the distinction between places; it is to intensify the defeat of locality; it is to decrease the size of the world.[8]

The result of this, argues Laver, is that the loyalties of locality (space) are being replaced by those of time. We are defined less and less by the place of our birth and more and more by the date of our birth and this means, as Laver observes, that we tend to become 'men of the post-war epoch', rather than 'Yorkshiremen'. It is the rise of these temporal loyalties that drew him to an interest in fashion, since 'nothing illustrates the Triumph of Time more clearly than the growing dominance of fashion'. In societies where place dominates life, differences between dress styles are indicative of spatial differences – for example, the regional distribution of folk costumes in Europe. But once time is the ruler, dress differences are more likely to indicate 'fashions', that is, differences that gain their significance by being distributed over time. The annual changes in women's fashions and our ability to easily distinguish between them is, argues Laver, no different from a modern city-dweller's ability to arrive at a station with such precision that he or she is able to catch 'the 10.13 from Euston'. It is at this point that Laver presents the reader with the first mention of his theory of fashion. It is worth quoting at length because there is little indication in the rest of the essay that Laver has been thinking along these lines.

> The speeding up of fashion's changes is due to several causes, chiefly to large-scale production and the survival of snobbery into a democratic world. The breakdown of the social hierarchy leaves every woman (for man has ceased to compete) free to

> dress as well as she can afford, with the result that the only possible superiority is the slight one of cut or material, or the short one of adopting a new fashion a little sooner than her neighbours.[9]

What is odd in this quotation is the presence of the phrase 'the survival of snobbery into a democratic world'. To what degree Laver was acquainted with the Fashion Classics tradition at this stage of his career is unclear since he rarely used footnotes or any of the modern apparatus of scholarly citation. However, the inclining of his definition toward a *sociology of fashion*, rather than making it reflect a twitch in the Time Spirit, would suggest that he had some awareness of what writers such as Veblen and Spencer have written about fashion. (Laver never refers to Simmel.) As we see later in this chapter, what might be called 'the secular aspect' of Laver's thought is to become more prominent after the Second World War. However, at this stage of his thinking it remains an isolated fragment and it is the notion of the Time Spirit, or *Zeitgeist*, that provides the most important link between fashion and his time philosophy.

Laver's professional activities at the Victoria and Albert Museum would have sensitized him to the inevitability of being in, and of, 'one's time'. Human beings and all their works may be children of time, but this does not mean that history reveals nothing but arbitrariness and confusion. Indeed, for Laver, what is revealed by the passage of time is the presence of an all-pervasive influence that places its imprint on every aspect of an age and it is the presence of such an imprint that often constitutes our sense of what an age is like. No matter how much at the moment of acting we feel ourselves to be autonomous individuals, the passage of time will always show us to be embedded in the Time Spirit of our age. In particular, changes in dress are not events that lie outside the determinations of the *Zeitgeist*. In an observation remarkably close to Kroeber's view of the influence fashion designers have on the overall form of clothing, Laver remarks

> It all seems very wasteful and almost meaningless, this discarding of old clothes in order to conform to the whim of half a dozen French designers, but the matter is not quite so simple as that. The designers are not their own masters. They can only introduce an innovation if it happens to be in accordance with the spirit of the age.[10]

It is this allegiance to the idea of *Zeitgeist* and its material manifestation in style that enables Laver to grant the many forms assumed by dress a *content*. There might not be a termination point to the dynamic of fashion, but this did not mean that any single instance of dress was arbitrary in relation to the deepest promptings of the Time Spirit.

Taste and Fashion

Laver published *Taste and Fashion: From the French Revolution to the Present Day* in 1937 and reading it, almost 80 years later, is still an exhilarating experience.[11] The book has three general themes. The first part is 'chronological in arrangement' and deals with the 'main tendencies' taken by European fashion (male and female) in the 150 years since the French revolution. The second half is 'divided into subjects, each of which is pursued through the whole one hundred and fifty years of its development'.[12] In addition to these historical concerns, the book is also a meditation upon the nature of taste and fashion in general and, as will become clear as this chapter unfolds, is an elaboration of the arguments rehearsed in the essay of 1933. Laver divides these theoretical concerns into those associated with taste and those concerned with fashion. In addition, at various points throughout the book, he presents the reader with a number of 'general principles' which he sees at work during the last 150 years of European fashion. Putting it simply, these principles are about the connections between *Zeitgeist* and dress forms, what was earlier described as the 'content' of clothes, and the effects that the passage of time has upon dress. The first concern is with taste and the second is with fashion.

Laver is fascinated by the differences that the ever-changing forms of life presented to the historian. The fact that men in the nineteenth century wore top hats while they played cricket or that women were capable of scrambling over The Alps in crinolines remains, for him, a constant delight. The question haunting him is 'Why was it that human beings, from one historical epoch to another, went about their daily tasks, their rituals and their pleasures in such wildly differing costumes?' The immediate source for this fascination undoubtedly lies in the structure of Laver's professional life. Passing in front of him was a constant stream of pictures so that, in the course of a normal working day, he would encounter human beings from a variety of times and places all of whom would be engaged in varying activities and, of course, all would be dressed in quite different sorts of clothing. There is no doubt that Laver's sense of dress form rests upon the 'look' of a period, a 'look' that is as much a characteristic of the style of a picture as it is of the historical reality it depicts. As well, Laver was born into a generation of men who experienced an unprecedented revolution in the dress of women. He was daily confronted, as were so many of the male representatives of the Fashion Classics tradition, by the sight of women's clothing going through a series of extraordinary changes. How to explain these radical new forms of clothing is a question that every student of dress was bound to examine.

The precise intellectual lineage of Laver's notion of *Zeitgeist* is unclear. He could read German. He refers to Hegel in the 1933 essay, and in his autobiography he mentions that he has read Spengler and Toynbee. But, ultimately the search for philosophical antecedents in Laver's case is unimportant on two counts. First, his conception of allegory convinced him that any attempt to specify its meaning too closely would lead to an impoverishment in the power contained in the allegorical figure. He retained a life-long aversion to those who dared to dismantle the magic of these evocative symbols by explaining them away. Of the profundity of the nature of time he remarks, rather peevishly, in the earlier essay

> I am aware . . . that in these remarks I have not even attempted to debate the profound philosophical problems involved. Of the nature of Time I have preferred to say nothing because I know nothing and lack the metaphysical equipment to make nothing sound like a great deal.[13]

While, on occasion, Laver will refer to Jung and 'the group mind', or intimate that something like a 'collective unconscious' may exist, these are not serious attempts on Laver's part to ground his notion of *Zeitgeist* in a rigorous manner. The second reason lies, I suspect, with Laver's overwhelmingly pictorial imagination. Again, in the 1933 essay, he begins his discussion of time with a description of a depiction of a renaissance triumph. It is clear from the excited way in which Laver is able to elaborate upon this pictorial version of the allegory that he neither needs nor desires to go any further in explaining the nature of the Time Spirit. The power of these figures lies in the way they suggest, rather than the way they explain.

For Laver, the Time Spirit is a given, but it is a given with a certain consistency in the way that it behaves. In the final chapter of *Taste and Fashion*, the author suggests that 'the costume of the period . . . is the mirror of the soul'. The 'soul' referred to here is a collective entity that 'pours itself' into the material equipment of an epoch. Since the *Zeitgeist* is ever-changing, the results of such 'outpourings' will, likewise, vary from age to age. This is the source of his observations about the 'inevitability' of clothing.

> In every period costume has some essential line, and when we look back over the fashions of the past we can see quite plainly what it is, and can see what is surely very strange, that the forms of dresses, apparently so haphazard, so dependent on the whim of the designer, have an extraordinary relevance to the spirit of the age.[14]

This desire to locate correspondences between the characteristics of an epoch's dress forms and the content of *Zeitgeist* leads Laver down the path that was anathema to Kroeber – the belief that analogical relations exist between the

social and political structures of an age and the details of its dress. It is his belief in such links that gives us such classic Laverian explanations as:

> The aristocratic stiffness of the old regime in France is completely mirrored in the brocaded gowns of the eighteenth century. The Republican yet licentious notions of the *Directoire* find their echo in the plain transparent dresses of the time. Victorian modesty expressed itself in the multiplicity of petticoats; the emancipation of the post-War flapper in short hair and short skirts.[15]

There are no accidents in dress history, just as there is no cessation in the insatiable creative urge of *Zeitgeist,* ever in the process of externalizing itself by appropriating the objective materials of nature and re-forming them according to its inner dispositions. If Spirit were not the restless, ever-changing entity it is, clothes would have a form, but there would be no fashion. What exactly it was that 'moved' the *Zeitgeist* remained something of a mystery. It is a process that Laver acknowledges, but fails to specify. As he observes, 'while what might be called the 'current idea' determines the form which fashion shall take, the actual impulse to change lies elsewhere'.[16] Because time passes, the elements that make up the mode, *Zeitgeist*, 'Form', and 'Taste' will also change and it is this movement, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, that Laver regards as the heartbeat of fashion. Indeed, we could say that he defines fashion as the sum of the effects wrought on human activities by the passage of time. From this premise of the inevitability of time passing, Laver derives a number of processes that govern the patterns of dress development. We can divide these changes into those governing the dynamics of taste, those that affect the forms of dress and shifts within the structure of the Time Spirit.

Taste

Laver conceived of taste as a set of collective aesthetic dispositions that incline social groups to prefer one form of clothing to another. Taste is the presence of *Zeitgeist* in the soul of the individual and it is this which ensures that groups will always be wearing forms of attire that are appropriate to the times; that is, clothes that are 'inevitable'. However, taste, like the *Zeitgeist*, never remains stable for long. Something that, at one moment, is considered chic can rapidly turn into a serious lapse of taste. Laver senses that while the length of the fashionable 'half-life' of a style had shortened in the twentieth century, the stages through which taste passes as it moves away from the present remain constant. It is this 'decay of chic' that he tries to describe and define by his theory of 'the gap in appreciation'.

Explaining how certain forms become fashionable is one thing but understanding why they go out of fashion requires a separate explanatory model. One of the sources for Laver's interest in this question is his sensitivity to what is happening to him as he scrutinizes old photographs and prints. 'How can it be', he asks, 'that what was thought of as fashionable becomes grotesque and can then start to appear charming as time passes?' Photographs of last year's fashion can make us look ridiculous but in 50 years' time the figures in the pictures will, more often than not, seem to be 'delightful' representatives of their times.[17] Laver is convinced that this process of 'fading' is a highly organized affair:

> Yet taste, when we study its history, seems to be a fluctuating thing, constantly developing, constantly taking new forms, and these changes in taste are not arbitrary. There are certain laws which appear to govern its development, and its evolution can be plotted.[18]

Laver's first task is to map the stages through which the taste for a particular style of dress passes. He charts these so:

Indecent	10 years before its time
Shameless	5 years before its time
Outré (daring)	1 year before its time
Smart	- - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
Dowdy	1 year after its time
Hideous	10 years after its time
Ridiculous	20 years after its time
Amusing	30 years after its time
Quaint	50 years after its time
Charming	70 years after its time
Romantic	100 years after its time.[19]

The 'gap in appreciation', namely that from any contemporary perspective there will occur 'a particularly black spot in the history of taste' trailing some 10 to 20 years behind, indicates to Laver that an amount time must elapse before our judgement in matters of taste can have any validity. These 'stations of taste' are, from one perspective, just effects of changes in the *Zeitgeist* which, in turn, are an inevitable consequence of time passing. But again, Laver seems dissatisfied by the vacuity of this explanation and once more turns to a version of the secular sociology that he reached for in the 1933 essay. What emerges as he searches for a grounding to his theory of taste is, in reality, an explanation

of women's dress fashions that draws directly upon many of the main themes of the Fashion Classics tradition:

> The breakdown of the social hierarchy leaves every woman (for man has ceased to compete) free to dress as well as she can afford, with the result that the only possible superiority is the slight one of cut or material, or the short one of adopting a new fashion a little sooner than her neighbours. The latest creations of the great Paris couturiers are copied and duplicated almost as soon as they appear in the shops, so that the fashionable woman is forced to adopt something still newer in order to preserve her advantage. Fashion, in a word, filters steadily down the social scale. The actual garments which express it become less and less attractive because they are less skillfully made. A fashion, therefore, very quickly becomes dowdy, and that is sufficient to induce women who can afford it to change it as quickly as possible.[20]

This sociology of fashion, which in the hands of earlier thinkers had been applicable across the social order, is with Laver restricted to the vestimentary activities of women alone. If we ask why this is so, Laver replies that it is because of 'the race for chic', a contemporary form of the 'Seduction Principle', and this he derives, overtly, from Flügel's discussion of exhibitionism in *The Psychology of Clothes*.[21] Laver's desire for a concrete foundation for his ideas about clothing leads him to become increasingly dependent upon Flügel and the writings of psychoanalysis.

Forms

At various points throughout *Taste and Fashion* Laver presents the reader with a number of 'general principles' that follow from his conception of the relation between *Zeitgeist* and dress form. Given that the historical period he is dealing with is one in which the garments worn by men and women become quite different from one another, most of his observations are about explaining this contrast between the garments of males and females. His first observation is of the variability of female dress in comparison with the stability of men's dress. The high degree of plasticity in female clothing since the French revolution suggests that 'women's dress is more susceptible to the dominant tastes and ideas than the dress of men'. The reason for this, continues Laver, is that women 'do not in general lead such strenuous lives' as do men and therefore their dress is much freer from 'the question of mere suitability'. Women's costume, because it is more labile, can provide a more sensitive 'mould into which the spirit of the age pours itself'.[22]

Because the relations between the Time Spirit and dress forms are beneath the level of consciousness, the interpreter of costume can often reveal what

Laver referred to as the 'wisdom of forms'. As an example of this, he cites the decline of the crinoline before the demise of the French Second Empire. By 1868 'it [the crinoline] is only half as wide as its wearer's height' whereas in the years previous to this the ratio of its width to height had been much greater. Laver's interpretation of this sudden shrinking is that it was a reflection of 'the political fortunes of the time . . . at the same moment when the crinoline began to lose its amplitude the fortunes of the Empire began to decline . . .' Laver regards the forms with which we live our lives as capable of registering changes in the fortunes of society well before they become available to us at a conscious level. Thus he is able to observe that:

> it is as if the mode reflects subconsciously or semiconsciously the subterranean movements of society rather that its obvious wishes or habits. The crinoline was wiser than those who wore it. It diminished its pretension and took shelter before the coming storm, while the monde and the demi-monde continued to lead that wild life of gaiety, that breathless competition in luxury and ostentation, which is the dominant note of the Second Empire.[23]

When, with the arrival of television, Laver became a minor media celebrity, he would often shock his audiences by asserting the existence of outrageous correlations such as a link between the stock market index and the propensity of women to abandon corsets!

Like many of the other thinkers in this volume, Laver is puzzled by the fact that 'in the wild' it is the male who is, generally, more resplendent than the female. However, since the French revolution, the dress of men has become simplified – 'dull' is how he describes it – and more uniform-like. Certainly, the period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the dress of men and women become increasingly different to one another. Laver's task is to explain why it is that, since the end of the eighteenth century, the form of male dress has become 'fossilized' while that of women's dress has never ceased to change from year to year and from season to season. His observations about this tendency, over time, for male dress to fossilize becomes, in *Taste and Fashion*, an example of a broader set of laws governing the formal careers of a wide variety of costumes. This is Laver's 'theory of stereotyping', a process in which a costume, or dress form, can retreat from the maelstrom of fashionable change and stabilize. (Or 'formalize', 'stereotype' or 'fossilize': these are all terms Laver employs to describe this process.) The purest example of this process is the uniform, which 'is by its nature a dead end'. At the other pole is the fashionable dress of wealthy women, which is able to obey every twist and turn of the *Zeitgeist*, unhampered by considerations of cost. Examples of stereotyped dress are the costumes associated with certain professions – the law, the clergy, and academia; examples of sporting wear that have ceased to develop; hunting

dress for males; the uniforms of sporting teams; military uniforms and, in particular, the dress uniforms worn on ceremonial occasions; occupational costumes that have transformed themselves into ceremonial wear; and, most importantly, the form taken by modern male dress. For the purpose of brevity I treat only of Laver's explanation of the 'fossilization' of modern male dress.

Flügel's notion of the 'great male renunciation' did have a great effect upon Laver, who advances his own version of Flügel's thesis as to why it is that 'male and female costume in the modern era have followed completely different principles of evolution and development'. The answer to this divergence of dress forms rests upon a divergence in the forms of life and, in particular, with the nature of the bourgeois revolution that overturned the rule of the aristocracy.

> Up to the end of the eighteenth century men's costumes were equally gorgeous, and it is apparently only since the French Revolution that men have ceased to compete with women in the sphere of fashionable attire.[24]

Once a form of dress ceases to be an agency of competition it ceases to display any 'natural tendency to change'. Male dress ceases to be 'fashionable' to the extent that it stops being something that the forces of the *Zeitgeist* struggle to influence:

> its [male dress] natural tendency is to stereotype itself. It is perpetually crystallizing into a uniform. This may be explained, perhaps, in part by noting that whereas even in modern times, when women have invaded so many spheres of masculine activity, a woman is first of all a woman, and then a typist or a mannequin or a film star, or whatever she may happen to be, a man is first and foremost a lawyer, a banker, or a bricklayer, and only after that a man. In a word, man's function in the State is more important than his function in the home: he tends to adopt the uniform of a profession.[25]

This is a very different sort of explanation from one relying upon the operations of *Zeitgeist*. While Laver never relinquishes his love of what Carlyle called the 'Architectural Idea' of an epoch, the inability of his notion of the Time Spirit to account for 'why' and 'how' it itself changed drove him deeper and deeper into the secular explanations favoured by the tradition of the fashion classics. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in his account of why women's dress is so fashionably restless.

One of Laver's favourite anecdotes is about an experience he had during the rehearsals of the stage adaptation of his novel *Nymph Errant*.

> During the rehearsals of *Nymph Errant* at the Adelphi Theatre in 1933 the practice dress of most of the chorus girls consisted of a backless bathing costume. No one

> thought anything of this – least of all the girls themselves. But the day came for the dress rehearsal, and in one of the scenes it was found that Doris Zinkeisen had devised for the chorus a costume very like the male costume of 1830: tail-coat, trousers, waistcoats, etc. The front of the waistcoat, however, was cut low, so as to form a kind of *décolletage*. It was not a very startling *décolletage* – certainly no lower than would have been worn without any embarrassment by an ingenue of the eighties when attending her first ball. But there was a strike among the chorus against the indecency of this costume, and Mr. Cochrane was compelled to fill up the offending gap with gauze.[26]

This is a story rich in examples of how changes of time and of place can alter the meaning of a garment. What catches Laver's eye is the greater sensitivity that the garments and the bodies of women display to such changes in comparison with those of men. In the 150 years covered by Laver's book the dress of men had stabilized but the dress of women had experienced, and was still experiencing, radical changes. Nor were these changes superficial alterations in 'look', but fundamental transformations of the forms of women's dress. Why was this? Nowhere was this malleability in women's fashions more apparent than in the constant changes to the parts of the body that women were permitted to expose and those parts that they were supposed to keep covered. To account for these shifting patterns of bare and covered, Laver advances his theory of *décolletage*.

Laver argues that, despite the changes to the position occupied by women in the modern world, their dress is not yet dominated by the demands of 'practicability' in the manner of men's dress. The dress of women is, therefore, more open to the fluctuating demands of the Time Spirit. This is particularly the case with evening dress.

> Having . . . an element of fantasy, it is more easily modified by any outside influence, and as it is the garb in which women look, or fancy they look, their best, it reflects their innermost thoughts and tendencies more closely than day dress, which has, of necessity, an element of practicability.[27]

But this does not explain why it is that women, routinely, exhibit more of their bodies than do men. It is at this point that Laver reaches for Flügel and specifically his ideas on the dialectic between modesty and exhibitionism. Women's dress, Laver explains, is fundamentally a competitive ensemble deployed by women in the struggle with other women for the attention of men. Since they lack the economic and political resources of men they must depend upon their sexuality and their power of reproduction. Let Laver take up the story:

> Such sexual significance has, since men made the great renunciation at the end of the eighteenth century, been confined almost exclusively to female attire. The

> sexuality of the female body is more diffused than that of the male, and as it is habitually covered up the exposure of any part of it focuses the erotic attention, conscious or unconscious, and makes for seductiveness.[28]

Women's dress, therefore, is not so much a 'dance of the seven veils', but more a dance in which a single veil is constantly being adjusted. Changes to the patterns of clothing and flesh are driven by the need to sustain the male's erotic interest which, if left to itself, will develop 'body-part fatigue'. This sequence of exposed, or more accurately, emphasized parts of the woman's body Laver called the theory of 'the shifting erogenous zone'.[9] So long as the current social and economic conditions governing the position of women persisted, so too would the 'seduction principle' and the 'shifting erogenous zone' dominate the formal organization of their garments.

Any reader coming to *Taste and Fashion,* unaware of the writings discussed in the earlier chapters of this book, would gain little sense that, by the time Laver published his book, frequent cross-referencing was occurring in the scholarly analysis of clothing and fashion. It is clear that he is at his most comfortable intellectually when dealing with Time Spirit, Form and Taste. Paradoxically, it is fashion that causes him the most difficulties. He is caught between either acquiescing to the 'restlessness' of the *Zeitgeist* or trying to give reasons for this restlessness and so account for what is, after all, the heart of fashion, its dynamism. The problem for Laver is that the answers to the questions that concern him are not congenial with his own intellectual and political dispositions. Each time Laver is forced to venture beyond an allegorical form, he is confronted by a number of secular and materialist intellectual frameworks such as psychoanalysis, the scepticism of Veblen's political economy and the dialectical materialism of Marxism. Laver moves across a number of intellectual appropriations which he then rapidly follows with a series of gratuitous disavowals as he tries to avoid the consequences implicit in these explanations. While drawing extensively upon the work of Flügel he will sneer at the Dress Reform Movement. He inserts the phrase 'libido-flux' into his argument, yet he refers to 'the swamps of psychoanalysis. He describes the set of precise historical circumstances governing the organization of women's dress although he is dismissive of those who would attempt to reform these circumstances.[30]

Style

Between *Taste and Fashion* (1937) and the appearance of one of Laver's most comprehensive statements about clothing, *Dress*, in 1950, Laver published the

brochure-length essay dealing with the dynamics of fashion, *Letter to a Girl on the Future of Clothes* (1946) and a pictorial essay on style and *Zeitgeist*, *Style in Costume* (1949).[31] The latter is a rather odd little book. It consists of a 12-page introduction, followed by a number of comparisons where pictures of clothes are placed next to pictures of architectural details and (or) household objects. The comparisons begin with 'an Assyrian mitre and Chaldean Ziggurat' and journey, via ancient Greece and the major historical epochs of Western Europe, to a fashion plate of 'A Lady of 1928' and a photograph titled 'Modern Architecture'. The latter is a photograph of the Empire State Building in New York. Nothing so clearly demonstrates the limitations of Laver's notion of *Zeitgeist* than this book. Sixteen years have passed since he published his first exposition of the relationship between the Time Spirit, the forms of our clothing and the styles of our living equipment. One might have expected that, in the intervening years, the unadorned assertion of 1933 would have become more sophisticated. Unfortunately what we find in this book is a restatement of his *Zeitgeist* theory in no more developed a form than the earlier version:

> The decorative unity of an age is manifest even in the most apparently insignificant details. What can all this mean except that the Time-Spirit (the *Zeitgeist* so dear to Carlyle's German mentors) is a reality and imposes the print of his vast thumb on everything that he touches?[32]

Such generalities would be fine if it were not for the fact that he has said the same thing on a number of previous occasions. In the very next paragraph he sets out his usual methodological caveats:

> The method adopted in the present booklet is strictly non-scientific, which is a different thing from unscientific. We shall proceed not logically, but analogically. There will be no attempt to prove anything, but only to bring related shapes together in the hope of firing the imagination to a perception of the reality behind surface-pattern. The whole work, text and pictures included, is what, a hundred years ago, would have been called a 'suggestive inquiry'. It is hardly even that, it is a mere hint, a sign post pointing into the Unknown . . . Such at least is its intention.[33]

That sequence of apologies and qualifications is embarrassing to read. Again, Laver seems unwilling, or unable, to clear the final intellectual hurdle and get down to practise (and enjoy) the life of a scholar.[34] When we arrive at the pictorial section of the essay our disappointment is compounded. Laver's aim only seems to be to draw attention the presence of stylistic parallels.

> A hat, a trouser-leg, or whatever it may be – and to place it beside some form of architecture or interior decoration of the same epoch, and to note the parallelism, if such exists, between them.[35]

The point, surely, is to discover the meaning of such parallels, to see how they articulate with one another and to trace how one form can migrate into another. Laver's interpretations of the stylistic correspondences are banal. When commenting on the emergence of top hats in the nineteenth century, he places a fashion plate of three men wearing top hats next to a household chimneystack with three chimney pots on it. About these two images he remarks:

> with the growth of towns and the development of nineteenth-century Industrialism, chimneys multiplied until it is no exaggeration to say that if you looked about you in any great city in England you saw nothing but top hats, and if you raised your eyes to heaven you saw nothing but chimneys.[36]

The reasons for this intellectual and methodological blockage are complex and outside of the remit of the present book. However, one factor I suspect to be playing an important role in holding him back is the fact that Laver is a very limited visionary. There is little doubt that *Style in Costume* is 'inspired' by Gerald Heard's extremely eccentric work *Narcissus: An Anatomy of Clothes*, published in 1924.[37] Laver does acknowledge Heard, but there are far too many parallels in the picture essay between *Style in Costume* and *Narcissus* to make this a case of mild appropriation.[38] We have only to compare Laver's tepid generalities to the fierceness of Heard's notions of dress and the relentless manner in which he hammers out his vision of the future of clothes to see what is missing. The occult is still being asserted, but it is a spent force in Laver's intellectual development. The most damning comment occurs when he is comparing the dress of a woman of 1895 to a table lamp of the same period:

> We are compelled to postulate a 'Spirit of the Age' which decides what the shape of things shall be; and if the 'Spirit of the Age' is a myth, at least it seems to be a myth that works.[39]

Laver's problem is that he is not sufficiently mystical. He is never consumed by his vision of time's passing with the result that he is left in the position of a stage conjuror desperately trying to believe in the power of magic.

The Arrival of the Tradition

By 1937 Laver is clearly aware that others before him had thought and written about clothes and fashion.[40] As he continues to publish a stream of books and essays during the next 33 years he becomes increasingly familiar with the work of the Fashion Classics tradition. This result is a peculiar 'reversed' progression

to his thought. By the time he publishes his last major work, *Modesty in Dress* (1969), he seems to have met, either directly or indirectly, all his major precursors.[41] In *Taste and Fashion* (1937) he is beginning to engage with Flügel. In *Style in Costume* (1949) it is Carlyle. In *Dress* (1950) he encounters Veblen through the writing of Quentin Bell, While Kroeber and Richardson are added with the publication of *Modesty in Dress*. It is this 'rear-view' perspective on the tradition that is, in part, responsible for the inability of Laver's thought to develop. Rather than taking the tradition into fresh areas, what happens is that he retraces the boundaries of the tradition at the very moment it is about to be transformed. In *Dress* Laver not only works over his usual themes, he also grounds it on a version of the 'three fundamental motives' that, as we have seen, had been present in the tradition ever since Carlyle.

Dress was part of an educational series entitled 'The Changing Shape of Things'. The aim of the series was to explore 'the four main factors that control the shape of things'. These are defined as

1. The function they perform
2. The materials and tools with which they are made
3. The influence of tradition or fashion
4. The desire to make the product beautiful.[42]

As a primer for the study of costume the book remains a lively and well-presented volume. It displays many of Laver's strengths: his grasp of the visual archive and the amplitude of his definition of clothing that makes him as much at ease with a pair of workman's dungarees as with a Dior gown. What is striking about the book, now, is the way that Laver finally places the tradition in the form of the 'three fundamental motives' of 'modesty', 'protection' and 'decoration', at the heart of his discussion. He had already skirted around the question in *Taste and Fashion*:

> There are probably now very few among those who have studied the subject of clothes, either from the anthropological or the psychological angle, who hold that the origin of clothing is to be found in the impulse of modesty. It is generally agreed that the main impulse among primitive people comes, on the contrary, from the desire for display, such display consisting in its most primitive forms of a decorative emphasis on those parts of the body which modesty leads us to hide. Protection as a motive for clothing is now relegated to a very minor role, and sometimes dismissed as a mere rationalization of a process which has other causes.[43]

However, in *Dress*, Laver makes a number of alterations to Flügel's threefold division. Flügel always maintained a strict division between the three 'motives', arguing that they were an explanation of the origins of clothing, not of fashion.

Laver, however, takes the 'three fundamental motives' and turns them into an explanation of fashion. He downplays the significance of Modesty and Protection and equates the motive of decoration with the 'theory of the shifting erogenous zones'. What he produces is an explanation of women's clothing and not, as Flügel had intended, a theory of the origins of clothes in general. By making clothing a compound of the three 'motives', or 'principles' as he now calls them, Laver can be said to have finally merged with the Fashion Classics tradition.

Flügel's argument had seen clothing as resting upon a complex dialectic out of which emerge a set of tentative sexual identities. These identities are not facts of nature, but the result of a fundamental act of repression necessary so that the human infant might become a functioning member of the social order. Psychoanalysis stresses that the human psyche is always trying to renegotiate the terms of its accommodation to the reality principle. Laver loses most of this subtlety and fossilizes the 'motives' into three rigid 'principles' that are grounded upon a number of 'universal facts' of nature, human psychology, and social life.

Laver's explanation is as follows. We are a species that needs to reproduce itself through sexual union. This means that we also are part of the natural order in that we have to compete for sexual partners. Clothes are an essential element in this 'race to reproduce'.

> Poor naked man, unable to grow the cock's comb or the peacock's feathers out of his own body has been constrained to grow them out of his mind.[44]

But the sexes are asymmetrically situated within the cycle of reproduction:

> our clothes are dictated by the fundamental desires of the opposite sex. Men still choose their mates by their physical allure; that is why women's clothes follow what might be called the Attraction Principle; they are designed to make their wearers as physically attractive as possible.[45]

The 'Attraction Principle', or as he sometimes refers to it, the 'Seduction Principle', is the most important of the three clothing 'principles' for women's clothing. Men's clothing is largely determined by the 'Hierarchical Principle' because:

> women choose their partners, as far as they are able, by their social status. Men's clothes therefore follow what might be called the Hierarchical Principle.[46]

The last of these principles is the 'Utility Principle'. Laver interprets this as use, function, or just 'practicality' and it is given short shrift.

> The Utility Principle completes the triad but it must be confessed that it has had singularly little influence, in historical times, upon the clothes of either men or women.[47]

Laver grounds each step of his argument on a series of dubious human 'needs'. Frequently all we are given to justify a specific assertion are phrases like: 'Psychologists tell us that', or that the existence of the 'snob-complex means that'. Clothing frequently 'must minister to the psychological need for', while inevitably 'human creatures like change'. Even allowing for the fact that this is an educational text there is very little evidence in Laver's writings after this point that he was willing, or able, to open out the inheritance of the Fashion Classics tradition to any new horizons. The nadir is reached in the final two conclusions of his summary that he places at the end of *Dress*:

> (7) What pulls clothes away from Functionalism and the Utility Principle is the secret desire of most men and women for a life of love and leisure, that is a life only obtainable by wealth and/or social status.
>
> (8) The moral and political implications of these results had better be left to the theologians and philosophers, as they are certainly outside the scope of the present study.[48]

The gods that had once inspired men and women to vestimentary excess, that had visited them with irresistible desires to wear the most extraordinary of garments, were now settling down to the milder pleasures of 'love and leisure'. Toward the end of his autobiography Laver confesses that perhaps his life was not as he might have wished:

> All my gratitude to the Victoria and Albert Museum for providing me with a profession for nearly forty years cannot conceal from me that it has dictated my path in a way I would not, perhaps, have chosen. Instead of proceeding, in however a pedestrian a fashion, along the highways of literature I had been diverted into the bypaths of expertise.

Notes

1. James Laver, *Museum Piece, or the Education of an Iconographer*, London: André Deutsch, 1963, p. 239.
2. Ibid., p. 240.
3. As well as the many books he produced, Laver was also an enthusiastic essayist. At the time of writing this book, no complete bibliography exists of his writings.

4. J. Laver, *Letter to a Girl on the Future of Clothes*, London: Home and Van Thal, 1946, p. 6. In 1942, Laver published a study of the work of the prophet Nostrodamus. This was long before interest in Nostrodamus' work became fashionable. In Laver's autobiography he also relates a visit he made to the ailing occultist Aleister Crowley in 1947. Like many of his generation during the 1920s and 1930s, Laver had been a member of the bohemian circles from which the 'Great Beast' (Crowley) had recruited his followers. See Laver *Museum Piece*, chapter 6, 'The Coast of Bohemia'.

5. J. Laver, *Taste and Fashion: From the French Revolution to the Present Day*, London: Harrap, 1937. Laver published a 'new and revised edition' of this book with an additional chapter in 1945.

6. J. Laver, 'The Triumph of Time', in *Contemporary Essays: 1933*, ed. Sylva Norman, London: Elkin Mathews and Marrot, 1933.

7. Ibid., p. 132.

8. Ibid., p. 135.

9. Ibid., p. 133.

10. Ibid.

11. J. Laver, *Taste and Fashion: From the French Revolution to the Present Day*, London: Harrap, 1937.

12. The subjects that make up the second part of the book are Hair and Hats, Corsets, Lingerie, The Theory of Decolletage, Colours and Materials, Furs, Bathing Costumes and other Sports Clothes and Fashions for Men.

13. Laver, 'Triumph of Time', p. 136.

14. Laver, 'Taste and Fashion, p. 250.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 19.

17. Aldous Huxley commences his novel *Eyeless in Gaza* with one of these encounters: 'The snapshots had become almost as dim as memories. This young woman who had stood in a garden at the turn of the century was like a ghost at cockcrow. His mother, Anthony Beavis recognized. A year or two, perhaps only a month or two, before she died. But fashion, as he peered at the brown phantom, fashion is a topiary art. Those swan-like loins! That long slanting cascade of bosom – without any apparent relation to the naked body beneath! And all that hair, like an ornamental deformity on the skull! Oddly hideous and repellent it seemed in 1933. And yet, if he shut his eyes (as he could not resist doing), he could see his mother languidly beautiful on her chaise longue; or, agile, playing tennis; or swooping like a bird across the ice of a far-off winter.' (A. Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, p. 5)

18. Laver, *Taste and Fashion*, p. 258.

19. Ibid., p. 255.

20. Ibid., pp. 254–5.

21. Ibid., p. 252, footnote.

22. Ibid., p. 198.

23. Ibid., p. 70.

24. Ibid., p. 185.

25. Ibid., p. 186.

26. Ibid., p. 201.
27. Ibid., p. 152.
28. Ibid., p. 200.
29. Fred Davis sharply criticizes Laver's appropriation of Flügel's idea so: 'The phrase "shifting erogenous zone" in reference to fashion occurs most prominently, although perhaps not initially, in the writings of the noted British costume historian Sir (*sic*) James Laver. While the words may be Laver's – he takes no credit for them, attributing them rather to unnamed "psychologists" . . . he renders the underlying theory with a good deal less subtlety than did Flügel.' (F. Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 82–6.)
30. Laver, *Letter to a Girl*.
31. J. Laver, *Style in Costume*, London: Oxford University Press, 1949, and J. Laver, *Dress: How and Why Fashion's in Men's and Women's Clothes Have Changed During The Past Two Hundred Years*, London: John Murray, 1950.
32. Laver, *Style in Costume*, p. 6.
33. Ibid., p. 7.
34. One of the ways in which Laver evades taking responsibility for the veracity of his ideas is to write for children. *Letter to a Girl* and *Dress* are both aimed at a younger audience, enabling the author to limit the complexity of the arguments that he is using on the grounds of 'having to keep it simple'. Even here he cannot resist taking up the position of the 'informed layman' who is dryly sceptical of the 'silliness of experts'.
35. Laver, *Style in Costume*, p. 7.
36. Ibid., p. 49. In Laver *Letter to a Girl* he had submitted the top hat to analysis: 'The soaring "topper" is Aspiration . . . within the narrow limits of respectability. Its top is flat, which means that on this reasonably exalted height all men are equal. And no personal eccentricity or private merit entitles you to indulge in a bump or a bulge or a point, or to add a towering plume. It is black, and therefore inconspicuous among other hats of the same kind, but very shiny, and therefore difficult to keep in proper condition and liable to be ruffled by any undue exertion' (p. 18). This is about as complex an analysis as Laver's conception of the *Zeitgeist* allows.
37. Gerald Heard, *Narcissus: An Anatomy of Clothes*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner, 1924.
38. Another source for *Style in Costume* can be found in Flügel's *The Psychology of Clothes*. In the context of a discussion of the forces of fashion Flügel makes the following observation: 'The real existence of some such influence of the *Zeitgeist* upon costume is corroborated if we compare costume with architecture and the internal decoration of houses there is a certain parallelism, both of function and of psychological significance between our clothing and our houses, so that we should expect that the psychological influences that guide our fashions in dress would also affect our styles of building and decoration' (p. 149). A comparison between dress styles and the styles of buildings and everyday objects immediately follow this. Mentioned in this list are:

the simplicity of the neo-classic style of the early nineteenth century in both clothes and architecture

the Victorian love of ornament in dress and architecture
gothic pointed arches and elongated dresses
the 'fussiness' of the Rococo.

Finally, Flügel remarks, 'we may perhaps be justified in seeing a parallel between the plain, wide windowed, open style of post-war factory or office building and the relatively simple style of modern dress, which has no ornamental complications and seeks to hide no secrets.' (p. 150)

39. Laver, *Style in Costume*, p. 54.

40. In the first sentence of *Taste and Fashion* we find the following statement: 'Some excuse may seem to be necessary for adding to the already considerable body of literature devoted to the history of costume. The bibliography of the subject is enormous, and some at least of the works included in it should spare those who concern themselves with women's dress from the charge of frivolity.' (p. 5)

41. J. Laver, *Modesty in Dress: An Inquiry into the Fundamentals of Fashion*, London: Heinemann, 1969.

42. J. Laver, *Dress*, London: John Murray, 1950, p. 47.

43. Laver, *Taste and Fashion*, p. 252.

44. Laver, *Dress*, p. 14.

45. Ibid., p. 15.

46. Ibid., p. 16.

47. Ibid., p. 18.

48. Ibid., p. 47.

8

Roland Barthes and the End of the Nineteenth Century

Fashion seems to possess two durations.

Barthes

In this final chapter of the book I examine how the French cultural critic and literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915–1980) changed the study of clothing and fashion in the 1950s and 1960s. His inclusion at the close of this book rests upon a number of criteria. Whoever was chosen would have to engage with the writers discussed earlier. He or she would have to deal directly with costume and fashion. If, at any point, he or she drew upon wider intellectual currents, it was essential that he or she make them speak specifically about the objects of study. Finally, the changes wrought should be lasting ones. It would be misleading to claim that Barthes was solely responsible for these changes due to a direct link between what he wrote and the effects that these writings had on scholars working in the areas of clothing and fashion, French or otherwise. Indeed, a number of things about Barthes's interest in fashion are only becoming clear, certainly to his English-speaking readers, with the growth in Barthes scholarship.[1] The picture emerging is of a thinker for whom clothing and fashion were an important area of study. Also surprising is how early Barthes begins to write about these topics and the direct way in which he engages with many of the writers discussed here.[2] My argument is a belated recognition that it is Barthes who first begins systematically to think through the intellectual changes that would eventually amount to a 'paradigm change' in the study of clothes and fashion. While he may not be responsible, literally, for the radical changes that have taken place, and are still taking place, in the study of clothing and fashion, with hindsight it can be said that he amply deserves his place at the end of the *Fashion Classics*.

Fashion as System

Barthes's reputation as a 'fashion thinker' rests mainly upon the doctorate that never was, *The Fashion System*. This was published in France in 1967 but its origins can be traced to the mid-1950s.[3] It has to be said that the book is one of the less seductive examples of Barthes's writing and has been variously described as 'rebarbative' and 'structuralism's *Moby Dick*'. Nevertheless, while I am not proposing to engage in a detailed account of its 300-plus pages, the book's opening section titled 'Introduction: Method' is a comprehensive and lucid demonstration of his methodological approach to the question 'What is fashion?'. Moreover, the careful and coherent way in which he describes, and then theoretically grounds, his field of study provides a vivid contrast to the complacent assertions into which the study of clothing and fashion had degenerated with Laver's later work. The text is, as he claims in the opening sentence, 'a book of method' and its aim is to impart to the object, *fashion*, a coherent conceptual order. Since it is dealing with the foundations, not only of the fashion system, but with Barthes's thinking about it, his opening chapter is an ideal place to start to look at how Barthes proposed to change the study of clothing and fashion.

The crucial word in the title *The Fashion System* is 'system', and it is Barthes's construal of this idea that constitutes the first of his major theoretical reformulations. System, defined as 'a group or set of related or associated material or immaterial things forming a unity or complex whole', lay at the heart of the revolution that swept through French intellectual life after the Second World War and one which has come to be known by the generic term 'structuralism'. 'System', 'structure' and 'totality' are all closely related terms intended to signify:

> the logical priority of the whole over its parts. They (structuralists) insist that the whole and the parts can be properly explained only in terms of the relations that exist between the parts. The essential quality of the structuralist method, and its fundamental tenet, lies in its attempt to study not the elements of a whole, but the complex network of relationships that link and unite those elements.[4]

Barthes deploys this idea of system as a way to map the 'elements' of the 'whole' of the phenomenon that is fashion. The key assumption at work is the idea that any social 'fact', such as fashion, should not be regarded as something having a singular identity. The central thrust of the idea of 'system' is to carefully sort out the *differential* components of fashion and then see how 'the complex network of relationships' can join together these different dimensions

into a dynamic whole. Systematicity is the process of bringing together different elements into relationships of mutual dependency.

The fashion system is the 'totality' of social relations and activities that are required for fashion to come into existence. To isolate just one dimension and then to declare *it* to be the source, the cause or the essence of fashion would be to fail to grasp the pattern of relationships that constitute fashion as a system. Shortages in the raw materials needed to make a particular item of clothing, for instance, can result in certain garments being unobtainable or, if the scarcity persists, a synthetic substitute may be invented. This substitute may lack many of the physical qualities of the original and so make it unattractive to potential buyers. This impoverishment of expectations may lead to the new material being regarded as 'coarse', or 'vulgar', with the result that it drops below the horizon of fashionability. Barthes's point is that no single element in a network such as this should be regarded as *the cause* of fashion; not the dress taste of individuals or groups; not the specific forms assumed by dress; not the claims made for a garment by its promoters. 'System', therefore, is a way of conceiving of human existence as something in which a structured collective being precedes, and provides the foundation for, individual being, and this has steadily become a central organizing principle of Western thought. The history of this 'social premise' is complex, but one of its sources lies with speculations of the economic theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One intellectual deposit of this history is the idea that neither are human activities random nor do they originate from within the individual. Veblen is just one of a number of economic thinkers who criticizes an individualistic conception of human activity and what he says about the institution of private property can apply with equal force to all human economic activity:

> The natural rights theory of property makes the creative effort of the isolated, self-sufficing individual the basis of the ownership vested in him. In so doing it overlooks the fact that there is no isolated, self-sufficing individual. All production is, in fact, a production in and by the help of the community, and all wealth is such only in society.[5]

Human action is 'structured' into patterned networks. In order that the necessities of life be secured and so ensure that social life and the life of the individual will continue, humans have to act in an organized, collective manner. The human animal is not guaranteed survival because of its instinctual inheritance. There have to be known, and shared, ways of going about 'getting a living' so that, as Veblen puts it, men and women can get on with the business of 'shaping inert materials to human use'. Human economic activity came to be seen as comprising of three dimensions.

- Production – what ensures that stuff gets made.
- Distribution – what ensures that what is made reaches the people who need it.
- Consumption – the ways in which what is made is used up.

The thinker who brings this to the fore and makes it the basis upon which all other aspects of human existence rest is Karl Marx, and he is an important influence playing on Barthes. Like many post-war French intellectuals, Barthes saw the analytical possibilities of extending this model of production, distribution and consumption to social institutions other than economic ones, in particular to dimensions of social life such as art and culture.

Barthes begins his mapping of the fashion system with a number of important distinctions that need registering if his attempt to grasp clothing and fashion in their full complexity is to be successful. The first of these distinctions separates clothing into 'three garments'. These he calls 'the real garment', 'the represented garment' and 'the used garment'. These titles denote the different modalities that clothes assume in their journey across the fashion system and each one inhabits the realm of either production, distribution or consumption. So the 'real garment' corresponds to the dimension of production, the 'represented garment' corresponds to the dimension of distribution, while the 'used garment' corresponds to the dimension of consumption. But, in using this model, Barthes is doing more than just mapping the pathways taken by physical materials and the clothing that they eventually become. In their journey from raw materials to finished goods the modern system of fashion also transforms clothing into something rich in meanings and symbolism. In *The Fashion System*, Barthes is overwhelmingly concerned not with 'real clothing' but with clothing that has been transformed by this modern system of signification. This is what he means by the term the 'represented garment'. The objects and their qualities that appear in the process of representation are, in modern capitalist societies, overwhelmingly produced as accompaniments to the processes of distribution. This ensures that the garment not only is available but always arrives in front of its potential user/buyer already in a 'state of representation'. In the case of the fashion system this means that every attempt is made, by advertising, by packaging and by the *mise en scène* of the place of purchase, to ensure that the garment is attractive to the buyer.

The initial distinction between the 'real' garment and the 'represented garment' has a number of important implications for how the fashionable object is construed by Barthes. If, in the fashion system, the fashionable object assumes a number of different modalities, then as we observed earlier it cannot be regarded as something with a singular identity. This is relevant to the key question Barthes is posing, 'What is fashion?' Many of us will have experienced

a situation where, having seen an item of clothing on the pages of a fashion magazine, have bought it and then immediately realized the enormity of the gap between how it looks in the photograph and how it looks on us. We might want to wear the represented garment, but all we can have on our backs is the garment of use. The represented garment and the garment of use are different species. The fashion system, like any modern system of production, distribution and consumption, is a system for producing different modalities of 'stuff' and this means that certain ontological shifts within the object have to be recognized, and respected as it moves through this system. This is the source of Barthes's distinction between the 'real' object and the 'represented', or semantic object, a distinction he makes as a first move toward describing the multiple registers at work within the fashion system.

With this fundamental distinction in place, Barthes starts to elaborate his conceptual map. His first task is to establish a relationship of rank between the two modalities of the garment. The question is, 'Which of the two modalities, the "real" garment or the "represented" garment, is anterior?' Barthes's answer to this marks another important break with the previous tradition of thinking about fashion. His is not an argument about origins, but of trying to sort out what fashion is in the modern world. One of his key claims is that, as far as fashion is concerned, images and words, but particularly words are not passive vehicles that transmit the real garment, unchanged, to its potential customers. As Barthes observes:

> Is there any system of objects, a system of some magnitude, which can dispense with articulated language? Is not speech the inevitable relay of any signifying order? . . . can clothing signify without recourse to the speech that describes it, comments upon it, and provides it with signifiers and signifieds abundant enough to constitute a system of meaning?[6]

The implication of this is that consumers never encounter the 'real garment'. What they encounter is the fashionable garment, the garment that is already in the realm of representation. So Barthes asserts that:

> It thus seemed unreasonable to place the reality of clothing before the discourse of fashion: true reason would in fact have us proceed from the instituting discourse to the reality which it constitutes.[7]

Again, Barthes is not interested in trying to establish the truth of fashion by appealing to some impulse, or social process, located at a point in the past. The conceptual ranking he is arguing for here also corresponds to the empirical situation to be found in the modern fashion system where the consumers of garments always encounter them in a 'transubstantiated' form, as a garment clothed in meaning.

Real Clothing

Barthes's next distinction further differentiates the category of real clothing, separating it into 'the real garment' and 'the used garment'. He places these two garment categories on either side of the central category of represented clothing. Both of these garment modalities remain at the margins of his analysis, provoking only a few comments, after which they are dropped. There are a number of reasons for this. Barthes's concept of the revised category of 'the real garment' arises to indicate the modality clothing assumes before it is translated into the garment of representation. This is an important distinction because once the real garment appears as a representation it is a changed object:

> we might suppose that these two garments (image-clothing and written clothing) recover a single identity at the level of the real garment they are supposed to represent, that the described dress and the photographed dress are united in the actual dress they both refer to. Equivalent, no doubt, but not identical; for just as between image-clothing and written clothing there is a difference in substances and relations, and thus a difference of structure in the same way, from these two garments to the real one there is a transition to other substances and other relations; thus, the real garment forms a third structure, different from the first two . . .[8]

The 'real garment' is something like a 'prototype' – that is, the object before it is named – or provided with a symbolic *mise en scène*. This state of pre-representation Barthes calls 'the technological' and has as its appropriate mode of description the language of 'manufacture'.[9]

To the other side of the category of the represented garment lies the domain of 'the used garment'. For Barthes, this area covers the life the garments have after having been purchased. The used garment is the garment that circulates among us in everyday life. For the contemporary reader, this might seem a brutal distinction, but it derives from a certain intellectual imperative that Barthes was working under at the time. One of the aims of *The Fashion System* is to establish the new intellectual discipline of semiology as a legitimate intellectual enterprise. To do this Barthes has to demonstrate that it has a discrete object of study distinct from adjacent disciplines and, moreover, that this new object of study requires a specific methodology. The closest academic discipline to the emerging semiology was sociology, and it is against the claims of the latter that Barthes is attempting to establish a space for semiotics. Much of this argument is now redundant, but his assertions that the domain of representation – that is, words and images – are social elements in their own right are still worthy of note:

> The description of Fashion (and no longer its production) is therefore a social fact, so that even if the garment of Fashion remained purely imaginary (without affecting real clothing), it would constitute an incontestable element of mass culture, like pulp fiction, comics, and movies.[10]

Barthes is registering more than the fact that in a modern capitalist society 'the mass media are powerful', he is asking that these huge systems of collective representation be analysed as determinant social facts with their own specific structures and operations.

The Represented Garment

The final distinction made by Barthes is in the central category of 'represented clothing' which he separates into 'image-clothing' and 'written clothing'. Given his insistence on the differences between the two, we need to follow what he says about these two orders of representation in some detail.

Barthes begins his comparison between the system of images and the system of language by drawing attention to the differences in the materials out of which they are built:

> I open a fashion magazine; I see that two different garments are being dealt with here. The first is the one presented to me as photographed or drawn – it is image-clothing. The second is the same garment, but described, transformed into language; this dress, photographed on the right, becomes on the left: *a leather belt, with a rose stuck in it, worn above the waist, on a soft shetland dress*; this is a written garment. In principle these two garments refer to the same reality (this dress on this day by this woman), and yet they do not have the same structure, because they are not made of the same substances and because consequently, these substances do not have the same relations with each other: in one the substances are forms, lines, surfaces, colors, and the relation is spatial; in the other, the substance is words, and the relation is, if not logical, at least syntactic; the first structure is plastic, the second verbal.[11]

The garments appearing in these two systems cannot be regarded as identical because the codes used by each system are constituted out of different 'stuff'. One way of grasping the difference between the two is to return to the earlier distinction of 'the real garment'. When we look at the relations the real garment has with image-clothing and written clothing, it appears that image-clothing is closer to the real garment because both share 'forms, lines, surfaces, colors' and both reside within an order that is spatial and plastic. Language, on the other hand, Barthes considers to be a 'purer, more powerful code for the production of meaning because it more readily renders the physical substance

of the 'real garment' into a set of common, abstract signifiers. It translates the 'real garment' into words and sentences which have no 'practical' functions, only semantic ones. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Barthes is not an advocate of 'the society of the spectacle' and its attendant assumption that in modern capitalism it is the image that is all-powerful.[12] Images in modern societies, he argues, usually appear accompanied by words and for good reason. Without language, pictures are too slippery and vague in the meanings they produce. It is only by translating pictures into words that garments can be transformed from 'immediate and diffuse' entities into something specifically coded as fashionable. Image-clothing retains elements from the world outside of representation and it is the presence of this residue that imparts a degree of resistance to image-clothing being coded as 'fashionable'. Barthes observes that:

> image-clothing can most certainly be *fashionable* . . . but it cannot be *Fashion* directly; its materiality, its very totality, its evidence, so to speak, makes the Fashion it represents an attribute and not a being; *this* dress which is represented to me (and not described), may well be something other than fashionable; it may be warm, strange, attractive, modest, protective, etc., before *being* fashionable . . .[13]

It is clear that image-clothing and written clothing have different functions within representation. Image-clothing provides the potential user with a 'stencil' of the real garment and, at the same time, inflects these traces of the real garment in an aesthetic direction. The image performs a mimetic function as well as making the garment into a pleasing sight, or pleasant arrangement. It is on this basis that Barthes argues for a sharp distinction in the ways in which these two orders of representation articulate with the garment's user/buyer:

> Here we find once again the considerable difference, of an anthropological order, which opposes looking to reading: we look at image-clothing, we read a described garment, and it is probable that two different audiences correspond to these two activities; . . . we can intoxicate ourselves on images, identify ourselves oneirically with the model . . . speech on the contrary, rids the garment of all corporal actuality . . . The image provokes fascination, speech an appropriation; the image is complete, it is a saturated system; speech is fragmentary, it is an open system: when combined, the latter serves to disappoint the former.[14]

Barthes argues that the presence of language 'immobilizes perception', and so 'imposes on the reading of the image a fixity of meaning' which the image, by itself, cannot achieve. It is language that brings about a closure to the meaning of the image and it is the task of written clothing to finally purge the represented garment of the 'ghost' of any lingering materiality. What is happening

is that material stuff is being turned into language. The garment is being translated into a system of abstract, intellective meanings and it is this final modality of the garment that Barthes sees as the true 'fashionable garment'. 'Fashionability', argues Barthes, is a function of language, not the physical constitution of the real garment, or the style of the used garment.

In *The Fashion System* Barthes is so focused upon the description and analysis of the represented garment that later students of dress and fashion have found it a difficult text to appropriate. As a result it has acquired the reputation of being Barthes's folly, a monument to the deranged illusion of a scientific rigour that gripped structuralism before it was swept away by the cleansing flames of post-structuralism. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that the exercise will ever be repeated, given the collapse of belief in the kind of grand social totality that Barthes thought he was helping to map.[15] Nevertheless, there are a number of general features of the work which relate directly to my earlier claims for Barthes about his renewal of the tradition of Fashion Classics. One of the difficulties that James Laver encountered, especially after the Second World War, was that the world, and especially the world of fashion, was running away from him. There are almost no indications in his writing of the *contemporary state* of fashion's production and distribution and no sense that fashion had become a highly integrated, capitalistic industry. One of the ironies of *The Fashion System* is that, while it appears to be little concerned with the production and the use of clothing, there is no doubt that Barthes is dealing with the *modern* fashion industry. The clearest indication of this is the centrality accorded to the role of representation as the mediator between manufacture and purchase which has become the *sine qua non* of any study of the contemporary fashion industry. One of the aspects of the book that has gone unrecognized is the extent to which it is one of the first fully mature studies of the system of modern advertising.[16]

The contemporary reader of *The Fashion System* will be struck by the meticulous way Barthes goes about separating, dividing and specifying each dimension of the system. Why this constant desire to delineate the elements of the system with such precision? Barthes says:

> In our society, the circulation of Fashion thus relies in large part on an activity of *transformation*: there is a transition . . . from the technological structure to the iconic and verbal structures. Yet this transition, as in all structures, can only be discontinuous: the real garment can only be transformed into 'representation' by means of certain operators which we might call *shifters*, since they serve to transpose one structure into another, to pass, if you will, from one code to another code.[17]

The most important word in that quotation is 'discontinuous'. Barthes wants to banish the assumption that, at the heart of the fashion system, there is a

seamless, unified object, or phenomenon. What we might call the 'fashionable object' is, itself, a discontinuous entity that is being constantly translated from one code into another. As each of these moves takes place, the 'object' re-appears in both a new language and a fresh material form. The ubiquitous presence of these codes has important consequences for that concept so beloved of dress historians, 'reflection', since, if codes are everywhere, it is difficult to divide the world into 'real bits' which are then reflected in the bits that are specialized in mirroring – representations. Rather than conceiving of the garment as a 'real object' that is reflected in either words or images, or the obverse, an item of clothing which itself is reflecting its historical and social circumstances, we must now think of it as something always appearing within a finite number of symbolic systems.

The Function of Clothes

A frequent criticism made of *The Fashion System* is that 'real' clothes get lost in the dense jungle of Barthes's system-building.[18] If *The Fashion System* were all that Barthes wrote on clothing and fashion or if he had intended his book to be his definitive statement on the whole area, then there might be some justification to these criticisms. But it was not and it is not. In 1957 Barthes had published an essay entitled 'Histoire et sociologie du vêtement: Quelques observations méthodologiques' in which he undertakes both a survey and a critique of the state in which he found the study of clothes.[19]

In setting out his ideas on clothing Barthes, of necessity, engages directly with what he calls the 'numerous Anglo-Saxon psychologies'. He is referring here to those attempts to explain the origins of clothing using an anthropology of psychological motivations: the Protection, Modesty and Decoration trilogy. Barthes's criticism of such explanations stems directly from Durkheim's insistence upon the reality of social facts. A social fact is

> a cultural or structural characteristic of a social system which we experience as external to us and having an influence and authority that amount to more than the sum of the intentions and motivations of the people who happen to be participating in those systems at a particular time.[20]

What is overlooked by using psychological explanations of clothing is the coherence exhibited by clothes inside the group in which they circulate, as against the great variations in clothing styles that exist from one group to another. The only way to account for this situation is to make the group structure, the social system, into the major determining factor in the constitution of clothing. In other words, clothing is a *social* phenomenon. At first sight

there might appear to be nothing especially novel about the claim Barthes is making here. But what makes Barthes and the whole strand of structuralist thinking more than participants in a vague consensus about the social nature of clothing is the way in which they conceive of the social. It was not just a question of asserting the social nature of clothing, but of specifying what it means to call something 'a social fact'. The major difference between Barthes and the earlier, Anglo-Saxon, tradition of explaining clothes and fashion is his rejection of the evolutionary method, or as he calls it, the 'phylogenetic model'. By this he means the tendency among previous writers to regard not just clothes, but social life in general, as a collection of individual 'traits', each with its own evolutionary pathway into the present. Clothing, in this model, is seen as a set of garments that have acquired their present form because of their past. Disputation never questions the validity of the evolutionary framework itself, but is concerned with the more restricted question of which 'fundamental motive' lies at the source of a particular evolutionary chain. Barthes's criticism of this approach is that it is not sociological. The 'phylogenetic psychologies' so beloved of Spencer, Veblen and Flügel are, argues Barthes, trying to account for a fact of collective life in terms of the psychological dispositions of the individuals that make up the group. As he says:

> All such discussions fall victim to an illusory psychological explanation: that is they define a social fact such as clothing by way of the sum of a certain number of psychological instincts, conceived of at a strictly individual level. These are then simply 'multiplied' by a group factor. This is a problem that sociology would want to explore more thoroughly.[21]

The question is, not whether it is protection, modesty or decoration that 'comes first', but what are the essential characteristics displayed by clothing. Having once determined these, we are in a better position to answer the question 'Why do humans wear clothes?'

Barthes's response to the question 'What is the origin of clothes?', or as he phrases it, 'Why do human beings wear clothes?', is complex because he disputes the earlier explanations at both an empirical and a methodological level. Citing the familiar ethnographic evidence from Tierra del Fuego together with Flügel's remarks about the indifference of children as to whether they are wearing clothes or not, Barthes rejects the conclusion that it is decoration which is the chief motive for clothing:

> Using such examples as these it was thought that decoration was the most important of the motives; one would wish to reserve the term clothing for those items serving the purpose of protection and the term decoration for decoration.[22]

His own explanation of the origins of clothing does not try to locate some founding clothing event 'back there' and instead he argues for a process of 'continuous emergence':

> what should be of interest to both historical and sociological researchers is not the transition from protection to decoration (this is an illusory transition) but the tendency of all bodily covering to insert itself into an organized, formal and normative system, which is recognized by society.[23]

He illustrates this process of continuous formalization with an example taken from the clothing of the soldiers of the Roman empire:

> The first Roman soldiers who threw a woollen cape over their shoulders to protect themselves from the rain were simply protecting themselves; but no sooner had the material, shape and manner of wearing become fixed, not embellished, and regulated by a defined social group (for example, the slaves of Romano-Gallic society round about the second century A.D.) then the item becomes part of a system and clothing becomes costume (the *penule*) without our being able to find in this shift any trace of an aesthetic aim.[24]

A number of questions need to be directed at this explanation. What is the status of 'un acte de pure protection'? Why not an act of pure decoration, or an act of pure modesty? What is it that allows 'protection' to remain outside of the system in order that it might, at some later point, be brought in? We can see what it is that Barthes is trying to establish with this example, namely that any explanation of clothing has to be able to account for the fact that it is social – that is, it is not 'invented' by an individual – and that being 'social' also means that it has the features of a system. If we are set on explaining the origins of clothing, we have to include in that explanation an account of the coming into being of that aspect of the phenomenon that is collective, organized, formal and normative.

Clothing and Language

In the 1957 essay, Barthes constantly has in mind the manner in which linguistics had confronted and, as far as he was concerned, resolved a similar set of problems to those he was encountering in his research into clothing. The integration of the ideas of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure into the social sciences has become so familiar that it is often overlooked as to why, and how, this move appeared to promise so much intellectual renewal.

At the heart of this intellectual revolution was the conviction that language, and its study through the methods of structural linguistics, could provide a model for explaining much about human activity over and above the strictly linguistic. Clothing seems to resemble language in a number of ways. Like language, clothing was pre-eminently a collective activity. Clothing, however it is defined, seems to have a universal cultural presence, and while it is not as deeply embedded as language, it could be argued that wearing 'clothes' is one of the defining characteristics of being human. Again, like language, clothing is an 'authorless system' and not contingent in its operations on the conscious will, or intention, of the individual. Like language, we 'wear' within a set of forms and norms and just as we do not 'just talk', nor do we 'just dress'. Finally, clothing seems to resemble language in that it displays a synchronic density, but at the same time also has a diachronic dimension – a history – so that it (clothing) exhibits the dual aspects of system and process, structure and becoming. Barthes used Saussure to do a number of things. First, he redefined the object of study, the garment, as a sign. He then reformulated the activity of wearing clothes, using a version of Saussure's notion of *langue* and *parole*. His final move was of a more general nature and this was to categorize clothes as a *mode of communication*.

If we start with the last of these moves, there are at least three strands at work in Barthes' concept of communication. The first theme is what might be called 'communication proper', that is the idea that:

> Man's role in the world . . . is quintessentially one of communication. He is . . . a receiver and sender of messages; he gathers and disseminates information.[25]

There is little evidence in the 1957 essay that Barthes was much taken with this signalling theory of clothing. It is the second element, *signification*, that appears to interest him the most. Generally, signification refers to the quality of significance; the fact that elements in, and of, the world have both meaning and value for human beings. Specifically, Barthes describes it as:

> *signification* can be conceived as a process; it is the act, which binds the signifier and the signified, an act whose product is the sign.[26]

More about the implications of this redefinition of the garment as a sign later, but note that what Barthes wants to establish is that clothes are a meaning within a specific group, as well as a shaped physical mass. The last, and most complex, element in Barthes's notion of communication is that of exchange. For the French intelligentsia the idea of exchange had acquired a distinct inflection that can be traced to the work of the French anthropologist, Marcel

Mauss (1872–1950) and, in particular, to his seminal work *The Gift*.[27] Mauss had argued that the elementary act of gift-giving was a 'total social fact', that is, a social phenomenon in which could be found, in highly compressed form, economic, symbolic and religious dimensions. Later generations of French thinkers elaborated Mauss' idea until it became something approximating to a general social economy. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, came to regard gift exchange as a model for communication at every level of society. The gift-economy was not just the circulation of things, it was also an 'economy of the exchange of signs'.[28] This meant that accompanying every level of the gift-economy was a corresponding system of values and meanings ('significances') structuring the activities of exchange. Clothes are not simply 'transmitters' of social meanings, they are also key elements in the business of symbolic exchange. There are undoubted traces of the Maussian thesis in the 1957 essay and they form an important part of Barthes's redefinition of clothes as signs.

To declare that clothes are 'signs saying something about their wearers . . .', or that 'we communicate with our clothes . . .' has become such a commonplace that it would be easy to assume that Barthes's use of Saussurean semiotics is just his version of clothing as a sort of vestimentary semaphore. While this communicative dimension is present in what Barthes has to say in the 1957 essay, his move toward Saussure has more to do with clarifying the nature of significance, or systematized meaning, in relationship to clothing than with communication. Saussure's division of the linguistic sign into the signifier and the signified stresses that the meaning of a sign does not inhere in the signifier, but is the product of a process of signification, of 'meaning-making'. Similarly, the meaning of clothes does not inhere in the physical forms of the stuff out of which they are made; rather, they circulate among the members of that particular clothing dialect.[29] Barthes repeatedly insists that a distinction must be made between the study of the signifier and the study of the signified. For clothes this means making a distinction between a clothing form, 'the signifier' and the garment's meaning, 'the signified'.

> Clothes are always a combination of a specific signifier and a general signified that is external to it (epoch, country, social class); without being sensitive to this the historian will always tend to write the history of the signified . . . there are two histories, that of the signifier and that of the signified and they are not the same.[30]

The absence of this distinction between signifier and signified in Flügel and Laver lead them to a rather blunted view of how the meaning of *clothing forms* operated among their wearers. The perceivers and wearers of clothes were a bit like passive receptacles into which dropped the messages 'beamed out' by clothes. The top hat *is* industrialism. A shortened female skirt *is* sexual and

economic liberation. Meaning and form seem to be cut from the same cloth, and so long as the analyst is studying a geographically bounded social order – for example, the upper classes of the countries of Western Europe – this illusion of unity between a thing and its meaning can continue.

However, once it becomes necessary to consider the social, geographic and temporal dispersion undergone by even just one garment, the benefits of the signifier/signified distinction are immediately evident. This is the situation to be found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australia, for example, where a European settler population dressed in styles of clothing that had 'originated' in Europe. Does this mean that the signifieds of these clothing forms remained the same as in Europe, or that what was happening was a kind of 'empty' imitation on the part of the inhabitants of the colony? Dress historian Margaret Maynard has shown how the meanings of the garments change as they circulate in their new environments. She remarks about the state of clothing in nineteenth-century Australia that: 'in the colonial period . . . it was the meanings of dress that accrued singularity in the Australian context rather than the unique quality of the garments themselves'.[31] The repercussions of this simple separation have had enormous influence upon the study of clothing and fashion. In terms of historical studies the idea that a garment originates from a geographical, or social, core and subsequently migrates hither and thither with its 'original' meanings intact has given way to more precise studies of how garments acquire, or do not acquire, certain meanings within sharply defined social groupings. The increasing globalization, and integration, of all aspects of the clothing industry means that we have to be able to understand how identical sorts of clothing produced by the global garment corporations can have their meanings inflected by local circumstances.

Barthes describes the relevance of Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* to clothing in the following way:

> Saussure thought that human language could be studied from two aspects, or in two ways. The first was from the aspect of *langue* and the second from the aspect of *parole*. Language is a social institution, independent of the individual; it is a normative reservoir, 'a system which is actualised in the speech of the individual' (Saussure) Parole (Speech) is an individual act – 'an actualisation of the function of language. It would appear to be extremely useful to make a similar distinction in clothing; there is an institutional component which is profoundly social and is independent of the individual; this takes the form of a systematic and normative reservoir and does not draw upon any external elements to guarantee its operations. We propose to call this dimension, which corresponds to Saussure's *langue*, *le costume*. The domain proper to the actions of the individual we will call *'habillement'*. This is where the individual makes the institutional personal. Costume becomes a personal garment. Costume and clothing constitute a totality that we propose to call '*vêtement*'.[32]

We can see why this distinction holds a particular fascination for Barthes because it provides him with a way of seeing how the unsystematic fragments of vestimentary behaviour are absorbed into the normative structure of a clothing *langue* and so become available for a clothing group to use. We saw earlier that Barthes speculates on how an 'acte de pure protection' became transformed into a collective clothing style with the example of the *penule*. The dimension of clothing speech is, argues Barthes, a matter of individual expression and therefore not a 'true' sociological object of study. He gives, as an example of this gradual formalization, the act of wearing a coat on the shoulders with the sleeves hanging loose. This may start out as a singular vestimentary gesture on the part of an individual and this it will remain so as long as there are no moves to break down the gesture's singularity. If this style of wearing a coat starts to become distinctive of a particular group, if it begins to achieve a quasi-compulsory status, it has then begun the process of absorption into a system and is well on the way to becoming a gesture with a collective semantic value.[33]

The History of Clothing

Kroeber, Flügel and Laver all recognized that there is something distinctive about the historical rhythms exhibited in the way clothes change over time. Recall Kroeber's observation that

> The reintroduction of the train in 1863, the invention of the Grecian bend in 1872, may now be looked upon as the product of the dress styles that preceded them, or of other cultural factors affecting style, more justifiably than they can be attributed to the talent of a specially gifted mind and hand.[34]

and Laver's remark that

> It all seems very wasteful and almost meaningless, this discarding of old clothes in order to conform to the whim of half a dozen French designers, but the matter is not quite so simple as that. The designers are not their own masters. They can only introduce an innovation if it happens to be in accordance with the spirit of the age.[35]

In both instances the authors make a clear distinction between the conscious actions of the creators of the garments and the long-term trends displayed by clothing which do not appear to result from these short-term intentions. The implication is that a 'history' of clothing would have to be very different from a history of singular events that were the outcome of individual intentions and

actions. Barthes devotes the remainder of his 1957 essay to answering the question of what this history of clothing would be like.

In 1956, Barthes had joined the CNRS, a research centre that was part of the *Annales* school of history and headed by its leading personality, Fernand Braudel. One of the central themes of the *Annales* group had been a criticism of the current forms of practising history, which they thought were too wedded to arranging sequences of events into linear chains of causation. Braudel had argued that the importance being given to systems and structures in the social sciences made it imperative that history devise new sorts of explanatory models. The most influential of Braudel's methodological advances is his separation of the historical time continuum into three distinct sorts of durations (*durées*). He describes these so:

> The first is . . . a history that is almost changeless, the history of man in relation to his surroundings. It is history which unfolds slowly and is slow to alter, often repeating itself and working itself out in cycles which are endlessly renewed . . . [it] exists almost out of time and tells the story of man's contact with the inanimate . .[36]

Then

> Over and above this unaltering history, there is the history of gentle rhythms, of groups and groupings . .[37]

Of this level, Braudel suggests that it is not an arena governed by the actions of individuals. Finally

> comes the third part, concerned with traditional history, history, so to speak, on the scale not so much of man in general as of men in particular. It is that history which François Simiand calls 'l'histoire événementielle', the history of events: a surface disturbance, the waves stirred up by the powerful movement of tides. A history of short, sharp, nervous vibrations.[38]

It should, therefore, be possible to write several different histories of clothing depending upon which of the three levels we chose to explore. The production of raw materials and cloth-making techniques would sit on the lowest level. Long-term stylistic continuities of the kind studied by Kroeber would be on the second level, while the events of the fashion world and its annual shows would be most appropriate in the uppermost level.

Barthes opens his 1957 essay with an attack upon the event-based history of clothing, which he regards as being, still, the dominant way of 'doing' costume history. But, argues Barthes, if clothing is a normative system then

its history can not be explained using the methodological apparatus of 'l'histoire événementielle'. Structures and systems do change over time, but it is the nature of this change that draws Barthes to Braudel's view of the historical continuum as 'vertically discontinuous' or 'laminated'. If historians of costume were to grasp the diachronic dimension of a system's 'becoming' it is, once again, essential to describe the internal elements of the system that would be participants in change:

> Clothing form has its own rhythm and these changes in form have a 'relative' independence from the general history that supports them. The finite 'archetypal forms' of clothing are dependent on a cyclical history that is clearly not compatible with a linear one.[39]

It is this attempt to describe the synchronic and diachronic aspects of women's evening dress that Barthes so much admires in the work of Kroeber and Richardson. He refers to their 1940 essay on numerous occasions and in *The Fashion System* he devotes an appendix to an interpretation of 'Three centuries of women's dress'. Kroeber and Richardson identify all the individual elements implicated in the system governing the changes in women's evening dresses – these are the six measurements – and had followed this up by tabulating the 'measured variations in them over a long period of time'. They also plot the movement of the variables against one another and find that 'the width of the skirt and the width of the waist are always in inverse relation to one another: when one is narrow, the other is wide'.[40] The findings of this research confirm two things for Barthes. First, that any system, be it a clothing system or a fashion system, only experiences 'external history' on its own 'endogenous' terms. As Barthes observes:

> history does not intervene in the Fashion process, except to hasten certain changes in a slight way, in cases of major historical upheavals.[41]

It is only when the normal operating rhythms of the system are disturbed and speed up or slow down that we are justified in searching outside of the system for 'a historical explanation'. Barthes does make a slight concession to his assertion about the impervious nature of the clothing system:

> clothes live in close symbiosis with their historical context, much more than language; violent historical episodes (wars, exoduses, revolutions) can rapidly smash a system: but also in contrast to language, the recasting of the system is much quicker.[42]

But, finally, he sides with Kroeber in seeing a quality of *sui generis* in the fundamental forms of clothing. History does not create them, nor does history

interact analogically with them. Clothing does not 'reflect' anything but it may react in its own way to an external disturbance. It is sobering, but just a little disappointing, to learn that the Empire State building is not really dressed in a 1920s frock.

Barthes introduces a high level of theoretical reflexivity into the discussion of clothing and fashion. His aims are to describe the discrete components of the fashion system; to recast the object of study – clothing – into its proper analytical dimensions and then to propose a set of appropriate methodological procedures through which it may be studied. What gives his revisions such conviction is that each of the moves being proposed draws upon a number of densely formulated intellectual traditions. We have already seen how Marxism provided the general framework for his formulation of the fashion system. Sociology, Barthes consigns to the study of the use and users of clothing, while the key area of 'collective representations' is to be analysed using semiology. What is important here is not the validity of each of these intellectual choices, although it is remarkable how closely those who came later followed the same route, but the fact that Barthes has a framework that could account for *why these choices were being made in this instance*. Structuralism helped to make analysts conscious of their presuppositions and insisted on the necessity of their being made explicit at every stage. This degree of methodological sophistication, once established in dress and fashion studies, never diminished.

Notes

Wherever possible I have attempted to rely upon friends whose French is better than mine. Any *faux pas* in the translations are entirely my responsibility.

1. See Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth: An Intellectual Biography*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998. See esp. ch. 3, 'Criticism and Mass Culture'.

2. His first substantial essay on clothing appears in 1956 and the last in 1970. In *The Fashion System*, Barthes mentions Spencer, Flügel (*The Psychology of Clothes*), Kroeber and Richardson, Laver (*Style in Costume*). Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Mathew Ward and Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1983. Originally published in French as *Système de la Mode*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967.

3. In his biography of Barthes, Jean-Louis Calvet relates the following anecdote about Barthes's attempts to secure a supervisor for his doctorate: 'So one summer evening in 1954, Barthes, Guiraud and Greimas were invited to dinner with Martinet in Sceaux . . . During dinner, Barthes asked which item of women's clothing was the most important. Martinet, clearly focusing on the sexual connotations of his question, immediately replied, 'the legs, of course, that is, the stockings, the shoes'. 'Not at all',

Barthes replied, 'semiologically speaking the legs don't stand up.' He explained that legs, with or without stockings, with or without seams, with or without high-heeled shoes, were not a very rich semiological system, whereas the shawl had at least thirty elementary categories . . . Was the linguist [Martinet] impressed by Barthes's brilliant performance? Whatever the case, he agreed to supervise the thesis.' Jean-Louis Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, Cambridge: Polity, 1994, pp. 130–1.

4. Michael Lane (ed.), *Introduction to Structuralism*, New York: Basic, 1970, p. 4.

5. Thorstein Veblen, 'The Beginnings of Ownership', in *Essays In Our Changing Order: The Writings of Thorstein Veblen*, ed. Leon Ardzrooni, New York, 1964, p. 33.

6. Barthes, *The Fashion System*, p. xi.

7. Ibid., p. xi.

8. Ibid., p. 4.

9. Ibid., p. 8.

10. Ibid., p. 9. A good example of the social density of the imaginary can be found in the costume of the character Superman. Between the ages of three and five my son spent most of his waking life 'in character' wearing an approximation of the great man's costume. He was not alone either. Our street was swarming with other young hopefuls.

11. Ibid., p. 3.

12. Barthes comments 'that it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image – we are still, and more than ever, a civilization of writing . . . In fact, it is simply the presence of the linguistic message that counts . . . (Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Roland Barthes: Image – Music – Text*, ed. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana, 1977, p. 38).

13. Barthes, *The Fashion System*, pp. 16–17.

14. Ibid., p. 17.

15. Useful discussions of *The Fashion System* can be found in the following works: Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After*, London: Methuen, 1982, ch. 11; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975, pp. 32–40; Stafford, *Roland Barthes*.

16. In *Elements of Semiology*, published three years before *The Fashion System*, Barthes had commented that 'There is at present a kind of demand for semiology, stemming not from the fads of a few scholars, but from the very history of the modern world.' (Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith, New York: Hill and Wang, 1968, p. 9).

17. Barthes, *The Fashion System*, p. 6.

18. Heiner Weidmann's comments are typical of this type of criticism: 'Astonishingly Roland Barthes does not go beyond the boundaries of language. He does not investigate what people wear but rather the fashion magazines of a randomly picked year from June 1958 to June 1959. He flaunts expectations by not using fashion to demonstrate the way in which we read the world.' (Heider Weidmann, 'Reading the Signs', *Passages: A Swiss Cultural Magazine*, No. 20, Winter, 2000, p. 4).

19. Roland Barthes, 'Histoire et sociologie du vêtement: Quelques observations méthodologiques', *Annales*, July–September 1957. I have based my discussion of this essay on the review of the essay in Stafford *Roland Barthes*, pp. 103–12. This essay is in Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, Paris: Seuil, 1993.

20. Allan G. Johnson, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 290.

21. Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, p. 744.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London: Methuen, 1977, p. 125.

26. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, p. 48.

27. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

28. Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard and Lyotard*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 31.

29. Anne Hollander discusses a historically stable signifier – black clothing in Europe – and shows how the signifieds (meaning) of black clothes have changed over time. See Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes,* New York, Avon, 1980. See pp. 365–90.

30. Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, p. 743.

31. Margaret Maynard, *Out of Line: Australian Women and Style*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001, p. 2.

32. Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes,* vol. 1, p. 746.

33. For a useful discussion of the limitations of the 'clothing-as-language' metaphor see F. Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 3–18.

34. A.L. Kroeber, On the principle of order in civilization as exemplified by changes of fashion', *American* Anthropologist, 19(2), April–June 1919, p. 260.

35. J. Laver, 'The Triumph of Time', in *Contemporary Essays*, ed. S. Norman, London: Elkin Mathews and Marrot, 1933, p. 133.

36. F. Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 3.

37. Ibid., p. 3.

38. Ibid., p. 3.

39. Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, p. 743.

40. Barthes, *The Fashion System*, p. 293.

41. Ibid., p. 293.

42. Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, p. 749.

Appendix

Questionnaire Issued by J. C. Flügel in 1929

All those who are interested are invited to give their answers to the following list of questions, designed to obtain information upon the attitude of different types of people towards certain matters relating to clothes. Please answer each question with the greatest possible care and sincerity. Give your own name or a pseudonym, as you prefer. (In any case your answers will be treated as *strictly confidential* and will be used for purely scientific purposes only.) If you think that your answer to any question has been influenced by the talks, or by reflections aroused by the talks, please say so.

Please number your answers very carefully, so that it will be quite clear to which question any answer refers.

In answering the questions, it will, in many cases, be convenient to distinguish carefully between men and women's clothing.

Name (or Pseudonym) (Mr, Mrs, or Miss).
Age.
Occupation.
Place of Residence.

1. Do you on the whole feel pleasurably supported and strengthened by stiff, tight clothes (*e.g.* corsets, belts, waistcoats, stiff collars, stiff shirt fronts), or do you feel rather that you are constricted and restrained by them, so that you lose freedom and self-confidence? Do you feel relief when you get out of them?
2. Do loose, soft, yielding, negligee costumes carry with them a suggestion of moral slackness or weakness of character? Give any instances. Do tolerably stiff, tight-fitting garments to any extent suggest moral strength or firmness of character?
3. Do you find your ordinary clothes in any way too heavy, too warm, or too thin? In what ways does this excessive heaviness, excessive warmth, or insufficient warmth affect you?

4. In what respects, if any, do you consider that present-day clothing is too ample or too scanty? Why?
5. What general changes would you like to see introduced into clothing from the point of view of convenience, comfort, and hygiene?
6. what changes from the point of view of beauty? Would these changes in any way conflict with those referred to in your answer to the preceding question?
7. Would you approve or disapprove of an attempt to replace (changing) fashions by a (more stable and persistent) uniform or national dress? On what grounds would you base your approval or disapproval?
8. The use of bright colours is now for the most part confined to women's clothes. Do you think it is desirable to retain this distinction between the sexes? If not, would you like (a) women to adopt men's more sober colours, or (b) men to return to the use of bright colours?
9. Do you think that the clothes in which people work should be rather sombre or severe, or do you hold the view that they should be as attractive as possible (consistent with reasonable economy and convenience)?
10. To what extent, if at all, do you resist fashion? Why (*e.g.* for reasons of economy, because the present fashion does not suit you, for reasons of modesty, comfort, hygiene, etc.)?
11. Are you sensitive about the 'feel' of clothes against your skin?
12. Do you enjoy the feeling of air-currents, sunshine, etc., against the skin? Doe this affect in any way your attitude to clothes or your choice of clothes?
13. Are you also particular about having plenty of fresh air in your rooms?
14. How long does it take you to dress (a) for your ordinary work; (b) for a more festive occasion?
15. Do you dawdle, read, reflect, or day-dream while dressing or undressing, or do you usually dress and undress energetically and without any unnecessary delays?
16. Can you suggest ways in which your clothes might be made easier to put on and off?
17. As regards your dress:

(a) Do you chiefly desire the admiration and approval of your own sex or the opposite sex?

(b) Do you chiefly fear the criticism and disapproval of your own sex or the opposite sex?

(c) Would you attach more importance to the advice of your own sex or the opposite sex?

18. Do you ever in imagination dress yourself in garments of the opposite sex? Do you ever do it in reality: (a) as a 'joke' or 'out of curiosity'; (b) in a masquerade or fancy dress; (c) in any portion of your ordinary clothing?
19. Have you any special views about the clothing of children?

20. Do you often dream of being naked, insufficiently, or inappropriately clad?
21. Do you spend much time on the purchase or fitting of your clothes (as opposed to refusing to be 'bothered' about such matters or taking just what is offered you)? Please answer with whichever of the following figures seems to fit your case best:

5. Much more than the average person of your sex.
4. Rather more than the average person of your sex.
3. About average for your sex.
2. Rather less than the average person of your sex.
1. Much less than the average person of your sex.

22. Do you dress yourself carefully and with forethought (as opposed to putting on your clothes without much attention as to how you will look in them)? Please answer according to the system of marks for question 21.
23. Do you often think of what impression your clothes are making? (Answer as in 21.)
24. Do you tend to notice much what other people are wearing? (Answer as in 21.)

The lecturer desires to thank you most heartily for the care and trouble you have spent in answering this Questionnaire.

Together with the answers to this Questionnaire you are invited to send up any comments you feel inclined to make upon any of the 'Questions for Discussion' contained in this pamphlet.

Please send your answers to:

J.C. Flügel, Esq., c/o The British Broadcasting Corporation,
(Adult Education Section),
Savoy Hill,
London W.C.1.

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