

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

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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.