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Bodies, Boundaries, Beauties and the Beast – Can the Subaltern Dandy Speak?

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The British twentieth century is usually considered a Puritan age that comes to grips with the body in a somewhat twisted way, thus offering an inspiring field of research for masculinities studies. It is therefore where this paper reaches to contribute to the understanding of the construction and representation of masculinity in literature. The corpus is indiscriminately composed of works taken from low-brow culture and the canon as they are all seen as alternatives for conduct books – which I hold they truly are. They indeed aim to spread established criteria, notably as regards body management and subsequent dress codes. In consequence, a selective perusal of them will eventually lead to a coherent – though personal – visitation of the masculinity issue. In this respect, it is no coincidence if the drab monotony of the male black outfit, which convincingly conveys an image of rigorous rigidity, is now associated with the period.

Paradoxically, the appearance and success of the dandy on the public scene shows that the figure was not totally out of place there, and so should at least be considered a partial incarnation of the spirit of the age. This reading is congruent with several reports which concur to designate the dandy as a slim, emaciated youth verging on the disincarnated. Yet, this study will examine the ambiguous light dandyism casts on the question of the body. The complexity of the finding will be further complicated by the literary nature of the selected body of texts, even though

the notion of discourse helps bridge the gap between spheres ontologically kept apart, as suggested in this line by Dudley Silchester, “a fashionably-dressed handsome bearded man of about forty” created by Arthur Pinero:

[...] the intelligent world has read me like a book for the last quarter of a century. It has read me, thumbed me, cut me—ah, yes, cut me—and made brutal marginal notes upon me, until I am the soiled, dogeared volume so out of keeping with your immaculate liberty. (*The Weaker Sex* I, 8)

It is then my contention that bodies, dandyism and literature converge and it will be the assignment of this paper to determine to what extent.

It is common knowledge that dandies made a point of opposing norms and conventions, composing a paradigm of their own, as the (in)famous, inaugural case of George Bryan Brummell gives ample proof. At the end of the eighteenth century, this commoner, turned the acknowledged legislator of man in matters of dress, secured a place in legend by insulting his former friend, the Prince of Wales, who ungratefully cut him at a ball—obviously a castration of the symbolic description that could not go unanswered. The beau’s question to Sheridan, “Who’s your fat friend?”, asked in as vocal a way as decorum would have it, not only humiliated the aspiring great *arbiter elegantiarum* and king, but also reminded the world that bodies are *baddies* and should not be allowed to expand freely. In fact, the dandy conformingly shows “self-possession” (Gore, *Memoirs of a Peeress* 8: 54) for all the world to see through the display of an impeccably mastered body, whose upright position in “a very stiff white neck-cloth, very tight pantaloons” (Disraeli, *Sybil* II, 1: 71) reads in abstract terms of presentability and thus moral acceptability. One may fruitfully refer to Cruikshank’s caricatures or self-portraits by Max Beerbohm for pictorial back up.

Dandyism is thus consonant with dominant ideology that posits disciplining the male individual through the policing of his body. What results from it is a project of concealment served by a visual rhetoric of repression. The dandy graphically displays his eagerness to terminate his body in order to abide by hegemonic standards, recomposing his self according to plan—or patterns by Stultz, a famous London tailor: “Stultz must have been his Frankenstein” (Bulwer, *England and the*

English I, 5: 48). The biological in him accordingly withdraws beneath a proliferation of elements turned into signs to be interpreted within general semiotics, whose ultimate referent is the discarding of human nature: “Lord Mute is an English *élégant*—a dandy. [...] all appearance of nature has disappeared from him” (Bulwer, *England and the English I*, 5: 47). The sememes network to spell a dandiacal subculture that does not so much oppose mainstream culture as it repeats it with slight variations, distinctions rather than differences, as in the case of self control:

Villers, accustomed to command the muscles of his countenance, and give them just what expression he pleased, having like a good actor, identified himself with the part he proposed playing, steadily, for the next week. (Wilson, *Paris Lions and London Tigers* 70)

In an over-dramatic way, dandies come into social existence—the only possible one—through the basic semantic structure of their costumes, which paradoxically uses the body only for backcloth, and the way they are dressed conditions the way they are *addressed*. It follows that dandyism turns out to be just another form of propaganda. Identification through vesture proceeds in complete denial of the body, hence the malevolent tendency in would-be non-conformist authors to introduce literary portraits of dandiacal figures as grotesque walking heaps of clothes and knick-knacks of fashion, that Thackeray called the “‘dressy’ Snobs” (*Book of Snobs* 15: 180):

He wore a chestnut-coloured frock, and a prodigality of gold-chain was relieved upon the raven bloom of a Genoa-velvet waistcoat. His cravat was a variegated silk, and denied the head all liberty of motion. The pantaloons were dark, and the least preposterous part of the dress. The head covering, for it was indeed but an abortion of a hat, was a shrivelled starved thing with a narrow rim, warped up at the side and bent down in the front [...] a contrast which operated so suddenly and forcibly upon my risible muscles, that I could scarcely refrain from laughter. (Massie, *Sydenham* 9: 52-53)

Still, the paramount importance of the cut, fabric, design and colour is founded on the social necessity to adhere to a strict dress code based on a system of hierarchy,

even after sumptuary laws are revoked or rather before they are ever enforced... These loosely formulated rules impose a regimen of visibility according to social and marital status, gender and age brackets. As a result of the emphasis laid on the outfit, the body stands as a mere “Clothes-Screen” (Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* I, 5: 32) devoid of meaning, density or dignity. It is pressed into use, and implicitly denied existence in the basic reformulation of the person as *somebody*: “Harris was a nobody, who had made himself somebody, and gave the law to everybody” (Gore, *Cecil* I, 1: 30). This example shows that its apparent textual proliferation only confirms its social banishment. As a natural substratum, the body is literally walled-in by dandiacal tight-fitting clothes, in celebration of the spiritual part in man. This *modus operandi* echoes in literary descriptions of the dandy’s costume, of the dandy through his costume, as they become increasingly detailed, and his substance is literarily sucked up into the dress he wears:

The said Mr. Quib [...] in a pair of broad-ribbed, yellow, silk small-clothes, with gold bell-buttons; silk embroidered stockings, immodestly transparent; a pale, pink, satin waistcoat, under a white one of gros de Naples; a coat, made quite tight, of such a very light shade of purple, that it was scarcely purple at all. (Wilson, *Paris Lions and London Tigers* 67-8)

In this respect, the fashion for “a pair of stays, to keep in shape the Dandy, O” (Anon., *A Dandy Lost*), symbolically materializes the oppression the group exerts on the bodies of individuals, whose willing submission and servitude need not be examined here and are just reported:

Here's the stays from the tailor,

For Mr. MacNailor.

Oh, Jeffrey! Lace it quite tight.

I'll hold by the post,

Anon., *The Dandies' Ball*

This capacity to “forge [their] bodies in the fire of [their] will,” in the words of Asian Han, the villain in *Enter the Dragon*, reveals unflinching determination to push back within the preconceived limits of a set perimeter the burden of the body. The very word “body” hardly ever appears in the literary corpus to refer to male characters – and dandies in particular – for human nature should remain underneath what can be seen, said and thought out. It only peeps through in metonymic filigree as reference is made to *bodices*, in the narrative of its own absence, so to speak. It is tamed into obedience and thus made to step back within the rigid bars of a prison-like device, the straight-jacket of formal word or wear which enacts the social power to “discipline and punish” the individual:

With a collar so high and so stiff it appears,
As to threaten each moment to cut off his ears.

Anon., *The Dandies*

Of course, the biological dimension of the body is connected to sexual activity, for the body all too easily translates into the *bawdy*. The conceptual matrix for the stays – and possibly for literary portraits – can thus be found in the special penile sheathes against onanism called “Contre l’Onanisme” (*Sous Vêtements, L’homme et la mode*, 14). Devised to prevent any erection, the penile stays “stand for,” or rather, lay bare the repressive regulation of sex by mortification, so that symbolically, through this castrating denial of the body, the beau dies.

In fact, the dandy’s re-organisation of bodily organism encapsulates the ethos of the age in its propensity to fake the inorganic and incidentally to turn everything into a monument of imperialistic self-promotion. One may think of Baudelaire’s praise of artifice as well as Beerbohm’s *Defence of Cosmetics*, which both offer just another means to posit the defeat of incarnated bodies on the public scene. The dandies’ faces take on unnatural complexions, but more importantly, they sediment into masks, covering the given features for concealment and confinement. For these “masqueraders” (Jones, *Masqueraders*), the body remains a distant reference and hairs are symptomatically tamed into sophisticated hairdo: “hair oiled, and twisted into

various ringlets; but separated, on the forehead, à la Madona" (Wilson, *Paris Lions and London Tigers* 67). The original hue is altered when the beau dyes, so that his body is never seen in its true colours:

[Sir George Tufto's] hair, which was very scarce and quite white, suddenly grew thick, and brown, and curly, and his whiskers and eyebrows took their present colour. Ill-natured people say that his chest is all wool, and that his hair, because it never grows, is a wig. (Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* 28: 272)

The dandy complies and accepts that the artificial role game of social life must be played by the rules. Dismissing the natural body is praised in the many reports which describe him as a hieratic character, "like a carved figure in motion" (Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* I, 4: 63), in which the material part of the body is forever lost in favour of its abstract, disincarnated delineation and contour. The text brings to completion the discarding of the biological body, which is transubstantiated into a social sign by the substitute body politic and its imposition of what Marcel Mauss calls "techniques of the body."

But the *screening* of the body—be it only partial—does not sit well with the dominant cult of performance and development on which nineteenth-century modernity rests. In consequence, means were devised to regulate the subsistence and visibility of bodily expressiveness in public. It consisted in carefully *staging* the body—be it only partially—by monitoring attitudes and behaviour through the adoption of strict normative codes of conduct, the "great decorum of manner" (Ward, *De Clifford* I, 16: 113), which dandies often feature in fiction. The basis for their social legitimacy lies in their being conversant with established decorous ways. In this perspective, the many mirrors propped up both in lounges and narratives do serve as reminders of the need for self-reflexive awareness as well as they indicate the presence of a public eye that reconfigures the scene within an institutional grid for validation. Gossip and narrative frames alike publicize conformity and deviance, with the possible sanction for contraveners of being ignored, which amounts to social death—the only real one—for "even an ill-cut coat, in short, the least vulgarity impedes their advance, if not absolutely annihilates them" (Ward, *De Clifford* II, 7:

59). The body is then under constant scrutiny and it is in fact only tolerated as a stylus writing out the grammar of decency and modesty—only form matters. Literature shares the same ambiguous status, as it organizes signifiers with only distant signifieds, cut to size and deposited in the pre-existing syntax of the novelistic ambition to spell out the whole world in an act of hegemonic appropriation. As control has to be complete, every detail counts and dandies have to be and look at ease with all the peccadillos of fashionable life, for which dancing can be considered an emblem:

Then he excelled in all manly exercises, and in those accomplishments which are most easily appreciated by the greatest number. He was the best waltzer, the best rider, the best shot, the best skater, fencer, billiard-player, whist-player, cricketer, the best in short at every game and accomplishment in which success draws ready applause from the generality.
(Lister, *Arlington I*, 8: 134-35)

In spite of its seemingly pure recreational part, dancing constitutes an ideological statement that ritualizes life in a most definite manner. It encodes every move and its structure—with man's leadership and his final bow—transcribes an idealized version of human relationships in patriarchal discourse, thus formalizing encounters between the sexes, or what is left of them. Obedient dancers proceed in measured steps, synchronised loops and orderly lines, the same way characters fall into the lines of a text which almost invariably leads them to the happy ending of matrimony in a vanity fair that is both literary and quite real. Dandies' alienation is blatantly exposed, and they are instrumental as indexes for what is done or not in good society, as a beau's characterization points to: "Lord Normanby, the commander-in-chief of the roués, the examining censor whose vote is indispensable to neophytes standing for their degree of beauty" (Gore, *Mothers and Daughters II*, 8: 262). In other words, their twofold function means dramatically exhibiting their acceptance of decorum and evaluating conformity in others, regardless of family links, for "[they] disclaim all ties of kindred—cut fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, if they are not Exclusives" (Lister, *Arlington I*, 18: 304). Scenes abound depicting pitiless

condemnation of unfashionable or unruly bodies, and a sneer proves sufficient to disqualify any blundering aspirant to fashion and high life:

[...] when White's bow-window once more crowded with its phalanx of critics, obliges many a 'would-be,' to prefer the shady side of St. James-street, who has not the courage to encounter the passing sarcasms which are shot from that fashionable battery. (White, *Almack's Revisited* I, 1: 4)

From the bow-window overlooking creation at White's—the famous London club—judgement is so notably passed on everyone, that the place becomes an institution for Exclusives, who term it the “*beau window*” (Gore, *The Débutante* I, 8: 203). Even if the dandy deliberates in the stead of the group, he does not merely embody the Table of the Law in a servile, mechanical way. He is no “walking machine” (Lister, *Arlington* II: 176) acting out the strict supervisor or janitor of refined circles. He is entitled to some “stage-play, the honest cheating” (Browning, *Fifine at the Fair* LXXXVII: 422) and a joy-ride through the hot spots of high life where he shines with the elegance of his performance. In other words, he is credited for the effortless subservience to established standards in his rendering of the prescribed script he received and accepted. Such a conception apparently leaves little elbow room, but as was made clear, this is the very principle on which the social dress is designed to contain bodily resurgence. Still, to restrain is not to forbid but to regulate, so that in his perfectly lawful parade, the dandy reconciles mind and body by striking aesthetic notes, thus composing a genuine *art de vivre*, a thorough commitment to the worship of beauty—or at least prettiness—in things small and grand:

His taste had become the standard upon which every article, from a hair-brush to a *vis-à-vis*, or from a bridle to an opera-hat, had been measured and christened: to be considered like Lord Alderney, either in appearance or bearing, was a feather in a man's cap. (White, *Almack's Revisited* III, 1: 1-2)

This exemplary quest highly surpasses ordinary life styles in a constant determination to insert the body in the work of art of one's existence. Consequently, the problem arises to determine how an artistic personal touch can emerge in such a

rigid set of conventions, since sheer elegance—even if it is permeating each and every move—will not do. It is generally admitted that a specific appeal of dandyism lies in the indescribable something, *un je-ne-sais-quoi*, which often comes extremely close to nothingness, *un presque-rien*, but adds a sort of aura to the character:

What was the magic of this man? What was the secret of his ease, that nothing could disturb, and yet was not deficient in deference and good taste? And then his dress, it seemed fashioned by some unearthly artist; yet it was impossible to detect the unobtrusive causes of the general effect that was irresistible. (Disraeli, *Coningsby* III, 4: 207-08)

This feature is therefore better sensed than seen or described, and might attest to the presence of marked individuality, a dominant, according to Roman Jakobson's terminology, which delineates an aesthetic zone through a complex choreography. This site of intensity would deconstruct the social occasion and compose a scene of tension where meaning and values are re-negotiated along new epistemologies metaphorically hinted at by Benjamin Disraeli:

[...] how dull was the ball in which he did not bound! How dim the banquet in which he did not glitter! His presence in the Gardens compensated for the want of flowers; his vision in the Park for the want of sun. In public breakfasts he was more indispensable than pineapples; in private concerts more noticed than an absent prima donna. How fair was the dame on whom he smiled! How dark the tradesman on whom he frowned! (*The Young Duke* I, 10: 42)

The change of paradigm may sound more radical than it actually is, since the very immateriality of the notions borrowed from Balthasar Gracian and Vladimir Jankélévitch probably accounts for the permissive attitude of the Establishment, and dandies may differ and go on with their harmless pranks, so long as they toe the acknowledged line of conduct, like Ned Pym:

[...] a little over twenty, is the young dandy of the day; handsome, tall, with excellent manners, which allow him to carry off his facetious attitude rather successfully. (Bennett & Knobbock, *Milestone* I: 20)

In other words, their most daring and provocative dash of originality will be condoned if it does not question the social base and superstructure. Their idiosyncrasies often originate in ideology anyway. A good case in point is found in the effeminacy that has become typical of dandiacal deportment:

He [...] twisted his head into a bow which assured her as plainly as words could have done, that he was exactly the coxcomb she had heard him described to be by Lucy. (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 36: 183)

There is the softening of the voice, an ear for obliquity and irony, a tighter costume and a slant for supine bodies – one may think of Lord Henry, in the incipit of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – all set in a frame of winning, self-assured arrogance and ease, in a style reminiscent of the clubbers in *The Philanderer*:

Every candidate for membership must be nominated by a man and a woman, who both guarantee that the candidate, if female, is not womanly, and if male, not manly. (Shaw, I: 118)

These characteristics resonate with the historical and political context of Great Britain at the time, after war had ceased to be a real field of self-promotion and men were driven to assert themselves and seek glory in the feminine society of salons, parties, boudoirs and balls. It should be noted that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, an ephebe was not automatically construed as an effete, and effeminacy in man was not of necessity a damning quality or a sign of what Max Nordaü later termed “degenerescence.” It becomes only too apparent that the dandy emerges as a situated being in whom common, deep-seated convention finds expression and he spreads a discourse on the management of the body that coheres with the dominant power structure.

Another paradoxical trait in dandyism sheds valuable light on the use that is made of the Exquisite to disseminate the grand, though multi-layered, narrative of British masculinity. In spite of the solitary nature of this conceited Narcissus, literature and reports often picture the dandy in a flock of fashionable alter egos, for in the words of Professor Teufelsdröckh, “The Dandiacal [...] is strong by union”

(Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* III, 10: 216). In these coteries, power partially resides in numbers, were it for reciprocal validation. The gathering of the refined at set times in set places and group-approved gear has something regimental or at least tribal, strongly societal about it; and theirs is as constraining a schedule as any socialite's:

[...] an hour to White's, half-an-hour to the House of Lords,—from six to seven a saunter on horseback by the Serpentine—a dinner at eight—a party at eleven—and three balls from twelve till day-light.
(Lister, *Arlington* I, 7: 125)

Most of all, this male bonding reproduces in its own specific idiom homosociality, which is so characteristic of the British male constitution—and of the club institution in particular—pointing to the notion that body matters are socialized into *buddy* matters.

Moreover, the very notion of “the body” is already a problematic one, and the effort to ritualize every fact of nature out of its original destination, from feeding to mating, conjures up the concept of an organ-free body made available for the sphere of culture. Yet, as was indicated before, this stylisation of incarnated experience leaves out the whole carnal sphere of the flesh in its brute, unmediated presence. Conversely, this fleshly mass ontologically resists representation and evocation in literature, for it opposes civilized attempts at narrativization, in the vocabulary of decency or aesthetics alike. It may be best defined as a de-territorialized site of pure pathos, beyond and beneath logocentric grasp. Dandyism is once more complicit in the repressive determination to police and polish the male bodies in order to compose the text of nineteenth-century decorous masculine modesty, since the concept of the body boils down to the refinement of the flesh into a social function. In brief, the phallogocentric mania for definitions, with its capacity to set limits and thrust meaning into an arbitrary sign, will easily come to terms with the body as it was conceived of, and even its complexities serve the ethos of the age. On the other hand, self-evident flesh, with its nauseating shapeless materiality *à la Sartre*, can't be contained within the systemic structures of individuating phrases, words or even letters, which all carry the epistemology of mainstream culture.

All this deconstruction of the so-called non-conformist aesthete does not make him score very high on the academic evaluation scale of originality and jeopardizes his qualifying as research material. Fortunately, a smart saving grace may be found by focusing on his contribution to the gender controversy. Dandies may not have broken new grounds by advocating effeminacy in men, but they certainly widened the fissure of the gender line of divide in their efficient staging, even when the fashion for effeminate men became a thing of the past—at least for a while. Significantly enough, most literary dandies only reluctantly engage in heterosexual scenarios and show little inclination for sexual gratification:

As for love—I conceive it a *mere empty bubble*,

And the fruits of success never worth *half* the trouble;

(Anon., *Pursuits of Fashion*)

The text may sometimes read obliquely, and such words as “happy” become felicitously ambiguous: “whatever I touch I am happy with, except when I touch women! How is it? What is the mystery? Some monstrous explanation must exist. What can it be?” (Meredith, *The Egoist* 40: 478). Still, the questions it sometimes raises should not find hasty answers to enable the meanings to resonate. Suffice it to say that sexuality apparently offers one not particularly satisfactory way to assert a sense of self and interact with others, so that the cult of climax—multiple or not—is challenged by a celebration of a polymorphous eroticization of the scene, which may be deemed regressive by psychoanalytical authorities. In consequence, the biological body in sex may still be founded on antinomy, but the social body in gender fans out into a continuum of variations without a posited origin or hierarchy: “this face had the singular dubious beauty distinctive of Italian boys; a loveliness that wavers and hovers between female and male” (Swinburne, *Lesbia Brandon* 11: 110). This amounts to saying that conventional inherited gendered traits constitute a tank for the individual to engineer a person-effect according to his, her, its or the author’s taste.

Thus dandies in literature subvert and transgress the conventional discourse on masculinity. They deconstruct the very concept of identity when they produce the

self as a “queer zone” (Marie-Hélène Bourcier) of freely flowing signs whose interplay sediments into a centre of awareness and whose fundamentally discursive unity is the result of endless negotiation based on a queering of the body.

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