

Critical notice of *Blind and Worried*
or *The Sorter Resorted*

by

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THIS WORK is the most perfect piece of McDowell¹ we are likely to have. It shows us how what distinguishes humans from mere animals—differences philosophers have traditionally construed as deep—can, without gainsaying their importance, be seen instead as residing entirely at the surface. (Though surfaces, it must be allowed, turn out to go deeper than we might have thought.) We are, to be sure, animals. But we are not *just* animals, we are *fashionable* animals. What distinguishes us from the animals is plain for all to see: it is our clothes, and all that wearing clothes involves and entails. Animals do not have clothes, they have only coverings. Or, if what they have is a kind of clothing, it is distinguished from ours in that ours is *second hand* clothing: clothing that being properly brought up in a community has enabled us buy or borrow from others to put on over our merely animal covering. Apart from such training, we can neither produce, nor even in the most important sense see clothes as such. With the advent of clothing the contours of the visible surface by which we are known to each other becomes a matter of choice and control, and so a potential target for criticism and the expression of selves — in a sense of ‘selves’ that is constituted thereby. Fashion is cultivation: it is *Bildung*. It is the origin and paradigm of spontaneity and intuition bound together within a framework of rules with respect to which everything we do and wear, every public gesture we make, is subject to assessment and searching criticism. The Realm of Fashion is the Realm of Freedom.

The author is well aware of the potential for a dualistic construal of these ideas. The tradition has persisted in the importation into this area of binary oppositions with reductive intent. Perhaps most pernicious is the view of fashion as mere *sorting* of given material. sorting as to light

¹ N.B. “McDowell¹”: a slightly archaic woodworking term for cabinetry constructed with strong, elegant joints made by snugly fitting square pegs in round holes; though the results are widely admired, the techniques for achieving them remain a mystery.

and dark, bright and dull, suitable for winter and suitable for summer, and so on. There is, of course, a grain of truth in such a picture. For instance, no-one any longer denies that the first kind of sorting is crucial to the proper *laundering* of clothes. More significantly, the last-mentioned sorting contains a dark appreciation of the constitutive involvement of the fashionable with the *race of seasons*. Again, though discrimination and above all criticism are indeed of the essence of the form of life of fashionable animals, there is much more to it than mere sorting. The need to reconceptualize the fashionable against the background of this venerable tradition is what motivates the book's subtitle.

The book's main title, of course, does not refer to the situation of the author. It invokes the famous saying: "Those who have clothes without fashion sense are blind, those who have fashion sense without clothes are worried." Those who believe they can get on while lacking one or another of these elements are denominated 'naked naturalists' – the blind and worried. (Here one should remember that 'naturalist' is also used as the favored label by those misguided souls who so misunderstand their actual natures as to construe clothes as a form of constraint rather than of constitutive self-expression: a usage that will be ruefully attested by any who have ventured into a "naturalist colony" expecting to join fellow bird-watchers, only to find themselves in a nudist camp. "Wearing no clothes" is itself a fashion option.) It is a somewhat delicate matter to characterize the relation between fashion and nature envisaged here. The view recommended is a relaxed naturalism, one that sees fashion as the partial re-enchantment of nature.² It contrasts with *rampant dandyism*, which is characterized by the ultimately dualistic insistence that fashion owes nothing to nature.

It is important not to recoil all the way from dandyism to insisting that all clothes should in the end be natural in the sense of merely casual. The author questions whether the traditional role played by purely for-

² In this connection much is made of the observation that the essence of lingerie is to make people look more naked than they would look without such garments. (This phenomenon is known as "the Victorians' Secret".) This observation should already cast doubt on the seemingly straightforward – but in fact metaphysically laden – classification of lingerie as a kind of underwear. This point is discussed below. In the book, it leads into the insightful treatment of the fashion-constitutive epistemology of glimpses – a deep issue, and one that is in no way dependent upon the disreputable, entirely optional, and distinctively modern obsession with ontological cleavage.

mal attire, made explicit by Kant in the form of rules, can adequately be played (as more recent theorists have argued) by the merely casual. In particular, it is doubted whether such merely casual garb can be adequate to the disparate demands of fashion both throughout the race of seasons, and also in the realm of in-laws.³ Relaxed naturalism allows a role for the formal, and shows such attire to be entirely compatible with our natural being. At the same time, it reveals how even the most natural sort of adornment is transformed when it becomes subject to our control and is brought into the realm of fashion and freedom.

Thus, for example, a beard is a natural product, but growing (wearing) one is something essentially *done* – in a sense in which narrowly natural animals cannot *do* anything. For it is essentially the product of *not shaving*, the product of a *decision*, an exercise in spontaneity thoroughly informed and made possible by the practices constitutive of our being as fashionable. We begin to understand fashionable naturalism (a matter of second nature) when we understand how this distinction is unthreatened by the observation that both the bearded man and his merely furry cat did not in fact shave this morning, and even by its being counterfactually true of them both that *had they shaved this morning*, they would have had bare chins. The *hirsute naturalism* that emerges from these considerations is scarcely distinguishable from a *relaxed dandyism* (not to be confused with the rampant variety), so intimately do the natural and the fashionable interpenetrate. And this is altogether as it should be. Fashion is nature with a human face – or as one might also say, humanity is the garment of nature. For faces are garments too. Except in a strained and somewhat comical sense, mere animals no more display the one than they do the other.

In a particularly acute analysis, the author criticizes the underwear/outwear distinction, for bringing with it the twin dangers of the myth of the linen, on the one hand, and frictionless spinning in the void, on the

³ Mention of the latter inevitably brings to mind the traditional in-law/outlaw distinction. We are warned to be careful here: this is an exploded dualism, but a perfectly good distinction. That is, there really are outlaws. (They were not, as some idealists have maintained, all killed in the explosion.) What the theorist must hold fast to is the realization that the fashionable do not dress for them – just as they do not dress for their inlaws. The point to realize is that the fashionable dress for each other. (Only those in the grip of a bad philosophical picture would think of this observation as incompatible with the fact that the fashionable also play with themselves. See the discussion of “frictionless spinning in the void” below.)

other. The former is the idea of a privileged layer of foundation garments. Such garments are construed as essentially invisible, but necessarily lying under and making possible those that are visible to others. But this traditional idea will only seem attractive if we forget that outerwear can be added (“layering”) or removed (“stripping”), with the effects respectively of turning outerwear into underwear and underwear into outerwear. The distinction is accordingly not absolute, but relative to our practices.⁴ Nor is it *completely* relative: so long as one is fashionable at all, there will always be *some* visibly present outerwear. The proper lesson is then that “It is outerwear all the way down” – the inner or under layer is merely one relative form that outerwear can take under specifiable circumstances. Indeed, for the fashionable, the ‘natural’ body itself is a form of fashionable self-presentation – one ‘outfit’ among others one can choose to don (a lesson implicit already in the idiom “birthday suit”). And the fact that one does so by uncovering is of no particular significance, though it can be seized upon to motivate various sorts of misunderstanding.

“Frictionless spinning in the void” is the author’s admirably gender-neutral imagery⁵ for a characteristic way of misunderstanding what happens when the fashionable play with themselves. Again, it is not that such an activity is impossible or even objectionable. Rather it must be not only understood, but also practiced properly.⁶ Here, above all, the importance of having been properly brought up cannot be overemphasized if we are to understand this characteristic infusion of nature into culture and culture into nature.

The author shows us how not to feel confined by the realization that the fashionable can never escape the race of seasons (apart from the acknowledgment of which there is no fashion at all). On the other hand, he provides for us also the liberating realization that there is more to life than is contained in the realm of in-laws. We are not ineluctably bound by the

⁴ Recall the traditional Indian way of making mittens, changed forever by Hiawatha. As the poet who chronicled this instructive episode in the history of clothes says: “They made them with the skin-side inside / Made them with fur-side outside. / Hiawatha turned them inside-outside: / Made them with the fur-side inside, / Made them with the skin-side outside.”

⁵ The author is characteristically unapologetic about this imagery: “Those who object to reliance upon imagery in philosophical writing do so only because they conceive of such language as a small crawling animal with a disgusting scaly tail, which fashionable people would be well advised not to let into their drawers.”

⁶ See the work mentioned in note 8 below.

sort of hegemony that obviously prevails within this realm – for fashion has its essential being in a sort of spontaneity that is only possible elsewhere.

Clothes are our visible presence as essentially fashionable animals. They are an essentially social medium – not a veil of appearance, but our very reality.⁷ Of course, fashion involves risk (else criticism would not be of its essence): we can go wrong. But that does not mean that when we go right we and our clothes are less than fully fashionable. In such favored cases (which, to be sure, we cannot always tell from the case of fashion disasters): “When we say, and mean, that an outfit is *comme il faut*, we and the outfit do not stop anywhere short of being *comme il faut*.”⁸ When things go right, there simply is no difference of the sort traditionally insisted upon, between *being* and *appearing* fashionable. And such a claim in no way undercuts our right to acknowledge the crucial distinction between being and not being fashionable. The author shows that this “two legged” view is compatible not only with the fashionableness of pants, but also (more surprisingly) with that of skirts (though he is witheringly critical of the pathetic attempts of those theorists who have felt obliged by their metaphysical theories to postulate the at least potential fashionableness of ludicrous intermediate forms such as culottes).

In sum, the author’s diagnosis is that we can only escape from unpalatable and uncomfortable osculation if we relinquish our nostalgia for drawing a line between the contentious and the noncontentious-or as the point is sometimes put, between the intelligible and the unintelligible. The story told here begins to teach us how to get along without such distinctions.

⁷ As with so many of the ideas put forward in this work, Kant is acknowledged as having introduced this line of thought, which is perhaps best expounded in his popular essay “On the Old Saw: ‘Clothes Make the Man’”.

⁸ This seems to be author’s favorite quotation from Lewdwig W’s classic retelling-as-unmasking of the traditional story of the Emperor’s New Clothes, in his *Pornographic Investigations*.