'A sensual and intellectual pleasure from start to finish'
DEBORAH LEVY

SHAHIDHA BARI



DRESSED

THE PHILOSOPHY OF CLOTHES

SHAHIDHA BARI

Shahidha Bari is a writer, academic and broadcaster working in the fields of literature, philosophy and art. Born in 1980, she studied at Cambridge and Cornell. She was one of the first ever BBC Radio 3 New Generation Thinkers (2011) and a winner of the Observer/Anthony Burgess Prize for Arts Journalism (2015). She teaches cultural theory at the University of London and is a Fellow of the Forum for Philosophy at the LSE. She writes for the *Financial Times*, *Guardian* and *Frieze* among other newspapers and journals. She features frequently on BBC Radio 4, and presents BBC Radio 3's Arts and Ideas programme *Free Thinking*. She lives in London.

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SHAHIDHA BARI

Dressed

The Philosophy of Clothes

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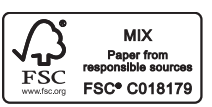
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Prologue



THE CHINESE DRESS

She wears a different cheongsam in every scene – stiffened silk, capped sleeves, high collars – and is, somehow, impossibly lovelier each time. All quiet grace and lissom limbs, she is a sylph, silently slipping through narrow corridors and darkened stairwells, her tiny wrist brushing against his sleeve, their bodies only momentarily turned to each other on their star-crossed paths.

After the revolution of 1949, the Communists had curtailed the wearing of the cheongsam in Shanghai, but émigrés carried them with them to Hong Kong as a marker of a defiant elegance. In Wong Kar-wai's film, *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Maggie Cheung's cheongsams are perfectly fitted to her slight frame, the upright collars reaching to the neck, always meticulously matched to studded ears. The dresses are structured and traditional, skimming close against the ribs and over the waist, holding her in place, holding her back, holding off the tumult inside. She never lets go.

He, by contrast, is young and warm, capable of passion. Tony Leung plays him with a rueful, smiling carelessness: a slim hand habitually running through glossy hair, rolled sleeves and slackened collar. He is plain-shirted, but stylish-smart, quick to laugh, neat in a narrow tie and tiepin.

When, partway through the film, she realises that they can

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never act on their desire, the camera catches her gazing wistfully from a gilt-edged window, its golden frame picking up the yellow jonquil printed on her dress, the flower's own mute beauty, in turn, mocked by the landlady's loudly chintzed lounge stretching behind her. The green tendrils of some climbing plant creeps into the edge of the shot. In its original Cantonese, the film was titled 'The Age of Blossoms'. Maggie Cheung's still-girlish character, in the spring of her life, mourns the loss of a flowering that never comes. She sips absently from a glass of water; her slender arm is pressed against her waist, holding in everything she might once have felt, might ever feel again, under the blooming yellow jonquil printed on her bluish-grey dress and across her heart.

THE BOOTS

When the American heiress Claribel Cone purchased an oil painting depicting a pair of discarded boots, she grimly conceded to her sister, Etta, that she was 'not so pleased' with her newest acquisition. You picture her writing from the satin-slippered serenity of her salon with a disappointed, grudging respect: 'the pair of shoes will not grace my living room with beauty – however – it is a Van Gogh – almost certainly – Mr V. [Vallotton] says *sans doute* . . .' The painting is unmistakably Van Gogh's, a variation on one of his particularly obstinate themes. The boots were his too, bought in a Parisian flea market in 1886. The feverish series of paintings that followed indicate how they possessed him in that wildly productive year, repeatedly

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commanding his painter's eye and demanding the touch of his brush.

The 1886 canvas in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam is also, unmistakably, his, profoundly marked by that peculiarly heavy hand and rendered in the dulled browns of his Dutch Nuenen palette. The paint is thickly knifed, the pigment-clogged brush visibly scrubbed across the canvas next to vigorously cross-hatched textures. The brushwork is graceless, brutish, honest. So are the boots. They sit exhausted, reluctantly ordered like chided children, right and left in place, the battered leather robust and defiant, and the long-worn uppers curled from use. The laces are tightly threaded but left strewn, resting in the gleaming eyelets they have pierced. The lolling tongues dip into each boot's dark internal recess. And yet they have the grace of the sunlit earth on which they rest. *They rest*. These boots have walked, have worked, and though they come to rest here on this sunlit earth, they are only momentarily stilled, as though they might labour yet with ragged breath.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, seeing the painted boots in an exhibition, wrote of them in an essay of 1950. He feared and romanticised them, projecting onto them the 'toilsome tread of the worker' and 'the menace of death'. The shoes, he claimed exultantly, contained a world, full of ripening grain and fallow wintry fields. 'On the leather,' he wrote, 'lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth . . .' But perhaps the world they contained was less even than this and more profound. The boots are simple and entreating, piercing us with their visible fatigue.

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They ask us to imagine the life of feet, conjured, as they are, by Van Gogh's hand. But walking and painting were always bound together for him.

As a child, he had roamed the fields and woodlands of Brabant, feeling the colours of sky, marsh, heath and sand resonate with unspoken tone and atmosphere. When in 1890 he suffered a breakdown, he sought solace and tranquillity in the grounds around Auvers-sur-Oise, painting landscapes palpably freighted with an emotional charge. 'Sometimes I long so much to do landscape,' he wrote, 'just as one would for a long walk to refresh oneself, and in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were.' In July 1890, he walked out into the wheat fields around Auvers for the last time and shot himself in the chest.

THE DENIM JACKET

'Take me to the centre of everything,' is what she demanded, apparently, when she first arrived to New York City in 1978, clambering into a taxi. The driver deposited her in Times Square. She found a job in Dunkin' Donuts before being fired for squirting jam into a customer's face. It's an apocryphal story, but you believe it, and have a sense of how well she would retell it, laughing wickedly. She is fearlessly, unstoppably fun and almost feline in her daring, confident that she'll land on her feet and right herself whatever risks she takes.

Madonna lived in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in Corona, a neighbourhood in Queens, during the early 1980s.

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By the time of 'Borderline', the fifth single from her first album, titled *Madonna*, she had dated the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, was kicking around with Andy Warhol and the Beastie Boys, hanging out at Studio 54, Danceteria and the Pyramid Club. Her style in those first years was boho-punk, both feminine and tomboyish, cool, carelessly sexy, fingerless gloves and string vests, a jumble of jewellery, jackets you could leave behind on the subway, on a dance floor, in a Brooklyn apartment at four in the morning.

'Borderline' was released in 1983. In the video to the track, she is a messy blonde, her hair a peroxide tangle with visible roots, topped by an orange-red headband tied in an impudent bow. She pairs a tangerine vest with baggy black cargo pants, dressed up with fluorescent socks and an armful of bangles. She finishes the look with a sleeveless denim jacket, oversized, as though she's borrowed it (and has no intention of returning it). The whole ensemble has the haphazardness of a spree around a thrift shop – and a certain poise, too.

The video begins with her dancing under a bridge, bopping with her cute Latino boyfriend, against a backdrop of corrugated iron and dilapidated warehouses. A handsome photographer in a slim-cut tan-coloured suit turns up. He carries her off in his smart car and gives her an expensive leather jacket, but she's street-smart and unseduced by his debonair ways. When she tires of his studio, the classical busts and faux Roman colonnades, she takes a canister to his marble walls and spray-paints a wonky heart so rudimentary that Basquiat would have been ashamed of her. No matter. Boys don't matter. She can take their jackets or throw them off at will.

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The opening notes of the song, if you know it, are high and clear – a penetrating sweetness to them – the synthesised melody uncomplicated, given momentum by the drums that roll in, blithe and relentless. 'Something in the way you love me won't let me be,' she sings in that high, still-childlike register, 'I don't want to be your prisoner, so baby, won't you set me free?' But it's not a request. Nothing will curtail her ambition and she'll meet every question with a level and challenging gaze.

Over the years, there will be other jackets – the short, glittering, greenish-bronze cropped jacket with zebra-patterned lapels and a pyramid embroidered on its back that Rosanna Arquette returns to her in the 1985 film *Desperately Seeking Susan*; the lurid purple leather bomber jacket, paired with an eye-wateringly high-leg leotard and a Farrah Fawcett flick for the disco themed *Confessions on a Dance Floor* album; the snug-fit, one-buttoned denim jacket, worn with nothing underneath it, her honey-coloured beach-waved hair flying against the wind, as she leans into the hurtling high-speed flashes of the 'Ray of Light' video.

But back then, singing 'Borderline' with all her heart, dancing under the bridge in that sleeveless denim jacket, you sense in her the longing of youth and the vulnerability that comes with it. The lyrics of the song are reflective, knowing how alert young people are to their own dreams, how determined they can be in their right to pursue them undiscouraged. They are buoyed by an innocence that hasn't yet met experience. She skips and trips in that opening sequence, moving guileless and free, filled with the kind of elation that you are only ever capable of at that age. 'Take me to the centre of everything,' she said.

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Introduction



THE THOUGHT OF OUR CLOTHES

A girl in a jade silk skirt dashes past on the escalator. She is like the glimpse of an unguessed possibility, a dauntless flash of brilliance against the ambient blue wash of an ordinary day. A man in neon-striped running shoes steadily circuits the park. He is racing the earth as it rotates beneath him, striving to peel back the years with each stride. What am I to them, in grey woollen coat and red suede gloves, this wintry morning? Only another person, walking through the world, thoughts carried in a fragile body, dressed like any other.

But when I listen closely in a crowd, I am conscious of the synthetic rustle of a jacket's lining as it grazes against an acrylic jumper, the crackle and quick hum of a zip as it zooms up to a neck, the pleasing clatter of an assortment of heels. I know precisely the smart smack of a leather sole against a solid floor. When the noise of voices, traffic and TV subsides, you'll hear it too – a cloud of inchoate sounds, the murmur of tangled fibres as they brush against surfaces of all kinds. When a sweater snags on a door handle or a button dangles from a dangerously loosened thread, our clothes pointedly remind us that they are there. They are *always* there, these wordless witnesses to our lives.

If, like me, you are haunted by clothes (garments you have worn, discarded or dreamed), and your memory is replete with

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the form and feel of dress (belonging to people you have loved, known or lost), then you will understand something of the mystery and allure that this book sets out to investigate. If you are compelled by that irresistible impulse to read dress, then you know that to do so is to peer into a world that is continually reconfigured round every new corner. I could not say how far an alertness to dress is as particular a facility as an ear for music or an aptitude for numbers, but I can easily believe in the deep and equal logic of our clothes, the subtle and complex ways they work in our lives.

I confess, from the start, that the thoughts gathered here come from my own irrepressible interest in matters of appearance and self-presentation. My eye is easily caught by a stranger's coat in a train carriage, my hand prone to drifting absently through any array of textures, my brain too readily disengaged from the task at hand and inclined instead to wonder about the sympathies and sensibilities made visible in the things worn by any passing body at any given moment. Yet I know, too, that the understanding won by this mode of wondering is not always wasted and that this form of engagement with the world can be humane, responsive and thoughtful. To care about clothes is to care about the people who make and wear them too. Each time we feel ourselves distracted by the colour of someone's cardigan or we straighten a friend's crooked tie, our clothes compel us to concede how susceptible we are to each other.

Some people love clothes: they collect them, clamour over them, take pains to present themselves correctly and consider their purchases with great care. For some of us, the making and wearing of clothes is an art form indicative of our discernment

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and the means by which we assert our distinction. For others, clothes fulfil a function, or provide a uniform, rarely meriting a thought beyond the requisite specifications of decency, the regulation of temperature and the unremarkable meeting of social mores. I write here for readers from both these houses (or wardrobes), since dress is, at its heart, really about memory, meaning and intimacy: the ties, if you like, that bind. In clothes, we are connected to other people and other places in complicated and unyielding ways.

The pleasure of dress comes easily: in the unexpected thickness of velvet into which our fingertips sink or a skinny knitted tie the exact colour of moss. Clothes can work upon us quickly – the suit that commands our attention with the authority it emanates, the fluorescent vest that warns us of the hazard from which we must swerve, the gown whose golden lustre summons our eye like a sunbeam in a darkened room. But the ubiquity of clothes means that we can be careless of them too. We rarely think to take the things we wear and hold them up to the light, inspecting them as objects of intellectual enquiry.

What do we talk about when we talk about clothes? Mostly, I think we are liable to lapse into truisms. Our 'identities are expressed' by them, we say vaguely, as though the boy in the Ramones T-shirt was the sum of what he wore and as though selfhood were a thing that could be articulated so effortlessly. Fashion historians, more usefully, trace the genealogy of corsets and conscientiously chronicle the Victorian dress reform movement. Ethno-sociologists identify the sartorial markers of subcultures in leather jackets and feathered headdresses. Formidably stylish bloggers swoon over the sumptuous details of

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designer wear. None of this explains what it feels like to pull on a padded coat on the first cold day of September. Why do some of us carry rucksacks and handbags spilling with stuff we *think* we need and can never find when we *do*? What is the peculiar peace that overcomes us when we peel off our shoes at the close of day? These are the questions that interest me.

It is true that, in times of crisis, what we wear can feel like the most trivial of concerns. But isn't it curious that so many of our most heated cultural disputes should circle around the right to wear particular clothes in particular circumstances? Think only of the dresses claimed by trans women, the near constant state of anxiety over the visibility of the Islamic veil in Europe, or the length of skirts regularly rebuked in cases of sexual assault. In our clothes we see our larger social crises play out. If I elect not to address these specific issues in this book, it is because you'll find the arguments around them rehearsed at length in innumerable other places. What strikes me, though, is how the undeniable politics of dress illuminates a paradox: we dismiss dress as the most superficial of subjects but we return to it too, again and again, in the critical debates of our time.

What I mean to say here is that life happens in clothes. In the chapters that follow, I focus on selected aspects of dress – gowns, suits, boots, animal skins, pockets and bags – identifying in each the articulation of a particular idea or dilemma. The depredations of violence and ageing, the longing for freedom, our illusions of civility and the erosion of privacy are the themes of this book. Underlying every chapter is a concern for the body – invested with authority as it is for men and subject to surveillance as it is for women. I write to both male and female readers here,

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and also to anybody for whom the conventions of gender can make the act of dressing an especially alienating or emancipatory practice. In the end, we are all of us returned to the fragility of our human form for which our clothes provide only the thinnest protection.

We are dressed. In all parts of culture – literature, music, film and art – we find the representation of clothes. They can be ordinary and unremarkable or glamorous and arresting, but they are *there*. I gather some of those representations together here in an effort to truly see our clothes, hoping to better understand how they function and what they might mean to us. In many ways, this is less a book about dresses and dinner jackets than about desire and denial, the fever and fret with which we love and are loved in clothes. Our deepest internal life is found in them. The garments we wear bear our secrets and betray us at every turn. I want to encourage us to put aside the distracting questions of what constitutes 'fashion', and move beyond the conventional discussions of identity, subcultures and social history. What I have in mind is something more expansive and open than that: a kind of philosophy of dress. I want to suggest that in dress we might find a way of apprehending the world, understanding it as it is expressed in an idiom that is found everywhere, if only we care to read it.

We are, everywhere, surrounded by ideas. For the most part, we unthinkingly suppose that they are found in the form of books and poems, visualised in buildings and paintings, expositied in philosophical propositions and mathematical deductions. Some ideas are born of dogged intellectual enquiry or diligent scientific discovery; they are taught in classrooms, a form of

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knowledge expressed in the mode of language, number and diagram. But what if clothes could be understood as ideas too, as fully formed and eloquent as any poem, painting or equation? What if in clothes the world could open up to us with the tug of a thread, its mysteries unravelling like the frayed edge of a sleeve? What if clothes were not simply reflective of personality, indicative of our banal preferences for grey over green, but more deeply imprinted with the ways human beings have lived, a material record of our experiences and an expression of our ambition? Could it be possible to understand the world in firmer, *felt* truths, in the perfect geometry of a notched lapel, the orderly measures of a pleated skirt, the stilled, skin-warmed perfection of a circlet of pearls?

For all the abstracted and elevated formulations of selfhood and the soul, interior life is so often *clothed*. Our memories tenaciously retain the texture and forms of dress. My own childhood replays itself as a jumble of sense impressions, often in the colour and shape of clothes – most unforgettably, an emerald green winter coat, fur-lined, hooded and belted, worn to the circus one afternoon, its silhouette so perfect that every coat after is a vain attempt at recovering it, caught at like a dream. I remember that coat and I see myself in it as I was then: a childish body, unbruised and uncurbed. We outgrow clothes, of course, and yet they stay with us, as though their fibres were imperceptibly threaded into our memory, winding through our experience. But our clothes do more even than this, sometimes more than we can know.

If through them we seek to declare our place in the world, our confidence and belonging, we do so under the veil of a

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deception. We select clothes painstakingly as though they didn't ruthlessly appoint us, indifferent to our intentions and contrary to our will. Old, favoured clothes can be loyal like lovers to our cause, when newer ones dazzle and deceive us. There is a naivety in the perilous ways that we trust in clothes because dress never promises to indemnify us, neither from external assault nor internal anguish. Skin turned to sunlight, some of us exult in exposure, as though unclothed we could be closer to truer, freer, more naked realities. E. M. Forster, misquoting Henry Thoreau, wryly cautions us to 'Mistrust all enterprises that require new clothes'. He has the slogan scrawled on a wardrobe belonging to the soulful George Emerson in *A Room with a View* (although there is another kind of closetedness we might read into Forster's own Edwardian elegance too). Our clothes can also provide refuge, acting as a canopy under which we shelter our most secret agonies. When despair echoes deep inside, dress can help us pacify and dull pain; a blazer and slacks somehow allay our vulnerability. Yet to trust that our clothes will keep our secrets is a seduction in itself.

Clothes can be the disguise in which we dissolve, the camouflage that allows us to keep something of ourselves in reserve, as though the only thing we are and own is that which we refuse to articulate in our outerwear. Or else they enable us to acknowledge our responsiveness to life, and we demonstrate it in the deft and quirky ways that we fix a belt, hang a tie, roll a sleeve. The clothes we love are like friends, they bear the softness of wear, skimming the various planes of our bodies, recalling the proportions that they seem almost to have learned by memory and habit. There are certain clothes that we long for and into

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which our limbs pour as soon as we find a private moment: the jumper in which you, at last, exhale at the close of day, the T-shirt that is the only thing pressed between you and your lover through the long hours of the night. We need not be the sort that wears our hearts on our sleeves for our clothes to already know everything we might say and many things for which we could never find words.

Writers sometimes find the words. In Edith Wharton's 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart concedes to herself the powerful truth of her passion for Laurence Selden:

> She was very near hating him now; yet the sound of his voice, the way the light fell on his thin, dark hair, the way he sat and moved and wore his clothes – she was conscious that even these trivial things were inwoven with her deepest life.

When we speak of things being 'woven together', we mean affinity, association, inseparability, but Wharton's 'inwoven' suggests yet more than this, something like an intimacy so close that it is constitutive. Her insight is more complex than the crass idea of clothing as an expression of character, more profound than the paradox of a surface that could speak of the inner self. Lily is bound to Laurence, not simply by some romantic pledge of affection but in the particularities of his being, as though the tightest seam ran back and forth between her slow-gathered sense impressions (his voice, his hair, his *clothes*) and the interior life to which they seem to reach. As Lily is to Laurence, we too are inwoven, bound up with things and the people to whom they belong or refer. To engage thoughtfully with clothes is to

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acknowledge the nature of objects and our utter entanglements with them. Isn't it possible that what we *are* could in some way be dispersed through the stuff of the world? Objects are imbued with the lives of those they serve, nicked, as they are, by incident, worn by habit and warmed by touch. Our clothes are closest of all.

For Karl Marx, clothes perfectly epitomised the mystification of objects that he saw as symptomatic of modern culture. When he described the world in the language of labour and economy in *Capital*, his treatise of 1867, it was a coat that exemplified the distorted nature of all commodities in a capitalist society. This, he understood first hand. Down on his luck one summer, he deposited his overcoat with a pawnbroker and found himself barred entry to the reading rooms of the British Museum without the appropriate attire. What was it about objects like coats, that they could so magically open doors and bestow permissions? Not even a coat belonging to Marx could evade the ineluctable mechanisms of capitalist exchange.

All commodities, including coats, it seemed to him, were mysterious things, loaded with significance, drawing their value not from the labour invested in their production but instead from the abstract, often ugly and always competitive social relations of capitalism. Commodities, as Marx understood it, were alienated from the workers who made them. He observed how the mundane and repetitive making of such objects exhausted their will and drained their vivacity, and he noted too the perversity with which a commodity could, in turn, appropriate and imitate the qualities of a human being, as though they possessed a diabolical life of their own.

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Clothes present that awful mimicry with a particular acuity. Think of the swaggering braggadocio of the newest trainers with their insouciantly swishing insignias, the dress that seems in possession of its own flirtatious personality as it swings on a store hanger, or the dangerously vertiginous heels that speak of a leisurely life without exertion, worlds away from that of the worker who made them. Garments enter the market seemingly untouched, the prints of the working hands through which they have passed wiped clean. Marx's criticism here is not so much directed at the garment itself but the values with which it is imbued. When he condemned the all-consuming 'commodity fetishism' of modern culture, he derived the term from the Portuguese *feitiço*, meaning charm or sorcery, referring specifically to the West African practice of object worship witnessed by fifteenth-century sailors. To the fetish, worshippers could attribute the kinds of magical properties that such objects did not possess in reality. In the same way, modern capitalism, it seemed to Marx, traded on the supernatural life of objects.

Clothes are not exempt from eliciting false idolatry. We sing the praises of shoes, dresses, jackets and bags as though they were in possession of an inherent power, a spirit or a soul. We attribute to them stories and character, and blot out their real origins, the hardships of mass production and the working conditions from which they come. The things that we wear bear the touch of the people who construct them. Marx theorised this in the nineteenth century, but the truth of it is as pressing for us now as it was for him then. As the rapid production cycles of 'fast fashion' render our garments increasingly disposable, it seems more important than ever to pause and to reflect on our

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clothes. If our clothes mean something to us, so too must the people who make them. And if we are to reshape the fashion and textiles industry for a sustainable future, then we must believe that there is more to our clothes than it first appears.

'Appearance' is itself an elusive term. In philosophy, it belongs to epistemology and tiresomely technical discussions about the limits of knowledge and the nature of perception. It is almost always disconnected from matters of dress. Plato, puzzling over how to distinguish between appearance and reality in the 'allegory of the cave', reveres the disclosure of truth and deplores the dissimulations that keep us from it. His mistrustful assessment that appearances can be deceptive lastingly shapes the tradition of thought that follows. For Immanuel Kant too, in the eighteenth century, the question of appearance is strictly philosophical, concerned with the thorny relationship between the reality of things 'as they really are' (*noumena*) and the limited ways in which we perceive them (*phenomena*). When Friedrich Nietzsche returns to the question of appearance in nineteenth-century philosophy, though, it is with wild enthusiasm for Dionysian disguises. Truth, as he figures it, *appears* as variable surfaces and masquerades, and he exhorts us to relish in its transformative possibilities. 'Truth is a mobile army of metaphors,' he explains, subject to 'translation and decoration'. It is not a disembodied abstraction, and the question of who we are is fused with the matter of how we appear.

This idea that 'being' and 'appearing' might be entangled, rather than opposed, is an alluring and persuasive one. How could we think that our experiences of selfhood were not shaped by many things, including clothes? When we disregard dress,

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relegating it as a superficial concern, we obstruct a mode of understanding ourselves and others. As the critic Susan Sontag demurs, contra Plato, maybe there is 'no opposition between a style one assumes and one's true being . . . In almost every case our manner of appearing *is* our manner of being.' We think that the truth is naked, but perhaps, instead, it is dressed up, changing day to day, eluding any easy grasp. We *are* in clothes. Perhaps we are *most* ourselves in the things we wear.

And yet, when we overthink our appearance, we hazard accusations of narcissism, as though self-concern were an impropriety. In the ancient Greek story, Narcissus is the prettiest youth with glossy hair and an ivory neck. Driven to distraction by the beauty reflected back to him in a woodland pool, he turns inward and away from life. His error is partly vanity, but mainly stupidity. He is the unthinking idiot, unable to recognise how the water only presents his own image back to him. He lends his unhappy name to a pathological self-centredness, but isn't narcissism only a naive version of the self-consciousness to which philosophy has directed us for centuries?

Freud discerns in the phenomenon of narcissism an instinct for self-preservation, 'a measure of which', he argues, 'may justifiably be attributed to every living creature'. This narcissism, he claims, forms part of our necessary infantile development since it describes the promiscuous ways in which we see ourselves in all things, our toys, our trinkets and our mothers alike. The entire world returns to us an inflated sense of ourselves, but this also tethers us to it in turn. This is a narcissism predicated on a fundamental sense of relatedness that means we cannot retreat from the world as Narcissus does. We are, instead, inextricably

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caught up in it for it is in the world that we find ourselves and in which we see ourselves.

And *seeing* ourselves, both literally and metaphorically, somehow finding a way to hold us up to our own inspection, is a profound task. The narcissist need not be stupidly self-absorbed. They can possess a vigilant and critical form of self-consciousness; they can be wry and ironic. When we fashion ourselves artfully and attentively, we are open to accusations of vanity and pretension, but the ability to imagine ourselves outside of ourselves is an important philosophical strategy. To reflect on the ways in which we are seen is also to pose questions about authenticity. How far are we able to present our inward selves with outward accuracy? Are there ever any moments that we make ourselves 'real' or 'true' to others?

Seeing ourselves can be a burden too, of course. This is made manifest in the dutiful ways we self-regulate, assessing our appearance against exacting ideals of beauty, propriety and age. Our clothes can be cruel, forcing us to confront our everyday attrition and our ineluctable mortality. When we dress, we see our bodies as mutable things, not always within the limits of our control. This is painful perhaps, but it is a vulnerability we all share, and as soon as we extend our imagination to the possibility of others, we form the basis of ethical relationships. When we disconsolately lament our fluctuating weight, our washed-out skin and our tired clothes, the kindness we deny ourselves we might extend more sympathetically to others with the understanding of our own imperfections.

Are these kinds of self-reflections always wasteful? We are accustomed to the idea of a contract-based culture of rights and

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responsibilities in which we abide by laws and fulfil obligations, but we might also think about the ways in which civic society is predicated on ideas of self-cultivation, not far removed from narcissism. We can 'care for the self' as the ancient Greeks once advised. This is what the French philosopher Michel Foucault contemplated towards the end of his life, his body pitilessly ravaged by Aids-related illness. To take care of oneself is to attend with great concern to every aspect of one's being, 'taking pains with one's holdings and one's health' alike, he explained. Self-care can take the form of writing, reading, eating and exercising, he lists, and in these activities we cultivate in ourselves a dignity that we might attribute to all human beings. Rather than bending inward like Narcissus, we can be selves that turn out to the world, open to the enquiry and engagement of others. This is self-care, not in the vein of Ayn Rand's rational egoism, but a mode of well-being based on a collective vision of society and our obligations to it.

'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation,' declares the black feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde, in the epilogue to her book *A Burst of Light* (1988), 'and that is an act of political warfare.' Here, self-care is not an excess of vanity but a way to insist on your own value in an oppressive culture disinclined to prize your particular body and being. Our acts of self-care are most powerful of all in a society that insists that we are not worthy of it. Working with a group of South African activists in the struggle against apartheid, Lorde recalls with tender detail how the women 'are sewing, sweeping the dirt ground of the yard, hanging out clothes in the sunlight at the edge of the enclosure, washing, combing each other's hair'. Later, in her

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own struggle with cancer, she asserts her sense of 'responsibility for attending my own health. I cannot simply hand over that responsibility to anybody else,' she explains, since acts of self-care are 'crucial strategies in my battle for living. They also provide me with important prototypes for doing battle in all other arenas of my life.' We care for ourselves, because if not us, then who? The dignity that we grant ourselves, we realise, can extend to all others equally. And the most profound parts of our lives – the intellectual enquiries that preoccupy and the moral questions that trouble – none of that can be abstracted from the bodily forms we inhabit and the social conditions in which we suffer hardship.

But what we come to know by caring for ourselves is the hardest truth of all. Our bodies are not unchanging and they will not last forever. We take pleasure in clothes perhaps because they seem to deny death, offering up endless possibilities for transformation and alteration. We can accomplish this in clumsy ways – the glasses that you hope might lend you gravity, the padded bra that fills out a flat chest – but in innumerably subtle ways too – the heel that imperceptibly cants the body and contracts your stride, the tie that stiffens your neck and straightens your spine. We can experiment with our image, as though renewal were always available to us. In the end though, seams tear and fabrics fray. Our clothes will fall apart. So will we.

There are some garments that we feel *closely*, which make apparent the difference of their textures to that of the surface of our skin, reminding us that we and they are not one. They can cause us discomfort, palpably constricting, itching and chafing – the shoes that are a half-size too small and which make your toe

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throb the whole day long, the buttoned collar that closes uncomfortably around your neck. These clothes alert us to the fact of our bodies in a way that can feel at odds with the rest of the world that glides past, apparently undisturbed. They sit in contrast to other garments that we wear almost imperceptibly, that are so light or diaphanous that they are hardly seen or felt, as though we were sheathed in air. Clothing continually places us in a relationship to a body that we can forget or deny but in which we always are.

The transformations that our clothes can enable are exciting, but they can also dislodge our self-assurance. How, for instance, can it be that we so easily emulate others in what we wear? When we adopt each other's style, we reveal how interchangeable and indistinct we really are. We make light of costumes, but their very possibility contests what we regard as our unique personhood. If I can glibly dress as someone else, how, then, are any of us ourselves at all? Anxieties about authenticity linger under the surface of all forms of dress. We seek clothes that we think 'are us', and there is an implicit insolence in the ready-to-wear, off-the-rail garments we rifle through, something unsettling in the idea that our precise measurements could be, instead, revealed as generic or average.

At other times, though, there can be immense tenderness, close to tragedy, in the different ways that our clothes tell the stories of a self that is subject to all kinds of alteration: the bittersweetness of growing into a coat inherited from a long-gone parent, remembering a forgotten life in the work shirt worn for a job you have left behind, throwing out the trainers for the runner that you no longer are, or folding away the maternity dress

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you will never have cause to wear again. Sometimes, there is, in dress, only anguish: the garments that bring to you the memory of someone you once loved and will never see again, the blood-stain on a T-shirt from that most terrible of days.

Death – and love – is never very far from dress. The French philosopher Roland Barthes, in his 1980 study of photography, *Camera Lucida*, pores over one particular image of his mother. The photograph captures her as a tiny child, decked in a stiff white dress from under which peep the smallest boots. Over the course of the book, he delineates an idea of the 'punctum', the detail in any given picture that penetrates, and by which we establish a relationship with the object or person represented to us. The punctum is the pinprick that startles, the part of an image that opens it up, suddenly permitting us to see more deeply and to understand differently. Searching the grey and grainy photograph of his mother, Barthes finds the punctum in her unbearably small hands, observing how she 'hold[s] one finger in the other hand, as children often do, in an awkward gesture'. But there is something in the fullness of the dress and the scuffed shoes too: a certain innocence that wounds.

Barthes's mother had died a year prior to the writing of *Camera Lucida*, and the book weighs with his grief. He would write of her death in his diary with piercing insight:

> One doesn't forget, but something *atonal* installs itself in you . . . Grief . . . is a sort of deposit, of rust, of mud . . . a bitterness of the heart. I say to myself . . . how barbaric it is not to believe in souls – in the immortality of souls. What a stupid form of truth materialism is.

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Barthes didn't believe in souls, and it made his grief intolerable. When we talk of the truth of materialism, we mean how fortunate and clever we are to no longer believe in God or in the truth of insubstantial souls, and how enlightened to believe instead in the truth of real things: of stuff. Perhaps stuff compared to souls is prosaic, boxy, ungraceful in some way, but stuff is also a solace to us, since it allows for there to be truth in things. Materials tell us truth; materials *are* a kind of *truth*.

What Barthes knows is that we are the bodies our parents give and the beings they make us, that our whole lives are continuous, faltering attempts to reshape the fates they consign us to. Our relationship with our parents is gravely weighted with desire – to know them, be like them, live up to them, have them love and forgive us, never to lose and always to run from them. We can inherit their things – an antique sari, a battered pair of rain boots, a set of twisted cufflinks – but those things only suggest their inscrutability even more, crushing us with the sense that the people we love best, are, in curious ways, those we know least. The clothes that our parents once wore and leave behind alert us to their interior life, the unseen, ever-present companion to all their experiences, of which we can have no part.

In Barthes's earlier work, *A Lover's Discourse* (1977), he writes of a ribbon belonging to Goethe's Young Werther, that having been 'touched by the loved being's body [it] becomes part of that body'. Werther kisses the knot of ribbon Charlotte has given him, the letter she has written, the pistols she has touched, because, Barthes notes, 'From the loved being emanates a power nothing can stop.' Each consecrated object becomes like 'the stone of Bologna', which by night radiates with the light it has

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