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The Un-Corseted Body and the Retro-Future of Pre-Raphaelite Dress

Modernity has rarely been purely modernist; instead it has always encompassed and unfolded some mix of modern and anti-modern elements. In his *Beyond Good and Evil* (1882), Nietzsche, who is generally perceived as a primary voice of the modernism of Victorian and our own times, spoke of “a portentous simultaneousness of Spring and Autumn,” where everything is pregnant with its contrary:

At this turning-point of history there manifest themselves, side by side, and often mixed and entangled together, a magnificent, manifold, virgin-forest-like up-growth and up-striving, a kind of Tropical Tempo in the rivalry of growth, and an extraordinary decay and self-destruction, [...] a portentous simultaneousness of Spring and Autumn.¹

As Marshall Berman, the author of *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, claims, the contradictory nature of modernity stemmed from the “sense of living in two worlds simultaneously.” On the one hand, the public shared the feeling of living in a revolutionary age that generated explosive upheavals in personal, social and political lives. This is a landscape of steam engines, automated factories, railways and vast new industrial zones; a land of teeming cities that grew overnight, often with dreadful human consequences; a communicative zone of daily newspapers, telegraphs and other mass media, spreading news of increasingly strong national states and multinational aggregations of capital, of new art, technological innovations and social policies. At the same time, the 19th-century modern public could remember, and often wished to bring back or revive, what it was like to live, materially and spiritually, in worlds that were not modern at all. People could

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*, ch. IX “What is Noble?”. 1882, para. 262, www.marxists.org.

see that the spectacular growth they witnessed did not offer much solidity and stability, but instead was capable of appalling waste and utter devastation of all fixed, fast-frozen concepts, relations and policies.² As a result, Nietzsche states, a troubled individual desperately needed “a set of Jaws of his own ... for self-preservation, self-heightening, self-awakening, self-liberation” to initiate a revolution against the totality of modern existence. “Our instincts can now run back in all sorts of directions,” the author continues, but the typical type of the modern man throws himself into parodies of the past: he needs history because it is the storage closet where all the costumes are kept, but instead of comfort he experiences moments of despair over the fact that no social role in modern times suits him:

The hybrid European [...] requires a costume: he needs history as a storeroom of costumes. To be sure, he notices that none of the costumes fit him properly—he changes and changes. Let us look at the nineteenth century with respect to these hasty preferences and changes in its masquerades of style, and also with respect to its moments of desperation on account of “nothing suiting” us. It is in vain to get ourselves up as romantic, or classical, or Christian, or Florentine, or barocco, or “national,” in moribus et artibus: it does not “clothe us”!³

This inner modern/anti-modern dichotomy is visible in numerous examples of Victorian ideas and policies of progress, modernization and modernism being balanced with notions and acts of decay, regression or sentimentalism. A good example of such a dichotomy in times of mid-Victorian modernity is the Pre-Raphaelite dress. This artistic dress of the mid-19th century, designed, painted and photographed by such artist as William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti or John Everett Millais, kept its distance from the modern dress of the time by drawing inspiration – artistic and social – from a vision of the 14th century. On the other hand, the free drapery and un-corseted body on the Pre-Raphaelite dress became an important part of the Victorian vision and debate of what it means to be and look modern for a Victorian woman. Thus, the dress might be seen as a morally and aesthetically regressive reaction against the ugliness of modern industrial civilization and, at the same time, as a progressive style setting the tone and artistic expression for reformed modernity. The purpose of this article is to discuss the un-corseted dress of the Victorian era as an expression of cultural contradictions brought about by the advent of modernity.

The modern paradox of the Pre-Raphaelite dress partly stems from being a critical reaction against the mid-Victorian fashionable corseted dress that

² Marshall Berman. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. New York 1982, pp. 17-19.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, op. cit., ch. 7 “Our Virtues”, para. 223, www.marxists.org.

also shares the ambivalence of being simultaneously modern and anti-modern. In the 19th century, the corset was playing out a contradiction between, on the one hand, the Victorian secularity of capitalism dedicated to material success, economic expansion, the preaching of the machine, consumption, luxurious living and a hedonistic attempt to emphasize the human body, and on the other hand, the Victorian revival of Christian ascetics that tended to despise the sensual and the corporal, and suffused sexuality with a sense of sinfulness and guilt about the body.⁴

The fashionable dress, with the help of a whalebone corset – a wonder of modern technical invention – helped to reconfigure the body's shape, meeting the norms of the modern industrial aesthetics that preached artifice and perfection divorced from nature's reality. The corseted dress provided the fashionable, modern look of the day, and it fulfilled the modernist desire for novelty, change and creative appearance. At the same time, the corset paradoxically met the norms of rule-abiding conservatism – it signified the female body's impermeability as well as women's social, economic and political oppression⁵ – and thus projected anti-modernity in times of increasing freedoms and mobility. The artificial look of a doll based on the anomaly of the natural female form was considered unhealthy, impractical, and aesthetically displeasing.⁶ At the same time it was recognised as the most natural look, reflective of a woman's natural willingness to obey and submit, even though the corset was blamed for making woman incapable of performing her main 'natural' duty of procreation.⁷ In the Victorian public debate, thus, the corset became both joining point and the dividing line between nature and artifice, projecting the ambivalence of being simultaneously modern and anti-modern.⁸

⁴ For more on the clash of values concerning the corset see: Helen E. Roberts. "The exquisite slave: the role of clothes in the making of the Victorian woman". *Signs*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 554-569; David Kunzle. "The corset as erotic alchemy: from Rococo Galanterie to Montaut's Physiologies", in *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art 1730-1970*. Ed. Thomas B. Hess & Linda Nochlin. New York 1972, pp. 91-165; Harold Coda. *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed*. New York 2011, p. 72; Kimberly Wahl. *Dressed as in a Painting. Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform*. Durham 2013, p. XXVI.

⁵ Helena Michie. "Under Victorian Skins: The Bodies Beneath", in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ed. T. F. Tucker. Oxford 1999, pp. 409-411.

⁶ Stella Mary Newton. *Health, Art, and Reason: Dress Reformers of the Nineteenth Century*. London 1974, pp. 31-32.

⁷ Mel Davies. "Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 24, no. 4 (October 1982) pp. 611-641.

⁸ Elizabeth Wilson. *Adorned in Dreams. Fashion and Modernity*. London 2014, p. 95.

Although many commentators criticized the corseted figure, few acceptable alternatives existed for women. Those who chose not to wear a corset were typically associated with two movements, Rational dress (also called Hygienic or Reform Dress), or Artistic Dress (including Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic dresses). With roots in the 1840s and 1850s, at a peak of industrialisation and of ‘unnatural’ and ‘distortive’ fashion, the two movements aimed to reform women’s dress to reflect philosophical, artistic and medical agendas,⁹ spreading the cry of truth to the natural in dress.¹⁰

Rational dress was designed against the restrictiveness and impracticality of women’s corseted outfits. The movement launched first in America where in the 1850s feminists such as Amelia Bloomer, Mary Walker and Elizabeth Stanton criticized the use of corsets and the numerous petticoats necessary to achieve the thin waist and broad hemline of the time. Instead, they donned a loosened corset and shortened skirt over wide-legged trousers, called ‘bloomers’. In Britain, very few women accepted and adopted the Bloomer costume, which was used for athletics only. In fact major steps toward rational dress reform began in the 1880s with the foundation of the Rational Dress Society, the Rational Dress Association and the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union.¹¹ Their recommendations concerning women’s dress are best seen in specific criteria called “Requirements of a Perfect Dress”:

1. Freedom of movement
2. Absence of any pressure over any parts of the body
3. No more weight than is necessary for warmth, and both weight and warmth evenly distributed.
4. Grace and beauty combined with comfort and convenience.
5. Not departing too conspicuously from ordinary dress at the time.¹²

⁹ The most popular and acknowledged of the proponents are (chronologically): Alexander Walker. *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Women*. London 1836; David Ramsay Hay. *The Geometric Beauty of the Human Figure Defined*. Edinburgh and London 1851; H. R. Haweis. *The Art of Dress*. London 1879; Mrs E. M. King. *Rational Dress, or the Dress of Women and Savages*. London 1882; Edward W. Godwin. “Dress and Its Relation to Health and Climate” in *Handbook for the International Health Exhibition*. London 1884; Ada S. Balin. *The Science of Dress in Theory and Practice*. London 1885; also the writings of Oscar and Lucy Wilde, Walter Crane, G. F. Watts, and the journal *Aglaia: The Journal of the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union* (1893).

¹⁰ Stella Mary Newton, op. cit., p. 6.

¹¹ Patricia A. Cunningham. *Politics, Health, and Art. Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850-1920*. Kent 2003, p. 33.

¹² The Rational Dress Association, *Exhibition Catalogue*, Prince’s Hall, Piccadilly, May 1883. Quoted in Patricia A. Cunningham, op. cit., p. 69.

The rational dress-reform societies, thus, were concerned with both aspects of Victorian modernity in dress – being modern and looking modern – as they emphasized mobility, comfort, health, rationality and beauty in dress but not at the expense of the contemporary, fashionable look. This was partly the reason why the dress became quickly a widely accepted look.

Until 1880, however, in Britain the only existing alternative to the fashionable corseted dress was the Pre-Raphaelite dress, and it is widely recognized that the reform dress was heavily influenced by this artistic style. The focus is, then, on how the dress of the Re-Raphaelite Brotherhood, that in many respects was clearly anti-modern, could become the basis for a modern alternative look. The foundational years of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood succeed Augustus Pugin's *Contrasts* (1836) – which argues for a revival of medieval aesthetics, faith, and social structures – and precede William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890) – which presents a utopian vision of the revival of craftsmanship. The Pre-Raphaelite dress was created in the early stage of the movement, spanning 1849-52, when the movement focused on religious and literary figures as the primary subject matter with high moral stakes and psychological tension.

The artistic Pre-Raphaelite dress originated from the ideas and work of two important social philosophers of the time, John Ruskin and William Morris. In 1848, inspired by Ruskin who advocated the study of art and nature as a spiritual, moral pursuit, three young artists at the Academy of Art in London – William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Everett Millais – formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and other artists such as Ford Madox Brown and Edward Burne-Jones came to be associated with them. The second wave of Pre-Raphaelites, including Edward Burne-Jones and Rossetti, worked closely with William Morris and Walter Crane, playing an active role in the Arts and Crafts Movement and holding strong critical views upon contemporary fashion.¹³

The design of Pre-Raphaelite dress stemmed from the conceptual principles of the Brotherhood art. Aiming to reform contemporary art, the Pre-Raphaelites rejected the mannerism and conventions of academic painting rooted in the High Italian Renaissance and mechanical mass reproduction, and strove for spiritual intensity and adherence to nature. The medieval period offered particular inspiration, for in the view of the Brotherhood, its art offered patterns of true beauty, spiritual depth and moral insight.

One of the main departures the Pre-Raphaelites made from contemporary pictorial conventions was through their representation of the human anatomy.¹⁴

¹³ Tim Barringer. *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*. New Haven 2012, pp. 26-42.

¹⁴ Lisa Michelle Hoffman-Reyes. *Subversive Beauty – Victorian Bodies of Expression*. Graduate Theses and Dissertations, University of South Florida, 2014, p. 37. www.scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5042.