

Le mot dans la mode: Fashion and literary journalism in nineteenth-century France



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- 01 Edmond Morin, *Outfit for the first days of autumn*, from *La Dernière Mode*, no. 1, 6 September 1874
- 02 Grandville, *Théophile Gautier, Honoré de Balzac et Frédérick Lemaitre*, ca. 1840

This is an essay about temptation: the temptation for a man to dress up as a woman, the temptation to write about clothing, and the temptation to leave the secure grounds of literary production for the transitory and ephemeral field of fashion journalism. The following text seeks to explain why such temptation proved quite irresistible for a number of famous nineteenth-century authors in France, and what this says about the relationship between literature and fashion and, significantly, about establishing a discourse and a mode of presentation for fashion writing. The setting for this discourse is Paris in the period between 1830 and 1880. Within these fifty years the notion of what fashion could achieve as a topic of literary discourse changed considerably, and with it the texts on fashion themselves underwent a significant transformation towards an unprecedented degree of autonomy.

In order to highlight some of these changes, the present text proposes to look at three writers: Honoré de Balzac, Jules Barbey d'Aureville and Stéphane Mallarmé. Such a selection does not, of course, exhaust the list of Parisian novelists or poets who have written about fashion, let alone account for the many writers around Europe who contributed to texts on dress and accessories. In the Netherlands, for instance, one could mention an author like Nicolaas Beets, who in his early work under the pseudonym Hildebrand pursued a related (and also satirical) discourse on finery and quotidian life. What unites Balzac, Barbey d'Aureville and Mallarmé in their relevance to the present discussion is the fact that they all chose a female pseudonym to author their texts, and thus reversed and even subverted expectations of contemporary literary production – most prominently the one which purported that if one aspired to succeed as a progressive novelist or poet, one better not be female, a fact that George Sand in France or George Eliot in Britain also found at the same time.

The three male authors selected also toyed with the appropriateness of the subject matter. They introduced fashion as a subject of literary contemplation, as a substantial field of investigation, and importantly as an indicator of a new sensibility that was to pervade the second half of the nineteenth century, namely the notion of



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modernity. By modernity, or better, *modernité* as Théophile Gautier's neologism of 1852 would have it, I mean the idea of a modern culture, a form of production of objects in the arts that expressively represents the material and sensory manifestation of contemporary life and embraces fleeting and changeable nature as an important hallmark. Gone were the times when artists had to follow the classical canon and emulate models from antiquity to communicate contemporary ideas. Gautier wrote in his review of the annual Parisian art exhibition of the *Salon*:

Therefore one is wrong to effect a certain revulsion or at least a certain disdain for purely contemporary expressions. For our part, we think that there are new effects and unexpected aspects in the intelligent and faithful representation of what we call modernity [*modernité*]. Thus when it comes to portraits one has to shake off the slavery of the old masters [...]. More than anybody else the portraitist can provide the idea of his epoch and make his painting bear an exact date [...]. The three portraits exhibited by him [Édouard Dubufe] [...] express with spiritual negligence the affectations of an idle dilettantism, his quick sketches of the *high life* are surprising in the nonchalance of the attitudes they portray. Above all, they are moderns, modern in their poses,

in their intentions, in their clothes and accessories.¹

Immediately, one comes to recognize the connection between *mode et modernité*, the need to dress contemporary expressions in contemporary fashion, and to articulate through the very medium of clothing and accessories the relevance of the present – not only as an immediate environment to situate a discourse but as a philosophical present, a present of mind and an understanding of history in which the present is not a foil for the achievements of the past or a reductive base from which the future must be shaped, but becomes a temporal entity that is activated and thus dominant as *experience*. The problem that such activation of the present, such insistence on the immediacy of experience, such single-minded pursuit of the now, posed in view of a possible substantial investigation, was often brushed aside. To highlight the importance of the present, and of the fashion within it, as indicator and visual primer, often led not to a discourse on fashion but simply a fashionable discourse, where the use or observation of a contemporary style was seen as relevant enough, while the interpretation of its meaning of the wider cultural structure that contained it, was largely ignored. The virtue of the texts by Balzac, Barbey d'Aurevilly and Mallarmé lies in their simultaneous adherence to fashion and the contemplation of what such a deliberate manoeuvre means for contemporary art.

Here, the text arrives at a discursive break in order to explain briefly why, beyond notions of the contemporary and the coinage of *modernité*, time itself becomes an important topic of investigation in the nineteenth century. It marks an understanding that differs from the mechanistic perception of time in the Enlightenment that had privileged the scientific measurement of temporal passage or its commodification through standardized time zones and timepieces. The nineteenth-century perception of time can be labelled phenomenological in the original sense, that is as an experience of the subject. The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote in his *Phenomenology of Experience of Spirit* (originally *Phänomenologie der Erfahrung*

des Geistes or, later, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*) on the manner in which spirit (*Geist*) develops within the perspective of time so that it completely actualizes itself through a variety of stages. (Hegel may have conceived this notion of spirit from Schelling's concept of 'intuition', although in his text Hegel singles out Schelling's intuition for criticism.) This spirit, therefore, has a *telos* – a purpose or goal – and it is meant to be actualized. Such a notion, developed by Hegel in around 1806-07, subsequently fed into a perception of time as proposed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson who, in his first book *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, published in 1889, wrote a reply to the Kantian notion of freedom belonging to a realm outside time and space. Bergson offers a two-fold response to the Enlightenment concept of natural causality. On the one hand, in order to define consciousness and therefore freedom, Bergson proposes to differentiate between time and space. On the other hand, through this differentiation, he defines the immediate data of consciousness as being temporal, as *duration* (*la durée*). In duration there is no juxtaposition of events; therefore there is no causality. It is in the duration that we can speak of the experience of freedom. To understand the conception of *durée/duration*, Bergson proposed the example of two spools, with a tape running between them, one spool unwinding the tape, the other winding it up. Duration resembles this image, according to Bergson, because, as we grow older, our future grows smaller and our past larger. The benefit of this image is that it presents a continuity of experiences without juxtaposition. Yet there is a drawback: because a tape moves between the two spools, the image presents the duration as being homogeneous, as if one could fold the tape back over its other parts, as if the tape could be superimposed, implying that two moments in consciousness might be identical. But Bergson clarifies in a later essay that 'no two moments are identical in a conscious being'. Duration, for Bergson, is continuity of progress and heterogeneity; moreover, in this very image one can also see that duration implies a conservation of the past.

Time therefore emerged as a significant and, moreover, constant topic for the nineteenth century. To reiterate: time appeared not prin-

cipally as mechanistic but phenomenological,² that is as an experiential subjective response to an age in which the notion of speeding up time, of increasing temporal change, coincided with economic and political developments, most notably with progressive industrialization in France (as well Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries) and with an increasing number of revolts, uprisings and revolutions which, through their ephemerality and relatively short political existence before they fell back into restorative tendencies, provided very rapid successions of contrasting events. Time appeared as lived through at any moment. People became conscious of passing time and of the past as an increasingly ambivalent point of reference. For example, the constant reassessment in France of the nature and impact of the Revolution of 1789/91 throughout the nineteenth century and of events like the July Revolution of 1830, the February Revolution of 1848 and the Commune of 1871, evoked the past as a continuous point of reference yet broke this temporal continuum by bringing up time and again the character of 1789 or 1791 (the bourgeois or Jacobin Revolution, respectively) as a historically changing model, in which certain aspects were omitted or written into at various points in time.

Fashion, as the supreme expression of the transitory, timely and constantly changing, became a focus for those who, on both sides, wanted to praise or attack the perception of time as an insubstantial, non-linear, irrational conceit. On the one hand the evocation of past styles came to the fore in Romanticism, when medieval and early modern dress codes were re-tailored for use in the 1830s and 1840s. Yet such sartorial quotations were attacked for their insubstantiality, and, as we will see a bit later on, the increasing tempo in which these past references followed one another led to a breathless production of representations and irritation by consumers. On the other hand the changing market for fashions, reflected in the fashion journals which will be discussed here, reflected changing modes of production, an increasing range in distribution and growing sophistication in consumption. All these generated the formation of a fashion industry proper around the middle of the nineteenth century.

And this formation required a less fixed, less rigid perception of time, of duration and historic significance, to allow for rapid changes in styles, trends and manifestations.

We can see therefore a context for the progressive formulation of *la mode* throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed the word itself in the singular with its female gender was only first recorded circa in 1845 (while the masculine *le mode*, as in *mode d'emploi* – manual – had existed in the French language since 1380). Correspondingly, a forum for the commercial representation and publication of fashion had to come into contemporary existence, too.

The linear discourse of this text will now be interrupted once more to take a very quick look at the origins of fashion journals, from the French Revolution to the second half of the nineteenth century, as an environment for the writing of Balzac, Barbey d'Aurevilly and Mallarmé between 1830 and 1880. The first fashion journal proper is the *Cabinet des Modes*, which appeared in 1785 in Paris, preceding the actual political Revolution by four years but certainly occurring at a time of considerable social and economic instability. Although the journal was destined to be read by the existing aristocracy of the *Ancien Régime*, it still pointed towards the feeling of change that would allow new 'bourgeois' consumers to become part of its subscription base. The political, social and economic ambiguities of the years before 1789 here generated a sense of immediacy of movement that could act as *raison d'être* for the commercial forum for the transitory and ephemeral that is fashion.

In order to understand what distinguishes a fashion journal from other publications that deal with decorative trends or the latest occurrences in culture (either as original contributions or as reviews), it might be useful to provide a taxonomy for this species of commercial writing. The fashion journal had to appear regularly, feature current or the latest fashions, provide a mixture of text and image, profess to being serious about fashion (i.e. refrain from obvious satire), and although it might contain other subjects in separate review sections, to define fashion as pertaining to dress and accessories. The fashion journal came into being

because a new medium was required to advertise the latest developments in dress that would supersede the extravagant and costly custom of dispatching fashion dolls that were made-up and attired according to contemporary trends from Paris to the provinces and European courts, as Marie Antoinette's dressmaker Rose Bertin was wont to do until the 1780s. Also, the development and wide application of new printing techniques for engravings, etchings and lithographs in the nineteenth century would aide the establishing of parity between new forms of writing, that is the listing, describing and evocation of dress as the semantic equal to the material record of clothes within contemporary visual representation.

In the very origin of the new fashion journals that replaced the erstwhile fashion almanac or traditional bound collection of fashion plates, that is as a publication that significantly featured a written discourse on fashion, one comes to recognize a curious phenomenon: *the description of fashion without its materiality*. This means the mention of a dress design in terms of name or evocation only, not in terms of a detailed description as such. This phenomenon, to be sure, emerged from the aforementioned profusion of fashion imagery which accompanied the text, but it also gave rise to something that is crucial to the understanding of the manner in which literary writers used female pseudonyms and a distinct style of writing – one is almost tempted to say 'tone of voice' – for their fashion texts. To evoke the dress without description generated a self-referential discourse that assumed knowledge on behalf of the readership in regard to cut, fabric, colour, etc. of dressing, so that its actual materiality was largely superfluous. This created the intimacy that characterized many commercial writings on fashion, not simply for the socially codified 'confessional' between affluent female friends about dress styles and novelties, but also for the secrecy that marked out the early consumer of a new trend. Here, intimacy created a forum for the conceptual and economic exclusivity in temporal and material terms that could only be effected by a female character for her female readership. A male writer would not be readily accepted into the fold of such an exchange – for reasons of sexual difference, and thus

because of overtones of a non-sanctioned form of intimacy. This secrecy might also be traced back to sumptuary laws that have traditionally regulated the consumption of clothing. Any transgression of these laws, which were decreed regularly to socially codify garments and accessories but simultaneously gave rise to the important aspect of emulation or conspicuous consumption, especially in fashion, was best committed in an intimate or exclusive environment before it became apparent over time to a wider public.

In the case of the *Cabinet des Modes*, the subscribers were addressed as male – *chers abonnés* – because only men were able to commit themselves financially by means of a signature, even if the readership consisted of their wives and lovers. However, after 1788 this changed and the magazine acknowledged its principally female readership, which also began to benefit from the increased status and educational possibilities that allowed for greater literacy and cultural consumption among bourgeois and aristocratic women. Important to note in conjunction with this aspect of intimacy is the performative character of fashion journals up to 1830. They were not used for solitary consumption but were often read in a shared fashion during afternoon *vistes* or *soirées*, i.e. as a communicative device that allowed for the semi-public display of sophistication, inside knowledge and expertise in regard to dress styles.

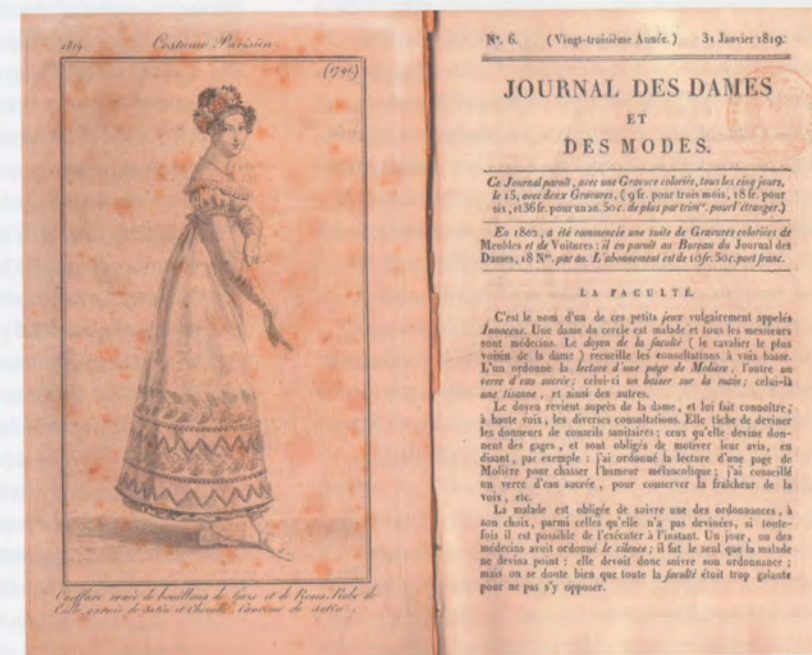
From the outset, too, a new vocabulary emerged, generated especially by the need to describe or evoke colours. Not all fashion plates were coloured, not even in very exclusive publications, and certainly they were not good enough to represent the precise shade and tone that weaver and designer had created. Therefore language was needed to provide signifiers through adjectives or associative descriptions, often put in italics, similar to terms for textiles or names of creations. This early distinction of a fashion-specific language was considerable, while the adjectives or names of specific colours, textiles or designs were extremely short-lived. The neologisms that appeared in fashion writing only lasted as long as the fashions themselves. The structure of language thereby approximated a commercial – implicitly capitalist – economic structure and, at the same

time, generated a new linguistic value system that was independent of classical canon and terminologies. Language, like fashion, is subject to constant change within the commercially primed media. The constant need for change created not just shifting or flickering signifiers, as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard would describe in their analyses of fashion discourse in the 1950s and 1960s, but the signifier actually disappeared along with an outmoded style of dress or dated accessories.

On 20 January 1813, the *Journal des Dames et des Modes*, the next significant fashion magazine in France, edited by Pierre Antoine Lebourg de la Mésangère (1761-1831) wrote: 'Novelty [...] the daughter of curiosity and boredom [...] thus constitutes our goddess. She alone can direct you towards fame and fortune [...]. Without her, without the cachet of originality, you will appear as nothing but servile copiers.' This marked a new perception of originality, which was coined by temporality. What was original had to be *new*, first and foremost. Narrative or formal invention were linked to the contemporary.

The emulation of traditions and classical forms was not what motivated the artist of the early nineteenth century. He had to court novelty and satisfy her incessant demand for quick representation. It is no coincidence that the poet Charles Baudelaire, in his famous *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, written in instalments for the newspaper *Le Figaro* in the early 1850s, would begin his discourse on the modern by evoking the fashion plates from the *Journal des Dames et des Modes*.

I have before me a series of fashion plates dating from Revolution and finishing more or less with the Consulate. These costumes, which seem laughable to many thoughtless people – people who are grave without true gravity – have a double natured charm, one both artistic and historical. They are often very beautiful and drawn with wit; but what to me is every bit as important, and what I am happy to find in all, or almost all of them, is the moral and aesthetic feeling of their time. The idea of beauty which man



03 Attributed to Philibert Louis Debucourt, illustration of an historical dress from 1791 on the opening page of *Journal des Dames et des Modes*, vol. 23, no. 6, 31 January 1819

for himself creates imprints itself on his whole attire, crumples or stiffens the dress, rounds off or squares his gesture, and in the long run even ends in subtly penetrating the very features of his face. Man ends by looking like his ideal self.³

La Mésangère's fashion journal, which Baudelaire cites here, began to appear six times a month, establishing a rhythm that was to be followed by all major fashion publications from 1815 onwards. At the same time literature, in the form of serialized novels, poetry, etc., began to appear in fashion journals. The market opened up and a fusion of the review elements of daily or weekly papers and the fashionable contents of the journals was effected.

Rivalling *Journal des Dames et des Modes* as the most important fashion journal to emerge from the Restoration period in France in terms of circulation and in view of its contributors is *La Mode*. After its first issue in October 1829 *La Mode* almost immediately reached a circulation of 2,625 copies, compared with not more than 1,000 for other contemporary fashion magazines. Among the writers who were signed up to contribute to *La Mode* over the next decade one finds famous names such as George Sand, Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas, Gérard de Nerval, Alphonse de Lamartine and of course Honoré de Balzac. Many of them were relatively unknown or comparatively progressive at the time of their first contribution to the magazine. This might indicate a high degree of literary sensibility on the part of the commissioning editor for *La Mode*, but is very likely to stem also from the fact that the contributions to literary journals and high calibre newspapers were now monitored by ambitious fashion editors. In its first issues *La Mode* provoked political scandal and deliberately managed to get its patronage from the court – the 'old guard' in fashion terms – withdrawn. This lent it a progressive cachet while the actual target audience remained resolutely aristocratic, and even royalist in character.

Let us look briefly now at the first of the chosen examples, the contribution by Honoré de Balzac to *La Mode*. It is significant that one finds his writing not on the review pages, i.e. the established *feuilleton*, but in the body proper of

the fashion magazine. His texts are integrated into the wider discourse on fashion, and no separation occurs between the rules of literary production, as signalled by the author's reputation, and the structure of the fashion industry with its commercial forum, the journal.

Balzac contributed in 1830 to twenty issues of *La Mode* while also working for three other magazines, *Le Voleur*, *La Silhouette* and the *Revue de Paris*. To describe his writing of the period as 'journalistic', however, can only be justified by the structure in which it appeared. As can be seen in countless references in his writing of *La Comédie humaine*, fashion, accessories, make-up, hairstyles, etc. remained a constant within his literary production. However, in Balzac fashion was not reduced to a mere social marker as part of a naturalist or even psychological discourse. Clothes did not simply serve to describe the sensibility or character of the wearer, nor did they render him or her part of a social group. For Balzac fashion guarded its autonomy as a discourse: its temporality, its structure, its societal rules and its psychological effects. Clothes were seen as independent of the wearer and the industry that produced and communicated them, and were granted influence over other hitherto more significant cultural constituents like physical anthropology or linguistics. These two concepts especially are connected to fashion in Balzac's texts. Language and vocabulary is the theme of two essays in particular written for *La Mode*, 'Des mots à la mode' of 22 May 1830, and 'De la mode en littérature' a week later. Balzac took concepts by physiologists like Johann Caspar Lavater and Franz Josef Gall that were popularized in a paradigm in the early nineteenth century, which stated that facial expressions as well as head shapes and size could be linked to the physiology of the brain and thus to intelligence and social interaction, and he applied them to clothing and accessories in his 'Physiologie de la Toilette', published in *La Silhouette* between June and July 1830. He stated that social equality, a result of the French Revolution, had rendered obsolete the sartorial signifiers which determine man's status among his peers. Fashion no longer established a fixed social context, and bourgeois newcomers and usurpers could easily and precisely emulate in

DE LA MODE EN LITTÉRATURE.

PREMIÈRE LETTRE

À Madame la Comtesse d'O....t.

J'ose à peine vous avouer, madame, que je suis épouvané de la confiance dont vous avez la bonté de m'honorer. Vous voulez faire un ouvrage, le faire à Tours et jouir d'un succès à Paris. Vous croyez qu'il est aussi facile de vous envoyer, par la poste, les patrons sur lesquels nous taillons un livre, que de vous transmettre ceux d'une robe ou d'un fichu, grâce aux élégans dessins de Gavarni.

Erreur, madame!... Et cette idée accuse déjà l'innocence du ravissant pays que vous habitez. Hélas! la mode est la *fixité* même en comparaison des vertiges dont notre littérature est saisie. Le vieux Parnasse s'est changé en vallée; que dis-je! en un désert sablonneux dont les monticules sont aussi mouvans que ces îles dorées qui flottent sur les eaux de votre belle Loire et dont les dunes fantasques se brisent, s'élèvent, s'arrondissent, s'abliment, reparaisent; inconcevables gouffres qui, souvent, emportent un imprudent sager, comme ici quelque faux système, quelque coterie, quelque amour insensé de soi-même, engloutissent un homme de talent. Aussi, j'aurais mille fois mieux aimé avoir été chargé, moi ignorant, de vous choisir un bonnet chez Herbault, une étoffe chez Delisle, plutôt que d'avoir, tout critique que je puisse être, à vous dicter les oracles du goût présent, à vous initier aux mystères de nos succès. D'abord, y a-t-il un goût, avons nous des succès? Vous ne savez donc pas, madame, qu'aujourd'hui un homme n'a qu'un jour et que tous les jours n'ont pas un homme?

TOME III. 9^e LIVRAISON.

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04 Honoré de Balzac, page from 'Fashion in Literature' from *La Mode*, 29 May 1830

cut and style the appearance of their aristocratic neighbours. Therefore the accessory closest to the face and head, the tie or cravat, now assumed the greatest significance.

Thus we find that a new destiny is created for the cravat: in our time, she is born into public life, she acquires social significance, since she is called upon to re-establish the nuances that have been banished entirely from our clothes. The cravat becomes the criterion by which one can recognize the fashionable as well as the educated man. [...] As the cravat is an expression of thought as well as style [...] its soul has passed into pliable fabric and manifests itself completely within it. Here one finds a lightness, a liberty of spirit without which there can be no originality. And surely this heated soul, this burning fire might well develop later into something akin to religious fervour, and results in a vocation [...].⁴

Balzac took up his notion of distinction through material objects in the absence of established and fixed social structures and codes in his essay on 'Des mots à la mode'. 'Today,' he opines, 'nuances have acquired veritable importance. As our customs are levelling out, when a sales assistant, at a dime a dozen, can pass for a count thanks to his manners and the elegance of his suit, and perhaps even through his forceful demeanour, it is now the nuance that allows fashionable beings to recognize each other in the midst of the crowd.'⁵

Men, who 'possess the secret of fashionable language', writes Balzac, distinguish themselves through a linguistic code that extends far beyond speech or writing. They effect through their discourse a whole raft of manners and mores. As a first example the novelist evokes the following scene, an ironic signpost pointing to his later *Comédie humaine* that references the very medium in which it appears and describes the very ritual that has been established for consuming the writing in fashion magazines.

blement l'heure, le jour, la minute à laquelle le mot est mort ou devient ridicule; et il faut un tact immense pour deviner ce qu'un mot a de vic. Là est l'écueil. Il y a autant de danger à se servir d'un mot usé qu'à ne pas le prononcer comme il faut, et quand il faut. Un jeune homme arriéré, qui croirait faire de l'effet avec *pyramidal*, est aussi ridicule qu'un dandy qui porterait un bolivar, ou qu'un rentier apportant à sa fille un kaléidoscope comme quelque chose de surprenant. Aussi nous croyons devoir prévenir les députés futurs, qui viendront bientôt siéger à Paris, qu'il y a une phrase législative bien vieille et dont on a prodigieusement abusé: «Messieurs, nous soumettons à vos investigations...»

Homme positif, femme positive, commencent à vieillir. — Jeunes hommes est devenu bouffon. Hommes graves se dit encore.

Hommes à fronts baus, à larges poitrines, n'a pas pu prendre. Cela est vulgaire, devient commun; mais vulgarité se soutient. «Ma vie est sans couleur. — Il a désenchanté sa vie. — Demander à la vic ce qu'elle n'a pas...» sont des expressions qui n'ont plus cours. Mais gâter son existence est encore à la mode.

En ce moment, il existe une certaine manière d'employer les mots qui vous donne des effets pittoresques dans le discours; vous accablez le non-conformiste par une éloquence *barbarismique* dont il est stupéfait.

— Victor Hugo?... Eh! oui! il a voulu faire DU *drame*. — Le ministre a essayé de faire DU *gouvernement absolu*. — Le journaliste se fait *pouvoir*.

Ou bien vous saupoudrez votre diction d'une *phraséologie technologique*: — Il y a dans cet ouvrage une *psychologie particulière*. — Mais, si ce roman avait une *fabulation mieux ménagée*. — Oh! monsieur, l'admirable *trilogie* de Beaumarchais!...

Parle-t-on de philosophie? Oh! qui que vous soyez, songez que, si vous ne suivez pas attentivement la mode, vous pouvez être perdu à jamais, en vous servant de mots qui se terminent en *ité*, comme *objectivité, subjectivité, identité, variété, simultanéité, spontanéité, fugitivité*, quand le maître a parlé par *lume*, en employant les mots *sensualisme, idéalisme, dogmatisme, criticisme, bouddhisme*, etc.; ou, si vous prenez les *lume* quand il met à la bouche les *ion*, comme *affection, sensation, inspiration, argumentation*, vous pouvez passer pour un sot.

Par exemple, pendant les *équinoxes*, il vous est permis d'envelopper votre pensée dans des phrases comme celle-ci:

— La puissance de reproduction de la réflexion ne s'étend pas jusqu'à certains phénomènes, parce que, si la réflexion est une *totalité*, c'est une *totalité confuse*.

Mais, les jours de pleine lune, vous devez prendre un langage plus clair et dire:

— Le *sensualisme s'enfonce par la sensation dans le monde sensible*.

Toutes les fois que vous discutez et que votre adversaire paraît l'emporter sur vous, prenez la parole en disant:

— Monsieur, vous n'êtes pas *logique*, et, si vous voulez revenir à une *marche plus rationnelle*...

C'est une manière décente de lui dire qu'il *dérisonne*.

Si l'on parle de Lamartine, oh! comme tout le monde vous écouterait si vous dites froidement:

— Il est de l'école des *lakists**...

05 Honoré de Balzac, page from 'Fashionable Words' from *La Mode*, 22 May 1830

You arrive at a manor house where the evening is taken up with the reading of an essay in a journal, a book, a novel, or whatever you desire. [...] Once the reading is finished everybody voices an opinion. Your turn comes; you find, in agreement with the mistress of the house, that the book is badly written, you concur with the husband that is it well thought out, you side with some on the illustrations, with others on characterization.

'Yet, you add, this is not it!... Today...'

Everybody looks at you.

'Today, books, like everything else of which there is a surplus, needs to have *actualité* ('contemporariness')...'

Then you take up your glasses and proceed to glance around. The next day, nearly everybody will be using the word *actualité*, but often wrongly and mistakenly. Thus you can easily discern a person with esprit and style, a fashionable man or woman.⁶

Apart from the setting, which, as mentioned above, establishes the performative character of consuming fashionable writing as a collective social display, the chosen example of the first fashionable word is telling indeed. '*Actualité*' underscores the notion of material to be essentially of its time and subject to rules of temporality and transience. Whether it is a cravat, a dress, or a word, the object has to be consumed within the now, it has to be actualized within history. The next day it has already begun to serve as an established signifier to mark intellectual ability and discursive as well as material efficiency – quite apart from the most important sign: as being *à la mode*.

Balzac runs through a gamut of fashionable words, deployed in a variety of social settings, from the political debate at an investor's table when economic influence is exerted, via the Parisian Salon where one judges fashionable appearances, to the supper at the latest restaurant during a discussion of the most recent *corps de ballet*. Each neologism is set in italics, echoing the aforementioned display of new terms for colours and fabrics in fashion journals. At the very beginning of his essay Balzac establishes his credo for the dominance

of fashion as structuring the perception not just of time but also of knowledge itself, while providing a quick sideswipe at the very forum in which his article appears. Such self-reference, given that people who might disagree with Balzac's assessment of fashion will not necessarily access the magazine in the first place, thus reiterates the circuitous discourse of intimacy between readers and consumers who are in the know. Fashion, says Balzac,

has to face its prejudices like any other branch of the human sciences. Previously, most people believed that being fashionable meant dressing according to the prescriptions of those vulgar journals that we are fighting with all our might. From such an attitude emanates all the disappointments that mortify the self-esteem of people who are so indifferent that they do not think of all the obligations imposed by good taste and *savoir vivre*. It does not suffice to have the latest fabric, to buy clothes from Blain, to have one's dresses made by Victorine, one's carriages by Thomas-Baptiste, to get one's trousers from England, one's gloves at Bodier. To be fashionable one needs moreover to greet, talk, sing, sit, debate, eat, drink, walk, dance, according to the wish and order of fashion.⁷

Such demands seem to be no more than the usual decrees meant to expand the realm of fashion beyond that of dress, but for Balzac the task was indeed a synthetic one, linking a structural principle found in the constant change of new clothes and accessories to any other cultural manifestation, and beyond it to economic and political life. In his second text for *La Mode*, 'De la mode en littérature', Balzac, from the not so lofty perch of pages in a fashion magazine, dispatched advice to a female aristocrat and amateur author in regard to the lack of style and insight in present literary production:

In literature as we have it today, Madame, there is a certain etiquette to which an author's personality and book have to submit. In a word, there is a fashion in dress to observe, and here, I feel, is what should appear most significant to you. We

are not dealing with style, or ideas, or the plan or title of your book. God forbid that I would intrude on the secret that envelops such an act of birth. But still, to learn the age of an author is at the moment of the highest interest. We love green shoots. A young man fresh from one of our great universities, a young girl not yet approaching her First Communion are quite assured thus to capture the public imagination.⁸

For Balzac the reigning desire for youth put additional pressures on the rapid production not of novels but novelties. Fashion in literature follows the principle of fashion in dress: the latest creation is the non-plus-ultra, while any dated product vanishes from public perception notwithstanding its material or technical excellence, and the canon of established classics cannot safeguard an outdated literary object.

Balzac, writing under the transparent pseudonyms of 'B.' or 'E.B.', performed an ambiguous role. He stepped back from his own discourse to underscore the ephemeral nature of language and literature, separating one persona from the autonomy of his own work, as a writer of contemporary novels with complex narratives and intricate psychologies. In his other discursive guise, however, he was ready to embrace the transitoriness of the forum of the fashion magazine in order to expose the negative effect of the short-lived and insubstantial. There was a schizophrenia in regard to *modernité* – and indeed Balzac is said to have used the term before Gautier as early as 1823, according to at least one historical source⁹ – as it embraced the latest yet had to distance itself from the fashion it created. Like any progressive designer who has to initiate a trend rather than follow it and has to remain ahead of the pack in terms of materials and forms, the modern author could not afford to rest and his production had to show itself as radically fashionable in theme as well as style without looking like a mere outward manifestation. The French writers of the nineteenth century negotiated such schizophrenic demands by choosing contemporary subjects or, in the case of the three examples given here, by selecting the medium that would frame their respective discourses in the most contemporary form.



06

The work of writer and critic Jules Amadée Barbey d'Aureville is less read today than Balzac's novels or Mallarmé's poetry. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, novels like *Les Diaboliques* or his study *Dandysme et de George Brummell* made him a fashionable and notorious figure, which was augmented by his outrageous behaviour as a social gadfly and his hyperbolic dress sense as an effeminate dandy. While Balzac in one of his sketches described a misadventure with a pair of black cashmere trousers that were torn to shreds by all too vigorous brushing, Barbey d'Aureville would regard the black trousers themselves as a misadventure when compared with the possibility of wearing skin-tight leopard print or zebra stripes on the nether regions of his body (which he practiced with great enthusiasm).

The change from Balzac's time in journalism to Barbey d'Aureville was marked by significant alterations in the fabric of fashion publications. After the July Revolution of 1830, rampant economic speculation, the flourishing capitalist structure and the forming of a consumer society created a volatile but highly profitable environment for the launching of many fashion magazines. From 1834 onwards, such publications began to echo monopolistic capitalism within their very structures. Subscribers were now invited to become investors by acquiring bonds for the journals in their drawing

rooms. The reader became a partner in his own consumption, and the comparatively small sum of 100 francs for a stake in a journal generated wide participation in such schemes. Fashion magazines multiplied and were modified according to a market that was much more segmented than before. Both the expanding audience and changing consumer bases meant that potential readers from outside the aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie had to be catered for and represented, not by having fashions designed for them but by being given styles than could be copied at home or made up by a reasonably skilled dressmaker in the *quartier* or outside Paris itself. Women progressively became more educated and literate, and they often used fashion journals as their first experience of sharing a discursive skill in public with which they were conversant. Industrial growth and colonial resources created great wealth in France, and the standard of living increased to take consumption to hitherto unknown levels. Correspondingly, women of the bourgeoisie began to re-formulate the roles they played in leisure activities from passive recipient to active consumer, while their husbands and lovers began to covet fashion, too, due to a prolonged period of national peace with its resulting domestic comfort. At the same time, the price of a publication as signifier, which had once served as the principal reason for consuming a particular fashion journal, became much less obvious and instrumental. A segregation of discourses occurred again within the magazine market, not due to traditional social structures but along economic lines. Most significantly, the fashion journal was no longer purchased exclusively by means of subscription but was bought by single issue in cafés or at the kiosk. The consumer now exercised a more spontaneous decision to acquire a copy and did not profess loyalty to a specific magazine. In consequence, the chance of intimate dialogue between fashion writer and reader was diminished and such an encounter had to be implemented again and again across many issues. By 1840 the Parisian reader could choose between some forty fashion journals, compared with just four back in 1820, and this rendered the form of the publication itself as transitory as the product it featured.

Two of the most successful journals of the 1840s were *Le Moniteur de la Mode* and *Le Constitutionnel*, to which Barbey d'Aureville contributed articles like 'De l'élégance' and 'Revue critique de la mode' between 1843 and 1846. His concept of beauty, in dialectical relation to the elegant, was spelt out from the beginning in 1843:

Therefore between real beauty and elegance lies a vast difference; elegance is beauty on a small scale, beauty in miniature. But let all beware! Beauty in miniature is like a realm gone to seed. Both have a short lifespan.¹⁰

Beauty was juxtaposed with its modern component, elegance – a 'kingdom ruled by the female sex'. To appear elegantly dressed was far from being fashionable, yet elegance could be achieved without beauty, even despite it. Modernity increasingly required reaction, not composure. It left less and less time to cultivate the beautiful. Barbey d'Aureville composed the

lines above under the female pseudonym of Maximilienne de Syrène, in remembrance of the woman he had 'silently adored' in his youth. Her particular style and grace, which he once evoked in a fragment of prose, became the sensual and sensory basis for his near complete empathy with a woman's judgement of her clothes. 'Elegance is the small sex of beauty',¹¹ he claimed. Elegance – the smaller and fairer sex? – here appears contemporary and modern. Not for Barbey d'Aureville the normative character of eternal beauty that forces man and woman into a restrained boredom. The speed of life was reflected in the twists and turns traced by fashion:

Amongst us, one is wrapped up in the most ceremonious words and extravagant attire, as with a black uniform worn too long; and this so-called tolerance, which refers to attire as extravagant, is something we find very impertinent. For in the end, what could be more charming, more sacred, more triumphant in the field of fashion

- 06 Émile Lévy, *Jules Amadée Barbey d'Aureville*, 1881
 07 Anonymous (after a drawing by Jules David), untitled fashion illustration from *Le Moniteur de la Mode*, ca. 1843



07

than extravagance, when it remains in the light of truthfulness? In a society like ours, on the verge of profound boredom, it is extravagance in all its forms for which one has to take up arms!¹²

This extravagance was manifested in the indulgence of 'playing' a fictional female character on the pages of the fashion magazines. The idealized memory of the woman he admired in his youth in the provinces now informed his perception of idealized elegance in fashion. He addressed the female readership of *Le Moniteur de la Mode* and *Le Constitutionnel* with the intimacy of one who shared their quest for the ideal form, perfect make-up and most beautiful gown. Barbey d'Aureville was not ignorant of contemporary reality, yet his empathy with women made him forsake the company of his fellow male critics to seek refuge among female consumers. In April 1846, while Baudelaire busied himself at the Louvre composing the second 'Salon', in which his thoughts on modernity would surface for the first time, Barbey d'Aureville left the museum to find a less than sublime but distinctly metropolitan modernity among female shoppers.

While the exhibition at the Louvre brings together the amateurs of painting, attentively judging the works submitted for their examination, an exhibition of a different kind has the happy privilege to reunite a crowd which, although less numerous, is in its entirety no less composed of admirers; or rather we should say admresses, since it addresses women only. We are speaking here of the exhibition of shawls offered by the beautiful stores along the Chaussée-d'Antin.¹³

In the conflict between the eternal and transitory beauty of fashion, Maximilienne de Syre knew which side (s)he would defect to. Fashion is too futile perhaps, yet surely too serious, to be constantly qualified through aesthetic reflection on the sublime. This dichotomy had first to be realized polemically by Barbey d'Aureville and theoretically by Baudelaire in order to appear as the self-evident yet ambiguous basis for the writings of Stéphane

Mallarmé, as one can see below.

The Parisian women of the nineteenth century claimed the *journaux de modes* for their own. Excluded from contributing to any of the political, that is 'serious' press, they were forced to focus their interest, hopes and passions on the pages of fashion magazines. Although most of the owners, and the majority of editors, were men, the contributors to this secluded world were at least expected to be feminine – if not in gender, at least in attitude, sensitivity and pseudonym. In the columns of these journals, a successful style of writing was expected to contain a certain *poncif*, a trademark to distinguish the artist in the commercial world, but its overall tone should resemble intimate, polite chat. The female subscribers were expected to appreciate refined and at times frivolous compliments. But to analyse fashion, even favourably, was felt to be out of place. The futility of female bourgeois existence could be gently ridiculed, but a writer should never pull the rug out from under the delicate feet of her/his *abonnées*. Thus the aspiring female pseudonyms of Barbey d'Aureville and Mallarmé would only enjoy a brief existence.

While Balzac and Barbey d'Aureville wrote in fashion journals for at least three years each, the Symbolist poet Mallarmé composed his own journal for six months only. Yet while the other writers contributed to an established publication, Mallarmé's *La Dernière Mode* was composed from the outset as a total work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, crossing and quoting artistic disciplines in the spirit of the fin-de-siècle. Mallarmé was born in 1842 into a bourgeois family of civil servants. He was expected to follow into his father's and grandfather's profession but, through the influence of Baudelaire and Gautier, turned to writing poetry. Throughout his life Mallarmé's literary output was sparse and deliberate. His first poem was published when he was twenty-four. The famous 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' appeared in 1865, but between 1867 and 1873 his principal poems were left unfinished. From the 1880s onwards he was at the centre of a group of French artists which included Édouard Manet and Paul Valéry. Mallarmé died in 1898. His modernist masterpiece, the poem 'Un Coup de Dés...' was only published posthumously in 1914.



08 Édouard Manet, *Portrait de Stéphane Mallarmé*, 1876

Mallarmé's relationship with fashion was formed by his association with literary movements of the late nineteenth century, most notably with the Parnasse group and Symbolism. However, his was not the use of clothing or accessories as mere metaphors or symbols for character or sentiment that occupied the literary output of most of his contemporaries. The divide between writing on clothes for a commercial medium and novels by Balzac or Barbey d'Aureville did not necessarily exist for Mallarmé. His writing was short and conceptual in origin, so the autonomy of the fashion journal as a poetic invention could be maintained in his writings. Despite his aspirations for commercial success, which Mallarmé professed to, *La Dernière Mode* was a carefully contrived formal experiment. Although it might have echoed existing fashion magazines in composition, illustrations and of course themes, Mallarmé's experiment in journalism distinguished itself through its language as a radical departure.

His work was characterized by a quest for pictorial composition and at the same time by a forceful rejection of the subject. In fashion he found both his visual stimulus, through the colourful sweeping fabric of French couture between the 1850s and 1890s, and his subject matter, which had been rendered marginal in contemporary cultural hierarchy. The topic of fashion allowed Mallarmé to remain on the outside, to work against narratives, to persist

resolutely with the subjective and non-linear, to use associative rhythms in his verses while, at the same time, removing himself from the sublime and weighty subjectivism that was considered necessary for symbolist poetry. *La Dernière Mode* used its dialogue with imaginary correspondents to celebrate the 'profound nothingness' that pervades the life and sartorial consumption especially of the bourgeois female. Mallarmé used the seemingly empty existence and ennui of a female readership not for narrative drama (cf. Gustave Flaubert's *Emma Bovary*) but in order to concentrate on formal questions. Fashion, seen as insignificant and ephemeral by the cultural status quo, thus became a *carte blanche* for a poetically elaborate yet curiously precise description of fabrics, ribbons, pleats and folds – as the journal aimed at fulfilling its commercial function as a source of sartorial information.

The fold in particular, as 'pli modal', operates in a material analogy to syntactic or stylistic innovation, where a notion is hidden within the surface of the word proper, where one word refers to another unknown one and needs to be drawn from the depth of the linguistic fabric through combinative or connotative efforts. Fellow poets credited *La Dernière Mode* with the 'invention of the word',¹⁴ and indeed the vocabulary in the journal surpassed the description of clothes or accessories and moved on to constitute fashion in the abstract, as a

verbal equivalent to sartorial innovations in contemporary *haute couture*. The professed independence from the material aspect of clothing, and the deliberate ignorance vis-à-vis stylistic minutiae, kept *La Dernière Mode* from being commercially viable among competitive fashion journals. However, the formal radicality of its prose (e.g. the 'metaphysical' musings of 'Marguerite de Ponty' in her column 'La Mode') and the irony of its stylistic quotations (repeated references by 'Miss Satin' to Charles Frederick Worth and Émile Pingat) created a unique and extended text that floated unconstrained by a specific stylistic period and spoke as eloquently of the sartorial as of the literary form.

La Dernière Mode thus comprised a number of stylistically well-defined columns on couture, accessories, hair, make-up, etc., which the poet wrote under different female pseudonyms, slipping easily into each 'mode' and adopting, with a mixture of reference and irony, various poetical voices as well as mannerisms of commercial prose from the Second Empire. Mal-

larmé realized that just as he used and re-used a hermetic, musical vocabulary where words take on very different meanings or are brought into an alternative syntax, fashion invents its own forms anew each season: the look of a familiar piece of clothing is changed beyond recognition or its use is radically re-defined.

Contrary to Balzac and Barbey d'Aurevilly, Mallarmé did not hide behind or subsequently disavows his feminine personae but *became* them. It was a mental cross-dressing which allowed the poet to indulge in the transitory and ephemeral unobserved by the patriarchal mainstream, leaving him free to subvert a commercial medium for the dissemination of formal experiments to a hitherto unaccustomed readership. One of the pseudonyms, Ix., in the first instalment of her column 'Chronique de Paris', addressed the female readership with a mixture of empathy and critique – empathy for the social and cultural position the bourgeois French woman found herself in 1874; critique for the unreflected acceptance of this position.



09 Stéphane Mallarmé, Fan for Misia Natanson, ca. 1880

Only the lady in her isolation from politics and morose concerns has the necessary leisure to free herself, her apparel completed, to cater for the need to adorn the soul as well.¹⁵

The first duty is to choose the dress, the second to dress the soul. Both evoke the ancient within the modern, one through sartorial quotation, the other through poetic impression(ism):

A book is closed very quickly, so boring; one lets the gaze wander in this cloud of impressions that one has readily conjured up to interpose, like ancient gods, modern woman in the mundane adventures of her Self. [...] Has not the external world had a profound influence on our deepest instincts? It provokes and refines them.

One learns everything on the spot, even beauty, how to hold one's head. One has to learn it from someone; that is to say from everyone, like how to wear a dress. Shall we escape this world? One travels through it at full steam, in its external reality, with its landscapes, its places, to get somewhere else: a modern image of its insufficiency for us! Well, what if the pleasures we know within our four walls were to relinquish their season's lead for games in the open air, long outings in the woods or regattas on the river, and, keen to rest our eyes in an oblivion created by the vast and naked horizon, we were to find a novel perception that is able to appreciate the paradox of intricate and complex outfits embroidered at the hem by the ocean's froth?¹⁶

In this passage Ix. displayed not only the fashionable ennui of a dandy, but professed the ironic fatality of the decadent poet as well. Every profound impression in life, everything beautiful, is but a repetition – especially embodied in the style of a gown. But where can one escape to find genuine expression? Even the vaporous speed of modern life which allows for the most rapid distractions cannot – and does not intend – to alter the perception created by the proximity of *mode et modernité*. Every phenomenon is judged according to the rules of contemporary commodified society. The horizon at the seaside

resort might have offered a brief respite, yet in the very next instant it becomes transformed again into the sartorial: a fabric, sky-blue as the cover of Mallarmé's magazine and subjected to the same rule of fashion.

The vocabulary of *La Dernière Mode* is characterized by the indefinable, transitory and immaterial. Words like 'vapour', 'clouds', 'perfume' or 'dream' reoccur in conjunction both with the female and her clothing and impose them on the surrounding space. The instantaneous creation of a shape or form is all that the object requires for poetic rendition; in its passing from the present, form is akin to the short life span of fashion and the changing shape of modernity. The voids these creations are soon destined to leave behind are not negatives. For Mallarmé they constitute a necessary antithesis to the material. The still vastness of the ocean contrasts with the travelling fashionable crowd; the white space on the book pages is required for the associative reading of the condensed letters of his poetry.

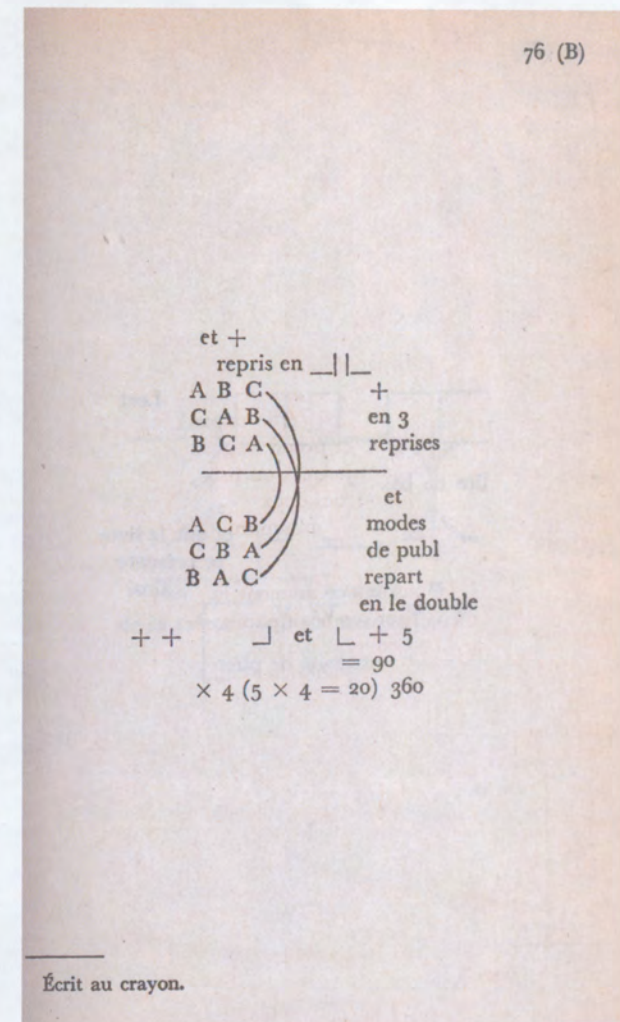
It is the non-tangible that also creates the allure of the woman and her gown. She remains distant, aestheticized and thus essentially asexual. Although her figure and perhaps her mind are keenly observed, the sartorial ideal capable of defining her is all that remains. As the modernist observes, the impact of the garment always lies in the abolition of eternal values, of ideals. Ix. in her first 'Chronique' singled out the 'gown of vaporous fabrics creased in impatience'; correspondingly, Miss Satin – another of Mallarmé's pseudonyms, as the fashionable girl from London – poetically evokes an ideal gown, captured in its transitory state and realized in the fashion for autumn/winter 1874-75, not forgetting a real commercial injection: 'We have all dreamed this gown without knowing it. M. [Charles Frederick] Worth alone knew how to design apparel as fugitive as our thoughts'. The dress was not dreamed up as a novelty. Its impact derived from it pre-existing within the collective imagination. The designer had only to realize the attire that is as fugitive as thoughts of the female clientele, whom Ix. had isolated from reality and confined to the salon and its 'rêve intérieur'. The female bourgeois seemed pure recipient, her appearance and existence

determined by the male – in the person of her husband and provider as well as through her couturier who swathes her in the latest *volants*. While the man's head was troubled with the rational of modernity, i.e. political and economic progress, her head was – literally, as the vocabulary of the fashion magazine suggested – 'in the clouds', only concerned with the material and plastic representation of her 'futile' dreams.

The futility and ephemerality, which not only were felt by the female consumer but were essential to the subject of fashion itself, according to contemporary cultural hierarchy and existing societal structures, conspired to allow for the complete invention of a new discourse. Fashion magazines and their journalism only came into being in the nineteenth century, and their linguistic codes had to be formed. Although there was literary journalism before this, and reviews and occasional prose did exist, the model for the description of dresses and accessories was to be new. Similar to *la mode*, *le mot* connected to it had to be created in its autonomy. Writers like Balzac, Barbey d'Aurevilly and Mallarmé recognized the novelty inherent in their chosen discourses between 1830 and 1880. Therefore they elected to write about novelties themselves, and none was more transitory than fashion. To further the potential of the new, they created alter egos for themselves that had not previously been connected to journalism or literary production. The novelists became women in their writing, and their 'commercial' texts moved from a neutered to a potent state. *Mode et modernité* were reflected through a new medium, a new language and new personae, rendering the discourse on fashion in Balzac, Barbey d'Aurevilly and Mallarmé the most contemporary, fleeting, ephemeral and insubstantial yet at the same time the most modern of all.

1. Théophile Gautier, 'Salon de 1852', *La Presse* (Paris, 25 May 1852). See Stéphane Guégan, 'Modernités', in: Stéphane Guégan (ed.) *Théophile Gautier: la critique en liberté* (Paris: Les Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay [no.62], 1997), p.47.
2. This is apparent in the conceptual move from Hegel to Bergson and, much later, forms the basis for Gilles Deleuze's study *Bergsonisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).
3. Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne I: Le Beau, la mode et le bonheur', in: *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), vol. 2, p. 684.
4. E. B. [Honoré de Balzac], 'Physiologie de la Toilette', in: *Œuvres complètes*, 40 vols. (Paris: Conard, 1938), vol. 39, pp. 47-48.
5. Balzac, 'Des mots à la mode', *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 39, p. 34.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
8. Balzac, 'De la mode en littérature', *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 39, p. 41.
9. See Antoine Compagnon, *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p.17.
10. Maximilienne de Syrène, 'De l'élégance', in: Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Premiers articles* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1973), p. 86.
11. *Ibid.*
12. De Syrène, 'Revue critique de la mode', in: Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Premiers articles*, p. 93.
13. De Syrène, 'Modes', in: Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Premiers articles*, p. 311.
14. As the journalist Philippe Burty wrote to Mallarmé in an undated letter, in: Henri Mondor & Lloyd James Austin (eds.), *Stéphane Mallarmé, Correspondance*, 11 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1965-85), vol. 4, p. 587.
15. IX. 'Chronique de Paris', in: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 716.
16. *Ibid.*

10 Stéphane Mallarmé, page from *Le Livre*, written between 1870 and 1890, manuscript restored and published by J. Scherer, 1957



Écrit au crayon.