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> In the figure of the dandy, Baudelaire seeks to find some use for idleness, just as leisure once had a use. The *vita contemplativa* is replaced by something that could be called the *vita contemptiva*. . . . Dandyism is the last glimmer of the heroic in times of *décadence*.
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "Idleness," *The Arcades Project* (1939)

> In naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. . . . [C]amp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture.
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> —Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964)

My father's mess kit was not what it sounds like, namely a snapped-together aluminum dinner set, complete with dual-purpose utensils, that you buy to go camping. It was, instead, the formal uniform he wore to attend mess dinners in the Canadian Air Force squadrons — the 404 in Nova Scotia, the 415 on Prince Edward Island — to which he was attached during his twenty-year association with late-century air power. The mess kit was impressive and extravagant, like all military dress uniforms a combination of evening wear and martial regalia.

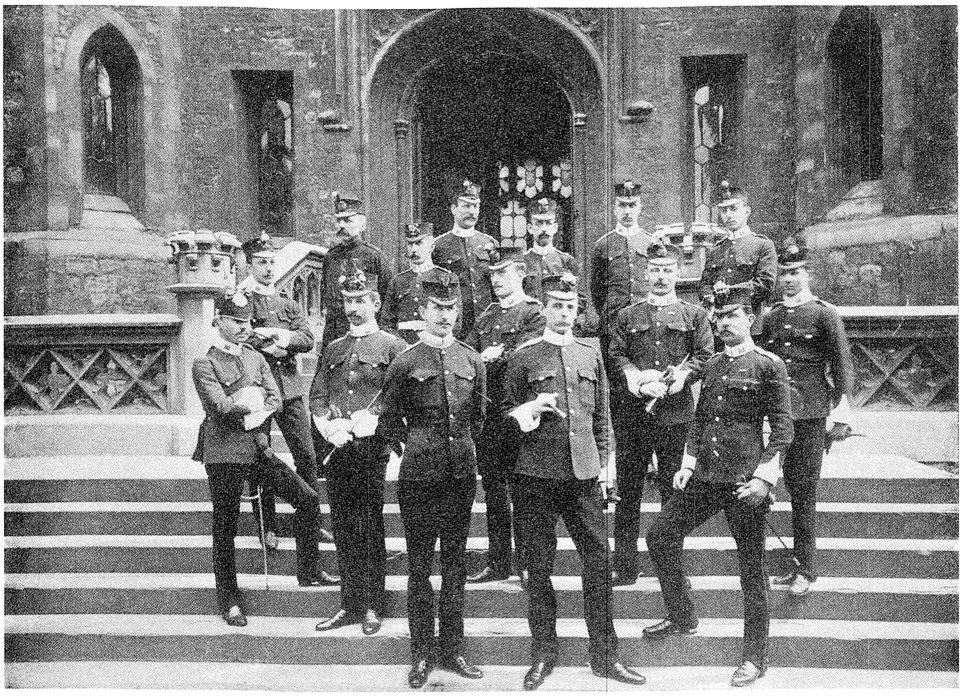
The black bow tie, white shirt, and cummerbund were standard-issue tuxedo, but the blue-grey melton

James Jacques Tissot's portrait of Frederick Gustavus Barnaby (1870). National Portrait Gallery, London.

jacket was cut short and scalloped in the back, with trousers that were high, tight, and stirrupped, a gold stripe down each side, ending in gleaming Wellington boots with elastic sides and a leather loop on the heel. The jacket had gold buttons on the cuffs, silk facing on the lapels, a pair of gold navigator's wings, small epaulettes with his captain's insignia, and the miniature versions of his two decorations — British and Commonwealth armed forces being, at least as compared to the American military and especially in peacetime, stingy with what servicepeople call "fruit salad." There were white cotton gloves, clutched rather than worn, and no headgear.

The mess kit resided most of the time in a thick plastic bag in my father's closet. The gloves, decorations, and a pair of white braces were kept in a separate plastic sarcophagus in my father's top dresser drawer, along with various cuff links and tie pins, often of exotic aeronautical design: one in the shape of a French Mirage fighter, another fashioned after the distinctive double-delta silhouette of the Saab Viggen. This drawer was a source of continual fascination for me, explored extensively during periods of parental absence. Contrary to convention, I discovered nothing disturbing — no condoms or porn mags or letters from women not my mother. Just the detritus of masculine dress, the jangly hardware of maleness. The drawer smelled of aftershave and wood and leather.

Because my father wore a uniform or flight suit every day of his working life, he didn't seem to possess any other clothes. The uniforms changed over



Officers standing on the steps of the Tower of London (1895). Mary Evans Picture Library.

the years, from the belted Royal Canadian Air Force tunics in grey-blue wool, indistinguishable from the ones to be seen in films such as *633 Squadron*, *The Battle of Britain*, or *The Dam Busters*, to the mediocre garage-attendant green zipper jackets and trousers of the unified Canadian forces of the 1970s. When the RCAF was absorbed into this formless mass in the 1960s, in a misguided attempt at republicanism, it lost its royal prefix, and my father's romantic rank of Flight Lieutenant (pronounced with the raf-and-jag *eff* sound) was modified to the unremarkable Captain. Whether from outspokenness, lack of ambition, or some other cause I was too naive to discern, he never advanced beyond it.

If the uniforms he wore were not always sartorially interesting, like the Italian Air Force designs supplied by Giorgio Armani in the 1980s or (more darkly) Hugo Boss's sharp silver-and-black outfits for the Gestapo in the 1930s, they nevertheless presented a stop-action essay in male attire. And when my father emerged, periodically, in the full glory of the mess kit, a peacock fanning to display, he was a brilliant reminder of the beauty masculine clothing can achieve when its vanities are unchecked. The military uniform is the ur-suit, the source of the norms that have for almost two centuries governed the presentation of the male form in everyday life. It spans both the range of ordinary working clothes, from the overalls of sappers to the T-shirts of naval gunnies, and the high-end, almost foppish finery of the dress uniform, an ensemble that, in its way, is the intrusion of dandyism into the serious male business of killing people. The spectacular military uniform is a kind of suited repression, an

incongruous mixture of the lovely and the deadly. And so an encounter with the uniform is the first step on the road to the rich and edgy territory of male dress, perhaps the discovery of a personal sense of style, a long-overdue revival of dandyism at the dawn of this new century.

This is not simply a matter of the uniform enforcing a minimum level of presentable polish — though there is that, as the movement of the uniform into other areas of life amply demonstrates, from the chaos-prevention programs of boys' high schools to the casual-seeming but actually rigid dress codes of contemporary waitstaffs and chain-store employees. Likewise the common understanding of the business suit — sometimes diplomatically dubbed the lounge suit, as on formal invitations — as a uniform of commercial life, the standard-issue duds for Wall Street or inside the Beltway. The uniform, whatever its details, is a bulwark against the uneven seas of individuality and (let it be said) against unsettling variations in taste and income. The uniform is, paradoxically, both democracy and elitism in action.

But the relations between military uniform and suit are more proximate still, from the cuff buttons allegedly introduced to prevent nose-wiping during the Napoleonic wars, when Europe's armies first fully realized the heady combination of violence and regalia, to the silk flashes and cravats that once indicated regimental membership and now signal personal style in the necktie, or the choice between shawl and pointed collar, double-breasted or single-breasted, vents or no vents.

In the shadow of this declension from function to decoration, my father confronts me as a figure reduced to his everyday uniform, complete with use-driven pockets and epaulettes, his name — my name — carved in white on a black plastic name tag pinned above the left front pocket. These name tags, which were secured with two spring-loaded tabs, were scattered around the house, including the seductive top drawer. Little chunks of identity, of uniformity, measuring three inches by three-quarters of an inch.

Also lying around the house was this sense of order in male clothing, the completeness of the uniform, even the beauty of it when got up in its formal version. I thought of my father's mess kit the first time I donned a black-tie dinner suit. I was an usher at the wedding of my college roommate, Tim Baker, and we rented outfits from a formal shop in Toronto. Twenty-one, a slightly built undergraduate at 5'10" and 150 pounds, I looked boyish and (I thought) rather devastating in the tux, snugly fastened in every imaginable place by cummerbund and braces and links. I felt like I was actually *wearing clothes* for the first time in my life, strapped in tight for whatever the world had to offer. Our ride to the church in Tim's beat-up blue Toyota, sunroof and windows wide open, Bruce Springsteen on the stereo, was for me one of those crystalline magic moments of late boyhood. We honked the horn and waved at people walking sloppily along Bloor Street, the lords of formalwear acknowledging these peasants of casualness.

In the end I didn't follow my father into military service, though I thought about it more or less constantly during the final years of high school. I had a real twinge just once, at a Christmas Day mass in 1979, a few months before I

was to graduate and go off (as I planned at the time) to study geology at the University of Toronto. My decision to switch to philosophy and English came later in that up-and-down year, during an early summer vacation when, floating aimlessly in my uncle's pool like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, the word "metaphysics," not "plastics," came swimming to mind. The Christmas event was of another order. In jeans and an old football jersey, number 60 for my hero, Bubba Smith of the Detroit Lions, I shuffled into church with my family. I had argued with my father even as we were leaving the house, an old argument that neither of us really cared for any longer. God doesn't care what I wear, I had said. God deserves your respect, he'd replied.

Now we were in the church, Pope John XXIII in the Westwood section of Winnipeg, and there was a collective turning of heads at something behind where I was sitting with my parents and two brothers. I looked back. A young man in the belted red tunic and black trousers of the Royal Military College, clearly back from Kingston, Ontario, for the holidays, was walking up the nave, his mother on his arm. He wore white gloves and had his pillbox under his arm. He was upright and tall and gorgeous, and I suddenly felt like an idiot in my football sweater. My father said nothing but I could feel him radiating I-told-you-so's down the pew. I thought, *I want to look like that. I want to be the young warrior at home, earning admiration and envy as I float through the crowd or congregation.*

The appeal of the uniform, like the violent conflict that creates it, is atavistic and troubling. Wearing one establishes a young man's relationship with a community, and with his own masculinity. Putting on a uniform is also, therefore, taking one's place in the larger order of things; it is a rite of passage that asserts adulthood. The badges of rank and regimental insignia, the orders of valor and corps identifiers, speak a complicated semantics of hierarchy and accomplishment. As a youth I could identify, by ribbon colors alone, most of the major decorations of the Commonwealth armed forces, from the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross to the Distinguished Flying Medal. In the film *Ryan's Daughter*, when the traumatized English army officer arrives in Ireland, a disabled hero of the trenches, the junior ranks of his obscure posting eye the plain maroon ribbon of his Victoria Cross with envy and awe. Like them, I recognized the tiny slash of ribbon for the sign it was, if not of valor then at least of violence ably survived.

The hint of violence is essential to the uniform's power. That is why there are so often hazing rituals associated with the privilege of wearing it, not merely formal qualifications like age or education. Hazing, often violent and humiliating, is a displacement ritual. We no longer think it appropriate to subject our young men to tests of pain and fortitude, to see if they belong in male society, but we do, in certain corners of that society — athletic teams, fraternities, the military — indulge in mild versions of such tests involving full-body shaves, canings and beatings, or the forcible consumption of excrement. Even these second-order initiation ceremonies are too much for our sensitive times, though. When a pirated video of similar brutal practices in Canada's elite Airborne Regiment was brought to light in the mid-1990s, it led to a different, and far more public, form of humiliation: the commanding officer, a knife-like lieutenant-colonel in a beret, was forced to resign and the unit was disbanded.

The continued presence of shaving in hazing rituals would be fodder to a cultural anthropologist of the right inclination. Bobby Orr, the gifted Boston Bruins defenseman of the 1970s, related in his memoirs how he was welcomed to the team by being pinned to the locker-room floor, lathered up, and roughly shaved clean from top to toe. It was a favorite in my high school locker room, too, and continues to be the haze of choice among blue-collar minor-league hockey teams, daring fraternities, and elite squadrons the continent over.

Just as interesting as the homoerotic sublimations of the act itself, with the helpless neophyte manhandled by his beefy new colleagues, is the act of removing hair. Hair plays a large role in male entry to adulthood, of course, from the first sproutings on groin and chest to the first shave, an act of initiation so common and apparently unremarkable as to have escaped sustained theoretical attention. But that is too bad, because the act of shaving, for many boys, marks their passage to a self-image of manhood. It most often occurs before the loss of virginity, and there might be years in between. Significantly, it is often done in the presence of the father, who passes on the mundane knowledge of razor and lather. Most very young boys are fascinated and awed by the father's act of shaving, observing technique in the service of transformation, a daily ritual of maleness. My brother Steve and I used to take turns watching our father shave when we were children.

Learning how to shave — to remove the very hair that marks puberty — thus takes its place in the set of routine skills that modern urban fathers routinely pass on to their sons. These skills also include tying a necktie, polishing shoes, perhaps wearing cologne. They are hardly the stuff of rugged maleness, at least as traditionally conceived, but they signal the creation of a presentable male figure in the non-lethal society of business and everyday life. No one will ever make a movie mythologizing these father-son bonding rituals, in the manner of *Field of Dreams*, say, with its tear-jerking evocation of the fabled Game of Catch between dad and junior, but for many of us they loom just as large, if not larger.

It was my mother who taught me to tie my shoes and, later, to bake and cook; but it was my father who taught me how to tend to my body and its accoutrements, how to prepare myself for presentation to the gaze of the world, how to dress. I laboriously copied his demonstration of how to create a chunky full-Windsor knot, though I was not comfortable enough with it to do it every day at my Catholic boys' school: like most of us, I kept a knotted tie in my locker and simply pulled it over my head each morning. When I did start tying ties regularly, I was so fixed on my father's instruction that I stuck with the full-Windsor well past the point of fashion, only shifting down to the sleeker half-Windsor six or seven years ago. It was like learning how to throw left-handed.

Nowadays I shop for clothes by myself or in the company of one or two trusted female friends, who can be counted on for accurate flattery and good advice, but it was my father who took me to buy my first suit for school. And when I was in university, on a rare visit to take me out for lunch, he offered to take me shopping afterwards at Harry Rosen on Bloor Street in Toronto. It was 1984 and the fashions were all English and collegiate, long rows of striped ties in garish colors arrayed like confections in wood-and-glass cabinets. The shirts

were fanned out in swaths of pastel broadcloth, multi-hued couches of cotton. Thinking of Tom Cruise in his underwear in *Risky Business*, and my then-girlfriend's recently communicated fantasy, I picked out a pale pink oxford-cloth button-down. My father smiled and got out his credit card. I kept that shirt for years, wearing it through at the collar and cuffs, fading it almost to white with many launderings, and finally left it in a closet during one of many moves in my late twenties. It no longer fit me at the neck or across the chest: I was no longer the boy my father treated that day in Toronto.

There is a depth of unrealized feeling in male attitudes to fashion and dress. My friend Russell, a novelist, for a couple of years wrote a weekly newspaper column about men's fashion. His sartorial advice was tart and peremptory but, to my mind, almost always accurate: no shirts with "swanky" designs on the collar, no backpacks, no crummy shoes. He received a lot of mail, much of it intemperate to the point of derangement, from men who felt slighted by his pronouncements. He speculated that the reason for this lay in the fact that these men, like all men, acquired whatever basic understanding of fashion they possessed from their fathers — or from role models to whom they stood in some kind of quasi-filial relationship. The phenomenon works in the other direction too. When Russell struck a chord with a man by recommending, say, a Burberry raincoat, he received letters suffused with longing and nostalgia, miniature and often halting paeans to lost fathers who wore that very symbol of male sophistication and, so attired, towered in the imagination of the boy now grown to manhood.

The complexity of this relationship overwhelms most of us, I think, but there is clearly a filial homage in play every time I put on one of my Italian suits, even though they are not the kind of thing my father would ever wear or have worn, even as a young man. Too expensive, too stylish, too dandyish. But my own dandyism, which proceeds more proximately from cinematic heroes such as Cary Grant or Gary Cooper, is nevertheless implicated in those glimpses of the RCAF mess kit from my father's closet. My uniforms run to a Fendi silk-and-wool three-button in dove grey; a brown, two-vent, high-gorge, narrow-trouser number by Tombolini; and a couple of classic-cut Armanis, one grey and one black. But every time I complete the ensemble of elegant male attire, I feel the sense of fulfillment that the French word for suit, *complet*, captures so much more economically, and truly, than the boring word "suit."

It is true that you can wear a suit like a uniform, the way bankers and downtown lawyers don their navy pinstripes and white-shirt/red-tie Identikit urban-hominid camouflage each morning; but the suit is also, and better, conceived as a stretched canvas, a blank slate. It does not allow *anything at all*, but within its limits lie nascent the possibilities of wit and dash, sex and seduction. The constrained freedom of assembling the elements in felicitous combination makes the suit a modern narrative *in potentia*, a story of downtown life waiting to be told. Beauty and utility emerge conjoined, in the pockets and buttons and padding that create the quintessential male silhouette — a silhouette whose minute variations from year to year (bigger shoulders, vents or no vents, and so on) are followed by the dandy not in the interests of fashion so much as of connoisseurship. A truly good tailor can give back some of the elements that con-

venience and mass production have mostly taken away: the functional surgeon's cuffs that may be unbuttoned and folded back, the way Jean Cocteau wore his sports jackets; or the right-lapel button that will be received by the left-side buttonhole, whose usual flower, if present at all, just plays with an originally ordinary way to achieve more protection, as seen (say) in an old photo of a willowy Frank Sinatra.

The suit is an idea, a set of associations. It comes to us in images, stills and movies, that reflect its presence in twentieth-century male life. The received wisdom says that whereas most men like to imagine women naked, women like to imagine men in suits. The suit finishes them, puts them in proper context. It smoothes out their imperfections and pads their deficiencies. It is armor against the contingencies of a hostile, judgmental world. And yet the last few decades have seen a steady decline in norms of dress in North American society, with the disappearance of evening wear, the nearly complete baseball-capping of the population, the tendency of grown men to dress like simulacra of Bart Simpson: T-shirt, sneakers, and shorts. In fact, most of them are worse than that, since Bart's invariable red T-shirt at least sports no corporate logo, no abusive or inane slogan.

Dandies, meanwhile, are almost universally disdained. Frasier Crane, the fussy television psychiatrist mocked successively in the prime-time comedy shows *Cheers* and *Frasier*, is the exemplar here. His fashion sense and aesthetic discrimination are at once displayed and undermined. He is frequently taken for gay. In a typical scene from the latter show, Frasier, off to meet an attractive policewoman at a cop-hangout bar, rushes off to his bedroom, saying, "I've got to put in new collar stays, and — ooh, ooh — I have a fabulous new cashmere jacket I've been dying to premiere!" His long-suffering regular-guy father, a cop himself, sighs, "Yeah, this is gonna work." Here, a sense of style is equated with being educated beyond sense, a pointy-headed idiocy. Given all this, which is hardly controversial, it is nevertheless dismaying how often the suit, when it is worn at all, is worn badly, or is simply a bad suit. It is impossible to have a suit that is *too nice*; the idea is a conceptual non-starter. But it is easy, all too easy, to have a suit that creates deficiencies rather than hides them. Sometimes, as for the character Ben in Louis Begley's *The Man Who Was Late*, this is a tale of lifelong disappointments, miniature "tragedies" of cuff width and sleeve buttons. Finally, late in life, Ben finds a Paris tailor who can solve these problems, but the man retires to the country soon after, leaving Ben disconsolate: another moment of arriving too late.

Surely part of the reason that so many suits one sees are bad suits is that they are resented by their wearers. This is self-defeating, and unnecessary. At its best, the suit is the outward sign of intelligence and attention. It takes its place in a lexicon of sophistication, an element in a grown-up world of travel and business in which bartenders know your usual drink, drivers bearing signs meet you at the airport, documents and telephones are brought to your table in restaurants, and every rental car in every visited city is a sexy convertible. This fantasy of male success, which surely cannot be unique to my daydreams, has little to do with the more robust pursuits of an Ernest Hemingway or Ted Williams, the fishing and hunting and horseback riding next to which this

other ideal of maleness may seem slightly effete, but its role models in literature and film are arguably more impressive: the *flâneurs* of the Symbolist moment, dandies such as Wilde and Beardsley, the young Disraeli, Ronald Firbank and Diaghilev, slightly ambiguous figures such as Grant. (Ellen Moers's work on the dandy as a staple literary figure, a central avatar of modernism, is the best assessment of these movements.)

One should also add the dandies of pop music. In the 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*, a loosely fictional bio-pic about a David Bowie figure called Brian Slade, a voice-over describes the late-sixties transition from Mod to Glam this way: "Taking their cue from Little Richard, the swank London Mods, short for Modernists, were the first to wear mascara and lacquer their hair — the first true dandies of pop. And known to just about any indiscretion where a good suit was involved. Style always wins out in the end." The last line is spoken over a scene of Brian, dressed in a purple French-cuffed shirt, black-and-white barred tie, taupe shoes, and a black pinstriped suit, having just sodomized a young boy in traditional British school uniform.

Velvet Goldmine explicitly links the Mods and the glitter-rock crowd to Wilde's languid modernism — the film starts with him in Ireland, and a brooch allegedly belonging to him becomes a magic talisman through the narrative. But it also alludes more gently to inter-war bird-of-paradise beauty junkies such as Stephen Tennant, a man who used to go out with a handkerchief tied over his eyes so as not to expire from "excessive sensibility." Tennant's fictional counterpart appears as a lovely comic confection in Nancy Mitford's novels, a Canadian-born beauty who descends on the staid aristocratic household of *Love in a Cold Climate*, but he is also said to be the model, in darker form, for Anthony Blanche, the depraved stuttering dandy of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. It is Blanche who, in two separate scenes of that novel, tries to poison the young Charles Ryder against winsome Sebastian Flyte, warning him of the Flyte family's "fatal English charm" — a charm that, in the event, proves indeed to be Charles's undoing. In love in turn with alcoholic Sebastian and his self-hating sister Julia, Charles is caught in the sticky amber of Anglo-Catholic decline during the 1930s.

This may be the somber side of the dandy-aesthete: the bitter outsider, given to outrage and cynical (if accurate) condemnations. Consider, for a different view, Grant in a wide-lapel pinstrip in Hitchcock's *Notorious*, a dandified spy falling in love with Ingrid Bergman in Rio de Janeiro. Or, even better, Grant as Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest*, the suave Madison Avenue advertising executive thrown by mistake into Cold War intrigue. Thornhill is one of American cinema's great unlikely heroes, a modern paragon in slick hand-sewn dress. Habitually charming, even glib — "In the world of advertising," he says, "there is no such thing as a lie; there is only expedient exaggeration" — Thornhill is Urban Man polished to a high gloss. Twice divorced, devoted to his mother, he favors cold martinis, French cuffs, and monogrammed matchbooks. In vivid Technicolor, his exquisitely tailored silver-blue suit, a three-button whose lapels nevertheless fall into a fashionable deeper gorge, precisely matches the distinguished greying hair at his temples. In the film's opening scenes, Thornhill emerges quickly as a fussy, narcissistic, apparently superficial mannequin.

Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint in North by Northwest *(1959). Photofest.*

But under pressure he is also agile, wily, resourceful, and brave. When a typical Hitchcockian trope of mistaken identity spins him into a world of espionage and betrayal, he manipulates the apparatus of modern life — telephones, hotels, trains, taxis, bars, banter — with enviable, grown-up assurance. And in the vertiginous world ruled by the urbane menace of villains James Mason and Martin Landau, where Hitchcock's unexpected overhead shots and thrilling signature sequences (the strafing crop-duster, the scramble on Mount Rushmore) seem to reflect a sort of cognitive imbalance, it is Thornhill who finds his feet. The film's title evokes Hamlet's description of his feigned madness; it savors deception, mistaken identity, the yawning chasm between appearance and reality. It is also, in its off-kilter way, a romantic comedy. How ironic, but how fitting, that the professional deceiver should carry the day — and carry off Eva Marie Saint, the beautiful double-agent who entered the picture on a mission to deceive *him*. Under the suit lies a man, and a particularly appealing one, too. The suit doesn't disguise these properties so much as reflect them, allow them play.

In our society, dandyism comes haltingly when it comes at all. It is a function of early adulthood, I think, and that first blush of success that frees a man to close the frustrating gap, so typical of post-graduate life especially, between taste and means. The unspoken tragedy of urban life in our century is this constant struggle to afford the self-presentation we desire. I don't have to want the baggy convict-wear and brand-name jackets of the urban scene to appreciate

the yearning evident in the startling statistic that the average inner-city African American spends $2440 on clothes in a year, compared to the $1508 considered sufficient by the average US consumer. I would consider it rolling pretty high if I granted myself an annual clothes budget of $2500, but apparently that's nothing to write home about in East Los Angeles or the Bronx. It's not about how much money you have; it's about what you choose to spend your money on.

I am struck by accounts of the entry into fashion consciousness, especially as granted by writers who might be thought above such things. David Mamet, in a long-ago article in the *New York Times Magazine*, described the way he would buy secondhand tweed jackets and then have them carefully tailored to his tastes: sleeves shortened, elbows patched, rear vent sewn shut to prevent "rooster-tail" (this before the advent of the now ubiquitous Italianate ventless jacket). In *The Facts*, Philip Roth mocks himself, post facto, for his clothes-horse tendencies as a youngish man, the way he ran out with his first big advance check and bought some tailored Savile Row suits: "I proceeded to have clothes made by three distinguished tailoring establishments, half a dozen suits that I didn't need, that required endless, stupefying fittings, and that finally never fit me anyway." This lack of fit is indicted as part of a "restlessness," mainly sexual, that afflicts Roth at 35. And yet, he cannot quite silence an enthusiasm for that reckless young man, nor can he entirely quell the affection aroused by an even younger, still more dashing version of himself, the hotshot freshman comp teacher he was in 1956, aged 22, who bought a Brooks Brothers suit to look more impressive. Contrast with this the dourness of George Steiner's *Errata*, say, which is admirably forthright about professional jealousies and intellectual epiphanies but reads as if the author never wore anything in particular, indeed as if he were continually naked.

But the quintessential dandy of American letters is probably, for good or bad, Tom Wolfe, whose cream-colored suits and high-collared dress shirts were adopted in the 1960s as a means at once of identifying the emerging social commentator and of pissing off the people he was writing about and talking to. Wolfe is, in this sense, the early literary analogue of someone such as Dennis Rodman, the Detroit Pistons and Chicago Bulls forward who took to extensive tattooing, cross-dressing, and polychrome hair-dyeing as a means of getting his share of available attention in the saturated late-century mediascape. Wolfe's latter-day attempts to pick fights with Norman Mailer and John Irving over his blowhard novel, *A Man In Full*, his tauntings of *The New Yorker*, are desperate versions of the same desire for notice. Yet, this is dandyism gone bad, its original impulse of disdain transformed into something far less defensible, and more dangerous: publicity-seeking. When *Harper's* magazine made the odd error of featuring Wolfe sitting opposite Mark Twain, another cream-suited dandy, on its 150th-anniversary cover (and, worse, including inside a ridiculous and shallow essay from the previously acute author of *The Painted Word* and *Radical Chic*), we knew that dandyism in American letters was in trouble.

Fictional accounts of young men at play are just as compelling as real-world examples, maybe more so, from John Barth's postmodern jape, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which includes a description of the rituals and variables of eighteenth-

Jeremy Irons and Anthony Andrews in Brideshead Revisited *(1982). Photofest.*

century male dress so delicious it makes the mouth water, to Sebastian and Charles in Waugh's elegiac *Brideshead.* Charles's priggish cousin Jasper remonstrates with him about, among other things, his lunchtime drunkenness and flashy habits of dress: "When you came up I remember advising to dress as you would in a country house. Your present get-up seems an unhappy compromise between the correct wear for a theatrical party at Maidenhead and a glee-

singing competition in a garden suburb." Charles, for his part, is undeterred by this precise insult. "It seems to me that I grew younger daily with each adult habit that I acquired," he says of this undergraduate flowering. "Now, that summer term with Sebastian, it seemed as though I was being given a brief spell of what I had never known, a happy childhood, and though its toys were silk shirts and liqueurs and cigars and its naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins, there was something of nursery freshness about us that fell little short of the joy of innocence."

Waugh's regard for style transferred itself easily into the uniformed milieu of wartime England — though, as an officer with the extremely fashionable Household Cavalry, or Blues, he had only contempt for the Royal Air Force uniforms I grew up envying. Airmen come in for all kinds of superior joking in his *Sword of Honour* trilogy, finally depicted as cultureless near-morons in the concluding volume, *Unconditional Surrender*. Like all writers of his generation and class who served in the war and wrote about it — Anthony Powell in his roman fleuve, *Dance to the Music of Time*, or Simon Raven in his second-rate version of the same, *Alms for Oblivion* — indeed like most soldiers of his time, Waugh was obsessed with the relative "smartness" of English regiments. The Coldstream Guards or Corps of Rifles are honored less for their prowess than for their fine red tunics or frogged green jackets. It is war to the tune of invidious social distinction, all passed for judgment in bright colors and badges.

Hans Castorp retails his partial seduction by the perfect turn-outs and slick style of the humanist Settembrini, and who can resist the pull of hard collars and spats, the cream-colored suits and high waistcoats of spa-life fashion? Even the cynical narrator of Graham Greene's *The Comedians* cannot conceal his admiration for a poverty-stricken dandy, who, despite living in near squalor, is so fastidious about his suit that he covers himself with an expansive handkerchief when he urinates. Reading these accounts, you cannot help thinking: *I* want to wear silk all the time! *I* want to be festooned and beswagged!

They also have a young man's eagerness about them, the dandy in waiting. It is one thing to view Cary Grant in all his grown-up perfection. His appeal is the appeal of the fashionable father you never had, a slightly foppish but unquestionably strong man who knew the ways of the world. This is surely his appeal for women too, whether realized with subtlety (Grace Kelly's sly banter in *To Catch A Thief*) or with crudeness (Audrey Hepburn repeatedly throwing herself at him in *Charade*). By contrast, watching Sebastian and Charles dress, or listening to the youthful ambition of Mamet and Roth, we hear something else, an echo from an earlier life-stage, the call of possibility. Here the suit of clothes still has an air of playfulness, of a costume worn. It is a uniform not in the common pejorative sense of the thing you don every day, without thinking, but in the antic sense of the uniforms worn by naval suitors in Jane Austen's novels, the finery sported by subalterns in the Raj, the arrogant peacock strutting of young Florentine carabinieri.

In my line of work, wearing suits is not normal, and so some of this playfulness continues to be available. Universities are sites of arrested development anyway, so a program of stylish adolescent rebellion often seems called for, bucking the

patched-tweed-and-hairy-sweater norm in favor of something more glamorous, more suggestive of the outside world's vast potential for beauty and pleasure. My students understand this very well, in their own mass-produced way. They care about how they look; like anyone alive today, they are past masters of the nuances of brands and models, styles and options. This is sometimes enervating, but among other things it issues in a surprising and complimentary degree of interest in my clothes. Style has become a running theme in the annual course evaluations they fill out, sometimes even entering into otherwise abstruse discussion of Aristotle or Spinoza in their papers.

Every professor realizes, sooner or later, the vast attention that students give to every detail of his or her appearance. A political science professor I had in college wore just two suits, a blue and a grey, prompting the guy next to me to speculate that he actually had a closet full of identical ones, like Superman costumes. My colleague Allan receives on his course evaluations long paeans to his impressive wardrobe and suggestions he should go into acting. On mine I have been asked what brand my watch is and where I bought a certain rather flamboyant tie. I have even been shyly consulted for fashion advice, something to add to the already lengthy list of topics — illness, relationships, car trouble, family conflicts — that make up the unseen, pastoral element of university teaching.

The half-formed dandyism of students, so depressingly conformist compared to the *fin-de-siècle* wonders of the last century's turn, so apparently driven by consumerism and branded free advertising, nevertheless confesses itself. Their desires speak louder than the bright colors of their FUBU shirts, the need to individuate all the more insistent for being diverted into a back-turned Kangol cap. It is the least I can do to make myself an example.

All this concern with clothes strikes others as unseemly, of course, especially since it seems to sit oddly with the other-worldly ambitions of my subject, philosophy. How is it possible for someone to be engaged in lofty thoughts when he is checking the creases on his trousers? How can concern with the implications of the Habermasian ideal speech situation be reconciled with concern for a precise color match between tie and socks? A simple answer to that is the one the former prime minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, himself a style maven of no mean gifts, once gave to reporters in an Ottawa press scrum. They wondered if he would have the nerve to call out the military to deal with separatist terrorists in 1970 Québec. He said: "Just watch me." But sometimes, more seriously, I refresh the memories of my knit-brow colleagues with Machiavelli's account of his engagements with the ancient authors during his political exile, in a passage I happily underlined during an undergraduate political theory course in the long-ago year of 1981, when we all thought the end of the world was much closer than we do now.

"When evening comes, I return to my home, and I go into my study," the disgraced diplomat wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori in December of 1513, describing his daily regimen.

> [A]nd on the threshold, I take off my everyday clothes, which are covered with mud and mire, and I put on regal and curial robes; and dressed in a

> more appropriate manner I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men and am welcomed by them kindly . . . and there I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they, in their humanity, answer me; and for four hours I feel no boredom, I dismiss every affliction, I no longer fear poverty nor do I tremble at the thought of death. . . . I have noted down what I have learned from their conversation, and I composed a little work, *De principatibus*, where I delve as deeply as I can into thoughts on this subject.

Would that we all possessed Machiavelli's jauntiness in the face of worldly adversity, and his sense of the finery's simultaneous mark of respect and bulwark against the misfortunes of this life. My buddy Mark Thompson used to own an expensive, cutting-edge tailored suit that he liked to wear to job interviews, not because it was suitable for them but precisely because it wasn't. It was tasty and beautiful beyond the expectations of the working world, a suit to wear while strolling in the Piazza San Marco, a suit to wear on a date with Elizabeth Hurley. Mark called it his "fuck-you suit."

Whenever possible, your suit should be a fuck-you suit. It should somehow, very slightly, irritate the mundane prejudices and routine pomposity of the Cousin Jaspers of the world. The socks should be a little too sky-blue (Astaire) or champagne-colored (Grant). The tie should be a smidge too unsual for Wall Street, the shirt too lavender or citron, the silhouette a little too exaggerated. Your raincoat should be, as Allan's is, the result of a weeks-long quest in Parisian boutiques for the perfect white-cotton blouson with navy lining and dashing turned-back cuffs.

It also helps, of course, if, like me, you don't have to wear a suit every day, don't *have* to wear a suit at all. Then the suit as costume may have free rein, and every foray into the world can take its proper place as an urban adventure, a complex encounter of beauty with ugliness, of style with boredom, of youth with time. Thus arrayed, you may glide through your day in a Todd Oldham quasi-Edwardian frock coat in purple raw silk. You may skim the sidewalk in your chunky Comme des Garçons shoes. Your bright blue tie may billow and flap out behind you. Think of the dandies of another, allegedly more decadent age, and wonder why we do not set our bar so high most of the time, why we allow our own decadence to be all of the mind and spirit, a decadence of mediocrity and acquisitiveness, rather than what it was meant to be, a challenge to received wisdom and bourgeois sluggishness.

Think, finally, of your father and his own sense of style. Think of what you have borrowed, what you have invented, what you have painfully thrown off. Behind the careful tailoring and colorful silk, this stroll is a primal encounter with your culture and your upbringing. It is a personal story not yet told, a narrative of self-creation waiting to happen. You only get one chance to take this particular walk — don't waste it. You are the young and the restless. Don't seek approval; demand only respect. Be a man. Be a dandy.

"Portrait of 'B.'" Vanity Fair *(18 June 1881). Courtesy of the author.*

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