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Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

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Nietzsche and the Corset

BY LOUISE FANNING

In Henri F Ellenberger's monumental work documenting the emergence of psychoanalysis, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, Friedrich Nietzsche is referred to as "the prophet of a new era".ⁱ The main theme of Nietzsche's first book was the mythological presence of Dionysus and Apollo. The book was not well received at the time but since can be seen to be emblematic. He also developed many other ideas, which included, in part, the close association of power gained through self-control. "One thing is needful. – To "give style" to one's character – a great and rare art!"ⁱⁱ

Nietzsche said that resentment was the result of the inability to stylize oneself. This theme also exemplified in part, the late 19th century cult of Anti-Physis,ⁱⁱⁱ a trend away from nature. Nietzsche described the basic drive to overcome oneself as the will to power.

Another huge cultural trend of the late 19th century of which Nietzsche was an eminent representative was the psychology of 'unmasking', the search for hidden unconscious motivations.^{iv} Integral to these theories were the interactions of truth and deceit: "Truth! Rapturous illusion of a god! What does truth matter to men!" conjectures Nietzsche in his essay On the Pathos of Truth^v.

Although "Nietzsche's works are an inexhaustible mine of instances showing how the will to power manifests under countless disguised forms",^{vi} he was not so much the prophet of a new era as to include women's lives in his psychology. Our appearance is a gesture of life wanting the world, organised through the cultural appropriations available at the time. The corset was a garment that was integral to the lives of women for many years and intensely so in the late 19th century. It inspired endless discussions around deception, unconscious instinct and the need for pleasure and struggle. It was an utterly evocative and eloquent image of the desire to overcome the body, not by transcending it but by temporalising it. Fashion mirrors its time and the corset seems to have done so with a candor that would have alarmed Nietzsche and stuffy contemporary psychologists, if they had noticed.

No garment takes more advantage of the ability to deceive than the corset. The corset is arguably the most successful and the most controversial garment in the history of clothes.^{vii} Symbolically, the phenomenon of clothing denotes a mystical veiling, which hides the eternal from sight.^{viii} It is a tangible sign of time. But it is not clothing alone that creates the mystery. It is when the body is supplied to the clothing the feeling of mystery is invoked and a site of signification created. Then an image of the psychological struggle between Apollonian form and Dionysian energy emerges, the theme of which permeates all Nietzsche's work, particularly *The Birth of Tragedy*.

When the body is unadorned, it might be described in the language of the ancient Greeks as physis. The moment we add to nature, Dionysus, the archetypal reality of zoë appears^{ix} - we somatise the divine. Plotinos called zoë "the time of the soul" ^x. The multiplicity and exuberance of Dionysian emotion employs Apollo's veil (or in Cretan terms, Ariadne^{xi}), to bring itself forth by way of a mask that is a gesture to life. This masking communicates a strangely ambivalent experience of zoë as uncannily near and at the same time remote.^{xii} The body alone is a gesture to the past, morbidly so in the dying body which is close to the eternal. A covering on the surface of the body speaks of the future. It is a gesture outward, to gaining life. It is power.

Nietzsche's intuitions in no small way influenced Freud who was putting "the unconscious mind on the map as a coherent and scientific entity"^{xiii}, and in particular, describing how the driving force of

the libido can be mitigated by a civilising process, the superego, which causes it to find gratification by socially acceptable means.^{xiv}

Most of Freud's patients were women. The clothes that Freud's patients wore, were most particular. Up until this time, dresses had remained more or less capricious, revealing, and flowing.^{xv} But by the beginning of the Third Empire they were hermetically sealed and underneath were layers of petticoats that clung to the drawers, which were then caught up with the chemise and the corset.^{xvi}

Yet at the same time of being their most restrictive, these garments inspired endless conversations about their erotic nature and within the context of 19th century society they played an extraordinarily ambivalent role. In order to be 'decently dressed' women had to wear corsets. Yet Victorian women "were well aware that the corset also functioned as an adjunct to female sexual beauty".^{xvii} As well as lying about the body's limitation of form it also makes the female body tantalizingly more inaccessible. Corsetry exaggerates the masculine role of sexual aggression and feminine receptivity for as long as corsets were laced at the back a woman could not undo the corset herself.

Aristocratic women began wearing the first modern corsets in the 16th century.^{xviii} A "fitted bust and wide décolletage underlined the wearer's new concentration on her individuality".^{xix} This movement to shape the body by the wearing of the corset spread quickly and continued as an essential element of dress for almost 400 years until it reached its late 19th century form after which, mainly due to a more active lifestyle for women, its use lessened.

Abandonment of sensuality in dress for men became concretized early in the 19th century. As the middle classes began to form, and men could gain power through industry, men's clothing took on the look of 'discreet anonymity'^{xx} that modern commerce still evidences today. Women, on the other hand, took on the burden of 'conspicuous consumption' for the now undecorated head of the household. Male anonymity in appearance led to a greater emphasis on appearance for women.^{xxi}

Nietzsche was, by training and profession, a classicist and drew inspiration for his Dionysian themes from the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome.^{xxii} The root of what has been termed Dionysian in the temperament of the Greeks reaches back to ancient Crete^{xxiii} and the ancient Minoan civilization was also the "prelude to the history of religion in Europe..."^{xxiv} The late 19th century feminine body shape is very similar to that of the Great Goddess, the special object of worship on Crete in the period of middle to late Minoan, from about 1750 – 1400 BCE. The Great Goddess was extraordinary and unique in that a corset emphasized her waist. This corset was probably made of metal^{xxv} and it raised and exposed her breasts. From her rounded hips hung a long layered skirt. Her hands, sometimes bearing snakes, are raised in a gesture, suggests Carl Kerényi, that brings transcendence into nature. "Thus do I appear" says the gesture. And the formless and only hinted-at becomes formed.^{xxvi}

This movement to shape the body is a signal to the gods and humankind that here is a scintillating and provocative gateway to the world and to the gods – a Dionysian and Apollonian gesture. Illusory images caused by corseted bodies are not valued for their 'truth' but for their ability to fascinate and allow life to delight in its own presence.

To quote Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, life wants to "create beyond itself. That is what it most wishes to do, that is its whole ardour".^{xxvii}

Bibliography.

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- ⁱⁱ F. Nietzsche, (1974). *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Page 232. New York: Vintage Books
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ellenberger, note 1, page 282
- ^{iv} Ibid, page 277
- ^v F. Nietzsche, On the Pathos of Truth in D. Breazale's *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*. Pages 64 – 66. New Jersey: Humanities Press
- ^{vi} Ellenberger, note 1, page 278
- ^{vii} V. Steele, (2002). *The Corset*. Page 1. London: Yale University Press.
- ^{viii} J. E. Cirlot, (1962). *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Page 379. London: Routledge.
- ^{ix} C. Kerényi, (1976). *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*. Page 124. Translated by R. Manheim. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- ^x Ibid, page xxxiii
- ^{xi} Ibid, page 124
- ^{xii} Ibid, page 80
- ^{xiii} M. Seymour – Smith, (1997). *The Hundred Most Influential Books Ever Written: The History of Thought from Ancient Times to Today*. Page 381. New Citadel Press
- ^{xiv} Ibid
- ^{xv} C. Saint – Laurent, (1986). *A History of Women's Underwear*. Page 123. London: Academy Editions
- ^{xvi} Ibid
- ^{xvii} Steele, note 6, page 35
- ^{xviii} Ibid, page 6
- ^{xix} F. Boucher, (1987). *A History of Costume in the West*. Page 198. London: Thames and Hudson
- ^{xx} T. Veblem in Q. Bell, (1992). *On Human Finery: a Classic Study of Fashion Through the Ages*. London: Allison and Busby
- ^{xxi} Ibid
- ^{xxii} D. Smith, (2000), in F. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Page xii. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- ^{xxiii} Kerényi, note 8, page 28
- ^{xxiv} Ibid, page 5
- ^{xxv} Boucher, note 17, page 83
- ^{xxvi} Ibid, page 22
- ^{xxvii} Friedrich Nietzsche, (1961). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Page 63. London: Penguin Books.