

Men in Tights

By ANNE HOLLANDER

Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear by Paul Fussell

(Houghton Mifflin, 204 pp., \$22)

AFTER PUBLISHING FOUR scholarly works about eighteenth-century English literature, Paul Fussell became famous with the publication of *The Great War and Modern Memory* in 1975. Since then he has written several other books with war as the theme, another called *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, and even *The Boy Scout's Handbook and Other Observations*. His new book lets us believe that the true reason he left the eighteenth century for the analysis of modern struggles was a passion for the uniforms that they require. This feeling was apparently born in him long before any interest in writing or scholarship. He recounts how the Boy Scouts' uniform made him join the organization when he was small, and how the junior and senior ROTC uniforms roped him in during high school and college and prepared him to wear, at last, the uniform of an officer in the U.S. Army between 1943 and 1947. Fussell notes that his entire youth was spent in uniform, registering his responses to it and its effect on everybody else.

Now we find him brooding on the notable appeal of all uniform clothing. This brief study touches on baseball and football uniforms, school uniforms, band-players' and cheerleaders' outfits, church vestments and religious habits, and the regulation gear for chefs, McDonald's workers, hospital staff, bellboys, doormen, railway porters, deliverymen, policemen, the Hasidim, the Amish, the Ku Klux Klan, ice cream vendors, and brides. And, in passing, the regulation teaching gear for professors in universities, as Fussell was for many years following his military period. We soon see, however, that modern military uniforms absorb him most, not just our own but also those of our allies and our enemies during the twentieth century,

and some from the preceding century. He still looks with envy at what Marines wear, always so superior to grubby Army brown, although he can appreciate the Navy without envying the blue.

At the very start Fussell asks pardon for what he calls the "unrelenting masculinity of this book," the brides notwithstanding. He takes pains to include remarks about the adaptation of masculine uniforms to female personnel—a tricky matter, sometimes involving special pregnancy arrangements—and he calls this "doing justice" to women; but the section on brides is meager and unsympathetic, without the many remarkable historical anecdotes that pepper the other parts of the book. Fussell mainly sneers at what he calls the "wedding trauma," and at the ridiculous cost not only of acquiring bridal finery in either chaste or sexy versions, but also of preserving it afterwards like a relic in dust-proof, acid-free, airtight containers. Abruptly ending the chapter, he says that selling these "has become a big business, like the divorce industry." Later on, though, we hear how very touching is the careful preservation of beloved old military uniforms.

Fussell attributes the beginning of regulation white for brides to Queen Victoria, although his scholarly self might remember that Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) wore a white wedding dress, "flowered with silver." Richardson made a point of this, because when his humble heroine married her aristocratic boss, bridal white was already a long-standing custom among royalty and nobility, as far back as 1614—but enough. Fussell is not really interested in this subject anyway, certainly not historically. He is interested in nurses and nuns—much more honorable than brides, and much closer to soldiers. He thinks it a loss that the formerly starched uniforms with stiff caps and the full habits with crisp veils have been phased out in contemporary society, but he is attentive to the idea that nuns and nurses now want to look connected to ordinary people instead

of set apart from them. But in truth the modern wedding dress is not a uniform at all, it is a costume, and for one appearance in a famous starring role. Fussell—who wants very much to emphasize the distinction between costume and uniform, as if between role-playing and role-filling—should simply have left out the brides.

Fussell points out that a real uniform brings honor, marking a man as one of a powerful retinue serving the duke, the king, the parliament, the president, or God, suiting him for an impersonal and demanding collective effort. A uniform is known to be conferred on its wearer, the visible prize for being worthy to join the company. It asks to be taken seriously, says Fussell, as a costume does not. And indeed he finds that today's personnel who wear uniforms are all proud of them, even in the most subordinate and lowest-paid occupations. Sanitation workers and McDonald's burger-slingers, we are invited to think, are feeling the same sense of ennoblement felt by the Knights Templar or the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

Perhaps they are. And perhaps that is because a quasi-religious flavor, suggesting self-sacrifice and risk-taking—to say nothing of thrillingly licit killing in a provisionally sacred cause—still lingers in any uniform's seams and buttons. Strong stuff, even for FedEx deliverymen. On the other hand, Fussell would see any actual cowboy got up to mimic television or Marlboro-ad cowboys, or any student mimicking a real basketball player or rock singer—or a "garage mechanic, panhandler, tearoom gypsy, or cattle rustler," to borrow Philip Roth's list, here quoted from *The Professor of Desire*—as dressed up in a costume.

The dark suit and necktie, needless to say, Fussell regards as a fashion that became a uniform, conferring similar honor. The academic-professorial tweed jacket and khaki trousers of Fussell's youth he recalls as once having had the same character, now being used as "casual" business uniform. His distinction gets very blurry, though, since both the dark suit and the sport coat with casual pants are essentially forms of costume for voluntary role-playing. The groups wearing them show submission to group fashion, not to a higher authority. It is the kind of effect that gives the word "uniform" its pejorative flavor, associating it with a dishonorable love of safety. High school and college students of both sexes, Fussell says, always feel the power in voluntary uniformity of dress, where all inventive variation looks like error, not freedom—as on parade, or in the monastery.

Fussell thinks girls are "allowed more

ANNE HOLLANDER's latest book is *Fabric of Vision: Dress and Drapery in Painting* (Yale University Press).

invention" in this, but that is not the right way to put it. Girls' clothes have more variation built into them. This means that girls get stuck with more possible ways of looking wrong, and that produces more constraint, not less. The uniformity of basic male garments is one thing that has made women wish to adopt them, to feel exempt from so many possibly wrong choices.

WHITE TIE AND tails once became an ennobling livery for gentlemen in the evening, but Fussell says he now feels like laughing at a symphony orchestra all wearing it. When the outfit was adopted for orchestras in the nineteenth century, it was fashionably worn by all males in the audience, and it looked as universally satisfying as any fashion at the peak of its run. The run was long for formal male evening dress, lasting well past the middle of the twentieth century; but white tie now reminds people of Adolph Menjou and Marlene Dietrich, and it has unquestionably become a costume, more comic—or let's say ludic—than dramatic in flavor. This may change back, of course, since fashion consists largely of perpetual re-invention.

The dominating masculinity of this book is actually one of its virtues, because Fussell feels free to visit in detail the rarely studied subject of male sartorial vanity. Modern fashion has become so feminine a hazard in everybody's mind that we tend to forget the analogous snares set for the male sex over the centuries. For many men, male groups, and whole nations, we find, it has not been shifts in male fashion—long since considered a diminished subject—but rather the seductive varieties of military finery that have become an obsession, a preoccupation, a fetish.

The masculine erotic appeal of military finery is undeniable. The legendary fact that guys in uniform get girls, perpetuated by Jane Austen, Balzac, and many other writers in epochs when military dress was spectacular, is still borne out in reality, certainly in wartime. You could say that girls have always liked uniforms the way guys have always liked low-necked dresses, at least since around 1300. The allure is very basic, and it does not depend on color, plumes, and gold trimming in either case. Fussell thinks that emphasis on big, strong shoulders helps make a uniform physically attractive—epaulettes, shoulder boards, and strips across the shoulders with insignia attached. It is notable, however, that in mid-eighteenth-century prints showing the many-colored uniforms of Frederick the Great's crack Prussian troops, all the figures have narrow chests and small

shoulders with nothing on the uniform to give them any bulk or spread. The *tenue* further emphasizes a dome-shaped belly, wide hips, and short legs.

This same figure appears on young and handsome male civilians in portraits of the period, and it seems to have been the ideal man's body at the time. It was only toward the very end of the eighteenth century that the classical Greek male figure, with long legs and big shoulders and no belly, once more became the model for soldiers and gentlemen, as it had been in the Renaissance (see Charles V and Henry VIII). Around 1780, civilian shoulders were again being augmented by padding, and soon military uniforms were sporting shoulder knots, epaulettes, shoulder boards, fourragères (loops of braid around the top of the arm), and eventually shoulder strips with insignia. Girls back in the early eighteenth century undoubtedly liked the bright and tight Prussian soldiers, even with bellies and without Herculean deltoids. The main thing was tightness, which produces an overall bodily tumescence quite impossible to resist. Full armor was best for that, but by the eighteenth century it was long gone.

Fussell describes the gradual abandonment of flashy and hard-to-wear uniforms for battle, although they once made sense when opposing armies marched or rode to meet one another face-to-face, and each side wished to be visually overwhelming. Dull-colored and easy-fitting uniforms are required for modern war, where to be invisible from any distance is a prime necessity, as well as to shoulder and fire a rifle with speed and to crawl through mud looking like a part of it. Tight, complex, and vivid dress uniforms, some with metallic gorgets or breastplates and plumed headgear, are now worn on parade by prestigious troops of guards in London and other great capitals, by high school marching bands in the United States, and perhaps also by a whole network of people called "reenactors," though Fussell prefers to call them "weirdos" or maybe "sickos."

For certain groups of these devotees, Third Reich Reproductions, among other companies, sells accurately made and accessorized Nazi uniforms that you can buy on the Internet from WaffenSS.com, so that you can re-enact World War II battles from the other side. Italian Fascist uniforms are also available, and probably Japanese ones, too, all for specific regiments. Other groups prefer re-enacting engagements from World War I, the Civil War, or the Revolutionary War, and perfect replicas of all those well-known trappings are likewise available to those in the

grip of what Fussell, with great distaste, calls military romanticism. Playing soldiers is now done by adults who have never been in battle, "indulging fantasies of heroism, mostly on weekends," he remarks. "Missing are the screams of the wounded and the vomiting and crying of those close to them." You can also get fake medals. Fussell goes on to mention uniform porn, which not only involves military gear but nurse and nun outfits and church and police gear. The power of uniforms to bring out cruelty in the wearer, along with their inherent sexual pull, has naturally made them an indispensable part of sadomasochistic equipment. You can rent and buy films that show them in use, or get the goods yourself and go to it.

THE ANCIENT POTENCY of uniforms has seeped into masculine civil consciousness in many forms. The "dullness" often objected to in modern masculine tailoring since its launch in the early nineteenth century, meaning its uniform discretion and reticence, had a gaudy counterpart in the still-dashing military modes at that time. Objections to the dullness of male clothing by Alfred de Musset, later Oscar Wilde, and still later D. H. Lawrence (here quoted by Fussell in praise of parti-colored Renaissance hose) can seem like envy on the part of literary men for military splendor, even though both Wilde and Lawrence said they envied only the vanished days of male color and sexy display in formal civil life. But it seems more than that.

"Colorful tights" is a phrase derived from Lawrence that Fussell himself uses again and again, as a running gag to mean what cannot acceptably be worn by modern men, alas. He and Lawrence, and Wilde, too, really seem to be envying the colorful and sexy creations (sometimes worn with bright tights) that fashion for many generations has been urging women to wear. Beautifully designed and adorned modern uniforms—trim, tight, always ennobling—then become the male answer to female fashion, the necessary counterpart of the low neckline. It is a replacement, *mutatis mutandis*, for all that ancient male civilian display, once accompanied by curled and flowing male hair, vivid and plumed male hats, and shapely male legs, which for a long time thoroughly outshone women's modest garments. Normal female dress in those dark ages somewhat resembled nun's habits, before female fashion began exposing the skin, adorning the hair, and tightening the waist, rivaling and eventually eclipsing the male version.

Fussell also quotes Virginia Woolf in

Three Guineas, in which she makes the usual mockery of modern female fashion by pointing derisively to the glories—"how many, how splendid, how extremely ornate"—of regulation public finery for English male judges, academics, and clergy, all of which stem from early days of male magnificence: "Now your shoulders are covered with lace, now furred with ermine... sometimes you wear wigs," and much more in like vein. She finds the most splendid public male costume to be military dress uniform, remarking that "since the red and gold, the brass and the feather are discarded upon active service," their appeal must be entirely to vanity, to flaunt military majesty and "induce young men to become soldiers." Fussell remarks that Lawrence would have agreed, and he certainly does himself. Men who are never soldiers (or sailors or Marines) must resign themselves to missing out on the delicious "colorful tights" effects of dress uniform.

The beauty of the other "uniform," the "dull" suit and tie, was praised enthusiastically in the 1890s by Max Beerbohm, who pointed approvingly to the universally becoming look of smooth and easy-fitting coats and trousers in muted shades and subtly textured fabrics. He noted that democratic ideals were served by this universalizing mode of dress, which looks good on men of every physical type and at all economic levels, flexible enough to suggest individuality and a sense of humor and pleasure, but demanding enough to suggest the effort required to maintain a common level of probity and civility—and peace, of course. Fussell points out that the "lounge suit," as it was once called, encourages sitting down, whereas "the uniform was made to stand up straight in." No genial or reflective attitudes were built into its design, and all common progress meant marching in step and perhaps chanting in unison, not sitting in colloquy exchanging opinions.

FUSSELL NOTES THAT in modern America military dress uniform has itself become muted in color and easy of fit. But the old tradition of stiff and dramatic display died hard elsewhere, and our enemies in World War II still held to it, especially the Italians, who came in for much Allied scorn. Fussell believes that this circumstance confirms "Shakespeare's apparent understanding that the fanciest-dressed army always loses." Homer and Virgil already seem to have believed this, since the Trojans attract Greek scorn for their gaudiness in both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*.

In his chapter on Germany, Fussell remarks that under the Nazi regime, a rule

was inaugurated giving all occupations, not just the military, a "dress uniform." This quasi-military outfit was not something to work in, but something to wear on the street when not working, and at public social gatherings. The Nazi idea, Fussell says, was to create a universal army-like spirit of conformity among civilians, which would prevail in the Reich after all undesirables were obliterated and the war was won. How do we square this, I wonder, with the lurid factoid that Fussell throws out at the beginning of the chapter (no source given) that in Germany "during the 1930s, and doubtless before, the public executioner performed his function, by means of an ax, in full evening dress, wearing white tie and tails, with silk top hat and white gloves." If this is true, it seems to ax white tie and tails as the uniform of civilized man in the evening. And that may have been the whole idea.

The idea of civil dress uniform was not a Nazi invention. Such accoutrements became fairly general in Central Europe during the decades following the Congress of Vienna, where military dandyism reached a dizzy height in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, often including padding and corsetry for ever more sublimely tumescent tightness. Thereafter, nineteenth-century ballrooms in Prague, St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Vienna were ablaze with the paramilitary braid, bright stripes, and gleaming buttons and swords worn by civil servants of all degrees, holders of honorary posts, ambassadors, and chancellors, right along with authentic field marshals, admirals, generals, and all degrees of officers. Members of clubs and societies often had quasi-military uniforms for such formal occasions, and in czarist Russia even doctors, lawyers, teachers, and state students of all kinds also had their own soldier-like, ornamented dress uniforms.

Imperial, czarist, and Nazi male elegance seemed to require looking most acutely military when at leisure, as if to suggest that superior men really sought pleasure only in marching, charging, wielding a saber, or standing at attention, and in being admired only for doing those things. In polite society, any dancing, flirting, eating, drinking, or even speaking must appear to be necessary obligations men might unbend to undertake, but just until the next trumpet blast. Late-nineteenth-century France and England did not go in for these effects, now associated with *The Merry Widow* and similar divertissements. The acutely civilian black tailcoat with white waistcoat and neckwear was then making a most dramatic contrast to the elaborate female gowns in the ballrooms of London and Paris, with New

York and Chicago following their lead.

One can imagine a Nazi plan to do away with decadent male evening wear at one stroke of the headsman and go back to Prussian braid and buttons for serious male appearance. Fussell indicates how much further Nazi Germany took the comic-opera spirit than the old imperial regimes ever did:

At work in the mines, miners necessarily wore practical, unsightly clothes, but walking out... an apprentice miner wore a black, high-collared tunic with rows of silver buttons on sleeves and chest to the number of twenty-four, and on top, a quasi-military visor cap. As you rose in the mining ranks, your black tunic added more silver buttons to a total of thirty-four.... As a graduate miner your headgear was a black shako with a large silver eagle in front and a plume on top. For formal affairs, you added white gloves, a sword, and a red-white-and-black Nazi armband.

Meanwhile, olive drab clothed the British, American, and Russian armies in World War II, and their miners at home had no white gloves and bright swords for evenings out. Throughout the war, in deliberate contrast to all the nifty-looking Nazi troops and the black-clad SS, Goebbels was wearing a double-breasted pinstriped suit; and Hitler, following Napoleon's dramatic style, always wore a plain pale gray coat with a white shirt and black tie, no insignia, adding only the eagle-and-swastika armband. Both he and Napoleon meant to look entirely superior to everyone else, all buttoned to the chin in their exciting tight trappings and laden with bars and badges. Fussell goes on further about the sartorial excesses of Hermann Goering, who sometimes wore a Roman toga and sandals to receive guests, and once received the diplomatic corps while dressed as Wotan and carrying a huge spear.

Fussell details more vain follies in the war dress of other leaders and other nations, reserving approval for the modest and often casual restraint of Generals Montgomery, Eisenhower, and MacArthur—the last once a military dandy, but reformed. American military simplicity generally delights Fussell, especially what he sees as a cool American way of wearing any uniform, of showing a healthy refusal to take a fanatic delight in any form of military decorum—perhaps he believes that only the re-enacting weirdos and the sado-masochists do that. He evokes the photos of the Japanese surrender aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri*, where all the humiliated

Japanese military are in impeccably stiff dress turnout, their civilian officials in morning coats, striped pants, and top hats, and the triumphant Americans all in wrinkled khaki pants and shirts.

"COMBAT FATIGUES" WERE an American invention—the use in battle of the loose and baggy one-piece suits originally designed for soldiers to wear while repairing engines, peeling potatoes, and cleaning latrines. The term "fatigue" had for centuries meant any non-military work carried out by soldiers, sometimes for punishment, and "fatigues" is short for the debasing garments worn for it—a far cry from real uniform. These demeaning clothes were later embellished with camouflage patterns for use in Vietnam and ever since, and now the world has adopted them for combatants, but Fussell gives an idea of their initial impact. He quotes Victor Klemperer's diary from just after the war's end to the effect that arriving American troops were almost unrecognizable as such: "They are not soldiers in the Prussian sense at all. They do not wear uniforms, but overalls or overall-like combinations of high trousers and blouse all in gray-green. The steel helmet is worn as comfortably as a hat, pushed forward or back, as it suits them."

Fussell then cannot resist quoting Mark Twain: "Huckleberry came and went at his own free will." He likes to think that all Americans naturally take their cue from Huck; but then he has a nasty little chapter exposing Hemingway as a "semi-weirdo." Hemingway frequently pretended to be a soldier, although he had seen combat only as a correspondent and an ambulance driver, on one occasion removing the correspondent's insignia from the uniform he wore and pretending to "command" a group of local French partisans. Tsk, tsk.

There are many quotations from fiction in this small volume, illustrating the feelings and the attitudes about uniforms that Fussell finds sympathetic, along with quotes from various writers on clothes and various experts with whom he has spoken. His modest enterprise is intended as a meditation, a familiar essay, an old-fashioned literary sort of book expounding the author's crotchets through anecdote, sardonic observation, and mild polemic. There is neither index nor bibliography, and no illustrations—it faintly suggests Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (quoted at the outset), but it is really more like several discursive short works on dress written in the first half of the last century: *The Eternal Masquerade* by H. Dennis Bradley (1923), or Quentin Bell's *On*

Human Finery (1947). Fussell ponders the fact that we all want to look the same, but we each want to look entirely individual, as these and other writers have pondered it before him. The subtitle is not really apt for the book—although it is

certainly very present-day—except as it applies among uniformed troops, where you are a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force because you are wearing that uniform. If it is a costume, then you are a weirdo. Or maybe Dana Andrews. ■

The Way We Are

By CHARLES LARMORE

Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism by Tzvetan Todorov translated by Carol Cosman

(Princeton University Press, 254 pp., \$29.95)

I.

"MAN IS A marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating thing," observed Montaigne at the beginning of his *Essays*. "It is difficult to found on him any constant and uniform judgment." Nothing is more true, and nothing better explains why the idea of humanism is so hard to pin down. It is really more of an outlook than a doctrine. Montaigne was himself among the first to use the term, meaning by "humanists" writers who looked as he did at human existence on its own terms, without appeal to theological teachings. His goal was not to present a substantial theory of man's nature or a comprehensive account of the good life. Montaigne observed that our thinking, if allowed to follow its natural path, is forever in movement, and shares in the endless variability that makes up the human condition as a whole.

Tzvetan Todorov's book on the humanist legacy is written very much in the spirit of Montaigne, with frequent reference to the *Essays* themselves. It offers a wide-ranging meditation on the open-endedness of human life, on the freedom and the sociability that are its only givens, and on the minimal ethic of autonomy and responsibility to others that they ought to inspire. Yet the book is by no means a hymn to man. Todorov harbors no illusions about the mix of good and bad that

enters into the fabric of all that is human. He takes his title from Montaigne's remark that the human world is never more than an "imperfect garden."

Born in Bulgaria in 1939, Todorov left his homeland at the age of twenty-four to study in Paris, where he has lived ever since. Upon his arrival he quickly became, during the heyday of Parisian structuralism, one of the foremost theorists of "poetics," analyzing the formal properties of literature (such as the recurrent structures of the folktale). But then there occurred a *crise de conscience*, and Todorov admirably turned his energies to showing how literature deals essentially with the substance of human experience and with all the great questions of human good and human evil. Over the past twenty years he has branched out to publish a series of books on subjects as various as cultural relativism, liberal democracy, and the endurance of the moral life even among prisoners in twentieth-century concentration camps. His new book brings together within a single volume many of these marvelously diverse interests. More as a lover of literature than as a systematic philosopher, Todorov develops his themes by interpreting the works of illustrious French writers of the past. Montaigne, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Constant are the main figures in a French tradition of humanism that he sets out to revive. Yet he speaks throughout in his own voice, with a rare breadth of sympathy and with a fine eye for the complexities of human experience.

Todorov's exclusively French focus is less surprising than his decision not to discuss in detail any writers of more recent times.

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