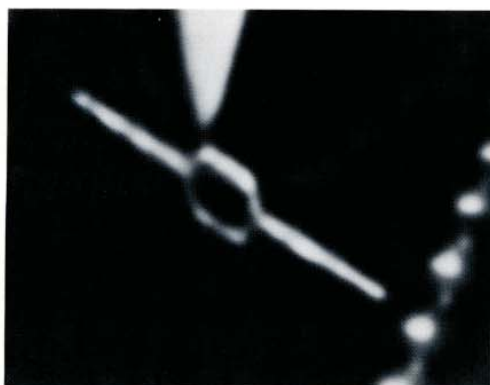

Auto Portrait

Shortly after Samuel Beckett's death, I again heard the story of how Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil leapt from her bicycle to rescue the writer as he lay dying in a Paris street with a stab wound in his chest. And how, after helping him recover from his grave injury, she devoted her life to his work by organizing everything for him, from homeopathic diets to publishing contracts. It could be argued that Beckett's life was saved first by his overcoat, and then by Suzanne. The coat, by virtue of its thick cloth, prevented the knife from penetrating his heart and, pinned to his chest, offered a felty swaddling, keeping the knife out and the body in, as the spider-legs gave way, and Beckett fell to the ground.

The scene: a lamp-lit alley. The attacker runs into the shadows; demi-monde type, greasy hair, tight skivvy, elevated shoes. The bike enters; balloon tires, a tubular, curved frame and high, wide handlebars. It falls to the ground. A woman runs to Beckett's side. Do her shoes make a noise on the wet stones? Does her skirt spread out around her as she bends down? Is her hair loose? (Blond? Black?) Does it fall forward as she leans to look at him? Is she a nurse, a Nightingale? Is she Estragon already, an Irish *butty* in a big coat?

She **was** something, I think. Training to **be** something. On her way home from somewhere. She's wearing a dress, mid-calf, with a neat pair of flats on her perfect dancer's feet. Or is she a painter in black pants? Was this before the war or after? Her hair must be short. She could be a writer: tight, grey suit, white shirt. This would have her walking the bike as she approaches, leaving a hand free to hold a cigarette. But this is Beckett again. Now all social costumes dissolve, giving way to a stranger image: a cowl, a tunic, a habit, a shirt of hair. She leaps from her bike in robes. But this is Squeaky Fromme.

To clear things up, I turn to biographies, expecting to find photographs of this selfless assistant. I even anticipate a picture of the rescue itself, a tableau of all the players: the bike, the knife, the pimp, the coat, the writer and the rescuer. But there is no photograph of that night, as there is no photograph of Suzanne – though Beckett is everywhere. A beautiful, wounded bird. An edgy line of pain in every picture. I search the group shots for his female equivalent, knowing that together they will make a dark track over the field of healthy people. She's not there. I find only one photograph that includes her, a snapshot, really, of three small, fuzzy people in a garden. It was taken at Ussé in 1952. Beckett's brother Frank is in the middle. His right arm encircles Sam from behind and clasps him under the arm and high on the chest. He is pulling Sam in, literally holding him in the picture.



Nora Joyce Jersey blouse gathered at the shoulder, belted at the hip. Small, contrasting collar. Polka-dot crepe de chine shirt, flounced. Silver pin with onyx centre. Long strand of onyx beads. Hair waved with scalloped edge framing the face.

Teha'amana Ankle length, cotton missionary dress. Bodice yoked and shirred. Batiste scarf knotted at the left shoulder. Flowers over right ear. Hair worn long and loose. One lock curled on the forehead.



Coretta King Black wool dress with squared neckline. Three-quarter length sleeves, set-in. Large corsage with tulle and ribbon bow. Gold watch. White drop earrings. Hair loose, high at the crown, off the forehead.



Suzanne assists in this endeavour by standing on Frank's other side. With her body close to his, they are united as a counterbalance to Sam's entropic lean to the left. She's wearing a suit with a pleated skirt and tailored jacket. She has a brooch on her jacket and a leather bag hooked over her left shoulder. Her hair is blond and waved. She's wearing lipstick. She's smiling. She is not a wraith. She appears to be normal.

I am surprised by her substance. I was expecting a ghost. Or perhaps this photograph of three people in a garden has brought another to mind: Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and his first wife Vivienne are in a garden in the summer of 1932. Virginia is in the middle. She seems completely at ease, both with her company and in her clothes, wearing a cardigan and blouse, skirt, sunhat, beads, and flat, laced shoes. She leans toward Tom and away from Vivienne. Her right arm overlaps Tom's while her left, akimbo, thrusts its elbow at Vivienne, driving her toward the edge of the frame. In Virginia's mind, at least, this is a portrait of two writers. Vivienne, thus banished, draws her feet together, pulls her arms back and disappears, offering her body as a lifeless rack for her outfit. Hers is a coordinated ensemble: garden dress, stockings and shoes – all in white and held down by an embellished, wide-brimmed hat. The intention, clearly, is to cut a sweet figure, evoking childhood and innocence with maybe a touch of Alice. Standing beside the giantess, Vivienne appears small enough to pull it off, but her Wonderland must be a horror if it could freeze her in such a posture of anxiety. Her own body betrays her disguise and the carefully selected costume becomes a shroud for a dissolving self.

Tom, of course, way over on the other side seems oblivious to all this, just as he seems oblivious to the weather. In contrast to his wife's short-sleeved summer dress, he is wearing a thick, tweedy suit with a vest. Perhaps this failure to notice things accounts for his being photographed *sans* spouse for the next 25 years. In any case a second wife doesn't appear until 1957, and, when she does, you can tell by her clothes that she's more appropriate.

Just as Suzanne leapt from her bike to scoop up Samuel Beckett, so Valerie Fletcher leapt from hers to scoop up loose papers. At the age of fourteen, she declared her intention to serve as secretary to a celebrated writer, and realized her ambition in 1950 when she reached T.S. Eliot's desk. In his service she evolved from secretary, to spouse, to literary executrix, extending her care to the posthumous. Valerie was frequently photographed: at Eliot's side during his lifetime, and as his representative after his death. Like a politician's wife she dresses with an understanding of her public responsibility. She is costumed but doesn't appear to be, so closely does she conform to the fashions of the time. As with others who appeal to the confidence of the public, she uses fashion to present the paradox of being willing to change while remaining conservative. Always her pleasure and flourish in dressing are restrained; the evening dress that hovers on the far edge of the shoulders, not daring to slide into straplessness; the silver fox collar and hat that would never conspire to being a full fur coat.

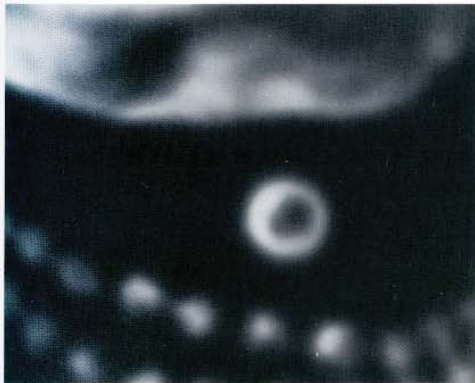
But Valerie's clothes diverge from those of the public figure, if not in appearance, at least in function. She can be seen as offering assurance more than seeking it, as her constituency was but one person – Tom Eliot, from whom she had a mandate for life. Both her public and private selves were charged with maintaining his work, so her wardrobe also took on a double role. While her correct hemlines declared to the world that all was well with the genius, her command of

the codes of fashion just as effectively assured her melancholy poet that all was right with the world.

A harder task fell to Nora Joyce insofar as assurances of normalcy were concerned, and it appears that she took to fashion for recreation rather than for duty. She exercised her interest extravagantly when means allowed, outfitting the whole family *à la mode* down to the last shoe buckle. Yet for some reason the stylishness attributed to James, Lucia and Giorgio does not attach itself to Nora. In his portraits, Joyce's wonderful elegance seems inherent and his characteristic vanity is seldom extended to his wife. Perhaps this is consistent with the perceived differences between them – he was literate, she was not; he was intellectual, she was not; he was frail, she was not; he was natty, she was not. This idea is reinforced by the conflation of Nora's identity with Molly Bloom's – drawn as a large, female thing with a mouth, who would no more punctuate her appearance with fashion than her speech with pauses. Besides, who needs clothes when one is constantly abed?

The aspects of his wife's identity that obsessed James Joyce certainly didn't encompass all that she embodied, yet the accounts of who she was have consistently sided with the literary portrait over historical accounts. Photographs, anecdotes and letters concerning the Joyces are a finite resource and are subject to various arrangements. For example, in Richard Ellman's 1959 biography of Joyce, there is only one photograph of Nora alone. She's in costume for a play – Synge's *Riders to the Sea* – and consequently is barefoot, wearing a peasant skirt and flowered blouse. Her blouse is wrinkled and her cuffs unfastened. The effect is rural: free, natural, careless. In the rest of the book there are no pictures of Nora without a hat; we never see her hair or her hands. She is usually buried in a crowd or lost in the murky resolution of the photographic emulsion. Like Vivienne Eliot she is so close to the edge, margins and nether worlds of the pictures that she is at risk of dropping out of sight and memory altogether. She takes on the characteristics of the pictures and seems indistinct and forgettable. But a rearrangement of documents by Helen Maddox in 1988 shows more, including a beautiful portrait by Berenice Abbott that reveals Nora as a match for Joyce – at least in terms of self-esteem. For his cane top, she has marcelled hair; for his ringed fingers, her pins and beads; for his stripes, her polkadots; for his bow tie, her lace collar. More surprising is a studio portrait taken in 1935, the glamour of which is attributable as much to Nora's own regal posture as to studio lighting. The elegance of this portrait is generated by the subject herself who comments on her own pale skin and silver hair by wearing a black dress with a white fox fur. This photograph confounds the image of Nora as a barefoot girl of Galway, offering instead a sophisticated Parisienne who frequents the same designer as Marlene Dietrich.

In terms of how people are represented in a given work – through photography or writing – there's a question as to whether or not the real-life models for stories fare better than those for pictures. People who end up in books are usually given full treatment: a name, a context, a role. Often they are depicted so faithfully that they can be traced as being the inspiration for a character. Certainly the tenure for the literary model is quieter and longer because its effectiveness as subject is dependent upon the slow formation of a psychological shape. Models and muses for visual artists, on the other hand, may be better able to protect their identity as they can confine their offering; they retain proprietary rights to subjecthood.



Anna Freud Dark cashmere cardigan, Tortoise-shell buttons. Grey pleated wool skirt. Double strand of jade beads. Roundfaced watch with brown leather strap. Hair cut short, unstyled.



Chiang Ch'ing Heavy-weight cotton overcoat with wide lapels. Cotton pants and shirt, loose fitting. Buttoned breast pockets and safari pockets at the hip. Hair, short bob, parted in the centre.



Alma Mahler Alpaca dress with high collar. Gathered sleeve caps. Bodice full in front, pulled in at waist with a sash. Shell cameo at the throat. Gold chain and locket. Hair piled on the head with a chignon at the nape.

Both the nudity and the costume of the model in the studio are abstractions and act as camouflage for the sitter. The figure doesn't refer to a psyche as much as it refers to light and to how light plays on the surface of the body. However, looking at photographs of models at work, one tries to look under the skin for a name or a notion of self. The hair is checked for style, the face for makeup, the body for features that may generate empathy. But consistently the body remains generic in the studio; it's not a body but a figure, and no particular person resides there.

Think of Teha'amana. Left alone in the dark in Paul Gauguin's hut, she flings herself in terror onto the bed and is found there when the painter returns. He is moved by the intensity of her fear and her primitive perception of what surrounds her in the dark. He decides to paint the scene. But what he paints is a beautiful pattern, with a brown figure as part of an arrangement of colours. This is not a Zelda Fitzgerald situation. Teha'amana can jump up, leaving the brown body behind, and tell her own story of what happened that night, not that we'll ever hear it, but, if we did, we would not confuse it with the other.

In fact, Teha'amana did jump up and tell a bit about herself. She sat for a photograph. She is sitting, not lying on a bed or a beach. Her hair is very shiny, and she has two flowers tucked, Tahitian style, over her right ear. She's wearing a white cotton dress, the kind distributed by missionaries in a bid to cover up the miles of pagan skin they encountered, and instill a notion of Christian modesty. It looks something like a nightdress, loose, with a shirred bodice and high neckline. If nothing else, the conflicting signs of the flower and the dress situate Teha'amana at a point of cultural change for her people. We can only speculate that the choices concerning her appearance in this photograph indicate her feelings or opinions on questions central to her identity.

Granted, **CHOICE** may be too strong a word – not just for Teha'amana, but also for Nora, Valerie and Suzanne. Getting dressed is a social act, negotiating what is desired and what is allowed. To wear clothes is to speak in a public language about one's status, sensibilities and expectations. A choice with regard to appearance is checked on every side and often seems the result more of coercion than of deliberation. There may be no choice that hasn't already been made. There may be nothing to wear but conventions.

But the best thing about conventions is that there are so many of them. If dress is a language, then the conventions of dress are its units, and they abound. In the inexhaustible recombinations of fashion's bits and pieces, a potential for expression can be found – not an expression inclined to profundity, but something exquisitely superficial. Fashion's qualities are best enumerated in a kind of inverted list of what modern art is: fashion is **NOT** private, it **IS** substantial and representational, and its trajectory is **ALWAYS** described in full public view.

For some, the extroversion of clothing is a sublimation of what is hidden or invisible. For others, subjected to massive doses of introspection through their service to art or artists, dressing becomes a critical alternative, a parallel to private production. It is the negotiation of an identity that is separate from work. It is the arrangement of one's appearance synchronized with the arrangement of an environment for thinking. It becomes a declaration of the real from one who serves the abstract.

When Nora left Dublin in 1904, she wasn't sailing into exile only as Joyce's

companion. In large part she was embarking on a journey alone, navigating the dense fog of his self-absorption, in constant danger of being obliterated by the blanket of his work and interiority. Photographs log this 35-year marriage, documenting her survival in terms that she could command. With Nora, and others like her, each bead, button and bow is a triumph of self-representation. Everything she wore is a marker on the flooded landscape that was her life, and her clothes and jewelry still bob, like painted buoys, defying the vast sea of obscurity that surrounds her.