

Daniel Salvatore Schiffer. *Le dandysme, dernier éclat d'héroïsme*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010, 302 pp. ISBN 978-2-13-058227-4

In his *Le dandysme, dernier éclat d'héroïsme* (Dandyism, the last spark of heroism), Daniel Salvatore Schiffer seems to follow the example of two great writer-dandies in two obvious respects: Barbey d'Aurevilly, who in his dandified, scintillating *Du dandysme et de George Brummell* (1845–61) set the tone for dealing with dandyism, and Baudelaire, who with his dictum from 'Le peintre de la vie moderne' (1863) established it as a 'vague institution'. Whether or not as an outcome of such an inspiration, the combination of both the 'literariness' of Schiffer's parenthetical style and the readiness to speak of dandyism in connection with the most diverse and unexpected personalities will most likely puzzle many readers, especially if the book in question happens to be the first study of the subject that they come upon. *Le dandysme* is an 'updating' sequel to Schiffer's 2008 monograph *Philosophie du dandysme*.¹ Whereas the latter strives to uncover the philosophical depths of dandyism in the works of such thinkers as Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, the former tries to prove that the nineteenth century assertions of the 'absolute modernity' of dandyism can still be taken seriously and that the phenomenon is by far not only a matter of cultural or literary history. In *Le dandysme*, Schiffer is concerned with the supposedly general tendency to write the dandy off as an extinct type (p. 17), a tendency which prompts him, in the concluding manifesto of '*prismatisme*', to attempt to establish the new dandy as the ideal hero not only for the present, but also for future generations.

The key question that Schiffer's book raises is the following: Is it still possible today to determine the 'authentic and profound' nature of the dandy as Barbey, Baudelaire, or Wilde did in their time? In other words: what is the nature of the 'new dandy, the direct heir of his illustrious ancestor' (pp. 42–43)? The way Schiffer poses the question suggests his recognition of the fact that any attempt at the identification of contemporary dandyism going beyond the superficial labelling of diverse trendy personalities and attitudes should not lose sight of its concrete historical prototypes. But here lies the problem. Schiffer's book lacks such a historical foil, despite the assertion in the back cover blurb according to which it 'retraces the history of dandyism' from Brummell to Bowie: the reference to historical origins cannot be substituted for by an occasional mention of the greatest of the Regency dandies, nor by references to the writings of Barbey or Baudelaire, which themselves represent a distinct departure from the original social dandyism.

¹ Daniel Salvatore Schiffer, *Philosophie du dandysme: Une esthétique de l'âme et du corps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

Moreover, Barbey and Baudelaire as the early and perhaps most influential theorists of dandyism largely contributed to the arbitrary and often confusing use of the term 'dandysme'. With his essay on Lauzun, Barbey opened the way to considering different kinds of dandyism irrespective of era. In Baudelaire there is an inclination to call a 'dandy' every figure he feels kinship with, his 'family' of dandies thus becoming a rather incongruous group sharing only some general traits like devotedness to the ideal of beauty, defiant solitariness, or aversion to the natural.

Among the diverse theories of dandyism we may discern two extremes: variations on the opinion that there was only one dandy worthy of the appellation (namely, Brummell), and the willingness – originating mainly in the 'interiorized' *dandysme à la française* – to grant it to anyone who shows a tinge of dandyism in any of the numerous possible respects. Schiffer's texts clearly come under the second extreme, making a 'dandy' even out of Jesus or Buddha (*Philosophie*, p. 213), not to mention Immanuel Kant (*Le dandysme*, p. 172) and Michael Jackson (pp. 273–75). Schiffer apparently realizes that such an understanding of dandyism leads to fuzziness, but anyone who would insist on a more cautious use of the term is looked down upon as a hairsplitter, an orthodox spirit. His main concern is to evade 'the pitfall [...] of the too classical, backward-looking or even conservative, if not outright reactionary conception of dandyism' – this is supposed to be the way to make dandyism comprehensible and acceptable to the contemporary sensibility (p. 204). Indeed, Schiffer succeeds in eluding the suspicion of pedantically clinging to some exclusive, narrow conception of dandyism, but at the cost of avoiding the formulation of any conception of dandyism. The reflexion concerning dandyism typically consists of continual attempts to (re)determine the nature of its subject whose vagueness is most often understood as a problem to tackle (without insisting on the necessity of the outcome in the guise of a definition of dandyism), while Schiffer welcomes it as an invitation to enjoy the possibilities of unrestrained analogizing.

These extremes in dealing with dandyism, what we could call 'purism' in the first case and 'liberalism' in the second, sometimes complement each other in the work of a single author, starting perhaps with Barbey, who, besides pronouncing Brummell dandyism itself ('il fut le dandysme même'), was, for instance, able to call Pascal 'un dandy comme on peut l'être en France'. A more recent example of such an approach is represented by Françoise Coblence's book *Le Dandysme*, where she declares the same liberal stance towards the new dandyism as Schiffer, stating that every age invents its own dandies and that today's are to be found in the world of fashion, among movie and pop stars, while she elaborates an image of dandyism in its pure state embodied by Beau Brummell, the only image that – as already indicated – can counterweigh the 'overdetermination' threatening

the term at least since the middle of the nineteenth century when the original dandyism was becoming only a distant memory.²

Schiffer is undoubtedly right when he maintains that dandyism calls for an 'empirical' treatment by way of sketching a 'galerie de tableaux' that would provide concrete illustrations of the elusive phenomenon (p. 62). This hardly represents a novel method, but one regularly adopted by authors dealing with dandyism, such as Émilien Carassus, who, instead of working with some 'clearly formulated concept of dandyism', prefers that 'the image of dandy emerges successively through a wandering among the historical dandies'.³ The essential difference, however, lies in the fact that Carassus in his wanderings does not renounce abiding by distinctions he has made – namely, the distinction between historical, theoretical, and literary dandyism and the difference between the 'conscious' dandyism and its 'vague' attributing irrespective of country or era. Of course, the insistence on the strict separation of the various levels of dandyism is untenable, especially when they intersect in a single personage; nevertheless, it retains its explicative value and wards off the worst confusions. Even if Schiffer cannot avoid mentioning that there are different kinds of dandyism, he stops at that: he does not work with the distinctions. For him, the 'empirical' approach consists mainly in putting together what he calls 'catalogues du dandysme' (p. 141), which, on closer inspection, become rather indiscriminate lists of names. We can find a telling example of such a list in the catalogue of twentieth-century female dandyism (pp. 128–41), which evidently absorbs every other reasonably famous woman with a sense of self-presentation, whether she is an actress, a supermodel, or a writer. The scope of the catalogue is wide indeed – it comprises not only those who 'participated in dandyism in a manner of their own' (p. 131) but even those who merely created a dandyish literary character. So, perplexingly, Patricia Highsmith comes, as an author of Tom Ripley novels, to represent 'one of the best examples of female dandyism' although 'she certainly was not herself what we would call, properly speaking, a *female dandy*' (p. 135). Schiffer's 'galeries de tableaux' also suffer from sketchiness and they fail to provide us with a single persuasive portrait of the 'new dandy' taken from reality: we can hardly expect to be shown that there is something like twentieth and twenty-first-century dandyism through cumulations of names and brief characterizations that often amount to mere enumeration.

Le dandysme stands closely connected with Schiffer's preceding essay on the subject, *Philosophie du dandysme*, which he himself refers to as a sort of more

² Françoise Coblenz, *Le dandysme, obligation d'incertitude* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

³ Émilien Carassus, *Le mythe du dandy* (Paris: Colin, 1971), 17.

demanding preamble to the present book and – confidently enough – as the first attempt ‘in the history of ideas’ to elaborate for dandyism the philosophical foundations worthy of the name (*Le dandysme*, pp. 51–52). Essentially, the philosophical dimension of dandyism consists in its ‘antiplatonism’: being an ‘aesthetic of the soul and body’, dandyism overcomes the age-old dualism of the spiritual and the corporeal and is further perceived as a refined synthesis of ‘epicurean hedonism’ and ‘stoic asceticism’. These assertions constantly recur in both essays, are expanded on, and represent the underlying tenets of the ‘philosophy of dandyism’, whose basis Schiffer finds in Kierkegaard’s theory of the three stages and Nietzsche’s revaluation of all values. According to Schiffer the dandyisms of both Baudelaire and Wilde, which have a paradigmatic value for him, originate ‘at the confluence’ of Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean aesthetics. The fact that Baudelaire or Wilde either could not or did not in all probability ever read Kierkegaard or Nietzsche does not in the least deter Schiffer from his interpretative efforts: the readiness to reveal the philosophical significance of dandyism irrespective of any actual intellectual influence allows him, for instance, to see the superiority of Baudelaire’s dandy as an ‘implicit but clear reference’ to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* (*Philosophie*, p. 195). It is of course legitimate to consider the affinities between dandyism and Nietzsche’s philosophy or to compare Nietzsche with Wilde (and Schiffer is by far not the first author to do so). But the problem lies in the way he finds the ‘origin’ of Wilde’s opinions in theories Wilde was not acquainted with (see *Le dandysme*, pp. 188–89), as if Nietzscheanism was some kind of ideal entity that could permeate anyone quite unwittingly. The array of names and theoretical concepts employed in connection with dandyism does indeed represent an original trait of Schiffer’s work – it is somewhat disappointing, then, that the outcome of such a massive deployment of the philosophical arsenal leads to statements that are utterly commonplace. Thus Schiffer arrives at the conclusion that the dandy, by means of self-aestheticization and constant self-perfection, becomes a living, ephemeral work of art doomed to ‘disparition’ (*Philosophie*, pp. 201–10).

The close connectedness of the two subsequent essays is not restricted to the level of their shared theoretical basis. Not only that the second book quotes at length the complimentary reviews of the first (*Le dandysme*, pp. 161–64) and refers to it explicitly (‘As we have already said in our own *Philosophie du dandysme*’), it also – this time without any explicit reference – takes over whole, only slightly rewritten passages from the earlier work. (Compare, for example, pp. 30–35 from *Philosophie du dandysme* and pp. 202–8 from *Le dandysme* or pp. 212–13 from the former book and pp. 238–39 from the latter.) It is therefore no surprise that both essays come to exactly the same conclusions.

Another irregular trait of Schiffer's writing is the predilection for extensive quotations, which lends some parts of his works the appearance of an anthology. Besides, why quote in both books (!) about a half of Baudelaire's chapter on dandies from 'Le peintre de la vie moderne'? The reason may lie in Schiffer's conviction that one of the most often cited texts on dandyism is 'relatively little known' (*Philosophie*, p. 193). This leads us to his startling view of another classic work on the subject, that is, the evaluation of Barbey's essay on Brummell, which is supposed to be 'centred exclusively on the social and material aspect of his personality' and pertains only to the questions of comportment (*ibid.*, pp. 189–90). The fact that most authors agree on the eminent importance of this essay for the 'spiritualization' of dandyism and for the loosening of its ties with outward manners certainly does not oblige Schiffer to take the same stance. Nevertheless, we can justifiably expect a substantiation of such a striking claim, which he, regrettably, does not provide.

The first paragraph of this review alludes to the 'parenthetical' style of the book. Schiffer seldom resists the opportunity to fill his text with allusions to another book he has read, another film he has seen, or another of the *implicit references* that offer themselves. Moreover, his piling up of examples and his rhetorical cumulation of redundant epithets frequently serve as a means of persuasion instead of reasoning. The argumentation is also frequently substituted for by the emphatic concluding of paragraphs, which leaves the text studded with exclamation marks. Because of the combination of bombastic style, the often unfounded, merely decorative indulgence in lofty philosophical concepts, and the commonplace findings, Schiffer's books on dandyism give the overall impression of flamboyant *Schöngeisterei*, which, in the case of *Le dandysme* is aggravated by its derivative, supplementary nature.

I have objected that Schiffer's *Le dandysme* does not offer a single persuasive portrait of the *new dandy* taken from reality. Its conclusion does, however, contain a vivid projection of the ideal of a new type of dandy, 'un dandy prismatique'. The dandy appears here as a cosmopolitan intellectual equipped with all-embracing curiosity, an enemy of all kinds of dogmatism, capable of 'multiplying his perspectives on a single subject without losing the concentration necessary for analysis' (p. 264), a protean personality marked by 'intellectual eclecticism', a 'polyvalent artist and multidisciplinary aesthete' (p. 268). Even ignoring the fact that this 'new' type of dandy is nothing but an incarnation of the old Bourgetian *dilettante*, we are left to wonder why this utopian figure should be called a 'dandy' at all. The final chapter also reveals one of the main shortcomings of the whole book, that is, a matter-of-course confusion of dandyism with all kinds of aestheticism, which forms a decisive factor in Schiffer's arbitrary treatment of the term.

Reading Schiffer's essays persistently brings to mind an expressive passage from Marcel Boulenger, who, in his *Lettres de Chantilly*, laments the all-embracing 'dandyism' of some injudicious authors:

Dandyism, dandyism! A magic word! A luxurious vocable, a precious term particularly dear to journalists and literary debutants! [...] A statesman indulges in *bons mots*, he does not take his grave duties very seriously: dandyism. A writer deals with burning questions in cold blood, he discusses facetiously an austere subject or talks solemnly about a futile matter: dandyism! Somebody, if he is elegant, surprises us with the smallest idiosyncrasy: dandyism. Dandyism all the time, everywhere! [...] Nothing could be more exaggerated.⁴

Those are true words, words all the more true with regard to the writings of Daniel Salvatore Schiffer.

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⁴ Marcel Boulenger, *Lettres de Chantilly* (Paris: Floury, 1907), 111, 115.