6 Men in Black with Women in White

Colour dies in menswear in the nineteenth century, leaving colour and brightness to women. This raises the question – Why is it that women do keep their brightness, when the men have passed into shadow? It is a large question, that lies, really, beyond the scope of the present study; as does the whole enormously abundant subject of the significance of colours – of all the colours – in dress, especially women's dress. I shall venture some considerations.

In so far as dark menswear signifies work, the world of work and professional dignity, the brightness of women's clothes is not hard to understand: the professions, and most jobs, were closed to women. But in so far as the darkening of menswear reflects either a certain sombre gravity of power, or, more at large, an ascetic temper, women's colour and brightness is problematic, for one might expect the wife's dress to be as strict and monochromatic as that of her husband. This was certainly the tendency with black fashions in the past: the courtly black, so favoured by Spain, was worn with grave dignity both by lords and by ladies; and again the Calvinist black of the United Provinces was worn both by burghers and by burghers' wives. This is very clear in portraits of couples: where, if the wife or fiancée does not wear black itself (quite often she does not, the man being the appointed 'head' of the household), she wears dark blue or dark brown in a tone very close to her husband's. Again, she may wear more jewellery, a more elaborate ruff, maybe a skirt of rich dark stuff; but often she wears with these things a black mantle, a black jacket or a black overskirt, while the husband may be as much decorated as she is, with cut velvet, brocaded silk, woollen damask. Often there is an elaborate complementarity, as in Rubens's beautiful portrait of himself with his young wife Isabella Brant (illus. 61). He wears black breeches but she wears a black overgown, the sheen on his deep-coloured doublet matches that on her deep-coloured skirt, while his warm-pink hose are light-toned like her satin stomacher, itself richly worked, as is his doublet. Her cuffs and ruff are richly edged with lace, so is his shoulder-wide shirt-collar.

Similarly, he sits higher but she is in the foreground; he leans towards her, it is she who has laid her hand on his. In many ways at once, their looks, their look and their clothes say both they are themselves, and they are each other's.

The eighteenth century preserved a reciprocity. In that period, as Fred Davis has observed, 'both men and women . . . were equally partial to ample displays of lace, rich velvets, fine silks, and embroideries, to highly ornamented footwear, to coiffures, wigs, and hats of rococo embellishment, and to lavish use of scented powders, rouges, and other cosmetics'. Men's embroidered satin suits might be as colourful as women's gowns. Men's coats had lifted skirts that quietly complemented the pannier-propped skirts of women. Women adopted 'le redingote' from the riding-coat of men. Both genders, it seems, were at peace with the fact that there is a thread of the masculine within the feminine, and of the feminine within the masculine. As to black, it is true that men wore more black than women, but then women would use black for provocative cosmetic details, like the black ribbon at the neck, or the beauty-spot (which men also wore). In Russia, women might have their teeth 'dyed black and shining as if japanned'.[1]

In contrast with such affected and affectionate intrication, the nineteenth century's way of using colour to differentiate gender, according to the stark formula of black men and bright women, seems another of that century's sharpened severities. It is a delicate question, whether one should align this contrast with those readings of gender that relate masculinity to a negation of the feminine. This negation is made especially necessary, in Nancy Chodorow's analysis of gendering, because the boy-child grows up knowing mainly his mother, while his father is absent at work. And as to the connection between dress and gender, one may note that this most stark black/light, man/woman contrast did develop in a period of commercial and industrial expansion. Work-patterns had changed. In the past, the father was often near, ploughing in a field within sight of home, or at work in the downstairs front room of the house, at a shop-counter, a loom, or a bench. Then, as the factories and offices multiplied, the father was more likely to be away many hours. It is true that in the – indeed – working class, women and children might themselves be slaving in the mills, or the mines: but the black/light, man/woman division is not so marked in working-class dress. That division was nurtured by the middle class especially, and it was middle-class mothers who stayed at home, absorbed in raising their children, whom also they had breast-fed, as the use of the wet-nurse by the well-to-do passed increasingly from fashion.[2]

It is not hard to point to qualifying circumstances, or to find quite different colour-combinations, used in other societies where the father might be often away (seeking merchandise, at war, at sea). Nor can one read all male dress as negation: the erect bracing of the figure, the sharp cut of a strong-coloured coat, the well-calved leg in close-fitting light trousers – all these had their positive male assertion. But black, on the other hand, is negation: very frequently it has had a negating value – of life, of the world, of the frivolous self – however smart it has also been. Indeed, if any colour has seemed to be made of meaning, it is black, in the sense that to negate something is an act of pure meaning. *Something* is negated when a person wears black. But even putting black aside, the distinctly plain style which men's dress developed in the nineteenth century does seem, however well-cut and smart, to embody a downgrading of the pleasure of dress, while dress as such, a high pleasure in dress, and indeed a readiness to talk of dress and nothing else, comes to be seen, in nineteenth-century superstition, almost as constituting the feminine. It is a superstition perpetuated, severely yet with a nod and a wink to both men and women, especially by women novelists: most notably Mrs Gaskell. So the father, in one of her novels, says to his daughter, with obvious complacent-indulgent belittlement, 'It seems people consider you as a young woman now, and so I suppose you must run up milliners' bills like the rest of your kind'. Mrs Gaskell will record that 'the ladies started back, as if half ashamed of their feminine interest in dress', that 'the ladies, for the most part, were silent, employing themselves in taking notes of the dinner and criticizing each other's dresses', that two women's 'chief talk was of fashions, and dress'.[3] And though I have stressed the value of remarks on dress in novels, it is true too that there is some redundancy in the ordinary run of clothing-comment in novels. What is most often said is that an interest in dress is frivolous, and that this interest is especially a feminine frivolity.

The corollary, certainly, is that it is in the novels by women, writing on women's dress, that the best light is shed on the real and serious importance of dress: as when, in *North and South*, the true nobility of Margaret Hale, both of her figure and of her spirit, is made visible by a particular dress, or as when Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, preparing for a difficult interview with the woman she believes to have seduced the man she loves, draws strength from the attention she gives to her toilet: 'the tradition that fresh garments belonged to all initiation, haunting her mind, made her grasp after even that slight outward help towards calm resolve'. The world of dress, and of talk about dress, is, in the nineteenth century especially, a woman's world. And the sugges-

tion that male dress is influenced, on various levels, by a concern to cancel the feminine, might be reinforced by the arguments of Jo Paoletti that a major motor of change in men's dress (which, otherwise, seems not impatient to change) is fear of ridicule – ridicule, that is, for dressing in a way that strikes observers as feminine. The subject of Jo Paoletti's study is the change of male dress in the 1880s in America, in particular to escape the label of the 'dude', who was lampooned at the time as a womanish figure. But her argument might equally be applied to European dress earlier in the century, when some divisions of the dandies were satirized in caricatures, by Cruikshank and others, with distortions that especially feminized their look. And it would seem that the plain style of Beau Brummell himself, which was notably spare and manly, accompanied a negation not only of the feminine but of sexuality too.[4]

Clearly at all times there is a negotiation between men's dress and the feminine, as between women's dress and the masculine: and it does seem reasonable to suppose that, in the nineteenth century even more than previously, there was a negotiation at a deep level between men's black and the feminine. It is important, however, not to overstate the rigour of the divide of men from women. In the 1840s, for instance, men's coats were padded so as to make their shoulders appear rounded, and their waists nipped in, in a shape of body that was cultivated also by women. And women's dress itself was not, in that century, always and uniformly luminous. Deep tones were available, and had periods of fashion in, again, the 1840s, and in the 1850s. There also were women in black, women who regularly wore black by choice; and the black they chose to wear had some of the assertive values it had when worn by men. George Eliot tells us of her Mrs Transome that 'her tight-fitting black dress was much worn': Mrs Transome is gentry and no widow, and even if her black dress is over-used (she is not as well-to-do as she would like), it is still part of her smartness and state and style ('rare jewels flashed on her hands, which lay on her folded black-clad arms like finely cut onyx cameos').[5] Her decision to wear smart black permanently goes with her sense of her presence and importance, and also with certain sombre notes in her life, certain secrecies and reasons for unease: her black is felt in the novel as belonging with her uncommon force of will. Outside the world of fiction, the smart black clothes of such a figure as the pioneering Africanist Mary Kingsley serve as the emphasis of her force.

Mrs Transome, one might say, wears the proud black dress; there was also, as in menswear, a more humble black wear – the black dress, plainer in cut, that was at once respectable and self-respectful, but

62 Richard Redgrave, *The Governess*, 1844, oil on canvas. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

which also partook of the un-lustrous black which was the colour of dutiful service. This is the form of black dress that might be worn (for instance) by governesses. In fiction, the career-governess Jane Eyre has an almost all-black wardrobe. For outdoor wear she has a black stuff travelling dress, a black merino cloak and a black beaver bonnet. Indoors, she normally wears a 'black stuff dress', but on smarter occasions changes it for 'one of black silk'. Her black clothes fit not only her situation, but also, growing out of it, her strong serious self-awareness. They fit her emotional temper, which is strengthened by losses and griefs, as well as by grief as such. They fit her intensity, her gathering clarity of will and decision. In her black Jane complements Mr Rochester, who is dark-haired, swarthy, and especially smart in black, as well as being a figure of sombre and damaged power. 'My master' she calls him, though she is by the end a governess who has risen to govern, a woman – as he is a man – whose black has command as well as duty.[6]

Since not all Jane's clothes are black, it does not seem her black is to be construed directly as mourning for the parents she has lost some years before. Of course, the death of a parent, or parents, could lead to a young woman becoming a governess, and Richard Redgrave's governess is clearly in mourning, as the letter in her hand confirms, for

it is on black-edged paper (illus. 62). The caption in the catalogue, when this painting was first exhibited in 1845, read 'She sees no kind domestic visage here', and she is isolated at once by her position and by her grief, seated in the sombre foreground of the picture, though clearly in the shadowy background of the family, whose children skip laughing near the sunny garden (or wait wistfully, with nothing better to hand than a book, for their turn to skip). She does, none the less, look smart and distinguished in her black mourning wear: this is not everyday governess's black, but something more formal. A commentary on the picture added in 1870 begins 'An orphan, whose mourning dress shows her loss is recent . . .', and this painting may serve to show, as men's dress also shows, the close relation there could be between the smart use of black and the mourning use of black. It is a characteristic of Victorian society that its formality and its grief wear nearly identical clothes. There is by the same token an affinity – or an ambiguity – between the humbler everyday black of employees and the commemorative but everyday black of those, like widows and orphans, whose condition is importantly defined by death, though the loss is no longer recent. As with formality and grief, so also there is an affinity between service and long loss.[7]

One might mention here the black of Lord Fauntleroy, although it is not only he who wears black. His mother wears black constantly, not because her loss and grief are recent, but because she is a widow. And Lord Fauntleroy wears black not because he is a little lord, and so naturally garbed in a black velvet Van Dyck suit, but because his father is dead. He wears black in America, not always but often, before he is a lord. At an early age he wore, as the cook says, 'his bit of a black velvet skirt made out of the misthress's ould gownd'; at seven he is 'a handsome, cheerful, brave little fellow in a black cloth suit and red neck-ribbon'. He has with him, on his trip to England, a black velvet cap that is not necessarily aristocratic, and when going to see the Earl he is dressed by his mother in the smart clothes he already has, 'a black velvet suit, with a lace collar'. Thereafter he regularly is, as he also is in the well-known illustrations, 'a little boy in a black velvet suit'. Black velvet had in the past been the wear of the very rich, indeed of the dukes of Burgundy, and it is in order that, inheriting his lordship, Lord Fauntleroy should once again wear, for his grand introduction to the neighbourhood gentry, a black velvet suit – augmented this time with 'a large Vandyke collar of rich lace'. The lace is evidently new, though he wore lace before. We are not told whether the velvet is new, and tailored at patrician expense. The uncertainty perhaps suits Frances Hodgson Burnett's ingenious tenderness for, at one and the same time,

the American open-hearted democratic spirit, and a British nobility redeemed by love. The uncertainty also enables Lord Fauntleroy and his mother (he is dressed by his mother) to illustrate, as also does Redgrave's dignified governess, the resemblance there could be not only between grief and formality, but between grief and rank.[8]

As to the truly smart, it is apparent that if women were required to mourn at length, still mourning dresses were so fully adjusted to fashionable society that one could almost think fashion was set by bereavement. The 1860s brochure of the London General Mourning Warehouse (247, 249 & 251 Regent Street, proprietors Jay & Co.) is called 'Jay's Manual of Fashion', not Jay's Manual of Mourning Fashion. It makes haste to point out that the mourning colours are anyway the height of fashion – 'it is also well worthy of remark, that in Paris, at the present time, Black and White enjoy a decided favouritism', and adds that all its dresses may actually (like men's clothes) be worn equally by the bereaved and the smart:

> It is necessary to explain that the subjects of the Illustrations are made up in various materials, suitable either for Ladies who adopt Mourning, or for those who wear Black in accordance with the taste of the day.

Constrained as she was by convention and grief, the widow could, none the less, in due season, choose from among the Madeline (mantle of black velvet, with a crochet insertion of jet, the bonnet of black *velours epinglé*), the Euphrasie (mantle of black ribbed cloth or crape, trimmed with slashed velvet bordered with braid, bonnet of violet terry and black velvet), the Agatha (mantle of black velvet, trimmed with Maltese lace, and headed with Vandyck crochet trimming, tassels of silk with jet headings), the Corinne (dress of black tulle, trimmed with goffered tulle and edged with black satin ribbon, with a coiffure of white frosted leaves and black velvet coral, and with jet necklace and bracelets), and the Druid (mantle of superfine black cloth or velvet, dress of black *gros de tour* or black *moiré antique*, bonnet of black velvet with crown of satin and black ostrich feathers on either side). For the Druid (illus. 63), which looks, from the back, like a Victorian Gothic church made in cloth, Jay's proudly declare they have taken out a patent:

> The configuration of the 'Druid' Mantle having been registered by the Messrs. Jay, no other persons can make it without their permission. This exclusiveness will ensure its being worn by families of distinction. . . . It is equally suited by its form for evening wear, carriage, promenade, or travelling, and is made up for these specialities. When trimmed with crape, either on cloth or silk, it is one of the most appropriate mantles for mourning ever invented. And when made in velvet, it folds with unusual ease from the shoulders.

63 'Druid' Mantle (Back), from *Jay's Manual of Fashion Illustrated*, published by The London General Mourning Warehouse, lithograph, *c.* 1860.

The prices vary between two and twenty-five guineas, crape additions coming in normally at a half guinea extra. It is clear that evening wear, carriage, promenade and travelling were occasions where smart wear and mourning could be virtually identical, and that in dressing to honour the dear departed, one could (as in earlier periods) dress in present luxury. The observances of death set the high style for life.

The black dress in the wardrobe, reserved for mourning, might be put on for other serious events, even if these were wholly private. Perhaps the most moving instance, in fiction, of black put on to share in loss, arises in *Middlemarch* when the severe, suave dissenting banker Bulstrode has at last revealed to his wife his secret crisis – now on the verge of becoming public – of sharp practice and, effectively, murder. Mrs Bulstrode, we are told,

> locked herself in her room. . . . She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet-cap, which made her look suddenly like an early Methodist. . . .
>
> He raised his eyes with a little start and looked at her half amazed for a moment: her pale face, her changed, mourning dress, the trembling about her mouth, all said 'I know'; and her hands and eyes rested gently on him. He burst out crying and they cried together, she sitting at his side.

She had decided she would only go down to see him when she could 'espouse his sorrow, and say of his guilt, I will mourn and not reproach'. What they must face together is not actual death, but social death: disgrace, the situation of outcasts in the tight town world.[9]

On a lighter note, but only slightly, Gwendolen Harleth, in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, says when she is preparing as she thinks to refuse Grandcourt's proposal of marriage, 'I shall put on my black silk. Black is the only wear when one is going to refuse an offer.' And there were other, non-mourning, forms of black dress, for instance, a woman's smart riding-habit might be all black, going with the man's black hat she would wear when on horseback. In the riding world, the normal colour-coding was reversed, as in Mary Ellen Edwards's engraving for *The Graphic*, *The Special Train for the Meet* (illus. 64), where two handsome young women stand with assurance in the centre of the carriage, both in long trailing black riding-habits and with neat, too-small black top-hats fastened tilted over their brows (one holds up her riding-crop as a fence between her and an amiable gentleman). The men attending them wear lighter-coloured clothes, and the man on the left is clearly in his hunting gear, including the pink coat. The smart black of the riding-habit, together with its pretty mock-masculinity, doubtless enhanced the excitement of escaping from the crinoline by getting on a horse. Of Gwendolen Harleth we are told, 'She always felt the more daring for being in her riding-dress'.[10]

It remains the case, however, that black was the exception in women's clothing, as it was the norm in men's. Preponderantly, women's clothing was light. It could also use bright colours – cyclamen, deep blue, saffron – either for whole dresses, or for such accessories as bonnets, shawls, sashes, ribbons. The developing use of aniline dyes from the 1850s on made available a brighter register of colours again, and English women might use the new colours in a way that could strike a foreign visitor as garish. Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, for instance, complained of 'bonnets resembling piled-up bunches of rhododendrons . . . with packets of red flowers or of enormous ribbons, gowns of shiny violet silk . . . the glare is terrible'.[11]

Taine, however, was a habitual exaggerator. Women wore purples, reds and blues, but they also wore a good deal of white, as is clear from paintings of promenades, *fêtes-champêtres*, horse-races, railway stations. Frequently women wear white dresses, white pelisses, white shawls, white caps. Often these garments are decorated, but the decoration again may be either white lace, or a light stitching of pale blue or pink. Ribbons and bows seems actually more often white than coloured, and materials that are not white are very often decidedly pale

64 Mary Ellen Edwards, *The Special Train for the Meet*, wood engraving in *The Graphic*, 23 March 1872.

in tone. The dress of young women especially is etiolated or virginal, as in Whistler's *The White Girl* (illus. 65), which he subtitled 'Symphony in White, No. 1'. One may say the painting plays with the conventions, since Whistler knew intimately his red-haired model. But in the painting itself, the white girl is a whiteness, as white within as out, standing erect loosely holding a white lily (the Virgin's flower), a white curtain behind her. Her eyes are alive but expression-less. The bearskin rug she stands on suggests that any animality in her is dead, unless one gives credit to the not-quite-dead look of the bear's head, tipped out towards us by the painting's steep perspective. It may be, too, knowing that the White Girl was Whistler's mistress, that one should speculate about an alternative under-association, and see the white dresses, beneath their profession of purity, as being open to a less cold affinity, with white linen and bed-sheets, the boudoir and the bed. And bed-sheets were embroidered, as were dresses. But yet the White Girl holds her lily; and it seems that white, in the world of Whistler's paintings, is, chiefly, purity. There is a wanness to his white vision, and a certain air of melancholy. This painting pays its odd oblique tribute to the age's wish for women to be angels; while men, who move in the soiling world, might turn its stain to a black sober smartness.

For whiteness too, it should be said, had over the centuries changed in its associations. When Peter the Venerable was discussing with Bernard of Clairvaux the pros and cons of black monks and white monks, he spoke of white as the colour that in the Scriptures represents 'gaudium et sollempnitas', that is, joy, and 'solemnity' in the sense of festive formality: it is the colour of the radiant transfigured Christ; similarly, it is the dress of weddings, where it represents 'nuptiali gaudio', nuptial joy.[12] White was not, then, worn only by the bride, or mainly to symbolize – as it did in the nineteenth century – a virginity she had and which the bridegroom, in black, probably lacked. And when older women wear white, it may represent virtue, fidelity, fineness, but hardly seems, often, the dress of joy.

White was, of course, also a mourning colour: worn especially for children, and also by young women. Mrs Gaskell gives a graceful, but wary, picture of mourning white, when she describes Edith Lennox in *North and South* (in mourning for an uncle), 'dancing in her white crape mourning, and long floating golden hair, all softness and glitter'. White, like black, could be a colour of death, and was also the colour of ghosts and the ghostly. Wilkie Collins plays on many of white's associations when his hero, Hartright, is crossing Hampstead Heath by bright moonlight:

every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me. . . .

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road – there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.

For an instant the Woman is ghost, angel, moon-goddess, corpse, bride, mourner, virgin in one. She is pale, like her clothes. Later we observe her white is humble: 'her dress – bonnet, shawl and gown all of white – was, so far as I could guess, certainly not composed of very delicate or very expensive materials'. Her whiteness may have a more disturbing strangeness, when we hear, at the chapter's end, 'She has escaped from my Asylum. Don't forget; a woman in white'.[13]

In the event, her whiteness, we learn, had been chosen for her years before by a benefactress, Mrs Fairlie, 'explaining to her that little girls of her complexion looked neater and better in white than in anything else'. The Woman in White – she is now named as Anne Catherick – continues in white from 'the old grateful fancy': that is to say, her white is a piety to charity. If this explanation dispels some of the aura Collins has conjured for her, he has at the same time added a new strangeness by introducing a second 'woman in white', Laura Fairlie. She also wears white because it suits her: and it suits her because, in one of the novel's mysteries, she is in her physique the double of Anne Catherick. She also, in white muslin, is to be met at night, on 'the terrace, walking slowly from end to end of it in the full radiance of the moon'. And white as worn by Laura Fairlie has some of the values of black as worn by men. In her we see that this other colour of mourning may be at once formal, and self-effacing, and to a degree classless and money-denying:

Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin. It was spotlessly pure: it was beautifully put on; but still it was the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn, and it made her, so far as externals went, look less affluent in circumstances than her own governess.

The narrator later learns she dresses thus because of her aversion 'to the slightest personal display of her own wealth'. She is beautiful, and pure, and, like her half-sister Anne Catherick, is white in her innocence and her goodness: she is technically the novel's heroine, and the technical hero, Walter Hartright (who, so named, could scarcely not be the hero), marries her at last. And yet, even as she focuses the snow-values of Wilkie Collins's world, she is a figure to some extent faint and weak, and could be said, to some degree, to personate

65 James McNeill Whistler, *The White Girl (Symphony in White, No. 1)*, 1862, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

femininity as absence. She is contrasted throughout the novel with another kind of woman, whom Collins warms to more, though he has to call her 'ugly': the woman of character, of strong colour, who wears colour, Marian Halcombe. She is vigorously intelligent and acts with vigour, she has elements of 'manliness', even to 'her large, firm, masculine mouth' and to 'the dark down on her upper lip'. She is outlawed by the colour-code, but truly is a heroine. Indeed, she not only has 'thick, coal-black hair', but has blackness in her, she is 'swarthy'. Within the person of Marian Halcombe, a masculinity which may be read as a blackness both negates her femininity and gives her strength. Thus she, not the white woman, is a fit antagonist for the Napoleonic villain, fat Count Fosco. She is the woman, not in white, that one best remembers from a reading of *The Woman in White.*[14]

One should not, however, overstress the cold side of white: the century was not in a constant frost. It was in the ballroom, for instance, that the colour contrast of the genders was greatest, but can hardly have been at its coldest, as partners approached, alert to each other, attracted, touching. If the colour-patterning made men and women opposites, the dances themselves – waltzes, not quadrilles – let couples keep hold. And in fact one finds, in ballroom scenes, a quietly stated complementarity: as in Tissot's *Too Early* (illus. 66), where the couple that lean apart in the doorway do at the same time lean symmetrically, their feet toe to toe and their bodies flexing forward again (but her fan, held in white gloves, guards her breast and lips). He is in black, with white cuffs, collar and neck-tie; she is in white, with black ribbons at wrists and neck. They are formally dressed but they are also relaxed. They are clearly acquainted, and wait with a degree of lassitude for other arrivals to allow them to move. The central group is partnerless, mainly, and not all the women's dark ribbons are black, but when their partners come their tones will reciprocate. The principal figure is in pink: her dress, as it were, blushes for her, since she has made the *faux pas* of arriving 'too early'. A disturbing element, possibly, is the way the women's collars end in stray ribbons trailing down their backs, as though they are ready-tethered for as yet unseen controlling hands.

If white was not always cold, often there was a chill. In Manet's *The Balcony* (illus. 67), women and man are dressed so as to press sexual difference to the maximum of difference: the women wholly in white; the man in black coat, dark-grey trousers, dark-blue necktie. The colour contrast gives them a complementarity, but that complementarity here seems purely formal and somewhat enigmatic. One cannot actually tell what the relationship between these people is: and though the models for the painting were friends of Manet's – the painters

66 James Tissot, *Too Early*, 1873, oil on canvas. Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

67 Edouard Manet, *The Balcony*, 1868–9, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Guillemet and Berthe Morisot, and the violinist Fanny Claus on the right – they seem a group only by juxtaposition, looking different ways, thinking their own thoughts in quite different moods. The most powerful face is that of Berthe Morisot (seated): her look is concerned and penetrating, and perhaps marks her as a separate soul. The man seems also apart, on his own, though he does stand with an air of proprietorial assurance.

While the women's white may be virtuous white, still virtue seems not the main point of their dress: rather, one would say, all three have dressed smartly. These are not casual clothes: they are special, and becoming – they are clothes for show, and what they show is the possession of a certain status. If one stands back from the painting, and tries to read in a generalized way its postures, it may suggest the thought that while women's brightness does still have the brightness of display, often what is at issue is vicarious display by men – women serving as leisure-bright accessories to a prosperous head of household standing black-garbed behind but over them. For it is apparent, especially if we return to England, that even the most severely workful bourgeois felt that a measure of show was called for, to make clear his success in his labour in his calling: and the lighter and more luminous part of the display is delegated to his woman or women. The result is the somewhat icy form of display, marked in nineteenth-century women's wear, which is bright and may have some colour – and occasionally may have rich colour – and which may imitate sexual display and the display of warm feeling, because these things are the pattern of display, but still seems not to be these things.[15]

Perhaps the best description of this joylessly dutiful conspicuous non-consumption is that given apropos of Mr Merdle, the *nouveau riche* financier in *Little Dorrit*:

> This great and fortunate man had provided that extensive bosom, which required so much room to be unfeeling enough in, with a nest of crimson and gold some fifteen years before. It was not a bosom to repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr Merdle wanted something to hang jewels upon, and he bought it for the purpose. Storr and Mortimer might have married on the same speculation.
>
> Like all his other speculations, it was sound and successful. The jewels showed to the richest advantage. The bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration. Society approving, Mr Merdle was satisfied. He was the most disinterested of men, – did everything for Society, and got as little for himself, out of all his gain, as a man might.[16]

This notably cold bosom is Mr Merdle's, he has bought it; and in general it is apparent, in nineteenth-century paintings, that the women

in white belong to men in black. Maybe they belong to them as the soul does to the body – this does seem one suggestion of the contrast, where women shed a pure light, while men enjoy the taint of property and power. Black often is a power colour, but white seldom is (with the strong exception of the tropics, of course, where Governors wore white, as they still do in Hong Kong and Bermuda). The white power of women is rather that of mothers over children (and white is the colour of mother's milk, as well as of the chaste snows). But both black and white are colours of denial; and what they deny is colour.

The dangerous power that colour could have is indicated – if we cross the Atlantic to another great Puritan country – in Hawthorne's mid-century fable 'Rappaccini's Daughter'. In the secluded Paduan garden of Dr Rappacini, the plants that he has bred are luridly rich in colour: they are sensuously and almost sexually gorgeous, but also poisonous. He has a daughter whom he keeps at home to look after the garden. She is of a deep and vivid beauty like the plants, and calls the most richly purple and splendid of them her 'sister'. This is also the most poisonous plant in the garden, and she has become poisonous from her contact with it. The story is a prose analogue to Blake's 'Sick Rose', a parable of secretive nurturings. The principal poison, however, is neither in the flowers nor in the girl. 'Farewell, Giovanni!' says Beatrice, the daughter, to the young hero at the end, 'Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?'[17] It is in the hero's righteous mind that the poison is. The story, in other words, seems a nightmare-poem, where the poison-garden and the poison-girl are a Puritan's eye-view, with both thrill and anguish in it, of sensuousness, sensuality, fragrant luscious carnality. If such is the Puritan's suspicion in the garden, his husbandry will be severe and cruel: he may choose to array his wives and daughters in white, he will do right to wear black himself.

In the Protestant countries especially, it appears, strains of asceticism were liable to blanch women as they darkened men. It is very clear in English nineteenth-century fiction, which has no Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina but does have a Puritan St Theresa, Dorothea Brooke; and Gwendolen Harleth; and Sue Bridehead; and Estella in *Great Expectations*. There are two powerful symbolic figures in Dickens, who surely are complementary: Mrs Clennam in her black, Miss Havisham in her discoloured white. Both are paralysed, and have stayed in their rooms, indoors, for decades: the one woman frozen in intolerant moralism, the other waiting eternally for a bridegroom who does not come, bringing up her ward in frigidity and malice. They are both in darkness, the one in black, the other in white, but a terrible

white – the colour of love and death at once. They make a joint image of damage done to women, at least as grievous as that done to men, in the rich but mourning mansion of Victoria's England – Satis House it is called at last – which in Dickens's presentation is at once the home of power, and a desolation, a prison, and a tomb.

It is customary now to argue that sexuality, in the Victorian period, was not as greatly scarred by puritanism as used once to be thought. As Valerie Steele has observed, historians today argue that 'we have greatly exaggerated the prudishness of Victorian women (and men) and have neglected their celebration of sexuality', and she notes, from her own research, that 'despite their long skirts, high collars, and corsets, Victorian women were neither prudish nor masochistic'. That there still was a blanching, that went deeper than dress, is I believe clear if one turns from the stylized art of Dickens to the fuller, inward picture of feminine life given in the novels of George Eliot. In particular there is Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of *Middlemarch*. Certainly Dorothea represents a serious attempt – an attempt scarcely made by Dickens – to present what is admirable in the ascetic and puritan strains of English character as they might appear in an energetic, beautiful, and vigorously intelligent woman. Dorothea is specifically identified with 'the hereditary strain of Puritan energy': we are told 'it glowed alike through [her] faults and virtues'. She is handsome, healthy, emotionally ardent, and it is no surprise that she is fascinated by deep and rich colour: though she is quick to spiritualize any sensuous beauty. Examining her mother's jewels with her sister, she exclaims:

> How very beautiful these gems are! . . . It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.[18]

She admires colour but has not herself much colour – we are told most often of her whiteness – and does not wear colour. She has a black dress, in which, her sister thinks, she would look well with jewellery. But especially she is represented in the novel as wearing grey.

In pursuing black, then white, I have not so far mentioned their compromise, grey: but it was a further un-coloured colour the Victorians valued. It was a virtuous colour, associated in Christian use with the faithful conjugality of doves. In menswear it figured especially in trousers – the trousers one might wear with a black frock-coat. And in women's wear the grey dress was clearly a precious item. It is the one dress Jane Eyre has that is not black: she records that her black silk dress was her best, 'except one of light grey, which, in my Lowood

notions of the toilette, I thought too fine to be worn, except on first-rate occasions'. Dorothea is dressed exceptionally finely, as well as simply, when she is observed in Rome by two young art-lovers, in an extraordinary scene that, for all its set-piece explicitness, does eloquently juxtapose the two great epochs of womanhood as the Victorians conceived of these:

The two figures passed lightly along . . . towards the hall where the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra, lies in the marble voluptuousness of her beauty, the drapery folding around her with a petal-like ease and tenderness. They were just in time to see another figure standing against a pedestal near the reclining marble: a breathing blooming girl, whose form, not shamed by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish grey drapery; her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair.

'What do you think of that for a fine bit of antithesis?' one of the young men exclaims, 'There lies antique beauty, not corpse-like even in death, but arrested in the complete contentment of its sensuous perfection: and here stands beauty in its breathing life, with the consciousness of Christian centuries in its bosom.'[19]

George Eliot very much *sees* her heroines. Presenting Dorothea she makes a large use of colour, or rather of bleached colour, and of different shades and values of whiteness. The most remarkable instance must be that passage, long recognized as symbolizing Dorothea and her world, when she has just arrived at her marital home and looks out on a snow-world, a privileged prisoner:

A light snow was falling as they descended at the door, and in the morning, when Dorothea passed from her dressing-room into the blue-green boudoir that we know of, she saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth, and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud. The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books. The bright fire of dry oak-boughs burning on the dogs seemed an incongruous renewal of life and glow – like the figure of Dorothea herself as she entered carrying the red-leather cases containing the cameos for Celia.

She was glowing from her morning toilette as only healthful youth can glow; there was warm red life in her lips; her throat had a breathing whiteness above the differing white of the fur which itself seemed to wind about her neck and cling down her blue-grey pelisse with a tenderness gathered from her own, a sentient commingled innocence which kept its loveliness against the crystalline purity of the out-door snow. As she laid the cameo-cases on the table in the

bow-window, she unconsciously kept her hands on them, immediately absorbed in looking out on the still, white enclosure which made her visible world.[20]

The enclosure is social as well as emotional: George Eliot equates 'the snow and the low arch of dun vapour' with 'the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world'. Imprisoned in cold whites and greys, Dorothea is, in her own whiteness, associated with fire, warmth and redness; yet still she seems, in many senses of Blake's phrase, and even though newly married, 'a pale virgin shrouded in snow'. The narrative makes it clear that Dorothea is damaged by her asceticism, even though George Eliot hesitates to criticise her heroine explicitly. It is apparent, for instance, that Dorothea lives very much in fantasy – extraordinarily much, when one considers how blind she is to the repulsiveness (George Eliot insists on it) of her first husband. Even when she finds a man more suited to her, in the second half of the novel, she would rather live away from him and fantasize about him, than actually be with him. The only level on which she can meet him intimately is the level of childhood – he himself being already in some ways a child-man, whom she does not wish so much to mother, but rather to join as a sibling ('and so they stood, with their hands clasped, like two children').[21]

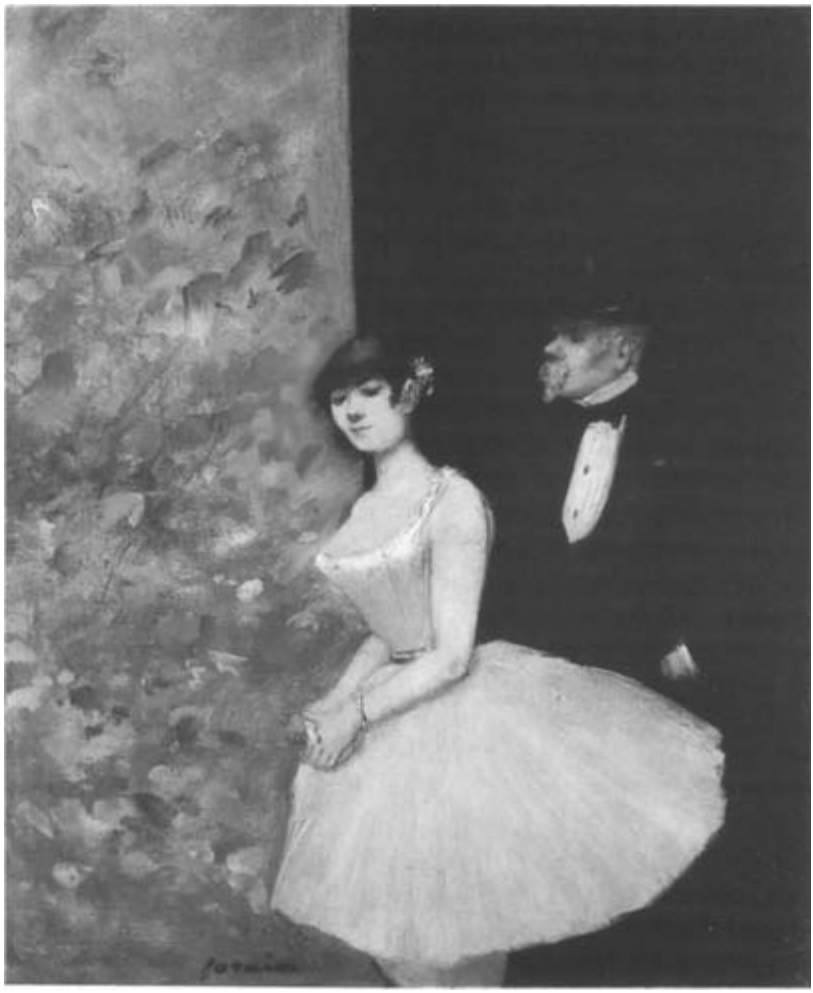
The main picture one takes of Dorothea is, however, probably of her sadness in her first marriage – a radiant figure of grey and different whites, married both spiritually and literally to English Puritanism, personated for her and for George Eliot by one of fictions's memorable men in black, the theologian Edward Casaubon ('the black figure with hands behind and head bent forward continued to pace the walk where the dark yew-trees gave him a mute companionship in melancholy'). Casaubon, it should be said, is a figure of upper-class, anglican, academic puritanism, as the other dark husband of the novel, the banker Nicholas Bulstrode, represents England's middle-class, dissenting, business-world puritanism. In her fiction at large, George Eliot has her own cast of memorable men in black, which includes Matthew Jermyn in *Felix Holt* and Savonarola in *Romola*.[22]

At the centre of her work, however, are the pilgrimages of her virginal puritan heroines. The type is first presented in Dinah Morris, the beautiful Methodist preacher in *Adam Bede* (a woman in black), but its fullest embodiment is Dorothea herself, a white woman in grey and a modern St Theresa. The puritan heroine is likely to be contrasted with a shallow, pretty worldly woman, as Dinah is with Hetty Sorrel, and Dorothea is with Rosamond Vincy, until, most interestingly, the two types are combined in Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*. Gwendolen is in principle no puritan, and is notably weak on the

philanthropic side. She is pretty, vivacious, worldly and daring; but still she is virginal, her prettiness has a 'stinging' quality. Like Dorothea, she can't stand a warm man and is glad to marry a cold one, especially when marrying coldness means marrying class. Even more than Dorothea she seems a snow-queen, markedly white and chill to the touch: she is convinced she cannot love, and does not want to love. Her colour, when first presented, is sea-green: she strikes onlookers as a nereid, silvery and serpentine, a creature from cold waters. Dorothea too was seen in surroundings of an underwater character, in the passage quoted earlier where she hovers in a blue-green, blue-grey world. Gwendolen is more provocative and sprightly than Dorothea, but moves in colder colours. Her figure is set off, at the dancing following the archery meeting, by 'the simplicity of her white cashmere with its border of pale green'. As noted, she thinks to wear her 'black silk' to reject Grandcourt's impending proposal; she is often in a riding-habit, which would be dark or black; she meets Deronda after her husband's death, in which she feels implicated, draped in a long white shawl. In her last meeting with Deronda, we are told, 'slowly the colour died out of face and neck, and she was as pale as before – with that almost withered paleness which is seen after a painful flush'. She is left alone and suffering, the pale heroine in cold-coloured robes, whose story is shaped by the chilled heart she has inherited and could only ever be – it seems written into the novel throughout – a tragedy.[23]

Such a heroine is harder to find in French fiction. In Catholic Christendom, the gender opposition of black *vis-à-vis* white seems often to have a less puritan value. So while one may find many French paintings, for instance many Impressionist paintings, where all the women in gardens, or at picnics, or at dances, wear virginal white, lightly relieved sometimes with rose or azure, there is also, in France especially, another combination, which I shall represent by that sub-genre of French art, the picture of a danseuse in a white toutou haunted by a man in black evening dress. Degas, especially and famously, endlessly reworked this theme, but it is familiar in the work of other artists too.

In Forain's *Behind the Scenes* (illus. 68), the picture is split nearly down the centre, so that we see also some of the scenery. We see the edge of a flat, and the white danseuse in her whiter dress patiently awaiting her cue. She is slightly plump but long-necked, and shows in her face a slightly foolish complacent awareness of the figure behind her, the denizen or master of the behind-the-scenes world – for the behind-the-scenes space is solid black, and he wears solid black, you cannot see where he ends and dark space begins. His face and collar



68 Jean Louis Forain, *Behind the Scenes, c.* 1880, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

are picked out brightly: so brightly there is an ambiguity as to recession, for the head and shirt seem to hover as far forward as her face, though necessarily he is behind her and might be expected to be more in shadow. He is middle-aged, comfortable, standing with raised head, hands in his pockets, the connoisseur-possessor of his body's desire, her body. His assured still figure leans slightly back, while she tips slightly forward, ready to move, to dance – to his appreciation especially, but perhaps to that of all the gents. For if his smart black is the uniform of his power in the social élite – the money élite – her white also has its distinction. Clearly, for the black-clad men of the world,

69 Paul Cézanne, *A Modern Olympia*, 1872–3, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

there also was an erotic élite, composed precisely of star danseuses, ballerinas, actresses: a different élite, often brilliant in limelit white, from that to which the men in black ultimately returned, the moral élite of virtuous women, kept waiting at home in wifely white.

The subject of the man of the world with his mistress is not always handled in the serious mode. Cézanne's *A Modern Olympia* (illus. 69) depicts him and his hat with satiric largesse, leaning back in prosperous well-fed awe before the vision of his desired, who seems to float high on a luminous cumulus cloud of bed-clothes, while her black servant with a wonderful flourish sweeps clear a white sheet to show her plump lovely pinknesses, drowsily nestled but just raising her head to acknowledge her desirer. The picture is, however, uncharacteristic of Cézanne, and uncharacteristic of paintings of men of the world, which tend to show their geniality in a less than genial light: especially when the location is not so much the opera-house, or the kept apartment, but the nineteenth century's form of night-club, where the woman desired may be a prostitute in white.

In Toulouse-Lautrec's painting on card, *The Englishman at the Moulin Rouge* (*William Tom Warrener*) (illus. 70), the woman Mr Warrener likes is in her skin colour white as her dress (though she also

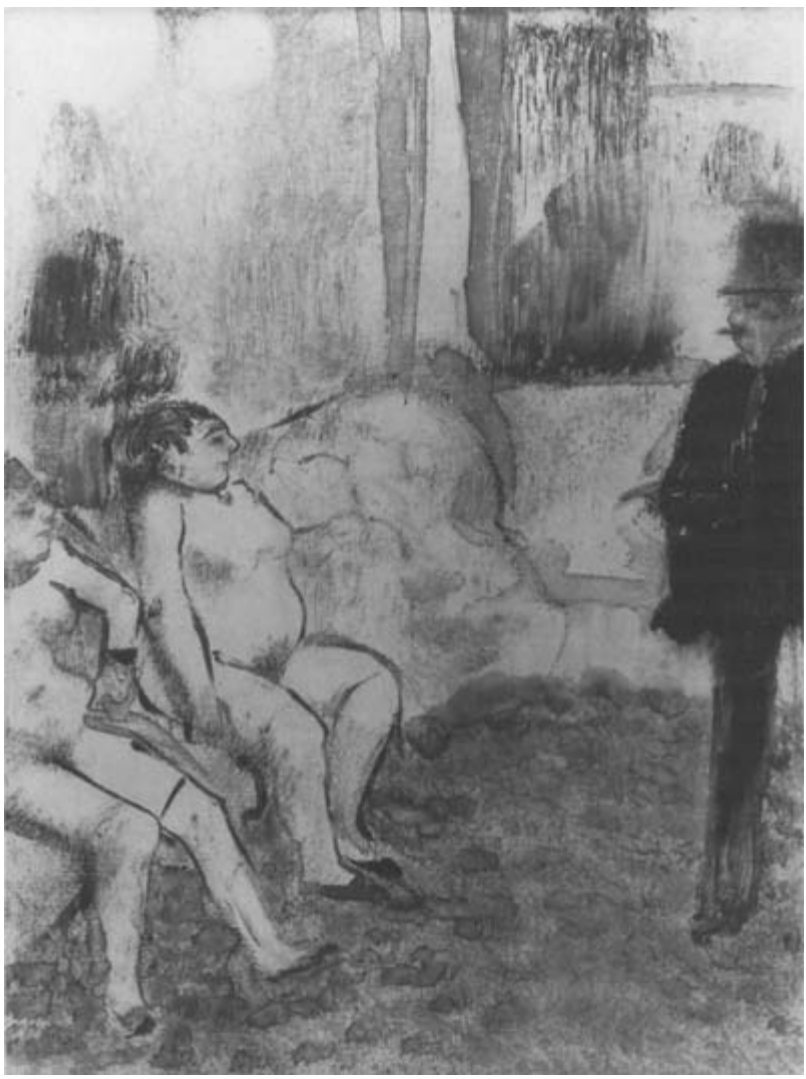
70 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *The Englishman at the Moulin Rouge (William Tom Warrener)*, 1892, oil and gouache on cardboard. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

wears a black neck-band, black armbands, and close-fitting, elbow-length black gloves). Their eyes don't quite meet, it's her flesh he wants and seems to gloat over, while she, leaning back but drawing tall in the face of his lurch towards her, seems – in the black dot of her eye – perhaps alarmed, perhaps appraising. There is something canine about William Warrener's snout, and something sinister in the face of the woman looking on, with a gleaming slanted eye. And if the prostitutes of Toulouse-Lautrec may at times seem sinister – dangerous, though desirable – so too can be the evening-dressed men, both in his and in other artists' paintings: where they can seem, in their standardized black wear, less like individuals than like automata of male desire. There is a sinisterness in a man wanting to make love who presents himself not in personal plumage, rather in an impersonal, formalized antiplumage, which has acquired its formality from earlier associations with the virtues of seriousness and self-denial. The men in these pictures may still have a gravity, and stand like black totems, ominously immobile among mobile women, seeming full of desire but less than fully alive – very different figures from the young lover in black in earlier art, whose black was grieving love, where these men's black is class and money.

Both Toulouse-Lautrec, and other French artists handling this

milieu, convey, with the eroticism, a sense of the sordid, the soiled, a sense of the mercenary side of the coin, of a transaction in the body market. In Degas's ink-drawing *The Customer* (illus. 71) the customer, dressed in black, keeps his black hat on as he decides his preference, and the women are white – as white as paper, they are coloured chiefly by the absence of ink – not because they are wearing white clothes, but because they are naked. In others of his drawings, Degas represents dancers by deepening the tones all round their shapes, while

71 Edgar Degas, *The Customer*, 1876–85, ink on paper. Pablo Picasso Museum, Paris.



they stay blank areas, suggesting again that what is recapitulated in the whiteness of the dancer's toutou (or of her petticoat, or of her white dress) is, especially, the whiteness of her skin. Nor should one discount the possibility that whiteness had sometimes this sensuous value in the respectable white worn by ladies, or young ladies: the different pearly whitenesses of some Renoirs suggest this. One might even draw a confirmation of the point from Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs*: for the Wanda the hero loves is his Venus, white either in her 'white muslin dress' or out of it, and he derives the same erotic charge from seeing sable fur wound either round her bare body, or round her white-dressed body. In *Venus in Furs* one sees the final inner work of dark clothing in the psyche, as black-on-white ascetic harshness is naturalized (fur not cloth), wedded to death (the furred animal is dead), and eroticized in a desire for punishment, to be inflicted by a whitened woman both bare and clad in black.[24]

The opposition of men's black and women's white seems in nineteenth-century night-life (and in the brothels of London, doubtless, as well as those of Paris) another instance of separation: an alienation confirmed by the *purchasing* of intimacy. In other words, though one may find various expressions of the complementarity of men and women, still the century's black/white gender-coding does seem to reflect an exacerbated sense of sexual difference, a magnified sense of sexual distance. This is not of course to deny that one can find pictures of lovers, he in black and she in white. Even, though very occasionally, one may see a closely loving couple, as in Renoir's wonderful *Dance in the Country* and *Dance in Town* (illus. 72, 73), where the country lover wears dark blue and clasps his girl more or less kissing her, but even so does not hold her as closely, affectionately and lovingly as the town-dancer in black (and white gloves) holds his partner to him.

Another benign image is of the man in black as family man, leading his daughter to her first communion, a subject handled by Toulouse-Lautrec with charm, poignancy and humour in his *First Communion* (illus. 74), where the paterfamilias, a man in his best black, pushes a pram with a little daughter in white, with his elder daughter behind in such brilliant-white clothes that she is an area of pure paper. (The mother and another child are somewhat grey behind her.) Father and daughter at a first communion was one of the first subjects the young Picasso painted.

How great, on the other hand, the black/white, man/woman distance could be, we may see if we return to where we began, to the nineteenth-century dandy – to the French dandy in black of the literary sort. For while the man in black in the brothel may be a very different

72 Auguste Renoir, *Dance in the Country*, 1883, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

73 Auguste Renoir, *Dance in Town*, 1883, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

figure from the earlier, devastated lover in black, the more sensitive dandies combined both personae. That, at all events, is the case with both Charles Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval. Baudelaire, who wrote both of men in black and of dandies, commissioned for himself an especially long and straight coat of black broadcloth with narrow pointed tails, which he wore with slim black trousers buttoning under patent leather shoes and a lustrous silk top-hat. Though when young he experimented with a red cravat and rose gloves, he later confined himself to black with black: with the coat, trousers and hat went a black cravat and a black kerseymere waistcoat, and at leisure in his black-and-red striped apartment he wore a black velvet tunic pinched at the waist by a golden belt. He saw the black fashion as a stylish form of

74 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *First Communion*, 1888, halftone gravure from the *Paris Illustré* of 7 July 1888.

mourning, and the black he wore was perhaps also Hamlet's black. His mother's remarriage had encouraged him in his sympathy with the prince, and he had a set of Delacroix's illustrations to the play hung around the walls of his apartment, together with Delacroix's painting of Grief. Like Nerval, he preferred to love women from a distance, and hymned his white 'ange', Mme Sabatier, as Nerval wove the luminous fantasies of his Aurelia, an actress, around the figure of Jenny Colon; it seems Nerval did not want closer contact, while Baudelaire demonized the woman he slept with.

Both were dandies in black who were lovers in black who also wore the black of the melancholy man, of the mourner, the man in the shadow of death. The black they wear is continuous with the use of black in their verse – the recurring 'noirs', Baudelaire's chiming of 'ténèbres' and 'funèbres' – and continuous too, in Baudelaire's case, with the construction he liked to place on the fact that his mistress, Jeanne Duval, was of mixed parentage and was herself dark-skinned: 'Sorcière au flanc d'ébène, enfant des noirs minuits. . . . O démon sans pitié! verse-moi moins de flamme. . . . Dans l'enfer de ton lit' (Sorceress with thighs of ebony, child of black midnights. . . . O demon without pity! pour less of your flames on me . . . in the hell of your bed). The sky of 'Spleen' poured on Baudelaire a 'jour noir' sadder than night. Nerval saw a black sun rise above Paris, and thought 'the eternal night begins': his Christ, seeking the eye of God, finds only a black socket radiating thickening night on the world.[25]

Though dramatized, their black is profoundly depressed. It is the black of death in the heart, even as at the same time it may involve black eroticism – from out of which they gaze towards a white high radiant angelic feminine figure, whom they want to keep at that far distance. In their different ways, each commits his genius to an eroticized fatality of absence: Baudelaire undoubtedly the greater genius, but Nerval standing in deeper shadows:

> I am the shadowed man – bereaved – unconsoled,
> Aquitaine's prince by his ruined tower,
> My only star's dead and my spangled lute
> Bears the black sun of melancholy.
>
> In the night of the tomb, you who consoled me,
> Give me Posilipo and the Italian sea,
> The flower which pleased so my desolate heart
> And the trellis where the vine and the rose are allied.
>
> Am I Love or Phoebus? Lusignan or Biron?
> My forehead's red still from the kiss of the queen;
> I've dreamed in the cave where the syren swims . . .
>
> And twice a victor I have crossed Acheron:
> Weaving in turn on Orpheus' lyre
> The sighs of the saint and the fairy's cries.

He was in love with being in love with his fantasy-Aurelia, and yet more poignantly in love after Jenny Colon died. Loving so her loss was a way of loving absence, negation and death. Still, he is the only man in black to have taken a lobster for a walk in the Palais Royale gardens; and he committed suicide in evening dress.[26]

75 John Singer Sargent, *Madame X* (Mme Gartreau), 1884, oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.