Some anecdotes concerning the dandy—

Brummell, George (1778–1840): the model of the dandy, celebrated in Barbey d'Aurévilly's "Du Dandysme et de George Brummell" (1845). As an intimate friend of the Prince of Wales (George IV), he dominates London fashion until 1816, when a falling out with the Prince and the pressure of creditors force him into exile in France.

I.

Q. What is the most wonderful invention of modern times?
A. The starched neckcloth.
Q. Who invented the starched neckcloth?
A. Brummell.
Q. Give the particulars of this invention.
A. When Brummell fell into disgrace, he devised the starched neckcloth with the design of putting the Prince's neck out of fashion, and of bringing his Royal Highness' muslin, his bow, and wadding into contempt. When he first appeared in this stiffened cravat, tradition says that the sensation in St. James’s Street was prodigious; dandies were struck dumb with envy, and washerwomen miscarried. No one could conceive how the effect was produced, — tin, card, a thousand contrivances were attempted, and innumerable men cut their throats in vain experiments; the secret, in fact, puzzled and baffled everyone, and the poor dandy L . . . d died raving mad of it; his mother, his sister, and all his relations waited on Brummell, and on their knees implored him to save their kinsman's life by the explanation of the mystery; but the beau was obdurate, and L. miserably perished. When B. fled from England, he left his secret a legacy to his country; he wrote on a sheet of paper, on his dressing table, the emphatic words, "Starch is the man."
—from "Examination of a Young Pretender to Fashion," London Magazine, May 1825

II.

"A friend one day called upon him, and found him confined to his room from a lameness in one foot, upon which he expressed his concern at the accident. 'I am very sorry for it too,' answered Brummell very gravely, 'particularly as its my favorite leg.' ”

Orsay, Gaspard, Alfred de Grimaud, comte d' (1801–1852); famous French dandy in both London and Paris, who also tried his hand at sculpture; named Directeur des Beaux-Arts by Napoléon III 2 months before his death.

Sub-Stance N° 36, 1982
A rich financier accidentally dropped a small coin on the ground. When he crouched down to look for it d'Orsay knelt down as well and, to help him better see, lit up a banknote.


Baudelaire, Charles

from “Le Peintre de la vie moderne.” IX. Le Dandy

... Qu’est-ce que donc que cette passion qui, devenue doctrine, a fait des adeptes dominateurs, cette institution non écrite qui a formé une caste si hautaine? C’est avant tout le besoin ardent de se faire une originalité, contenu dans les limites extérieures des convenances. C’est une espèce de culte de soi-même, qui peut survivre à la recherche du bonheur à trouver dans autrui ... C’est le plaisir d’étonner et la satisfaction orgueilleuse de ne jamais être étonné. Un dandy peut être un homme blasé, peut être un homme souffrant; ...

from the preface to *Mlle de Maupin* (Théophile Gautier)

... Une couverture, roulée convenablement autour du corps, le défendra aussi bien et mieux contre le froid que le frac de Staub le plus élégant et le mieux coupé.

Avec cela il pourra subsister à la lettre. On dit bien qu’on peut vivre avec 25 sous par jour; mais s’empêcher de mourir ce n’est pas vivre ...

Moi, ... je suis de ceux pour qui le superflu est nécessaire ...

from *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Oscar Wilde)

(Lady Bracknell is cross-examining Jack, a prospective son-in-law; Act I)

Lady B.: “Do you smoke?”
Jack: “Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.”
Lady B.: “I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is ...”

“The expression “blue stocking” and “dandy” may furnish subject matter for the learning of a commentator at some future period. At this moment every English reader will understand them. Our present ephemeral dandy is akin to the macaroni of earlier days. The first of these expressions has become classical by Mrs. Hannah More’s poem of the “Bas Bleu” and the other by the use of it in one of Lord Byron’s poems. Though now familiar and very trite, their day may not be long.”

The Dandy as Ironic Figure

"Il se fait avec rien une supériorité mystérieuse que nul ne saurait définir, mais dont les effets sont aussi réels et aussi grands que ceux des supériorités classées et reconnues par les hommes. Le dandy est un révolutionnaire et un illusioniste."


"Eternelle supériorité du Dandy.
Qu'est-ce que le Dandy? . . .
Le Dandy ne fait rien."


It is one of history's ironies that the ephemeral Dandy—the man whose social distinction lies in the fact that he produced nothing—should continue to draw our attention and invite comment. In a world devoted to utilitarian values, Charles Baudelaire interprets the Dandy's idleness as his moral superiority and heroic "éclat." Albert Camus sees in the frivolous self-indulgence of the Dandy a serious act of metaphysical revolt and the affirmation of an aesthetic of negation; for him the Dandy becomes the supreme symbol of the Romantic cult of the individual. And yet, what does the Dandy do to deserve all this attention? — Nothing. His life is devoted to a self-conscious celebration of style and personal elegance rather than to the creation of anything outside himself. "Le Dandy doit aspirer à être sublime sans interruption; il doit vivre et dormir devant un miroir" (Mon Coeur . . .). His sole preoccupation is the cultivation of beauty in his own person and when he dies, all he leaves is a reputation. But that reputation lives on in the anecdotes that persist and which in their very persistence testify to the formal perfection of the Dandy's gestures which have transcended time to become artistic events. Herein lies the aesthetic triumph of the Dandy that Baudelaire predicts.

This is the legitimate reason for beginning this discussion of the Dandy with a series of anecdotes. What characterizes all of these accounts, both for their narrators and for the critics who write of them later, is a quality of irony that they wish to retain and in which the Dandy's reputation for finesse seems to lie. In the first part of this paper we shall trace the "bilan du Dandy" and examine the Dandy's posture as a socially motivated analogue of the ironic figure. In the second half of the paper we shall question the nature of this irony and attempt to analyze it in terms of its rhetorical performance.

A less "legitimate" reason for beginning with anecdotes about the Dandy is that, as in the case of the ironic figure, acceptable examples are always more available than acceptable definitions. Indeed, definitions of the word dandy are almost as confusing as definitions of the word irony itself. It is much easier to say who is a dandy than to define precisely what he is. And as with the ironic
figure, as soon as we attempt to subject him to rigorous rules and constraints, we realize that it is a certain freedom from these—a singular spirit of negation, to use Camus' phrase—that constitutes an essential quality of his nature. The Dandy consciously defies and eludes the convenient labels of definition that modern society uses systematically to categorize its members into objects and functional roles. This defiance consists precisely in his refusal to be reduced to a word or a meaning; a pure signifier, his role in society is a formal one that is constantly revising its performance to meet and oppose the standards of the occasion. "On ne se lassera point de le répéter: ce qui fait le Dandy, c'est l'indépendance. Autrement il y aurait une législation du Dandysme, et il n'y en a pas" (Barbey, O. C. II, p. 689).

Littré defines the dandy as a man "recherché dans sa toilette et exagérant les modes jusqu'au ridicule." More recently, the Trésor de la langue française has defined him first as a young man "appartenant à la haute société qui réglait la mode." The apparent contradiction between definitions of a man who is at once ridiculous and yet dictates fashion identifies for us the essential paradox of the Dandy, and it is clear that the difference in interpretation is contingent upon the perspective of the observer. In each case, like the ironic figure in discourse, he is measured up to his performance by the standards of a presupposed context; and depending on how we perceive that context and our relationship to it, he can be read alternately as absurd or sophisticated. An eccentric outsider or member of an elite core, he defies social order at the same time that he embodies its ultimate standard in good taste. And at all times, like the ironic figure, he is exclusive in the company he keeps. To be admitted into the circle of the Dandy, like to enter into a situation of ironic exchange, is to be an initiate. This perhaps explains part of our attraction to the Dandy, and the pleasure that we take in reading of his ironic gestures and witticisms. To understand him, to interpret his behavior in terms of subtlety rather than silliness, is temporarily to enter into his world, a world that defines itself outside the limits set by everyday demands of practical, sensible action.

The Dandy, like the ironic figure, we have said, must be perceived in context and in order to understand fully the "grandeur in his folly" (Baudelaire) and his coincidence with an ironic mode of discourse and literature, we begin with the social phenomenon of the Dandy in the 19th century.

The Dandy is a man who, by virtue of his own sense of superior taste, stands outside and slightly above the rest of his society. He looks down on the world at whose edge he stands in much the same way as irony for Kierkegaard, assuming its own kind of "bon ton," "looks down as it were on plain and ordinary discourse immediately understood by everyone." It is his elected distance from a world of more common concerns that gives the Dandy a perspective of superiority and irony on that world and conversely allows others excluded from his private realm, but members of a larger bourgeoisie, to judge him as eccentric and extravagant.

His status in society is vaguely foreign, like the name that he imports from England, and French society of the early 19th century views him with the same
ambivalent eye that they do all things English. On the one hand, English vanity is a target for mockery; on the other, the French can find no better word to describe their own standards of elegance than “fashionable.” Similarly the English scan the French dictionary to find terms like “bon ton” and “bas bleu” that in their very foreignness conjure up the exclusive nature and rarity of the quality described. It is as if there were not words enough in our practical language of everyday transaction to deal with these special borderline refinements. The Dandy is therefore a foreigner of sorts; he exists not only outside the world of the common man, but outside his language as well. Barbey D'Aurévilly in his essay of 1845 “Du Dandysme et de George Brummell” introduces the Dandy as follows: “Cette autre espèce qui, sous le nom de Dandysme cherche depuis quelque temps à s’acclimater à Paris. . . . restera étranger[e] comme la chose qu’il exprime” (OC II, p. 670).

The Dandy’s fundamental position of social alienation anticipates for us his later identification with the Romantic artist, as well as the analogy that we wish to pursue with the ironic figure in discourse, a figure that in its functional strategy is similarly marked by its willful alienation from an accepted order or norm of speech and by its potential alienating effect on the naive listener or audience. When the word dandy is introduced in France at the height of Anglomania in 1816, it refers at first to the English dandy who is characterized by the effect that he produces through an eccentric manner of dress — starched collar, extravagant tie and corseted waist — and an impertinent manner of speech. We note that in the portrait that is drawn of George Brummell in the first anecdote quoted, these are the pertinent features in operation: the starched collar is matched only by the witticism at the end in “dumbfounding” the observer.

While it is the first of these features — the visibly eccentric manner of dress — that originally attracts superficial attention, as the Dandy’s social presence becomes more felt, it will be the latter aspect — his impertinence, his sense of irony — that will earn him his true notoriety and lasting reputation. Barbey comments on the Dandy’s singular blend of Impertinence and Grace and adds: “Le Dandysme est toute une manière d’être, et l’on ne l’est pas que par le côté matériellement visible.” Brummell’s genius lies not in his starched collar but “C’est le génie de l’Ironie qui le rendit le plus grand mystificateur que l’Angleterre ait jamais eu” (OC II, pp. 673-4, 694).

In 1820, however, the Dandy is still perceived in France in terms of his superficial elegance and the term is used pejoratively to describe a shallow sort of foppish French aristocrat. Stendhal, in De l’Amour (1822), regretting the quality of certain educational institutions in Paris, complains that they produce nothing but “des dandys, des espèces de jocrisses qui ne savent que bien mettre leur cravate et se battre dans le Bois de Boulogne.” This rather curt appreciation of the Dandy will change by 1830, when Musset, Balzac, Barbier and Stendhal himself all start introducing dandies as characters in their work, and we shall briefly examine the literary transformation of the Dandy into the aesthetic hero of Romantic rebellion. If we signal this particular example of
the Dandy, however, it is to stress another aspect of his character upon which we have not yet touched and which links the Dandy in a very significant way to ironic discourse, and that is his urbanity.4

The Dandy is very much a phenomenon of the 19th century capital, specifically London and Paris, and it is in his person that the two-sided meaning of urbanity is fully actualized. An urban phenomenon—of the big city—he is characterized by a certain kind of fine wit and polish that we call urbane and which dates back to Roman times when people from the Urbs (the city, Rome) were commonly opposed to people from the country, rustici. Ernout and Maillot, in the Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine define urbanus as “de la ville, par suite poli, fin, spirituel (par opposition à rusticus).” With the rapid growth of the city in the 19th century, the etymological distinction of urbanus becomes meaningful again, and the noun “urbanité” starts taking on new connotations that alert us to social change and to the general impact of the Dandy’s style. The language of irony becomes identified with the sophisticated and unnatural setting of the big city.

Littér’s report on the word “urbanité” is of special interest: “on a souvent attribué ce mot à Balzac; mais il est beaucoup plus ancien, seulement c’est Balzac qui l’a introduit définitivement et autorisé.” Bloch and Wartburg (Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française) confirm this revitalized 19th century usage: “établissement dans la langue par Balzac.” It is significant that Balzac, the first major French novelist of the big city, should also be the responsible authority on urbanity, for he is also the writer of the Traité de la vie élégante, the Physiologie de la toilette ("la cravate c’est l’homme") and the creator of two of the more notable literary dandies of the early 19th century, Henri de Marsay and Maxime de Trailles.

Urbanity, then, that quality of speech that we continue to associate with refinement and irony, takes on its modern connotation in the 19th century with the parallel and related developments of the big city and dandyism, and dandyism might thus be considered as a manner bred out of and in reaction to new conditions of urban society. Baudelaire, the superbly ironic “peintre de la vie moderne” and the first major French poet of the big city, defends dandyism as “une chose moderne et qui tient à des causes toutes nouvelles” (Salon de 1846).

The Dandy, like the ironic figure, we have suggested, is essentially oppositional; he defines himself against other values rather than in terms of any specific order of values. In this sense, he is rather like the adjective urbanus itself, which derives its full meaning only in opposition to the adjective rusticus. Just as the Dandy’s outstanding elegance exists only in opposition to a more general context of tasteless or dull practicality, his urbanity may be measured against a manner that we still call provincial. His self-conscious world is closed within the artificial boundaries of a city that becomes “le monde” in a very special sense, a city that itself marks off its inner circles for the select.

“. . . Q. How long have you been on the town?
A. Three years.
Q. What are the boundaries of town?
A. Town is bounded on the north by Oxford St., on the east by Bond St. and the Haymarket, on the south by Pall-Mall, and on the west by Park Lane.

Q. Is Portman Square then out of town?
A. No, certainly it is not; but I do not know how to bring it into town, nor how to leave it out; but many people hold, with good authority, that the north of Oxford St. cannot be quite right . . .”

("Examination of a Young Pretender to Fashion")

The model of the Dandy, the “superior”5 man who is constantly asserting himself against a larger world whose values are alien to him, holds an obvious appeal for the post-1830’s Romantic artist. Gautier’s preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin is the sustained utterance of a somewhat overexcited dandy rebelling against the utilitarian mold that his society wishes to impose on art. “Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid. . . . l’endroit le plus utile d’une maison, ce sont les latrines.” The polemic of “the beautiful versus the useful” epitomizes the dandy’s struggle to define the meaning of his own life in terms of beauty in a world devoted chiefly to useful production; to invert the order of the superfluous and the necessary6 and redefine the aesthetic concept of “need” and “function.” Gautier’s dandy can live three days without bread, but not without poetry.

By the time Gautier creates his portrait of the Dandy in Fortunio (1837) the literary image of the Dandy has grown into something significantly more complex and intelligent than the dapper socialite that the dandy once conjured up. An anonymous critic reviewing Fortunio in the Revue Française (June 1838) recognizes in this transformation of the dandy the artistic yearning for “le rêve d’une existence plus large” that grows out of a sense of disgust with the vulgar conformity and limitations of everyday life. “Chacun comprit la portée de cet exemple: le dandysme, ainsi déplacé, changeait de conditions; il quittait la sphère des réalités pour entrer dans le domaine de l’intelligence.”

In “Le Peintre de la vie moderne” Baudelaire articulates this intelligence of the Dandy in terms of an existential revolt. “Que ces hommes se fassent nommer raffinés, incroyables, beaux ou dandys, tous sont issus d’une même origine; tous participent d’un même caractère d’opposition et de révolte; tous sont des représentants de ce qu’il y a de meilleur dans l’orgueil humain, de ce besoin, trop rare chez ceux d’aujourd’hui de combattre et de détruire la trivialité” (O.C., t. II, p. 711).

It is this transformation of the Dandy from a mindless model of vanity to a model of the repressed dreamer and intellectual rebel that separates earlier interpretations of the dandy from more modern ones. Whereas Littre in 1863 still writes him off to ridicule, the T.L.F. sees the Dandy’s exaggerated refinement as “(témoignant) d’un anti-conformisme et d’une recherche éthique fondée sur le mépris des conventions sociales et de la morale bourgeoise.” This is the more heroic image of the Dandy that we inherit from Barbey, Baudelaire and Camus. And this is the Dandy, caught in a dialectic relationship with social convention, that we wish to examine as ironic.
In presenting the first serious study of the Dandy, Barbey defines his eccentricity as "une révolution individuelle contre l'ordre établi"—a description that we might wish to retain for his use of irony as well. Dandyism is the consequence of a certain condition of society that pre-exists the appearance of the Dandy and determines the rules of his game, and Barbey is the first to define the dialectic dependence of the dandy on a society whose conventions and values he seeks to undermine. "Le Dandysme . . . se joue de la règle et pourtant la respecte encore. Il en souffre et s'en venge tout en la subissant; il s'en réclame quand il y échappe; il la domine et en est dominé à son tour: double et muable caractère!" (O. C., II, p. 675).

In the same way that we could not speak of an ironic figure if we did not already suppose a standard norm of discourse that is "literal" and direct, the Dandy would not stand out as an independent phenomenon were it not for a context of general social conventions that he contradicts in his own person. Both are figures that function in terms of their potential effect, negating the expectations and presuppositions of a public. Indeed, the Dandy, like the ironist, could not exist at all without a public whose standards of taste, hierarchies of value and conventions of discourse he could predict. It is in this sense that we speak of the Dandy's presence as a performance, with all the self-conscious theatricality and lack of substance that the term implies. The Dandy, Camus says—and we add, the ironic figure—"ne peut se poser qu'en s'opposant." Without a set of conventions to respect and oppose, neither figure can produce the effect that justifies its existence.

Should the bourgeois society that the Dandy opposes be threatened, so is the Dandy. "Le jour où la victoire sera décidée, il est à penser que la manière d'être qu'on appelle Dandysme sera grandement modifiée, si elle existe encore; car elle résulte de cet état de lutte sans fin entre la convenance et l'ennui." The Dandy is not an anarchist who overthrows rules of behavior and discourse; rather, he exploits their logic in order to produce the unexpected (an unexpected that conforms, however, to the rules of unexpectedness within that system) and challenges their system from within.8 "Ainsi, une des conséquences du Dandysme, un de ses principaux caractères—pour mieux parler, son caractère le plus général—est de produire toujours l'imprévu, ce à quoi l'esprit accoutumé au joug des règles ne peut pas s'attendre en bonne logique" (O. C. II, p. 675). If the common ironic inversion is to say the opposite of what you think, the Dandy's ironic inversion consists in saying (or doing) the opposite of what others think. This is the lesson that Julien Sorel in Le Rouge et le Noir learns in London. "Vous n'avez pas compris votre siècle, lui disait le Prince Korasoff; faites toujours le contraire de ce qu'on attend de vous. Voilà, d'honneur, la seule religion de l'époque."

It is with this lesson in mind that we finally return to the anecdotes with which we began. What is worrisome about these anecdotes is the fact that although they strike one—and have certainly struck the scholars and biographers who collect them—as ironic, one is hard pressed to explain how irony functions in any of these given examples. If we assume the classical interpretation
of the ironic figure in terms of a play between literal and figural sense, none of these anecdotes is ironic. The standard description of irony that has one say one thing and mean another cannot explain, for instance, why we find Brummell’s comment in the second anecdote ironic. Does Brummell not mean it when he says that he regrets the accident to his favorite leg? On the contrary, what seems ironic here is the fact that he means it very seriously. (Hazlitt says “gravely.”) Indeed, the only analysis of irony that I have found which can account for this special set of potentially ironic examples about the Dandy is the interpretation proposed by Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson of “Irony as Mention” (Poétique 36, 1978, pp. 399-412).

Rejecting the classical opposition of literal and figural senses as inadequate to explain many examples of irony, Sperber and Wilson invoke the Logical opposition of use versus mention, and they conclude that all ironies may be interpreted as mentions having the character of an echo. “Nous soutenons que toutes les ironies typiques, mais aussi bien nombre d’ironies a-typiques du point de vue classique, peuvent être décrites comme des mentions (généralement implicites) de propositions; ces mentions sont interprétées comme l’écho d’un énoncé ou d’une pensée dont le locuteur entend souligner le manque de justesse ou de pertinence.”

In the example given by Sperber and Wilson, of the speaker who turns to his partner during a torrential downpour and says: “Lovely weather we’re having,” the utterance echoes a relevant statement made or thought in anticipation of good weather. Irony then functions as the echo of an utterance that may be pertinent in one context, but no longer is in its given context. It is this basic impertinence of the ironic figure in a given context that links it most significantly to the Dandy.

Le joug des règles or la bonne logique, to use Barbey’s terms, tell us that the phrase “Lovely weather we’re having” belongs to a context of, for example, sunshine. To take it out of that context into a situation of hurricane conditions is to problematize the referent of the utterance and to produce either an absurd statement—in which case it is the interlocutor’s prerogative to react with surprise or to refuse the statement—or an ironic one, that entails the listener’s acceptance and complicity. The listener in the second case acknowledges the utterance as not referring to actual meteorological conditions, but to the expression itself, that has been removed from its relevant context.

It is further concluded that irony takes naturally as its target the people or states of mind, real or imaginary, that it echoes. In the “lovely weather” example, the target may be a mistaken weatherman who predicted sunshine or a much vaguer hidden state of mind that always hopes, naively perhaps, for fine weather.

We return to the problem of Brummell’s favorite leg. To suggest that this example is ironic is to imply a certain impertinence or non-relevance of Brummell’s remark in a given context. But what is the context that suggests or produces this irrelevance? Surely not the dandy’s; in the closed self-conscious world of the dandy, where he has cultivated himself as a work of art, a leg
may be favored just as easily as any other prized possession. On the contrary, the dandy's statement, the echo of a social cliché—regretting a favorite object—alludes to the larger context of a bourgeois utilitarian society in which this particular reflection jars. Rather than echoing a previous condition in which a given statement is or was pertinent, the Dandy introduces a special ironic twist whereby his statement, coherent and direct within his own isolated world of private reference, becomes ironic only by nature of its function as mention or echo: alluding to a larger context in which it is incongruous, a context which then becomes the target for the subtlest of mockeries.

The "superfluous" quality of mention or echo that is implicit in all instances of irony becomes clear in the case of the Dandy. What the Dandy's ironic statements and gestures all echo to some degree is a body of "'idées reçues" or clichés that exist outside his world in the practical, everyday, utilitarian concerns of a society at large. Within this larger context it is quite feasible and routinely acceptable for a man to regret an accident to his better or best leg, because the notion of one leg being better than another inscribes itself within a system of value oriented towards function. (I.e., if you have a weak ankle or knee, then your remaining leg is the one that is of more use to you.) But to have a favorite leg is to bring to the anatomy of one's body criteria of taste or aesthetic appreciation and implicitly to mock the more banal concern for utility. The Dandy's game is one based not only on echo, but moreover on the inversion of accepted hierarchies of convention. In his exclusive "Jockey Club" of language, internal coherence is derived from the valorization of a certain number of qualities that act in radical contradiction to their more generally accepted polar opposites, available to us in the form of common clichés.

In the polemic between the useful and the beautiful, the necessary and the superfluous, it is the latter of these terms that are emphasized within the Dandy's inverted and introverted world. The argumentative orientation of a more general scale of value directed from beauty at the bottom to usefulness at the top is turned upside down. Indeed, for the Dandy the beautiful and the superfluous become the useful and the necessary as he defines them, and those remarks and gestures that are perceived from the outside as ironic mention function for him in terms of their use. Within the world of Brummell's concerns there exists beyond language a favorite leg that is either left or right; outside his world the favorite leg is only a linguistic echo of so many other favorite things that people regret.

However, to acknowledge the Dandy's statement as potentially absurd or ironic is, as we have suggested, to place one's self necessarily outside the closed circle of the Dandy. Within Brummell's salon, where beauty and taste determine value, where the superfluous has become the necessary, the utterance, we have said, does indeed have a referent outside itself and designates through its use a real object. It is only from the perspective of an outsider that his statement, perceived as eccentric or as the imperfect echo of a common social platitude, is interpreted as ironic. If the listener is a dandy himself, however, he will not react with any surprise to Brummell's grave regret, for he shares the
context of aesthetic concern in which the statement has its own coherence. Recalling Baudelaire, the dandy is the man who shocks, but is never shocked ("le caractère de beauté du dandy consiste surtout dans l'air froid qui vient de l'inébranlable résolution de ne pas être ému") and he is always characterized by a kind of blasé "impassibilité."

The dandy may thus be regarded as the signifying master of intertextual polyphony, the man who consciously manipulates two levels of discourse at once: the common language of everyday cliché and the more esoterically defined marginal language of his own private context that inverts the first and echoes it at a distance. It is the privilege of the dandy to both invoke the echo and the irony at the same time that he addresses his initiated listener directly beyond it.

The anecdote about the comte d'Orsay illustrates the same sort of ironic behavior at the level of gesture. D'Orsay's burning of the banknote to help the financier find his coin alludes directly to the world of the same financier by echoing upside-down such platitudes as "a penny saved is a penny earned" and various other idées reçues about saving money. Within the financier's materialistic world, money exists as a professional necessity and as his own raison d'être; within d'Orsay's world, the quality of money is superfluous and valuable only in its aesthetic versatility; d'Orsay gives special meaning to the cliché "l'argent lui brûle les doigts" (which he echoes in his gesture) and thereby mocks the materialistic context out of which the expression arises.

However, it is Oscar Wilde who is the master of dandy-irony. His epigrams, we recall, are often no more than slightly imperfect echoes of the platitudes of Victorian social morality that they implicitly mock. The Importance of Being Earnest provides perhaps the most entertaining portrait of the Dandy, giving him a proper stage to perform on. The dandy here appears in his rarefied milieu, surrounded by other dandies who all share in the same splendid use of language. Wilde's dandies, less subtle and more flamboyant than the earlier versions of which we have been speaking, afford their public — the larger audience of the theatre who come to watch them — the facility of immediately perceiving the strategy of mention, by explicitly introducing the external context of cliché that they echo. And indeed, the easy pleasure that one derives in watching or reading a play by Wilde is the pleasure that comes from a certain sense of shared superiority with the Dandy that permits one, temporarily, to partake in his ironic vision of our world.

In the very brief quotation we have provided from the play, the irony of Lady Bracknell's retort comes from its immediate juxtaposition to the moralistic platitudes that she and her colleagues in the Salon defy in their very person. "A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is." This could easily be a direct quotation from any number of good Victorian mothers and it belongs quite clearly to a system of values based on usefulness rather than beauty. The irony emerges from the juxtaposition and implied equivalence between smoking and occupation in her reply, an equivalence that seems indeed impertinent in that same external con-
text that is defined by criteria of productive activity. The impertinence is further emphasized within the banal expression by the inclusion of the occupied man’s antithesis, the idle man.

For the outside bourgeois observer looking into this closed salon, idleness might seem a more fitting designation for the pastime of smoking, as smoking tends to be classified in our catalogue of idées reçues with wasteful activity. The world of the dandy, we have maintained, is, however, based on an inversion of conventional binary oppositions of beauty and use. The dandy’s only “occupation” and indeed, Lady Bracknell uses the word in this sense, is his idleness that occasionally manifests itself in non-productive activities like eating olives after dinner or smoking. “Eternelle superiorité du Dandy? . . . Le Dandy ne fait rien.” Lady Bracknell’s reply makes perfectly good sense within her private world but her fine manipulation of irony comes nonetheless from a mastery of the conventions of the world outside herself (and beyond the stage) which she echoes so completely.

It is the quality of the echo to repeat and despite the impertinence and the shock-effect of the Dandy that arises from his skillful timing of familiar statements in unfamiliar contexts; his ironic gesture or statement always echoes the system of values that he seeks to mock. This echo, this repetition, serves ultimately to remind us of and assert the strength of the presupposed external context or norm to which the dandy is marginal; and it is finally the strength of cliché and the lasting recall of the idées reçues of bourgeois society that allow the Dandy his game at all.

Baudelaire, regardless of his occasionally shocking behavior and celebrated quest for Novelty, is a conservative moralist, keenly aware of and concerned by the dangers of “toute liberté absolue” (Salon de 1859). For him, modern art, like the Dandy, exists in a condition of duality, inextricably linked to a society which it can neither totally accept nor reject. And if the result of this duality is the production of an ironic vision, it is, Baudelaire tells us, “une conséquence fatale de la dualité de l’homme.” It is the Dandy’s ambivalent relationship to his society, standing both on the inside and above it on the outside, that generates the ironic energy that is invested in the art of modernity. “Il s’agit pour lui de dégager de la mode ce qu’elle peut contenir de poétique dans l’historique, de tirer l’éternel du transitoire . . . La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable” (“Le Peintre . . . ” O.C., t. II, pp. 694-5).

To the extent that the reputation of the ephemeral Dandy has survived “immuablement” despite forecasts of an early oblivion, he has in fact achieved the status of work of art to which he aspired, and speaking both as and for the work of art, he can proclaim with justifiable pride through the voice of Oscar Wilde: “All art is quite useless.” For a man who did nothing, his eternal superiority is also his eternal irony.
Notes


2. Although we refer to English dandies, this study concentrates on the Dandy—and his literary presence—in 19th century France.


4. Our general curiosity about the Dandy and particularly about his place in French letters of the 19th century is largely motivated by Baudelaire's interest in him. In Baudelaire's collected writings one is struck by three elements that interrelate in his theory of modern art: the big city as locus, the Dandy as hero, and irony as the mode of modernity. These three aspects are resumed in the multiple resonances of the word "urbaniyey.“

5. Cf. Théophile Gautier: "Rien n'est plus contraire aux règles du haut Dandysme que de se reconnaître, par la surprise ou l'admiration, inférieur à quelque chose."

6. The strategy of inversion is crucial to an understanding of irony (especially verbal) which often implies the inversion and re-orientation of argumentative scales of value and priority. For the theory of argumentative scales ("Les échelles argumentatives") see J. C. Anscombe and O. Ducrot, "L'argumentation dans la Langue" in *Langages* 42, June 1976, pp. 5-27; also by the same authors, "Lois logiques et lois argumentatives" parts I and II in *Le Français Moderne*, 46, 47, 1978, pp. 347-357, 35-52, respectively.


8. This explains the essential conservatism of the Dandy, politically as well as (in pertinent instances) aesthetically. For the purposes of 19th century French literary history we are talking about the difference between the ultimately conservative Baudelaire—dandy, ironist—and the unclassifiable Rimbaud—anarchist.

9. We remark that these are the two interpretive poles that operate in the seemingly contradictory definitions of the Dandy cited earlier, where he is characterized alternately as ridiculous and sophisticated.

10. And that is by force our position today, separated as we are from that circle by temporal as well as social distance. Barbey understood very well the problem of considering the dandy's performance post-facto and at a distance. For this reason he does not quote a single famous "bon-mot" of his protagonist Brummell. "On ne citera donc pas les mots de Brummell. Ils ne justifieraient pas sa renommée et pourtant ils la lui méritèrent; mais les circonstances dont ils avaient jailli, et qui les avaient chargés d'électricité, pour ainsi dire, ne sont plus" (*O.C.* II, p. 697).