

## Writing on the Transformative and Imaginary Body

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### Abstract

Unable to sense any articulation in your palms and fingers, you realise your arms are now stumps, rounded off where the elbows would have been. All you can feel is clammy, thin film, like loosely stretched latex. You are entirely covered in a milky coalescence forming a semi-translucent, membrane-like film. This new skin stretches over an engorged blob enclosing you like a wrinkly, half-deflated water balloon. Laying there immobilised you think of those whole headless chickens with their appendages neatly tucked under plump bodies, wrapped in plastic bags and sitting in a supermarket cool room along with countless others, their identity registered on barcode stickers, their value calculated in weight. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

This article discusses the potential for the literary imagination to extend conceptual and imagistic possibilities of the body in fashion. It posits that writing, as an act of creative production and an expressive tool, can initiate ideation of bodies that are as yet unknown – as potentialities. The narrative form and linguistic devices of metaphor, analogy, allusion and projection are used to draw forth, shape and carry the body from the imaginary (concept or idea) into readable form. The transformative body performs as the subject of imagination, the protagonist in the narrative. It also performs as the agent mediating between the actual and imaginary, who, in this context, relates to both the author (me) and reader (you).

This article discusses the author's writing practice that focuses on "writing the imaginary, embodied and performative." The intent of the practice is to produce affective sketches of imaginative forays into and beyond one's own body, coalescing into performative self narratives as well as fictions.

You gasp, in wonder, as you contemplate the forces of collision, disintegration and reconstitution at work. You sense an anticipation growing in you that is so

achingly pure – because you expect nothing in return. All you want to know is what would become of you when the transformation is complete. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

This article connects Joanne Entwistle's emphasis on dress as embodied practice, the phenomenological approach of Gaston Bachelard, especially his writings on the poetics of the creative imagination, and the concept of ekphrasis (specifically the use of verbal art to engage a visual one) put forth by literary critics and authors Michael Clune and Ben Lerner. The discussion weaves through a piece of prose fiction entitled *Falling* which alludes to some of the concepts in this article. Produced as part of the author's PhD research practice, *Falling* presents an alternative, narrative-based approach to account for the poetics of fashion, using the transformable/transformational body as the site and subject. The narrative centres on a body undergoing a process of extreme physical transformation, metaphorically referring to the continual disintegration and reconstitution of the self, at the verge of fashion, where fashion is understood, conceptually, as the aesthetic expression of ideas and sensibilities to do with contemporariness and progress (Lehmann, 2000, p. xii), and how this implicates the self. The article mediates literary experiences of what the body could potentially be, and suggests the capacity of writing to account for fashion as an embodied practice and lived experience. *Falling* performs the propositions put forward in this presentation – to enact, through writing, processes of bodily transformation that drive fashion, stressing the fundamental role of imagination, and the performativity of language in understanding the transformational agency of fashion.

Keywords: fashion narrative, fashion writing, writing practice, fashion imagination, body in fashion, embodied fashion

## Introduction

Something terrible happens in that memory. There is a physical sense of loss – an uncanny emptiness coddling deep in your viscera. In its potency you could sense a prophetic urge. You remember laying at the edge of a cliff, unable to move. You feel a sickness in your core as deep and hostile as the black ocean

raging underneath. Wetness streams down your face, your fleshy cheeks throb, currents of anxiety course to the tips of your fingers. You tell yourself to remember this, to write it down before it dissolves. For now you just want to close your eyes. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

This article demonstrates the capacity for writing and the literary imagination to evoke poetic potentialities of the body in fashion. Writing is used as a tool, and words as expressive material, to convey imaginative and subjectively lived experiences of the body. This suggests a profound role for writing in fashion; writing to prompt aesthetic imaginings which, from the phenomenological perspective, is mediated by the body and bodily. This article threads narrative fragments through its discursive structure, to allude to the imagined body in fashion and its transformative possibilities. The fragments are excerpted from the prose works produced as part of my emergent writing practice. As a critical fashion practice, it explores the multifarious body as protagonist, author, and site and subject of experience. It suggests an investment in the embodied nature of writing and reflexive engagement with the phenomenological experience of dress and dressing and the practice of fashion, which will be further discussed in the article.

The writing practice is located at the margins of experiential fashion. Operating at the juncture of creative expression and critical practice, it takes up a position against conventional fashion media. In magazines, blogs, websites, trade newspapers, journals and catalogues, writing is typically associated with writing *about* fashion, where the intention is to inform, profile, report or give opinions on contemporary issues, chronological trends and future projections. Within the formal conventions of fashion writing, the writing is a passive, representational tool that supports the image, or the persona, collection and garment. In contrast, Roland Barthes' semiological study of fashion presents written or "described fashion" as a system of signs that holds its own structure of meaning, independent of the image. He claims, "Even if the garment of fashion remained purely imaginary (without affecting real clothing), it would constitute an incontestable element of mass culture, like pulp fiction, comics, and movies" (Barthes, 1985, p. 9). While I do not follow on from Barthes, I appreciate his conceptual underpinning of written or described fashion –

as opposed to the image and actual garment – as the production of fashion. However, Barthes' structuralist dissection of fashion does not account for the body, and this is my point of departure from Barthes.

As a counterpoint to Barthes' written fashion, the realm of literary fiction demonstrates the verbal crafting of the poetic imagination that *provokes* rather than *explains* dress and fashion. Novelists such as Emile Zola, Marcel Proust and Honoré de Balzac create narrative experiences of imaginary garments and the bodies that wear them, and it is within this tradition of narrative making that my writing practice unfolds. However, my practice is not in literary fiction; my intent is not to craft stories but rather, to use the narrative device to approach and consider fashion. It gestures towards the poetics of fashion in relation to the lived body and sensing self. My approach is evocative rather than assertive, where the intent is not to describe but to perform and “move around” mindfully, not to represent in concrete, finite terms, but rather to cultivate subtle and loose expressions. In the late nineteenth century the poet Stéphane Mallarmé undertook an artistic exercise by writing and publishing a series of women's fashion magazines titled *La Dernière Mode/The Latest Fashion* (1874). Under a variety of pseudonyms, he wrote fictional articles on fashion and its nature and principles, as well as on food, interior decoration, lifestyle and society. As editor, author and designer, Mallarmé also published in each issue poems and short stories commissioned from friends, along with engravings of two newly designed toilettes. Critics remain divided as to the intent behind his idiosyncratic endeavour – having been referred to as “ironic,” “puzzling,” “appealingly enigmatic” and “strange” (Furbank & Cain, 2004, pp. 3-5). My interest is specifically in Mallarmé's use of fictional and meta-fictional devices to theorize fashion (which could perhaps be an ironic gesture toward the limits of literature and poetry), whilst at the same time performing a subversive socio-cultural critique of fashion.

### *Falling: A Prose Work*

To illustrate the concept of “writing on the transformative and imaginary body,” excerpts from my prose work *Falling* are woven throughout the discussion. My intent behind writing *Falling* is to produce an experiential account of an abstract body that is unhinged from the actual world. It attempts to draw out, through vivid verbal

description, the body as *only* physical matter, detached from any human psyche, emotion and characterization, though engaging directly with the reader by addressing “you.”

The narrative unfolds as a fleshy body undergoing extreme material decomposition as it merges with its dress. It is a metaphor for the “fall,” or the dissolving, of the self into fashion. Alluding to the sense of being “pulled into” and “swallowed into” the gravity of fashion, it describes the body breaking, rupturing and melting as it becomes one with dress. This image of decomposition and disintegration resonates with the German word *verfallen* (Inwood, 1999, p. 243; Sembera, 2007, p. 254), which the title *Falling* alludes to. However, more significantly, it is through the sequential processes of fragmentation and destruction that the body in *Falling* is subsequently (re)constituted into a new body/entity.

In *Falling*, writing is a tool for imagining or producing images of the body as a composition of substances and matter (gases, liquids, metals, chemicals, jewels). The body is gradually formed not through the fixed figuration of the human body, but as amorphous images and sounds, and their descriptions. It is akin to a designer idly sketching, without prior knowledge of what the end image should be, investing in the gradual revelation of unforeseen images. Words form images in the process of *Falling*; images, concepts and ideas are gradually constructed and *lived* through the durational experiences of writing and reading. Could the image/imagining/idea of the body, through the writing, affect, or transform, the perception of the actual body or bodily matter? What other bodies are possible, if we imagine with pure matter rather than its silhouette or outline, and how do words draw them into being?

Now, as I recall:

Moments pass, and you move to get up but everything feels changed. Gravity feels altered and uncertain. You are lying on your back and it's near impossible to move. You try to make out whether you're still in your bedroom but all the edges are blurring into one another, becoming fainter and more shadowy the further they stray from you. You can hear howling – or maybe it's

heavy breathing. Waves of sound pulsate and thrash around you, and you're drowning. The body that you own and know – or think you know – feels hollowed out. It is no longer a physical density that you can touch and understand. It feels detached and foreign, yet liberated. This can't be a dream. I'm wide awake. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

## Writing practice

My aim is to experiment with writing to question, prompt and perform meaning in fashion. This is about grappling with the affect of fashion as speculative device, linking imagination with agency. The words are the material for moulding and shaping imagination, in as much as they are the precursor to imaginative ventures. In my practice, the intent of the writing is not to create stories and fantasies of dress, but rather to interrogate itself as a process of thinking and ideation. Situated in the context of creative practice-based research, writing is a meaning-making activity and a site in which meaning is performed and drawn into being (Higgs et al., 2010, p. 209).

*Falling* treats the subject of fashion body as an imaginary projection, experimenting with the gravity of words to vivify the present image and incite further images within the self. It is not so much the body that is the subject of interest, but rather what it incites, provokes and projects. *Falling*, in particular, speaks of the poetics of the fashion body as a condition of perpetual transformation; cycles of dissolution and reconstitution. It would be useful here to note the specifics of my conception of fashion upon which this article builds. My practice emphasizes fashion as a ubiquitous force that drives, and is driven by, transformations of self; for example, the continual curation of self through appearance and behaviour. This self-curation or self-fashioning is a response to what is *here* and *now*, and (therefore) what else it *could be*. The body – the main protagonist and source/site/origin of each narrative – is the mediator for the perpetual transformation, performance, and presentation of self. Llewellyn Negrin argues for fashion as a vehicle for self-curation and self-fashioning, cautioning against the power of fashion to subsume individual identities (2008, pp. 4-5). Framing the argument within the aesthetic cult of the self, fashion is an expressive tool with the capacity to emerge and constitute distinct identities.

This framework is also a deliberate response to Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson's positioning of fashion as situated bodily practice. Postulating dress as a "fleshy practice involving the body," and fashion as "embodied practice" (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001, pp. 1-5), they suggest a necessity to engage with phenomenology as the basis for accessing this experiential dimension of body and dress. However, beyond this rhetoric, they do not provide qualitative accounts of such embodied, phenomenological practices, in terms of how they are experienced and communicated, as well as their effects and contingency on language. As a practice-based account of Entwistle and Wilson's conceptual framework, and combined with Negrin's emphasis on "self-curation," this work explores the aesthetic self as a dynamic agent, sensing, performing and transforming (beyond surface appearance) through the "fashion/ed body." The concept of self-fashioning involves a reflexive engagement with the immediate, actual world as well as speculative possibilities beyond. At all stages, the body is the site of experience and point of departure into further (phenomenological and imaginary) possibilities.

For example, let us delve into this scene, that – once, this happened:

Unable to sense any articulation in your palms and fingers, you realise that your arms are now stumps, rounded off right above where the elbows would have been. You move the stumps around and all you can feel is clammy, thin film, like loosely stretched latex. The elastic film responds by shifting over and around your stumps, breathing and swelling on its own volition. Now, peering more closely at the blob, through the milkiness of the membrane, you note what appears to be an impressive mass of blood-red filaments. You see a tiny hole on the surface of the skin exuding an off-white dense fluid and impatiently thrust your stumpy appendages into the hole. It gapes open like an idiotic laugh. Some of the red filaments fall out of the cavity and you shudder with satisfaction. Now, this body is still yours. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

As a reflexive agent, the body in fashion effects, and is affected by, impulses of desire and imagination. Elastic and porous, visible and performative, it is the

machine and mechanism through which one self-curates through shifts in appearance and behaviour. An agent of perpetual transformation, answering to the nuances and tumults of its surroundings, the body in fashion adapts, absorbs, resists and challenges its boundaries through adornment, dress and behaviour. The body pursued in this article is one that continually reimagines its own constitution and speculates possible transformations. In the context of fashion, this article asks: what are the limits of the actual and the imagined? What is the threshold between the body and self?

This is what happens next:

Long, slender stems with a delicious profusion of tiny, soft fibers extending horizontally from each side ... feathers! An entire sack densely packed with them, every single feather exactly the same, shrieking in a blood-red tone and cloistering under a gelatinous membrane – this horrifies and impresses you all at once. You resist the urge to quantify them. You decide that these must be ostrich feathers – you remember touching them on a dress once. And now they're resolutely a part of you; this heaving, oozing blob, this sack of waste, this immeasurable force that has claimed your body and made it into a thing. You try to shift your stumps but they've given up – your muscles must've just stopped contracting. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

The dress is melting into the body – the body disintegrating, the skin erupting, the flesh rotting. As it endures gradual decomposition and reconstitution, the surface of dress and skin weave into each other, metaphorically forming a textile, a network of interactions between body and garment. *Falling* was an experiment in addressing the limits of the imagined body and the threshold between flesh and the self, to speculate what the body in fashion is, what it is not, and what else it may be.

The trunk of your body is covered with rows of small rectangular glass plates, overlapping one another in a spectrum of inky reds, mixed with midnight blues and purples – trembling, shimmering and tinkling like decorative paillettes on something rich. With their surfaces smeared unevenly in reds-blues-purple

and some merely partially smudged, they remind you of surgical plates in various stages of staining. They smell metallic. Or maybe you just think they do. What you do know, because you feel it internally, are shards of glass pushing around your blood stream. Following a gravitational pull of some malevolent force, the glass cuts towards your lungs, heart, intestines, ovaries, kidneys and stomach, tunnelling into the hollowness of your core. The glass plates begin to merge with the skin, forming smooth seams where the surface of the skin meets glass. At other parts they simply protrude rudely from underneath the skin, causing bluish-purple blisters to form around the dress seams. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

### A phenomenological approach

*Falling* was composed during the early stages of my PhD research, when I was grappling with the complex relations between the body and dress, self and other. This led me to the entanglement between imagining and writing, between aesthetic experience and how to speak of it. Writing *Falling* was a way to fold myself within the fleshiness of body – the imagined physicality of skin and dress; which, in this case, was Alexander McQueen's red ostrich feather dress, with glass medical slides painted red, from the VOSS collection in 2000. I only had a picture of the dress; I could not wear nor touch it. So I imagined it through words. Rather than describing the dress as I see it in the picture, I composed a narrative based on the imagined experience of merging with it – to daydream about the physicality of my own body, to explore the extent to which imagined experience is embodied in language. The phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard asks, "Why should the actions of the imagination not be as real as those of perception?" (1958/1994, p. 158).

Through this writing practice, I seek out experiential and imaginary phenomena that are difficult to reduce to words: events, figures, images and sensations at the limits of imaginative possibility and the edge of graspable knowledge. I am interested in bodies, dress and dressing experiences that are only possible in words. In pursuing these phenomena, it is not the destination but rather the point of departure – the conscious moment of "taking off," enlivened by desire and anticipation of the as yet unknown – that accounts for the gravity of phenomenological experience. *Writing*,

*dressing, doing, fashioning*: all of these have the capacity to be embodied phenomena and, following Bachelard, the prime phenomenological moment is that which occurs *prior* to knowing. In this sense, it is more about the departure, projection and potentialities, rather than the destination.

The phenomenological pursuit *narrows inwards and focuses*; the imaginative path flows through a funnel in reverse; one dives deep and narrow towards a singular point that then opens outwards into new, surprising expanses. My writing process is a continual focalization and expansion of the perceptive journey. Bachelard's writings on the phenomenological inhabitation of space extend into my engagement with bodily inhabitation of dress. Writing illuminates hidden depths of dress and dressing; its appeal is the promise of something new. Often, in seeking to *precisely* denote a thing, event, image or impression, I follow the impulse to dig around it, uprooting loose matter. My writing process resists linearity; I glance sideways and encounter other possibilities of meaning. Writing is an indulgence of thinking, remembering and imagining which are always enmeshed in one another; one triggers and transforms another. As Bachelard speaks of the reverie; "... [it] works in a star pattern. It returns to its center to shoot out new beams" (1964, p. 14).

The phenomenological method invested in writing proposes an alternative approach for aesthetic experience and expression. My writing practice resists direct representation of a thought, idea, image or narrative. Instead, writing creates and shapes amorphous imaginings; writing occurs as an immediate expression of imagining and thinking, rather than *after*. Narratives give form to the poetic imagination, such that the written body is gradually drawn into being, bleeding in from the edges of material imagination.

Your heart has stopped beating – perhaps it stopped a long while ago. This is the point when you realise the metamorphosis is uncontrollable, and therefore – irresistible. You could mask the signs of decay and disintegration, but, once the revolt begins – like a crumbling cake or a wasting blanket – it could only take you down from within. You are at the point where things are longer holding together; they are just falling apart. In this state of transformation

everything seems to want to pulsate in symphony (you can almost taste the conceit, but you choose not to question it). So, you, too, want to be thoroughly absorbed into this liquid experience. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

### The ekphrastic imagination

We find, in writing, these moments between words and images; of images in words, words in images, and the gaps in and beyond the image-word coupling. Between the image and word, in that instant of possibility, rests the inkling of a poetic resonance: a moment of correspondence.

The gap between the image and the word is not a vacuum but rather a lacuna – a space of potentialities – of creative association and interpretation. The productive glitches between image and word, between the visual and the verbal, allude to the ekphrastic mode: the craft and use of verbal expression to transact with the visual, where one does not represent but rather departs from the other. Words can transform the imaginary into tangible experience.

Embodied, phenomenological and ekphrastic writing emphasizes the moment of encounter between the writer, the page, and aesthetic imagination and experience. The phenomenological attention that focuses my writing may paradoxically lead my imagination astray. But that is part of the process of the ekphrastic mode, where imagination moves aslant, without hesitation. When confronted with a surprising image, I let my attention fall through, delve into and skip across and beyond its surface. In the process of inscription, my imagination refracts, takes off, transmits, transforms.

*Falling* started with a single image of the McQueen dress. It was the “redness” in that image that was potent, palpitating with body; it lingered. The poetic image sparks the imaginary, the site of daydreams. Starting with the image of the dress, or more precisely the image of the *redness* of the dress, *Falling* was formed gradually as a negotiation between word, perception, and the slippages between them.

You feel your trunk and stumps swelling, expanding and bloating up, pushing against your skin wanting to burst through. Your bluish-purple skin stretches

taut to breaking point as your internal cavity fills up hungrily with invisible matter. You stare at the red-stained surgical plates gradually breaking from pressure – the lines of breakage like a migration of transparent termites zig-zagging across frozen ice lakes. The ostrich feathers covering the lower half of your body begin to pulsate arrhythmically, or maybe it's just your vision flickering in and out of consciousness. The translucent membrane encasing the feathers starts to dissolve into a sticky, gelatinous mess. The milky fluids contained within begin to froth on the surface of the feathers. You can feel fluids oozing from your nostrils, eyes and ears. Your mouth gapes open, your lips moist with froth. You haven't noticed your hair until now, because now it's all falling off, detaching itself from your scalp and snaking down to your face, neck, chest, ground. The surface of your skin – now starting to marble with blue-grey veins – begins to rupture, oozing noisy fluids and gases from orifices. You close your eyes again and let the sounds recombine into a twisted unison of hissing, gurgling and popping, the surface of your skin cracking, peeling, slipping off. Tiny innumerable creatures with feathery legs caress your eyelids, ear lobes, nostrils and lips, drawing rapid patterns on your face as they move from one orifice to another. You hear them criss-crossing the landscape of your scalp. You open your eyes again and the tiny creatures are pushing through the dense fluids – you could sense the greed in their movements.

Everything is simultaneously expanding, bursting, melting, dripping and falling apart – a chaotic transformation of solids to liquids to gases. You are losing body mass, waste material draining out of you and accumulating around you, or else simply dissolving into the air, leaving a vile taste in your mouth. In the midst of all this purging you remember something someone once said to you: “Beauty is only the first touch of terror we can still bear and it awes us so much because it coolly disdains to destroy us. Each single angel is terrible!” (Rilke, 1978, p. 25).

You look down at the ostrich feathers and the multitudes of tiny, shaky fibres are emitting red, blue and purple vapours, colouring thin lines in the air, loosely swirling and dancing in their own putrid odour. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

*Falling* is a writing experiment in an embodied, phenomenological and ekphrastic condition. The McQueen dress is an imaginary event to be read and spoken of, rather than seen or handled by hand. One approaches it with words, its poetics imbued through language. The dress *will never* be concrete; it exists as an idea to propagate other ideas. It is a body of ideas, and body in the guise of a dress. It could only be realized through words, writing, reading. As the poet, novelist and literary critic Ben Lerner asks, “are objects more real than words?” (2013, p. 153).

## Conclusion

In *Falling*, the dress exposes the body; it is by virtue of describing the dress that the body is revealed. Facing each other, the body and the dress are mutually contingent; one relies on the other to speak. This is about a reflexive relationship between imagination and its verbal expression, between the image and text, where one speaks of the other not in direct, representational terms, but where one refers to, jumps off, or departs from another; they inspire and transform each other.

Finally the fibers of the ostrich feathers fall away from their stems, the glass plates shatter hesitantly from invisible fractures, liquids ooze and gases trail up and outwards from skin ruptures and orifices ... Everything is happening as if it's filtered through someone else's eyes. You are wearing out. This could be anyone's body, anyone's experience. You can't see your face and this is a large part of the problem. You are immersed deep within the picture but at the same time levitating just over it. Parts of your body and the surfaces of your skin are starting to fall away. You gasp, in wonder, as you contemplate the combined natural forces of collision, disintegration and reconstitution at work: the cycles of transformation. And, at the edge of the picture, a tiny crack has begun its trick. (Ha Mitford, 2012)

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