

Steven Connor, Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things, Profile Books UK, 2011.

6 Glasses

I have worn glasses for as long as I can remember, indeed, now I come to think of it, for longer even than that. My first pair of glasses, I am informed, was held in place around my infant head with elastic, since my budding nose and ears were insufficiently prominent to support them. My world has, as a consequence, always been a refracted, relayed, conditional thing. There has always been an intermediary in my visual transactions with the world, inciting in me, perhaps, a strongly developed feeling for intercessions of all kinds. For some twenty years I was able to dispense with glasses, with contact lenses doing the job instead. But, with the waning of my reading powers in what may yet turn out to have been my middle age, I have renewed my acquaintance with glasses.

In the intervening time, something has changed. When I was a child, my glasses defined me. I lived through them, I lived in them. There was little I could do without them; they not only brought the world into focus, they also gave me resolution. They were a kind of emblem or vocation of the kind of child I was – studious, wary, watchful, not very strong or brave. But now, glasses have become a kind of prop, they are optional, stagey, even operatic, dandyish, twinklingly ironic. I feel sure that, like an antique aunt in bombazine, I should know instinctively what to do with a lorgnette (known in Edwardian times as ‘starers’). As a child, seeing and looking for me were not actions, they were defining conditions; they were what I needed to do to get around the world. Nowadays, I watch myself putting on shows of looking, exhibitions of attention and inspection; I display myself to myself, and others. Perspicuity has given way to conspicuousness. Like St Lucy, whose martyrdom involved the gouging out of her eyes, and who is therefore often shown in paintings displaying them like scallops on a golden plate, I have my eyes always ready to hand. As a child, I had one pair of glasses, that I clamped over my ears in the morning and only took off to swim or sleep. Having only one pair of glasses meant that I could never see them properly. Without my glasses, I stood no chance of finding them. This meant careful routines of disposition and insurance – the glasses needed always to be in the same place, on the same side of the bed. But now that I have more pairs of glasses than my grandfather had pipes, I can abandon them anywhere. My glasses have entered my field of vision, rather than being it. It is not the eyes that are the windows of the soul, it is glasses and, as in Henry James’s house of fiction, the soul, or this one, now has many windows to look out of.¹

As a teacher, I spend a lot of time listening to people – to students, applicants, supplicants, complainants, administrators, vendors, mentors, mentees. A pair of glasses is an indispensable adjunct to the display of auditory engagement. Deaf old Edwardian ladies used sometimes to indicate their lack of interest in a particularly tedious speaker by conspicuously lowering the mouths of their hearing trumpets downwards to the tabletop. By contrast, I grant people entry to the space of my

attention by taking my glasses off. Deployed in this way, spectacles are an absolute necessity for the spectacle of alertness I supply, for myself as well as those about me. Glasses used to be necessary to correct my vision, to bring things to a focus, to let me look, to lock me into the world. Though more than ever optically necessary, glasses are now a means of diversion, play, and display.

My glasses were carefully prescribed for me as a child, and I remember being amused by my father's stories of people in 1920s Merseyside where he grew up rummaging through trays of assorted second-hand spectacles in Woolworths, looking for a pair that wouldn't do too badly for them. But now, when reading glasses are available in various strengths in pharmacists and general stores, one can rely on finding pairs of glasses anywhere, or at least wherever one can find combs. Glasses have become a currency, not least wherewith to perform actions and transactions with ourselves. For glasses concern very much more than our vision; they are closely and expressly involved with many aspects of our bodily life. A pair of glasses is an animator, an intensifier, a magnifier, a focaliser, a distributor and a transformer of the body. It is not just an accessory pair of eyes, but a whole little optical homunculus. When you are as dependent upon glasses as I, they come to seem like your double. When I look at my glasses on the desk, with its, or their, arms, or legs (or ribs?) opened out, they seem to have an elementary phantom of me still lingering inside them, eyes behind the windows, ears pricked. Whether one calls the side pieces of glasses by their technical name of 'temple arms', or, as in Scotland, 'legs', seems to me to change everything about them, somehow. A pair of glasses with arms seems docile and reliable, for it does what arms do, namely holds to me and offers me assistance. A pair of glasses with legs seems much more apt or able to stand on its own two feet, and even walk away.

Like all magical objects, glasses provide an object and occasion for fidgeting. Fidgety behaviour suggests worry and uneasiness, but it is really a way of easing these conditions. The enormous class of things with which we fidget are ways of playing with ourselves at a distance, putting ourselves into serious play. With a pair of glasses, the play may be rather risky – testing the strength or bendiness of the joints, holding them by one arm, or leg – which is part of its point. Play is meant to protect us against the jeopardy which it encounters and enacts. Dangling diagonally from one arm, or leg, gripped in my front teeth, or whirlybirded around with one arm, or leg, they seem helpless and vulnerable, while I feel suavely, sadistically insouciant. Folded, like a crab's claws shutting above its head (and how delicious is the dull clack they make when they do that) they seem firmly, even sulkily, withdrawn.

I like to draw the ear-pieces together and then pinch them, half-open and half-closed, with a thumb and forefinger, making a slightly unstable but agreeable isosceles which I can meditatively heft or waggishly waft about. Sometimes, the joined ear-pieces can be cinched by the top joints of the first and second fingers, curled to form a claw like that of a claw hammer, in a grip not dissimilar to that employed in playing the spoons. The glasses can then be flicked up and down, as though I were a fifties beatnik clicking his fingers to some hot jazz, to mark my oratorical periods, or my mild exasperation at what I may be hearing. The hand-eye-

glasses assemblage becomes a sort of manopticon, or seeing hand, which can provide a commentary, docile or sceptical, on whatever is going on around it.

Taking glasses off is altogether easier, and productive of much more powerful theatrical effects, than putting them back on. It is like the problem the stripper faces in the pub with no changing room, when she has to find an elegant way to pick up her strewn togs after the performance is complete. It seems to me that there are essentially two ways of putting glasses back on. The issue is, that if you thrust them straight on to your face, you are liable to prod yourself in the eye with one of the ear-pieces. I am quite accomplished at the rather dashing movement that involves rotating my head slightly to the right, anchoring the left arm, or foot, of the glasses in the little dint in my left temple, then turning my head back to the left so that I am facing the front again, this process serving to stretch the arms apart, like a wishbone, sufficiently to be able to slide the glasses safely back in their channels over the ears. But on the whole I prefer the dignified pathos of the movement that involves holding the glasses apart with two hands in front of and slightly below the level of my face, and then gravely dipping my head towards them, as though I were donning a balaclava, or bowing to be invested with a chivalric order, a movement that feels more like inserting myself inside my glasses than putting them on me. Oh yes: into, out, on, through, from, behind, beside, towards, glasses offer a positive gymnastics of prepositions.

It is not clear where or by whom spectacles were invented, though we can pin down their appearance fairly precisely to the last two decades of the thirteenth century, probably somewhere in northern Italy. Some attribute their invention to Salvino d'Armati, a Florentine who died in 1317, and whose grave in the Church of Santa Maggiore describes him as 'inventore degli occhiale'. Others have credited Alessandro Spina of Pisa, or Roger Bacon in England.² But the principle that one could use convex lenses to correct sight had been understood for centuries before this; Seneca, for instance, explained in around AD 65 that '[l]etters, however tiny and obscure, are seen larger and clearer through a glass ball filled with water'.³

The first eyeglasses, using convex lenses, were developed to correct hyperopia, or long-sightedness. Oddly, it took another 150 years for the first glasses to correct myopia, using concave lenses, to be developed (in around 1450). Why might this have been? One plausible suggestion is that the invention of eyeglasses was driven, during the huge expansion of trade and banking in northern Italy in the early Renaissance, by the need to concentrate the workforce in occupations that required close-up work – the crafts of weaving, sewing, carpentry, shoemaking and, most importantly in the late thirteenth century, clerical and accounting functions.⁴

Eyeglasses are associated with feebleness and timidity, but they have also from the earliest times been apt to focus fantasies of secret power. This may be in part because glasses always to some degree mask the eyes they assist. One of the reasons that Roger Bacon is sometimes credited with their invention is because of the references in his work to the powers of magnifying lenses: 'if the following designe be conjoynd to the former (viz.) Glasses so cast, that things at hand may appear at distance, and things at distance, as hard at hand: yea so farre may the designe be driven, as the least letters may be read, and things reckoned at an incredible distance'. Bacon goes on to evoke the marvels of telescopic vision,

claiming that Julius Caesar used 'great Glasses from the Coasts of France, to view the site and disposition of both the Castles and Sea-Towns in great Britain' and that, using lenses, Socrates 'did discover a Dragon, whose pestiferous breathings and influences corrupted both City and Countrey thereabouts, to have his residence in the Caverns of the Mountains'. Even more pleasing, if even less probable, is the suggestion that 'Glasses may be framed to send forth Species, and poisonous infectious influences, whither a man pleaseth. And this invention Aristotle shewed Alexander, by which he erecting the poison of a Basilisk upon the Wall of a City, which held out against his Army, conveyed the very poison into the City it self'.⁵

Some of the earliest reading aids may in fact not have been worn, but laid over books. The earliest 'reading stones', as they were called, date from around AD 1000. This links the optical properties of glass to the magical powers often invested in gems and jewels. Pliny hints at the use of emeralds (or what he calls 'smaragdi') for optical effects, suggesting that the Emperor Nero used them to view gladiators. This may be because they are 'generally concave in shape, so that they concentrate the vision [conconi ut visum conligant]'. In fact, Pliny gives these stones a restorative power for the eye, since, uniquely, they feed the eyes without satiating them [inplent oculos nec satiant]. What is more, they are self-magnifying, since, says Pliny, they 'appear larger when they are viewed at a distance because they reflect their colour upon the air around them' [longinquo amplificantur visu inficientes circa se repercussum aëra].⁶

The belief in the magical powers of spectacles seems to linger. When I was a child, I longed to believe in the small ads in Marvel comics for X-ray spectacles that would allow me to see through walls and ladies' clothing. Since vision is the most active and interrogative of the senses, it is hard for humans to believe that its powers cannot be enhanced by sheer willpower, and fantasies of X-ray vision and other modes of clairvoyance abounded long before the discovery of X-rays in 1895.⁷ I discovered the physical power of my glasses as a child, for, on a sunny day, I could set carbon paper and pigtales smouldering in a matter of seconds. Piggy, the bespectacled fat boy in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, is given the same power over fire (much of the authority of the word 'spectacles', as opposed to the vernacular 'glasses', is surely the way it clicks together with the word 'intellectual'); and the smashing of his glasses later in the novel is the definitive sign of the boys' abandonment of civilised reason for bestial passion. Although it feels right for the studious, asthmatic Piggy to have this Promethean accomplishment, his glasses would not actually have served to concentrate the rays of the sun as mine did, for, as a myope, his lenses would have been concave rather than convex.

Glasses are an indispensable supplement to the work of persuasion or browbeating. As a leader in *The Times* observed in 1948, prompted by the rush of people to acquire free glasses under the newly instituted National Health Service:

To the orator, the divine, the advocate, they can add a whole vocabulary, not indeed of words, but of gestures. Many a witness, deeming himself as bold as brass, has been reduced to an abject condition by a pair of pince-nez skilfully manipulated. They can be waved as a devastating prelude to attack and resumed with a crushing

finality. They can be taken off and carefully wiped with an air portending terrible things.⁸

Perhaps the associations of glasses with the desire for power accounts for the fact that, for centuries after they became common, the wearing of spectacles attracted ridicule and suspicion. Fools were frequently shown adorned with or clutching spectacles.⁹ The German humanist Sebastian Brant included in his satirical poem *The Ship of Fools* a woodcut showing a bibliomaniac, completely surrounded by his books, clutching a fool's cap and brush and wearing an enormous pair of insect-like goggles.¹⁰ Even today, the simplest and most effective way to disfigure a portrait is to inscribe over it a big, round pair of glasses. To be given spectacles is to be made a spectacle. The suspicions about glasses constitute a hidden counter-tradition to the prevailingly benign view of their effect; in this tradition, glasses are associated with jealousy, craftiness, voyeurism, hubristic desire, blindness, even madness. In what may very well be the first mention of eyeglasses in poetry, in *'Sopra la nuove disposizione del mundo mutata al male'* (*'On the New Order of the World Turned Bad'*), the Florentine poet Franco Sacchetti seems to associate their wearing with financial double-dealing, usury being forbidden at this time (and glasses might be thought to be inherently duplicitous, since they double our eyes – hence 'four-eyes'): 'Artisans, it seems to me, have become as knowledgeable and astute as brokers; they examine the books with spectacles to settle accounts, and with pens on their ears and with disguised interest-bearing loans'.¹¹ In a satire written against the Jesuits, John Donne elaborately mocked the magic spectacles that apparently make it possible for Ignatian divines to furnish detailed descriptions of the fixtures and fittings of Hell:

In the twinckling of an eye, I saw all the roomes in Hell open to my sight. And by the benefit of certaine spectacles, I know not of what making, but, I thinke, of the same, by which Gregory the great, and Beda did discern so distinctly the soules of their friends, when they were discharged from their bodies, and sometimes the soules of such men as they knew not by sight, and of some that were never in the world, and yet they could distinguish them flying into Heaven, or conversing with living men, I saw all the channels in the bowels of the Earth; and all the inhabitants of all nations, and of all ages were suddenly made familiar to me.¹²

The idea that eyeglasses impose a kind of filter or limit on vision, rather than augmenting it – the idea of seeing the world 'through rose-tinted spectacles' – occurs early, too. A 1496 sermon by the famous Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola evokes the distorting effect of different kinds of glasses: 'So if you have good spectacles, you will always see good things, and if they are not good, you will see wicked things ... Yellow glasses raise phantoms of envy or of avarice ... Red glasses signify rage and vengefulness ... You should submit to the rule of the spectacles of death'.¹³ In Edgar Allan Poe's story *'The Spectacles'*, a young man unwittingly marries his great-great-grandmother, and is able to see her horrifyingly aged features only when he puts on a pair of spectacles she gives him.¹⁴ Glasses are even more sinister in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *'The Sandman'*, in which Dr Coppelius, a maker of automata, is associated both with the stealing of eyes and with the making

of spectacles. He comes into the narrator's room and offers him 'beautiful eyes', as he spills out on to the table a pile of sinisterly glinting lorgnettes and glasses:

'Now, now, glass-a, glass-a to wear on your nose-a, dese are my eyes-a, beautiful eyes-a!' And with these words he pulled out more and more spectacles, so that the whole table began strangely gleaming and shining. Innumerable eyes flickered and winked and goggled at Nathanael; but he could not look away from the table, and Coppola put more and more spectacles on it, and their flaming eyes sprang to and fro ever more wildly.¹⁵

There is something potentially cracked or crazy about glasses, never more so than in the Groucho Marx nose, moustache and glasses combo. As Arnauld Maillet has put it, in a play on words that has defeated my efforts to translate it, 'les lunettes peuvent devenir elles-mêmes lunatiques'.¹⁶

Lifelong wearers of eyeglasses have to get used to a thousand little tricks and freaks that come from the properties of optical glass and plastic. I used to be able to focus on the outside corner of my lens and catch an exquisitely magnified reflection of my own eyelid and eyelashes. For the most part, you see with contact lenses; but, with eyeglasses, you see through a medium that is always itself noisily visible. Lenses scratch and fog and smear. Wearers of glasses can sometimes be observed walking backwards into pubs, a ritual that is believed to prevent them steaming up. After a warm day I would find a greasy half-moon imprint of my eyebrow on the top edge of each lens. One of the many forms of bodily intuition that glasses have given me is an awareness of the grease transfer index of any item. Because I have a horror of the refractive stripes and bar sinisters that streaks of grease impart to the vision, I have an instinctive understanding of what may be pressed into service as cleaning materials. Freshly laundered handkerchiefs are the best. I am astonished when I see people cleaning their glasses on their ties, or shirt-tails, or even, my God, between finger and thumb. I imagine them cheerfully swigging from half-empty beer bottles on the street, or offering used tissues around.

Glasses are never simply used or worn; they are, to use Jean-Paul Sartre's expression, existed – both lived out and brought into active and magical existence.¹⁷ They are one of the richest and most versatile forms of my self-invention and self-securing. They are an abstract, an anatomy, and an anagram of my being. I live myself out in them, and I can see them seeing me out. Connor, Professor Steven (2011-06-09). *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things* (Kindle Locations 1244-1260). Profile Books UK. Kindle Edition.

3 Buttons

I can think of no object in common use that is more cross-temporally old-new than the button. Learning to button and unbutton oneself is a skill that, like tying a lace or a tie, we have all somehow, though too long ago to remember, acquired, a skill that is easy to perform but notoriously hard to describe or instruct a novice in. I can't remember ever being taught to sew on a button, either, though it has also been a

rare occurrence for anyone ever to have done this for me. Like pins, buttons are fiddly things, with which it is hard not to fidget. The worship of sleekness and functionality in the 1960s made it obvious to makers of science fiction films and TV series in the period that buttons must be on their way out. The stripped-down, straight-up, streamlined future would have no time for all this fiddle-faddle, so its sheer all-in-one suits would be secured by zips and velcro (which would fasten diagonally, slashing diagonality being the infallible sign of futurity's intolerance of fussy delay). As though in reaction to that factitious futurity, buttons started to reappear during the 1990s, for example in the button-fly of Levi jeans, as the sign of no-nonsense honesty and downhome straightforwardness.¹

We had a tin in the house where I grew up for assorted buttons (the very word 'assorted', applied as it was in those days to so many things, including sweets and biscuits, summons up that era of mixtures and approximate associations in which buttons were in their prime). There is no more powerfully synecdochic object than a button, which offers to let one reconstruct the garment from which it came, just as the Victorian palaeontologist Richard Owen was reputed to be able, or to think himself able, to reconstruct an entire dinosaur from a single fossil. Our button tin in Hawthorn Road, which doubtless had once held toffees or acid drops, contained an entire imaginary currency; there were extravagantly large, high-denomination flat discs, some of mother-of-pearl, that had once surely belonged to fancy items of evening wear or dressing gowns; middle-value buttons for coats and trousers; and the small change of shirt buttons. The extraordinary variety of shapes and textures was accompanied by strange, musty perfumes. The button tin would be raided periodically to provide capital for our small-time domestic gambling at Ludo and Strip Jack Naked. There were also exotic items of what seemed like foreign or antique currency, the testudi, groats and denarii of the button currency market, many of which scarcely seemed like buttons at all; outlandish pegs and plugs, Joseph Grimaldi pompom buttons, buttons wound in silk and other fabrics, barrels, enamelled plaques, butterfly buttons and bowtie buttons. What on earth could they be for? The remote chance that one day a lounge suit or ball gown with exactly corresponding buttons (only with one missing) would turn up? Buttons, like keys, are part of an economy of lost belongings, and glow glumly with the melancholy sense that the fate of things is not so much to fall apart as to come undone or get lost.

Like so many other intimate objects, buttons are bodily. The word 'button' may be related to 'bud', and the word 'button' was used in eastern parts of England in just this sense. The undesirable buddings in the flesh of pimples and pustules have long been known as buttons (spots are still 'boutons' in French). 'Buttons of Naples' was the mock-honorific seventeenth-century name for syphilitic buboes.² Cotgrave's 1611 French-English dictionary memorably defines a 'bouton de verolle' as 'a pockie botch; or a high, and eminent pimple, bursting out in any part of a bodie infected with the pockes'.³ Sheep dung was also known as 'buttons' in Devon and the expression 'his tail makes buttons' was an expression transferred to humans to indicate the outward and visible signs of a state of terror and apprehension.⁴ Silver breast-shaped buttons, with a nipple in the centre, were produced, mostly in Holland and Norway, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵

And, of course, the node of flesh where the foetus buds off from its mother will come to be known, once tied off, as its 'belly button'. Parents, in my day, and for all I know still in this, used to tell children that their belly buttons were there to hold their bottoms on. This information was less reassuring than I assume it was meant to be, though both 'button' and 'buttock' obligingly derive from Latin *bottare*, to push out or protrude. There are superstitions that suggest that the belly button really is thought of as a human being's hub or heart. I learn from the Heritage Coach Company blog (devoted to 'the discussion of all things related to funeral cars and limousines') that '[i]t is believed that grabbing a button on your clothing when passing hearses or funeral cars will help you stay "connected" to life and the living rather than death'.⁶ There is a Japanese superstition that, if you sleep with your belly button exposed on a thundery night, you may wake up to find it has been stolen by the thunder god (to do what with, exactly? to eat? croon over? make new babies from?).⁷

The navel is certainly a numinous thing. To determine the omphalos, or centre of the earth, Jupiter sent two eagles flying in contrary directions, finding that they crossed at the oracle of Delphi. But the navel is also a permanent reminder that we did not and could not ever have given rise to ourselves, and that, like the buttons in the button tin, we are add-ons, afterthoughts, offcuts, branchings, sprouts. Like the button itself, which is only any good as long as there is a buttonhole to answer to it, we are sundered from our other halves, detached from our first attachments, ever at one remove from entirety.

Yet to get something 'on the button' is to get it right on target, an expression probably deriving from boxing, in which the button is the chin, though also looking back to the 'butt' that was the target in medieval archery. But (there is always a but with the button), if buttons have an identifying function, and seem to suffice to pin down things in themselves, they are also detachable, circulable and substitutable, and therefore vicarious, or place-holding, objects. They are therefore among the large class of things that function as 'quasi-objects', in Michel Serres' phrase, distributors or illuminators of subjectivity, ways of transferring or putting into circulation the quality of being 'it' in games.⁸ In the game of 'Buttony', boys and girls stand in a line with closed eyes and hands held out, one of them receiving a button from a child known as 'Buttony' who goes along the line. 'Buttony' then challenges the children to guess who the recipient of the button has been and, if they guess correctly, the recipient takes the place of Buttony.⁹

The German word for button is *Knopf*, close to the English 'knob', another form of suggestive bodily protruberance. The buttonhole that accommodates the button's knob or bud has sometimes been identified with the vagina, and a 'buttonhole factory', in consequence, as a brothel, while a 'buttonhole-maker' was American slang for the parent exclusively of daughters.¹⁰ Buttons are also implicated in other kinds of copulation between persons, most notably in the extraordinary practice that survives in the expression 'buttonholing', to mean securing somebody for conversation, in which one's interlocutor would literally hold one by the button, or hook a finger in a spare buttonhole for the space of the exchange – or rather, as often as not, the merciless monologue of the buttonholer. The fact that the original term for this was 'buttonholding' suggests that it was first

of all the button of one's helpless auditor that was held and then subsequently a spare buttonhole. The most famous escape from this discursive predicament was that of Charles Lamb from his loquacious schoolmate Samuel Taylor Coleridge, here in Lamb's somewhat fanciful reconstruction:

brimful of some new idea, and in spite of my assuring him that time was precious, he drew me within the door of an unoccupied garden by the roadside, and there, sheltered from observation by a hedge of evergreens, he took me by the button of my coat, and closing his eyes commenced an eloquent discourse, waving his right hand gently, as the musical words flowed in an unbroken stream from his lips. I listened entranced; but the striking of a church-clock recalled me to a sense of duty. I saw it was of no use to attempt to break away, so taking advantage of his absorption in his subject, I, with my penknife, quietly severed the button from my coat, and decamped. Five hours afterwards, in passing the same garden, on my way home, I heard Coleridge's voice, and on looking in, there he was, with closed eyes – the button in his fingers – and his right hand gracefully waving, just as when I left him. He had never missed me!¹¹

Like many another everyday object, the button is a thing to fidget with, which is to say that it is a mediator of meditation – at once a distraction, and yet also the vehicle of the effort of our thinking to settle on, settle into, some material form. The button can be rocked, rotated, twisted, flicked, tilted, tugged, inverted. Fidgeting and fumbling with buttons surely recalls our very first plaything, with which every infant human first learns the arts of toying and temporising, the nipple.

Buttons splice us together with ourselves, halving us to make us one. Being buttoned up or buttoned down offers more reassurance, a greater sense of safety and self-coinciding, than any other kind of fastening. One need think only of the intolerable, unspeakable sense of unease attaching to the idea of being buttoned up wrongly of leaving a top or bottom button pitifully or ludicrously orphaned. To 'have a full set of buttons' is to be fully compos mentis, whereas to 'have a button missing' is to be daft or crazy. The buttons on a new waistcoat allowed for divination, by a counting rhyme such as 'sowja, salor, tinker, tailor, gentleman, apothecary, plow-boy, thief', or, in an alternative version from Arbroath, 'A laird, a lord, / A rich man, a thief, / A tailor, a drummer, / A stealer o' beef', told out down one's buttons, with one's destined condition predicted by whatever corresponded to the bottom button.¹²

One of the delightful sophistications of buttons is that they not only require buttonholes to complete their action, they also themselves incorporate holes, whether in the form of shanks attached to their reverse sides, or in holes drilled through them. Finding a button is thought to be lucky, but only if it has four holes rather than two.¹³ But there is also such a thing as a single-holed button, known suggestively as a 'Bachelor Button' (also the name of a flower).

Buttons are a cipher for near-worthlessness – indeed, it became a word for a counterfeit coin, or, in a related usage, a decoy or sham buyer at an auction.¹⁴ But buttons are also the emblems of standing and grandeur. In 1530, the artist Benvenuto Cellini, one of the greatest goldsmiths of his age, made a button for Pope

Clement VII, which was mounted on gold and surrounded by diamonds, depicting God the Father surrounded by cherubs.¹⁵ Such exorbitance in buttons has long been a sign of magnificence. Elizabeth I had a craving for buttons, and Louis XIV once handed over £22,000 for a set of six buttons.¹⁶ Buttons seem to have been decorative rather than utilitarian until relatively recent times. Yet no buttons have been found in excavations of Greek sites. The reason usually given for this is suggestive of the boom-and-bust variability of the button's value; it is because they were either made of valuable materials that were recycled, or of negligible and perishable materials like wood which have decomposed. Some illustrations of Roman tunics have shoulder fastenings suggestive of buttons, but it is unlikely that they involved the sewn eyeholes that became common later.¹⁷

Buttons began to replace the fibula, the brooch or pin, by the early Middle Ages.¹⁸ They were particularly useful for the tight fitting dress of the thirteenth century where they were often used in sleeves to close fabric from the wrist to the elbow, though during this period they still seem to have been more decorative than functional. As a result, they became the target of clerical censure and sumptuary regulation. A thirteenth-century song informs us that 'Now our horse-clawes [grooms], clothed in pride / They busk them with buttons, as it were a bride'.¹⁹ Henry III passed a law forbidding artificers, artisans and tradesmen to wear buttons made of anything but pewter, bone or wood, a law that Henry VIII thought it necessary to revive in 1550.²⁰ Buttons also seem to have been employed earlier and more often in men's dress than in women's.²¹ One of the earliest extant pieces of clothing incorporating buttons is a pourpoint, a waistcoat-like doublet with buttons at the front and on the sleeves, that belonged to Charles du Blois (1319–64). Calvin explicitly condemned men for their wearing of buttons, bellowing in a sermon 'Whereas men doe commonly weare brooches, buttons, & such other thinges, & women weare billiments of gold and other costly attyres vpon their heades: the attire of the faithful must be to haue some remembrance of Gods law'.²²

Buttons became everyday during the 1600s, and their forms, uses and diameters expanded hugely during the following century. Once again, it was men's costume that led the way, with the rows of buttons that abounded on male waistcoats and breeches.²³ Women continued to rely mostly on hooks and laces for fastenings, but began to mimic men's decorative buttons from the later eighteenth century onwards, when buttons began to be mass produced, principally in Birmingham (button-making remained a craft rather than an industry in France). But during the nineteenth century there was another development which reinforced the association between men and buttons, namely their prominence in the military uniforms that began to be standardised in the early nineteenth century and the many civilian uniforms that imitated them – pages, hotel commissaires, firemen, railway and bank officials, chauffeurs, airline pilots and policemen (known as the 'button-mob' in the US).²⁴ The figure of 'Buttons' the page in *Cinderella* belongs to this pattern of slightly overreaching male flamboyance. It is for this reason that, odd as it may seem, buttons continue to have male rather than female associations, the button perhaps being to male attire what the pin is to women's. The sign that used to be displayed in male public lavatories in Britain enjoining clients to adjust their dress before leaving is part of the regime of the button rather than the zip fly, aiming

as it does to suppress the unsavoury spectacle of men debouching into the street while still fumbling suggestively at their crotches.

If I'm susceptible to buttons, perhaps it's because they were so prominent in the bluecoat uniform worn at my (and Coleridge's) school, Christ's Hospital – seven silver buttons running from neck to waist of the tunic, with the lower coat flaring away to the ankles, along with three buttons worn on the outsides of the knee breeches. These buttons are as symbolically potent as they are conspicuous. The highest rank one can achieve in the school is that of 'Button Grecian', an honour given mostly for academic achievement. A Grecian was a student in the final year, and to become a Button Grecian, or to 'get your buttons', meant that you were permitted to wear a coat adorned with (I am guessing) twice the number of buttons down the front. This expression chimes with one in use in the Wrens Naval College, where 'getting one's buttons' means being promoted from leading hand to petty officer and thus getting brass uniform buttons in place of black.²⁵ Though the blue coat has been in use since the foundation of Christ's Hospital in 1553, the first mention of provision for brass buttons is in 1706. The heightened potency of buttons on the coat and breeches contrasts with the complete absence of buttons to secure the shirt and clerical bands still worn by the boys, which are secured now, as they have been for centuries, by pins. It's testimony to the importance of the pin that an unprincipled Matron at Christ's Hospital was accused in 1736 of appropriating for her own profit no fewer than 207,082 of them.²⁶

But the button had to wait until the twentieth century for its real transfiguration to take place. For this was the push-button century, in which, steadily taking over from switches, levers and knobs, buttons, which required only to be pressed, became the means of operating hundreds of machines and devices – doorbells, lights, hoovers, telephones, elevators, washing machines, cameras, cars, cisterns, radios, explosives, rockets. The button became the image of the convertibility of scales, the possibility of setting in train or discontinuing a massive, complex and ramifying set of operations by a single elementary motion, one that is almost indistinguishable from pointing. The button was the proof of the new dominion of the miniature, the maximal condensed into the minimal. The button allows the concentration of will and purpose into a single form, a single, simple gesture, and the closing of the gap between intention and action. As the design of buttons developed, there was less and less effort involved in their operation – pressing and pushing buttons gave way to equipment that could be set in motion 'at the touch of a button'. The button was uncoupled from its physical matrix, in order that it could be coupled to a set of powerful, remote and invisible effects. Alarm buttons started to be coloured an inflammatory red, reminding us of their physical origins in the skin, in order to warn of the consequences that could be unleashed by an ill-considered push. During the anxious days of the Cold War, the terrifying ease with which a nuclear war could be begun was focused in the fantasy of a button that somewhere would be pressed to launch the missiles and institute the end of the world. Buttons have migrated to the digital world, where their function is no longer to minimise physical effort but to furnish a compensatory hallucination of it, in the animated images that obediently seem to recess into the screen as you click on them. The unnecessary button proves to be stubbornly irreducible. It continues to

require and to conjure a ghostly kind of body, to retain the possibility that we could still bear down on things. Connor, Professor Steven (2011-06-09). Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things (Kindle Locations 666-669). Profile Books UK. Kindle Edition.