

Fashion and Fetishism, by David Kunzle (George Prior, £14.95).

The Language of Clothes, by Alison Lurie (Heinemann, £10).

THE SIGHT of a feather in a peacock's tail, whenever he gazed at it, said Darwin, made him sick. One can understand his reactions. How can you get such a case of conspicuous consumption to evolve and yet escape bankruptcy? A utilitarian biologist can only groan with bewilderment at the successful tyranny of such a fashion.

How human beings manage to peacock it about, however, is no secret since Veblen told all. But what is difficult is to account for the mixture of necessity and whimsy that fashion displays, as though it were in the grip of a fetishistic Time-spirit.

And here, one hopes, David Kunzle's social history of the corset should come in handy. For the corset has been squeezing women—and men, occasionally—since the 14th century at least, sometimes as a fashion and sometimes (now, for instance) as a fetishism. Mr Kunzle goes into the corset at great length, with tireless appetite for documentation, in tribute to the corset's power to fascinate the mind with the mysterious obviousness of it all.

It's a bit oxymoronic you see: the corset arose to satisfy an ideal of asceticism as well as of sexual allure-ment, as Havelock Ellis nearly said. It goes with other punishing vanities, such as high heels and tightly collared necks, all of them producing peculiar yet intoxicating sensations, and that not only in the spectator. We learn from Mr Kunzle's fetishists that tight lacing constricts the abdomen and so exaggerates thoracic breathing. This at once agitates the breasts and leads to a sense of pleasurable suffocation—something like glue-sniffing, maybe. It makes a girl feel nice and hot, and when it takes over the waist it divides her into



"A waist of (wooden) material": 1887 cartoon reproduced in *Fashion and Fetishism*

In a tight squeeze

Francis Huxley on fashionable thought

two, a top and a bottom with doubtless a gap between where total helplessness feels like total freedom.

Tight lacing bespeaks the dangers of female sexuality. As for a tight-laced woman on a tight reined horse—there's a picture for you, as she applies the spur! Another nice observation of his is that the most strident critics of tight lacing have been misogynists such as Rousseau, or Napoleon, or East European regimes prescribing doses of hard work

against the disease of feminine frivolity.

But this puts him on the spot. Should men be interested in how women turn themselves into sex objects, and as for corsets—well, is fetishism so bad, really?

His radical appreciation of the case is that a woman's corset "is both the symbol of her availability and of her self-control, which renders her ultimately invulnerable, always victorious, in the war of the sexes." But this brave

stand gets lost in 300 pages of uncorseted research. I suppose this is because, in spite of him being an extensive writer on revolutionary literature, he can't bring himself to see that a corset is to the psycho-physiology of fetish-induced pleasure-pain what poetry is to passion. What a bore.

Alison Lurie is a novelist, which means something when writing on such topics—for if they do not exactly add up to a story, at least they can be presented as a series of episodes. This she does efficiently by stringing them on the idea that clothing is a language, with a vocabulary and grammar of its own, which can form entire sentences.

Ensembles, if you like, which can be understood in the light of the occasions they were designed for. To see the sixteen outfits an Edwardian gentleman should be prepared to dress in is a nice reminder of the tyranny of wealth and convention. She has a neat way of summing up the turns of fashion from 1800 till the present day—I had especially liked her remark that in France the political history of Rome from Republic to tyranny was condensed into a mere three decades, as if by some satirical college outline. And she has a good eye for the meaning of ethnic chic, conspicuous outrage, and labels exhibiting the maker's name on your bosom or backside. She guides one through colour theory, and the meaning of spots and stripes; she remarks on the moral untrustworthiness of lapels on waistcoats, what it means for hats to be out of fashion, why punks appeal simultaneously to one's pity, fear and anger, and how tight buttoning at the wrist can disclaim the invitation of a blouse.

For, as she says, once they begin to think about it, everyone knows that clothes mean something, that they tell who we are, where we come from, what we like to do in bed, and a dozen other intimate things. If only they spoke a trifle more clearly, one would have the key to history. Or evolution. But luckily Miss Lurie is a novelist, not a Darwinian, and her reader is unlikely to feel sick unless trying to swallow her in one gulp.