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Clothing Autonomy

Audrée Wilhelmy

(Translated by Lucas Zabotin)

It starts with the cuts of scissors, the sound of the blade along the table, splits the weft. I drew the patterns, adjusted the curves throughout the ages of my body. I know the fibres, the flaxes, the wools, the weight of matter—folded or on the body.

I've made my own skirts since I was eight years old. First it was a matter of comfort: after a stomach surgery, I could no longer tolerate clothes tightly fitted on my skin, jeans, pants with a regular fit. I sewed a skirt. I imagined it long, woolen, like a portable blanket to protect my knees, to provide me with shelter. My desk is always by a window, and the cold gives me joint pain (I'm 35 and 100 at the same time.) The shawls placed on my legs constantly become caught up in the wheels of my work chair. The floor-length skirt, made of thick wool, was the ideal solution.

I sewed it and I found that, wearing it, I resembled myself. So I made one, and another. I changed the initial pattern, adjusted the forms. After a second (third if I count the first) abominable surgery, my weight would fluctuate a lot in a year. So during that period, I would search for new ways of attaching skirts so that they might follow the states of my body. XVIIIth and XIXth century sewing methods--particularly those used for workers' clothes—are extremely

useful for this, as women could not change their wardrobe when pregnant, and all their clothes were adaptable. I read, I test, I learn, I feed my writing as I clothe my body.

During the pandemic, I finally tried my hand at knitting, in order to also be able to make my sweaters. I now have some precious pieces added to my wardrobe, and even if I might need to knit another ten tops to really get into a groove with my own creations, things are progressing faster than I expected. I intend to try working with leather in the coming years, in order to make my own belts and repair my boots.

We often talk about food autonomy: here, I'm talking instead about clothing autonomy. This might seem superficial to some, but making my clothes myself, drawing and inventing them so that they resemble me, so that they truly become a second skin, is a gesture that reminds me of writing. The fabrics, the threads, the wool are manipulated like words. It's harder, for me, to succeed in making what I want with a sweater than with a paragraph, but these are both crafts that take time to learn, and mastery comes with practice. The writer Cajetan Larochelle recently said that manual work is "meditation," and I find the word to be well chosen. It seems to me that, in this movement of the hands, in this tangible construction of an object that satisfies a very basic need, there is something that feeds our creativity and calms our spirit. When it comes to wearing clothes imagined, sewn or knitted oneself, it is a privilege (and a comfort) of which I never tire.