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Lauren Gillingham

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The Novel of Fashion Redressed: Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham* in a 19th-Century Context

Lauren Gillingham

The nineteenth-century novel of fashion isn't terribly fashionable these days. A fictional genre that dates in Britain from the late eighteenth century, that dominated the literary marketplace in the 1820s and 30s under the epithet of the silver-fork school, and that remained popular through the nineteenth century in the various sub-genres to which it gave rise, the novel of fashion has been widely dismissed by both its nineteenth-century and more recent critics. Despite the duration of its popularity and the breadth of its appeal among then-contemporary readers, critics have disregarded the genre on the grounds of its folly, insipidity, and general irrelevance to the novel's development in Britain.¹ Seen to possess none of the prerequisites to literary value, fashionable literature is assumed to aspire mainly to novelty, popular appeal, and commercial success. Freighted with charges of overproduction, bad writing, and "extravagant romance," fashionable novels are said to be interesting only insofar as they "increase our understanding of those who react against them, especially of Thackeray" (Tillotson 5). Perhaps most damning of all, the genre is seen to concern itself solely with the "condition of the rich" - a point of focus that appears particularly inexcusable on the other side of the industrial fiction and bourgeois social realism that emerges immediately in its wake (Rosa 4).

These various accusations are not without foundation: the novel of fashion does aim to be popular, it does take up the fashionable trends of its day, and it does focus principally on an exclusive social class. The genre's interest in fashion, however, is one of the traits

which makes it most worthy of our consideration. The critical obloquy which has been heaped on the fashionable novel has obscured the literary and cultural significance of the problem of fashion with which the genre is openly concerned. Fashion serves, in this literature, less as a means to avoid or deny the acute social problems preoccupying many Britons in the early nineteenth century, than as a vehicle for articulating a new consciousness of the unprecedented rapidity of social change. Fashionable society itself provides a venue within which to explore the mixture of gentility and merit, of old tradition and new energy, which some contemporaries believed held the potential to regenerate and reform society as a whole.² Indeed, the fashion for fashionable writing and for self-fashioning heroes that reached a certain pitch in the liminal era between the Romantic and Victorian periods formed part of a broader literary movement in the early nineteenth-century to recast then-prevalent models of narrative history and heroic subjectivity. On a generic register, the fashionable novel's contribution to this movement served to influence subsequent novelistic developments, and to interfere in the generic norms taking shape in the days of the novel's mounting cultural hegemony. On a cultural register, the genre shared the concern, voiced by so many in the post-Napoleonic period, about the legitimacy and fitness of the ruling class to lead modern British society, in both its political and moral domains. Although frequently denounced as an uncritical derivation of aristocratic corruption and exclusivism, the silver-fork school provided a key cultural locus in which both the possibilities and bounds of emerging subjective and social formations could be articulated and critiqued.³

To draw into focus the genre's engagement of these issues, I turn in this article to one of the foremost – and most notorious – novels of the silver-fork school, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1828 *Pelham; or, The Adventures of a Gentleman*. The eponymous hero of *Pelham* is a quint-essential Regency dandy: he cultivates the appearance of an irreverent fop, concerns himself with all things fashionable, and, when not lounging about with his aristocratic friends, spends a good deal of time adjusting his "best curl" and worrying about his wrinkles (*Pelham*

15). Beneath this dandiacal persona, however, Pelham veils a set of carefully-cultivated social principles, a firm commitment to social reform, and an aspiration to act in a political capacity to implement that reform. Far from a sign of novelistic mediocrity, these apparent contradictions in the hero's character embody, I will argue, the novel's active engagement of the problems of heroic agency, fashion, and social change which so preoccupy Britons in the early nineteenth century. Without taking Bulwer's novel as representative of the silver-fork school in its entirety, nor its protagonist as representative of the array of dandies who populate this genre, we can, nonetheless, identify in Pelham the culmination of a model of the dandy that possessed substantial cultural currency through to the early 1830s.⁴ Through this character, we can analyze the school's exploration of the cultural significance of fashion, as well as the productive agency born of self-fashioning which proves so seductive and troublesome to Bulwer's contemporaries and his successors - especially to novelists as concerned with the problem of heroic self-fashioning as Thackeray and Dickens.⁵

Silver-fork novels prove interesting in formal terms, moreover, because they synthesize and work over some of the preeminent narrative models of the early nineteenth century. The school's most obvious inheritance derives from the fiction of novelists like Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, who were among the first to turn their attention to what F. R. Hart describes as a "growing concern [in the late eighteenth century] with that feature of social change called 'fashion'" (84). The dilemma which early novels of fashion stage, Hart explains, is that although fashion is understood to be a corrupting force which encourages "a commitment to social role that atrophies the true nature," one cannot *be* in society without attending to the codes and conventions on which fashion is premised (85). While struggling to imagine ways to preserve subjective autonomy and integrity in the face of an increasingly mercurial society, these texts make clear that, whatever the consequences, the solution is not to be found in a renunciation of society: "Not to be educated in 'the world,'" Hart observes, "is to remain either narrow or romantic in

seclusion” (115).

While taking up the early novel of fashion’s concern with how to *be* in the world, the silver-fork school works simultaneously to resolve the questions of historical action - the problem of how to *act* in the world - that had been engendered in the late eighteenth-century romance revival. Emerging in the years following the cultural ascendancy of the Romantic period’s two literary lions, Walter Scott and Lord Byron, the silver-fork school integrates the narrative, historical, and heroic models that had been made available in the works of these predecessors with the novel of fashion’s concern with the mercuriality of contemporary society. Specifically, silver-fork novelists use their extravagant Regency dandies to respond to the problem of heroic agency which the nineteenth-century novel inherits from Scott’s *Waverley* novels, and from Romantic narrative more broadly: namely, the problem of an heroic subject increasingly unable to take action in the public sphere, as a result of what Ian Duncan terms the “combination of morally antithetical class principles of gentility and self-making” (63). “In brief,” Duncan asks, “what relation should the traditional, ‘heroic’ figures of masculine enterprise, force and cunning bear to the romance plot of a new dispensation - if they were not to license all kinds of subversive conduct, from social climbing to insurrection?” (63).

Scott dealt with that generic problem by re-figuring the virile hero of romance on the model of “the feminine figure of subjectivity” which was readily available in the fiction of then-contemporary women writers, transforming that hero into the prudent, domesticated gentleman of civil society (Duncan 63).⁶ Having overcome one cultural impasse, however, Scott’s civilized gentleman-hero introduced a new set of difficulties into the novel form: typically serving as a witness to the heroic actions of others, while doing little himself that might compromise the existing social order, the *Waverley* hero frequently finds himself, as Alexander Welsh has argued, “wholly at the mercy of the forces that surround him, and thus acted upon rather than acting” (18). The protagonist who does not act to determine his own fate will find his fate decided for him by the impetus of circum-

stances, or by the agency that secondary characters can more freely assume.

Taking up the difficult narrative legacy that Scott's fiction generated, the silver-fork school reworks it by embracing the circumspection and gentility which so hampered the Waverley heroes. Ever attentive to their position in civil society, the dandies of the silver-fork school flaunt the increasingly performative bases of gentlemanly status, and prove themselves willing, moreover, to fashion themselves self-consciously as spectacle in order to garner a degree of self-determining, subjective agency. This predilection for self-spectacle brought down upon the school, famously, Thomas Carlyle's censure: Bulwer's *Pelham* is most often remembered today as the dandy novel that Carlyle satirizes in *Sartor Resartus*. As the eponymous hero Pelham represents it, however, dandiacal self-spectacle is far from frivolous; rather, Pelham's self-fashioning works in service of an integrity of self which bears a striking resemblance to the "ideal of perfect social autonomy" that Carlyle advocates throughout his early writings (Adams 39).

Sartor Resartus's satire has helped to obscure both the consonance of key elements of Bulwer's and Carlyle's social philosophies, and the social and political engagement of silver-fork fiction more broadly. A closer consideration of the school reveals, nonetheless, that much of its fiction shares the moral and political objectives of more canonical writing of the period, and that dandiacal self-fashioning constitutes, moreover, one of the key strategies by which fashionable novelists like Bulwer took up a specific question that would consume the Victorians, and Carlyle himself: namely, what model of heroic subjectivity is necessary to renovate and redirect what was widely perceived to be a debilitated, yet determining, society?

I. Nothing that Glitters Can Be Gold: Critics and the Novel of Fashion

In order to illuminate the generic significance of the heroic model which the silver-fork dandy embodies, we need first to interrogate the ideological presuppositions informing the critical standards that have

been used, historically, to effect the novel of fashion's marginalization. Critics have readily perceived the silver-fork novel as politically and socially reactionary; it has been dismissed as the symptom of a corrupt, superannuated aristocracy, ripe for overthrow at the hands of an increasingly dissatisfied middle class. William Hazlitt was one of the first to make explicit this political critique of the school: the very term "silver-fork" was adopted from his article, "The Dandy School," in which he blames the school for the widespread superficiality and class sycophancy which, he argues, have served to narrow literary interests. In disparaging the fashion for fashionable writing, Hazlitt makes an example of the novelist Theodore Hook, whom he characterizes as a "wide-eyed *arriviste*," slavishly enamoured of the elite and their urbane manners (Adburgham 1). Hook is so delighted with reporting his discovery that "the quality eat fish with silver forks," Hazlitt contends, that he cares little for telling us what his characters think or feel ("The Dandy School" 146). More gravely still, "provided a few select persons eat fish with silver forks, [Hook] considers it a circumstance of no consequence if a whole country starves" (146).

These charges of snobbery, vacuity, and indifference dogged the fashionable novel through the length of its popularity. Hazlitt maintains that the authors of the dandy school wilfully turn a blind eye to the severe social problems consuming the nation, in order to teach readers instead to revere and identify with a "few select persons": those "people who ride in their carriages" (144). Whether the fashionables themselves or simply the "upstart" writers who aspire to their elite ranks are responsible for inculcating this social intolerance and apathy among the reading public, Hazlitt insists that the fiction devoted to this coterie betrays, by "its own excessive folly and insipidity," its disconnection from the matters of import preoccupying the majority of the population (144, 148).

The line of argument that Hazlitt develops in this article facilitates the conclusion, on the other side of the school's decay, that the overthrow of this novelistic genre by high Victorian social realism was not only inevitable, but linked explicitly to the concurrent dismantling

of a discriminatory political structure, and the social dominance of the class in whose service that structure was designed. Bulwer-Lytton himself carries further the scope of Hazlitt's critique when he argues, in *England and the English*, that the fashionable novel's representation to a broad reading public of the full extent of patrician degeneration directly precipitated the aristocracy's political and cultural unseating. "Few writers ever produced so great an effect on the political spirit of their generation," he suggests, "as some of these [fashionable] novelists, who ... unconsciously exposed the falsehood, the hypocrisy, the arrogant and vulgar insolence of patrician life" (*England* 288). These works, he continues, "could not but engender a mingled indignation and disgust" at the perceived excesses of aristocratic society (288). Although his own novel *Pelham* makes clear that silver-fork novelists were hardly unconscious - nor, for that matter, unsolicitous - of the critique of an idle ruling class which their texts inspired, Bulwer attributes to the practitioners of this school, and by extension to the fashionable set they portray, a widespread ignorance of the social problems and political actions then sweeping the nation.

Among other things, this attribution allows Bulwer to mark a hard and fast boundary between one historical age and the next: on his construction, the self-indulgent, socially disengaged exemplars of the Regency period ensure their own overthrow at the hands of the responsible, morally upright subjects of a new, proto-Victorian age. With the death of "George the Fourth" in 1830, Bulwer states, "an *old era* expired"; at the same time, "the excitement of a popular election at home concurred with the three days of July in France, to give a decisive tone to the *new*. The question of Reform came on, and, to the astonishment of the nation itself, it was hailed at once by the national heart" (*England* 288). Along with this wave of political transformation, he insists, have been carried dictates for a new cultural ethos, a spirit appropriate to the new age: "A description of the mere frivolities of fashion is no longer coveted; for the public mind, once settled towards an examination of the aristocracy, has pierced from the surface to the depth; it has *probed* the wound, and it now desires to *cure*" (289). The literature of the old era, like the social ethos it

reflects, is characterized by surface and disease; with the ascension of a new monarch, and the ostensible unanimity in Britain about the need for social and political reform, a new era has emerged that can be characterized, in contrast, by profundity and health.

Although the terms affiliated with each era have varied, the historical conversion narrative that Bulwer constructs in this analysis has become synonymous with the transition from the Romantic to Victorian periods. His assessment of Regency literature, moreover, continues to inform critical opinions of the novels which precede the canonical fiction of the early Victorian period. In her classic study *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, for example, Kathleen Tillotson espouses an evaluation of the Regency novel analogous to that first articulated by Hazlitt and Bulwer, in order to dismiss from consideration those texts associated with the froth and romance of the earlier age. "I see the novelists of the forties as initiating rather than continuing," she observes, "and am more aware of their legacy to succeeding novels than of their own inheritance from the novel's past" (139). The "high-life or 'silver fork'" novels, along with their low-life counterpart, the crime fiction of the Newgate school, constitute a "Minor popular" literature, of import primarily, she suggests, insofar as it "show[s] what expectations had been built up in the minds of readers and hence how far the great novelists could afford to defeat those expectations" (5, 4). By marking a distinct break at the start of the 1840s, Tillotson reinforces a critical commonplace that firmly partitions the first half of the nineteenth century into two distinct literary camps, related only by their profound differences from one another, rather than by any meaningful connection. Although the distinctions between these literary periods are not without foundation, subsequent generations of literary scholars have tended so unconditionally to embrace the divide that the lines of connection traversing it have almost entirely disappeared from view.

The silver-fork novel's continued relegation to a position of insignificance, if not infamy, at the end of an historical and cultural order has been reinforced, I would argue, by the paucity of critics who will take seriously fiction that concerns itself with fashion. Michael Wheeler

voices the opinion shared by many literary critics when he states that “most of the fiction of the 1830s and early 1840s [is] inferior stuff, for, apart from the work of Dickens and Thackeray, this was a period of fads and fashions rather than of major developments in the novel” (15). Defined by its attention to surface detail and its ephemerality, fashion tends to equate, in most critical circles, with social triviality and historical inconsequence. In an article “On Fashion,” for example, Hazlitt observes that, “Fashion constantly begins and ends in the two things it abhors most, singularity and vulgarity. It ... has no other foundation or authority than that it is the prevailing distinction of the moment, which was yesterday ridiculous from its being new, and to-morrow will be odious from its being common” (52). The rapidity with which fashions pass, and the odium which a superannuated style inspires, combine to determine the fashionable novel’s worthlessness. Hazlitt insists that the “business of literature” is “to direct the mind’s eye beyond the present moment and the present object; ... by the aid of imagination, to place us in the situations of others and enable us to feel an interest in all that strikes them” (“The Dandy School” 144). In order to “enlarge the bounds of knowledge and feeling,” literature should transport us beyond the present, the immediate, and the local (144). With this prerequisite to literary value, the novel of fashion is unable, by its very currency, to transact literature’s proper business.

Hazlitt’s is, clearly, a well-trod argument with a long heritage. “In every age,” Northrop Frye notes in *The Secular Scripture*, “it has been generally assumed that the function of serious literature is to produce illustrations of the higher truths conveyed by expository prose” (24). By contrast, “Popular literature has been the object of a constant bombardment of social anxieties for over two thousand years, and nearly the whole of the established critical tradition has stood out against it” (23). The popular may long have provoked critical derision, but as a rule, Frye reminds us, popular literature also “indicates where the next literary developments are most likely to come from” (28). The cultural prescience of popular forms typically registers as such only with the hindsight of a subsequent historical moment; even

then, as is the case with the silver-fork school, a popular form may never enter into what Frye terms “the literary ‘establishment’” (28). Yet such critical exclusions negate neither the relationship that inevitably exists between the popular and other literary forms, nor the influence that the popular literature of a given age may have on the literature that follows it. We may find, moreover, that interrogating the grounds on which such exclusions have been made and perpetuated serves to historicize our own critical practice, and shed light on the presuppositions we bring to particular bodies of writing.⁷

In order to clarify further the grounds on which silver-fork fiction has been dismissed, to register the cultural anxiety that the school provoked in the early nineteenth century, and, at the same time, to begin to appreciate the genre’s broader cultural interest, we need to attend in particular to the position that fashion occupies relative to history. The concept of history, specifically, is fundamental to the rhetoric of value that has been marshalled against the novel of fashion. Invoking once again the terms of Hazlitt’s critique of silver-fork fiction, we will recall that the crux of his argument turns on fashion’s evanescence, or stated otherwise, on its relationship to history. Simultaneously too historical and not historical enough, fashion manifests a strangely conflicted temporality. Preoccupied with the issues and trends of the moment, fashion is understood to be immediately and irrevocably dated, to be mired in its historical circumstance. A repository of information about the prevailing customs of the day, fashionable literature is regarded as too historically embedded to speak to humanity’s higher truths. Opposed to this suggestion of its ponderous historicity, fashion appears, on the other hand, to disregard history altogether. Proceeding on the authority of merely passing distinctions, based on nothing of substance, fashion is construed as a phenomenon too fleeting to engage history meaningfully. In its preference for novelty, it is assumed to neglect tradition, establishment, and the responsibilities of heredity. This seeming paradox which sees fashion fostering a neglect of history, while simultaneously drawing attention to its own historicity, can be clarified substantially if we consider the proximity of the concept of fashion to another contro-

versial term of the period: custom.

An oft-deployed, much disputed concept that was mobilized in discussions of both politics and aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, custom stands somewhat precariously between the mutability and historical particularity of fashion, on one side, and the permanence or inflexibility of tradition, on the other. Indeed, custom serves as the hinge that articulates these two poles. A politically-inflected discourse of custom materialized in the later eighteenth century, John Barrell has argued, in reaction against the democratic appropriation of a discourse of civic humanism; long the property of aristocratic government and the “aristocratic man of virtue,” the civic discourse began to be employed in support of a Locke-inspired “language of inalienable human rights” (*The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge* xv). For those “with most to lose by the threat of advancing democracy,” Barrell suggests, the language of custom “seemed able to give the most authoritative definition to the distinctive nature and value of the established constitution and legal system of Britain, and ... provided the most effective language in which change - almost all change - could be represented as dangerous” (xv-xvi).

Allied on a political register, by the end of the eighteenth century, with the inexorable authority of long-established tradition, the discourse of custom continued to be haunted, nonetheless, by its coincident affiliation with the transience and arbitrariness of fashion. This bifurcation of custom’s allegiances comes into focus most clearly on an aesthetic register, and specifically, Barrell notes, in the “distinction, not uncommon in eighteenth-century aesthetics, between customs so universal as to have become ‘a second nature’, and customs or habits merely local, personal and transient” (*The Political Theory of Painting* 143). While it was the former definition of custom - that which insists on the longevity and universality of a customary practice - that was deployed in service of a theory of taste and in defence of English history and the English constitution, the distinction between the two meanings of custom proved not only open to challenge, but difficult, in practice, to preserve.

Prominent nineteenth-century critiques of the silver-fork school further complicate these distinctions among forms of custom by aligning the Regency rage for fashion and fashionable writing with, alternately, the transient instantiation of customary practice and its tradition-bound counterpart. In certain arguments, in fact, fashion is affiliated with both forms at once. Fashion's representative status vis-à-vis custom, tradition, and a politically reactionary aristocracy remains, in these critiques, rather fluid; the relative positions of these terms are reconfigured variously in order most effectively, it would seem, to illustrate the many liabilities of both fashion and the aristocracy.⁸ Fashion's simultaneous affiliation with both poles of custom almost guarantees that novels premised on fashionable life meet with little other than critical condemnation. That condemnation has only been intensified by the fact that, on the other side of the canonization of certain forms of Victorian fiction, it has become extremely difficult to denaturalize the representational standards of the "great realistic tradition of prose fiction" that have been mapped onto the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - standards that have become, to us, almost "second nature" (Johnson 2). I would contend, however, that such a process of denaturalization not only is necessary, but will allow us to read with greater nuance and, ideally, with greater interest a body of fiction written before these critical criteria came entirely to dominate.

II. The Spectacular Hero of Romance: Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham*

While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider the full range of ways in which the silver-fork school engages these critical issues of custom, history, and fashion, we can begin to draw the parameters of that engagement into focus by turning to one of the novels of the school that foregrounds those issues as the particular concern of the protagonist himself. When, in 1828, Bulwer places at the heart of his new novel, *Pelham*, a dandiacal hero who openly distances himself from the generation of Corsair-styled Byronic heroes that had dominated British society and culture in the previous decade, the novel-

ist marks an historical shift that extends substantially beyond trends in men's fashion, or a fad for moping and melancholia.⁹ In taking up the widespread concern - both the unease and the fascination - with the dandy and with fashion more generally, Bulwer registers a deep-seated crisis over what *Don Juan's* narrator had identified as the "changeability" of change: "I knew that nought was lasting, but now even / Change grows too changeable without being new" (*Juan* 11.82). Into the midst of a society groping about for a new ballast as it finds itself consumed by the magnitude, rapidity, and relentlessness of change, Bulwer sets a hero who regards this fast-transforming landscape with both cool detachment and passionate interest. In response to precisely those pressing demands of history that his critics accused him of neglecting, Bulwer posits a hero who, by embracing the spectacular character of his society and its inhabitants, affirms that change itself, once subjected to the discipline of a sovereign consciousness, can serve as a valuable tool in the establishment of a new, progressive social order.

To register the significance of the model of masculine heroism that Bulwer's novel incarnates, we must attend in detail to the character that this hero establishes for himself. Elegant, narcissistic, and fastidious, Henry Pelham is modelled explicitly on the dandyism of Beau Brummell, the infamous friend of the Prince Regent who was, in his day, at the top of male fashion. Beau Brummell set the dandy off from what Robin Gilmour describes as "earlier types of unregenerate gentlemanliness ... [such as the] beau, the fop, the macaroni, [and] the buck," by introducing into the gentlemanly pose a "cool and austere elegance," a pretension to intellectual refinement, a clean and simple style of dress, and a trenchant wit (51). Pelham assumes this sophistication, self-possession, and cultivation of style, as well as the dandiical penchant for performance. More than anything else, Pelham loves to perform himself. Desirous in all situations "of being distinguished from the ordinary herd," he admits to "set[ting] up 'a character'" in each social sphere through which he moves (*Pelham* 30). In the ease and effectiveness of this self-performance, Bulwer's pro-

tagonist appears a direct descendant of Byron's Don Juan. Like Juan, Pelham is eminently skilled at reading his audience, assessing their desires and expectations, and adapting his behaviour accordingly. Much as Byron's narrator implies of his Spanish hero, moreover, Pelham insists that the characters he sets up are distinct from his true "nature," which, he maintains, lies "[b]uried deep beneath the surface" (43).¹⁰ To set up a character in itself is not an unusual undertaking: "let our faces be ever so beautiful," he suggests, "we must still wear a mask" in society (79). Yet only a few are skilled at assuming characters as the situation requires. The productive manipulation of artifice is achieved exclusively, he insists, through masterful self-command.

Pelham claims that his own self-mastery is born of his "love of observing character," and his "addict[ion] to reflect over the various bearings of any object that once engrossed [his] attention" (153, 147). Despite the apparent superficiality of this preoccupation, it is self-consciously calculating: the trifles to which he assiduously attends constitute that complex system of codifying and regulating social behaviour that we know as manners. An intimate knowledge of manners, Pelham maintains, allows an individual to assume postures as a given situation requires, and thus to work the world to his or her advantage.

What a rare gift, by the by, is that of manners! ... Better for a man to possess them, than wealth, beauty, or talent; they will more than supply all. No attention is too minute, no labour too exaggerated, which tends to perfect them. He who enjoys their advantages in the highest degree, viz., he who can please, penetrate, persuade, as the object may require, possesses the subtlest secret of the diplomatist and the statesman, and wants nothing but opportunity to become "*great*." (43)

Pelham's manifesto on manners reflects one of the fundamental tenets of his social ethic: namely, that to enter into society with the hope not only of succeeding oneself, but more importantly, of effecting progressive social and political change, one must understand intimately the forms and conventions dictated by an increasingly hectic,

mercurial social world. Yet a gentleman can capitalize on such understanding, Pelham makes clear, only if he keeps himself distinct from the social forms in which he traffics. It is only in entering the world possessed of an integrity of self that respects, practises, but does not depend on manners, that one will be able to judge independently those ever-shifting social dictates. Failing this, the only alternatives, the novel implies, are an utter enslavement to manners, or antisocial withdrawal.

To elaborate the importance of a careful management of manners to the subjective model that Pelham himself embodies, Bulwer posits as foils to his protagonist two characters who personify the alternative extremes of enslavement to, or renunciation of, society. The first type is exemplified by an acquaintance of Pelham's, Sir Lionel Garrett, who is so consumed by the elusive dictates of custom, Pelham reports, that he "cared not a straw that he was a man of fortune, of family, of consequence; he must be a man of *ton*; or he was an atom, a nonentity, a very worm, and no man" (10). Lacking sufficient integrity to maintain his dignity and an autonomous sense of self, Sir Lionel Garrett ends by losing that status and regard which he strove through society to improve. The novel opposes to this slave to fashion the figure of Pelham's dearest friend, Sir Reginald Glanville, who is styled explicitly as a brooding, melancholic, Byronic hero. Recognizing that Glanville is fundamentally principled and honourable, but has been debilitated by a tortured, guilty memory, Pelham criticizes his friend for obsessing futilely over the past, and thus producing no resistance to history's determining force. Finding in society no balm to his "morbidly of mind," and refusing to ameliorate his circumstances by force of will, the gloomy Byronic hero simply withdraws into antisocial isolation (353).

In presenting these emblematic characters as equally barren modes of situating oneself in relation to society, Bulwer marks off carefully the bounds of that new heroic ideal that his protagonist incarnates. Specifically, Bulwer works to supplant the subjective models inherited from both Scott's fiction and Byron's early verse: on the one hand, from a *Waverley* hero whose extreme prudence and passivity leave

his character to be determined by arbitrary historical forces; and on the other, a Byronic hero whose obsessive, guilty brooding equally disables him from social or political action. In working to overcome the difficulties engendered by these earlier subjective models, Bulwer does not simply repudiate them. Rather, he re-tools them by infusing the figure of the modern, civilized gentleman-hero with the penchant for self-fashioning characteristic of the Regency dandy and of Byron's Don Juan. Bulwer thus draws from Byron's late verse in order to move beyond the subjective models associated with earlier Romantic narratives. Bulwer's recourse to a later hero in Byron's canon, and his fusion in *Pelham* of the traits characterizing both *Don Juan's* hero and its narrator, mark significant shifts in the period in the formulation of fictional male protagonists, and in the particular cultural signs by which "Byron" is invoked and circulated.¹¹ The implications of these shifts for prose narrative in the Victorian period, and especially for conceptions of heroic agency, cannot be overstated. As important as Byron is as a resource, however, Bulwer simultaneously drives a wedge into the representation of the romance hero that distances *Pelham* as much from Juan as from the *Waverley* heroes and other Romantic figures the dandy-hero works to supplant. This wedge turns specifically on the question of self-reflection. It is with a move to first-person narration, that is, that Bulwer takes a decisive step away from his predecessors in order to recuperate for his hero a greater degree of self-determining agency.

The first of the silver-fork novels to employ its dandy as narrator, *Pelham* makes good use of the narrative ambiguities that this dual role produces in the text. For example, the dandy, by definition, must do nothing to prove himself a gentleman: "He *was* a gentleman," Ellen Moers explains; "it was a visible fact - by virtue of a 'certain something' ... which could not be defined - or denied" (17). This constitutive inactivity conforms nicely to the passivity required of the modern, Scott-inflected romance hero. Ever conscious of the poses he adopts, however, the dandy does not fall inadvertently into the role of passive spectator to the actions of others; he assumes this position precisely to preserve his cool, self-possessed detachment

from those among whom he moves.

Bulwer exploits the dandy's characteristic cynicism, moreover, to ensure that nothing, least of all the dandy's own pose, escapes his satirical gaze. "The dandy as observer," Moers states, "must find *himself* by far the most interesting subject of observation, and the dandy as satirist must find his own pose by far the most fertile field for satire" (75). By serving as narrator, Pelham is able to reflect openly on the work of self-fashioning, and to reveal that which lies behind the dandy's pose: we see both the dandy's self-performance, and behind that, the mechanisms and motives of which these performances are formed. We see, importantly, that the dandy is not all bauble, vanity, and capricious surface, and that he might use his pose to a particular, even an exemplary, purpose. By serving both as protagonist-observer and as canny, socially-literate narrator, Pelham adopts a narrative posture which collapses the temporal and epistemological gap that perennially separates not only the protagonist of a Scott novel from its more enlightened narrator, but also the philosophical, self-reflexive, English narrator of *Don Juan* from its adventuring, Spanish hero. By contrast to the structure of these antecedent texts, Bulwer's narrating protagonist is himself situated proximate to the reader, in the present day; he makes of his own social circle a satirical study. Deferring to no one, especially not to a pseudo-authorial presence, he himself occupies the position of enlightenment and retains the power born of perspicacity.

Through the medium of the hero's narration, two key facets of the novel come to light: first, Pelham reveals that he exploits the convention of mask-wearing in order to proceed privately with his acute social observation, and on that basis, to refine his political principles. Secondly, the distance that Pelham's narration marks between his appearance and interiority makes manifest the self-consciousness with which he assumes a narrative function conventionally served by the modern hero of romance. Through the dandy's narration, that is, Bulwer lays bare his canny use of the popular topos in the period of the modern romance hero as blank screen in order to imagine differently both the hero's coming-to-selfhood, and, as part of that

process, the articulation of the individual in its relations to history.¹² This re-working opens a space in which to elaborate more fully the hero's private life, and more specifically, his psychological interiority, as distinct from his socially-constituted identity. With *Pelham*, Bulwer facilitates the exploration in nineteenth-century fiction of what George Levine has identified as the "characteristic realist's subject": namely, that conflict between a "personal desire to be oneself, to be defined not socially but privately," and the unavoidable "necessity to make one's peace with a determining society" (102).

The self-consciousness with which Pelham embraces and even extends the disjunction of the screen of identity from the interiority that subtends it constitutes one of his most remarkable features, and much of the basis of his significance for the later nineteenth-century novel. This self-consciousness also provoked, however, much critical ire, as Bulwer's critics took exception to the dandiacal gentleman's ostensible deceit. The outrage this novel inspired in critics like Carlyle and William Maginn is unsurprising, for Pelham's proficiency in self-fashioning bespeaks an acute awareness of both the potency and inevitability of dissimulation. On his example, one assumes an identity as one assumes a pose; character is reduced to a social function, to a phantasmic construct that one can manipulate with artfulness and aplomb. Pelham adeptly works the blank screen to which the modern romance hero has been reduced, stepping behind it, as it were, in order to treat it as a surface on which to self-spectacularize. In aligning the seat of identity with the blank of romance heroism, and identifying behind that screen an original, far more autonomous nature, Bulwer cleaves the externality of romance characterization from the increasingly realistic or interior character of the private self. He posits a subject who is not merely psychically individuated, but who substantiates the possibility that external action and expression need not figure psychological motive. That autonomy of consciousness will become increasingly important later in the century, as the force of a determining society comes to preoccupy subsequent generations of novelists. It will provide a resource of which women writers in particular will make good use, as they struggle to envision a

selfhood for their female protagonists which exists independently of the economic and psychic constraints of social roles. Within the context of his own generation's concerns, Bulwer's choice of protagonist begins to seem especially appropriate: with whom better to explore the productive potential of a disparity between appearance and interiority than a figure whose very appeal lies in the inscrutability of its motive? In the dandy, Bulwer finds an individual whose elusive self-construction not only intimates the existence of an interiority distinct from his pose, but renders that interiority an object of acute curiosity. It was precisely because of the dandy's refusal to reveal his motive, explain his purpose, or defend his claim to the status of a gentleman, Moers suggests, that this spectacular figure, "in all his ghostly elegance," so persistently "haunted the Victorian imagination" (13).

University of Toronto

Notes

1. Two hundred years after the silver-fork novel's emergence on the literary scene, Matthew Rosa's *The Silver Fork School* (1936) remains the only full-length study of the genre. Alison Adburgham's *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814 to 1840* (1983) provides valuable historical contexts for the novels, but treats the texts as fairly uncomplicated *romans à clef*. Most studies of nineteenth-century British fiction dismiss the silver-fork school, along with the Newgate novel and other variations on the historical novel, as weak imitations of Scott's *Waverley* novels.
2. See F. R. Hart 110-12 on the faith which some in the early nineteenth century held in fashion's potentially "regenerative liberality" (112).
3. Bulwer-Lytton was one of the first to equate silver-fork fiction with aristocratic exclusivism: see *England and the English* 286-90. For more recent articulations of the alignment, see Moers 50-58 and Adburgham 1-2. The alignment of the silver-fork school with a defensive aristocratic elitism is not without some justification: the tours through exclusive London venues and the exhaustive catalogues of fashionable goods and rituals that were a staple of the genre made these texts

eminently valuable to the *nouveaux riches* who were keen to gain entry to elite circles; this appeal, in turn, reinforced the social prestige and authority that a beleaguered aristocracy appeared desperate to maintain. While fashionable fiction may have contributed to the retrenchment of patrician elitism, however, it is worth remarking that a conflation of the school with aristocratic exclusivism necessarily elides both the satire with which fashionable novels depict elite society, and the overt bourgeois moralism with which they almost invariably conclude. Indeed, silver-fork novels dwell on the moral bankruptcy of fashionable society not only because such bankruptcy shocks and entertains, but equally because it justifies the texts' own arguments for social reform.

4. Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine*, published in 1825, is generally acknowledged as the inaugural text of the silver-fork school; among the last is Catherine Gore's brilliant *Cecil* (1841), which attests to the chastening influence on the British novel of the critical reaction against the fashionable novel in general, and Bulwer's dandy novel in particular.
5. One thinks, for example, of the ways in which Dickens tries in *David Copperfield* to contain the hero's irrepressible fascination with the dandiacal Steerforth, and Thackeray works in *Pendennis*, through the influence of the manly, though impotent, Warrington, to establish the heroic qualifications of the exquisite Pen.
6. On Scott's relationship to then-contemporary novelists, especially women, see Duncan 62-73, Ferris 79-104, and Trumpener 128-57.
7. Claudia Johnson interrogates similar claims of aesthetic inferiority as those which have been marshalled against the silver-fork novel when she examines, in *Equivocal Beings*, the terms in which critics have dismissed or apologized for novels of the 1790s that appear "bizarre and untidy," or are marked by the "excess" of their affect, writing, or plotting (1-2).
8. On the critical affiliation of the fiction of the silver-fork school with both forms of custom, see "*The Dominie's Legacy; and Fashionable Novels*" and "Mr. Edward Lytton Bulwer's Novels; and Remarks on Novel-Writing," two of *Fraser's Magazine's* many sallies against the genre and especially against Bulwer-Lytton. The two articles are attributed conventionally to William Maginn.
9. In his preface to the significantly toned down 1840 edition of the novel, Bulwer responds to the many critics of his dandy hero by

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remarking: “Whether [*Pelham*] answered all the objects it attempted I cannot pretend to say; one at least I imagine that it did answer: I think, above most works it contributed to put an end to the Satanic mania, - to turn the thoughts and ambition of young gentlemen without neck-cloths, and young clerks who were sallow, from playing the Corsair, and boasting that they were villains. If, mistaking the irony of *Pelham*, they went to the extreme of emulating the foibles which that hero attributes to himself, those were foibles at least more harmless, and even more manly and noble, than the conceit of a general detestation of mankind, or the vanity of storming our pity by lamentations over imaginary sorrows, and sombre hints at the fatal burthen of inexorable crimes” (451-52).

10. Juan’s adaptability manifests itself throughout his tale, but those particular skills of dissimulation and self-performance that seem to cast the mould for his fictional successor emerge in the English cantos. See especially canto XV, where the narrator reflects that the hero, “like Alcibiades,” possesses “The art of living in all climes with ease” (15.11). On the increasing novelism of the English cantos, see Michasiw 45 and McGann, *Don Juan in Context* 129-30.
11. I refer to Andrew Elfenbein’s argument, in *Byron and the Victorians*, that Byron’s legacy in the nineteenth century is comprised of not only his poems themselves, but also the biographies of his life, and the critical and popular responses to both, all of which serve to translate “Byron” into a set of cultural signs available for circulation and redeployment in future generations: see 1-11.
12. Hazlitt offers an articulation of this popular topos, for example, when he suggests that the hero of modern romance “is not so properly the chief object in [the work], as a sort of blank left open to the imagination, or lay-figure on which the reader disposes whatever drapery he pleases!” (“Why the Heroes of Romance are Insipid” 253).

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