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978-0-521-51333-3 - The Silver Fork Novel: Fashionable Fiction in the Age of Reform

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The first sounding for this project, a study of late-Regency novels of fashionable life, came in a telephone call from the Regency Club of Southern California. Could I do a lecture, a brief one please, for the Regency Club gala? I could talk during dinner, perhaps while people were eating dessert, after which the members of the Club could get on with what they came for, Regency dancing. As the speaker I would not need to wear a Regency costume (unless I wanted to), but everyone else would be in Regency dress. The topic, ‘something about food or wine’, would be ideal. This happened a long time ago, and I missed my chance. I had to tell the chairman that I did not know a thing about the Regency – what *I* did was Jane Austen. Today it seems strange to remember such a restricted world of literary studies. Nevertheless, the Regency Club chairman put me to rethinking the issue – that, first, I really ought to know something about the Regency and, second, that the Regency must have something more interesting going for it than dancing and smart costumes.

In the 1970s there seemed to be two Regencies, the one that was respectable to study, Jane Austen for the most part, and then its bedraggled shadow, the Regency of ripped bodices, Georgette Heyer and Harlequin romances. Today Regency studies do much better, with Byron, Jane Austen, Walter Scott, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, Frances Burney and Susan Ferrier, all solid and respectable enough to be included in anybody’s doctoral dissertation. But these authors, Byron excluded, have little to say about the seductive, glamorous Regency that the party-minded Regency Club had in mind. Besides, the careers of these early Regency authors (Scott’s an exception) were done and dusted considerably before the close of the ‘long’ Regency in 1837, when Victoria’s Regency-era uncle died and everyone became a Victorian.

Until recently, the second half of the ‘long’ Regency, the reign of George IV, 1820 to 1830, and that of his younger brother William IV, 1830 to 1837, has been a missing piece in the history of the novel. Fresh studies

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of the novels of the period, the 1820s and 1830s, only began to appear in the 1990s. The exceptions to this, of course, are Matthew Whiting Rosa's *The Silver-Fork School: Novels of Fashion Preceding Vanity Fair* (1936), Alison Adburgham's *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814 to 1840* (1983) and Ellen Moers' brilliant study, *The Dandy: from Brummell to Beerbohm* (1960). Matthew Rosa's study, however, belongs to a period of formalist criticism of the 1930s, a style of criticism which takes novels of fashionable life, at best, as slightly embarrassing precursors to 'great literature', i.e. Thackeray. Alison Adburgham, a former journalist and newspaper writer, captures the point of fashionable-life novels far better, celebrating their close attachment to consumerism, celebrity news, insider social information and the wider world of power and politics, but she unintentionally offers a reprise of the silver fork novel at its most anarchic: a display of facts and insights that defy organization, with enough scandal, gossip and surprising information, not all of it accurate, to please Henry Colburn himself, the contemporary publisher of silver fork novels.

At present there is no general framework for identifying 'the silver fork school' in the outlines of its historical and literary contexts. Rosa's study suggests that the task is not worth doing and Adburgham's that it may not be possible. Neither is the case. The number of authors writing silver fork novels, for example, is not difficult to determine – around eight significant authors, four men and four women, with a few extras tucked in around the edges. The period of time in which novels of fashionable life flourished, 1825 to 1841, is limited on both ends by the span of the Reform era, beginning in 1825 as the winds of political change began to whisper, and closing in 1841 with the defeat of Lord Melbourne's post-Reform Whig government. The significant role of silver fork novels in the political and social debates of the Reform era cannot be overestimated. This is a period, historians remind us, in which Britain came closest to violent revolution since the seventeenth century. Novels of fashionable life were novels about power, who has it and who doesn't. Reform produced the issues that silver fork authors engaged, the renegotiation of traditional systems of power, including the shifts in social relationships and status that come along with such momentous change.

Thus far it is simple enough to mark out the boundaries and political significance of the 'school'. However, a truly off-kilter fact – that silver fork novels were more or less expunged from literary history – complicates our ability to look at them dispassionately. The black hole in literary

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history between Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë remains. Reasons for the disappearance of silver fork novels are not hard to understand. First of all, the materials of modern life that made them exciting to contemporaries – social rivalries, political manoeuvring, fashion, newspapers, ephemeral print culture in general – make them difficult to experience the same way again. Once the excitement was over, later generations were bound to find a diminishing interest in them. Second and far more effective in sending them off-stage, however, was the effort of a nascent, self-defining literary establishment of the 1830s to sink these novels as non-canonical, low, commercial and not worthy to be included in the company of Literature. The programme was motivated in some cases by personal animosity towards a specific writer, but more generally by the lofty notion that Authorship was a Profession, and that novels conceived and marketed solely for profit were definitely downmarket, not Literature, and an embarrassment to the status aspirations of real Authors. A third reason for their disappearance, one not usually considered, is that silver fork novels were a political embarrassment to the next generation, both to liberal-leaning and to conservative Victorians. With only a few exceptions, silver fork novels had supported the liberalizing Whig Party policies of social and political reform that led to the Reform Bill. The Whig programme, in its most general terms, aimed to unite in a reformed Parliament the traditional ruling classes with the newly enfranchised middle classes. The future government of Great Britain would then consist of responsible aristocratic overseers generously guiding an enlarged middle-class electorate – an essential buffer against more troubling political demands from radicals and the working classes. From 1825 until the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832, this had been the leading liberal position in Great Britain. After Reform, however, this Whig vision of political reform began to look more and more unsatisfactory, largely because the aristocracy did not adapt to the changes in the political climate, but continued to govern in the same old ways. To contemporaries the supremely aristocratic Whig governments of Lord Grey and later Lord Melbourne seemed little different from any other pre-Reform governments they had known. Gratitude for the significant achievements of Whig liberalism, for the urgent compromises, the high ideals and the courage that it had taken to get their Reform Bill all the way to the King's signature, was in short supply. There was now another game in town, organized partisan politics that saw no reason to encourage sentimental notions of aristocratic power. As a consequence, the very novels that had helped to prepare the way for Reform became a political embarrassment, particularly to male middle-class Authors, some

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of whom had their own ambitions for political careers in the new world of party politics. Disraeli and Bulwer, once Whig liberals themselves, prudently altered later editions of their pre-Reform novels to mitigate the offence.

Another reason for the low visibility of silver fork novels today is that they are truly eccentric to present-day readers who expect to find in them the conventions of the realist novel. They can seem irresponsibly giddy in their acceptance of surfaces, of print culture, advertisements and fashion as ways of knowing, which is Matthew Whiting Rosa's main objection to them. Their plots seem to twist and turn disturbingly with little reference to the psychological forces that move the realist fictions of Jane Austen, for example. The suspicion arises that there must be something else in the wider culture propelling these narratives. For contemporaries in the Reform era, there was little more exciting, or distressing, than the sense that their lives were literally 'passing before their eyes'. Parliamentary debates in the newspapers, fire-breathing editorials from the political left and right, an aristocracy eager to flaunt and display its power were not distant phenomena for the reading public. They were quite literally 'street' knowledge. Novels that could package such knowledge as a way of knowing the world were highly marketable – enough to make their publishers, if not their authors, very rich indeed. Today, allusions in these novels to an unfamiliar political and social history can tempt a modern reader to slide by them for the easier attractions of well-turned plots and finely probed characters.

In constructing an ordered map of the 'silver fork school', two plans suggest themselves: first, an author-by-author trip through the novels to package the material and make it conveniently accessible. To accomplish this aim, an Appendix to this study lists the authors alphabetically, with brief biographical information, followed by the author's works arranged chronologically by publication date, each work accompanied by a plot summary and by an explanatory comment, if appropriate.

The second approach, the one chosen for the body of the study, attempts to explain how contemporary readers might have experienced these novels. A consideration of the political and social issues that attracted readers is of course an important task, but an examination of the print culture in which the novels found their place is equally revealing. The great flourishing of visual knowledge in the 1820s and '30s – advertisements, newspapers, museums, scientific demonstrations, panoramas – was essential to

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the experience of reading silver fork novels. See the Frontispiece, *Flyposters* (1828).

Chapter 1, 'Cultural contexts', addresses the reading practices of a society flooded with such an abundance of information. How, for example, new ways of reading could make silver fork novels, each three volumes in length and consisting of more than three hundred pages per volume, delightful enough to bring readers back to the circulating library for the next novel and the next author. The reading skills of speed, the fast return and hurry-up that lending libraries demanded of their readers, inevitably produced different expectations of what a novel should be and how it should be read. Chapter 2, 'The woman's tradition: Edgeworth, Burney and Austen', turns the tables on new reading styles for a consideration of an earlier women's literature. It explores how this familiar heritage gave authors and readers of silver fork fiction useful signposts for interpreting the contemporary moral, social and political issues at stake. Paradoxically, silver fork novels cast a light backwards on the significance of the older tradition, sifting it for powers that were perhaps never envisioned by the earlier writers.

The political history of the period, of course, demands attention, the task that occupies Chapter 3, 'Reform and the silver fork novel'. It would be hard to overestimate the attachment of these novels to the politics of reform, not merely general, but in specifics. Year by year silver fork novels follow the political and social developments, responding to each – the elections, the change of government from Tories to Whigs, the propaganda of the parties, representations of the best-known political players – not just to sell novels, but as attempts to lever power, to bring about the major changes in attitude necessary to make an effective union of the middle classes and the traditional ruling classes. The next chapter, Chapter 4, on 'Newspapers and the silver fork novel', delves into the awareness in the novels of a union of classes already well under way. Silver fork novelists exploit the power of newspapers to bear witness to a shared commercial culture of classes.

Chapter 5, 'The topography of silver fork London' brings attention to the politics of the urban landscape in silver fork novels, particularly the political fictions governing the topographic importance of Oxford Street in separating the aspiring residents of Marylebone, to the north of the street, from elegant, aristocratic and politically powerful Mayfair, on the south side of the street. The political design of Regent Street, which provides a convenient conduit to Westminster, the seat of government,

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through both of these power neighbourhoods, Marylebone and Mayfair, plays a large role for characters in the novels, but also for the social and political imaginations of contemporary Londoners. The Colosseum, a Marylebone entertainment venue situated at the southern end of Regent's Park, provides contemporary witness to the contested political imagination that governs the topography of silver fork novels.

The last chapter, 'Reform and the silver fork heroine', takes into account the fate of aristocratic women in silver fork novels. The traditional skills of 'polite discourse' that gave heroines an essential role in the display of aristocratic power simply disappear as an essential element of political life after 1832. They had begun to diminish in their significance years before, as Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of Mr Darcy's notions of 'an accomplished woman' reminds us. But silver fork novelists give 'accomplishments', understood as 'politeness discourse', a last chance to convey their literary and political powers into Reform. It's a story of mixed triumph and defeat, but an aristocratic heroine's accomplishments provide a remarkably poignant conclusion to the silver fork genre and the fatal loss of its political basis for existence.

Silver fork novels are so intimately attached to the political and cultural issues of the Reform years that they can scarcely be understood, much less appreciated, outside that context. The danger for present-day scholars is to underestimate these novels, to let them become confused with the novels George Eliot pillories in 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856), works written twenty years later, divorced from the cultural upheavals that gave silver fork novels their reason for being. 'Fashion', the running trope of silver fork novels, is under review at all times, not as mindless 'millinery', but as the drapery of power – in social occasions, political poses, dress, shopping, architecture, reading and manners. The ephemeral conditions of fashion, in fact, give it its strength. In novels driven by the consciousness of moving time, 'fashion' becomes the novelist's deliberate instrument of choice – the perfect trope for a nation, as it seemed to contemporaries, rushing pell-mell towards an uncertain, ambivalent future.

So, we are back to the Regency Club and my invited lecture, which has turned out to be rather longer than requested, not a brief talk suitable for presenting over dessert and coffee. On the other hand, the Regency Club diners would have found readings from the novels absolutely delightful. I have taken the opportunity in this study, in fact, to include liberal citations from the novels in order to give present-day readers a sense of the wit and sharp observation that contemporary readers would have appreciated.

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Some novels appear more than once, in one chapter and then another, for the richness of their source material. The focus of each chapter is an attempt take the silver fork genre a step beyond Rosa's and Adburgham's studies by situating the novels in the literary and political history that brought them into being, both as reporters and as active participants in contemporary struggles for Reform.

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## CHAPTER I

*Cultural contexts*

There is a wonderful power in words, formed into regular propositions, and printed in capital letters, to draw assent after them.

William Hazlitt<sup>1</sup>

## NEW CONTEXTS

The most telling mark of the late Regency is its vast culture of flourishing print, with ‘print’ understood, paradoxically, as Clifford Siskin describes ‘writing’, a shorthand for the ‘entire configuration of writing, print, and silent reading’.<sup>2</sup> Novels of fashionable life embrace this culture vigorously to present, in Walter Benjamin’s perceptive term, ‘moral dioramas ... of unscrupulous multiplicity’.<sup>3</sup> Alexander Zevin suggests that ‘the question of representation, of how ideologies, institutions, names and images are codified’ is exactly the task of such panoramic literature – to bring prints, maps, guides, caricatures, pamphlets, posters, advertisements, journals, magazines into their purview. Their joint ‘obsession’ to codify, he writes, was one in which ‘newspapers and novels were *concomitant* with panoramic literature’.<sup>4</sup> As the *Westminster Review* remarked in 1829, ‘The daily press ... has an omnipresent vision—there is nothing too high for its grasp—nothing too minute for its attention. It occupies itself with all public affairs—and with all private concerns as soon as they come within the circle of public interest.’<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin’s ‘unscrupulous multiplicity’ of print creates a reality of its own, as Clifford Siskin argues, citing the physicist David Deutsch for confirmation: ‘in our planetariums, books, films, and computer memories, and in our brains – there are images of physical reality at large, images not just of the appearance of objects, but of the structure of reality’. Deutsch argues, ‘To the extent that [they] are true – that is, they resemble in appropriate respects the concrete or abstract things they refer



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to – their existence gives reality a new sort of self-similarity, the self-similarity we call knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

In the early years of the nineteenth century, the novel had become ‘the vehicle of almost every kind of knowledge’, writes Siskin. ‘The reform-minded public of 1832 wanted “facts” and fiction was now valued as a practical way of meeting the demand’ – which is to say, argues Siskin, ‘Novels began to become “information systems”.’<sup>7</sup> Bulwer’s remark in the ‘Introduction’ to *Paul Clifford* (1830) makes a similar point: ‘Readers now look into fiction for facts, as Voltaire, in his witty philosophy, looked among facts for fiction.’<sup>8</sup> The ‘information systems’ of the silver fork novel, however, were perceived almost exclusively in exhibitionary forms, not in the organizational systems that would become the characterizing feature of later, Victorian literature.

The culture of silver fork novels rests on surfaces – dioramas, panoramas, the spectacles of urban life perceived as transparent conveyors of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Letitia Landon confesses in her novel *Romance and Reality* (1831), ‘One great reason why we believe so devoutly in the beauty of Italy, is that we chiefly know it from plates.’ She then proceeds to recall seeing a print that mystified her:

I remember seeing an architectural view—on one side stood a noble old house, the spire and roof of a church, a mass of fine-looking buildings, a distant view of a colonnade, and a broad open space with an equestrian statue. I did not at first believe it could be Charing Cross whose effect was so imposing; and it was not till Northumberland House and St. Martin’s Church were identified, that my confession was fairly extorted, of how little justice one does to the beauty of London. (II, 265)

The visual technologies of popular London culture, the Panorama in Leicester Square,<sup>10</sup> the Colosseum in Regent’s Park,<sup>11</sup> the Cosmorama in Regent Street,<sup>12</sup> the Diorama near Regent’s Park and Madame Tussaud’s in Baker Street offered Londoners an epistemology of the world. For the Diorama, the spectators sat on benches in the dark to face a painting apparently set in a frame, but actually placed in a perspective tunnel.<sup>13</sup> The painting, done in translucent and opaque pigments, had natural light on it manipulated from above by a system of screens and shutters to produce a show lasting for ten to fifteen minutes, one of the most popular being a ruined abbey emerging from the dim illumination of starlight and moonlight into the opening rays of morning and full day.<sup>14</sup> ‘There is no effect that cannot be produced in this admirable establishment’, marvelled contemporaries: ‘Sunrise and sunset; dawn and twilight, moonlight; the

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obscuration of the sun by a passing cloud ... are all faithfully delineated, and without anything like theatrical effect.<sup>15</sup> Henry Lister borrowed a representation of this technology for an early morning view of Oxford Street in his novel *Granby* (1826):

The whole extent of that long vista, unclouded by the mid-day smoke, was distinctly visible to his eye at once. The houses shrunk to half their span, while the few visible spires of the adjacent churches seemed to rise less distant than before, gaily tipped with early sunshine, and much diminished in apparent size, but heightened in distinctness and in beauty. Had it not been for the cool grey tint which slightly mingled with every object, the brightness was almost that of noon. But the life, the bustle, the busy din, the flowing tide of human existence, were all wanting to complete the similitude. (1, 298)

The visual information of print (in its widest sense) turns London into 'an endless promotion of surfaces', a fresh way of knowing the world.<sup>16</sup> The frontispiece of this book, for example, shows *Flyposters* (1828), George Scharf's sketch of a London wall offering a comically wide range of poster enticements: 'Shakesper's Works', 'Fire Pumps', 'The Edinburgh Steam Carriage', 'Single Stick Fighting', 'Sparing Ned Baldwin', 'Fencing Taught' and 'DUCROW' (the famous equestrian performer) appearing on 'Monday, April 28, in 7 Characters', six individually illustrated. Timeliness and surface immediacy are the expectation. A diorama of *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* was painted, mounted and available for viewing within a week of the event.<sup>17</sup> Anna Jameson's novel *Diary of an Ennuyée* (1826) demonstrates the extent of public interest in the power of such 'virtual presence'. After travelling to see Lake Geneva for herself, the heroine of the novel reports:

The Panorama exhibited in London just before I left it, is wonderfully correct, with one pardonable exception; the artist did not venture to make the waters of the lake of the intense ultramarine tinged with violet as I now see them before me; 'So darkly, deeply, beautifully blue.' It would have shocked English eyes as an exaggeration, or rather impossibility. (37)

Urban life in fashionable novels rests on a reader's familiarity with a wide variety of such urban representations produced by popular culture. As the advertising puff for Catherine Gore's novel *Women as They Are* claimed in the *Morning Post*, 11 February 1830, 'Altogether this Work forms a *moving panorama* of the manners of the day.' In his study *Imagining the Middle Class* Dror Wahrman describes the 1820s as being 'strangely quiet', as if the mammoth upheaval of the great Reform Bill, like the blast of an unexpected storm, appeared with no preparation. In fact, during the ten years