Reading the Details: Realism and the Silver Fork Novel, 1825-1845

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ABSTRACT

"Reading the Details: Realism and the Silver Fork Novel, 1825-1845," argues that the silver fork novel, a popular genre characterized by meticulous depictions of elite lifestyles and their material trappings, utilizes a particular set of narrative practices in order to foreground detailed description. These novels display an orientation towards openness and inclusivity, an emphasis on deliberate self-fashioning, and a reversal of subject-object hierarchies. The poetics of the silver fork thus challenge many of the normative narrative features established by realist fiction. In lieu of conventional realist values such as coherent plotting, character interiority, and affective engagement, silver forks offer an emphasis on details, surfaces, and the external world of materiality and consumption. While other critical studies of the silver fork have focused on questions of gender, the relation between silver fork texts and more canonical authors, or depictions of the aristocracy during periods of political reform, this thesis is the first study to situate silver fork novels in conversation with theories of realism, and the history of the novel.

The first chapter examines how the silver fork novel prioritizes inclusiveness in order to encompass as much detail as possible. In their fluid approaches to plot and genre, these texts depart from a traditional emphasis on closure and coherence. Benjamin Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1826-27), Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Godolphin* (1831), and Letitia Landon's *Romance and Reality* (1833) all feature meandering, at times wildly improbable plots, which terminate abruptly, with either the certain or probable death of main characters. A novel's generic status is likewise flexible: tropes from other schools of fiction, such as the gothic, can be readily inserted and equally readily discarded. In this chapter I complicate the tendency to read these traits as indications of structural carelessness, and posit that they allow the silver fork text to present the dense texture of detail that functions as the genre's key aim.

The second chapter investigates another narrative property that is likewise perceived as a mark of failure when read through realist expectations: an emphasis on artifice and self-conscious construction. These tropes shape the silver fork delineation of character and lead to practices of metanarration and revision in which the text is crafted in response to dictates of fashion and taste. In works such as Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham* (1828), Catherine Gore's *Cecil* (1841) and Benjamin Disraeli's *The Young Duke* (1831), silver forks emphasize externals rather than prioritizing the representation of believable, psychologically complex characters. By showing how both protagonists and narratives engage in deliberate and prescriptive strategies of self-presentation I continue the work of analyzing how the narrative structures of silver fork novels optimize the representation of detail.

In the final chapter, I explore how the representation of objects intervenes in silver fork depictions of relationships and affect, subverting the typical hierarchy between subjects and objects. Silver fork objects provoke and harness individual desire, often at the expense of shared feeling and to the detriment of core relationships: these are novels where goods come between mothers and daughters and husbands and wives. Interactions with a silk sofa or *foie gras* are depicted as attentively as interactions between siblings or lovers, and in fact sometimes function as the only means by which readers are given insight into these affective bonds. To establish this pattern, the chapter focuses on two particularly "domesticated" examples of the silver fork tradition, Catherine Gore's *Mothers and Daughters* (1834) and the Countess of Blessington's *Victims of Society* (1837). Both of these novels deal extensively with relationships, subjective choices, and the production and governance of desire as they follow their casts of characters

through courtships, betrayals, and both happy and unhappy marriages. They thus participate in reframing priorities concerning the representation of relationships and broadening the kinds of desire which silver fork novels depict beyond the expectations of the realist tradition. Having shown how plot functions to accumulate detail, and characterization functions to refine it, the final chapter reveals how that detail can then serve to reshape narrative priorities.

This research participates in an ongoing critical project of contextualizing the silver fork genre within studies of the nineteenth-century novel by exploring the ways in which silver fork novels utilise an emphasis on detail and description, thus refocusing attention on a defining but neglected aspect of the genre, and enriching the existing account of ways in which these texts transcend their long reputation of frivolity. By offering a counter-narrative to the aims of realism, it also offers more broadly a means of reframing the presence of detail in the nineteenth-century novel.

RÉSUMÉ

"Reading the Details: Realism and the Silver Fork Novel, 1825-1845" explore le "silver fork novel" ou "roman à fourchette d'argent," un genre littéraire populaire caractérisé par des descriptions élaborées du style de vie de l'élite et des biens matériels de celle-ci. Cette thèse de doctorat fait valoir que ce genre littéraire utilise un éventail de pratiques narratives afin de mettre à l'avant-plan ces descriptions détaillées. Les romans à fourchette d'argent démontrent une orientation vers l'ouverture et l'inclusivité, un accent sur la construction personnelle délibérée et une inversion des hiérarchies sujet-objet. La forme du roman à fourchette d'argent va donc à l'encontre de plusieurs caractéristiques narratives normatives établies par la fiction réaliste. Au lieu des valeurs réalistes conventionnelles telles que l'intrigue cohérente, l'intériorité des personnages et l'engagement affectif, le roman à fourchette d'argent met de l'avant les détails, les surfaces et la sphère de la matérialité et de la consommation. Alors que la plupart des études sur le roman à fourchette d'argent ont davantage porté sur des questions de sexe, sur la relation entre les textes à fourchette d'argent et les auteurs plus canoniques, ou sur les représentations de l'aristocratie durant les périodes de réforme politique, cette thèse est la première étude à situer les romans à fourchette d'argent en relation avec les théories du réalisme et l'histoire du roman.

Le premier chapitre examine la façon dont le roman à fourchette d'argent priorise l'inclusivité afin d'offrir le plus de détails possibles. À travers leur approche fluide à l'action et au genre, ces textes se dissocient de l'accent traditionnel sur la cohérence et la résolution. *Vivian Grey* (1826-27), de Benjamin Disraeli, *Godolphin* (1831), d'Edward Bulwer Lytton et *Romance and Reality* (1833), de Letitia Landon présentent tous une intrigue sinueuse et souvent improbable qui se termine abruptement par la mort probable ou certaine des personnages principaux. Le statut générique d'un roman est aussi flexible : les tropes d'autres styles de fiction telle que le style gothique peuvent être utilisés et tout aussi facilement reniés. Dans ce chapitre je nuance la tendance à lire ces caractéristiques comme les indications d'une négligence structurelle. Je suggère plutôt qu'elles permettent au roman à fourchette d'argent d'exhiber une texture dense en détails qui s'offre comme l'objectif principal du genre.

Le deuxième chapitre traite d'une propriété narrative qui est elle aussi perçue comme un signe d'échec lorsque lue à travers les attentes réalistes : un accent sur l'artifice et la construction personnelle consciente. Ces tropes donnent forme aux personnages des romans à fourchette d'argent et mènent à des pratiques de méta-narration et de révision par lesquelles le texte est construit en réponse aux dictats externes de la mode et du goût. Des oeuvres telles que *Pelham* (1828), d'Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Cecil* (1841), de Catherine Gore et *The Young Duke* (1831), de Benjamin Disraeli favorisent les facteurs externes plutôt que la représentation de personnages crédibles et psychologiquement complexes. En démontrant comment trois jeunes protagonistes masculins et les romans qui portent leurs noms ou leurs titres adoptent continuellement des stratégies de présentation personnelle délibérées et normatives, je continue à analyser la façon dont la structure narrative des romans à fourchette d'argent optimise la représentation de détails.

Dans le dernier chapitre, j'explore la façon dont la représentation des objets intervient dans la description des relations interpersonnelles et des émotions, ce qui déstabilise la hiérarchie traditionnelle entre sujet et objet. Les objets dans le roman à fourchette d'argent provoquent et maîtrisent le désir, souvent aux dépens de l'émotion partagée et au détriment de relations importantes : dans ces romans, les biens matériels finissent par séparer les mères de leurs filles, les maris de leurs femmes. Les interactions entre un individu et un divan en soie ou un morceau de foie gras sont décrites aussi attentivement que les interactions entre frères et soeurs ou entre amants. Elles représentent même parfois la seule perspective à travers laquelle les lecteurs ont accès aux liens affectifs des personnages. Pour établir ce motif, le chapitre se centre autour de deux exemples « domestiqués » de la tradition de fourchette d'argent, *Mothers and Daughters* (1834), de Catherine Gore et *Victims of Society* (1837), de la Comtesse de Blessington. Ces deux romans traitent de relations interpersonnelles, de choix subjectifs, de trahisons et de marriages heureux et malheureux. Ils participent donc au remodelage des priorités en termes de la représentation des relations et à l'élargissement des types de désir que les romans à fourchette d'argent illustrent au delà des attentes de la tradition réaliste. Ayant démontré comment l'intrigue sert à l'accumulation de détails et comment l'établissement des personnages sert à leur raffinement, la thèse dévoile dans le dernier chapitre la manière dont les détails peuvent alors servir à réorganiser les priorités narratives et transformer les valeurs narratives.

Cette étude s'inscrit dans un projet qui vise à placer le roman à fourchette d'argent dans le contexte des études sur le roman du 19ième siècle en explorant l'accent qu'il place sur le détail et la description. Ce faisant, l'étude tente de recentrer l'attention critique sur un aspect crucial, mais négligé, du genre et d'enrichir les approches qui privilégient la façon dont ces textes transcendent leur réputation de frivolité. En offrant un contre-exemple à la tradition réaliste, elle offre aussi plus généralement un moyen de ré-envisager la présence du détail dans le roman du 19ième siècle.

Introduction

"I like high life. I like its manners, its splendors, its luxuries, the beings which move in its enchanted sphere. I like to consider the habits of those beings, their ways of thinking, speaking, acting" (3). Charlotte Brontë, age 18, used these remarks to open her novella "High Life in Verdopolis," written in 1834. The fascination with an "enchanted sphere" of wealth and luxury voiced by Brontë's protagonist speaks to a broader literary trend that, by the mid-1830s, was reaching its apex. Between about 1825 and 1845, the British literary marketplace witnessed a steady output of novels seemingly obsessed with documenting the manners, splendors, and luxuries of an elite aristocratic world. Bearing a series of family resemblances including setting, date of publication, style, and a network of interconnected authors, these texts came to be grouped together into a genre known as either "fashionable" or "silver fork"[1] novels.

Brontë evokes the main thematic interests of such novels in her story's opening and a few lines later she adopts the genre's most important formal strategy: the use of detailed description. When she notes "the delicate vessel of porcelain [that] stood beside him, half-filled with chocolate; a dozen Golden plover's eggs resting on a fine damask napkin; the silver coffee urn steam[ing] above a mat of embroidered velvet; [and] elegant breakfast appointments arranged on a round rose-wood table" (4), these markers of affluence and the latest fashions reflect the fine nuances of what it meant to live in the world of high life. This evocation defines the central goal of silver fork novels: "to draw convincing pictures of the upper-classes was the[ir] first and most important duty" (Rosa 15). The kinds of plot, the didactic aims, and even the tone of the novels

[1] The term "silver fork novel" has its roots in William Hazlitt's essay "The Dandy School" (1827). There, Hazlitt deplores the quantity of minute detail represented in fashionable fiction and cites Theodore Hook's account of the wealthy eating their fish with silver forks as an example of this exaggerated description.

may vary quite widely, but close attention to the details of privilege defines the silver fork school.

This dissertation argues that the aim of representing those details leads silver fork novels to develop an unconventional set of narrative practices. Concerned with surfaces, not depths, silver fork texts foreground detailed description. The narrative structures of these novels support this aim: they display an orientation towards openness and inclusivity, an emphasis on deliberate self-fashioning, and a reversal of subject-object hierarchies. All of these features challenge the normative expectations inherited from realism, and as a result, these texts have typically been read as failed novels.[2] In order to reassess them, the first step is to understand the distinct narrative mode in which silver forks operate. This project proposes a model of silver fork poetics in hope of giving readers and critics the tools to understand these texts on their own terms and situate them within frameworks of the history and theory of the novel.

Sustained attention to *how* silver fork novels function has largely been neglected in favor of critics explaining what the genre's dominant preoccupations reveal. Other studies have focused on demonstrating how silver fork novels shed new light on questions of gender, class relations, political reform, and literary celebrity. [3] However, in attempting to engage with these topics without first accounting for the genre's distinct poetics, scholars of the silver fork focus on the genre's historical rather than literary attributes. Without an understanding of the formal

[2] Critics who have openly asserted that many or most examples of the silver fork genre lack literary value include Matthew Rosa, Michael Sadleir (who claimed that it "produced a higher proportion of downright bad novels than any similar group" (*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* xxxi)) and Elliot Engel and Margaret King. Traces of this attitude continue to linger among some scholars writing today, including Cheryl Wilson, who in the introduction to *Fashioning the Silver Fork Novel* agrees that "Sadleir rightly questions the literary merit of silver fork novels" (3).

[3] Much silver fork criticism considers these issues to be intertwined. Critics who devote significant attention to questions of gender in the silver fork novel include April Kendra, Tamara Wagner, and Muireann Ó'Cinnéide; critics specially attuned to questions of class and political reform include Gary Kelly, Winifred Hughes, and Edward Copeland. Andrew Elfenbein and Deborah Lutz have productively explored the impact of Byron's celebrity and influence on the genre.

particularities of the silver fork genre, these novels appear as weak examples of realism. With that understanding in place, their distinctive narrative practices can be understood on a different register.

Investigating these properties not only makes one a better reader of silver fork novels: it also leaves one more attuned to assumptions about realism and the rise of the novel. In asking how silver fork novels are deemed "good" or "bad", one confronts questions of how the features of a particular variety of narrative were naturalized to the extent that they came to seem the desirable way for fiction to function. This normalization tends to result in a teleological account of the history of the novel, where realism is posited as the natural endpoint towards which other genres were evolving. In *Novel Beginnings* Patricia Spacks provides an account of the eighteenth-century novel with the aim of explicitly "focusing especially on deviations from realism" (2) because "to think of eighteenth-century fiction as dominated by realism makes it more difficult to see its complexity and range and to experience its variety of riches" (3). As Spacks suggests, "the relative triumph, until quite recently, of realism … meant that critics and historians have tended to see most distinctly the line of development bearing the most obvious affinities to the major literary trends of later periods" (22). Nineteenth-century fiction has likewise been viewed as dominated by a realist tradition and genres located outside of that tradition, such as the silver fork, have tended to be neglected, misread, or both. By suggesting that for a time silver fork novels represented a viable alternative model of how fiction might work, we continue the work of unsettling assumptions about the hegemony of realism.

The first novels that could be definitively labeled silver forks appeared in the mid-1820s.[4] Beginning in 1824, Theodore Hook published a series of sketches called *Sayings and Doings* which focused on recording, often in a satirical tone, details of elite lifestyles. Henry Lister's 1826 novel *Granby* inaugurated a tradition of silver fork novels focused on elegant young men that would continue to be reflected in later 'dandy novels.' Works by authors such as Benjamin Disraeli, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Catherine Gore, and Letitia Landon followed in short order: with the financial success of each subsequent silver fork novel, the genre became more and more attractive to writers often explicitly interested in speedy and lucrative publishing ventures. With the aim of clearly signaling generic affiliation, novels were often published with subtitles indicating their focus on elite lifestyles and on capturing a precise historical instant, with examples including, "a tale of fashionable life," "a tale of the day," or "a tale of the present age."

The genre's major characteristics emerged quickly. Silver forks, although they might feature cross-class encounters with shop-owners or the farmers who resided on an estate, sourced their major characters almost exclusively from the wealthy and the titled. Rich but non-aristocratic characters did play a role, especially in later iterations of the genre, although they often function as foils who exemplify the social embarrassment resulting from wealth unmediated by cultivated taste and refined manners. Deeply invested in social ritual, silver forks lavish attention on a highly structured pattern of events: balls, dinners, and country house visits, all organized in a prescribed calendar structured around the London society season, during which, while Parliament was in session, the gentry would mainly reside in town houses and maintain an active social calendar. The details of this world as presented in silver fork novels were expected to be

[4] The period of silver fork popularity is often seen as coinciding with the Regency era, if defined broadly so as to include the reigns of both George IV (1820-1830) and William IV (1830-1837). The silver fork era also coincides with the often-elided gap between late Romanticism and early Victorianism.

both accurate and precise. Shops, locales, and brand names reflected what would be available to a reader of sufficient means. This made these novels both instructive to those with purchasing power, and a source of vicarious pleasure to those without it. At the same time, part of the momentum that sustained the genre was the premise that products and trends moved quickly in and out of fashion, and silver forks, therefore, were constantly updating so as to reflect what was *au courant*. Food, clothes, and furnishings were used as key signifiers of social position in the increasingly commercial culture of the early nineteenth century. Manners and etiquette were also carefully delimited so that silver forks could direct one as to "what hours of the day it was elegant to drive in the park, to make calls, to dine, to arrive at the Opera and to leave" (Adburgham 1). Conversation was a paramount feature of the class consciousness demonstrated in these novels, especially considering the leisured existence led by most characters who "talk at their club, as they stroll through the gardens of a country house, as they endure a rainy day with no shooting and they talk at dinner" (Cronin, "Bulwer, Carlyle, and the Fashionable Novel," 38-39). Although occasionally given a coy veneer of anonymity, recognizable figures such as famous dandies or individuals active in the publishing scene would often be represented in these novels, as would references to contemporary scandals and gossip.[5]

Two other characteristics of silver fork novels often presented as ubiquitous, their geography and their domestic resolutions, will be reassessed in this dissertation, and therefore merit some initial qualification. First, the genre is undoubtedly associated with the exclusive spaces of London's fashionable West End,

[5] Benjamin Disraeli, for example, earned the enmity of publisher John Murray after his novel *Vivian Grey* (1826) featured a recognizable caricature of Murray in the character of the ineffectual and often drunken Marquess of Carrabas.

> … the first 'residential' area of the city, where inhabitants don't work ... but quite simply live. In novel after novel, the same features return: the squares (a great invention of London real estate speculation), the exclusive gathering places (shops in Bond Street, clubs in St James, Almack's ballroom on Pall Mall); the parks (with a clear preference for St James, ennobled by its proximity to the crown. (Moretti 79)

Emphasizing consistency and specificity of setting reinforces the impression that silver forks represent a unified genre. However, to consider them as too rigidly circumscribed by these urban boundaries would be a mistake. Novels often stage significant events, especially those related to a character's reform or moral awakening, on country estates, and characters also travel widely throughout Europe, whether in flight from creditors and broken hearts, or in pursuit of a suitable match. Many prominent silver fork novelists, including Disraeli, Gore, and Blessington, travelled extensively, or lived abroad, and could therefore draw on these experiences in their fiction.[6] Part of rethinking what the silver fork genre might be doing will involve reconsidering what spaces it uses.

Second, silver fork novels have been widely read as emphasizing happy domestic resolutions that work to reify bourgeois domestic values. Elfenbein, Cronin, and Colby, for instance, opt to regard them as forerunners of later modes of Victorian domestic realism. While some silver forks do seem to anticipate "high-Victorian tales of domestic angels, separate spheres, and marital duty" (Sadoff 118), there exists a significant body of texts that end with ambiguous or even deliberately anti-domestic closure, as my first chapter will explore at length. Attempts to theorize both silver fork geography and silver fork domesticity tend to homogenize the silver fork genre

[6] See Mathew Rosa's *The Silver Fork School*, pg. 42, for a listing of the various locales where prominent silver fork writers travelled or lived.

unduly. In contrast, I would prefer to emphasize the genre's potential unruliness, rather than subscribe to such efforts to situate these novels within a restrictive framework, which bespeak an anxiety about a range of works that often seem to fit rather poorly into any unified category.

In at least one way, however, silver fork novels maintain total consistency: above all else, these texts were preoccupied with representing the upper-classes. What varies is the attitude manifested towards this elite group. Two central groupings divide critical opinion on the subject. One, generally represented in older criticism, argues that silver forks idolize the upper-classes and promote slavish imitation. Although she does not subscribe to this interpretation herself, Hughes effectively summarizes how it is "axiomatic in commentaries on the silver fork novel … that its mass audience was primarily motivated by the vulgar aspirations of the social climber" (Hughes, "Silver Fork Writers," 339). The genre, this line of thinking argues, existed effectively as a kind of conduct book, through which individuals newly in possession of wealth could find models for how to replicate the behavior and fine nuances of custom that distinguished the traditions of long-established, inherited fortunes. In this model, "middle class readers who looked to these novels of the 1830s as guides to emulating the upper classes would learn about what to wear or what to serve at tea" (Engel & King 114). These didactic merits also ensured stable sales for the genre: "It was Colburn's genius to see that a literature written about the exclusives, by the exclusives (or those who knew them well) and for the exclusives would be royally supported by those who were not but wanted desperately to become exclusives" (Moers 52).

Another theory, however, suggests that many, if not all, of the aristocratic figures populating silver fork fiction were in fact objects of satire and ridicule, as well as moral indignation, thus explaining why so many characters eventually experience conversions away from valuing

fashion and wealth. As Jana Davis argues, "though the splendor of aristocratic fashionable life is frequently detailed with appreciative zest, subtle irony and satire hint at the hollowness behind the splendor" (29). When read as critiques rather than guides to imitation, silver forks can also be interpreted as catalysts for social and political reform, so that "by describing and satirizing the follies and vices of high society, fashionable novelists … prepared the way for the reform movement of 1830" (Kendra, "Stereotypes," 142). This line of argument, which permits silver forks to be read as products of a shifting social and political consciousness, has been taken up by many recent critics, some of whom go so far as to propose defining the genre as "a subset of the novel of manners, devoted to exploring the matrix of wealth, family, celebrity, fashion and political power in order to expose if not remove the barriers to reform" (Kendra, "Stereotypes," 159) and "as indices of social change, class mobility, and a shifting political landscape" (Sadoff 121).

Increasingly nuanced perspectives have sought to articulate a middle ground, arguing that non-aristocratic readers of silver forks may well have experienced an ambivalent combination of desire and mistrust in their perusal of representations of luxury: "caught within this popular dynamic, the silver fork novels were marked by a radical instability of tone: they could be, and were, [both] read as celebrations of the aristocratic ascendancy and as devastating satires" (Hughes, "Silver Fork Writers," 329). Richard Cronin echoes exactly this formula in his description of how silver forks work to "satirize the world they celebrate, and celebrate the world they satirize" ("Bulwer," 117). Some silver fork novelists themselves manifested this ambivalence towards portraying aristocratic excess. In his novel *Godolphin*, Edward Bulwer Lytton's narrator claims that

> No description of rose-coloured curtains and buhl cabinets, no miniature paintings of boudoirs and salons, no recital of conventional insipidities, interlarded with affected criticisms, and honoured by the name of dramatic dialogue, shall lend their fascination to these pages. Far other and far deeper aims are mine in stooping to delineate the customs and springs of aristocratic life. (91)

In a letter to Rosina Bulwer, written in 1830 while she was at work on *Romance and Reality*, Letitia Landon lamented that her novel would, according to convention, have to be filled with "orange jelly, feather fringe, and sleeves larger than their wearer. I am leaving all the nobler attributes of humanity to dwell among its ridicules" (qtd. in Lawford xxiv).

These questions of just what note silver forks struck in their portrayal of aristocratic culture are intertwined with questions about why the genre emerged at this precise historical moment. It achieved popularity at a time when elite privilege was becoming both increasingly permeable and increasingly unstable. By the 1820s commercial and industrial shifts had made wealth, and the display of that wealth via conspicuous consumption, accessible to a wider span of the British population than ever before. The emphasis on exclusivity and careful coding of social distinction that flourished during the Regency resulted from anxieties about increasing numbers of *nouveaux riches* with the means, if not the knowledge, to imitate the traditional elite, in a world where "the social stability of the earlier periods was gone, and in its place came a shifting class alignment" (Rosa 5). However, if privilege was a sphere some wanted to infiltrate, it was also one that others sought to radically reformulate, or eliminate all together. In the years leading up to and immediately following the Reform Act of 1832, aristocratic privilege was a major theme in both literary and broader cultural discourse, and through their central subject matter, silver forks were implicated in this debate. As Edward Copeland summarizes, "the engine that drives the silver

fork novel is competition for social and political power—who has it, who is seeking it, who is losing it" ("Opera and the Great Reform Act" n.p).

Silver forks may represent a last-gasp celebration of aristocratic privilege, a sort of swan song to a sumptuous *ancien régime* no longer regarded as viable. As Hughes argues, "by origin and definition then, the silver fork novel is an elegiac form" ("Silver Fork Writers," 334). Conversely, these texts may be read as tools designed to raise a kind of political consciousness about the vastly unequal distribution of wealth, power, and privilege. If silver forks are read as an indictment of aristocratic self-indulgence and idleness, there can still be debate as to whether the intended effect was to encourage the upper-classes to take a more active interest in social improvement, and thereby make responsible use of hereditary privilege (an interpretation often applied to both Disraeli's silver fork and his later social problem fiction)[7] or to trigger more revolutionary possibilities for curtailing elite privilege and redistributing influence.

The reinsertion of silver forks into larger narratives of nineteenth-century literary history tends to represent a reaction to a long-standing tradition of seeing these novels as strictly commercial products, generated when "tired hacks—Mrs. Gore occasionally and Theodore Hook more frequently—puffed out their formula fabricated three deckers with descriptions remarkable for camera-like fidelity but little else" (Engel & King 22). Undoubtedly, "fashionable novelists … daringly presented their books as commodities, as items for sale in a world inhabited by people like the characters of these novels, people who are defined by the character of their purchases" (Cronin, "Bulwer," 41). Therefore, "the silver fork novel's relentless insistence on the external material emblems of fashionable life—the right shops, clothes, food, decor and jewellery—

[7] See, for example, writings by Flavin ("Disraeli did not want to convert the working class into the governing class: his primary concern was that the working class remain nurtured and sustained, governed by the aristocracy" (118)) and Guy ("For Disraeli, then, the central critical problem was not defining the nature or grounds for a more cohesive society, but legitimating the power structures (the Tory aristocracy)" (181)).

creates a textual echo of a paratexual reality: the novel itself as commodity, marketed to the hilt by Colburn" (Ó'Cinnéide, *Aristocratic Women* 52). Embracing the silver fork's status as commodity allows for valuable rediscovery within disciplines such as book history and studies of nineteenth-century consumerism and advertising, but also repositions the study of the genre, encouraging it to be seen as primarily a historical or commercial phenomenon rather than a literary one. As such, this way of reading the silver fork may secure it a place in nineteenth-century studies, but only within a relatively narrow niche.

Whatever kind of phenomenon silver forks might have been, they were a short lived one. The precise date at which silver forks ceased to be produced varies, with some tracing late variations of the genre into the 1850s. In most accounts, by the early 1840s the genre no longer held much currency; some critics go so far as to locate their decline before the Reform Act, so that "although fashionable novels continued to be published until 1850, their popularity began to wane as early as 1830" (Engel & King 106). The decline of silver fork novels has been traced to both literary and extraliterary sources. In the case of the former, as non-silver fork authors increasingly made the genre's conventions and stock characters the subject of satire, the silver fork novel suffered the fate it had always been most critical of: it fell out of fashion and became passé. Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836) satirized both the figure of the dandy, and the obsession with commodities, fashion, and dress that was popularly associated with the silver fork genre. Thackeray's novels such as *Vanity Fair* (1848), *Pendennis* (1850), and *The Newcomes* (1855) likewise took aim at the fashionable world made recognizable via silver fork novels, as did Dickens's use of characters such as the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) or Lady Dedlock's world of Fashion in *Bleak House* (1853). George Eliot's (1856) essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" also leveled critiques at many of the genre's salient features.

Most of the fiction and criticism that heralded the decline of the silver fork novel took issue with both its stylistic features and with its ethical perspective (or lack thereof). The self-ironizing tone, melodramatic plotting, and unrelenting pursuit of novelty that often characterized these texts did little to recommend the genre as critics and authors increasingly came to see the novel as a literary form capable of interrogating both intellectual and moral issues.[8] From this vantage point, the silver fork's overwhelming interest in showcasing a world very few had the means to experience, and its perceived lack of ethical or social engagement, tended to be seen as serious flaws.

The decline of silver fork popularity may be rationalized as intrinsic to a genre presented as "the amber which serves to preserve the ephemeral modes and caprices of the passing day" (Gore, *Women as They Are*, 117). As Cronin puts it, "the rapidity with which the novels will become obsolete [was] offered as a guarantee of their verisimilitude, because the society that they represent is defined by the swiftness with which it changes, and in such an age the conscientious novelist must attempt to write novels as ephemeral as newspapers" ("Bulwer," 40). Once the Regency and Reform eras had ended, taking with them a specific set of cultural circumstances, a genre whose whole existence depended on that milieu could not persist either, rendering the silver fork a category that had to, from its origins, "gleefully accept [its] own transience" (Cronin, *Romantic Victorians* 119).

As a number of critics have countered, tropes of the silver fork may not have disappeared entirely. It has been suggested that some silver fork tropes were reabsorbed into other texts and

[8] In *Desire and Domestic Fiction* Nancy Armstrong argues that by the Victorian era, domestic fiction was increasingly aligned with a project of redirecting individual desires to social ends, and that fiction largely participated in "produc[ing] men and women fit to occupy the institutions of industrialized society" (164). Raymond Williams, in the introduction to *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, posits a shift in the 1840s towards both a new social and cultural order, and a new consciousness of that order which precipitated the development of fictional modes concerned with both representing and developing community.

literary genres, including sensation fiction, Victorian domestic realism, and even detective fiction[9] (a significant portion of Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham*, often cited as the archetypal silver fork novel, actually revolves around Pelham acting as an amateur detective while probing a murder case). The *fin de siècle's* interest in decadence and the figure of the dandy might also be traced to earlier silver fork conventions.

Considering that they experienced commercial, not critical, success, which itself declined sharply in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is no great surprise that silver fork novels experienced a long period of either critical silence, or critical dismay. Early examples of scholarly engagement with the genre are few. Matthew Rosa published *The Silver Fork School: Novels of Fashion Preceding Vanity Fair* in 1936. His approach is mainly historical and biographical and he positions the genre as a deservedly temporary phenomenon, notable primarily for its contribution as satirical material in later Victorian novels. Rosa's work was followed by Alison Adburgham's monograph *Silver Fork Society* in 1983. While again providing a wealth of detail about the context in which this kind of fiction emerged, her study is mainly historical in scope. Silver fork novels also received mention in more diffuse works on the Regency, such as Ellen Moer's *The Dandy* (1960) or in broad studies of the nineteenth-century novel, such as Michael Sadleir's *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1951) and Elliot Engel and Margaret King's *The Victorian Novel Before Victoria* (1984). Francis Russell Hart's 1981 essay "The Regency Novel of Fashion" represents an early example of a major turn in silver fork studies when he considers how the genre reflects the charged political values of the time,

[9] The concluding chapter of Wilson's *Fashioning the Silver Fork* considers the influence of the genre on later sensation fiction, realist novels, and Victorian domestic fiction. Wagner has discussed the afterlife of the silver fork genre in a number of studies, including "Silver Fork Legacies: Sensationalizing Fashionable Fiction" and *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction*, and Lauren Gillingham's forthcoming book, *Fashion, History, and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century Britain* examines the intersection of the silver-fork novel, Newgate novel, and sensation fiction.

concluding that "fashionable novelists, writing normally in the voices of traditional moralism, nonetheless led the way towards a new social consciousness" (84).

Winifred Hughes's 1992 article "Silver Fork Writers and Readers: Social Contexts of a Best Seller" marks one of the first examples of emergent interest in studying the silver fork. Hughes concentrates on understanding how the genre was positioned in a cultural, historical, and print culture matrix. Her work was followed by other articles and essays, many of which can be grouped into one of two strains. The first, as already discussed, considers the subversive potential of the depictions of class at play in silver fork novels and includes works by scholars such as Gary Kelly, Maria Bachman, and Tamara Wagner. Other critics such as April Kendra, Lauren Gillingham, and Muireann Ó'Cinnéide have read silver forks in gendered terms, considering such topics as the way that female authors and female readers shaped the genre, how the silver fork evolved from focusing on aristocratic male protagonists to having a more social orientation, and the experience of young women navigating the marriage market.

My work in this project is indebted to both class- and gender-oriented approaches. The readings which reveal the silver fork novel, easily perceived as a highly conservative genre, to represent politically disruptive energies provide the starting-point for my analysis of how these novels unsettle narrative hierarchies as well as political ones. Likewise, reading silver forks through the lens of theories of gender and sexuality draws attention to their subversive potential. Whether considering the ways in which the figure of the silver fork dandy troubles conventions of masculinity, or exploring how Catherine Gore's ventriloquism of a male persona in *Cecil* reflects a challenge to norms of female authorship, critics have demonstrated that these novels cannot be understood as mere catalogues of dresses and tableware, but should be read with an eye to how they articulate alternatives to the conventions of gender performances. I aim here to build on this

broad foundation of viewing silver forks as sites of alternative possibility, extending it to an analysis of how they challenge the conventions of realist fiction.

Much of the recent silver fork criticism has been facilitated by the publication of a six volume edited series of prominent silver fork novels by Pickering and Chatto in 2005. Other than this series, most of these novels continue to exist only in either their original editions or reprints dating to the nineteenth or early twentieth century. (*Pelham* represents one exception, with a new edition, edited by Jerome McGann, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1972). As invaluable as the Pickering and Chatto editions are to scholarly research, Ó'Cinnéide offers some trenchant criticism when she notes that

> the very necessity for such detailed notes, the sheer density of the critical apparatus required to put these novels before us again, runs the risk of stamping them as fundamentally *un*-revivable. This raises the question of the extent to which the silver-fork novel can be revived as literature *per se*, that is, as a readable genre, rather than a matter of socio-historical interest. ("Across," 1231)

While this dissertation was being written, two monographs were published on the silver fork, both bringing with them enriching perspectives. Edward Copeland's *The Silver Fork Novel: Fashionable Fiction in the Age of Reform* offers a primarily politicized reading, giving the fullest account thus far of how the form can be understood as intertwined with questions of political reform in the 1820s and 30s, in which "'fashion' becomes the novelists' deliberate instrument of choice" (6), a persuasive strategy for developing a unified political project available to aristocrats and middle-class readers alike. Wilson's *Fashioning the Silver Fork Novel* focuses on publishing and commercial circulation, criticism and self-reflexivity, and the class dynamics at play for both

authors and readers. It approaches these topics so as to "stud[y] the construction of the genre and the silver fork formula … the relationship between the novels and the fashionable world … [and] the literary marketplace, publishing practices and commercialization of fiction during this period" (5).

This existing body of silver fork criticism, while offering a range of insightful and increasingly complex readings of the novels, tends to seek depth over surface, looking beyond the immediacy of material representations in pursuit of politically or culturally inflected signification. This project aims to redirect that critical gaze, so that rather than looking through, and past, the surface details of the novels, we linger on them a while longer. By reading the details, at once the most pronounced but also most undertheorized aspect of the silver fork novel, I will articulate a model of silver fork poetics. With this model in hand, the narrative structures of the genre can become sources of critical interest, rather than critical elision.

Detail represents a complex aesthetic category. Etymologically, the term "detail" originates with the French verb, *détailler*, "to cut up into small pieces." The detail originates in a notion of fragmentation, in which pieces become detached from a whole, but also of minute particularity, so that those pieces remain accessible to investigation. Indeed, the motive for isolating a detail is often to render closer inspection possible: the notion of a detail as a small portion of a whole is integral to the history and criticism of art and architecture, where, for example, a portion of a painting might be reproduced as "a detail" and thereby made available for closer study.

In its broadest sense, then, the detail might be defined simply as a particular, delimited portion of a whole. In more conventional usage, however, and particularly in reference to narratives, the detail is deeply bound up with notions of the inessential. It may contribute to a unified aesthetic,

convey additional information, or delight by adding complexity, but it is most often implied to be something that could be excised without the collapse of narrative meaning. Inessential does not equate with insignificant: if we were not told that Little Red Riding Hood's cape was red, we would not have quite the same story. But we would still, most would argue, have a story; and that makes the red-ness a different kind of narrative feature than, say, the wolf.

The work that follows subscribes to this encompassing definition of the detail as the representation of a particularity, material or otherwise, that is not essential to basic comprehension of the overall narrative. The inclusion of intricate attention to details has long been acknowledged as a, if not *the*, defining trait of the silver fork genre, a genre in which "the declared aim … was authenticity" (Hughes, "Silver Fork Writers," 336). The inclusion of detail is highly important in silver fork novels because they are engaged in a process of creating a space that most readers are not particularly familiar with: the world of the elite and fabulously wealthy. They share this trait with other types of novel that are similarly invested in representing foreign or esoteric settings, such as gothic and historical fiction, where the heavy use of descriptive detail likewise works to bridge the distance between the world the narrative is shaping and the world of a reader's experience. While a space in which corpses may be found tucked away inside a hidden chamber is certainly less plausible than a space simply replete with every conceivable luxury of food, furnishing, and dress, most readers are not likely to ever have experienced either, and details become a way of anchoring the impression of entering into these worlds.

Silver forks also have an additional investment in the use of detail. For the reader of a gothic or of a historical novel, there is no illusion that the author has lived the experiences that he or she depicts. However, a major way in which the silver fork genre sold itself was as providing insider

access. Because "the silver fork novel was an aristocratic genre populated by predominantly non-aristocratic writers" (Ó'Cinnéide, *Aristocratic* 47), it becomes all the more important that these texts over-perform their familiarity and insider knowledge through the presence of copious details. This performance led to a number of early silver fork novels being heavily revised in subsequent editions, as errors came to light about the unfamiliar exoticized details authors had been unable to render accurately.[10] Whether or not the details that were included were found to be entirely accurate, they served at first glance to create a rich texture of verisimilitude, thus miming an air of authenticity.

Despite its prevalence, silver fork detail has most often been treated as a feature obscuring the more complex meanings at play: Kendra specifically advocates that readers and critics "not allow this glittering detail to blind us to the very real social concerns of the fashionable novel" ("Silver Forks and Double Standards," 211) while Hughes admits that "typical silver fork novels are cluttered with snobbish references to the minutiae of costumes, menus, furnishings, consumer goods and material objects" ("Silver Fork Writers," 336). This reluctance to engage with one of the genre's defining features evokes lingering doubts about the value of the detail. When trying to find grounds on which to claim that a genre depicted as ornamental and trivial actually has more to offer, the detail, so often viewed as embodying those very traits, hardly seems the most obvious tool for shoring up credibility. Even if viewed in more neutral terms, the detail, as a representation of a particularity, may serve to render texts opaque and inaccessible if it ceases to have relevance to a new generation of readers. Considering the highly specific orientation of the silver fork, Copeland notes that "allusions in these novels to an unfamiliar political and social

[10] The revisions to the novels of Bulwer and Disraeli are particularly extensive; Cronin argues that both authors "came to think of the novels that charted the youthful indiscretions of their heroes as themselves constituting a youthful indiscretion" ("Bulwer,"45). In the editions included in Pickering & Chatto's *Silver Fork Novels*, the textual revisions are comprehensively catalogued.

history can tempt a modern reader to slide by them for the easier attractions of well-turned plots and finely probed characters" (*The Silver Fork Novel* 4).

Yet using their detail to fashion a new understanding of the silver fork genre is precisely what this project seeks to accomplish. I regard silver fork detail as the primary determinant of the genre's structural orientation, and as the source of subversive potential. My general proposition is that if we read silver fork novels through the lens of values inherited from realism, they will indeed seem to be flawed. In order to appreciate the position they occupy in the history of the novel, the focus will have to shift towards exploring their narrative practices and away from confining them to a cultural-materialist perspective, as has been the dominant approach in criticism thus far. If we are willing to set aside some of the key expectations inherited from a realist tradition, we will not only be better equipped to read the particular genre of the silver fork, but also able to challenge received accounts of the rise of the novel.

By "key" I mean nothing less central than basic ideas of what criteria a novel should offer: a reasonably organic plot culminating in a coherent ending, populated by multidimensional characters, engaging in emotionally nuanced interactions. A broad arc can be traced through eighteenth-century, Romantic, and Victorian novels operating in a roughly realist mode in which basic norms emerge: characters bear a recognizable resemblance to psychologically realistic individuals, plotlines operate with some regularity and consistency according to what seems plausible within the world inhabited by readers, and endings resolve, or at least respond to, the central tensions of the plot. Richetti offer a concise synthesis of these categories when he describes "what we now think of as the novel—a long prose narrative about largely fictional if usually realistic characters and plausible events" (1). He goes on, however, to immediately check the tendency to naturalize this form, pointing out that the novel "did not actually solidify in the

minds of readers and writers as a literary type or a set of expectations for narrative in the English-speaking world until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when … the novel in our current sense of it was widely accepted … as the inevitable and inescapable mode of telling a long fictional story" (1).

When readers and critics respond to silver fork novels as peculiar or deficient, they detect, even if unwittingly, the departure from this "inevitable and inescapable mode" that Richetti identifies at the heart of the novel project. As Brooks explains, "realism becomes so much the expected mode of the novel that even today we tend to think of it as the norm from which other modes… are variants or deviants" (*Realist Vision* 5). As a result, there is a ready slippage between "unusual" and "bad". Not all texts play by the same rules, and in uncovering how silver fork novels operate with different aims, it becomes clear that to read them in light of presumptions gleaned from the realist novel is to foreclose an understanding and appreciation of their specific narrative techniques. In charting these techniques, it is helpful to remember that the genre of the silver fork emerged at a moment when the precise characteristics of the novel remained malleable and in flux.

The standards for how a novel was expected to operate were largely determined by the literature that came both before and after the era of the silver fork. These standards are largely inherited from what Claudia Johnson (alluding to F.R Leavis) usefully labels "the great realistic tradition of prose fiction" (2). Realism, as Jonathan Stern notes, is an imprecise and expansive label, and "this untidiness is precisely what makes the term so indispensable in common and literary discourse alike" (40). As a literary category, realism both preceded and followed the silver fork heyday. The era of high realism is often aligned with Victorian fiction, sometimes conveniently dated to 1837, but in any case roughly coinciding with the decline of silver fork popularity in the

late 1830s and early 1840s. However, in Ian Watt's insight, a kind of 'formal realism' animated the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century as well, preceding the advent of silver fork fiction, marked by

> … the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language. (xx)

The development of the novel up to about 1825 (taking that as an approximate starting point for the age of silver fork fiction) established some of the groundwork for the genre, although it also established norms from which it would depart. Most broadly, and perhaps most importantly, there was the precedent of different kinds of novel; a very brief list of examples includes: the gothic, utopian fiction, historical fiction, sentimental and domestic fiction, and the "it-narrative."[11] Because the form of the novel coalesced out of a variety of preexisting types of prose narrative, it almost immediately began to splinter into subgenres, each with its own particular conventions and expectations. This creation of niche genres, linked to the cultivation of specific audience demands, meant that the idea of a silver fork novel, with its own distinct features tailored to please particular kinds of readers, could be possible.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also witnessed debates surrounding the categories of romance and the novel. While both were long fictional prose narratives, "the

[11] "It-Narratives" (sometimes also called "novels of circulation" or "object tales") are "a type of prose fiction in which inanimate objects (coins, waistcoats, pincushions, corkscrews, goose-quills, coaches, whipping-tops) and animals (dogs, fleas, cats, ponies) endowed with consciousness serve as the central characters … [and] typically narrate their own life stories" (Blackwell n.p).

novel" tended to be defined by being interested in the present day, striving to achieve verisimilitude, and omitting the fanciful or the improbable from its catalogue of events. Walter Scott, in his "Essay on Romance" (1824) offers perhaps the most succinct juxtaposition:

> we would be rather inclined to describe a Romance as a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns on marvelous or uncommon events, being thus opposed to the kindred term Novel …which we would rather define as a fictitious narrative differing from Romance because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society. (129)

Silver forks operate in a somewhat liminal space between romance and the novel. In the emphasis placed on representing the ephemeral present, they seem to belong in the category of novels. However, their investment in an exclusive and rarified world already locates them somewhat outside of a category of "ordinary human events." They also contain an unexpectedly high ratio of "marvelous or uncommon events," ranging from landslides to attacks by bandit pirates, and prophecies from beyond the grave.

Other features that defined the early development of the English novel also established the preconditions for the silver fork. Across genres, an emphasis on detail and description became generally significant; the novel, of whatever kind it might be, was expected to give weight to particularities.[12] While certainly not universal, a focus on characters belonging at least to the gentry, if not higher social echelons, also tended to appear, particularly in domestic fiction by authors such as Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and eventually, Jane Austen. A number of critical studies, particularly work by Copeland, rely on these resemblances to trace the origins of

[12] See Cynthia Wall's *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* for a consideration of how description became increasingly central to prose narratives.

the silver fork to this tradition of domestic novels focused on the family dynamics and marriage arrangements of young women of good families. Cronin notes that the silver fork tradition arrives on the heels of significant developments in the historical novel, particularly as practiced by Walter Scott, arguing that silver fork "novelists retain, but in a new form, the historical sense that Scott had made central to fiction [by] becom[ing] the historians of the contemporary" ("Bulwer," 38).

These traditions of domestic and historical fiction established by the 1820s reflect many of the key features located within a broadly realist framework: plausible plot, well-developed and psychologically realistic characters, and a coherent ending that resolves most of the text's major conflicts. To locate silver forks as direct extensions of these traditions, then, is to introduce nagging questions as to why silver forks seem to fare so poorly at reproducing those features. Many of the roots of early critical disdain for silver forks can be found in just such an assumption. In her article on Catherine Gore and Jane Austen, Kendra cites a quotation from a reviewer, who pronounces of Gore, "You, madam, are no Jane Austen." What is left unspoken is the assumption that Gore was trying to resemble Austen. While the shared features of many of their novels are undeniable, this stands as an example of an early critic using an existing tradition of domestic realism, in which silver forks were not necessarily striving to participate, to indicate the genre's failings.

Later literary critics have been able to fault silver forks not only for their departure from the fiction that preceded them, but also for falling short of the novels that followed them: the masterpieces of Victorian realism. As Rosa notes, "Coming immediately after the Waverley novels, and before the work of Dickens and Thackeray, the fashionable novels inevitably suffer in comparison" (1). Rosa's examples are, by and large, still the texts that define nineteenth-

century fiction, at least in the first half of the century. In negotiating a place for silver forks within a literary history of the nineteenth century, critics tend to continue to define the literary value of silver fork novels in terms of their subordinate relation to canonical texts, such as when Wilson concedes that George Eliot's characters are "far more complex and psychologically developed than the heroines of silver fork novels" (*Fashioning* 161), or admits that Catherine Gore's *Pin Money* "may not have the same aesthetic qualities or universal appeal as *The Pickwick Papers* or *Pride and Prejudice"* (161).

Because the realist mode became regarded as desirable, works of fictional prose that operated according to different standards tended to be regarded as of intrinsically lower value. For example, it-narratives, much like the silver fork, experienced commercial success and critical castigation throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. Texts like *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782), *Pompey the Little* (1751) (tracing the movements of a small lap-dog), and *The Adventures of a Guinea* (1765) follow non-human, and often inanimate objects, as they circulate and are transferred from owner to owner. Liz Bellamy describes the genre as defined by a "loose episodic form" (n.p) in which multiple characters and plot threads appear, and then are discarded in rapid succession without any central plot or movement towards a coherent ending.

Because these traits place them outside of realist norms, it-narratives were often criticized as inferior fictional productions, or as a mode employed by hack writers, both of which were critiques the silver fork genre also encountered. However, the distinctiveness of their central narrative mode (focalization through a non-human protagonist) meant that a certain boundary could be maintained, and rather than being classed as bad novels, it-narratives tended to be regarded, both then and now, as something other than novels. Although sometimes called

"novels of circulation", tellingly, the genre's other label eschews the terminology of "novel" all together, in favor of the more encompassing category of "narrative."

For silver forks, however, the resemblance to the domestic realism that preceded them, and the social realism that followed them, proved more damning. Because of their emphasis on representing a highly specific and contemporary setting, and because of the absence of overt markers of criminal or supernatural forces, they have tended to be read as reflecting a minor hiccup in the ongoing evolution of the realist tradition, a brief and ill-advised detour wherein representations of wealth and materiality dominated novelistic representations. A kind of category error exists surrounding the silver fork genre, and has made it virtually impossible to arrive at an unbiased assessment of the genre. The notion of "category error" derives from the work of twentieth-century philosopher Gilbert Ryle; it occurs when "things or facts of one kind are presented as if they belonged to another" ("Category Mistake"). In Ryle's classic example, an individual having been shown the various buildings of a campus proceeds to ask "But where is the university?" This question reflects confusion about the category to which universities belong, and a failure to identify them as a kind of abstract thing composed of many tangible parts, rather than a discrete, identifiable unit. Category errors, then, rely on assumptions of what traits a thing is expected to possess. A reader encountering a silver fork text might very well wonder, "But where is the plot?"

The silver fork novel can easily be understood as being a different kind of text than it actually is, and then be castigated for not possessing the associated traits. Efforts to reinsert the silver fork genre into a chronology of the history of the novel, either by reading it as an extension of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century domestic realism, or a precursor to Victorian social realism, reinforce this understanding. In so doing, they also draw attention to the apparently

unresolvable problem surrounding the silver fork: if these novels are participating in a realist tradition, why are they so bad at it? Why are the characters wooden, the plots flimsy, and the conclusions hurried or even non-existent? So long as silver forks are positioned as second-rate attempts at realism, conversations about their value will remain limited to their social and historical significance, and perhaps their impact on the evolution of later genres.

One reason why the silver fork is so often misunderstood as a variation of the realist text is its reliance on detail. The centrality of this feature is shared across both types of novel, and thus facilitates confusion between the two. Definitions of realism nearly always mention attention to representing particularities: realism may be recognized by "its deflation of ambition and passion, its antiheroism, its tendency to see all people and things within large containing social organizations and, hence, its apparently digressive preoccupation with surfaces, things, particularities, social manners" (Levine 15), or "representation of ordinary people rather than heroic ones, the attention to everyday customs and habits, especially those that change with relative slowness over the centuries; the detailed rendering of material objects and settings, particularly the domestic interior of lower and middle-class classes" (Yeazell xv). As both of these catalogues suggest, the detail is central to the realist project, a claim neatly summarized by Brooks in his assertion that "the accumulation of things, of details, of particularities, could be nearly definitional of the realist novel" (*Realist Vision* 16).

However, while relying on detail, realism also contains it, marshalling it towards productive ends. The realist detail can serve a number of functions. Often, it serves to tell readers something about characters, since "in realism, you always are, to some extent, what you eat, buy, drink, wear" (Kearns 47). This function of revealing character is a specific case of a broader trend towards what Leo Bersani calls "the portentous detail," explaining that, "in writers as different as

Jane Austen, Balzac, Dickens and James we find a shared commitment to the portentous detail. The most casual word, the most trifling gesture, the most tangential episode all submit easily to the discipline of being *revealing* words, gestures and episodes" (52-53, emphasis in the original). Other critics such as Susan Stewart and Jonathan Culler understand realism's use of the detail to function primarily with the aim of "confirm[ing] the mimetic contract and assur[ing] the reader that he can interpret the text as about the real world" (Culler 226). In all of these cases, details work to further a realist project perhaps best understood as "a self-conscious effort, usually in the name of some moral enterprise of truth-telling and extending the limits of human sympathy, to make literature appear to be describing directly not some other language but reality itself (whatever that may be taken to be)" (Levine 8).

The realist detail, then, has work to do in the novel. That work is performed in service of values of faithful representation, and the production of meaning surrounding those representations. By these standards, silver fork details seem to be either failing or not working at all. An 1832 review of two fashionable novels in *The Quarterly Review* makes exactly such a distinction the source of its complaint against fashionable fiction:

> When Richardson records the merest small-talk and the minutest gestures of Sir Charles Grandison or Clarissa Harlowe, we do not quarrel with his particularity… we allow the amplitude of detail as a means, and submit ourselves to that dominion over the fancy which minute description will not fail to acquire, provided always that it be connected with objects of interest. The leaf, we allow, must be painted in order to paint the tree; and the lace must be painted, in order to pourtray [sic] the dowager: and if the subject be worth the pains, and the work of art be in its totality effective, we are bound to give our approval to its indispensable incidents and conditions. But we are under no such

> obligation in respect to descriptions, however faithful and minute, which have no connexion with any object we care to contemplate, and which contribute to the construction of nothing. (165)

In so far as silver fork novels, especially in their shared interest in portraying details such as food, dress and furnishings, seem to resemble realist texts, it becomes easy to assume that they will likewise share basic narrative values and attempt to replicate them.

If details are culprits that have led to confusion surrounding the silver fork genre, they are also, I propose, the means by which that confusion can be dispelled. Over the course of three chapters, this dissertation establishes the central narrative orientations of the silver fork novel. It also explores how this approach departs from key realist values such as an interest in coherent and organic plot, an investment in characters possessing complex interiorities, and a hierarchy in which individuals and the interactive relationships between individuals are predominant over an interest in their material environment. Together, these values signal an interlaced web of broader ideological orientations. Emerging in light of new theories of history, a relatively orderly plot (even if composed of multiple, complex strands) unfurling towards a clear resolution that casts some sort of meaning over prior plot events, speaks to hopes for notions of progress and development.[13] When plots eventually reveal connections between seemingly disparate characters and events, the idea of an interconnected social fabric and communal ties can also be reinforced.

If the plots of realist novels suggest that the experiences of individual subjects can be seen as ultimately intertwined, their characters reaffirm the significance of those subjects in the first

[13] Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* connects these narrative tendencies to the nineteenth century's culture of scientific advancement.

place. As Claudia Johnson writes, "the leading principle of twentieth-century histories of the novel is that novels are narratives of private life, that they turn inward, forming subjectivities" (7). This principle is substantiated by an abiding interest in modelling deep characters with complex interior lives. The development of modern notions of subjectivity and selfhood is a project which novels both reflect, and, as critics such as Nancy Armstrong have noted, participate in.

Alongside mirroring and fostering new kinds of subjectivity, realism also sets up a hierarchy in which individuals and the community they form occupy a clear position of privilege. While undoubtedly invested in material environments, a careful balance is maintained in which there exists "an unquestioned moral and hierarchical antinomy between people and animate creatures, on the one hand, and things, on the other [so that] the awful thing is to be like a thing" (Freedgood, "Commodity Criticism," 160). In an increasingly industrialized and commercialized world, developing and maintaining this distinction became ever more important, and ever more difficult, as realist novels tend to attest in their often ambivalent representation of a profusion of materiality. For example, when Jane Eyre refuses to wear the silk gowns Rochester presents to her, or Eliot's Dorothea attempts to transmute her aesthetic pleasure in gazing upon inherited jewels into a moment of spiritual transcendence,[14] we see realist characters exemplifying the belief that the rejection of adornment and luxuries reflects a kind of moral integrity. That integrity, and the subjectivity it emerges from, affirms a border between subjects and objects.

Silver forks use details to refuse and subvert these narrative values. Rather than an interest in linear progression of events, silver forks advertise their commitment to the present instant by

[14] These examples are indebted to a conversation with Lauren Gillingham during her talk "Being Real: Fashion, Fiction, and Sociability in Britain, 1750-1850"at McGill University in February 2014.

composing their plot through disparate and often random events, proceeding with little regard for linear continuity. Just as the Regency society that produced the genre accepted and even revelled in transience and the ephemeral, silver forks focus on isolated and easily discarded episodes. They similarly challenge cherished conceptions of deep interiority usually manifested in the representation of realistic characters. Within silver fork systems of value, individuals exist primarily as social constructs, defined by display and spectacle rather than interiority. Class position and the performance of this class position define a subject almost entirely, challenging concepts of distinct individuality and the possibility of social mobility. While offering this form of representation, silver forks however still resist the movement towards creating or recognizing community that often animates realist texts.[15] To further trouble notions of community, rather than privileging affect, emotion, and bonds of relationality, the genre suggests that these experiences may in fact be as transferable and functional as material goods. By blurring boundaries between what can constitute subjectivity and community, they disrupt hierarchies between people and things.

The first chapter examines how the silver fork novel prioritizes inclusiveness in order to encompass as much detail as possible. In their fluid approaches to plot and genre, these texts depart from a traditional emphasis on closure and coherence. Benjamin Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1826-27), Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Godolphin* (1831), and Letitia Landon's *Romance and Reality* (1833) all feature meandering, at times wildly improbable plots, which terminate abruptly, with either the certain or probable death of main characters. This tendency towards suddenly abandoning narrative threads is glibly summarized by the narrator of *Romance and*

[15] As John Richetti explains, "At their most complex, novels can dramatize the relationship whereby the lonely or defiant individual is linked by experience in the world to society and discovers his or her implication in history and community" (5-6).

Reality: "in the closing chapter a little explanation goes a long way; and a character, like a rule of morality, may be dismissed in a sentence" (446). A novel's generic status is likewise flexible: tropes from other schools of fiction, such as the gothic, can be readily inserted and equally readily discarded. In this chapter I complicate the tendency to read these traits as indications of structural carelessness, and posit that they allow the silver fork text to present the dense texture of detail that functions as the genre's key aim.

The second chapter investigates another narrative property that is perceived as a failure when read through realist expectations: an emphasis on artifice and self-conscious construction. These tropes shape the silver fork delineation of character and lead to practices of metanarration and revision in which the text is crafted in response to dictates of fashion and taste. In works such as Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham* (1828), Catherine Gore's *Cecil* (1841), and Benjamin Disraeli's *The Young Duke* (1831), silver forks emphasize externals rather than prioritizing the representation of believable, psychologically complex characters. For example, upon arriving in Paris, Pelham has resolved

> … to set up 'a character' for I was always of an ambitious nature, and desirous of being distinguished from the ordinary herd. After various cogitations as to the particular one I should assume, I … arranged my hair in ringlets, [and] dressed myself with singular plainness and simplicity … putting on an air of exceeding languor. (35).

Upon deciding to reinvent himself, the protagonist lingers on the details of self-presentation, not action or even reflection, and specifies how that choice is enacted. By showing how three young male protagonists, and the novels that bear either their names or their titles, continually engage in

deliberate and prescriptive strategies of self-presentation, I continue the work of analyzing how the narrative structures of silver fork novels optimize the representation of detail.

In the final chapter, I explore how the representation of objects intervenes in silver fork depictions of relationships and affect, subverting the typical hierarchy between subjects and objects. In these texts, objects provoke and harness individual desire, often at the expense of shared feeling and to the detriment of core relationships: these are novels where goods come between mothers and daughters and husbands and wives. Interactions with a silk sofa or *foie gras* are depicted as attentively as interactions between siblings or lovers, and in fact sometimes function as the only means by which readers are given insight into these affective bonds. To establish this pattern, the chapter focuses on two particularly "domesticated" examples of the silver fork tradition, Catherine Gore's *Mothers and Daughters* (1834) and the Countess of Blessington's *Victims of Society* (1837). Both of these novels deal extensively with relationships, subjective choices, and the production and governance of desire as they follow their casts of characters through courtships, betrayals, and both happy and unhappy marriages. They thus participate in reframing priorities concerning the representation of relationships and broadening the kinds of desire which silver fork novels depict beyond the expectations of the realist tradition. Having shown how plot functions to accumulate detail, and characterization functions to refine it, the final chapter reveals how that detail can then serve to reshape narrative priorities.

The novels discussed in these chapters represent a varied group, produced by a colourful cast of authors. Benjamin Disraeli wrote his first silver fork novel in 1826, a year that "began bleakly for Disraeli. He had no money and huge debts. His former patron was disgusted with him. He had no work and no prospects" (Kuhn 55). Under these less than auspicious circumstances, producing a fashionable novel akin to those which had started appearing on the market, and

selling well, seemed a viable solution to some of these problems, and *Vivian Grey* was born "out of a mixture of frustration, fun, financial peril and Disraeli's ever-present thirst for fame" (Braun 41).

The novel was initially published anonymously, and prior to its publication, it had been promoted as offering life-like portraits of the rich and famous of the day, strongly suggesting that these were observations drawn from the experiences of a high-society insider. So well concealed was Disraeli's identity that Colburn himself remained unaware that "his author was actually a twenty-one-year-old Jew, whose knowledge of high society began and ended at his father's dinner table" (Kirsch 47). Nonetheless, a representative promotional piece praised it as "[a] very singular novel of the satirical kind is on the eve of publication … It is said to be a sort of *Don Juan* in prose, detailing the adventures of an ambitious, dashing and talented young man of high life" (qtd. in Stewart, *Disraeli 's Novels* 113). Problems arose when, sometime around May 1826, Disraeli's identity and corresponding lack of aristocratic standing were revealed. Although his background was comfortably middle-class and his father had enjoyed significant success with his collections of literary miscellany, Disraeli was hardly travelling in aristocratic circles. The critical response in publications such as *Blackwood's* to this discovery was most often scathing. Disraeli's 'outing,' so to speak, was met with all the more outrage because the initial readership of *Vivian Grey* had been so thoroughly deceived into believing the novel was the work of an anonymous member of high society, just as it had been promoted to be. The shock of learning that these "accounts of life in country houses surrounded by deer parks [were] written by a young man who grew up in a smoky part of London" (Kuhn 13) led to him being harshly rebuked for impertinence. Despite the virulent critical reactions concerning attribution, and perhaps because of the publicity which the scandal generated, the novel was enough of a commercial success that

that in eight of Disraeli's next thirteen publications 'by the author of *Vivian Grey*' appeared on the title page (Kuhn 67).

Disraeli's deployment of tropes of the silver fork genre would become even more pronounced in *The Young Duke* (1831). In 1829, Benjamin Disraeli was emerging from the period of isolation and depression into which he had lapsed shortly after the publication of the second part of *Vivian Grey*. He became obsessed with the idea of a journey to the Eastern Mediterranean, fuelled in equal measure by Byronic fantasy and an increasing interest in his Jewish heritage, which he aligned with the 'Orient' more broadly. The problem, as was so often his case, was how he would go about funding these ambitions. Encouraged by the commercial, if not critical, success of *Vivian Grey*, he set to work on *The Young Duke* sometime in late 1829. In February 1830 he wrote to Henry Colburn, assuring the publisher of the novel's eventual success and requesting an advance; the novel was half finished, but he did not think he could bear to remain in England long enough to finish it and made vague suggestions that he would complete the manuscript while abroad. With typical Disraelian melodrama, he wrote to Catherine Gore that same month that "my only chance, and a very forlorn one, of not immediately quitting this life, is immediately quitting this country" (*Letters* 114).

Although he was provided with a 500 pound advance, Disraeli did not leave on his travels until the end of May, having completed the rest of the novel in the interim. *The Young Duke* was published in the spring of 1831. Much like *Vivian Grey*, it received a mixed critical reception. The genre of the fashionable novel had by then developed into a recognizable type, and as such, any new attempt in the genre was subject to being critiqued as derivative. *The Young Duke* was also aligned with a general flippancy characteristic of the fashionable genre. The title page asserts authorship with the formula of "By the author of *Vivian Grey*." The original

advertisement from the 1831 edition begins: "There is a partial distress, or universal, — and the affairs of India must really be settled; but we must also be amused."[16] Disraeli himself only ever displayed lukewarm feelings towards the work. Although his motivation for writing *Vivian Grey* was also at least in part financial, it was with *The Young Duke* that he explicitly affirmed his aims of writing directly for profit, writing that he "had never prostituted [him]self before ... I suppose Colburn must be the bawd" (*Letters* 113). Much like *Vivian Grey*, in its 1853 and 1870 editions, the novel would be subject to significant cuts.[17]

One of Disraeli's friends who had the opportunity to read and respond to drafts of *The Young Duke* was Edward Bulwer Lytton, [18] fresh from his own first silver fork production. In 1828, he had published *Pelham*; much like Disraeli, his immediate motivations were financial in the wake of being cut off from his family's money due to a marriage of which his mother disapproved. While extremely popular, Bulwer quickly came to have doubts about his participation in the genre and would go on to try and distance himself from silver fork affiliations, both through how he later positioned the work, and through his revisions to it. Moreover, he explicitly critiqued the genre, even while it continued to be popular. In 1833, he noted in his assessment of literary culture *England and the English*: "few writers ever produced so great an effect on the political spirit of their generation as some of these novelists who, without any other merit, unconsciously exposed the falsehood, the hypocrisy, the arrogant and vulgar insolence of patrician life" (2:109).

Although it represents the most self-evidently silver fork text of a long and varied literary career, *Pelham* also displays early evidence of Bulwer's fascination with gothic vestiges and criminal drama. He returns to these tropes in *Godolphin*, "a novel of fashionable life and politics and

[16] This advertisement is included in the 2004 Pickering & Chatto edition, edited by Miles Kimball.
[17] The Pickering & Chatto edition catalogues the textual revisions across editions.
[18] Initially Edward Lytton Bulwer, after his mother's death in 1843, he formally adopted Lytton as his surname. I use here the more commonly used form he chose to adopt for his later life.

world-weariness … [wherein] the mainspring of the action depends upon an astrological prophecy" (Woolff 150). By this time, Bulwer had published a substantial body of novels and poetry, served as editor for the *New Monthly Magazine*, and held a seat as a Member of Parliament. He was nonetheless motivated by similar financial constraints: his 1827 marriage had led to familial estrangement which reduced his financial support, while simultaneously inaugurating a period of extravagant expenditure. Generally, *Godolphin* signals his departure from the sub-genre; within a year he would publish his important historical novel, the *Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), arguably his most famous work, and confine his subsequent writings to other genres.

In eventually moving towards presenting himself as a sober-minded statesman, Bulwer had to transcend not only his reputation for early literary frivolity but also the fall-out from an acrimonious and highly publicized divorce. Another silver fork author, Lady Blessington, likewise found herself dogged by notoriety, but was able to successfully convert her scandalous reputation into the celebrity which drove her literary reputation. When she married Charles John Gardiner, second Viscount Mountjoy and first earl of Blessington, in 1818, she brought with her not only a beauty so exceptional that she was popularly referred to as "the most gorgeous Lady Blessington" but also a chequered past: raised in relative obscurity in Ireland as Margaret Power (the transformation of her name to Marguerite speaks itself to values mirrored in the silver fork genre), she was married at fourteen to a captain from the regiment stationed nearby, though they quickly became estranged and lived apart for most of their marriage, during which time she also had a long relationship with another military captain who would eventually be the one to introduce her to Lord Blessington (and receive 10 000 pounds from the earl for graciously ceding his claims). Her greatest notoriety, however, came from the widely-accepted rumor that there

was long-standing affair between herself and the famous dandy, Count D'Orsay; technically her son-in-law, his marriage to her stepdaughter was widely understood as transacted to facilitate their relationship (although there were rumors as well that D'Orsay was in fact the lover of the Earl of Blessington himself, not that of his wife). [19]

None of this prevented Lady Blessington from enjoying a position at the centre of social and intellectual life, both in London and during extended periods spent abroad in Italy and France, and establishing herself as the "most lavish, intelligent and captivating London hostess of her generation" (Foulkes 64). Her interactions with Byron, whom she met in Genoa, would be the source of her best-known literary work, *Journal of Conversations with Lord Byron* (published serially in 1832, and as a single volume in 1834). She was also close to other silver fork novelists, including Edward Bulwer Lytton, and Benjamin Disraeli, who lived with her family for a time due to his own precarious financial situation; he completed his novel *Venetia* under the roof of her London home, Gore House, and his earlier novel *Henrietta Temple* is dedicated to the Count D'Orsay, whom the young Disraeli idolized as an iconic man of fashion.

Blessington continued as a prominent hostess and socialite after her husband's death in 1829, but on a much reduced income which made her lavish lifestyle difficult to support; by this time, she had also assumed financial responsibility for various family members. Writing offered one of few means to supplement her income and she published in a number of different forms. Her first novel, *The Repealers* was published in 1833, followed by others. She was simultaneously active in the world of anthology and gift book publication, eventually becoming the editor to both *The Book of Beauty* and *The Keepsake*. She also produced anecdotal records of her travels (*Idler in*

[19] Nick Foulkes's biography, *Last of the Dandies : The Scandalous Life and Escapades of Count D'Orsay* (2003) considers the complicated situation at length, balancing Michael Sadleir's much earlier account *Blessington-D'Orsay: A Masquerade* (1933). Ann Hawkins and Jeraldine Kraver also provide an overview of Blessington's biography in their introduction to the Pickering & Chatto edition of *Victims of Society*.

Italy, *Idler in France*) and these tended to draw on her acquaintance with other celebrity figures. In her literary work, she evokes both her incisive knowledge of the workings of elite society to portray the details the silver fork form require, and a willingness to critique it.

The debts she would accumulate in attempting to maintain the façade of a lifestyle she could not afford would eventually prove insurmountable. In the spring of 1849, most of the contents of her Kensington mansion, Gore House, were liquidated at auction; the sale itself became a kind of public spectacle in which thousands visited the house. Thackeray describes the event grimly: "I have just come away from a dismal sight—Gore House full of snobs looking at the furniture" (*Letters* 2: 532). In this moment, Blessington's personal residence becomes a kind of silver fork theme park— a living version of the genre that offers the same pleasures of looking at luxury goods the viewer can't afford to actually purchase. Blessington had departed for Paris shortly before the sale began and died there in 1849, less than 8 weeks later.

Another female silver fork author, Letitia Landon, also capitalized on celebrity in her writings albeit of a kind more shrouded in mystery. Landon's poems began appearing steadily in the *Literary Gazette* as of 1820, and she had also published multiple volumes of poetry, beginning with *The Fate of Adelaide* in 1821. *Romance and Reality* was published under the pseudonym that her poetry had already thoroughly popularized: L.E.L. Her experience with periodical culture, through which she had participated by writing reviews and criticism, as well as poetry, had left her attuned to a shifting literary market, and her responsibility for supporting her family financially encouraged her to consider the increasingly lucrative market for fiction. As Landon notes in an article celebrating the fiction of Bulwer Lytton, published in the *New Monthly Magazine* a few months before her own novel appeared, "critics are either strangely behind, or willfully blind, to their own time, who deny the importance of the novel" ("Living Literary

Characters" 442). Much like Disraeli, "by merely agreeing to write a fashionable novel for Colburn and Bentley, Landon was forced to assume a false position. She had to present herself as more *au fait* on fashionable matters than she really was" (Lawford xviii). Although the critical re-evaluation of Landon's writing which began in the 1990s has focused almost exclusively on her poetry,[20] she continued to write both poetry and prose up until the time of her death in 1838.

While Blessington and Landon each produced only a small body of silver fork novels, Catherine Gore ranks among the most prolific of silver fork novelists. Indeed, the model of rapid-paced industrial production of examples of the genre (which often does not reflect the reality of authors like Bulwer, Disraeli, or Landon, who in fact often only published a small number of silver fork novels) could be argued to be best represented in Gore's decades of steady output. She authored dozens of novels over the course of a career that spanned nearly three decades, in some cases at the rate of two or three a year. She began working in the silver fork genre in 1830 when Henry Colburn published her novel *Women as They Are*, subtitled, *Manners of the Day.* She had published historical romances prior to this, as well as establishing herself as a composer; she would go on to enjoy success as a playwright as well, with her first play *The School for Coquettes* enjoying a thirty-night run at the Haymarket theatre in 1831. But it was with the silver fork genre that she truly found her niche: the name Mrs. Gore rapidly became affiliated with a steady stream of fashionable novels. While she was productive throughout the 1830s heyday of the form, Catherine Gore's production of silver fork novels stretched well into the era of high Victorian realism.

[20] See for example, Isobel Armstrong's "The Gush of the Feminine," Anne Mellor's *Romanticism and Gender*, and the Introduction to the Broadview edition of Landon's *Selected Writings*, edited by Jerome McGann and Daniel Riess.

Not only was Gore's model of composition one of the best representations of how silver forks were largely understood to be produced, the novels themselves typified what silver forks were understood to be about. It is arguably in Gore's novels where the outlines of material culture, high society name dropping, and conduct manual directions for fashion and manners, all strung together under the gossamer pretext of a marriage plot, find their fullest expression. When *Mothers and Daughters* was published in 1832, Gore was immersed in rapid-paced literary production, producing multiple novels a year. Her interests at the time show a pattern of preoccupation with the place of women in fashionable society, with economic exchange, and with the role of commodities as a form of social currency: "Gore's earliest fictional works primarily set out to expose a 'profitable matrimonial market' in which impecunious aristocrats 'forward their speculations, at any cost'" (Wagner, *Financial Speculation* 44). Most of these were received as archetypal examples of the silver fork novel and subject to the expected criticism; in its review of *Pin Money* (1831), for example, the *Westminster Review* complained that the novel was really "a sort of London Directory … of fashionable tradesmen" (433). In cases where early Gore novels, such as *Pin Money* or *Women as They Are,* have received critical attention by scholars such as Kendra and Copeland, this attention has tended to focus on the careful verisimilitude lavished on a "dense peppering of vendors, venues, celebrities, and brand-name products" (Kendra, "You, Madam," 13).

Gore is most famous however for *Cecil*, a novel that harkens back to the early years of the genre in both its tropes and setting. Published in 1840, and followed by a sequel the same year, *Cecil* is a relatively late addition to the canon of silver fork novels. It was published anonymously, and much like *Vivian Grey*, created a flurry of speculation as to who had authored it. [21] The

[21] See Andrea Hibbard and Edward Copeland's introduction for a description of the controversy.

revelation that the novel, narrated by a fashionable Regency dandy, had been written by a woman who had previously focused on domestic fiction led to surprise and some outrage, reflecting the notion that "when Gore wrote *Cecil*, she violated conventions of feminine propriety" (Hibbard & Copeland xvii). Gore's ability to successfully ventriloquize a dandy persona reflects a narrative adaptability that was often a source of surprise: when Thackeray reviewed her *Sketches of English Character* in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1846, he marvelled that "she knows some things which were supposed hitherto to be as much out of the reach of female experience as shaving, duelling or the bass viol" (139). Nonetheless, Gore was known to refer to *Cecil* as "my best book" (qtd. in Hibbard & Copeland xi).

The texts highlighted here reflect the range of silver fork novels: they include one of the first examples of the genre (*Vivian Grey*), one of its final productions (*Cecil*) and a sample of the novels published in the fifteen-odd years in between. While some are highly domestic, others feature criminal and supernatural elements. Some take men as their protagonists, some are focalized almost entirely through female characters. What they share are the prevailing preoccupations of the genre: a dominant interest in the world of the fashionable elite, an often sardonic and self-reflexive tone, and, of course, the inclusion of pages upon pages of description of an esoteric and luxurious world. In order to encompass these features, and display them to their fullest advantage, the silver fork developed a distinctive set of narrative strategies.

In the chapters that follow, those poetic strategies will be closely examined, as the object of a scholarly investigation, for the first time. This work will also interrogate the normative expectations surrounding the novel in the nineteenth century. *Reading the Details* denaturalizes those expectations, ultimately arguing for the silver fork genre representing a foray into alternative narrative possibilities. The genre has always been understood to carry with it the

frisson of a decadent alternative to the ubiquitous. This has usually been attributed to the world it chose to represent, one in which "insouciant Regency exclusives … offered a seductive model of license rather than restraint" (Hughes, "Silver Fork Writers," 330). In Bulwer Lytton's 1828 novel *The Disowned*, the genre is described as "fashionable novel[s], th[ose] intellectual libertine[s] of literature [who] require no rules" (xiii). This project serves to chart out the sometimes difficult-to-ascertain rules by which silver forks did in fact operate, while also considering how those rules constitute a challenge to inherited narrative norms.

Chapter 1: Having It All: Plot and Genre

Generally, in novels, there is a beginning and an end, and in between, things happen. There may be more, or less, detail offered about those middle things; nineteenth-century realist novels tend to offer an abundance, and this tends to be depicted as one of their strengths. Silver fork novels also extend a wealth of minute detail, but contrarily, this has usually been portrayed as a weakness. This difference in attitude, I believe, can be traced back to the weight placed on the pattern of beginning, middle, and end. The existence of a cohesive plot generates an aim, a *telos*, a meaning, and bestows meaning on the details which both comprise and ornament it. Likewise, in both realist and non-realist texts, generic consistency creates a sense of textual unity that also works to legitimize details. The silver fork novel, however, is oriented towards openness rather than closure, and inclusiveness rather than coherence. This orientation allows for the maximum accumulation of detail and determines the shape of its generic affiliations and the structures of its plot.

By demonstrating that silver fork novels are primarily oriented towards the inclusion of detail, we learn how to negotiate what can otherwise be a disorienting reading experience. Because they adopt a structure of loosely linked episodes, concluded by an abruptly tacked-on ending, silver fork novels can be perceived as structural failures when regarded through the lens of realist expectations of a clear generic affiliation and a unified, organic plot. Moreover, while their abundance of detail is easily detected, those same narrative expectations can make details seem hollow, lacking in meaning and purpose. While the condemnation of detail in silver fork novels has typically been based on quantity, understanding the orientation of silver fork novels allows

us to move away from reading their details as merely textual excess, and also requires us to reconsider the centrality of closure and coherence as the determinants of a successful narrative.

Glitter and the Gothic: Unity and Genre

While the silver fork school borrowed actively from realist traditions, it also augmented this with features imported from other genres. Bahktin remarks on the novel's general tendency to "incorporate other [kinds of literature] into its own particular structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them" (5), and silver forks participate in this tradition via their interplay with other kinds of nineteenth-century literature. Their hybridity has been recognised by several critics, including Michael Sanders, who notes that "*Vivian Grey* is a novel which defies ordinary generic conventions" (xxxvii). In *Financial Speculation and the Victorian Novel*, Tamara Wagner uses the common thread of finance plots to suggest connections between silver forks and both sensation novels and social problem fiction. The silver fork genre also incorporates a surprising number of tropes and features imported from a tradition of gothic fiction.

Gothic elements are often incorporated into the silver fork through structures of "romance." The two terms share a long and complex history. Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), usually considered the inaugural example of the gothic novel, featured in its second edition both a Preface advertising its desire to "blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (65) and the new subtitle, "A Gothic Story." The terms were often yoked together in the category of the gothic romance; as Ian Duncan points out, "[the late-eighteenth-century gothic novel] is the first English prose fiction to call itself 'romance' with a certain generic intention" (12-13), and that intentionality is used to "distinguish itself from the novel and the representation of contemporary life" (13).

By the time of the rise of the silver fork novel in general, and this cluster of texts in particular, the gothic, usually considered at a peak of popularity in the 1790s, was well past its heyday, and key satires such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) had been published, dismantling some of the genre's credibility. While I locate important gothic elements in many silver fork novels, functioning to undercut realism, these features are also counter-balanced by self-reflexivity, a wry playfulness, and a distinctive emphasis on the fashionable world. This modification of gothic tropes evokes the somewhat unstable nature of the gothic, understood as "an ensemble of themes and formal elements which could be taken over and adapted in whole or in part by other novelists and writers" (Kelly 49).

Explicit consideration of the category of "romance" is most prominent in Landon's novel, where it resonates from the title onwards. "As far as Landon was concerned, the phrase spoke for the desire to cling to past ideals" (Lawford xx), and she repeatedly plays with ideas about the decline of romance in contemporary literary conventions and contemporary society, most frequently juxtaposing the category with the "reality" she also gestures towards in the title. The decline of romance can be something to be lamented; "adventures never happen nowadays … romance and roads are alike macadamised [a process of smoothing over and rendering level]" so that "literary life grows too like the actual one. Illusions merge in realities—imagination gives place to memory—one grows witty instead of romantic; and poetry ends in prose, all the world over" (79). While acknowledging the decline of romance explicitly in the narrative, and perhaps implicitly in her own move to writing fiction instead of poetry, Landon nonetheless still fashions a text that bears out the assertion that "if it were not for romance, reality would be unbearable" (370). As Lawford points out in her introduction, "the last third of the novel … becomes heavily romantic, even taking a few ludicrous turns when bandits dressed like melodramatic actors

appear in Italy and when a Spanish revolutionary cannot find a decent revolution" (xxvi). Plausibility and seriousness of tone are playfully dismissed in favour of an excess of melodramatic and overwrought plot events.

An episode from *Romance and Reality* presents perhaps the best example of this gothic instability. While travelling in Italy, Emily and her companion Lady Mandeville are abducted and held prisoner by a mysterious figure who claims to have fallen in love with Emily and abducted her with the intention of marrying her. The scene, with its elements of imprisonment in a crumbling castle and threat of sexual coercion, resonates with echoes of the popular gothic tradition, Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) in particular, and combines a clearly self-aware sense of satire with a sense of real danger. With "a cloak flung over her head … [Emily] was placed upon a horse" and she "almost faints with their speed" (313). Upon being deposited in a mouldering chamber, complete with "windows fastened with iron lattices … [so] that not one gleam of daylight pierced through the thick leaves" Lady Mandeville is depicted as "divided between alarm and laughter," wanting Emily to tell her "what you think of our adventure." The propensity of gothic heroines for fainting (which Emily at least verges on doing a few times) is playfully gestured towards through Lady Mandeville's observation that bottles of essential oils have been carefully laid out, such that "our bandit chief is prepared for fainting and hysterics" (314).

The self-referential nature of the episode is clear. In identifying their abductor, who adopts the title of Count Frianchettini, Lady Mandeville asks whether Emily has failed to recognise "the hero of our "Romance of the Castle?" referring to an 1800 Gothic novel by Jane Elson. A few lines later she comments that the room with its "dark floor—the discoloured walls—the huge shadows, which seem to move… [is] the very place for ghosts and midnight murder" (317). Lady

Mandeville both maintains a sense of humour about the whole escapade, and has moments of genuine anxiety about their safety and ability to secure assistance. She observes that the romantic nature of the episode will be dampened by a husband, rather than a lover's rescue. Any real tension, however, is undercut by her pointing out that the mysterious Italian count is actually her former hairdresser, having now left London, re-encountered Emily, and decided on abduction as a strategy for courtship.

A brief biography of the Italian, disappointed in his hopes and given to romantic speculation, firmly strips him of any menacing mystery; Emily and Lady Mandeville are easily rescued by an English acquaintance, and the whole episode ends with the meditation that it is "worth while to have an adventure, were it only for the sake of talking about it afterwards" (328). The vestiges of Gothic anxiety are undercut by the flippant silver fork playfulness, especially about matters of fashion and trend: it is no coincidence that when the Count is revealed as an utterly banal figure, he is also associated with the fashionable arts of remaining *à la mode*. The two it seems, cannot co-exist: the allusion to fashionable London dispels the menace of an Italian castle, and ironizes the situation. Once this has occurred, the episode disappears from the text; it exists as a closed entity, a moment of generic departure which disrupts and delays the rest of the narrative, but ultimately does not even try to position itself as part of the main plot.

A similar intrusion occurs quite early in the novel. Edward's elder brother Reginald's disastrous love affair with an Italian woman Francisca performs a pantomime of gothic horrors, and leaves him devastated, so that he returns to England, intent upon brooding to death. Impulsively marrying Francisca in a Catholic ceremony only to find that "truly does passion live but in the present" (60), he quickly tires of her, discovering her to be "beautiful but weak, without power to comprehend, or intellect to take part with her lover" (60). Sensing the waning of his affections,

Francisca, “with the wild superstition of the ardent and the weak, had held it as judgement for loving a heretic” (61). Reginald interrupts her one day, clad in sackcloth and scourging herself, which triggers a fever and her death “in a fearful paroxysm of terror” (61). Reginald does eventually recover and the episode, like many of the other gothic elements, is largely an occasion for satire, with the narrator commenting in regards to his excessive melancholy that “grief, after all, is like smoking in a damp country—what was at first a necessity becomes afterwards an indulgence”(61). These moments when gothic elements are inserted, and then vanish, with seemingly no connection to the rest of the text reveal the fluidity with which the silver fork moves between generic affiliations. It enacts these moves so as to heighten the level of detail it includes, and also vary it. The description of an isolated, decaying castle represents a different category of detail than the typical silver fork panoply, but still reflects an emphasis on detailed representation for representation’s sake.

These incorporations of gothic elements are, of course, not unique to silver fork novels. Many realist novels likewise borrow such elements and interweave them into their plots. However, whether they are treated satirically or seriously, these elements are fitted coherently into the overall plot structure. Catherine Morland may discover that there are no dark secrets lurking in Northanger Abbey while Jane Eyre may discover that Thornfield houses secrets even darker than her suspicions, but in both cases, these discoveries affect change in characters and move the plot forwards towards eventual conclusion. The details which are used to create an atmosphere of mystery and suspicion thereby maintain a sense of relevance, even if readers eventually come to learn that they have been radically misinterpreted. When, in silver fork novels, these gothic elements are introduced and discarded at random, the details used to create that atmosphere are marked out as perhaps even more superfluous than the ones which at least create a vivid

impression of a glamorous setting. They are not anchored towards a coherent generic affiliation, and so can seem a form of narrative excess.

In *Vivian Grey*, episodes of mystery and the threat of violence are also undermined by flippancy. While the site of these threats is not a Continental castle but the graceful country estate of the Marquess of Carrabas, Château Desir[22] certainly becomes a house of secrets and dark mysteries for the young Vivian. Vaguely attracted to his host's sister-in-law, Mrs. Felix Lorraine, Vivian is drawn into her web of intrigues, which include a secret love affair, political scheming, and eventually, when he refuses to function as her pawn, an attempt to poison him. While these schemes and stratagems necessitate partially overheard conversations and midnight meetings in secluded portions of the chateau, there are repeated intrusions of the ludicrous which refuse to allow for any genuine sense of menace.

In one chapter, playfully entitled "South American Ornithology," in order to account for the shrieks which resulted from a late-night encounter with the hysterical Mrs. Lorraine, Vivian invents a ludicrous account of a rare, and uniquely noisy, species of parrot. In the poisoning episode, after Vivian "distinctly beh[olds] Mrs Felix Lorraine open a small silver box, and throw some powder into the tumbler which she was preparing for him" (107), he empties the tumbler into "a large globe of glass, in which some gold and silver fishes were swimming" (107). The fish suffer the worst effects, hardly a melodramatic climax. There is the interesting role reversal of Vivian, as a young man, being suspicious of a malevolent female figure who seems to oscillate between aiming to seduce or to harm him, thereby in some ways coming to mirror the typical gothic villain. More importantly, such a form of plotting creates opportunities for

[22] The combination of an accent being present in "château" but omitted in what is more properly "désir" is Disraeli's own.

additional detail to be introduced into the text: because of this scene of poisoning, readers get to hear about glass fish bowls, and fish that themselves echo the language of luxury in their silver and gold colours.

In *Godolphin*, there is more of an emphasis on the supernatural and the occult: this is after all, a somewhat ghastly and ghostly novel, which opens on the deathbed of Constance Vernon's father. His final words to her, "words that ruled her life and sealed her destiny" are "remember—the Oath—Revenge!" (9). The binding power of an oath and a curse, especially in the way in which it cuts Constance off from domestic security, and dooms her to a restless, unstable quest, carries Gothic precedents. This gesture, however, is not motivated by any of the usual acts of bloodshed or betrayal that might be expected to spur this kind of multigenerational feud: Vernon's bitterness is directed very explicitly towards the fashionable world, and the financial losses and social embarrassment he has suffered. As he recounts his tale to Constance he stresses his decline into debt at the urging of wealthier peers, and their subsequent abandonment of him so that "my life was reduced to two epochs—that of use to them—that not" (8). The revenge he seeks is oriented in the same way: he predicts for Constance that "in the social walks of life you will delight to gall their vanities; in state intrigues, you will embrace every measure that can bring them to their eternal downfall" (8). Dark motives are couched in the familiar glitter of London high society, and the combination evokes a distinctly silver fork interpretation of a gothic legacy of curses and vengeance.

All of these features reflect a loose, episodic structure marked by rapid shifts of tone. There are also shifts in place throughout these novels. Although critics have identified a rigid geographic

confinement (not just to London, but to a few elite neighbourhoods within London)[23] as a trademark feature of the silver fork novel all three of these novels engage in significant ways with a world not only outside, but one which is 'Other.' Although significant portions take place respectively in the German principalities, Spain, and Italy, all three novels start in typically English settings: Vivian is born in London and educated at an English boarding school, Emily is raised in an isolated English country town and then makes her debut into London society, while Percy and Constance grow up in close proximity to each other, again in the English country-side. The characters move to exoticized Continental locales only in the latter halves of their respective texts, and most often after a traumatic event (a death, rejection by a beloved). In all of the texts the move to Continental locations is accompanied by an intrusion of the fantastic, if not downright supernatural. It also affords an opportunity to include additional detail about their travel experiences and destinations, heightening the exoticism of a genre that rooted its appeal in the voyeuristic pleasure of representing esoteric experiences.

Even Vivian's arrival at Château Desir, still located in England, begins with an architectural description that occupies essentially the entire chapter and offers intricate, if at times hyperbolic, levels of detail, including for example, "a noble gateway … in various parts of which, the Ionic column, and the prominent keystone, and other creations of Roman architecture, intermingled with the expiring Gothic, into a large quadrangle, to which the square casement windows, and the triangular pediments or gable ends, supplying the place of battlements, gave a varied and Italian feature" (40). The structure in which a gothic plot will unfold itself boasts Gothic architectural elements, and in both, an irregular, if not outright chaotic, mass of detail seems to be a defining characteristic.

[23] For a discussion of this, as well as cartographic representation, see Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel*, 79-83.

Deviating from a strict reliance on utility and purpose has repeatedly been read as a function of the Gothic in art and architecture. In outlining her theory of the definalized detail, Schor turns to this style for an example: "Sublimated by the totality into which they are absorbed, the ornamental details of the Gothic cathedral become, to borrow from Kant's aesthetic vocabulary, purposeless" (27). Ruskin, writing not long after the decline of the silver fork, would argue for a departure from utility and strict unity as one of one the great virtues of the Gothic. Unexpected as it may seem, the language he uses in *The Stones of Venice* reflects a model for understanding the aesthetics in silver fork plot:

> It is one of the chief virtues of the Gothic builders, that they never suffered ideas of outside symmetries and consistencies to interfere with the real use and value of what they did. If they wanted a window, they opened one; a room, they added one; a buttress, they built one; utterly regardless of any established conventionalities of external appearance, knowing (as indeed it always happened) that such daring interruptions of the formal plan would rather give additional interest to its symmetry than injure it. So that, in the best times of Gothic, a useless window would rather have been opened in an unexpected place for the sake of the surprise, than a useful one forbidden for the sake of symmetry. (44-45)

Silver forks likewise show little regard for external conventions of how novels should be organized, and are open to including the useless, where and when they want it. In so far as they display any pattern, it is that they freely abandon pattern when something else provides a better opportunity to engender a richer texture of detail. This may mean borrowing liberally from another genre, or, as the next section will show, abandoning conventional expectations about plot altogether.

The Good, the Bad and the Decorative: Plot and Detail

One of the best formulations of the ambivalence that surrounds heavy reliance on details is offered in Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail*. While concerned primarily with visual art, her study traces "the story of the rise of the detail [which] is of course inseparable from the all too familiar story of the demise of classicism and the birth of realism"(Rooney xlii). While gesturing to the close affinity between realism and a preponderance of detail, she also distinguishes between the categories of the "bad" and the "good" detail as follows: "the bad detail is a good detail which has gone bad by completely detaching itself from its support to become an end in itself, a detail for detail's sake" (50). This evokes precisely the dichotomy between how details are used in different kinds of novels: realist texts abound in these sorts of good details, instrumentally revealing characters and facilitating plot. Even when their existence serves primarily to create a richer, more realistic texture of experience, the existence of a coherent plot safely close at hand offers them a sort of legitimacy by proximity, functioning as exactly the "support" whose absence marks a descent into bad details. As Schor explains, "as long as the clauses of a certain aesthetic contract are respected—avoidance of the contingent, maintenance of the guarantors of classical order (simplicity, regularity, symmetry)—the proliferation of details is authorized, even encouraged" (27). Although she is referring to architecture, this seems likewise to embody the grounds on which realist novels are permitted to revel in detail.

It is difficult to sustain an argument that silver fork novels feature too many details. Any critical discussion of realist texts tends to contend eventually with both the sheer quantity of detail they convey, and just how central its presence is to the nineteenth-century examples of the genre. When critics have turned to survey a similar wealth of detail available in silver fork novels, they have generally acknowledged this as a flaw, grounds for either rebuke or embarrassed apology.

Classed as "the most circumstantial kind of novel that had existed, the most prosaic and precise" (Colby 22), silver forks have been judged "pseudo-literary gossip journalism concerned with neither characterization nor plot but with the illusion of authenticity" (Moers 53), an illusion most easily cultivated through a wealth of detail.

The distinction between categories of detail is to be arrived at not by calculating quantity, but by considering the structures of the respective novels in which the details are embedded, and how these structures succeed or fail at legitimizing them. Schor offers another immensely useful concept for this analysis in her definition of the "definalized detail": "by definalized, I mean not having a finality, a goal, a *telos*" (27). Silver fork details belong in this category because they exist in novels which, due to their unstructured and open-ended approach to plot and conclusion, cannot endow them with the requisite meaning to become functional details.

In realism, plot relies on coherence between narrated events such that it can become "the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative" (Brooks, *Reading* 5). Brooks also states that plot generates "the dynamic aspect of narrative … [forming] the unfolding of … a line of intention and a portent of design that holds the promise of progress towards meaning" (*Reading* xiii). Events, particularly those which may at first seem irrelevant or inexplicable, become meaningful in relation to the unfolding of plot, even if only after a lengthy delay; Dickens offers some of the most skillful examples of how various intersecting plots come to ensure that a seemingly chaotic body of events is eventually endowed with significance. Silver fork plots, by contrast, "seem to twist and turn disturbingly with little reference to the psychological forces that move realist fictions" (Copeland, *The Silver Fork Novel* 4).

This pattern of plot bestowing meaning holds true not only for events, which may in fact be working to facilitate plot, but also for details and small incidents. Take, for example, *Wuthering Heights* and Cathy's childhood request for a whip as a gift. The request does not facilitate anything of direct consequence to the plot, but in the context of what readers learn about Cathy, and what they watch happen to her, the detail becomes a productive space, an opportunity for some of the work of the novel (telling readers something about Cathy) to be performed. Or, when Hardy's Tess first appears with a red sash adorning her white dress, this is not the moment of a superfluous detail of fashion that silver forks are notorious for, even though, taken in isolation, the inclusion of such a detail can seem virtually identical to noting that Emily Arundel wore a sea-green dress and diamond tiara. Plot is particularly important to realism, with its wealth of detail, for just this reason: "the material world is arranged, and transformed with regard to the exigencies of plot or in order to allow the reader to enter the signifying practices of the work" (Stewart, *On Longing* 31).

Considering the quantity of details presented, plot offers a structuring principle, a literal *raison d'être,* around which details can be organized. Duncan goes so far as to suggest that plot is central to the functioning of fiction:

> Even as the novel began to totalize its mimetic range, it reasserted fiction, and not mimesis, as its critical principle, in an elaborate commitment to plot. Fiction in these novels is the effect above all of plot … to read a plot—to take part in its work of recognition—is to imagine a transformation of life and its conditions, and not their mere reproduction. (2)

This equation of plot allowing the novel to move beyond "mere reproduction" begs the question of what might happen if plot no longer offered an organizing principle. It seems that in silver fork novels, where plot ceases to exert a unifying function, there is precisely this descent into "mere reproduction." An abundance of details works to confirm an impression of accuracy, but fails to take its place in a larger structure of narrative meaning.

If details tend to rely on plots for meaning, plots tend in turn to rely on conclusions: as Frank Kermode puts it in his study of endings, "all such plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning" (46). In so doing, endings generate a sense of closure. Closure seems linked to a sense of unified parts: it may be defined as "the process by which a novel reaches an adequate, appropriate conclusion" (Torgovnick 6), fulfilling one of the functions of an ending, which is to "justify the cessation of narrative and to complete the meaning of what has gone before" (Miller xi). A certain pattern for achieving this has long been associated with a certain incarnation of realism which has at times been reviled for, as Henry James describes it in "The Art of Fiction," treating endings like "[the end] of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices" (7) in which rewards and punishments are satisfyingly, and neatly, portioned out. Oscar Wilde parodies this convention when he has a character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* glibly explain, "the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. This is what Fiction means" (206). While many novels certainly support this emphasis on poetic justice as a means of providing resolution (*Pride and Prejudice*, or *Oliver Twist* offer easy examples to reach for), even in cases where the ending can in no way be classified as "happy," there still tends to be a sense of unity which generates a certain kind of satisfaction: a sense of resolution or stasis is achieved. This is often regarded as serving an ideological function: "by leaving the reader in a state of unquestioning repose and acceptance, the self-contained or classic text inculcates a

vision of a coherence or stability underlying social reality and cultural conventions alike: the finality of the end becomes the ultimate signifier of this immutable worldview" (Boone 78). For the purposes of this study, however, analyzing precisely *why* realism is so attached to closure is less important than simply recognizing that it is, and that this attachment often defines expectations of how a text will function.

Some silver fork novels appear to offer endings that conform to expectations of closure and coherence. This has led to assertions that "the formulaic plot of the fashionable novel is one of supersession: the glittering show of aristocratic Regency society gives way to sturdy happiness of the bourgeois, companionate marriage" (Elfenbein, "Silver Fork Byron," 79). Of the novels discussed in this project, *The Young Duke*, *Pelham*, and *Mothers and Daughters* conform at least to some extent to this pattern of ending, though less frequently to the plot structures expected to generate it. There is nonetheless undeniable evidence that the endings of "many silver fork novels feature a flurry of murder, suicides and all-round collapses" (Ó'Cinnéide, *Aristocratic Women* 59). The three novels discussed in this chapter, Benjamin Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1826), Letitia Elizabeth Landon's *Romance and Reality* (1831), and Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Godolphin* (1833) offer exactly these kind of 'messy' endings. Simply recognising this is a valuable insight into a genre repeatedly accused of homogeneous mass-production,[24] often paralleled to the production of contemporary Harlequin romances: "silver-fork novels assimilated the mentality of the assembly-line to artistic production. One novel virtually identical to the next poured from Colburn's presses" (Elfenbein, "Silver Fork Byron," 79). The plots of the silver fork novels to which I draw attention are certainly not formulaic and prescriptive;

[24] This critique has existed for nearly as long as the genre: an 1831 article in *Fraser's Magazine* deplored how "quantity and not quality is the thing closest to the [fashionable] author's heart; and the bookseller cares little what he publishes, since … the vilest trash is sure of some sort of market" ("Novels of the Season," 9).

rather, their narrative disarray and sense of excess speak to the particular descriptive orientation of silver fork endings.

It is of course not simply the kind of endings that matters in distinguishing silver fork novels from realist ones, but more significantly, how that ending is situated in relation to plot. In the place of a realist attention to developing plot and building towards an ending, silver forks substitute an emphasis on describing a sequence of details. This process is perhaps best described by the *Quarterly Review*: "here, plot provides separating links" (Rev. of *Arlington*, 177) for the highly detailed descriptions that comprise the core of the text. Silver forks use plot as a means to arrive at the next description, rather than a trajectory towards resolution, and because silver fork novels don't 'do' closure, nor unity, their details therefore become definalized. These bad details, in turn, generate the impression that silver forks are bad novels.

The absence of a linear narrative in all three novels is apparent in even the briefest of plot summaries. *Vivian Grey* is likely the most convoluted of the three; Sanders tactfully cautions in his introduction that "coherent plotting is not one of the strengths of *Vivian Grey*" (xxxix). What plot there is encompasses the education and ambitious schemes of the eponymous young hero. Vivian's adventures and misadventures include, but are not limited to: an expulsion from school, an elaborate but entirely failed scheme of political manoeuvres to secure office for the Marquess of Carrabas, escaping the murderous efforts of a discarded mistress, accidentally killing a close friend in a duel, a series of rambling travels through the German states, falling in love only to have Violet Fane, the object of his desire, drop dead upon hearing his proposal, and precipitating a political crisis by falling in love with a disguised princess. He finds himself embroiled in political schemes wherever he goes, but these tend to be poorly thought out and lead literally nowhere, towards an ending where the narrative is abandoned at a moment of crisis, apparently

out of sheer lack of interest in proceeding any further. In the novel's final scene, while travelling towards Austria, Vivian is swept off his horse during a flash flood, and without specifying whether he lives or dies, the text concludes, "Here leave we Vivian" (528).

Landon and Lytton's novels offer slightly more by way of structure, if no less in the way of melodrama. *Romance and Reality* largely centres around heiress and beauty Emily Arundel as she discovers how to navigate London society, promptly falling in love with the hero Edward Lorraine. He never returns her feelings, losing his heart instead to Beatrice, the daughter of a Spanish revolutionary, whom he encounters during Continental travels. Moving rapidly between Spain, Italy, and England, after a complicated series of political and personal upheavals and coincidences in which Emily and Beatrice befriend one another, Emily dies of a broken heart, bestowing her blessing on Edward and Beatrice's marriage. The plotting is erratic and episodic enough that reviews debated whether the result could even in full justice be called a novel, [25] suggesting that at the very least "it is dissimilar in manner and subject from its predecessors" ("Important New Publications," 403). Later critics have often taken a similar view, suggesting that, "There is much undoing in *Romance and Reality*. Contradictions abound, as does mockery of what was said before, so that it often appears Landon is more interested in the novel as a dialogue of ideas than in any kind of resolution of them" (Lawford xxvi) or noting that "through three long volumes the main events are densely surrounded by secondary action, and by dialogues and vignettes that have virtually nothing to do with the development of the story or of the characters" (Sypher, *Letitia* 134).

Godolphin takes its title from the surname of its hero, Percy Godolphin, who falls in love with the proud beauty Constance Vernon, only to have her reject him because she has promised her

[25] Cynthia Lawford's Introduction opens with a brief summary of this debate.

dying father to amass power, wealth, and influence so as to carry out a mission of revenge on high society, which he had blamed for ruining him and precipitating his death. While she makes a more distinguished match, he goes to Italy, becomes involved in practices of the occult, and takes Lucilla, the daughter of an astrologer, as his mistress, only to leave her several years later when he reunites with a now widowed Constance. After the novel charts several years of their complicated marriage and political strategems, Lucilla reappears in England, bearing curses for Godolphin[26] and as she predicts, only hours after she dies, he is swept off of his horse during a raging storm, and drowns.

Excess is a key silver fork convention and these novels abound with a glittering panoply of objects, a seemingly endless array of minor characters, and in their formal properties, a verbosity which no doubt contributed to their decline in popularity. These three particular novels expand upon this excess, brimming over with the outlandish and the implausible. Their details and descriptions are not contained or legitimized by plot; rather, their plots and ending work to create as many opportunities for description as possible. The first step in establishing a poetics of the silver fork is understanding this alternative orientation.

Open Relationships: Silver Forks and the Marriage Plot

Godolphin did not appear with an acknowledgement of Bulwer Lytton's authorship until the 1840 edition. This edition also featured a new Preface,[27] reading in part,

> The defects of *Godolphin* most apparent to myself, are in the manner in which Lucilla is reintroduced in the later chapters, and in the final catastrophe of the hero. There is an

[26] A note on names: in this chapter I refer to characters according to the convention of their respective novels. In the case of *Vivian Grey*, this leads to referring to the protagonist by his first name, while Godolphin is almost exclusively called by his surname.
[27] This Preface is included as an Appendix in the Pickering & Chatto edition edited by Harriet Devine Jump.

> exaggerated romance in the one, and the admission of accident as a crowning agency in the other, which my mature judgement would certainly condemn, and which at all events appears to me out of keeping with the natural events. (318-19)

This excerpt from Bulwer's preface draws attention to the novel's latter portion. Both of the problems he isolates are associated with the conclusion: one marks a disruption to the marital happiness of his protagonists, and the other addresses the abrupt halting of the novel with its hero's demise. In noting the disruption of the marriage plot and the dismissive ending, Bulwer detects a pattern which reappears in Landon and Disraeli's novels. Typically used to provide closure in realist texts, marriage plots and deaths are used in silver fork novels as ways to multiply narrative possibilities and create opportunities for detail and description.

The significance of the marriage plot to the realist novel has long been a subject of critical interest. Boone notes that "the novel's recurring obsession with the nature of romantic relationship and its possible outcomes is clear" (5), while Tony Tanner, in his study of adultery and the novel, states emphatically that "Marriage is *the* central subject for the bourgeois novel" (15, emphasis in the original). Tabitha Sparks likewise identifies the marriage plot as "the Victorian novel's central imaginative structure" (3). Marriages hold an important relationship not just to novels in general, but to the ends of novels in particular: they are, of course, one of the most frequently deployed ways in which a narrative can be brought to a close. It is also worth noting that not just any kind of marriage produces closure: the appropriate end to a courtship plot tends to exert a stabilizing function by providing hope for an enduring future, a role of affirming communal bonds, and often ensuing financial stability and resulting offspring. It also tends to require a carefully moderated degree of companionate affection: while avoiding an excess of passion, there is also a requirement for a level of emotional and intellectual compatibility

between partners. As Sparks summarizes, "this mode of realism finds a satisfying and convincing resolution in a marriage plot that symbolizes companionship, often (but not always) desire, and the economic and civic virtues of compromise that marriage represents" (5). It is often these kinds of marriages that are allowed to conclude novels: indeed, one indication that a marriage is not going to endure is often when it is located early or midway in a text (for example, Dorothea and Casaubon, or David Copperfield and Dora), becoming instead an obstacle that will have to be worked through before the text can arrive at the 'right' marriage which will successfully conclude the narrative.

Existing criticism of silver fork novels has likewise registered the significance of the marriage plot within the genre. There is recognition that a broad basis of the genre's appeal lay in the moral license it depicted, offering "potent fantasies of release from middle-class structures [in which] insouciant Regency exclusives … offered a seductive model of license rather than self-restraint" (Hughes, "Silver Fork Writers," 330), accompanied by an early willingness to accommodate depictions of challenges to domesticity, particularly divorce.[28] There is also, however, a critical emphasis on the development of a pre-Victorian bourgeois domesticity in these novels, such that "the glittering show of aristocratic Regency society gives way to sturdy happiness of the bourgeois, companionate marriage … the Regency is the beautiful but flawed society that must at last be renounced for the tamer but more lasting pleasures of what looks like middle-class domesticity" (Elfenbein, "Silver Fork Byron," 79). Colby goes further, asserting, "there is not a single [silver fork] novel in which virtue does not triumph and in which the values of simple domestic life are not ultimately confirmed" (56). While this pattern holds true for some silver forks, an ending which asserts the triumph of domesticity is certainly not the only available

[28] See Wagner's "Satirized Silver Cutlery" for a brief discussion of the reoccurring presence of divorce, and divorced women, in silver fork texts.

narrative pattern in the genre. Recognizing the diversity of attitudes towards domesticity is helpful for more broadly rethinking the customary typification of the silver fork genre, in which "[critical] dismissal [is] due, in part, to the formulaic nature of the texts" (Wilson, "Almack's," 238). Understanding this greater level of richness and complexity suggests a need to examine silver fork novels more closely so as to understand the nuances they offer, rather than regarding them monolithically.

Some work has already been done towards rethinking the role of the courtship plot in silver fork novels. In her essay, "Silver Fork Stereotypes and Regency Romance" Kendra works to dismantle the image of silver fork novels as akin to mass-produced contemporary romances, and in so doing argues for their resistance to the traditional courtship plot, suggesting that they do not demonstrate "resolute focus on a single, developing relationship between heroine and hero" (150). And in considering the trajectory of dandy novels, Deborah Lutz notices that "the reform of the silver fork dandy happens through politics (*Pelham*) or an emotional downfall (*Vivian Grey*) and not through romantic love" (69), suggesting that the courtship plot ceases to be a major narrative motor in the tradition. While these readings suggest that courtship and the marriage plot simply cease to be very important within the silver fork tradition, it is also worth considering how these tropes can remain important, and yet function in distinctive and hitherto unrecognized ways. I will argue here that in the silver fork novel, marriage plots remain a key feature, but work to create open-ended, rather than conclusive, plots.

All three novels begin by establishing expectations that they will enact a traditional courtship and marriage narrative. *Vivian* traces the maturation of a young man beginning in childhood, and the *Bildungsroman* tendencies of the text generate expectations that his development will culminate in a stable career and a happy marriage. The number of obstacles he encounters only furthers

these expectations: as he eliminates possible career paths and possible spouses along the way, attention becomes more focused on the choices he will eventually make. This pattern certainly appears in considerations of his career: dismissive of, in turn, the respectable professions of law, the military, and the clergy, it is in fact never clear what Vivian will do with his impressive intellectual abilities and personal charisma.

Nor is it clear who, if anyone, he will commit himself to. No single courtship plot marks out the course of the novel. The possibility of romantic success is as convoluted and vacillating as the political plot lines, so that "in both, Vivian's hopes and expectations are ultimately thwarted by unforeseen circumstances" (Sanders liv). This works to show Vivian as unable to commit to any particular goal, even while his desires are easily stirred by every new opportunity: at the aptly named Château Desir, his attentions wander between Mrs. Lorraine and the daughters of various visiting nobles. His encounter with Violet Fane in Part II suggests a more sincere devotion, but if his relationship with her represents Vivian's genuine attempt at pursuing love, this is a disastrous failure as well. When he confesses his love to her, he speaks of "his early follies —his misfortunes— his misery—his matured views—his settled principles—his plans—his prospects—his hopes" (286). The language Vivian uses here evokes a young man who has made mistakes, learned from them, and is now prepared to move forward with his life, married, established and settled. However, this possibility is cut short by nothing less dramatic than Violet dropping dead upon hearing his declaration of love.

Through this melodramatic staging of events, a moment of potential romantic resolution is both denied and rendered farcical, particularly by details such as Vivian expressing his anguish by "shout[ing] as if an hyena were feeding on his vitals" (287). After Violet's death, there are few romantic prospects for Vivian, even though a significant portion of the novel remains. While

entangled in political intrigues at the court of a German prince, he does develop some feelings for a young woman he believes to be a Baronness, but who is later revealed to be "a Princess of the House of Austria, and the pledged wife of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Reisenberg" (492). When he is forced to leave court immediately upon learning this, the romance ends as abruptly as did the one between Vivian and Violet, and his own suggested demise follows shortly.

The conclusion of *Vivian Grey* has been read explicitly as a dismissal of domesticity. April Kendra argues that "the novel ends abruptly, denying Vivian the opportunity to redeem himself by reentering a domestic space. Indeed, a careful reading of the overwritten ending reveals that it is not Vivian but domesticity itself that is destroyed" ("Gendering," 30). In addition to the disruption of romance plots by violent deaths, the presence of love and sexuality in the novel is persistently undermined by Vivian's rather lukewarm attitude. There are suggestions that his ambitions dominate his libido. His discovery of politics is eroticized in the satisfaction that it provides him with, in that "the *want*, the indefinable *want*, which he had so constantly experienced, was at last supplied" (22, emphasis in the original). Here, "the language is nearly erotic: [what with] the inexplicable longings, the indefinable want … the agitation and the panting" (Kuhn 57). Vivian reveals a certain cynicism when contemplating marriage as well, since he "looked upon marriage as a certain farce in which, sooner or later, he was, as a well-paid actor, to play his part" (52) and even the possibility of sincere attraction is risky, since "how a statesman, who was wedded to a beautiful woman, could possibly perform his duties to the public, did most exceedingly puzzle him" (52). With the attitude embedded from the beginning, the absence of a marriage at the novel's end is less surprising, but no less disruptive to a sense of closure, working to heighten the sense of Vivian being left in a radically indeterminate state.

The other two novels feature plots of courtship and domestic resolution more explicitly, but they likewise use these to diversify their texts rather than bring them to a coherent resolution. *Romance and Reality* does end with a happy marriage. Importantly, however, it is not a socially-endorsed marriage, with the English world never being fully able to embrace Beatrice, concluding that "the beautiful Spaniard was as cold as she was beautiful—too reserved and proud for attraction" (448). This is especially important because Beatrice is clearly not the only option available to Lorraine: Emily, in some ways staged from the beginning as the ideal candidate to be his wife, is implicitly contrasted as a figure who would have fit naturally as his partner in English society. The isolation of their marriage is depicted in the intensity of Beatrice's attachment to her husband: she "shrink[s] away from the many, to concentrate her whole existence upon the one … for him only her eye brightened" (448).

While this might signal passionate devotion, coupled with society's failure to warm to her, this isolated and asocial relationship can hardly be understood as a complete success in a novel which has repeatedly presented marriage as a complicated expression of social and communal bonds. As the coquette Adelaide placidly concludes "as to her marriage, that she took for granted must happen—but she left all its arrangements to her mother" (80). In the period most closely approximating courtship between Edward and Emily, Lady Mandeville takes an active part, having "erected a little romance in her own mind, of which Emily was already the heroine" (217). In addition to situating marriage as an essentially social institution, involving far more than two parties, the novel also explicitly considers the difficulties attendant on a match which meets with social disapproval. Interestingly, the narrator takes this opportunity to distinguish "the difference there is between a woman's love and a man's" (383): generally, " [a man's] passion may lead him, in the first instance, to act in opposition to opinion—but its influence is

only suspended and soon a sneer or censure wounds his pride and weakens his love" (383) and in reference specifically to Edward Lorraine, "he had lived too much in society not to be solicitous about its opinion" (383). This assertion hardly bodes well for the stability of a marriage that, at the novel's end, does not suggest he is in possession of social approval. Emily, on the other hand, is adored by virtually everyone she encounters, and her good graces and social positioning establish her as an ideal spouse.

The disruptive potential of Edward and Beatrice's marriage is further signalled by the way it unsettles patterns of tradition and inheritance. Because Emily "could not endure that another race should dwell in the house of [her] fathers" (448), at the novel's end, "the wheat now springs up over the dwelling place of the ancient house of the Arundels" (448). Despite having bonded with Beatrice, Emily does not regard her, or the children she may bear Edward, as the appropriate inheritors of her legacy. Readers may presume that if she had married Edward herself, they would have happily inhabited Arundel Hall. Instead, when her future hopes are denied, she effectively obliterates her family's history, refusing to see the legacy diverge into a lineage she views as non-legitimate. The language of "another race" here is especially significant: Beatrice is not only external to the Arundel family, and its traditions, but considering her exoticized status as an outsider from a Catholic country, her exclusion from a landed legacy gestures to a refusal to position her as an appropriate match for Edward. Landon thereby undermines the value of the marriage that the novel ends with.

The legacy of the Arundel family is not depicted as entirely vanquished at the novel's end: Emily's portrait remains in the home of Beatrice and Lorraine. However, this gesture of memory also serves to undermine any sense of domestic resolution: it both reframes attention away from the completed marriage, to the abbreviated history of Emily's life, and emphasises her

uncompleted romantic trajectory. When visitors admire her portrait, the response to queries about her identity is that she was "an early and beloved friend of [Beatrice]'s" (449). As a result, Emily is, in her final position in the text, denied domestic resolution. Because of her centrality to most of the novel, a domestic resolution that excludes her fails to be much of a domestic resolution at all. Considering the relationship of the marriage plot to social stability and continuity, a partnership which does not perpetuate these values does not truly produce a sense of closure at the end of the narrative. Instead, the convoluted courtship between Beatrice and Edward Lorraine creates the occasion for an array of locales and episodes to be featured in the text: her exotic heritage, and the adventures that must be traversed before they can be together, become sites for the inclusion of detail.

While the marriage plot that seems to be present in the text works away from closure rather than towards it, the novel is also haunted by its shadowy double which is never realized. A focus on the development of Emily's character is established from the beginning of the text. In the novel's opening scene, she is clearly the centre of attention, and the early portions of the plot follow a narrative familiar to readers of, for example, Burney's *Evelina*: moving from boredom and isolation in a sleepy country home at the beginning of the novel, a sheltered beauty confronts the dazzling world of London high society, "with no very accurate notion of what she had to expect; but [that] it was to be something very delightful" (144), recording her impressions along the way. All the signposts of her narrative suggest that the ultimate end will be marriage: the presence of false suitors who want her, but who she doesn't want, contrast with Lorraine, who is presented as her ideal partner. For the novel to end not with her marriage, but with her untimely death, is deeply at odds with the aims of a courtship plot producing narrative closure.

However, in Landon's novel, the courtship plot that is implied without being realized for Emily becomes the occasion for copious material details, a feature that is more central to the text than any successful domestic resolution. Most of what would be deemed "plot" or "action" in *Romance and Reality* is compressed into roughly the last third of the novel. Prior to that, the lack of events is conspicuous in that Emily repeatedly expresses disappointment at the contrast of her expectations concerning life in London and the actuality of what she encounters. The title's contrast plays out explicitly in her notions of what she had hoped to encounter, and what she actually does experience, which is virtually nothing of substance, comprising instead largely conversation and her hidden and one-sided infatuation with Edward Lorraine. Emily's disillusionment flirts with the possibility of disillusionment also being shared by readers of the novel: they, like Emily, have already been trained to believe that when a young and beautiful woman enters London high society, something will happen. *Romance and Reality's* refusal to conform to the plot trajectory of courtship and marriage comes into play in these early sections. Just as Emily will later be denied a happy domestic ending, she is here denied much in the way of suitors, agreeable or not, obstacles, or events of any kind.

A particularly good example of this occurs in the description of Emily's first ball. The spatial description begins even with her preparations in a boudoir that is "one of those becoming rooms which would put even a grace in additional good humor" (31), minutely described as featuring "curtains at the window [which] were rich rose colour, the paper a pale pink … on the mantel piece two alabaster figures supported each a little lamp, whose flame was tinted by the stained flowers" (31). The richly visual character of the evening continues with an account of how

> … the silver light from the moon-like lamps flashed back from bright gems, and brighter eyes; the rich decorations—alabaster vases, their delicate tracery like the frost-work of

> winter filled with the flowers of summer—the sweep of purple curtains—the gold mouldings and a few beautiful pictures—while all terminated in a splendidly illuminated conservatory. (32)

Ultimately, however, the ocular pleasure of such scenes is the only pleasure Emily derives from that evening, and the subsequent ones, lush and gorgeous as they might be. Emily is left dissatisfied with the whole experience, so that "evening after evening Emily stepped into the carriage with all the slowness of discontent, and flung off robe and wreath on her return with all the pettishness of disappointment" (34). She responds to a frustration rooted in the carefully tailored setting, which seems created with an eye specifically for a sort of romantic action that it never sees. While an elite form of entertainment might be deemed unproductive by several standards, this is a particularly unproductive ball in that it fails to do any of the things it might be expected to do: introduce a good suitor, introduce a bad suitor, a rival, or a long-lost wealthy relative who will endow her with future fortune.

This subversion is further heightened when her potential suitor is married off to a rival, even one to whom she had declared herself a sister. It may in fact go so far as to parody it: conventionally, a courtship plot will offer alongside the clearly appropriate match, an attractive but unsuitable one. Walter Scott invests heavily in this model in a number of novels: Waverley finds himself with two possible romantic partners, Flora MacIvor and Rose Bradwardine, as does Ivanhoe, attracted to both Rebecca and Rowena. In both cases, the former, much like Beatrice, is dark, bears associations with some form of exotic otherness (be it an affiliation with the Highland clans or Jewish heritage) and offers a more assertive and sexually alluring prospect than her demure, blonde, English counterpart. Another important instance of this pattern occurs in Madame De Stael's 1807 novel *Corinne*, *or Italy*, a text which Landon at times seems to seek

consciously to revise (her poetry had dealt extensively with themes related to Stael's novel, particularly the figure of the *improvisatrice*). There, the hero Oswald must weigh his love for the independent and exoticized poetess Corinne against the domestic charms of her half-sister Lucile, and eventually chooses the latter, despite his lingering regrets, especially after Corinne's death. While these novels are marked by their protagonist choosing the woman who has been posited as the apt match, Landon's hero in fact goes through with marrying the sultry, dark, and foreign Beatrice, defying the expectations that have been established by the contrast between Beatrice and Emily.

In addition to the denial of domesticity which the ending confirms, the conclusion is not an optimistic one; upon the novel's publication, "Landon surprised many … with her cynicism with its absence of hope and its deflation of ideals that her poetry had seemed to promote" (Lawford xxi). It is worth noting that her poetry abounds with images of unhappy love affairs, and the deaths of female characters under tragic circumstances, and so *Romance and Reality* may not be such a radical departure from these themes; as Ann Mellor notes, "Landon's poems repetitively construct the narrative of female love as love rejected, love thwarted by fate and circumstances, love known only to be lost" (113). In the Preface to *The Venetian Bracelet* Landon even uses the variety of portrayals of "love unrequited, then betrayed, and again destroyed by death" as grounds on which to disclaim biographical readings, noting wryly that "assuredly the same mind cannot have suffered such varied modes of misery" (102).

Even if it aligns with the predominant themes of Landon's poetry, the conclusion of *Romance and Reality* is one which perversely refuses domestic resolution, even though it does foreground the marriage of two lovers who have overcome extensive obstacles. By multiplying the marriage plot, so to speak, there are more opportunities to include more description: every failed ball is a

new opportunity to detail that Emily nervously ate pineapple, rather than strawberry, ices while hoping to catch Edward's eye. However, the narrative risks having these details appear hollow: they might seem something worth noting if situated as a part, however small, of a trajectory towards some resolution between the two: without this structuring pattern, much of what has come before can be read as superfluity. Rather than wondering why the details are cluttering up the progress of a plot, it is important to recognize that here, the plot exists mainly to link the details and hold them together like a strand of pearls.

Godolphin in some ways offers the sharpest blow to traditions of domesticity, and affects it most jarringly. By early in volume 3, the novel appears to offer exactly what *Romance and Reality* has denied: Godolphin has rejected Lucilla, the young Italian woman who is his mistress during the years he spends abroad, and married Constance, who much like Emily, has been positioned as his appropriate match all along: "the hand of her whom Percy Godolphin had loved so passionately and whose voice even now thrilled in his inmost heart, and awakened echoes that had slept for years … [was] his to demand" (182). This turn towards domestic resolution is marked by a geographic return: the newly married pair leave Italy and return to England, presumably to spend the rest of the novel in wedded bliss; Godolphin expresses his hopes of an idyllic home including "books, pictures, statues, and old trees that shall put us in mind of our Norman fathers who planted them" (220). In so doing, he evokes the sense of marriage facilitating a tradition of continuity and stability within the broader framework of a historically and nationally grounded community. However, upon closer inspection, the novel largely dismantles whatever domestic relationships it evokes. Because courtship plots are introduced only to fail, or at least falter, the overall plot arc of the novel becomes more circuitous, creating fresh sites for description.

Lucilla and Godolphin initially seem to mime a sort of pastoral domestic felicity; however, this is persistently undercut, even in the early stages of their relationship. Consider this honest, if acerbic, description of their relationship: "for two years they live together in a remote region of Italy, where the hero indulges in meditation and metaphysical speculation while imagining himself to be happy" (58-59). Lucilla is repeatedly held up as unequal to Godolphin's intellectual abilities, and while her naivety initially charms him, he is left with an eventual experience of "a wearisome seclusion and an eternal ennui" (175). In addition to these problems of compatibility, Lucilla and Godolphin's relationship is pointedly not a sanctioned marriage, and the narrator treats this as grounds for its eventual failure. Lucilla will eventually make it clear that she resents him for having robbed her of "the young pure heart I had ere I loved you" (222). She is presented as substantiated in this resentment: the text clearly signals the questionable morality of Godolphin's choice to live with Lucilla as his mistress. His immediate response to her initial declaration of love is that "were I to love you … it would be dishonour" (144). Her offer to live with him without being married to him engenders "a terrible struggle in Godolphin's breast" (148) and he accepts her only with a guilty conscience, moved by her persistent pleading and insistence on her love for him.

The narrator clearly condemns this socially unsanctioned relationship, arguing that as a result of "a love unrecognized by the customs of society … you will be beset, entangled, mortified" (176). Addressing a presumed male reader who "in the heat and zeal of blood, [has] thought to rebel against the social law" (175), the narrator cautions him not to "give to everyone the power to misinterpret your best friend—to jest at her virtues" (176). Pointedly, Godolphin's legal marriage to Constance is celebrated for "that which gives to lawful, what clandestine love can never

attain" (220).[29] Whatever sort of domesticity is established between Lucilla and Godolphin is undermined by this condemnation and also by Godolphin's failure to find a true intellectual or emotional partnership with his young Italian mistress. Not only does the relationship fail on technical grounds of matrimony, it does not adequately display the model of a companionate partnership which is central to the successful conclusion of a marriage plot. Constance's first marriage, to the wealthy and politically influential Lord Erpingham, is likewise portrayed as emotionally illegitimate, "surrounded by power and pomp and adulation … for which [she] sacrificed affection" (110). Both of these early relationships imitate but do not achieve domestic happiness, and thereby foreshadow the anti-domestic themes of the novel's conclusion.

They might be seen as the early false steps through which Constance and Godolphin will come to a fuller appreciation of one another, as their successful reunion suggests. However, even after that reunion, their relationship manifests internal tensions. The chapter heading to Chapter 7 of volume 3 summarizes events: "the return to London—the eternal nature of disappointment …" (227); the preceding chapter carries the even darker heading "in which two persons, permanently united, discover that no tie can produce union of minds" (224). While malevolent occult forces may damage Constance and Godolphin's marriage from the outside, it is the discord between the two that undermines the idea that their union will guarantee stability, or generate a tidy conclusion for the text.

Constance is a complexly gendered figure in the novel: there are repeated references to her engagement with power and politics, her ability to suppress her feelings and her ambitious drive

[29]Lytton's earlier novel *Pelham* also expresses anxieties about relationships that lack the legal sanction of marriage, even if founded on genuine emotion: Pelham's close friend Reginald Glanville eventually shares with him the harrowing tale of how refusing to marry the woman he loved because of her lack of social status and living with her instead as his mistress, leads to their mutual isolation, and eventually her rape and subsequent death. This crime sets in motion the elaborate revenge plot/murder mystery that animates much of the novel's later portion.

towards achieving her desires, all of which mark her as a masculinised woman. For example, exalting in her return to London, she exclaims, "oh, that I were a man!" (227), expressing her desire to obtain full public and political agency, so as to more directly pursue her schemes of revenge. Exacerbating this, Godolphin fails to live up to the standards of masculinity she expects from him. Although his choices to marry Constance and return with her to England reflect the possibility of newfound ambition, once there he fails to shoulder the new set of responsibilities she clearly wants him to assume. He is resistant to moving to London, which she sees as essential due to its status as the hub of social and political activity. Instead, he prefers to lounge idly in a country retreat, so that she rebukes him: "is pleasure, mere pleasure … to be really the sole end and aim of life? ... and action, enterprise—are these as nothing?" (221). While "he lavished away his life, Constance became more and more powerful" (250), and this imbalance of power drives a rift between the couple which is only beginning to be mended upon his death.

These problems are reflected in the reconciliation they achieve shortly before Godolphin's death. It is triggered by a combination of factors. Godolphin takes a more assertive role, and begins to plan for a more active and politicized life, in which "a clearer and distincter view of the large objects of life lay before him" (290-91). Constance simultaneously becomes more docile and passive, thus triggering his dormant tenderness for her through her displays of "a gentle, even a humble sweetness, which … was what most attracted him" (269). Their new equilibrium is, however, remarkably short-lived (though not, as the narrator tartly notes, "as short-lived as matters of the kind frequently are," (269)) and dominated by tragedy and lack of resolution at the novel's ending. Effectively, neither the hero nor the heroine spends more than a very brief portion of the text in any sort of happy and sustainable relationship: "Too late, Godolphin realizes that his has been a selfish existence, a life of continuous disappointment … the question

of whether he would be able to rechannel his energies is of little consequence and remains unanswered" (Zipser 59). In sum, Lytton's text, like Disraeli's and Landon's, does not privilege any convincing domestic resolution. By avoiding this resolution, the novel creates space for the accumulation of detail.

Sudden Deaths

When closure is the aim, there is, of course, at least one prominent alternative to ending with marriage: "In traditional fiction, marriage is a dominant form of this *ne plus ultra*, but death is another" (Miller 4). Rachel DuPlessis draws attention to the same duality so as to examine its gendered implications: "the marriage/death closure … is a 'place' where ideology meets narrative and produces a meaning-laden figure of some sort" (19). Death, of course, potentially offers the ultimate closure, and it is certainly not unknown for a high realist text to end with the deaths, even abrupt ones, of significant characters. In both Landon and Bulwer Lytton's texts, the ending is defined by the deaths of protagonists. In Disraeli's novel, there is a literal abandonment of the narrative and lack of resolution, to the point that it remains unclear whether the protagonist lives or dies. All of these silver fork deaths defy closure, facilitating a model of plot oriented towards the representation of details, not structuring a movement towards a coherent conclusion.

The circumstances under which both Vivian and Godolphin meet their fate are remarkably similar: riding through a thunderstorm so intense that it seems unearthly, they are both imperilled by torrential waters. The descriptions of these storms echo one another: "some of the largest trees were torn up by the roots; the sluices of the mountains were filled, and innumerable torrents rushed down … the Heavens now open, and lightning and thunder contend with the horrors of the wind" (Disraeli 527) is closely paralleled by "Down fell the black rain in torrents; and far

from the mountains you might hear the rushing of the swelled streams … the trees rocked and groaned beneath the rains and storm" (Bulwer 311). Vivian is swept off of his horse in a flash flood, while Godolphin, attempting to cross a swollen river, is struck on the head, falls from his horse and drowns. Importantly, in Vivian's case while the situation is depicted as perilous, the ending is left open, with only the summation of "Here leave we Vivian!" (528). Disraeli, years after publication, remarked playfully that he believed that Vivian still lived. Godolphin is decisively killed off: his body is retrieved the next day.

The fate of Landon's heroine is likewise definitive. Prompted by some sort of wasting disease triggered by a broken heart, Emily's death displays a lack of violence, in that the cause is organic rather than accidental. Her death lacks the heroic, active aspects of the two male characters and is triggered by romantic loss instead. It is nonetheless hardly a controlled, graceful languishing towards a final end, in the vein of, for example, Clarissa. She literally drops dead: she manages to make her way back to her ancestral home in England to die moments after the clock strikes midnight, ushering in her twenty-first birthday. In the seconds that elapse after the chimes are heard, Emily not only signs the will she has prepared in advance, but also recognises the footsteps signalling Lorraine's arrival on the scene. She does not, however, have sufficient time to greet him: she gives "one eager look towards him [and then] her face was set in the fixed calm and pale hues of death" (445). In its abruptness, Emily's demise parallels an accidental death: there is a total absence of farewells, final resolutions, or final thoughts. As such, Emily's death creates a similar effect as do those of Godolphin, and, possibly, Vivian. While the deaths may end the novels, they do not generate a sense of closure, nor do they connect in a meaningful way to the action and events which have come before.

This lack of conclusion is particularly striking because all three characters originate as protagonists whose development spans the text, encompassing significant stretches of time. *Vivian Grey* opens with explicit attention to its hero's development, reflecting that, "I am not aware that the infancy of Vivian Grey was distinguished by any extraordinary incident" (5), and moves forward through his childhood and school days. Godolphin also first appears as a youth, arguing with his father about being forced to continue to attend school. Emily, interestingly, is significantly older than either of the two male protagonists: she is nineteen, "that pleasantest of ages" (8) at the novel's opening. However, she remains relatively unformed at this stage, having lived a sheltered and uneventful life in the country under the benevolent guardianship of her aunt and uncle. Bearing in mind also that the focus of her maturation will be the events and choices that lead her towards an eventual marriage rather than the educational and career trajectory of Vivian and Godolphin, there is little narrative investment in turning attention to her before she arrives at a marriageable age: "with her capacity to think and form opinions undeveloped, beautiful Emily is seen by most to possess interest only for her marriage prospects" (Lawford xvi).

The abrupt deaths signal an attitude of dismissal and abandonment, enacted with particular assurance in the final moments of these novels. Landon makes this attitude an explicit part of her narrative, commenting that "in the closing chapter a little explanation goes a great way; and a character, like a rule of morality, may be dismissed in a sentence" (446). Some critics have found these patterns of relative lack of interest appearing even earlier; for example, it is suggested that in the earlier part of *Romance and Reality*, high-society description overwhelms attention to the protagonist so that "the heroine Emily Arundel is nowhere to be seen here" (Lawford, ix). The tone of the final lines of *Vivian Grey* is similar: after the famous, "Here leave we Vivian" the

narrator continues, "his history has expanded under my pen" (528), suggesting that he has now recollected himself, and is stopping the narrative out of this recognition, rather than any natural sense of conclusion.

Instead of moving briskly towards a final, definitive moment of closure, silver fork novels embrace circuitous structures, and often end on a note of surprise that they must cease. The narrator of *Vivian Grey* concludes wistfully, "his history has expanded under my pen, and I fear that I have, even now, too much presumed upon an attention which, probably, I am not entitled to command … following my roving fancy, I might arrive at some green retreats hitherto unexplored, and loiter among some leafy bowers where none have lingered before me" (528-29). This language of "roving," "lingering," and "loitering" reflects the silver fork aesthetic of plot, one which differs markedly from realist expectations, and therefore can present a jarring and disruptive encounter, unless its aims and strategies are clearly understood.

Chatting and Browsing: An Aesthetic of Leisure

The silver fork approach to both genre and plot tends towards the accretive, so that the form of these novels mirrors the plenitude and abundance central to their project of representation. As described in the introduction to this chapter, silver fork texts also display a certain narrative indolence, in which there is no particular attachment to making things happen. The transition between this model and the more outcome-oriented plotting of the realist text, especially in later Victorian incarnations, lends itself to being read as a metaphor for the social and political transitions that surrounded the decline of the silver fork genre. As Engel and King argue, this decline can be partially attributed to "the manner in which [silver fork novels] held up frivolity and idleness as *summa bona* in an age whose bywords were fast becoming earnestness and

work" (107). Whether they represented them in a spirit of critique or admiration, silver forks mainly represented individuals who, due to their wealth and status, had no need to approach their lives in a spirit of utility. The novels that represented this aristocratic life came to embody a similar ethos. In these texts, pleasure was also divorced from function, and details were represented without regard as to whether they were fulfilling an immediate purpose or not.

Practices surrounding plot in the silver fork novel also borrow from an aesthetic of leisure. As it popularly figured within the genre, the Regency represented an apex of privilege, which while it might have been fleeting, engendered very few specific demands on one's time. Over and over, one sees silver fork characters drowsing on sofas, sleeping until noon, and wondering how to kill time until dinner. The extensive travel undertaken by silver fork heroes is made possible because of the lack of professional demands on their time. These social conditions are given narrative manifestation in novels that sprawl out their storylines in desultory fashion, and simply abandon plotlines and characters whenever their immediate charms wear off.

The leisurely narrative aesthetic of the silver fork results in an emphasis on conversation as a way of creating a rich texture of verbal detail. They also display self-reflexive meditation about this choice to foreground conversation over event. Disraeli's narrator explains lackadaisically,

> These conversations play the very deuce with one's story. I had intended to have commenced this book with something quite terrific — a murder or a marriage and I find that all my great ideas have ended in a lounge. After all it is, perhaps the most natural termination. In life surely man is not always as monstrously busy as he appears to be in novels. We are not always in action — not always making speeches, or making money or making war or making love. Occasionally we talk — about the weather, generally, —

> sometimes about ourselves, oftener about our friends — as often about our enemies. (148)

While this technique is defended, the attention lavished on conversation as a form of detail is seen as occurring at the clear expense of a carefully structured plot punctuated by regular action, and leading to a cohesive ending.

In *Romance and Reality*, detailed representation of conversation, usually, but not always, occurring at dinner parties, begins in chapter 11, almost exactly midway through the first volume. In chapters dominated by conversation, the dialogue is presented as if drama, indicating the character's name in italics, followed by his or her speech. There are no qualifiers or mediations in the form of adverbs, or choice of verb. Even the simple absence of, "said Lorraine," replaced here with merely a name followed by a dash to introduce speech, serves to distance the speech from its speaker. The speech, often witty, droll, and highly artificial, could be spoken by almost anyone, and as such it does not deepen or develop characterization. In fact, many of the characters who appear in these chapters are entirely incidental, receiving minimal introduction, and sometimes only appearing once, as mouthpieces for dialogue that could be as easily spoken by another interchangeable individual. Sypher puts conversation at odds with plot in the novel, noting that in place of a well-developed plot, *Romance and Reality* substitutes "conversations, *bons mots* and vignettes of society" ("Introduction," 6). The effect of this emphasis was jarring enough that reviews suggested that it would "most probably originate a separate class in novel-writing" ("Important New Publications," 403).

In order to feature as many varieties of detail as possible, a vast range of subjects are included in these conversations, and they are approached lightly, rarely being examined in any depth, simply

picked up and then cast aside. There is also very little differentiation between these subjects. The wry heading to Chapter 20 in *Godolphin* which focuses on such dinner table chatter lists: "love-woman-books-a hundred topics touched on the surface" (84) as its content. Not only does this gesture towards a sense of variety, and a mere skim over the surface, it also suggests a combination of subjects being treated more or less equally. A description from *Vivian Grey* highlights this even more explicitly: "All the lively chattering, amusing elegant conversation, so full of scandal, politics and cookery" (31). In the combination of topics available, ranging from the conventionally "serious" to the "frivolous," there is the sense that both the serious and the frivolous are treated interchangeably. Silver forks are in some ways incredibly fastidious about what can be included in the text, excluding anything that does not fall within a sphere of elite privilege, and thereby establishing protocol for what is socially acceptable or not, fashionable, or not, gauche or not. Yet, when it comes to conversation, there is very little sense of rank, or discrimination between categories. In silver fork novels, that hierarchy collapses into a surprisingly democratic melee in which the fabric of a sofa is on par with musings about whether or not to accept a proposal of marriage.

While wide ranging, these conversations are most often portrayed as highly ritualized social events. Within the silver fork genre, the dinner party is a central event. Speaking of *Vivian Grey* as an example of the genre, Kuhn evokes its emphasis on "parties and drinking and dressing up and what they had for dinner and who danced with whom" (13); Ó'Cinnéide furthers observes that "the quintessential narrative spaces of the silver fork novel are dining rooms and drawing rooms" (*Aristocratic* 51). The novels themselves record these events as ones governed by strict, although not always readily apparent, codes of protocol, part of which involved the appropriate tenor and timing of conversation. Landon's narrator notes that "dinner arrived, and with it soup,

salmon, and silence. A person who talks at the commencement of the course must either have no feelings of his own or no regard for those of others" (227). Disraeli's narrator in turn offers the further dictum that "when a man is either going to talk sense, fight a duel, or make his will, nothing should be seen at dinner save rump steaks, and the lightest Bourdeaux [sic]" (87). By analyzing the policies around dinner-party conversation, the narrative gives the impression of presenting authentic knowledge, and readers are given a sense of privileged access. These impressions are most effectively generated when the silver fork includes lavish detail.

The silver fork plot's aimless movements in which pleasure is rooted in the experience of details rather than any outcome also mirrors the emerging phenomenon of shopping as a leisure practice. As Lysak notes in her study of Victorian women's shopping practices, "the notion of shopping as a leisure activity was becoming fully institutionalized … [marked by] look[ing] at the wares [and] at times –- and sometimes transgressively — handling them as well" (7). Similarly, the details which silver fork novels hold are presented with such careful verisimilitude that they are given almost tactile representation. While silver fork readers may linger over gazing and handling textual details, those details needn't be attached to a thought-provoking or morally-improving plot, or indeed to any plot at all. The pleasure is derived from the experience, rather than the conclusion and results of the experience. Describing this shift in the practice of shopping in an 1875 article, "The Philosophy of Shopping," the author distinguishes between "going to the shop with a definite sense of want, and a clear determination to purchase something" and "passing so many hours in the shop on the mere chance of buying something … just as [one] would decide to pass a similar period in driving through the Parks" (488).

Trying to measure the success of a silver fork novel according to the amount of plot resolution it achieves is akin to considering the latter sort of shopping trip a failure because no purchase is

made at its conclusion. A silver fork novel offers the chance to idle away a few hours in the literary equivalent of browsing amidst details, a practice wherein the outcome of the excursion does not determine its success or failure. It therefore uses plotting and generic borrowing to accommodate as many details as possible so as to make it all the more appealing to rifle through, and there is no need for those details to be strictly organized. The pleasure of coming across them unexpectedly only secures the sense of the novel as a place where the indulgence of a moment's whim trumps any commitment to an overarching plan.

Chapter 2 "Polished and So Curiously Insincere": Characters and Self-Referentiality

In writing about the silver fork dandy as an object of convoluted desire, Deborah Lutz describes how

> The dandy's unattainability lies not in a deep interior— a blighted spirit—but rather in superficial externalities such as his genius for inimitable style, a brilliant social intercourse so dazzling it can't be grasped, a performance of personality that is unreadable not because of its obscure hiddenness but rather its oversimplification in the realm of the marketplace. It appears sometimes that the dandy's soul can be located by discovering the name of his tailor, his florist and his horse dealer. Emotions, even subjectivity, take on inauthenticity. (71)

Lutz identifies a deliberate and self-conscious self-fashioning that is typical of both the silver fork dandy and the genre in general. While she thoughtfully seeks to reframe these characteristics as the key to a more nuanced understanding of the figure of the dandy, the silver fork emphasis on "superficial externalities" has more often been used as an indictment of the genre. Just as the silver fork's looseness of plot and generic affiliation can be read as messy, the genre's approach to characterization and metatextuality have been read as evidence of inauthenticity and insincerity. In Conrad's *Nigger of the Narcissus* (1898), for example, the unnamed narrator observes an elderly sailor reading Bulwer's famous dandy novel *Pelham* and

wonders ""what ideas do [Bulwer's] polished and so curiously insincere sentences awaken in the simple minds …" (3).[30]

Both the dandy protagonists and the self-reflexive narration of silver fork novels model a form of self-conscious self-fashioning, in which texts and individuals are deliberately crafted and composed according to dictates determined by standards of fashion. This makes them largely shaped by externals. At the same time, they remain fluid and perpetually subject to change and revision. This narrative model challenges realist expectations concerning the representation of complex, individuated characters, and a text that serves primarily to represent the experiences and emotions of those characters as they progress through the world. The silver fork novel is primarily invested in using its characters as devices for the inclusion of detail. These novels are also generally self-aware about their status as participants in a pre-scripted and pre-scribed genre structured around a set of largely formulaic expectations. In both cases, rather than the illusion of an individual or a text that exists organically, silver forks foreground a process of deliberate crafting and self-fashioning in response to external forces.

Self-Reflexivity and Metanarration

Silver fork novels are openly self-reflexive about the work of capturing the fashionable world and making it available for public inspection. Whether voiced directly by a dandy character who has adopted the device of penning his memoirs, or by the chatty narrator of *The Young Duke*, these texts discuss the strategies for writing a good fashionable novel with the same measured and careful deliberation that the dandies apply to their dress and their décor. In her prologue

[30] The passage begins with the observation that "The popularity of Bulwer Lytton in the forecastles of Southern-going ships is a wonderful and bizarre phenomenon" and continues, "What meaning can their rough, inexperienced souls find in the elegant verbiage of his pages? What excitement?—what forgetfulness?—what appeasement? Mystery! Is it the fascination of the incomprehensible? Is it the charm of the impossible?" (3)

Gore uses Cecil's voice to frame the rest of his narrative by describing how to be a good "flippant writer," a figure which seems to have something in common with being a good dandy: "[the author] should rather put forward, as if his careless manner of dismissing objects half considered did not at all proceed from his own incompetence to go deeper, but rather as if such little things as the interests of nations, philosophy, science, literature, and the fine arts were not of so much importance that his august self should take too much trouble about them" (5).

In considering how to best represent the world of the elite to a readership that is presumed to lie outside of that world, the emphasis falls, interestingly, on a sort of naturalism. As Pelham's mother explains,

> I have often wondered what common people think of us, since in their novels they always affect to portray us so different from themselves. I am very much afraid we are in all things exactly like them, except in being more simple and unaffected. The higher the rank, indeed, the less pretence, because there is less to pretend to. This is the chief reason why our manners are better than low persons: ours are more natural, because they imitate no one else; theirs are affected because they think to imitate ours; and whatever is evidently borrowed becomes vulgar. (103)

Later in the novel, Lord Clarendon agrees, lamenting that "The author [of a silver fork novel] makes the countesses always talking of their family, and he is always quoting the peerage. There is as much fuss about state and dignity and pride, as if the greatest amongst us were not far too busy with the petty affairs of the world to have time for such lofty vanities" (306). This state of affairs comes to pass largely because "Most of the writers upon our little great world have seen nothing of it: at most they have been occasionally admitted into the routs of the B and Cs of the

second, or rather the third set." However, this inaccuracy could be prevented easily enough by following a simple maxim. "There is only one rule," he summarizes, "necessary for a clever writer who wishes to delineate the beau monde." It is this: "let him consider that dukes, lords, and noble princes eat, drink, talk move exactly the same as any other class of civilized people" (306-07).

By openly discussing how to write a fashionable novel, silver forks engage in a form of ironic metacriticism. The trope of offering directives for how to produce a fashionable novel occurs over and over within the genre. In Lord Normanby's *Yes and No: A Tale of the Day* (1828), the narrator playfully (but accurately) suggests that an aristocratic authorial name will ensure publishing success:

> Do you know the modern recipe for a finished picture of fashionable life? Let a gentlemanly man, with a gentlemanly style, take of foolscap paper a few quires, stuff them well with high-sounding titles—dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, *ad libitum*. Then open the Peerage at random, pick a suppositious author out of one page of it, and fix the imaginary characters upon some of the rest; mix it all up with a *quantum suff* of puff, and the book is in the second edition before ninety-nine readers out of a hundred have found out that the one is as little likely to have written, as the others to have done, what is attributed to them. (1:135-36)

Disraeli offers his own formula in *The Young Duke*: "Take a pair of pistols and a pack of cards, a cookery-book, and a set of new quadrilles; mix them up with half an intrigue and a whole marriage, and divide them into three equal portions" (111). These formulas evoke the reoccurring critique that novels of this type were commodities, rather than literature, and could

therefore be produced by following a rote script without any recourse to creativity, inspiration or even skill. In 1841, for example, *Punch* included a piece titled "Literary Recipes: How to Cook Up a Fashionable Novel": "Take a consummate puppy— […] baste with self-conceit—stuff with slang—season with maudlin sentiment—hash up with a popular publisher […] Shred scraps of French and small-talk very fine. Add 'superfine coats'—'satin stocks'—'bouquets'—'opera-boxes'—'a duel' " (39).

When agreeing, ironically or otherwise, that a silver fork novel can be constructed simply by including the "right" sort of details, both authors and critics reveal the silver fork as a highly prescriptive mode, reliant on the presentation of insider details to readers who were, as they themselves acknowledged by purchasing the novels, outsiders. Because a novel's success as a fashionable text could be determined by these superficial nods to stock tropes, the silver fork genre can readily be perceived as failing to present an authentic core narrative. In the self-conscious articulation of these prescriptive conventions, however, silver fork novels reveal that this devotion to detail constitutes an accepted and inevitable part of the genre. Composing a text within these strictures created an opportunity to playfully and self-consciously enact those tropes while displaying an awareness of their intended effect.

The Dandy

A number of critics have noted that the silver fork novel emerges in two main overlapping waves: from about 1825 to the early 1830s, there tends to be a predominantly masculine emphasis in terms of both writers and protagonists, which subsequently gives way to greater inclusion of female authors, and a new emphasis on courtship plotlines and focalization through female characters. Kendra summarizes this trend in a now-widely adopted division between

dandy and society novels, the former referring to early examples of the genre made famous by authors such as Lister, Disraeli and Bulwer Lytton. It was with these authors and early novels such as *Granby, Tremaine, Pelham, Vivian Grey* and *The Young Duke* that the silver fork genre became established, initially grouped under Hazlitt's label of "the dandy school."

The figure of the dandy has been variously defined, and is the subject of a fairly extensive body of criticism. He is an individual marked by restrained yet fastidious attention to his dress and public presentation, so that critics can write of the "Regency dandy, enveloped in an egocentric aura of ennui, elegant clothes and epigrammatic wit" (Engel and King 62). A number of studies locate him as a historical phenomenon:

> Regency England reinvented the dandy as a social and political phenomenon during the decades when working and middling people increasingly despised the notion— and members — of the aristocracy and the monarchy. The dandy thus became an emblem of aristocratic fashionable exclusiveness and a figure for middle class emulation and social mobility: a mediating, precarious and malleable man ambiguously positioned between the ranks in an age of status anxiety and class instability (Sadoff 110).

The dandy was present in both literature and life, drawing "on two of the most fascinating celebrities of the Regency era: Beau Brummell, who presumed to set the fashion not only for the beau monde but for the sovereign himself, and Lord Byron, whose exploits as a lover, wit, and a bon vivant (not to mention as a poet) had become legendary" (Kendra, "Stereotypes," 144).

The dandy also could be defined against emerging cultural norms, therefore taking on subversive valences: "bourgeois sincerity or earnestness holds no attraction for the unregenerate dandy; he self-consciously privileges ornament and artifice, even if they are patently spurious or deceptive"

(Hughes, "Elegies," 192). Further, "the dandy [exists as] the perfectly useless man who makes of his uselessness and disdain for work an exquisite style" (Gilmour 7). In order to manifest that style, the dandy is preoccupied with the most subtle nuances as the means to displaying sophistication: "The beau, fop and dandy all exist in relation to the detail— of wine, plate and fabric. Like a detail himself with his soft voice, this beau performs the significance of the trivial" (George, "Emergence," n.p). In marshalling such details in service of self-presentation, "The dandy's achievement is simply to be himself. In his terms, however, the phrase does not mean to relax, to sprawl, or ... to unbutton; it means to tighten, to control, to attain perfection in all the accessories of life" (Moers 18). Because the dandy was already positioned in the cultural imagination as a figure defined by small details, he could readily be imported into a literary genre that shared a similar preoccupation.

Benjamin Disraeli's *The Young Duke* (1831), Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham* (1828), and Catherine Gore's *Cecil* (1841) all devote sustained attention to a single figure, and span long stretches of time, evoking the convention of a developmental narrative. Two out of three of these novels feature first-person narration by their protagonists, suggesting that readers will be granted intimate access to the interiority of at least one character as a result of this narrative convention. In Disraeli's novel *The Young Duke*, the title character, George Frederick Augustus, Duke of St James[31] is the heir to a fabulous fortune; when he is orphaned as a child he is consigned to the guardianship of the retiring Mr. Dacre, a model of virtue and a devout Catholic. The young heir however is quickly seduced by the more glittering charms of the family circle of his uncle, the Earl of Fitz-pompey (*sic*), and loses contact with both Mr. Dacre and his daughter May, the duke's childhood companion. Upon achieving his majority he becomes the darling of high

[31] The title does not reflect any actual dukedom; Disraeli may have drawn the name from St. James Square, a prestigious West End address.

society, devoting most of his time to spending his fortune and becoming enmeshed in a complex web of love affairs, plots, and counterplots. This keeps him so preoccupied that he learns only with shock that he has not only spent the entirety of his fortune, but also fallen deeply into debt. Humbled by his financial losses, as well as the realization that his celebrity status has declined, he retreats to the country where he learns the importance of a modest lifestyle and social and political engagement from Mr. Dacre, and the pleasures of unaffected love from May Dacre. He ends the novel by making his mark as an emerging politician through championing the cause of Catholic rights, thereby also proving his worth to May, who agrees to marry him.

The hero of Bulwer's *Pelham* is likewise born into a life of privilege and luxury, and initially devotes himself to a life of pleasure in London and Paris, taking cues from his mentor, the famous dandy Russelton (closely modelled after Beau Brummel). Pelham's narcissistic self-absorption is disrupted in the final portion of the novel when he learns that his longtime friend Reginald Glanville has been accused of murder. Despite the damning evidence against him, Glanville insists that he is not guilty, though he had good reason to hate the murder victim, who had years before raped Glanville's fiancée. Pelham commits to proving his friend's innocence and is able to discover the true murderer, resulting in Glanville's acquittal. The novel concludes with Pelham marrying Glanville's sister Ellen and settling into a life of contented domesticity.

While *Pelham* and *The Young Duke* were published within a few years of one another, *Cecil* appeared a full decade later. Nonetheless, it aligns itself in subject matter much more closely with the silver fork novel in its earlier phase of the dandy novel. The length of time spanned by the three volumes of *Cecil* carries readers through a retrospective, and at times nostalgia-tinged, reennactment of the Regency. With *Cecil*, Gore has to navigate a past era, (the chronology of the novel begins in the era of the French Revolution and ends around 1825), and in her efforts to do

so, the text becomes in part a historical novel. Silver forks and historical fiction remain fields that might be richly explored alongside one another: many authors (including all three discussed in this chapter) move fluidly between both forms, and in many ways, the attention to detail and setting that is so essential to the creation of historical verisimilitude is also of the utmost importance to the silver fork genre.

The novel's protagonist, Cecil Danby, is likewise born into a life of privilege, although the narrative reveals early on that his illegitimacy is an open secret, and that he is only tacitly accepted by his mother's husband. Able to live a life of ease and pleasure, Gore's "sarcastic, club-going, peripatetic, womanizing" (Hibbard & Copeland xv) protagonist spends much of the novel recounting his travels, love affairs, and dictums concerning fashion and taste. His history is however punctuated by regular tragedies, such as the death of his first true love, and the accidental death of his young nephew, for which Cecil is largely held responsible. Nonetheless, he is ultimately able to advance in public influence, and by the end of the novel, concluding that his "inborn graces were now refined … by much travel and much converse" (342-343) he accepts a Court appointment, the specifics of which are purposefully left vague.

Over the course of three volumes, the reader spends a great deal of time with a given dandy, and yet it seems unlikely that he or she leaves the novel with a sense of having come to know that character in the way that often seems to be one of the central aims of novel reading. One is left bumping up against unyielding surfaces rather than being able to penetrate them. The dandy is presented as both surface and spectacle: he is defined by external, material details, and he exists primarily as a self he performs, ever conscious of his own presentation. He also moves fluidly between different desires and different personas. The novels are crowded with incident and detail, seemingly providing ample opportunities to learn things about the characters to which

readers have such proximate access. This strategy represents a reversal of the typical realist technique of characterization, in which details often exist to perform the task of revealing character, because "you cannot, the realist claims, represent people without taking account of the things that people use and acquire in order to define themselves—their tools, their furniture, their accessories" (Brooks, *Realist Vision* 16). This need to take account of a character's material surroundings explains why realist texts contain a rich texture of description. These realist details possess a clear purpose that legitimizes their function, while silver fork details exist in the same sort of privileged sphere as the aristocratic characters who facilitate their representation. Rather than mean, they prefer to simply be; just as Cecil or the young Duke can scarcely contemplate a life of obligation governed by productivity, earnestness, and effort, silver fork details have no obligation to pull their narrative weight, so to speak.

This model of characterization largely challenges realist norms. "The concept of character," writes John Frow, "is perhaps the most problematic and the most undertheorized of the basic categories of narrative theory [because] its sheer obviousness disguises the conceptual difficulties it presents" (2). Yet despite this theoretical difficulty, it does not seem to be difficult to intuit that for novels, characters matter profoundly. W.J Harvey writes blithely in his 1965 study *Character and the Novel* that "most great novels exist to reveal and explore character" (23). Deidre Lynch opens her study of the history of literary characters with the more nuanced meditation that, "in the late twentieth century, after all, it is (still) the time that we spend with characters that matters most to many readers" (1). As new research borrowing from techniques of the neurosciences offers increasingly detailed cognitive models of reading experiences, much

has focused on exploring the empathetic connections that have come to be understood as central to the practice of reading literature in general, but fiction in particular. [32]

The act of reading, it seems, is often defined largely in terms of the act of imagining oneself as a character, or in similar situations to those a character encounters. While this is no doubt a valuable part of the reading experience, it also establishes a specific hierarchy of values for the novel, in which characters who offer fully developed subjectivity deepen and increase the value of the text as a whole. This hierarchy, like most, rewards some and punishes others: novels that present detailed, plausible, and otherwise "well-rounded" characters are valorized for doing so, and novels that don't often get critiqued for having failed at a vital part of what a novel should be doing. So central is the value of well-portrayed characters that this has been used as the grounds on which to attempt to salvage the reputation of the silver fork, as when Rosa argues that "had it not been for the few writers … who went further and created real characters" (8), the silver fork genre could be justly forgotten.

The problem arises when other kinds of novels, which may not prioritize character development in the first place, are perceived as having failed in this area. This is a problem for a number of genres such as science fiction and some examples of the gothic, where the focus may be on events, or the construction of a world, rather than the individuals responding to those events, or inhabiting that world. Silver fork novels have been running into objections concerning their presentations of characters from their inception. Despite their position as literature seemingly

[32] For a good synopsis of a number of studies related to reading and cognitive science, see Annie Murphy Paul's "Your Brain on Fiction." This article quotes one study that "concluded that there was substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals — in particular, interactions in which we're trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others. Scientists call this capacity of the brain to construct a map of other people's intentions 'theory of mind.' Narratives offer a unique opportunity to engage this capacity, as we identify with characters' longings and frustrations, guess at their hidden motives and track their encounters with friends and enemies, neighbors and lovers".

obsessed with good manners and proper behaviour, silver fork novels are over and over again critiqued in tones that suggest they have violated some aspect of decorum: in this case, that novels should serve mostly to tell us about people, with things safely relegated to second place.

Critical attempts at defining some of the things realism might mean return, in strikingly similar language, to talk of "individuals": "the form of realism shifts to individual experience in its temporal and spatial context" (Stewart, *On Longing* 27), "realism … is interested in the effects of experience on individuals" (Eigner 2), "[realism] is tied to … a new concern with private lives and the psychology and morality of individual choices" (Brooks, *Realist Vision* 12). Talking of individuals is, in the first place, a revealing move, since it means not only people, but convincingly unique people, who can be counted as discrete units based on distinguishable qualities that lend them interest. Silver fork novels are full of people, certainly, but how many of them qualify as individuals might be open to debate, and this suggests part of their departure from realist patterns of characterization. As Copeland explains, "Regency and post-Regency literature push the limit case of 'literature's self-recognition' by ignoring the familiar critical demand that characters must have inner lives" ("Opera," n.p).

On the other hand, while carefully and often lovingly delineated, the individuals at the heart of most realist enterprises are often quite unexceptional: Ian Watt, whose account of the rise of the novel is inextricably connected to what he labels its formal realism, notes that

> the novel's serious concern with the daily lives of ordinary people seems to depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature and there must be enough

> variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of the novel. (31)

The realist project of depicting (or claiming to depict) "the daily lives of ordinary people," unfolds in a tradition stretching from Jane Austen's attention to "three or four families in a country village" (*Letters* 275) to George Eliot's celebration of art that depicts the "monotonous homely existence which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow mortals than a life of pomp … or world-stirring actions" (*Adam Bede* 161), and well beyond into the twentieth century. Silver fork novels interrupt this tradition when they opt to do characters differently: their fundamental premise is that the lives offered to readers will not be ordinary at all, but rather luxuriant and dramatic. The focus of the novel will be the excess and privilege of a select few who bear only a passing resemblance to what is available to most readers via their lived experience.

A significant part of the work of upsetting the assumptions surrounding how and why literature and literary studies arrived at the valuing of complex, individuated characters has been undertaken by Lynch in *The Economy of Character.* Lynch's project is immensely helpful in its challenge of "the intrinsic truths of an individuality that is simply 'there' and seems magically to escape the social conditions of its meaning" (9). She works to uncover the social motivations and market forces behind the rise of "characters acquir[ing] inner lives, becoming associated, that is, with 'deep' meanings nowhere stated in print" (6). Building on her suggestion that "deep meaning" and the inner lives of characters are in some ways optional, a route that the novel went because of historical and social determinants, I posit here that silver fork novels present an alternative model of characterization, one that like the genre itself can easily be read as flat or inauthentic. The dandy protagonists are largely defined by external details, show a lack of

interest in genuine affective engagement, and transition between different modes of being with such ease that they can seem to lack any consistent core selfhood. This model of characterization allows the silver fork to maximize its inclusion of detail, and it is only when that model is understood and recognized, that silver forks will cease to be seen as blemished by poorly-drawn characters.

"Made To Be Looked At": The Dandy Self and Materiality

In his 1820 essay, "Brummelliana,"[33] William Hazlitt takes occasion to marvel at the attention legendary dandy Beau Brummel lavishes on his dress and grooming. To express the effect of this fastidiousness, he quotes a line of John Donne's poetry: "You might almost say the body thought."[34] Thought, perhaps more than any other attribute, has long been the grounds of inclusion or exclusion from a certain kind of subject status. Thinking forms a large part of what readers expect to see characters doing; to return to Hazlitt's subsequent critique in "The Dandy School," one of the problems with silver fork novels seems to be that they aren't revealing enough about the thinking that surely, by virtue of being subjects, the characters must be doing. Here, though, extending these views of real-life dandy Brummel to the dandy heroes of these novels, we can locate traces of a more troubling possibility: what if rather than thought going unrepresented, the "thinking" of these characters, that is, their selfhood and subjectivity, is manifested solely through their physical bodies? To evoke this possibility, the novels devote significant space to corporeal depictions of their protagonists. The presentation of these bodies is

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[33] Two distinct essays with this title were published, the first in *The Literary Pocket-Book* (1820) and the second in the *London Weekly Review* (1828). Duncan Wu attributes both to William Hazlitt and suggests that the 1820 essay may have been a collaboration with Leigh Hunt. The Donne quotation appears only in the 1820 essay.

[34] From Donne's "Of the Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary": "her pure and eloquent blood/Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought/That one might almost say, her body thought." Hazlitt interestingly uses the quotation to evoke practices of dress, rather than natural process of blushing, and alters the possessive pronoun to a gender neutral one.

seldom static: rather, they are shown, most often, as recipients of careful and solicitous tending. The novels offer us the spectacle of these bodies being fed, dressed, and groomed. In so doing, they effectively relocate the source of a meaningful self from the internal to the external, and through this shift become more aligned with the representation of detail.

Scenes of eating in silver fork novels are often interpreted as marking class distinctions: as a universal practice, eating becomes a particularly effective marker of distinctions between groups. The narrator of *The Young Duke* makes this hierarchical function explicit when he notes, "it is universally acknowledged, that a dinner is the most important of affairs, and a dandy the most important of individuals" (140). Dandies are emblematic of luxury and providing an opportunity for fashionable display just as aristocratic dinners offer a greater spectacle than do more modest forms of eating. While that is undoubtedly part of the function of the relatively ubiquitous dining scenes in silver fork novels, in the case of dandy novels, eating takes on additional functions. First, there is often a distinct move from dining towards actual eating: while certainly the social rituals and the conversations that take place as part of the dining process continue to be significant, in many silver fork novels, these become effectively the entire substance of what gets represented when there is a scene of characters dining. There may be mention of what dishes are served as another indication of taste and status, but rarely is there any specific reference to someone actually eating, or a record of the sensory experience of that eating. That sort of description is only found with any regularity in the dandy novels (including those not discussed directly in this chapter, such as *Vivian Grey*).

This distinction relies partly on gender: as the division between dandy novels and society novels highlights, the latter tends to focalize around female characters and a desire to depict them as adequately dainty and feminine tends to preclude them being shown taking too distinct a pleasure

in consuming food. In general, silver fork novels adhere to Byron's dictum that "A woman should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be lobster salad and Champagne, the only true feminine and becoming viands" (*Letters and Journals* 2: 171). Fortunately most meals in the pages of these novels can boast of lobster salads and champagne, though there are cases where heroines quite literally waste away in the wake of heartbreak, such as Emily Arundel in *Romance and Reality.* Dandy novels maintain this gender distinction through their generally sardonic tone about women's appetites: while visiting Paris, Pelham makes the acquaintance of the Duchesse de Perpignan, whom he describes as follows: "As for me, I had not known her four days before I discovered that she could not be excessively enamoured of anything but an oyster *pâté* and Lord Byron's Corsair ... She was pleased with sighs, but she adored suppers. She would leave every thing for her lover, except her dinner" (85). Cecil has a more visceral encounter with a woman's appetite: having become enchanted with Wilhelmina, a married German woman,[35] he is first ecstatic at the invitation to join her and her family for dinner. The event, however, brings the infatuation to a crashing halt as Cecil is repulsed first by the meal that he is served, and then by Wilhelmina's enthusiastic consumption of it: "she ate with voracity and when the third dish was placed on the table, consisting of a stew of wild boar swimming in stewed apricots and looking like everything that was nastiest in nature, I literally shuddered at the unctuosity of lip with which this ethereal being justified her carnivorous propensities" (233-34). By the dinner's end, he concludes "the horror of the Arabian husband who beheld his wife Amina steal to the churchyard and indulge in her foul repast of human flesh, could not have exceeded mine. I should as soon have expected the Venus de Medicis or Belvidere Apollo to sup on cheese and onions, as that ethereal creature" (234).

[35] It is no coincidence that both of these figures are not Englishwomen.

Men, or at least dandies, seem entitled to gustatory pleasures in these novels, and often to an immoderate degree. The encounters between characters and food are staged in terms of hyperbolic rapture that often verges on the comedic. Examples across the three novels show remarkable consistency. From *The Young Duke*, we get the following address to an ortolan (small birds served as delicacies): "What gushes of rapture! What a flavour! How peculiar! Even how sacred! Heaven at once sends both manna and quails. Another little wanderer! Pray follow my example! Allow me. All Paradise opens! Let me die eating ortolans to the sound of soft music! The flavor is really too intensely exquisite" (28). The Duke's own gratification is mirrored in the commentary of the narrator, who sees gustatory pleasure as an aim so great that it should be pursued alone, so as to minimize the risk of distraction:

> A banqueting hall is often the scene of exquisite pleasure; but that is not so much excited by the gratification of a delicate palette, as by the magnificent effect of light and shade—by the beautiful women, the radiant jewels, the graceful costume, the rainbow glass, the glowing wines, the glorious plate. The rest is all too hot, too crowded, and too noisy, to catch a flavor—to analyze a combination—to dwell upon a gust. To eat—*really*, to eat, one must eat alone, with a soft light with simple furniture, an easy dress and a single dish—at a time. Oh, hours that I have thus spent! Oh, hours of bliss. (38)

Pelham's reminiscences of eating *foie gras* at a French restaurant share a similar tone of rapture: "and thou, most beautiful of all—thou evening star of *entremets*—thou that delightest in truffles, and gloriest in a dark cloud of sauces—exquisite *foie gras*! — Have I forgotten thee? Do I not, on the contrary, see thee—smell thee—taste thee—and almost die with rapture of thy possession?" (80). He also expands the value of eating to privilege it wryly above other serious occasions: "A buried friend may be replaced — a lost mistress renewed — a slandered character

be recovered — even a broken constitution restored; but a dinner, once lost, is irremediable" (238).

These moments of exaggerated pleasure display the general aims of the genre. The dish being exalted never represents exquisite simplicity: rather, the foods are the height of luxury, indulgence and fashionable taste, as is often indicated by their French nomenclature. On a fairly direct level, their inclusion serves to advertise to readers examples of the luxurious cuisine available to those whose means permitted it, thus performing the guidebook and advertising functions of the genre that are assumed when it is read as "a type of conduct book, offering guidance for socially-aspirant members of the middle class who longed to peer behind the façade of fashion" (Wilson, *Fashioning* 1). The consumption of exotic delicacies and the celebration of that consumption performs a classifying function for the characters who experience such pleasure, reminding readers of the rarefied tastes of these men. They are also telling moments as they represent unguarded instants in which often cynical, blasé characters seem to achieve genuine rapture. Because that pleasure is primarily a physical one, perhaps compounded by the thrill of consuming exotic delicacies out of reach for most, it draws attention to the material existence of the characters. Their most evident feelings are bodily sensations.

As the silver fork evokes the transitory pleasure of a luxury the reader will never be fully able to capture, it sustains interest by whetting the appetite without sating it. The narrator of *The Young Duke* roots this ability in his position as a member of the elite: "I could give you a description of the *fête*, which should make all your mouths water—and my cookery has been admired in its day, which was right; because my gastronomical details were the reminiscences of experience, and not of reading" (140). The representation of details of eating plays on this pleasure directly, since unlike even the most rarefied commodities, which could theoretically be purchased if the

means are available, a reader will never be able to know precisely what the particular bite of truffle tasted like. Other types of novel, including realism, certainly portray gourmands but usually as comic relief or foils to more fully realized characters: Jos Sedley of *Vanity Fair*, an aging dandy forever trying to reconcile the expanding waistline that accompanies his gluttony with his fashionable fastidiousness, represents one example. The appetite of the silver fork dandy, while still sometimes presented in a comic vein, is taken seriously as a mode of characterization.

Perhaps the only source of gratification that can rival the dandy's pleasure in dining is the pleasure he takes in dress. When silver forks are noted for their emphasis on material details, clothing and accessories are often one of the first categories invoked. The dandy novels invest heavily in lush, highly visual descriptions of dress and ornamentation. For example, a description of the young Duke runs as follows:

> His grace had a taste for magnificence in costume; but he was handsome, young and a Duke. Pardon him. Yet today he was on the whole, simple, and with the exception of the pink topaz buttons, which shed their rosy hue over his white silk waistcoat, he wore no jewels. … the interior of the waistcoat was imperceptibly lined with rose-coloured silk, and a rich and flickering light was thus thrown over the soft beauties of the blonde. (73)

Even when praising an aesthetic he describes as elegant and simple, Disraeli lingers on material luxuries. This is most likely the passage Bulwer had in mind when he tactfully cautioned Disraeli to beware of descriptive excess, noting "as a trifle— but not to be overlooked—I would give matured attention to the Duke's dress. I confess I think the blonde edgings too bold" (qtd. in Stewart, *Disraeli* 133).

The process of dressing is also luxuriously described, as in passages like

> His Grace's toilette was already prepared: the magical dressing box had been unpacked, and the shrine for his devotions was covered with richly cut bottles of all sizes arranged in all the elegant combinations with the picturesque fancy of his valet could devise, adroitly intermixed with the golden instruments, the china vases and the ivory and rosewood brushes. (72)

Likewise, Cecil notes with pride that "the most refined coxcombry breathed in the arrangements of my sanctuary" (61). The attention to not only the finished result of the dandy's refined appearance, but the process by which it is achieved helps to make it even more revealing of his character: his exquisitely refined dress is not merely a felicitous accident, but a process in which he actively and painstakingly engages. In a sense it is his primary occupation, and yet the results yield not anything telling about him as a man, but a surface so smooth as to be impenetrable.

So seriously is this process taken that all three novels liken acts of dressing and self-adornment to forms of artistic practice, drawing attention to the way in which the body of the dandy and the body of a text both are deliberately prepared for display and presentation to the reader. For example, "The Duke of St James was master of the art of dress, and consequently consummated that paramount of operation with the decisive rapidity of one whose principles are settled. He was cognizant of all effects, could calculate in a second of all consequences, and obtained his result with that promptitude and precision which stamp the great artist" (72). Pelham's comparable skills are refined through an encounter with the famous dandy Russelton, who likens his skill in self-adornment to a kind of artistic practice: "Finding therefore that my *forte* was not

in the Pierian line,[36] I redoubled my attention to my dress; I *coated* and *cravated* and *essenced* and *oiled,* with all the attention the very inspiration of my rhymes seemed to advise" (131, emphasis in the original).

This precise attention to detail is reflected not only in the dandies' attention to themselves, but also towards others; Pelham makes a point of informing readers that "careless and indifferent as I seem to all things, nothing ever escapes me: the minutest *erreur* in a dish or a domestic, the most trifling peculiarity in a criticism or a coat, my glance detects in an instant" (92). Describing the villain Tyrrel, who is presented from the first in negative terms, Pelham appropriates the usage of dress and eating as a way of revealing character: he "wore doe-skin gloves— drank port-wine, *par préférence*, and considered beef-steaks and oysters as the most delicate dish in the whole *carte*. I think, now, reader, you have a tolerably good view of his character" (170). This fastidiousness reinforces dressing and grooming as primary facets of what silver fork characters do, and therefore a large part of who they are.

Dis-Engaged: Dandy Courtships

Significant portions of these novels are preoccupied with the love affairs of the dandies. The position of the figure of the dandy as a lover is a complex one. While sometimes associated with the figure of a charming womanizer, he can also be depicted as so isolated and solipsistic as to be largely uninterested in engaging with others. Pelham, Cecil, and the Duke of St James combine aspects of both of these characterizations: in two out of three cases, they end by enacting the normative, ritualized conversion to a single, appropriately devoted, and virtuous woman, winning her heart, and becoming loving husbands. However, before arriving at these

[36] In Classical mythology, the Pierian spring was sacred to the Muses, and therefore served as the point of origin for artistic and scientific knowledge.

conclusions, the dandies are depicted engaged in ever-multiplying and often overlapping relationships where the women come to seem virtually interchangeable and disappear from the text with little to no consequence. Excess in the silver fork reverberates on multiple levels, with multiplicity characterizing emotional as well as material aspects. The number of love objects available to the three dandies represents the same sort of varied spread they prize having available to them in their wardrobes and on their tables. Partially a function of luxury and a mark of the *connoisseur*, the array of women available to the dandies is also a strategy to introduce occasions for detail into the text.

Objects of desire can fulfil an important and revealing communicative function: in effect showing us whom the protagonist wants tells us something about who that protagonist is. This involuntary revelation is perhaps part of the reason why the narratives remain somewhat suspicious of desire. Generally the dandies are portrayed as striving to maintain rigid control over themselves. Moments when that control might be ceded constitute moments of vulnerability, for "the mark of the dandy is artifice and aloofness, a studied detachment from any inordinate emotion that might ruffle the decorative surface" (Hughes, "Elegies," 195). Writing about the archetypal dandy, Beau Brummel, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly notes that, "to be excited is to care about something, and to care about anything is to shew [sic] oneself inferior" (79).

That vulnerability, however, can be mitigated by limiting how much is revealed, and showing the dandies falling in love, or at least experiencing desire, many times in rapid succession makes each instance less telling. Rather than an indication of something specific, it becomes part of a relatively homogenous pattern: each woman becomes herself less distinct, and less able to illuminate the depths of the dandy's character. The repetition and multiplicity of conquests extends so far that it comes to seem monotonous and meaningless to the dandies themselves.

Pelham cuts short a scene with the following interjection: "All love-making is just the same, and therefore, I shall spare the reader my conversation that evening. When he recollects that it was Henry Pelham who was the gallant, I am persuaded that he will be pretty certain as to the success" (66).

Pelham, for example, is initially attracted to Lady Roseville on the basis of "hav[ing] never seen but one person more beautiful" (12) and encouraged further by his mother's advice that he ought to "be particularly attentive to her … [since] nothing … is like a *liaison* (quite innocent of course) with a woman of celebrity in the world" (15). This pattern continues during his sojourn in Paris with "a numerous cohort of *folles amours*" (104). However, few of these ever receive any serious attention from the narrative, or any serious emotional attention from the hero. This is partially a strategic move, enacted so as to help him gain power and influence; in one of her didactic epistles, his mother advises him that "in general, weak minds think only of others, and yet seem only occupied with themselves; *you*, on the contrary, must appear wholly engrossed with those about you, and yet never have a single idea which does not terminate in yourself" (36). Indeed, Pelham often seems more preoccupied with homoeroticized bonds than with the abrupt heterosexual resolution the novel eventually arrives at, and Ellen Glanville remains a shadowy, barely visible presence in the novel, towards whom "Pelham's lack of fervor after the marriage is so pronounced that it seems to warrant explanation" (Lane 59). Even in his attempts to extol her, such as when he explains that she was "the only woman in the world I had ever really loved—who had ever pierced the thousand folds of my ambitious and scheming heart" (293), the attention comes to return squarely to a meditation on his own self.

The Duke of St James enjoys a series of love affairs while travelling: "In all places, his homage to the fair sex was renowned. The Parisian duchess, the Austrian princess, and the Italian

countess, spoke in the most enthusiastic terms of the English nobility" (8). He continues his conquests upon his return to London, with the narrative highlighting his relationships with Lady Grafton and the Bird of Paradise. His history becomes one of the main grounds on which May Dacre will refuse his initial proposal, arguing, "What do you know of me, that you should feel all this … Another week and another woman may command a similar effusion" (101). The narrator seems to echo this perspective in depicting the rapid fluctuations of the Duke's affections, observing "it is extraordinary how hourly, and how violently, change the feelings of an inexperienced young man" (115).

Amidst the multiplicity of other romantic plots, May Dacre comes closest to a representation of an autonomous individual, and the Duke responds accordingly, with something approaching sincerity. Yet even here, he has difficulty moving beyond self-reflection:

> The Duke of St James was in one of his sublime fits. He had commenced by thinking about May Dacre, and he ended by thinking of himself. He was under that delicious and dreamy excitement which we experience, when the image of a lovely and beloved object begins to mix itself up with our own intense self-love. She was the heroine rather of an indefinite reverie than of definite romance" (84-85).

This intense self-love is in part the narcissistic state which he can only transcend with difficulty. Disraeli's novel also adopts an ambivalence towards marriage that is never entirely resolved. When the Duke has offered, primarily out of guilt for his role in destroying her previous marriage, to marry Lady Aphrodite, he muses, "so the game is up! Truly, a most lame and impotent conclusion! And this, then, is the result of all my high fancies and indefinite aspirations!" (154)

Cecil takes this ambivalence a step further: not only does the novel end with the protagonist unmarried, but he seems pleased with this state when he proclaims, "I thank Heaven I was born a coxcomb, for coxcombs are bachelors by prescriptive right; and it would have stung me to the soul to find myself tied down like Gulliver, in my middle age, by the authority of a regiment of pigmies" (14). Inculcating an anti-domestic mindset, Cecil also links this to his status as a coxcomb, a term used with complicated multivalence in the novel. It alludes certainly to a self-absorption that is often directed towards grooming and self-adornment, but also to more complex moral and social self-absorption: being a coxcomb seems to be at odds with being a husband and father because it eclipses the possibility of seriously engaging with others. Indeed, he himself questions whether he is able to feel any genuine emotion, musing "I was born without a genius for family affection. I am much inclined to doubt whether such instincts exist; or rather, whether the love of kindred be not the mere result of education" (77). As a result, Cecil moves indeterminately (and destructively) through a range of romantic prospects, and settles with no one in the end. Yet this lack of focus in no way precludes him from finding himself at various junctures, "Petted by Lady Harriet, — smiled upon by the Marchioness, — thanked —gratefully and affectionately thanked, by Emily" (60).

Because the female love-interests in these novels range in origin from relatively humble backgrounds (*Cecil*'s ill-fated Emily) to the lavish society hostesses (*The Young Duke*'s Lady Aphrodite Grafton), they permit the inclusion of diverse details. For example, Cecil's visit to Emily's abode provides an occasion to describe "the creaking stair, the yellow paint, omitted in a central stripe intended for a carpet—though carpet there was none—, the dirty hall, with its worn-out floor cloth; the very streetdoor, with its unsightly bolts and chains" (26). Cecil is particularly trans-national in his romantic adventures, and this allows for the description of

exotic sites and local customs, such as his encounter with the Italian dancing girl Franszetta while sojourning in Venice.

Details can also function as a form of synecdoche. When the Duke of St James finds his suit rejected by Lady Aphrodite while she tries to remain faithful to her husband, he seeks an alternative way to achieve proximity to her body. Bribing a servant, he has the stones in the diamond necklace her husband has given her secretly switched with a set of similar but slightly more valuable jewels of his own purchase. He never reveals this to her and the incident has no further bearing on the events of the novel, but the pleasure he takes in watching her appear with these objects in contact with her skin clearly functions with the aim of erotic displacement. This connection of woman and object reveals how the dandies' love interests function as adornment, rather than revealing anything essential about his nature. As a result, the multiple courtship plotlines disrupt expectations concerning fully realized characters, but do so in service of the alternative aim of providing a rich texture of detail.

Revising the Self

By the end of their respective novels, the three dandies, initially bestowed with a kind of amoral license, have all largely moved towards responsibility and utility. They come to value privacy over spectacle, while simultaneously displaying new orientations towards public service. The new specificity to their ambitions and desires generates a sense of rootedness and stability to the characters rather than the diffuse aimlessness that defines them for much of the novels. Both of these personas offer different opportunities for different categories of detail: in their early manifestations as high-society darlings, the dandies facilitate opportunities for descriptions of

opulent parties, while their subsequent roles require the evocation of stately country manors and sedate libraries, thus increasing the variety and quantity of detail on offer.

Critics have noted this pattern of characterization: "Pelham's account of character gets revised as the novel progresses chapter by chapter. First supercilious and shallow, Pelham later appears more reflective" (Lane 56). In his article on *The Young Duke*, Charles Nickerson also notes with some surprise that the novel "ends on a note of qualified realism, —Disraeli's first serious attempt at anything of this sort" (20), while Wilson notes the development from "aspiring dand[ies] to a more fully realized individual, disgusted with the shallow show of fashionable life" (*Fashioning* 50). The pattern in which an initially self-absorbed character gradually develops into an altruistic individual capable of fuller self-knowledge and more mature judgment represents a key trajectory within the *bildungsroman* tradition, especially in its Victorian incarnations: *David Copperfield*, or Thackeray's *Pendennis* both portray this sort of evolution. When critics detect similar structures in silver fork novels in hopes of aligning them with realism, they participate in normalizing a tradition in which psychologically complex characters are affirmed as the standard of value. Recognizing that silver forks deploy characterization as a technique for compounding detail allows us to appreciate how they present individuals who move fluidly and sometimes arbitrarily between identities, rather than imposing a model of linear development.

This fluidity is one which, while it satisfies the individual, comes at the cost of alienation from others. As Russelton, the debonair young aristocrat who schools Pelham in the postures of dandyhood, blithely summarizes, "The great secrets of being courted are, to shun others, and seem delighted with yourself. The latter is obvious enough; who the deuce *should* be pleased with you, if you yourself are not?" (130). Pelham muses more somberly, "For a coxcomb there is

no mercy—for a coquette no pardon. They are, as it were, the dissenters of society—no crime is too bad to be imputed to them; they do not believe the religion of others—they set up a deity of their own vanity" (84).

However, the dandy's opacity means that while he is difficult to read, other characters can insert their own interpretations of who he is. *Pelham* provides some of the best examples of this strategy: Glanville insists, "I know, amidst all your worldly ambition, and the encrusted artificiality of your exterior, how warm and generous is your real heart—how noble and intellectual is your real mind" (376). Likewise, Lady Roseville insists, "While you seem frivolous to the superficial, I know you to have a mind not only capable of the most solid and important affairs, but habituated by reflection to consider them. You appear effeminate, I know that none are more daring—indolent, none are more actively ambitious—utterly selfish, and I know that no earthly interest could bribe you into meanness or injustice" (334-35). Pelham's hidden personality is also mentioned by his uncle: "you have abilities that may make you capable of effecting much good to your fellow-creatures; but you are fond of the world, and, though not adverse to application, devoted to pleasure, and likely to pervert the gifts you possess" (152), and by Lord Vincent: "I have often seen that, in spite of all your love of pleasure, you have your mind continually turned towards higher and graver objects; and I have thought the better of your talents and of your future success, for the little parade you make of the one, and the little care you appear to pay to the other" (215). The only concrete examples of Pelham's ambition that a reader could cite are pronouncements by other characters that he is ambitious: marks not of internal depths, but publicly available external advertisements.

By and large, all three dandies move away from the fashionable urban ideal central to the silver fork genre, and this transition reflects an amorphous, adaptable concept of the self. They choose

instead lives that while undoubtedly comfortable, are much less oriented towards luxury and, most importantly, far less concerned with the ostentatious display of that luxury. Disraeli offers one of the most apt descriptions: "Behold, then, our hero domesticated at Dacre – rising at nine, joining a family breakfast, taking a quiet ride, or moderate stroll" (237), while Pelham reflects on a similar shift in outlook: "Matrimony found me ambitious; it has not cured me of the passion: but it has concentrated what was scattered, and determined what was vague. If I am less anxious than formerly for the reputation to be acquired in society, I am more eager for honour in the world, and instead of amusing my enemies, and the saloon, I trust yet to be useful to my friends and to mankind" (443-44). These transitions are marked in general by a far more private and rural orientation. Initially, "since the dandy is a man of sophistication, the dandy novel always has an urban setting, for it is only in the metropolis that the hero's powers can be fully displayed and appreciated" (Kendra, "Gendering," 26). Rather than existing primarily as a spectacle for others, they aim ultimately for a sort of quiet, contemplative internal satisfaction. They also tend to look back to the glittering world of the *ton* with suspicion and disgust, as when the Duke declares, "I would sooner live in a cottage with May Dacre, and work for our daily bread, than to be worshipped by all the beauty of this Babylon" (227).

Despite this newly private orientation, the dandies still engage with the public world. This engagement is marked by a new attitude: rather than an arena of privilege, it becomes a site of responsibility. All three men mature into figures with active political orientations and cogent understandings of how they can serve the public good. Pelham becomes involved in politics quite early in the novel: "after the due quantum of dining, drinking, spouting, lying, equivocating, bribing, head-breaking, promise-breaking," (144) he is elected to a newly vacant seat in the borough of his uncle. However, as his summation of the election process indicates, he

does not initially take his new office seriously: a week after the election, the following dialogue takes place between him and his uncle: " 'What did you think of doing to-day, Henry?' 'Nothing!' said [Pelham] very innocently. 'I should conceive that to be a usual answer of yours, Henry' " (145). Pelham's political career appears to be a false start: he "had scarcely taken my seat, before I was forced to relinquish it" (189) after his opponent contests the means by which he has secured his election. In effect then, this early attempt at a political career serves to mark Pelham as not yet ready for it. Likewise, the Duke takes his seat almost immediately upon his youthful return from Continental travels though he has little interest in the work actually involved. Instead, "it is difficult to conceive a career of more various, more constant, or more distracting excitement … his life was an ocean of enjoyment and each hour, like each wave, threw up its pearl" (26).

The reformed trajectory of the Duke's life at the end of the novel is explicitly linked to a political model in which the aristocracy plays a valuable contributing role: "His life is passed in the agreeable discharge of all the important duties of his exalted station, and his present career [represents an argument] in favor of the existence of an Aristocracy" (283). Disraeli was concerned with a vision of social reform wherein hierarchies of rank could still be maintained, and in novels such as *Sybil* and *Coningsby*, he works hard to defend the place of the aristocracy in a rapidly changing world. Davis notes that "Disraeli is concerned with what aristocratic life should be and with the nature of the ideal aristocratic hero … using satire and irony to criticize what the young Duke is, Disraeli suggests what the aristocratic hero should be" (24). Nickerson sees the turn towards political and social realism in the final volume of *The Young Duke* as symptomatic of Bulwer Lytton's influence on the text, and reads this as foreshadowing "the road that would lead [Disraeli] finally to the Young England novels" (29) of the 1850s and 60s.

However, he still has to insist that what he is presenting is a reformed aristocracy, defined, importantly, by a consciousness of its responsibilities as well as its privileges and a sense of utility. Alongside this social and political reconception, the silver fork genre also reconceives itself as likewise less ornamental and more utilitarian.

Disraeli evokes this notion of coming to know a central, core self when he identifies the Duke's newfound ability to move the House with his speeches: "He can know nothing of mankind without … know[ing] something of himself" (250). Yet the Duke's conversion to an entirely different form of self-perception and accompanying value system is triggered not by the progress of maturity but rather by a change of fortune, and the shifts of fashion. Having "determined to look into his [financial] affairs, merely to amuse himself" (209), he quickly realizes that his extravagances have not only depleted his vast fortune, but have sunk him into debt. He recklessly compounds this by losing huge sums in a gambling bout, even as he persuades himself that he will be able to win back his fortune. When the Duke chooses to retreat, then, to a life of quieter contemplation and more modest means, he does so not (or, at the very least, not entirely) out of having come to see the follies of his early life and matured into a wiser man, but rather as a result of having come to a point where he could no longer sustain that lifestyle. As Nickerson argues "in the third volume (books four and five) an entirely new spirit comes into the book. Financial difficulties (the consequences of his earlier extravagance) and the continued failure of his suit for the hand of May Dacre have combined to humble his pride" (24). The Duke's abandonment of the fashionable world, and especially his particular bitterness towards it as a "moral whirlpool!" should resonate with a sense of loss, rather than simply rejection.

As sharply as he turns his back on the world that he had initially taken so much pleasure in, it also turns its back on him. After chronicling the Duke's extensive financial losses, Disraeli

inserts a short chapter (Chapter X of Book 4) describing the new rising star of the metropolis, William Henry, Marquess of Marylebone. It opens with a saucy paraphrase of the novel's opening paragraph, where the Duke had been celebrated in terms nearly as glorious. Now he finds himself eclipsed by a new society darling who manages to be even wealthier, more handsome, and more captivating. With "the young Duke quite forgotten, if really young he could be longer called" (226), the novel makes clear that his departure involves a process of being cast out as much as one of turning away. Rather than the Duke's newfound ambitions arising internally from his coming to value work and reject luxurious indolence, he is propelled into this transition through external circumstances.

Pelham, theoretically, transitions towards ambition and hard work quite early in the novel: after he is elected to political office, his uncle begins a project of educating him in principles of political economy, and this triggers a new sense of seriousness and obligation in Pelham's character. He ends Part 1 of the novel celebrating a transition in which he has "ceased to look upon the world as a game … where a little cheating was readily allowed; I no longer divorced the interests of other men from my own" (148). This does not immediately effect a change in his attitude towards the luxuries he has enjoyed:

> I was not the less a coxcomb than heretofore, nor the less a voluptuary, nor the less choice in my perfumes, nor the less fastidious in my horses and my dress; but I viewed these matters in a light wholly different from that in which I had hitherto regarded them. Beneath all the carelessness of my exterior, my mind was close, keen and inquiring. (176)

Here, his new persona maintains a continued affiliation with external, material qualities, and is still used to evoke the fashionable details that the text remains interested in. Because Pelham

eventually becomes driven by an ethical commitment to clearing Glanville's name, the novel includes lengthy descriptions of the criminal underworld he must move through.

This aim of inclusivity is a driving force behind the way in which silver fork novels represent character, leading to the representation of flat but sprawling characters who are defined by their exteriors and remain flexible and mutable in their desires and personalities. This model is at odds with a traditional novelistic emphasis on deep interiority, growth, and self-development, and represents one of the key ways in which the silver fork departs from a realist tradition. Just as Pelham boldly chooses the coat that best flatters his complexion rather than the coat that fashion dictates, the silver fork novel adopts strategies of characterization that are best tailored to its unique aim of accumulating detail, even if they may be viewed as odd or inappropriate.

Didacticism & Self-Control

All of the dandies place on a high value on self-control. The point is never to be ostentatious or overtly seeking of attention, even in bold gestures, but to exude the utmost refinement in the smallest details, creating so seamless an effect of perfection that any discrete effort can hardly be detected. In praising a superb display of politeness, Pelham notes, "this is, in my opinion, the real test of perfect breeding. While you are enchanted with the effect, it should possess so little prominency and peculiarity, that you should never be able to guess the cause" (12).

The dandies rarely betray impetuous or impulsive action, preferring to act only after careful deliberation, but then to do so decisively. As Pelham playfully notes in describing the pattern of his morning routine, "I was soon dressed, for it is the *design*, not the *execution*, of all great undertakings which requires deliberation and delay" (155). Because of this emphasis on control, the revealing nature of romantic passion is particularly risky, providing part of the explanation as

to why the dandies often remain cool and blasé about their love affairs. Other moments that might provoke a loss of self-restraint include fighting, drinking, and gambling. While they don't entirely avoid these activities, the dandies tend to maintain a sense of self-control in all of them. For example, describing himself striking a man who has insulted him, Pelham notes "I was never more free from passion in my life, and it was, therefore, with the utmost calmness and composure that, in the midst of my antagonist's harangue, I raised my hand and – quietly knocked him down" (39). While preparing for the duel that follows this encounter, he takes comfort in the fact that he "had all the advantage of coolness" (40). The Duke does succumb to a loss of control during an extended bout of gambling, effectively destroying any chances of salvaging his already depleted fortune. However, this moment comes late in the novel and works as one of the final catalysts in triggering his self-transformation.

Because the novels clearly establish that the dandies are not ruled by emotion or impulse, they evoke instead a world where behaviour is determined through a process of consultation and reflection. In the case of Pelham, he profits from the sage advice of a worldly mother, anxious to see her son advance in society. Prior to one of his first country-house visits, she sends him a lengthy and detailed letter advising him to

> take care not to be *too* intimate; it is, however, a very good house: all you meet there are worth knowing, for one thing or the other … gain as much knowledge de *l'art culinaire* as you can: it is an accomplishment absolutely necessary. You may also pick up a little acquaintance with metaphysics, if you have any opportunity; that sort of thing is a good deal talked about just at present. (15)

The view according to which the individuals Pelham will meet are primarily instrumental in their value is reflected when his mother gives more specific instructions about social interactions. She suggests that he insinuate himself with Lady Roseville, advising him to "never talk much to young men—remember that it is the women who make a reputation in society" (15). Pelham's mother is also responsible for providing the advice that produced the novel's most enduring legacy. She writes to her son to tell him that "I did not like that green[37] coat you wore when I last saw you; you look best in black—which is a great compliment, for people must be very *distingué* in appearance, in order to do so" (14). Within a few years, a black coat had become standard attire in men's evening wear. This evolution of fashion has been widely attributed to the novel's popularity,[38] although the explanation for this shift also likely lies in the transition described by psychologist John Carl Flügel as "the great masculine renunciation."[39] He posited that around the end of the eighteenth century, men of the professional and aristocratic classes largely moved away from a preoccupation with color, ornamentation, and a desire to attract attention via dress, such that these became predominantly, if not uniquely feminine, purviews.

Although Cecil is shaped by maternal influence in his very early days, recollecting that he neglected his childhood toys for "other glittering objects in my mother's sanctum … jewels, feathers, flowers, and frippery of all descriptions" (7-8), the Duke is an orphan. In these two novels, instruction on how to succeed in the fashionable *monde* is largely gleaned through contact with other dandies. For the Duke of St James, the renowned man of fashion Charles Annesley represents both a mentor and a rival. Interestingly, after distinguishing between the

[37] In the 1835 and subsequent editions, this was altered to "blue."
[38] Adburgham and Cronin both reference this origin story for the ubiquitous black evening coat, and Andrew Brown includes this detail in his profile of Bulwer Lytton for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.*
[39] See Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes.*

categories of "beau" and "dandy" (and noting that the latter was popularized by Lord Byron), Disraeli's narrator asserts that

> Annesley could hardly be called a dandy or a beau. There was nothing in his dress; though some mysterious arrangement in his costume—some rare simplicity —some curious happiness—always made it distinguished; there was nothing in his dress which could account for the influence which he exercised over the manners of his contemporaries. (13)

The title of "dandy" here is associated with dress, particularly in its more spectacular and florid incarnations (foreshadowing Carlyle's famous assertion in *Sartor Resartus* that "a dandy is a clothes-wearing man" (17)), and it is no coincidence that throughout the novel, the Duke's costumes tend to occasionally border on garish. However, the description of Annesley's fastidious simplicity asserting a magnetic pull, comes closer to the carefully refined deliberation of Pelham and Cecil, where adornment might consist of a single curl of hair left artfully out of place. This is more typical of the dandy aesthetic, best summarized by Beau Brummel reflected in his famous dictum that if one attracted attention from the average passer-by, one was not well-dressed.

Annesley's manner, as well as his dress, reflects this aesthetic of control. The narrator describes his self-contained and reserved nature as follows: "his coldness of heart, which was hereditary, not acquired; his cautious courage and his unadulterated self-love had permitted him to mingle much with mankind without being too deeply involved in the play of their passions … even with his intimates, he was never confidential and perpetually assumed his public character" (13). Annesley is presented as in part a foil to the initially more ostentatious Duke of St James, but his

control and restraint become aspirational as well. The Duke's penchant for excess in his spending, womanizing, and eventually, gambling, nearly ruin him and it is only when he comes to act with more strategy and deliberation that he is able to successfully earn a position of public respect and win the heart of May Dacre. By presenting Annesley as a figure from whom the Duke has much to learn, Disraeli's novel assumes both a didactic perspective, in which following the appropriate model rather than merely indulging momentary impulses becomes the key to success, and eventually comes to endorse a restrained and selective aesthetic.

For Bulwer Lytton's hero, this mode comes more naturally: Pelham is from the first portrayed as highly discriminating in his judgment and taste. Therefore, when he encounters the exiled dandy Russelton at Calais, Pelham responds to him with reverence, praising him as the man

> who had introduced, by a single example, starch into neckcloths and had fed the pampered appetite of his boot-tops on champagne[40]—whose coat and whose friends were cut with equal grace— and whose name connected with every triumph that the world's great virtue of audacity could achieve … I recognized in him a congenial, though a superior spirit, and I bowed with a profundity of veneration, with which no other human being has ever inspired me. (125)

In the conversation that ensues between them, Russelton reflects without regret on a trajectory that has furnished him with memories of his influence and social triumphs, noting that "Napoleon died in exile, and so shall I; but we have both had our day, and mine was the brightest of the two" (132). While Pelham is portrayed as highly self-assured and independent-minded, his willingness to listen to, and learn from the dandy of another generation evokes a model where

[40] Bulwer uses these details to position Russelton as a thinly veiled portrait of Beau Brummell; for these, and other anecdotes about Brummel's famed fastidiousness, see Ian Kelly's *Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Man of Style*.

aesthetic choices are shaped in relation to formal standards, rather than arrived at in an organic manner.

While Bulwer clearly portrays Russelton in reference to the historical figure of Brummell, Gore openly inserts no less a celebrity than Lord Byron into her novel. He appears as Cecil's friend and travel companion. Indeed in a moment of playful hubris, Cecil explains that "it was to join me at Geneva that, the following year, Byron betook himself in the same direction" (243). Cecil's explanation that "he rejoined me… a paria, a banished man, a monster rejected by the caprices of Great Britain" (243) allows for a historical positioning of the travels in 1816 when Byron left England for Switzerland after his divorce. Gore's novel incorporates Cecil's fictional adventures into a biographically accurate framework referencing the ongoing composition of the third canto of *Childe Harold* and their subsequent travel to Venice where, "while Byron was polishing his periods or lisping Venetian, [Cecil] went sauntering about" (249), "a good looking misanthrope, as black in hat, coat, and countenance, as a gondola!" (249). All of these men provide a framework of directives for the younger dandies to develop their practices of dress and behavior. These didactic interactions not only offer an occasion for detail, but they also introduce prescriptive structures into the text, creating a narrative wherein every move becomes a strategic choice, and where the self is carefully scripted and displayed so that for the dandies merely existing becomes a kind of artistry.

The dandies also become great dispensers of advice about how others can practice this art. Unsurprisingly, much of this advice has to do with grooming and dress. The second edition (1828) of *Pelham* lists 22 maxims on the subject of dress,[41] and most of these are oriented

[41] The revisions to this section of the novel between the first and second editions (both published in 1828) are discussed later in this chapter.

towards a carefully cultivated, but unadorned and unobtrusive style. Number 8, for example, cautions that "a man must be a profound calculator to be a consummate dresser. One does not dress the same whether one goes to a minister or a mistress…there is no diplomacy more subtle than that of dress" (44) while 17 advises, "Dress so that it may never be said of you "What a well-dressed man" but "what a gentleman-like man!" (46).

The performance of prescription extends beyond the dandy to suffuse the novels as a whole. In *Cecil*, Gore playfully mimics the tone of a conduct book or moral primer in discussing what she labels the

> first few maxims excerpted from "The Chaperon's Own Book" (289). In a parody of the catechism, these are formatted as questions and answers, beginning with "What is the first duty in life of a well-educated young lady?—The first duty in life of a well-educated young lady, is to make an excellent match at the close of her first season. Q-What constitutes an excellent match? – A. a peer, or a baronet, with a sufficient rent-roll, constitutes an excellent match. The eldest son of a peer or baronet, whose father does not enjoy particularly good health, constitutes a good match. The second son of a wealthy peer, or a baronet with five thousand a year, constitutes a tolerable match. (289)

In a less formalized structure, the Duke of St James grandly advises an emerging dandy on how to understand his position as an object of spectacle: "Let them stare," he declares. "… we were made to be looked at. 'Tis our vocation, Hall, and they are gifted with vision purposely to behold us" (62). The dandy presents himself to both readers and the public as an object of visual display. The self-display that renders him effectively an object of public consumption is much like the

physical gratification of eating and dressing, one of the main sources of pleasure for a dandy. Cecil muses on that pleasure as follows:

> How was *I*, Cecil Danby, to pretend to Spartanism? My senses were lulled by the sweetest music—the most perfumed atmosphere—and the companionship of the wise, the witty, the piquant and the fair. There was no occasion for me to submit a single instant of the day to the pressing to death torture of being bored. People talked their best for me, and looked their best. I carried my sunshine with me, summer its welcome. (304)

The height of the Duke's success is similarly resplendent:

> At no moment of his life had the young Duke felt existence so intense. Wherever he turned his eye, he found a responding glance of beauty and admiration; wherever he turned his ear, the whispered tones were soft and sweet as summer winds. Each look was an offering, each word was adoration. His soul dilated, the glory of the scene touched all his passions. He almost determined not again to mingle in society; but like a monarch merely to receive the world which worshipped him. The idea was sublime; was it even to him impracticable? In the midst of his splendor, he fell into a reverie and mused on his magnificence. He could no longer resist the conviction, that he was a superior essence even to all around him. The world seemed created solely for his enjoyment. (28)

The figure of the dandy creates occasion for cultivating a tapestry of detail that, through its splendor and wish fulfillment, engenders an impression of verisimilitude. As Rosa writes, "the book has great verisimilitude. It sounds as though it *ought* to be true of Dukes. It satisfies in the same way that Versailles satisfies the mental picture of a fairy prince's palace. If young dukes aren't like Disraeli's young duke, so much the worse for them" (108).

Fashioning and Refashioning the Text

Through tropes of advice-giving, mentoring, and instruction, silver fork dandy novels use their characters to establish a framework of didactic and prescriptive overtones, where it is clear that while luxury and high style may be the aims, it is never the case that simply anything goes. Within this framework these texts then dispense advice that is directly correlated to narrative practice, and the use of details. Firstly, they advise caution about devolving into overextended description: Disraeli's narrator declines to linger over the dress uniforms worn by the Duke's friends, commenting that "I shall not describe them, for the description of costume is the most inventive province of our historical novelists, and I never like to be unfair, or trench upon my neighbour's lands or rights" (151). *Cecil* also displays hesitation about extending lavish description too far:

> My readers have, I trust, done justice to my forbearance in the daubery or description line. … It depended on myself to develop all this in a couple of dozen pages of historiography, emblazoned like a missal with scarlet, cobalt and gold, fine enough for the gorgeous pages of the most fashionable annual going. But I forbore. I reflected that the florid was going out of fashion. (174)

Of course, even while *Cecil'*s narrator frets about extending description too far, that anxiety itself becomes a way of presenting luxuriant details, in this case surrounding a hypothetical missal. This strategy reappears in the following exploration of Lady Ormington's dubitable tastes in interiors:

> Poor Lady Ormington had in fact never recovered from her first glimpse of the *chinoiseries* of the boudoirs of Paris and Trianon, in Marie Antoinette's time … snatched

> from the simplicity of a country parsonage into a paradise of buhl and ormolu,[42] her ladyship's ideas received an ineffaceable impression, which produced and reproduced itself in her tawdry domain in Hanover Square. Apple-green and turquoise blue—lacquer and Japan—Chelsea and Sèvres—ebony encrusted with ivory or mother of pearl, —dainty bonbonnieres of Dutch enamel … her existence was all Watteau, all *à vignette*, all Pompadour, all powder puff, all musk, all ambergris! (43)

While ostensibly the narrative is criticizing the excess that is displayed, these warnings are themselves driven by detail. Tensions about how much description to use also surface in settings less marked by sophistication, as when Cecil begins a natural description "The wild hyacinths, glimmering like sapphires in the brake … served to variegate the scene, where gradually deepening bowers seemed formed of such transparent foliage that the light came down, scarcely subdued through the—," only to interject, "Reader! I most humbly ask your pardon—I feel that I am forgetting myself and you. I promised you, like Plato, to banish poets from my republic" (209). In their meta-textual musings, these novels display a somewhat paradoxical attitude towards detail: they use the very occasions where they claim to be advising caution about excess to in fact include even more detail. The cautionary notes, then, are not really about the amount of detail, so much as the kind, and how they are integrated into the narrative. So long as details accord with standards of taste, they can be represented in abundance, but the novels constantly invent, and reinvent, those standards of taste along the way.

To render matters more complex, a detail that is at one moment *au fait* may become, in short order, embarrassingly out of step. Deeply affiliated with concepts of fashion and remaining

[42] Buhl: Decorative inlay of tortoiseshell, ivory, and other metals, typically used on furniture. Ormolu: the application of finely ground gold to a bronze object, often used on furniture, clocks, and candelabras.

current, silver forks are as a result yoked to a model of constant, and often seemingly arbitrary change. As a result fluidity within a text is key: tropes such as borrowing elements from other genres, and having protagonists suddenly begin to display entirely new character traits allow novels to introduce new kinds of detail and discard old ones. Because the silver fork's relationship to the detail can never be static, individual novels often display textual histories that extend beyond their initial publication as they continuously evolve in response to the vicissitudes of literary fashions. *Pelham* and *The Young Duke* were subject to heavy revisions in later editions; Gore's *Cecil*, on the other hand, spawned two sequels. In these textual afterlives, there is a movement away from the heavy use of detail. The changes Disraeli made to *The Young Duke* in subsequent editions mirror a pattern established in his revisions to *Vivian Grey*. In the 1853 editions where both novels are included as part of a multi-volume Collected Works, they are heavily revised so as to reduce some of the more ostentatious silver fork elements. Considering Disraeli's own stature as a politician by this point, this parallelism to the revisions is logical considering the silver fork elements of both novels, such that they both came to "constitute heavy millstones round the neck of anyone who wanted to become a respectable political figure" (Blake 183-84). Drawing parallels between Disraeli and Edward Bulwer Lytton, Cronin notes that both "came to think of the novels that charted the youthful indiscretions of their heroes as themselves constituting a youthful indiscretion. The brittle cynicism of the novels seemed inappropriate to the lofty literary and political careers that both men were anxious to pursue" ("Bulwer," 45).

Disraeli opens the revised edition with a new Preface that makes it immediately clear that his attitude towards the silver fork genre, perhaps not the warmest to begin with, has cooled even further: "the reader will be kind enough to recollect that "The Young Duke" [sic] was written … nearly a quarter of a century ago, and that, therefore, it is entitled to the indulgence which is the

privilege of juvenile productions … Young authors are apt to fall into affectation and conceit, and the writer of this work sinned very much in these respects" (299). A number of stratagems are employed to reduce the elements which situated the novel within a subgenre now deplored for its frivolity and lack of substance. Examples of stylistic revisions include a reduction of superlatives, so that "very ancient" is altered to "ancient", "extremely desirous" becomes "desirous" and "copious supply" is adjusted to "supply". Another example has a description change from "a very young man, very tall, with a very fine figure, and very fine features" to a "young man, tall, with a fine figure, and fine features."

Disraeli also omits or reduces a number of the material details characteristic of his initial project. These can be as subtle as a "pink and printed *carte*" becoming "a pink *carte*" or the omission of a larger detail such as "Luigi offered the Eau de Cologne. Without looking at it, his Grace tossed the richly cut bottle into a corner. It broke. Reverie is a most expensive luxury" (86) (omitted from 1853 and subsequent editions). Such changes try to reduce the sardonic and often frivolous tone of the initial narration. Bulwer echoes much of this strategy in the revisions he made to *Pelham*. After the first edition was published by Henry Colburn in 1828, a second edition followed later that year, featuring significant revisions and a new preface, "a prefatory explanation which [Bulwer] deemed it superfluous to place to the first" (McGann xxxiii). Further editions followed in 1835 and 1840, marked by more stylistic revisions in which Bulwer gradually cuts more and more of the opulent details present in the initial text.[43] For instance a description of Pelham pausing to "play with my best ringlet," or as fully prepared only when "essenced and oiled" are omitted. Having explored how the rich texture of these sorts of details tends to obscure the presence of interiority in the dandies, it is striking to see attempts at

[43] The edition prepared by Jerome McGann and cited in this dissertation reprints the second edition of 1828, but also catalogues textual variants from the first edition, and from the 1835 and 1840 editions.

reducing this mass enacted in later editions, as part of an effort to show these protagonists as less artificial and more complex.

One substitution illustrates this transition particularly well. In Chapter 7 of Volume 2 (in the McGann edition, pages 177-180) Pelham directly addresses the policies he endorses concerning dress and self-adornment. In the original 1828 edition, these musings are presented in a narrative of several pages, including notes that "the hand, I would observe, should never be utterly ringless" and "of a morning, the trowsers [sic] cannot be too long." It ends with the note that he "cannot sufficiently impress upon your mind the most thoughtful consideration to the minutiae of dress, such as the glove, the button, the boot, the shape of the hat, &c."[44] In so doing, Pelham turns attention to a system of value in which the smallest external details are in fact sources of meaning, and significant as such.

In the revised edition, Pelham's interest in the properties of dress is not abandoned but a different passage is substituted, in which new principles for dress and self- adornment are introduced, and are presented specifically as rules or maxims to be followed (they are laid out in a numbered list of 22 items, rather than the earlier narrative account). While clear overlap in the underlying principles remains visible, (neatness and subtlety being esteemed as the highest virtues), the advice becomes much more general. While in the first edition, Pelham had taken on the task of specifying what colours were acceptable in a waistcoat, and how shoes should be tied, here the guiding principles take the form of suggestions such as "the handsome may be shewy in dress, the plain should study to be unexceptionable," (178) or "Always remember that you dress to fascinate others, not yourself" (177).

[44] The full text of this section as it appeared in the first edition can be found in the Textual Notes section of the McGann edition.

In effect, the revisions move from advising about external details to advising about an inner consciousness that will then manifest itself in the correct outward details. Rather than fixating on the tying of a cravat, being the sort of man who understands that "the most graceful principle of dress is neatness" will naturally lead one to displaying the proper kind of details, ones which gracefully accord with realist conventions of signifying something of the inward self. Peter Graham articulates just such a reading when he comments that, "Pelham's maxims offer more than the tastes of an elegant man; they articulate the social and moral precepts of an impeccable mind" (79). What deserves attention is that these maxims are a late arrival, designed to cultivate exactly that impression.

In Gore's case, rather than undergoing a process of revision, *Cecil* experiences an after-life in the form of two sequels. *Cecil, a Peer* was published in 1841, following the first *Cecil* novel by only a few months. A third novel featuring Cecil Danby was published in 1845, titled simply *Self.* A glance at the titles evokes the transitions occurring: initially defined by his status as a coxcomb, by the second work in the series, he is defined instead by his social position, and the accompanying political responsibilities. His status as a peer evokes implicitly his membership in a number of communities, including a national one, moving him away from the solipsistic focus on himself that had defined him in the first novel. The third title carries this process even further, evoking exactly the status of a self-aware and reflective subject that emerges as the norm, particularly in the case of the retrospective narration displayed in Gore's novel. This pressure would also have increased, rather than decreased, over time; by the time of the final Cecil novel in 1845, Gore was working in a literary landscape where the silver fork style had mainly passed away, and where characteristically Victorian realism had fully emerged as a normative mode of fiction.

Neither of these two subsequent novels have received any critical assessment. Considering that *Cecil* has been a fairly popular choice of study for silver fork scholars, and that Catherine Gore is arguably the most characteristic practitioner of the genre, it seems strange that two other novels stemming directly from it have not received at least some attention, especially for the light they could shed on the first text of the series, and as studies of late variants of the silver fork genre. The silence suggests that perhaps these later Cecil novels are not in fact perceived as silver fork texts at all, and therefore remain unclaimed as either silver fork or realist novels. If that is the case, Gore successfully used her two subsequent novels to enact a project of transforming the Cecil series into an example of the realist *Bildungsroman* tradition.

These post-publication transitions reveal an eventual shift in the poetics of the silver fork. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, the inclusion of detail remains the genre's dominant narrative aim. As time passed, and the narrative conventions of realism became increasingly dominant and influential in shaping understandings of what a novel should be like, an excess of detail came to fall out of fashion. Fashion, "the running trope of silver fork novels" (Copeland, *The Silver Fork Novel* 6), shapes the genre into being perpetually invested in the new, the ephemeral and the ever-changing. As Gillingham summarizes, fashion articulates "an idiom of change that has become synonymous with modernity itself" ("Being Real"). Keen, after summarizing an array of eighteenth-century anxieties about fashion and novelty, offers a similar assessment: "fashion constituted a temporalized form of luxury: an endlessly exhausted, endlessly self-reproducing scene of excess" (12), which moreover "privileg[ed] novelty over inherent worth" (12). At the same time, the line dividing what is in fashion from what is outside of it can be razor thin. Because of the genre's commitment to an aesthetic driven by fashion, its poetics can never be stable, and therefore its relationship to the detail evolves over time.

Elegizing the Artificial

Silver fork novels represent a moment wherein characters and novels are both transitioning into the more familiar realist conceptions of how these categories should function, and therefore create a space of simultaneous elegy and free play. The silver fork has long been understood as a genre either preserving for posterity a brief efflorescence of privilege, or charting the last gasps of a rapidly declining era. The Regency was an era whose own excesses both signified and contributed to its rapid disappearance. That the peak of the silver fork genre coincided with the era immediately before the Reform Act of 1832 has been interpreted as positioning silver fork novels to simultaneously celebrate and mourn the final moments of supreme aristocratic privilege. Depictions of the aristocracy could only appear as they did in silver fork novels because a particular conception of privilege was in the process of being eroded and therefore could simultaneously be critiqued and celebrated.

Writing about the *Cecil* novels, Hughes suggests that these novels "document the shared transition of [Gore's] society from Regency glitz and frivolity to a more sober-minded and as yet precarious experiment in bourgeois democracy. This is what accounts for the complex bittersweet tone of the *Cecil* novels, in which Gore combines a revival of the old sparkling comedy of manners with an elegy for its irrevocable loss" ("Elegies," 192). In a chapter on *Don Juan*, a text which exerts a significant influence on early examples of the silver fork school, Tom Mole argues that Byron specifically challenges modern notions of subjectivity by challenging ideas of legibility and development, turning anachronistically to older models just at the moment when the transition away from these models is being completed.[45] Because "character is not specific to the discourse of literary theory, but is necessarily dependent on cultural schemata

[45] See chapter 8 of *Byron's Romantic Celebrity.*

defining the nature of the self" (Frow 12), I read a similar process at play in silver fork novels and their presentations of subjects. The dandy can be understood as a liminal figure, born out of a moment of transition, and representing "resistance to one notion of modern masculinity just as its hegemony is coalescing" (George, "Emergence " n. p.). In their emphasis on a prescriptive and self-consciously constructed fiction, silver fork novels resist a vision of the novel where each text is complexly individuated.

In their willingness to foreground adherence to a formula and then change according to the dictates of fashion, silver fork novelists call disruptive attention to the artifice and malleability of the fictional text. Likewise, in lacking a vivid internal life, and instead largely borrowing meaning from the objects that surround him, the dandy risks collapsing the borders between subject and object altogether. In her article on the emergence of the dandy, George notes that "the man who embraces fashionable performance was often dismissed as a man who has voluntarily given up the rights and privileges of both masculinity and personhood, and who has willingly reduced himself to an object, a commodity—a thing" ("Reification," n.p). An exploration of the threats posed by this collapse of the borders between individual and thing will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Glittering Confusion: Selves, Objects, and Relationships

The very name of the silver fork genre advertises just how important material objects are in these novels. In Hazlitt's critique, the silver fork that conveys fish to the mouths of the wealthy functions symbolically, representing both a sphere of elite privilege and the concurrent fascination with describing that sphere. Everything that fills Hook with fascination when he represents this detail in his fiction is conveyed through an object that is tangible, portable, and subject to economic transactions. Despite the silver fork's concern with representations of behavior, conversation, and etiquette, all of these are bound up with the presence and display of objects, especially since the novels focus on individuals who could afford a seemingly endless array of goods. Moreover, as this chapter will show, silver fork objects are presented with a kind of autonomy that alters the way in which affect and sociability function in these novels. In these representations, the silver fork's emphasis on details allows these novels to disrupt the boundaries between subjects and objects, resulting in an alternative narrative hierarchy.

The first two chapters have demonstrated how silver fork plots and characters invite the accumulation of details and introduce structures of taste governing how those details are displayed. Discussing these two elements separately, however, is in some ways misleading: generally, plots are directed by the ways in which characters interact. In turn, characters are formed and revealed as they navigate plot events. The intersection of the two falls broadly under the scope of relationships and interactions. These categories house almost endless possibilities; a few to be explored here include friendships, courtships, familial interactions, and ambivalence towards both absent and present figures. In realist texts, these relationships tend to function as sites where subjectivity and humanity are affirmed; indeed, the trajectory of a text might focus specifically on an individual coming to understand his or her status as someone intertwined in a

network of social and communal ties. Objects, even luxurious or valuable ones, may well still be a feature of these narratives, but their textual presence most often serves to symbolically affirm (especially upon being renounced) the value of human connection. The golden coins in *Silas Marner*, for example, are shown to have little value in comparison to Eppie's golden curls.

In silver fork novels, representations of intersubjective interactions are persistently marked by the mediating presence of objects. These objects however do not perform the symbolic function typical in realism. Rather than use things to reaffirm the importance of bonds between characters, they suggest that characters might in fact be interchangeable with things. This implication is rendered all the more disconcerting by the intrusion of objects into emotionally-charged encounters where they would not be expected to occupy a prominent position: this renders their presence jarring enough to effectively disrupt a subject-object dichotomy. Within the private, domestic relationships of these novels, objects are repeatedly shown to take on a quality of substitution: they may be stand-ins for displays of emotion, for knowledge of characters, or for affective bonds. In all of these cases, the level of detail surrounding objects furthers this disruption, making it almost impossible to read them merely as backdrop to the human drama at play. Instead, they come to the forefront of the narrative, taking part in a process "in which objects are turned into 'things' through their participation in practices traditionally associated with subjective agency" (Boehm 2). When emotionally charged encounters are dominated by the detailed presence of things, the status of these encounters as sites where subjecthood is prominently on display is challenged, raising questions of where the novel's focus actually lies.

'Social Forks'[46]

[46] Sarah Alexander uses the term "social fork novel" in her article "A Tale of Two Dandies" to argue for a reading of *Cecil* as a novel engaged with questions of social and civic responsibility, and critical of the figure of the Regency

In order to show what silver forks do differently concerning patterns of relationships, it makes sense to turn to two novels where the major narrative momentum derives from how emotional bonds are configured and reconfigured. Both Blessington's *Victims of Society* (1837) and Catherine Gore's *Mothers and Daughters* (1834) remain tightly focused on the world of English high society and its ritualized migrations between country and city, with the majority of important characters limited to these locales, though there is still some display of a rarely-cited silver fork cosmopolitanism. They confine their plots to plausible, if at times Byzantine, family quarrels and courtship narratives, eschewing the abductions and murders that appear with some frequency in the genre's earlier works. *Mothers and Daughters* is primarily a family saga: Lady Maria Willingham is the mother to three daughters, and upon her husband's death, she finds that the bulk of his estate and wealth passes to his younger brother, whose wife and children she has long viewed as rivals. She takes the two elder daughters, Eleanor and Claudia, with her to the Continent for a number of years in order to live more cheaply and avoid having to witness the spectacle of her sister-in-law's triumph, leaving her youngest daughter Minnie with her cousins, Mary and Charles. When Lady Maria, Eleanor and Claudia return with the aim of securing advantageous marriages, all four of the female cousins are vividly contrasted. Largely under their mother's direction, Eleanor and Claudia proceed avariciously, with the clear goal of securing a wealthy and titled husband. Minnie and Mary, who share a close bond with one another, are instead motivated by genuine and long-standing love: Minnie for her cousin Charles, and Mary for her brother's childhood friend Frederick Lorimer. Both are ultimately triumphant in winning the hearts of their appropriate matches, and Minnie along the way becomes the heiress to the fortune of her mother's brother, bringing her own wealth to the marriage. At the novel's end,

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dandy. I employ the term here both to suggest that the novels in this chapter likewise engage with social problems, particularly those pertaining to gender equality, and to evoke their general preoccupation with representing individuals enmeshed in complex webs of relationships.

Eleanor and Claudia remain unmarried, but continue grasping and scheming in hopes of eventually securing matches which come to seem increasingly unlikely as they age.

Victims of Society similarly contrasts a group of four women and their varying marital choices, but to more dramatic effect. Augusta Vernon is young and sheltered at the beginning of the novel; after marrying Lord Annandale, despite doubts about the match, she receives conflicting advice from two close female confidantes, the recently married Mary Delaward, who is committed to steering her away from the temptations of fashionable life, and Caroline Montressor, ambitious and determined to secure a comfortable position for herself at almost any cost. Caroline in turn corresponds with the Parisian marquise, Delphine de Villeroi who acts as her foil, representing an even more cynical and calculating personality. Augusta quickly finds herself alienated by the cold and materially preoccupied life she shares with her husband and the elite society in which she is expected to mingle. She increasingly turns to her husband's friend Lord Nottingham for companionship, and noticing this, Caroline secretly engineers rumors of an affair between the two, aiming to provoke Lord Annandale to divorce his wife and then to subsequently marry her. While she is successful in achieving this, she fails to account for how devastated Augusta will be by the public destruction of her reputation and is consumed with guilt upon Augusta's death. She is also dogged by blackmail from a previous lover who threatens to reveal their relationship to her current husband. In the end, both Caroline and Delphine witness the deaths of their husbands at the hands of their lovers (one in the case of the duel, the other during an interrupted theft) and in both cases this triggers their death due to suicide or shock. Lady Mary is the only one to survive the novel, a fact attributed to a supportive and affectionate marriage, and her secluded and modest lifestyle.

Both novels are highly specific in their depiction of the fashionable world and were often understood as useful to "the wives and daughters of [Northern manufacturers and urban merchants and bankers] as guidebooks to an elegant lifestyle" (Adburgham 68). That is not to suggest, however, that these novels are uncritical of fashionable society. Rather, they offer the best example of how silver forks can be read as highly distrustful of the very elite worlds that they represent. Both novels show the fashionable world as a cold, if not downright cruel, place where concern for status, powers, and commodities reigns supreme, to the detriment of relationships. This critical orientation speaks in part to the relatively late publication dates of these novels: as Engel and King argue, "although fashionable novels continued to be published until 1850, their popularity began to wane as early as 1830" (106). A savvy late-era silver fork novelist, then, might do well to develop a thread which had always been an important part of the genre: the castigation of the same fashionable world that was also a source of fascination. Earlier examples of an eventual renunciation of high society abound in dandy novels, but there, provided a character eventually comes to see the ills of the glittering metropolis, he can often still be left with a comfortable income and a powerful, privileged position (for example, the conclusion of *The Young Duke*, or *Pelham*); indeed power and influence become a means to affecting social improvement through displays of *noblesse oblige*. In these novels, characters who have been seduced by a desire for wealth and status tend to meet with more severe punishment. In Gore's novel, this takes the form of social ostracism, and the threat of spinsterhood, or a singularly unsatisfying match. Blessington takes a more exacting toll, ending her novel with multiple deaths. This potential for social critique suggests that these will be novels engaged in the kind of exploration of social and intersubjective networks favored by realism. When these texts instead

remain preoccupied with objects, they evoke the possibility that relationships to and with things matter as much, if not more, than relationships between individuals.

While engaging in social critique, both of these novels place particular emphasis on the intricacies of female communities, and the potentially damaging effects of the social expectations for aristocratic women. The relationship of silver fork novels and 'women's fiction', in either the sense of novels written by women, or with the primary audience of women readers in mind, is a complex one. A number of scholars have suggested that part of the reason silver forks were critically marginalized stems from a two-fold disdain for both popular fiction in general, and specifically for popular fiction marketed towards women.[47] One of the most valuable contributions of explicitly feminist criticism has been the rediscovery and reevaluation of long-neglected female authors, and much of the early wave of criticism calling attention to silver fork novels read them through the framework of gender criticism; the 2009 special issue of *Women's Writing* devoted to silver fork fiction provides an excellent array of articles that take this approach.

One of these articles, by Kendra, offers a useful division of subcategories of the silver fork. Gore and Blessington's novels epitomize the "society novel" category. This group, in contrast to the "dandy novel" category, takes women characters as its major focus, and usually navigates their progress towards marriage. However, these matches are presented neither as part of a gothic melodrama (as is the case in silver forks like *Godolphin* or *Romance and Reality*) or as a potential trap for the world-weary bachelor of dandy novels such as *Cecil*, or *Vivian Grey*. Rather, marriages here are the outcome of carefully orchestrated social and economic alliances,

[47] Muireann Ó'Cinnéide's book *Aristocratic Women and the Literary Nation, 1832-1867* insightfully considers how the intersection of class and genre impacted the reception of silver forks (as well as other genres).

and the highest determinant of a woman's future happiness and security. As such, they are not matters to be taken lightly or determined without proper guidance: in the tradition of novelists such as Austen and Burney, these silver fork texts approach the matter of a young woman's marriage through a social lens in which a fairly large cast of characters take an interest, and impose their own views, sometimes to comic or tragic effect. These novels are frank in their depiction of both romantic and familial relationships as essentially economic in nature. This is certainly not a uniquely silver fork trait: if anything, it marks a point where silver forks can be seen to share in one of the dominant concerns of nineteenth-century fiction as a whole. It is in fact somewhat surprising that a genre that is often described as uncritically revelling in wealth includes novels that express so much anxiety about the acquisition of wealth, and the moral cost of this acquisition.

Thinking of these texts as exemplars of the 'society novel' genre, and thus as particularly feminized examples of the silver fork, also helps to understand how objects function in these novels. In their concern with the domestic, they highlight situations where emotional exchanges would be expected to be paramount. Characters both reveal and hide love, lie and communicate painfully sincere emotions, reject one another and enact reconciliations. There are arguably more structural similarities than differences between, say, *Mansfield Park* and *Victims of Society*: a quiet virtuous young woman loves the cousin who has been like a brother to her, but is troubled by the more superficial and assertive females who surround her, only to eventually see her steadfastness rewarded in the end. This very orientation towards depicting inner states of being makes the genre's attention to outward details all the more striking.

As much as these silver fork texts engage with the domestic lives of their protagonists, they also situate their characters in complex social environments. Subjects relate not only to friends and

family, but also to wider social circles that are often characterized by ambivalence. This broader social orientation is not merely grounds for observation but also grounds for criticism. Over and over again, readers witness female characters struggling under circumstances that leave them economically disempowered, subject at the same time to rigid codes of conduct. Both novels reveal the destructive effects of the limitations imposed on female characters and in so doing create expectations that the concern of the novel will be its human subjects. Much like an emotional orientation, an ideological orientation creates a space where material objects introduce a note of discord when they appear.

A focus on female subjects structures a different relationship between those selves and surrounding relationships. Criticism of the consumerism in silver fork novels tended to highlight fickle consumers, unsatisfied with modest and easily accessible goods, craving instead the latest trends and unnecessary luxury.[48] The discourse surrounding the newly emerging figure of the shopper often relied on tropes of visual seduction: displays of previously unknown goods would ignite a desire for them. While unable to provide the fully visual stimuli of an illustrated advertisement or a shop window, in their rich texture of detail silver fork descriptions could give an approximation of luxury goods (as well as useful information about how to display or use them, where to purchase them, and other 'user's guide' type information). Silver forks were not only implicated in reproducing this consumerist logic: on the literary front they were seen as part of it. Decorative rather than utilitarian, they ensured a market for themselves, critics charged, by assuring readers that each new novel contained a still more finely nuanced representation of the

[48] When, for example, *The Westminster Review* reviewed Catherine Gore's novel *Pin Money* in 1831, the reviewer complained that the novel was so preoccupied with identifying fashionable London shops that it "is in fact a sort of London Directory" (433) and speculated that Gore had been paid to mention and promote particular shops.

fashion of the present moment, ensuring that one more item would always have to be purchased, as the last one rapidly became outdated.[49]

In this scheme, it tended to be women who collapsed categories of reader and consumer. If dandies were critiqued for their consumption and materialism, it was because these were markers of a dangerous effeminacy: as a "figure who challenged traditional gender roles," the dandy "because of his interest in fashion and appearance was often quite feminized" (Wilson, *Fashioning* 47). These traits were also manifested differently. For dandies, materialism is usually in some ways an extension of the self: luxury goods, while certainly present, exist in the form of clothes, accessories, sumptuous foods, racehorses and liveries. The commodities here, rather than competing with individuals, adorn them, advertising their power and potency and speaking to their talent at public display. For the feminized silver forks, the material details in these novels tend to pertain to fixed objects, usually meant for presentation only to a select few in domestic spaces, and often strictly decorative. While dress and accessories are not negligible, they form a less prominent part of the novel's materiality than might be expected, and especially in the case of jewelry are more often seen in cases or atop a dressing table than actually adorning the neck of a protagonist. Here, unlike what we see in the dandy novel, commodities are external to subjects, and because of this separation, represent something that may in fact compete with the presentation of that self. Objects existing as an extension of a male subject are less disruptive to a binary: even in the description of a well-adorned dandy, the focus remains on an individual, bedecked as he may be. An object no longer in contact with a human body slips more readily into thingness.

[49] Ellen Miller Casey uses readings of Lady Morgan's reviews of silver fork fiction to explore how it generated self-perpetuating consumer demand in her article "Silver Forks and the Commodity Text."

Theorizing Things

That shift into thingness is both disruptive and productive. Articulations of how the silver fork refuses realist norms, in matters such as plotting and characterization, tell us something about why we need to read this genre differently. It is important to consider not only how silver forks use details as strategies of resistance but also as sites of alternative possibility. As Brown points out in his seminal introduction to thing theory, "objects become things when they stop working for us" ("Thing Theory," 4). By reading the intrusive moments where objects stop working, at least in the ways realism trains readers to expect them to work, I will show how silver fork novels use their particular structures not just to refute assumptions about where meaning lies in a text, but also to ask new sets of questions. Those questions, especially when directed towards the position of subjects, mark details and the material as spaces that characterize who or what matters in these narratives.

This chapter considers two major settings in which details give silver fork objects a thing-like ability to intrude and disrupt notions of agency and autonomy that privilege human subjects. The first section considers individuals engaged in private, domestic interactions, the second in more public displays. In both cases, these should be precisely the places where subjects are most distinct, defined by their ability to feel, think, and engage with other feeling, thinking beings – in effect, to be fundamentally unlike objects. Yet in both cases, objects are stubbornly present, and unlike realist objects, not for the purpose of buttressing meaning by conveying additional information about interiority or ideology. Rather, they take on a liminal status, part of what thing theory (as identified in more detail below) calls "the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like" (Brown, *Sense* 13). That this confusion seeps into moments when humans would be expected to be seen building and displaying

affective bonds speaks to just how thoroughly details in the silver fork disrupt some of the central assumptions of the realist tradition. As Schor notes, "what is perhaps most threatening about the detail [is] its tendency to subvert an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the centre, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background" (15).

Nineteenth-century novels in general tend to feature "cavalcades of objects [that] threaten to crowd the narrative right off the page" (Freedgood, *Ideas* 1). These objects may fall into a number of categories, and a major thread in criticism of Victorian fiction has become the parsing of those categories. In recent years, a number of studies marked by "a growing skepticism towards the view that commodity culture constitutes the grand narrative of the Victorian period" (Wynne 4) have sought to introduce new ways of reading objects. These theorizations have profited from developments in 'thing theory' more broadly, building on studies by critics such as Brown that "ask why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves" (*Sense* 4). Freedgood, for example, argues for a move away from viewing objects in Victorian novels (immediately or solely) as 'commodities' and towards viewing them as 'things,' objects which can figure in a more complex array of relationships. This move is designed to open up the possibility of "taking them literally, materially, and then returning them to the novel with lost associations and possibilities restored" ("Commodity," 166).

What thing theory most productively brings to readings of silver fork novels, then, is "the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (Brown, "Thing Theory," 4). In realist texts, whether those objects are understood as things, commodities or something in between, that relation tends to be a hierarchical one. Freedgood cites in contemporary criticism "an

unquestioned moral and hierarchical antinomy between people and animate creatures, on the one hand, and things, on the other: the awful thing is to be like a thing; there is no sense that we might learn something important about subjects from objects" ("Commodity," 160). While she seeks to dismantle this opposition by regarding objects outside of a commodity framework, silver forks offer an alternative possibility: that even while retaining an at least partially commodified status, objects might still be able to function like things in their ability to challenge privileged boundaries between subjects and objects.

Because these texts, more than many other silver forks, provide us with scenes where emotional display is expected to be the primary focus, the intrusion of objects is all the more jarring and likely to invert narrative priorities. Unlike in more fantastical gothic/romance exchanges where material details seem to be part of a descriptive aim and perform part of the text's necessary process of world-creation, these works that at first glance most closely resemble domestic realism seem to have no need for elaborations of objects. When objects do come into narrative prominence, they come to display "the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power" (Brown, "Thing Theory," 3) and that very presence and power challenges assumptions about where the meaning might reside in say, the scene of a betrothal: no longer in either the suitor or the beloved, but perhaps in the ring, or a piece of embroidery discarded at her feet.

When Schor discusses the subversive potential of the detail, she emphasizes its ability to shift attention from the foreground to the background, an interpretation grounded in attention to the details of visual art, especially paintings. In reading the details of silver fork novels, a different spatial paradigm is more useful: here, details move the narrative focus from insides towards outsides, redirecting attention to material objects and external details. Rather than privileging the

behaviors and emotions of subjects, and locating these within interiorities that might be communicated to others, discrete and distinct objects circulate through the text, asserting their own claims to be read with as much autonomy and complexity as any of the individuals on the page. Indeed, individuals and their emotions and desires seem to be legible only through those objects, raising questions of which category is more essential to the meaning of the work.

The Logic of Substitution

In both Gore and Blessington's novels, objects repeatedly convey an absence of emotion. Because a number of characters are calculating and self-concerned (a structure that works to reaffirm the novels' critique of fashionable society), in many exchanges, concealing a lack of genuine feeling becomes an important stratagem. This is effected not just by bodily or rhetorical performance, but also by material goods. When Lady Maria, motivated by financial reasons, dotes on her elderly and ailing mother, "[s]he was held up as a mirror of filial imitation to their remiss offspring by every dowager throughout the parishes of St. George and St. James. Nobody, indeed, could be more assiduously expert in placing the gorgeous Indian screen impervious to a draught; nobody more accurately versed in the mysteries of chicken-panada!" (1:12-13). Here, a character is self-consciously performing a relational role, that of a loving daughter. This performance is not, however, represented through Maria's speech or actions, but rather through the textiles and delicacies that allow her to construct the impression of an emotion. Later, Lady Maria and her two daughters are returning from a masked ball when they learn that her wealthy uncle is on his deathbed, and under the guise of emotion, make a last-ditch attempt to ensure they have been designated in his will. Again, characters perform emotions that are not really present, and again material details allow for this substitution, in this case literally concealing an absence: "In rushed Lady Maria! Enrobed in her gaudy apparel; concealing with an embroidered

handkerchief two anxious eyes all-guiltless of a tear. In rushed Claudia and Eleanor! horror-struck and amazed but in reality little touched in the chord of true feminine mercy" (2: 315). In such cases, silver fork novels evoke an affinity between human emotions, typically regarded as intangible and immaterial, and objects: the one might be substituted for the other.

This practice of treating the tangible and the intangible as equivalent to one another extends into the silver fork use of metaphors. Comparing an abstraction to something material is a ubiquitous literary technique for clarifying the meaning of that abstraction. However, in the case of silver forks, the level of detail expended upon the material object serves to reframe the focus. Take for example, the metaphor that "youth resembles a Claude Lorraine glass, which imparts to all objects, its own beautiful tint" (Blessington 108). The Claude Lorraine glass (named after the French painter) became a popular tool for amateur artists and tourists in the early nineteenth century. It was a small, dark-tinted mirror and when objects were viewed through its lens, the colour schemes were simplified, producing an effect that was perceived as evocative of picturesque landscape painting. While here the object does work to perform an expressive function, it evokes an of-the-moment, purchaseable item with enough specificity that the moment ceases to convey musings about the nature of youth, and becomes one instead where the novel effectively advertises a commodity. The level of detail is what transforms the object into both a commodity, and at the same time into a thing, capable of reframing attention away from any general musings on what youth might mean.

In silver fork novels, objects are used as a means of attaining knowledge of characters, and as tools to evoke the identity of an absent character. Jean Arnold reads a number of instances where jewels come to stand in for characters in Victorian realist texts, suggesting that "jewelled objects are present and narrated, because the person the jewels represent is absent. Objects fill the

emotional void of absences" (149). In silver fork novels, the level of detail surrounding objects tends to suggest that objects possess the same amount of complexity as individual subjects and might occupy an equivalent, or even superior, position of interest for readers. Consider the following example from *Victims of Society*: Nottingham has had only the briefest of interactions with Augusta, and has reluctantly watched her marry his closest friend. Accompanying her parents to her childhood home, he finds himself moved by "the now silent harp that answered so melodiously to the taper fingers of the beautiful Augusta; the flowers she loved, drooping on their stands; and the different objects of feminine utility she was wont to use, all of which retain their places, though she they were destined for is far away" (44). In the absence of an evolution of feeling between Augusta and Nottingham, the attraction he feels towards her, which will be so central to the rest of the novel, is provoked and nurtured by objects, more so than any interactions readers are granted access to. Silver forks can here be most fully seen as the sites of a complex desire. While harps and gilded flower stands are being used to evoke Nottingham's fledgling desire for Augusta, the long-declared aim of the silver fork genre has been to induce readers to in turn desire those harps and gilded flower stands. These fashionable objects are meant to be reflective of the latest trends, working to cultivate a reader's desire for objects, even as they mediate a representation of intersubjective desire between characters.

Relationships mediated by objects need not be structured around desire. Material objects are also used to evoke ambivalent memories of characters. Augusta's most powerful awareness of her husband's first wife is triggered when she first comes to live with him: "the house was fitted up to receive Lady Annandale as a bride; her cipher, intermingled with flowers and gold arabesques, ornaments all the furniture in the apartments appropriated to me, the gloss scarcely off them" (64). This moment will be reiterated later in the text when, having driven her friend to her death,

Caroline, now the third Lady Annandale, is reminded that Augusta once occupied the position she is now in. Here, objects trigger regret, and speak to the ambivalence concerning her marriage:

> [the Annandale diamonds] are now mine; but do they give me pleasure? Alas no for they remind me, that, to obtain them, I have lost a jewel beyond all price— the price that a conscience free from guilt bestows. When I look round on the stately saloons, splendid pictures, and magnificent furniture, of this fine castle, I almost wonder that, being its mistress, I can be otherwise than happy; yet, too late I find, that the splendor purchased by wicked schemes , and successful artifices, can never give happiness. (254)

While physical jewels invoke Caroline's sensations of regret and guilt, the lost possibility of unsullied conscience is represented through the metaphor of a luxury object: the "jewel beyond all price." Whether absent individuals are being invoked as sources of desire, or as sources of regret, the fact that their textual presence can be conjured through detailed luxury objects, suggests that they are in some way congruent with those objects. This narrative practice differs from the realist technique of using symbolically charged objects to reveal character. Rather than providing additional meaning or exposition, because equivalent levels of detail are used to depict both people and things, the difference between the two categories is destabilized.

Objects do not only at times substitute for abstractions or individuals: they are also used as placeholders to indicate a variety of emotional engagements. A bond, or the absence thereof, between characters is usually indicated by the way in which objects circulate between them. This builds on the slippage between characters and objects. In moments where a character might be relatively static, likening him or her to an object is less challenging. When an individual is

represented engaged in the emotional and intersubjective work of interacting with other individuals, he or she is positioned to display the privileged aspects of being not-a-thing: a thinking, feeling conduit of the social. When objects intrude even into these moments (this quality of intrusion marked not just by their presence, but by the level of detail that serves to place them on par with the subjects), one of the most cherished assumptions about what it means to be a subject is denied.

Gifts

One of the key ways in which this mediation of relationality occurs is through the use of gifts in the narratives. Blessington, in particular, would be familiar with the cultural weight of objects received and distributed as gift items: an active participant in the gift book industry as an editor and contributor, part of her literary career relied on assumptions about luxury items in possession of cultural cachet being viewed as the appropriate vehicle for conveying emotions. Gift books had to balance two oft-competing intents: most often purchased as a gift for a young woman by either a suitor, or an older female relative, they had to reflect the purchaser's perception of what would please the recipient, as well as appeal to the recipient's actual tastes. The domesticated, late incarnations of the silver fork genre perform a similar kind of doubling, appealing to both a taste for a moralizing sort of poetic justice, and a voyeuristic desire for representations of luxury. The shift of objects doing the work of conveying emotions is perhaps most clear when the language designed to couch the gift exchange in sincere emotion is absent: in the first description of Mary's reunion with her mother and sisters after years of separation, the interaction is succinctly conveyed through the exchange of material objects: "Mary was presented with her set of Roman mosaic and Neapolitan coral" (1:104).

Familial relationships are a dominant feature of these narratives, and appear heavily marked by the mediation of gifts. Young women who enjoy parental guidance and support are figured as endowed with moral virtues, although they may still fall prey to a lack of understanding and awareness of the world around them. Mary Delaward enjoys such a close relationship to her parents that they are fairly devastated by her marriage, promising as it may be. In *Mothers and Daughters*, the fact that both Mary and Minnie are able to enjoy the stable nurturing provided by Mary's parents seems to set them on a different course than either of Minnie's two sisters.

The first letter featured in *Victims*, in turn, centres not on the romantic affection but on the love that Augusta professes to feel, intensely, if even hyperbolically, towards her parents. In this letter, she frankly admits to her confidante Mary who is "two years my senior and ten years wiser" (5) that "much of this elation was caused by my dear mother's presenting me with her beautiful parure of pearls; and my kind father giving me a hundred pounds, in the prettiest new pocket-book that ever was seen" (5-6). In this opening scene, Augusta reveals the ambivalence towards objects that the novel as a whole will attest to: "the words which accompanied the gifts caused the happiness, more than the gifts themselves; though I am not insensible to their charms" (6). As her further behaviour will substantiate, Augusta is at this point impulsive and finds it difficult to conceal her emotions, even if they are fleeting: she cannot help but admit, even as she tries to enact expectations of seeing the gifts as significant as markers of a relationship between herself and her parents, that she experiences an emotional tie to the objects as well.

The objects here also serve as a way of prefiguring later plot events: Lady Vernon bestows the pearls on her daughter with fervent wishes that she "may ever continue as pure and spotless as the pearls which I now bestow on you" (6). In a passage laced with foreboding, as Augusta herself records "gleams of melancholy presentiment, as if I felt that there is that within me which

may preclude lasting peace" (5), this initial letter works to frame the questions of her moral status and the tests of her virtue that will go on to animate the rest of the novel, even before introducing the events that will give rise to her unhappy marriage. If the text as a whole is a challenge to the mistaken society which will fail to calculate Augusta's virtue as a "pure woman", these questions make their first entrance into the novel with the assistance of material objects. The pearls function as both emblem and safeguard, designed to advertise Augusta's chastity at the moment she receives them, and preserve that chastity in a world which, as readers are tantalizingly made aware, will try to compromise it. The pearls are not, however, as might be the case in many realist novels, simply outward symbols of an inner quality: in their visibility they evoke the ways in which Augusta's inner virtue is less important than her public reputation: in effect, how chaste she is *understood* to be, matters far more than the actual facts of her behaviour and choices. This external orientation shifts the narrative away from Augusta's interiority, even as it seems to be delivering information about her feelings and anxieties: these inner qualities are transferable to objects.

Within the space of a few letters, Augusta has confirmed her tendency to be distracted by the material qualities of luxury objects. She describes to Caroline how she is surprised by Mary's lack of enthusiasm when her fiancée presents her with "a superb suit of diamonds … [that] shone like stars in the azure sky" (8). Augusta astutely notes that Mary "seemed to value them only as being his gift and in consequence of their never having been worn save by virtuous women" (8), while acknowledging that "I, if the truth must be told, should have valued them for their own intrinsic beauty… a new dress, or a trinket, excite me to fresh levities" (8). Indeed Augusta refers, in her description of the wedding day proper, to her understanding (developed under Caroline's supervision) that marriage is "only a ceremony established to give ladies the power of

obtaining homes and wardrobes, diamonds and new carriages, and various other delightful things, too numerous to name" (10). This description reflects how objects mediate an affective bond between husband and wife: even in the case where Mary's pleasure is triggered not by the jewelry as emblems of luxury, but because of their connotations with moral standards she aspires to, the sense of how an individual is defining herself and her aspirations and attachments is refracted through objects that receive as much narrative attention as her future husband. Augusta is even more explicit in defining her fantasies as consumed with "delightful things," not people. Even in Blessington's project of critiquing a world where women take on a commodity-like status as they circulate through the marriage market, the boundaries between subjects and objects are shown to be most permeable precisely at the most emotionally loaded moments.

Mothers and Daughters displays remarkable overlap in its depictions of matrimonial gifts. Eleanor, who initially appears to have the best prospects of securing a wealthy match, is depicted much like Augusta in being easily enchanted by tempting commodities that seem best achievable through marriage. Her praise for a new bride turns out to be hollow: "'She appears a most lovely and loveable creature.' But Eleanor's admiration was secretly lavished rather on the charms of her ladyship's diamond necklace than upon those of her disposition!" (1: 235). Her mother understands this tendency and exploits it when it suits her to do so. When Eleanor expresses her displeasure at the match she feels pressured to accept, she sneers that, "I shall revenge myself on myself by always confessing to my mother that I abhor and despise my husband." Lady Maria replies tartly that she "will leave Sir William and his family diamonds to plead their own cause," (2:83). While these scenes try to create a framework wherein desires for objects are presented in a negative light, the only way to build that framework is by describing the sources of desire, and thus in fact reinscribing objects into the text, which in turn undermine intersubjective connection.

On the surface, first Eleanor and then her mother are rebuked for prioritizing objects over the possibility of companionship and affection. However, because the text does not distinguish clearly enough between Sir William and his diamonds (or, for that matter, Eleanor and the diamonds), treating the two as roughly equivalent cannot be read as entirely reprehensible. They exist on the same plane of representation, granted roughly the same amount of detail, and thereby come to seem comparable, so that feelings for one are linked to the other.

The presence of objects is not confined to the relationships of the central characters. On at least one occasion, it seems as though a relationship is introduced into the text solely so that it can be read through objects. Over two of the letters contained in *Victims of Society*, Delphine chronicles a lengthy account of a fashionable couple, Alicia and Jules, who at first enjoy an idyllic marriage based on mutual trust. However, the social circles in which they travel are so replete with gossip and innuendo that they become the victims of an *Othello*-like scheme, in which Jules is lured into unfounded suspicions about his wife's fidelity. A complicated series of miscommunications and stratagems ensues, leading finally to their separation and Alicia's death. While the anecdote functions to critique the toxic atmosphere of gossip and the circulation of personal information in the fashionable *monde*, it in fact relies on those same devices to be communicated: the moral lesson can only be preserved through the transmission of post-mortem gossip. While performing this condemnation of the cultural practices of the fashionable world, the anecdote also cannot help calling up images of the materialities which make this world such a tempting place:

> The book he had been reading to her the day before, while she sat at her embroidery, was still on the table, with a mark upon it, to indicate the place where he had terminated; and the bouquet he had brought to her was still fresh in the vase where he had placed it. As her eyes rested on each object indicative of his tenderness, she asked herself, whether it

> was possible that he could always have been deceiving her; and that, while he seemed to be only occupied in lavishing tokens of affection on her, he was in reality wholly devoted to another? (88)

Although positioned to feel empathy for Alicia's wronged innocence, readers are also liable to find themselves unable to avoid interest in the "lavish tokens of affection," feigned as that affection may be. The anecdote as a whole works to perform a normative function: by articulating a version of the main plot, it provides further evidence that marriages in the world of elite society are often damaged by a toxic network of gossip and scandal, suggesting that the problems Augusta faces are not a unique case. That a relationship (including its collapse) can only be narrated through objects, even if the relationship plays a minor role in the novel as a whole, evokes just how essential those objects are. Especially because so little else is known about Jules and Alicia, their material environment comes to seem as significant as whatever readers might glean of their internal states.

Such ambiguity would seem less intrusive in earlier iterations of the silver fork. In the dandy novels, for example, characters are blatantly used as devices through which detail can be inserted into the text. As a result, interactions and connections between characters are clearly marked as superficial. In these later incarnations, however, particularly their emphasis on domestic relations, silver fork society novels seem to attempt to imitate the emotional and intersubjective emphasis inherited from domestic realism. That they do so while still maintaining a clear commitment to representing materiality with as much attention as subjectivity has sometimes been read as an indication that they fail in their attempt to capture emotional nuance. Instead, I argue, because of their project of emphasizing detail silver forks deliberately redistribute attention away from subjectivity. As such, they stand as examples of a case where novels might

tell a different kind of story: not one of individuals coming to value people over things, but of things and people coming to seem increasingly interchangeable.

The Social Life of Things?

One of the most provocative contributions of recent silver fork criticism has been the claim that rather than slavishly holding up elite lifestyles as an ideal and template to be imitated, these novels actually critiqued such acquisitiveness. The origins of this claim stretch quite far back; Bulwer Lytton, in *England and the English* claims that the great contribution of the silver fork genre lay in the disgust it triggered towards the indolence and self-indulgence of the aristocrats (though he saw this as an accidental benefit, not a deliberate project). As he explains, "the novels of fashionable life illustrate feelings very deeply rooted, and productive of no common revolution" (2:108). In more recent years, critics such as Copeland and Francis Russell Hart have explored the genre's political valences. As Ó'Cinnéide summarizes, "the silver-fork novel is being reconsidered as a more subtle, ambiguous entity than its traditional representation would suggest: exclusive yet aspirational; complicit in, yet satirizing, a world of aristocratic wealth and privilege" ("Across," 1227-28).

There is undoubtedly often a pattern of suspicion towards that world of privilege, a world that is ultimately revealed as hollow and inhumane. The entire plot of *Godolphin*, for example, is driven by Constance's quest to conquer and destroy an elite world; the protagonist of *The Young Duke* can only find happiness, maturity and stability when he comes to see though the glittering façade of fashionable life. These critical functions are developed to even greater extent in the 'society' novels. If they take as their primary topic not an individual, as the dandy novels do, but the wider, communal scope of a segment of society, the gaze they turn upon it is not wholly

flattering. Blessington's novel makes explicit its attitude towards the fashionable *monde* in its very title, and within the text, the distrust and distaste displayed towards fashionable society emerges early on. While the fashionable world is staged as a place that the truly wise characters (Mary Delaward, Mary and Minnie Willingham) have the sense to largely avoid, and cultivate indifference towards, it is also held out as a site where characters can be destroyed. Mary from the first cautions that Augusta is exaggerating her expectations of London high society: "I pronounce that disappointment must await you in that glittering circle where you anticipate only happiness" (18).

In order to perform this social critique, silver fork society novels situate their characters not only in private, domestic relationships with friends, families and loved ones: they also make clear that these characters exist in extended, often ambivalent social networks defined by carefully coded behaviour. This would seem to be a structure that reaffirms the complexity of subjects manoeuvring through social norms. Yet through the persistent emphasis on externals and objects, the textual focus remains difficult to establish. Social critique, like affect and emotion, is performed not through displays of interiority and multivalent interactions, but is staged in narratives where dichotomies between subjects and objects become fluid and permeable. Firstly, detailed depictions of objects undermine moments of social critique, reaffirming the significance of material goods at the very moment where they are supposedly being renounced. Second, when depictions of subjects in social contexts are read more broadly, this results not in more complex individuation but in individuals being rendered knowable from the outside in, defined by factors such as environmental conditioning, nationality, and reputation, all of which suggests that they can be read much like objects. A world in which objects are shown to be in possession of disruptive levels of agency, and where characters are in fact comparable to those objects, is

hardly a world where the value of subjects is affirmed. Instead, the self-reflexive and highly self-aware depictions of public, social circulation in these novels raises further questions of whether a social existence is adequate to ensure subjecthood.

Both novels, but especially Lady Blessington's, take aim at many of the conditions and assumptions governing the lives of aristocratic women. At her most didactic, Caroline provides a lengthy summary in the style of an early anthropological report, summarizing her impressions of London fashionable society. This section extends for well over 20 pages in the modern edition and contains many explicit and sometimes biting criticisms, such as "A woman of fashion must be callous to the domestic affections. How [else] could she fulfil the arduous duties of her post … the woman of fashion having emancipated herself from the drudgery of household cares and domestic duties and having substituted the services of hirelings, has ample time to perform the self- imposed functions of her office" (155) or "So few women in fashionable society here can afford to be merciful to others, that they are often led to a severity they are far from feeling, to avoid incurring the imputation of impropriety" (161). As Jenny Bourne Taylor and John Kucich summarize, "*Victims of Society* … satirically exposes and exploits the decadence and duplicity of fashionable society" (259). However at the same time, in the amount of detail this report offers as the standard customs and practices, the kinds of fashions worn, and the best shops to patronize, it makes both visible and imitable a world that retains an allure even as its values are challenged.

This is a world where confusion between subjects and objects is shown to emerge organically out of structures where individuals are effectively bought and sold, and valued primarily within a utilitarian framework. Both novels draw attention to the economic underpinnings of the supposedly personal practices of courtship and marriage. Neither attempts to suggest that women

are powerless within this sexual economy: if anything, women are portrayed as better able than men to understand and deploy this system to their advantage. Within its first few paragraphs, *Mothers and Daughters* offers a crisp reversal of the stereotypes of female emotion and male rationality: "Charles Willingham very properly fell in love, and Lady Maria very naturally fell into a fit of musing." (1:3) Her musing here concerns the odds that she will be able to restore Charles to his father's good graces, so as to secure an inheritance that is currently in doubt. She ultimately decides to take the gamble, but this is a function of strategic consideration, not the lure of an emotional pull.

This is the same model that is applied to the fates of a second generation as well. The following episode inaugurates the concern Lady Maria will display towards securing lucrative matches for her two eldest daughters:

> 'Excellent connection good match hang on hand get off make out devil's beauty leader of ton jointure and settlements.' Claudia and Eleanor Willingham, who had been loitering unperceived over an embroidered frame at the other end of the room, were considerably puzzled by these mysterious phrases ...They little imagined the long apprenticeship they were about to serve to the horrible calling, of which these words may be regarded as the initiatory cabala." (1:90)

The language of employment used at the end of the passage reinforces the economic necessity which transforms the pursuit of a husband into a full-time job. It also tints all subsequent portrayals of what might be pleasant entertainments and gaieties with the suggestion of being laborious endeavors, always susceptible to the risk of failure. As a shrewd dowager will note later in the novel, "those girls are never happy except amid the blazing of lights and the scraping

of fiddles. And even that I would forgive, if it proceeded from a girlish love of pleasure; but with them it is all a speculation, all a trade; ay, and one that will end in bankruptcy, or I am very much mistaken" (3:42).

The stakes are somewhat different for at least some of the characters in *Victims.* For Augusta, because she already enjoys financial security as an only child and heiress, she is not led into her ill-fated marriage by pecuniary interest; rather, it is Annandale's position as a leader of fashionable society which she finds so enticing. Because of the secluded life she has led (and also her young age), the possibility of gaining status and popularity in a world she has never encountered eclipses her ambivalence about her future husband. This is in some ways an even more damning critique of the false allure of fashionable society: its power extends beyond merely the temptation of wealth, so that characters who are already financially stable may still find themselves seduced. This portrayal is also balanced by the figure of Caroline, who occupies a much more precarious financial and social state. Much like Eleanor and Claudia, she does have to work to achieve a secure future position for herself and her lack of family connections leaves her with few openings into privileged social circles, a fact which explains why she cultivates her friendship with Augusta so assiduously. She also has to contend with the legacy of having been sexually compromised as a young woman, a fact which will eventually prove her downfall. In both novels, then, the primary narrative content of courtship and evolving romantic relationships occur in a commercial framework where individuals are treated much like objects, being bought, sold, traded, and catalogued. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that confusion can occur between objects and individuals, and over which of the two categories ought to take priority.

However, even while rendering a critique of how prominent a role objects are allowed to play, and how humans (especially women) take on an object-like status, Gore and Blessington's novels seem only able to articulate these criticisms by in fact offering details of objects. Take the example of Augusta, having come to a belated awareness of the problems in her marriage and becoming an outspoken (at least in the forum of her letters) critic of the models of how the bulk of fashionable marriages are conducted:

> She wears his family jewels, sits at the head of his table, gives him an heir to his honours, is polite and courteous to him and his friends, —and he is satisfied. Whether she is, or is not, he never pauses to inquire … As well might it be supposed that because a woman is sparkling in diamonds of an inestimable price, she is happy. The brilliant position, like the glitter of the diamonds, is only seen by others; the owner beholds not the lustre, though she is conscious of the weight. (70)

This moment might seem to anticipate other Victorian novelists who would go on utilize the figure of a bejeweled woman to evoke a lack of agency; Dickens, for example, in *Little Dorrit* describes Mr. Merdle's motivation for marrying: he "wanted something to hang jewels upon, and he bought it for that purpose," securing a wife with "a capital bosom to hang jewels upon" (207), explicitly configuring Mrs. Merdle as an object. In Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, when Gwendolyn balks at wearing diamonds she sees as evidence of a morally corrupt past, her husband informs her, "What you think has nothing to do with it … I wish you to wear the diamonds" (366). However, in Blessington's portrayal, whatever empathy might be cultivated tends to be distanced by the almost refrain like repetition of mention of diamonds and jewels, as if she is unconsciously citing the motive for enduring these hollow facades of marriage. The details surrounding their representation ("sparkling," "glitter," "lustre," "brilliant") reinforce their

materiality and render the narrative purpose of the episode unclear. Is the reader being incited to desire, or asked to reject that desire? Fewer details would make the objects less prominent, but here the diamonds and the woman presumably trapped under their weight become almost indistinguishable.

If these are the sufferings expected to be endured by married women, the unmarried fared no better, especially upon reaching a certain age. An elaborate description of the pains that Eleanor and Claudia take with their appearance runs as follows:

> the slight tinge of rouge vegetal *superfin*, which was to simulate the blush of maiden modesty, the profuse ringlets of jetty hue and silken softness, which were to flow in dishevelled grace around their brows, the shoulders bared to the extreme verge of decent endurance, the laboured smile, the elaborate plaitings and gatherings and puffings which purported to disguise the absence of many a youthful charm and girlish grace: such were the superfluous beauties in which they had arrayed themselves to compete with the inimitable captivations of a perfectly artless demeanour, and a perfectly simple costume (3:247).

While this passage might well be read as critical of the performances expected of women in order to simultaneously conceal and display themselves (especially in a novel where Minnie and Mary succeed at finding love and happiness with no pretense whatsoever), because of the detail packed into this section, it also functions as a catalogue of tools and techniques available for precisely this kind of display. Because the objects that are utilised by Eleanor and Claudia are enumerated in such detail, the distinction between individuals and things comes to seem blurry at best. This passage also offers an example of how the level of detail marks the transition between

objects and things: cosmetics and accessories are shown in their utilitarian capacity, designed to conceal and produce a spectacle. They are also shown failing in that capacity and therefore becoming alien and strange, "plaitings and gatherings and puffings" somehow disconnected from any impression of a whole. Even the smile becomes disconnected from the rest of the body, something superimposed at will to produce a calculated effect. While this is a moment where this sort of performed artifice is explicitly being held up for critique, juxtaposed against a more artless and unadorned beauty, the level of detail devoted to the objects required to simulate an effect distract from the condemnation of that effect. While the jetty locks may not be as alluring as the diamonds, they do make it comparably difficult to see this passage as a critique of a world where these kind of enhancements are expected and necessary. In attempting to critique materialism through materiality, and objectification through objects, the energy created by detailing things redirects focus away from the place of subjects in a social world.

Influence and Anxiety

Detailed representations of material objects are one form of redirecting attention from interiors (the emotions and psyches of characters, their social and political nuances) towards exteriors. Emphasizing the significance of exterior influences, especially if not coupled with equivalent interior details, reduces the complexity of subjects, suggesting that they can be understood as static and fixed. Alongside the disruptive presence of things, society silver fork novels, as they might aptly be called, challenge the entire notion of a society comprising distinctly individuated subjects. Realist novels display persistent interest in exploring the impact of environment upon characters. However, those factors are rarely rigidly determining; rather, the influence of (often competing) environmental factors allows for the development of increasingly complex subjectivities, a pattern at the heart of the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Within Gore and

Blessington's novels, environmental influences are used to render characters more static and less capable of complex social interactions, making their claim to subjectivity less, rather than more, compelling.

In particular, the novels stress the influence, and the resulting potential threat, of a female network. Mothers and sisters are particularly charged examples, but close friends may figure as well. Both Eleanor and Claudia start as benign enough presences, and their moral decay is depicted as attributable to their mother's influence: "from her very earliest hour, her heart had been seared and her mind degraded by the worldly maxims of her lady mother" (2:54). As Mary cautions Augusta, urging her to cease corresponding with Caroline, "There is more danger to a young and innocent female in an unrestrained correspondence with one of her own sex who is unprincipled and heartless, than in an acquaintance even with men of light character, who possess not equal opportunities of instilling the poison of their false opinions" (13-14).

While female networks may be sources of either good or bad influence, two other spheres of influence are held out as definitive sources of corruption, both of which are used to explain Caroline's descent into cynicism and unruly sexuality. The first source of corruption occurs when, left unsupervised by her negligent mother, she passes time in listening to the gossip of servants (and French servants, at that) concerning the behaviour they have witnessed:

> The poor child … was initiated into all the mysteries of high life below stairs, and sipped her *café au lait* in the coterie of mademoiselle Annette, consisting of half-a-dozen *femmes de chambre*, and as many couriers, or valets, who related the adventures of their respective masters and mistresses, past and present, with so much naiveté and graphic skill, as to make a deep impression on the mind of their unlucky little auditor. (57)

Additionally, Caroline is given the same freedom in her reading material, and of course perverts her young mind through a steady diet of scandalous novels. This critique of the power of fiction must be carefully negotiated, since silver fork texts likewise exist in large part as archives of upper-class scandal. In fact, when *Victims* chronicles the eventual downfalls of Caroline, Augusta and Delphine, the novel is in fact likewise relating "adventures … with graphic skill" (57).

The fashionable world is shown to be a dangerous influence for men as well as women. In her first letter, Lady Mary explains to her protégée Augusta the vetting process she has demanded that her fiancé undergo. She is now satisfied that "he has neither frequented Crockford's, nor attended every meeting at Newmarket; nor hunted at Melton … in short he is not a young man of fashion; or, rather, a fashionable young man" (7). Having ascertained this, she can feel secure that her marriage is likely to be a happy one. This explanation in some ways reverses the process of selecting a match that is typically held out: while Lord Delaward is exemplary in his wealth, pedigree and good looks, Mary warily verifies that he does not partake of the fashionable activities that are often depicted as lending a suitor additional charms or distinguishing him from others. The list she chronicles also gives her an opportunity to perform the oft-cited 'guidebook' function of the silver fork novel: by being specific and precise about the marks of fashionable life, even while presenting these details as things to be avoided, she offers a window into the most prestigious attractions and locations. At the same time as these details might be sources of desire, they are also meant to evoke the virtue of those who avoid them, and the danger of those who immerse themselves in the fashionable world, a danger made all the more clear by the cruelty displayed by Lord Annandale throughout the text.

Mothers and Daughters does not lack description of dandified, indolent young men either: consider the following response to being asked how much he had lost at cards the previous night: " 'I forget,' replied the yawning Stapylford, passing a white hand through his perfumed curls, and crumpling with the other the Morning Post into a toss-ball. "Tichborne!" said he, elevating his drawl to address a particular friend, who, dressed as his double, was busily engaged at the breakfast-table, with the wreck of a pate de foie gras" (1: 277-78). That same friend will later be the object of Claudia's disdain: "Tichborne whom I like about as well as my bay mare, or my new harp, or my conservatory, or any Other inanimate object which serves to increase my stock of amusements" (2:154). True to the lighter spirit of Gore's novel, these specimens of fashionable society are portrayed more as annoyances than threats, but in neither case does this seem to be an environment conducive to nurturing the sort of men who will make good husbands. In either case, the critique of male characters rendered either effete or dangerously ruthless comes couched in terms which elaborate the material realities of a world already familiar to readers of dandy novels, displayed here in tempting detail. It is not only however that a persistent exposure to the fashionable world makes characters into unappealing individuals. As Claudia's comment about "other inanimate objects" suggests, it risks raising questions of whether they can be considered individuals at all. In depicting both minor and major characters as unable to respond to or react against environmental influences, they come to take on a static, unresponsive quality which tends to render them something akin to objects. Much like furniture placed in a room, they take on the character of that setting rather than imbuing it with anything of their own. Because the environment in which these characters find themselves is one filled with goods, especially luxury ones, the qualities they most reflect are the passive, portable qualities of static goods, with little capacity for evolution or change.

Cultural influences can prove as pernicious as social ones. Amidst all this energetic criticism of the fashionable world centred in London, these novels actually extend their reach further and work to portray French high society as even more decayed and cynical than the world of the English elite. This broader spectrum helps to disrupt further claims of the silver fork as an insular genre: even in these relatively geographically static texts, where much of the action is predictably confined to the West End, there are distinct stirrings of the cosmopolitan. The epistolary structure of *Victims* means that Caroline can correspond with her French confidante Delphine alongside the rest of the actions. Delphine displays an acerbic pragmatism, and also champions a cheerfully defiant view of women's sexuality. Until the events of the novel catch up with her, she has what appears to be a conveniently discreet marriage which satisfies the social requirements of both partners while leaving them to free to pursue various liaisons. Caroline, reared in a similar tradition, occasionally has moments of expressing a more moderate view, but is often highly cynical as well. Responding to Augusta's comments on the solemn and serious nature of matrimony, she cheerfully counters with mention of the very present, albeit rarely discussed realities, of divorce and adultery: "domestic feelings are *passés de mode*" (11).

Blessington had long manifested an interest in documenting divergent social mores between France and England, especially where women were concerned. From her volume of travel writing, *The Idler in Italy*, she notes that "It strikes me that French women are more formed to be admired, than loved, … their quickness at repartee and love of society, while it serves to render them very agreeable, is not conducive to the soft, and grave sentiment of love; hence the tender passion is more talked of than felt in France" (1:16). In positioning these female characters as vulnerable to seemingly arbitrary cultural and moral fashions, and shaped by those fashions in a determining way, Blessington undermines the subjective complexity of her characters, aligning

them instead with objects. Not only does she utilize stereotypes of emotionless sexual license, she also embeds more explicitly political critiques, as when she has Delphine sigh wistfully,

How delightful it must have been, *ma chère*, to have lived in the time of *l'ancien regime*, when it was so easy to procure a *lettre de cachet*, and immure any troublesome person … All the privileges and immunities of la noblesse are destroyed; and except for the pleasures of having a coronet emblazoned on one's carriage and plate, there is no advantage to be derived from a title" (127).

Mothers likewise deals with the corrupting influence of Continental society: Claudia and Eleanor are transplanted at a young age and this affects the sort of women they develop into. That transition is charted in part through descriptions of their language: "In another year, it grew deformed with Gallicisms; in another, it found its way into downright French; and, in the course of a fourth, their residence of a few months in Italy enabled both Claudia and her sister to effect something of a polyglot text" (1:102). This description of a polyglot text stands in very close proximity to Caroline's letters, heavily laced with French expression and vocabulary. More generally, the affected usage of French was something for which the silver fork genre was often critiqued, the charges being levelled that it was used by ignorant authors in efforts to sound exotic and refined. Several silver fork novels by Disraeli and Bulwer Lytton, revised for subsequent editions, were stripped of their French expressions. So, for a silver fork text, even a later example in which this practice had become less dominant, critiquing French vocabulary as a sign of affectation or even corruption was a practice to be carefully negotiated. Gore may attempt to use these linguistic clues as a way of advertising the moral status of Delphine and Caroline, but in so doing she also gives her audience the recognizable verbal texture typical of the genre.

For the generalized social influence of the aristocratic world and the more specific French acculturation, these influences are shown to be negative and damaging. As such, they participate in the novels' social critique. Yet, rather than show these networks as sources of a more complex subjectivity, wherein characters might challenge, question or struggle to break free, the all-consuming influence of environmental factors is such that it lessens the impact these characters can have. This in turn disrupts the potential social project of the narrative: a society in which individuals are not treated as secondary to objects is only potentially possible if individuals are indisputably different from, and better than, objects. Questioning that distinction disrupts not only the way in which a novel might be structured, but also what its aims can be.

Rumors and Gossip

Much like external social and cultural influences, reputation and rumor are shown to be important determining forces. The texts work to precisely mirror a world rife with these scandals: Lady Maria remains preoccupied with ensuring her daughters avoid becoming entangled in scandal, while Augusta heedlessly blunders into one of the most devastating nature. They are also occasionally given material manifestations as they circulate through the world of the novel. Of particular interest is the destructive nature of rumors circulated through print.[50] While Augusta is already devastated, the narrative suggests that is only when rumors of her indiscretion appear in print that she is destined for complete collapse and death: "a packet of newspapers, one or two vile caricatures, and a coarse anonymous letter were brought to her; after the perusal of which she was seized with violent fits of trembling" (213); these are later diagnosed as brain fever. Silver fork novels evoke the power of print culture deeply bound up

[50] Copeland lays particular stress on the provenance of the genre within a print ecology and states that "the daily newspaper, for example, is simply assumed in silver fork novels to belong to the routine of daily life" (*The Silver Fork* 17).

with an at times savage culture of personal attack: with their usage of thinly veiled yet well-known scandal, part of the genre's allure rested on its ability to circulate gossip and rumors. While these kinds of discourse are perhaps most notorious for their oral circulation, in silver fork society novels, they are often given material form, asserting a connection between objects and a social world.

For *Victims of Society*, questions of materiality are written into the very form of the novel. Because the text is presented as a collection of letters, materiality becomes central to the novel in that the reader is invited to see it as composed of objects. Beyond the printed book's final material status as an object held in the reader's hands, the imagined status of the narrative is also one composed of fragments which can be imagined being touched, folded, and unsealed. They are depicted as subject to conditions of writing (fatigue, cold rooms, and broken pens) and can also be mislaid, forgotten, or read by individuals other than their intended recipients; though not commodities, letters might sometimes intrude prominently enough into the narrative to be classed as things. Even if no commodities are being described, social circulation in silver fork texts is mediated through objects, and thus the novels tend to reflect external appearances, rather than internal realities.

Not only are characters shown to be moulded by external factors: their very social existence is primarily defined by how they are perceived. Within the world of fashionable society, the power of externals is such that interior realities, even if more accurate, have little impact. Mary Delaward clarifies precisely this relationship between outward appearances and inward reality in regards to Augusta's virtue: "Heaven forbid, my dear Augusta, that I should have any doubts of your conduct being always what it ought to be; what I dread in you is a disregard of appearances, a neglect of the shadow of goodness, while you are satisfied with possessing the substance" (66).

While a number of dichotomies are staged between Augusta and Mary, on one hand, and Caroline and her confidante Delphine on the other, one of the most profound divides exists in the ability or inability of the women to understand this fact, central to the ordering of the society they move in. Both Augusta and Mary prioritize the realities of what is occurring in a situation and find it difficult to abandon the belief that these realities will not ultimately serve to exonerate even situations that may appear questionable. Caroline and Delphine by contrast cheerfully accept that outward appearances largely define how a situation will be regarded by the general public, and that, provided public opinion remains in one's favour, one has little to fear by way of consequences. After Augusta's own reputation is destroyed, this distinction is helpfully clarified by her husband: "the actual guilt of the parties was not the point to be considered; but the circumstance, that, in the case of Lady Annandale, not only was the guilt presumed, but the husband had denounced her: whereas the husband of the Comtesse still countenanced her; —and, consequently, her honour was in no degree compromised" (205).

In *Mothers and Daughters,* once Minnie's fate is more or less satisfactorily resolved, there seems to be time and space remaining in the third volume for additional plot, and a significant portion is occupied with a subplot concerning Lady Barringhurst. Impulsively married to a wealthy but cruel man, she finds herself falsely accused of infidelity, divorced, and then barred from all contact with her two young daughters. When a number of fellow aristocratic women, including Mary and Minnie, learn that she is dangerously ill, they arrange a secret meeting with her daughters. Able to pronounce her innocence, Lady Barringhurst dies almost immediately thereafter. The episode critiques a model in which women choose husbands based on financial assets and therefore often make regrettable choices, and are unjustly controlled by their reputations and thus subject to being manipulated. It opposes this to Lady Maria's relationship

with her daughters, one in which the bonds that govern them are solely emotional, and have no relation to social advancement (in fact, the daughters risk ruining their future reputations by a revival of contact with their fallen mother). It also evokes Augusta's experience of finding herself past social redemption once her reputation has been tarnished, with no remedy except for a martyr-like death. Even while being cast largely as the novel's villain, Caroline sometimes hovers near revealing a more complex interior. She makes statements that align her as someone sensitive enough to be rendered guilt-stricken once the consequences of her actions become evident. Examples include "I was so subdued by the recollection of the unvarying affection and gentleness of the creature before me … [that] a pang of remorse and regret reminded me that I am not so philosophic as I had imagined myself to be" (200), and "yet I do believe that were I not convinced that with Lord Annandale, Augusta never can be happy, and with lord Nottingham she will, I should even now retract, were it possible; for I could not bring myself to drive this innocent and confiding creature to shame or sorrow. But she must, she will be happy with Nottingham—I will not allow myself to doubt it" (201)

In a reversal of the normative hierarchy established by realism, touches of interiority serve as ornaments to the primary focus of a social order governed by externals, including objects. They function as a gesture that these late examples of the genre were self-aware about being located in a literary culture where an interest in individual subjects navigating complex social environments was rapidly becoming a hallmark of Victorian realist novels. However, what is shown to be triumphant in these narratives is the external register: reputations, appearances, and outward manifestations rule the day, determining a character's outcome. Because the social networks of these novels primarily serve to reaffirm that external factors matter more than any conceptions of

interiority, they pave the way for coming to see characters as comprised primarily of their external features, challenging the presence of subjectivity, rather than reinforcing it.

"Commodities Themselves"

While deeply invested in representing and reflecting on the complicated world of elite society, Gore and Blessington's novels do not perform the sort of realist social critique in which a shallow, materialistic world is shown to fail to be a proper home for complexly individuated subjects. Whereas in the realist tradition "the novelist concerns himself mainly with the insides of people's heads, but the insides of their houses may also receive his full attention" (Spacks 19), in a silver fork novel, the interior of a house will not only be assured of attention, it will in fact be the dominant part of the narrative. The attention to material details in these texts ensures that the distinction between subjects and objects is blurry at best, even at the moment where the value of individuals seems to be insisted upon. When individuals are given full narrative attention, they are depicted not so much shaping and determining social interactions, but circulating, prefabricated, through them, like a piece of furniture that might be moved through space without in fact altering or evolving. Rather than depicting the public, social world as a place where individual subjectivities interact, open to the possibility of either changing that world or being changed by it, the social world of the silver fork seems to be a place populated by objects, and the object-like. To suggest that depicting the social need not mean depicting subjects may in fact be where the power of silver fork social criticism lies. In the introduction to a volume of essays *Bodies and Things in Nineteenth –Century Fiction*, Katharina Boehm writes that

> …literary writings of various genres — including the realist novel, decadent poetry, sensation fiction … intervened in the emergence of [subject-object] networks; for instance, by providing forums in which different concepts of materiality and embodiment could be hashed out, by dramatizing the affective currents between subjects and objects, and by offering glimpses of a utopian future in which the distinction between subjects and objects will have ceased to exist. (9)

The silver fork novel exemplifies this sort of intervention, complicating subject–object networks in both private and public relational worlds.

This complication is important because it stages an intervention into a debate about how the form of the novel could be positioned within a world of fashionable commodities. From its beginnings, one of the critiques that dogged the novel was that it was just another object that could be bought and sold, and that would be perpetually subject to fads and fashions.[51] This perception rendered its practitioners at best craftsmen, at worst, something closer to shopkeepers, pushing their product as if it were interchangeable with any other sort of good. As Spacks summarizes, "declared financial motivation for literary production suggested something less than the high moral purpose traditionally assigned to literature" (8). This negative criticism became one of the shaping forces in determining the direction of realism: by insisting that the proper aim of the novel was the representation of complexly individuated human subjects, and the interrelations between them, the novel found a defensible ground on which to distinguish itself from a world of commodities.

[51] In *Portable Property*, for example, Plotz identifies novels as "torn between being fungible objects—saleable commodities … and sublime effusions … with a value precisely dependent on exemption from commerce's usual laws." (xv).

When the silver fork, therefore, suggests that the line between representing individuals and representing things is in fact more permeable than it might appear, it simultaneously disrupts the boundaries between art and commodity. The objects on their pages are generally not mass-produced, and their possession remains a mark of privileged status. Some of the objects, for example, family jewels, in fact seem to exist outside of a commodity system, in that their value stems from the fact that they cannot be purchased, and so they exist instead as marks of inherited wealth and lineage. However, silver fork objects are never entirely free of the forces of desire, and associations with class and consumption. Even if the gowns and carriages represented on the pages of a silver fork novel are not always necessarily available for purchase, the strength of their appeal is rooted in a world where luxurious and elegant goods can be bought, and where that purchasing power is increasingly widely available. The world of the silver fork may be a world of fantasy but the strength of that fantasy relies on how near it hovers to being attainable. Moreover, even if the goods displayed within a silver fork novel are not necessarily obtainable via a market economy, the novel that performs the work of representing these goods certainly is. As the narrator of *Vivian Grey* glibly announces "Every body being very rich, has afforded to be very literary— books being considered a luxury almost as elegant and necessary as Ottomans, bonbons and pier glasses" (143). Here "books" refers both to literary texts and to material objects, likely leather bound and printed on gilded paper. That these novels are presented as objects and moreover as objects which can readily be interchanged with what are clearly fashionable commodities builds on the thematic presentation of individuals as interchangeable with objects, and works to further the blurring of boundaries and reversal of hierarchies present throughout.

A number of critics have gestured to the genre's willingness, and even eagerness, to self-commodify. Simply, while "they are novels about commodities ... they are also commodities themselves. They were the first novels that are more usefully identifiable by their publisher than by their author" (Cronin, *Romantic Victorians* 11). Whereas Cronin attributes the commodity status of the silver fork to what it is that they focus on representing (namely, other commodities), I believe it is more important to see their particular willingness to embrace a commodified status as rooted instead in how they represent those objects. Whereas realist novels, invested in denying exactly that status, do not by any means shy away from representing objects, they tend to insist on the secondary status of those objects, especially when contrasted with the more detailed representation of subjects and the network of relationships those subjects engage in. For silver forks to boldly insist that those objects matter as much, and possibly more, than the individual emotions and social networks that are expected to comprise the core of the realist tradition is not just to refuse that tradition but to call it into question.

Conclusion

For a brief, ephemeral moment, the silver fork novel articulated a set of alternative narrative strategies, interrupting the development of realist conventions. Having shown what strategies were deployed in regards to plot, character, and subjectivity, the question remains: why did these strategies not become the norm? Since the silver fork model of narrative, in which description trumps closure, plausibility and interiority, did not become standard practice, and in fact was largely maligned, what is the value of registering it all?

In his study of the silver fork genre, Copeland cites three major reasons for the disappearance of the genre. First, the novels were highly historically specific: "the materials of modern life that made them exciting to contemporaries—social rivalries, political manoeuvring, fashion… made them difficult to experience [for later generations]" (*The Silver Fork* 3). Second, he identifies "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" (3). Finally, the political allegiance between much silver fork fiction and the platform of the liberalizing Whig party, made them something of a political embarrassment as "this Whig vision of political reform began to look more and more unsatisfactory" (3).

While all of these reasons are compelling and important, the emphasis on silver forks as historically and geographically specific texts is of special interest. That specificity is largely developed through the use of details, and just as Copeland sees the particularity of the silver fork genre as both what defined it, and what ensured it could not be successful in the long term, there seems to be a similar danger to reliance on detail. The detail does not always remain translatable as time passes, and the more specific and particular the detail, the shorter its lifespan. For example, a description of a meal, or of an individual's costume, when represented in fairly general terms, can be recognizable to readers long after such items have ceased to be widely eaten or widely worn. When represented in minute and often opaque particularities that would have had no meaning to a large population even when the text first appeared, the number of readers for whom that detail remains a legible source of significance declines sharply over time.

Within realist novels, details may still become defamiliarized with the passing of time; however, because these details are integrated into, and draw meaning from, a larger whole, the text can continue to resonate. A contemporary reader of *Pride and Prejudice*, particularly a non-academic one, may have no distinct idea of what a particular kind of carriage named in the novel looks like, but can likely still achieve a generally satisfying reading experience derived instead from the pleasures of psychologically complex characters, representations of affect, and an ending that resolves the central crises of the text. When a reader likewise can no longer recognize these sorts of details in a silver fork text, and there seems to be nothing else available except those details, the novel can rapidly come to seem inaccessible, hollow, or both.

One way of responding to this challenge is simply to try and make the details legible through editorial interventions such as footnotes. While silver forks tend to be lengthy novels in their own right, the heft of modern editions such as the Pickering & Chatto reprints speaks in part to

the need for lengthy critical apparatuses if there is to be any hope of making the texts accessible to anyone without specialized historical knowledge of Regency London, let alone a general readership. The scholarly labor of researching the allusions, in-jokes, and references, while invaluable to comprehension of the novel, takes a text already dense with detail and makes it denser; more accessible, but perhaps in fact even more intimidating to approach. Moreover, while footnotes and other critical interventions can help to elucidate the content of a silver fork novel, it cannot persuade readers why that content matters.

Because of this orientation towards establishing an enduring legacy, some critics try valiantly to chart the continuity of silver fork features within other genres. Sensation fiction is a particularly popular choice, although there is also a significant body of critical work arguing that features inherited from the silver fork appear in realist texts from the latter half of the nineteenth century. Two problems complicate this way of assessing the impact of the silver fork. First, as this dissertation has argued, the genre is defined by particular narrative structures, and descriptions of aristocratic excess, or luxury goods, without those structures don't signify the ongoing legacy of the genre. A realist text can focus on dukes and diamonds (and some do), without actually continuing the legacy of the silver fork genre, because it pairs these features with unified plot, deep characterization, and a subject-object hierarchy.

Second, this desire to assert that silver forks establish an ongoing legacy speaks to an unwillingness to accept their unique narrative position. The features that make silver fork texts unlike realist texts mean they also have a different relationship to posterity. While realism certainly invests in representing a particular reality, whether the conditions of an industrial town, or an idyllic countryside, that representation is also meant to be recognizable and to be understood to refer to something beyond language, giving it a universalizing tendency. Specific

details are meant to perform an archival function, commemorating the reality they represent, and preserving it even in the face of change. This tradition also intersects with a Romantic legacy asserting the timeless value of works of genius. Combined, readers and critics of a post-silver fork age often inherit a deeply cherished, if implicit, belief that a text is meant to be able to speak to a long line of future readers, and that its value can be assessed based on its ability to do so. The shape of those encounters will surely change over time, and can never be anticipated, but in a good novel, there will be some way for even a very disparate community of readers to find something recognizable.

Like so many other cherished norms, silver forks defy this expectation, appearing instead as "truly eccentric to present-day readers who expect to find in them the conventions of the realist novel" (Wilson, *Fashioning* 4). In his 1903 lecture on "English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century," Leslie Stephen offered a model for the evolution of literary forms that likened them to the material objects more readily understood to exist under the sway of fashion: "Are changes in literary fashions enveloped in the same inscrutable mystery as changes in ladies' dresses? It is and no doubt always will be impossible to say why at one period garments should spread over a hoop and another cling to the limbs. It is equally impossible to say why the fashion of Pope should have been succeeded by the fashion of Wordsworth and Coleridge" (18-19). While this represents an extreme point of view, and one that has been discredited by the labors of both literary and costume historians who produce compelling, if not definitive, accounts of why such changes occurred, it does illustrate something telling about an anxiety which can be generated when literary genres are regarded in the same light as other fashions: that there is indeed something arbitrary about why this mode endured, and this other vanished. Thinking seriously about a form that did not survive, and that blatantly advertised itself as subject to

temporary trends, can stage an uncomfortable encounter with this arbitrariness. To assuage this, it can be easier to conveniently excise the silver fork from literary history, or to insist on its inferiority, thereby naturalizing and justifying its disappearance.

Both silver fork authors and reviewers noted from the first that the genre was inherently transitory, reflecting the particularities of a specific epoch. The language of "fashion" was then, and has continued to be, widely used in discussions of the genre, and evokes the idea of cyclical rhythms in which particular practices move fluidly in and out of popularity. There is no particular value assigned to a practice, whether in narrative or dress, falling out of favor; indeed, this is an expected and inherent part of its rise in popularity. Silver forks operate within this fashion culture more than they operate within a culture where achieving lasting impact marks the highest achievement. Because silver forks didn't operate within a framework where cohesive plot or round characters were held out as valuable, detecting the absence of these traits is not a way to assess their value, and likewise, because silver forks never operated with an aim of functioning as enduring texts, their transience is simply a mark of their orientation, not an indication of their value.

Rather than struggle to assert that silver fork novels actually do have an enduring legacy, the idea that an inheritance is important needs to be reframed as yet another inherited expectation. Useful parallels may be drawn between the silver fork and other transient literary practices. At the conclusion of *Masquerade and Civilization*, Terry Castle states, "the classic masquerade scene, then is a temporary phenomenon in literary history— and for modern readers, trained to value the sophisticated formal and thematic strategies of nineteenth-century realism, perhaps a somewhat primitive seeming one at that" (345). However, she goes on to clarify that "this is not to malign it or limit its ultimate significance. Indeed, the masquerade scene draws its critical

power precisely from the ways it focuses our conceptions of literary history, and raises once again the perennial issues having to do with literary form and plot structure, theme and ideology, the role of topoi, the working of tropes" (345).

Reading the silver fork, and reading it deliberately and well, affords the same opportunity to reframe attention towards the perennial issues that Castle lists. As Wilson writes, "as fiction made the transition from the eighteenth-century Gothic novel and novel of manners to the Victorian realist novel, however, the silver fork novel intervened, occupying an important transitory space and giving rise to debates about both the content and form of fiction" (*Fashioning* 69). Gillingham likewise concluded a recent talk on the silver fork novel and the culture of fashion by suggesting that "were we to take seriously, though, these demotic, unruly, ephemeral novels that capture the movements and energies of urban modernity, it strikes me that we might engender a lens through which to read anew both respectable realism and its disruptive, fashionable other" ("Being Real.")

The first step in taking the silver fork novel seriously is understanding how it works, and this is why charting a poetics for the genre is such an important endeavor. Studies of the silver fork have come very far in the last twenty years, and opportunities remain for fruitful study of their approaches to class, gender, and commodity culture. However, for so long as there remains a desire to avoid engaging with their formal narrative properties, there will be a limit to how far studies of the genre can progress. The silver fork represents a moment when narrative fiction went down a different path, and tried on a different system of aesthetic values with an accompanying set of expectations for how to convey those values. Whether or not that experiment was a success, that it happened in the first place serves to remind us that much of what we can so easily take for granted about how the novel works is not fixed or predetermined.

Read in this light, then, a genre that declined and died out becomes a reminder of the encompassing capacity of the novel, a literary form that as Henry James wrote, "can do simply everything" ("Future" 105). That, he went on, "is its strength and its life" (105).

The silver fork's insistence on representing detail and its capacity to engender the requisite narrative structures to do so, marks an unusual example of one of the things that the novel, for a period, did. By reading the silver fork novel and engaging with the particular poetics of the genre, we gain a heightened awareness of one of the varieties of fiction that operated alongside realism and worked to unsettle its assumptions. This reminds us to remain cognizant of a long history of experimentation in non-realist fiction, ranging from the gothic and sensation fiction to stream of consciousness and magical realism. While reading the silver fork allows us to look backwards with a more discerning insight, it also encourages us to look forwards to other innovations, from hypertexts to fan fiction, which challenge static and monolithic concepts of how fiction can or should work. A reminder that things could have been other than how they are is a reminder that they can always be made different, and an understanding of this multivalent possibility is the silver fork's best legacy.

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