

## *The Literary London Journal*



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### **Excavating Silverware: A Review of**

**Edward Copeland, *The Silver Fork Novel: Fashionable Fiction in the Age of Reform*, Hardback, 306 pages, Cambridge University Press, 2012, ISBN: 978-0521513333, £55**

**and**

**Cheryl A. Wilson, *Fashioning the Silver Fork Novel*, Hardback, 224 pages, Pickering & Chatto, 2012, ISBN: 978-1848932074, £60.**

**Reviewed by**

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<1>While the post-war Kitchen Sink drama is still meaningful shorthand to non-specialist theatre goers today, the Silver Fork fiction of the 1820s and 1830s bears a signifier that has lost its referent to all but a tiny minority of novel readers. The tag originated in an article which appeared in 1827 in the radical *Examiner* entitled 'The Dandy School'. Written by the great London journalist and critic William Hazlitt – though published anonymously, as was the convention – the piece launched a tirade against the snobbishness, frivolity and disingenuousness of what was then a bestselling genre, having been all the rage on the literary scene since 1824. The genre is probably best known today in the fields of Bibliography and History of the Book because of its identification with a particular publisher, Henry Colburn, whose successful strategies in selling the product he denominated 'fashionable' fiction pioneered what thenceforward became standard procedures in literary marketing and branding. Until the recent corrective effected by these important books by Edward Copeland and Cheryl A. Wilson, which boost a steady resurgence of interest in the genre since the late 1990s, most scholars in literary studies knew nothing more than the fact that these novels were once terrifically popular but now are not.

<2>As the luxury cutlery item of the nickname suggests (satirically), the popular fiction it designates was obsessed with trivia of the table: think *Come Dine With Me*, but with Regency wigs, and a yet more sneering voiceover. The extent of its social codification by no means stopped at the dining room door, however. Silver Fork texts were marketed as

'fashionable' novels, not only because they were themselves trendy to read, but because they documented and disseminated the fluctuating tastes of the wealthy and powerful, be they what and what not to eat, wear, say or resemble. These novels performed an overt social function, providing topical updates on the latest habits and *faux-pas* of the West-End metropolitan court-centred in-crowd to a more geographically dispersed and socially variegated reading public. This marks an important point in the development of modern urban fashion and celebrity culture: it is interesting to see where *Hello* magazine and the discourse in which it participates have come from. But Silver Fork fiction is interesting in itself too, not only for what it can tell us about the origins of the way we live now.

<3>Fashion dates: that is a structural necessity. The heady cultural embeddedness of these novels – their brazen topicality – is at once their most remarkable quality and an obstacle to their remarketing to twenty-first-century readers. It is not difficult to comprehend why the genre is one of the most under-researched in the history of the novel. The denseness of the particular cultural references of Silver Fork novels makes them relatively hard to 'translate' in comparison with other narrative texts of the early nineteenth century. Predominantly rural fiction from the previous generation – Austen's 'three or four families' – has proved more durably assimilable, both for popular culture and the academy. But, much as the specifics of the Silver Fork are offputtingly alien to us now, its metropolitan population of fashionable people and wannabes also chimes unexpectedly with the world we inhabit, in a general sense, and this is equally disconcerting for the modern reader. At once almost illegibly distant and perplexingly approximate to something we know all too well, reading Silver Fork fiction can be an uncanny experience, and one which the virtual critical vacuum in which the genre has been sealed until recently has only accentuated.

<4>One of the ways in which the uncanniness of Silver Fork fiction imposes itself most forcibly upon the current reader is through its depiction of urban space. Unremittingly particularising in its representation of London, these novels continually present us with images of recognisable localities that are set at a tilt in significant ways, our spatial semantics and theirs being related but also estranged. For anyone interested in Literary London, their importance can hardly be overestimated. Replete with socially-inflected references to the city's streets and squares, the novels of Theodore Hook, T. H. Lister, Edward Bulwer (later Bulwer-Lytton), Catherine Gore, Lady Blessington, Benjamin Disraeli and a host of other neglected Silver Forks published between the mid-1820s and c. 1840 place the business of metropolitan representation at the centre of their writing project, in a way that had not been witnessed before in the history of the novel. Published amidst the series of mini-booms and busts that characterized London's speculative building market at this time, these novels contested trends in *residential* fashion in this fast-changing city as much as they charted the sartorial or culinary practices of exclusive Society. Silver Fork fiction interrogated recently manifest Suburbia, for instance, long before the timeframe most recent scholars of the phenomenon focus upon. Shaped by the often haphazard, irreducible way in which the city sprawled in this period, the Silver Fork promises fascinating reading material to anyone interested in the imaginative appropriation and construction of geographies either at the centre or the periphery of the capital.

<5>Earlier prose fiction – notably by Defoe – had set fictional narratives in known urban locations, but Silver Fork fiction is markedly louder than anything that had gone before

in its obsession with (and allegiance to) London, in its dissection of the complex social cartography of the city, and in its self-consciousness about the broader cultural discourse of metropolitan, national and global geography in which it participated. London in the Silver Fork is frequently interrogated as a totality, even though its constituent parts are also sifted and stratified by Silver Fork narrators and characters with unprecedented diligence. Indeed, London's paradoxical plurality and singularity is a continual source of comment, and the narrator in Bulwer's *Pelham* (1828) is characteristic when he describes the city thus: 'Many are the curious places of London: it has its romantic sites, and its sublime sites, and its tremendous sites; it contains matter for endless research and endless reflection'.

<6>Some of this geographical focus is reflected in these two monographs, most explicitly in one excellent chapter (the 5th) by Copeland, which is a version of an article published in *Eighteenth Century Life* (2002). Focussing on Regent Street, Copeland suggests that Nash's grand new roadway is not only a divider of the East and the West – as Franco Moretti has it – but also draws attention to another related South/North axis that was under scrutiny *within* the Silver Fork West-End, aristocratic Mayfair and a more upper-middle-class Marylebone being held up to the light against one another. The contents of 'The Topography of Silver Fork London' are absorbing, even though they are less comprehensive than the title suggests. (Suburbia is generally eschewed here in favour of a discussion of more central London locations; the poorer parts of the city, meanwhile, which provide an important counterpoint to fashionable West-End locations in the novels of Bulwer and Hook, receive scant attention.) But the omnipresence of the whole variegated city in Silver Fork writing means that a very rich London pattern cannot help but surface throughout both of these studies, via the generous quotations that each assembles in order to showcase little-known urban fiction. As a result, *Literary London* readers will find much of value in each, despite a specifically spatialised reading of the genre being restricted to only the one chapter of Copeland's book.

<7>These two publications, both of which appeared in 2012, now represent the most comprehensively useful accounts of the Silver Fork. Each engages with the issue of the genre's popularity, contemporary critical reception, and subsequent demise. Both highlight its topicality, materiality, and social function in the mediation of fashion. Both employ late twentieth-century theorists of taste and social capital such as Pierre Bourdieu: Copeland has both a lighter and a surer touch in this regard, and appears conversant with a range of relevant recent voices, while Wilson frequently drops whole segments of undigested sociological material into her argument in a slightly clunky manner. Generally, Copeland is far more ambitious and precise in his engagement with the historical and political contexts surrounding the literary genre, and his book feels like the result of a much longer research strand than hers. Wilson, however, evinces the significance of the Silver Fork as a commercial publishing phenomenon, complementing the other kind of historical contextualisation very nicely. It may well be that the two critics were unaware of each other's project, as there is much that they share in common: there is sufficient in each that is unique, however, to make the overlap of little consequence.

<8>Edward Copeland's *The Silver Fork Novel* is, in the main, a compelling fusion of sensitive textual analysis and probing historical engagement. It provides some very fine contextual readings of novels by key Silver Fork novelists such as Edward Bulwer, T. H. Lister, and, most substantially, Catherine Gore, the writer in whom Copeland is most

invested of all of those he assembles in a handy scholarly guide to be found in an appendix. It is her novels, especially *The Hamiltons*, *Pin Money*, *Cecil and Women as They Are*, that are awarded the most space in this formally concise yet content-generous book, which condenses much new and fascinating research.

<9>Copeland will be known to many as an Austen scholar, and this monograph, which has had a long gestation, was initially trailed as a book about Austen and the Silver Fork (the subject of a chapter in the Cambridge Companion to Austen he co-edited). There are traces throughout of this earlier idea of what the book was to be, which, though frequently illuminating, are also at times, problematic. Copeland has a tendency to overstate the causality of the connections between the earlier writer and the latter genre. In chapter 2, for instance, Copeland hears specific echoes of Austen in Silver Fork small talk, but it is not clear why we should not find them instantiations of a wider cultural discourse in which non-textual dinner party conversations played at least as great a part as decade-old fiction. Elsewhere, a complex argument in Chapter 5 about the importance of metropolitan geography to the Silver Fork is interrupted by a digressive and vague paragraph that claims Austen's characters are in the later novels simply transplanted to a different urban geography, undermining rather than aiding the (convincing) claim that these are specifically London fictions (with metropolitan characters and plots too). There is doubtless substantial evidence to support Copeland's repeated assertion of specific intertextual Austenian legacies in the works of Catherine Gore and others, but he doesn't provide a sufficiency of it here.

<10>Copeland's analysis is most persuasive, by contrast, when it takes a thoroughly cultural-historical approach to these texts unhampered by comparison with the previous generation's fiction. Chapters on the parliamentary political scene, newspaper culture, and London topography all insert the literary phenomenon successfully into a thickly drawn and dynamic social milieu, engaging with the latest relevant critical scholarship to show how these novels interacted fully with their own time and place. The subtitle to Copeland's study points us to the theme that unites all these middle chapters, which will be for most readers its selling point: the perennially interesting question of the relation of the cultural sphere to the Political one (with a capital P). Winifred Hughes began to explore the genre's peculiar relevance to the class conflicts and compromises that characterised this tumultuous period in an article that appeared in 1992, but we have had to wait two decades for the connection of Silver Fork culture to Reform politics to be entertained with due seriousness. Copeland argues that these apparently flimsy fashionable novels bear a crucial ideological imperative. Commissioned with the task of 'bring[ing] about the major changes of attitude necessary to make an effective union of the middle classes and traditional ruling classes', the Silver Fork is weightier than it had initially seemed.

<11>Copeland's main historical thesis is compelling: that the 1832 Reform Act represents a critical moment within the trajectory of the Silver Fork, after which it is gradually marginalised, having been tarred with the brush of the obsolescing aristocratic Whig faction with which it was supposedly associated. The key dates of British constitutional history have proved tantalising opportunities for scholars to reframe development within the nineteenth-century literary sphere. The Reform Act of 1832 is here used deftly to explain the emergence, dominance and latter residualisation of Silver Fork culture, and in doing so Copeland's argument in part resembles Jonathan Loesberg's Reformist contextualisation of another short-lived subgenre of the novel,

Sensation fiction. (Loesberg, in his *Representations* essay 'The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction' (1986) juxtaposed the 1860s popular literary craze against the Reformist agitation surrounding 1867.) Copeland's account complements another politically framed study of Silver Fork fiction, Muireann O'Cuinneide's *Aristocratic Women and the Literary Nation, 1832-1867* (Palgrave 2008), incidentally, though his thesis about the impact of 1832 is bolder than hers.

<12> Copeland's focus represents a fine strategy for linking up a potentially over-marginal subject with some very live wires within research in the period, the political field within the early nineteenth-century metropolis being one of the most productive topics in Romanticism studies today. The imperative to clarify the politics of the Silver Fork, however, unsurprisingly leads him to be reductive at times. Copeland's emphasis on the strong Whig agenda of many Silver Fork novels (by Gore and Lister) results in the over-marginalisation of ultra-Tory Theodore Hook from the narrative, for instance. Although a number of Hook's novels appear in the appendix, none is subject to any sustained analysis. But, Hook should be fundamental to any narrative about this phenomenon, as he was responsible – in Hazlitt's genre-defining critique, at least – for the initiation of the Silver Fork in the first place, with the first series of his *Sayings and Doings* (1824). For Hazlitt, Hook is the very acme of Silver Fork writing in the height of its prominence – that is between 1824 and 1830. Can then, as Copeland has it, the Toryism of Hook be an exception to an identifiable generic rule? If 'fashionable fiction' was so clearly a Whig product, it seems a strange circumstance that the whole thing was begun and exemplified most identifiably by a fellow from the other side. One has the suspicion that Hook's central role is purposely downplayed in Copeland's thesis, because Hook's Toryism does not fit with his diagnosis of the genre's politics.

<13> In any case, the absence of Hook represents a loss for those of us who are interested in Silver Fork London *per se*, as his fiction (in particular *Sayings and Doings* and *Maxwell*) inscribes his idea of the city with partisan vigour, casting aspersions on Whig parts of the city (such as Bedford-family owned Bloomsbury), and generally creating waves in the broader geographical discourse to which other writers could only respond. A fuller attention to Hook might have contextualised his London fiction by way of the several notorious – and markedly urban – practical jokes, which punctuated his early career. Best known of these was the Berners Street Hoax, when hundreds of tradesmen and goods delivery men were called to the same house (No. 54) unbeknownst to the resident, clogging up the road and generally causing mayhem. An immersive street drama to complement his London fiction, satirising the madness of modern consumer culture, the Hoax can be read as a kind of aleatory 'happening', working with but also overloading the everyday patterns of street life in order to effect a spectacular collapse. Copeland's emphasis on the Silver Fork's participation in a vibrant and ever expanding print culture – in chapters 1 and 4, in particular – moreover, would have surely have been enriched by an account of Hook's key role in periodical culture as editor of the Tory *John Bull*. In short, while Copeland's study marks a major advance on anything published previous to the genre, it has its blind-spots which, in addition to the productive new avenues of research opened up by what is still an exceptionally timely, thoroughly researched and livelily written book, suggest there is plenty more work on the Silver Fork left to do.

<14> Cheryl Wilson's book is, on the whole, slightly less thrilling and less risky in its kind of historical focus, though there is still much in this book to commend. While it is

comparatively uninterested in the relationship of the Silver Fork to parliamentary politics or in fixing down its precise ideological role, *Fashioning the Silver Fork Novel* does shed new light upon publishing contexts Copeland only touches upon in a broader discussion of print culture. In Chapter 5, entitled 'Commercial Texts', she places a discussion of Colburn's pioneering development of 'puffing' (the practice of placing a plethora of favourable reviews and notices in the media to market texts) alongside an examination of the material culture represented so acutely in Silver Fork fiction, intelligently suggesting a form of 'product placement' is at work here.

<15>Wilson's last chapter, 'Literary Contexts and Afterlives', moreover, usefully attempts to place the Silver Fork in literary history, drawing out connections both to the fiction of the generation immediately previous to its own and to that of the Victorians. Wilson is less elegant or thought-provoking than Copeland in the way she bridges the gap between rural Austen and the metropolitan novels of the later Regency, but it is her adumbration of the genre's posthumous legacies for the Victorian period that deserve more comment. It is thoroughly commendable that Wilson includes a brief survey of the impact of the Silver Fork novel on the fiction of Thackeray, Dickens, Braddon, Collins, Trollope, Eliot and Ouida. After all, the overwhelming majority of readers will encounter *Vanity Fair*, an 1848 retrospective on Silver Fork culture, before (or, perhaps, rather than) reading anything by Hook or Gore, and this surely begs to be discussed. But Wilson's whistle-stop tour through the world of post-Regency literature only confirms how much more thinking needs to be done about the relations between the Victorians and their immediate precursors before this chasm artificially separating the conventionally defined periods can be overcome. Though Wilson's broad brush strokes at least prove that a spectre of Silver Fork persists long after the initial publishing phenomenon has passed, she discriminates not nearly sensitively enough between Victorian satires of the Regency period itself and the engagement of novelists with its fictional forms, the intertextual question being a distinct subspecies of the broader cultural one. There are subtler ways, moreover, in which the Silver Fork novel can be said to haunt later fiction, beyond conscious appropriations (by the second wave of Silver Fork – Ouida, etc.) or exorcisms (by the generation immediately following the genre – i.e. Dickens). The story of the submerged survival into Victorian culture of the Silver Fork model of representing London, for instance, is not told here. Gregory Dart's new book, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840* has recently shown us how Dickens's fiction engages with and keeps in play the Romantic constructions of the city of Lamb and Hazlitt, but the afterlife of the coterminous but contrastingly imagined Silver Fork metropolis in Victorian novels has yet to be critically explored.

<16>These two books build upon a steadily growing body of scholarship about this still obscure genre whose huge significance within the history of London's cultural representation deserves to be appreciated within the mainstream of literary studies. There is currently much superb research upon what is known as the 'Romantic metropolis', but the fashionable novels that represent an intermediary point in literary history between Austen and Dickens have largely been neglected in these accounts, despite their making the city an unremitting focus. Copeland and Wilson here enable the reader to recognise the phenomenon for what it is as a whole. Now, we need some more in-depth work upon the individual texts and their authors, so that the contribution made by Silver Fork culture to both the English novel and its central city can be understood with due nuance.

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