

The Evolution of the Dandy Figure in the Writings of Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Dr. Nayef Al-Yasin *

Abstract

The dandy was an elusive cultural icon which found expression in many literary works and attracted the attention of prominent cultural critics. The general undiscerning assumption was that the dandy was merely a man interested in clothes and matters of style. A more discriminating examination of the dandy figure reveals, however, that he was much more sophisticated than this assumption makes him to be. This paper examines the nineteenth-century theoretical debate about the dandy in the works of Charles Baudelaire and Thomas Carlyle, particularly in Carlyle's book *Sartor Resartus* and then proceeds to study the presentation of the dandy figure in two novels by Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham*.

The paper concludes that the cultural and literary debate about the dandy figure reflected the social and ideological biases of those involved in the debate and was part of a larger conflict between aristocratic and middle-class cultural and aesthetic values and their attempt for dominance in British society.

* Department of English -Faculty of Arts and Humanities-Damascus University

The common perception of the dandy is that he is a man who lays particular emphasis on physical appearance, witty language, and takes leisure seriously. This is usually wrapped up in an apparent nonchalant posture and the attitude of raising interest in the self to something tantamount to obsession. Despite these common assumptions, theorizing about the dandy differed significantly in the nineteenth century as can be discerned in the writings of Thomas Carlyle and those of Charles Baudelaire. The presentation of the dandy also varied in nineteenth-century novels. This paper will outline the theoretical divergences and trace the way in which the dandy was presented by two nineteenth-century novelists: Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. More space will be given to Bulwer partly because Dickens's works have been more widely examined and partly because the treatment of the dandy figure in Bulwer's work is more sophisticated and elaborate.

Carlyle, in his book *Sartor Resartus*, wrote that a dandy was no more than "a clothes-wearing man".¹ Baudelaire, in the later, "metaphysical" phase of dandyism, defined the dandy as one who elevates aesthetics to a living religion,² that the dandy's mere existence reproaches the responsible citizen of the middle class: "Dandyism in certain respects comes close to spirituality and to stoicism" and "These beings have no other status, but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons, of satisfying their passions, of feeling and thinking Contrary to what many thoughtless people seem to believe, dandyism is not even an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than the symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind".³ In this sense, dandyism is seen as exalting the values of aesthetic autonomy and individual 'personality,' and the dandy is portrayed as a trans-historical, timeless phenomenon.

1 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 207.

2 Baudelaire, in his essay about painter Constantin Guys, "The Painter of Modern Life", <http://www.idehist.uu.se/distans/ilmh/pm/ baudelaire-painter.htm>.

3 Ibid.

The link between clothing and political protest had become a particularly English characteristic during the 18th century.⁴ Given these connotations, dandyism can be seen as a political protestation against the rise of 'leveling' egalitarian principles, often including nostalgic adherence to feudal or pre-industrial values.

Carlyle came to know the fashionable society when he taught the children of a London fashionable family while translating Goethe's book, *Wilhelm Meister*. He expressed his disdain of the inactivity of the aristocracy in a letter to Jane Welsh: "I see something of fashionable people here; and truly to my plebeian conception there is not a more futile class of persons on God's earth."⁵ Carlyle was not objecting to people who dressed well; rather, he was drawing attention to what, to him, was a ridiculous obsession with clothes. His definition of the dandy reflects this: "A dandy is a clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of clothes".⁶

However, other English cultural critics of the age had a different view of the dandy. They saw in him a social critic qualified by the acuteness of his observation and his fascination by detail. William Hazlitt recognized that a major characteristic of Beau Brummell, the most famous dandy, was "the exaggerating of the merest trifles into matters of importance, or treating everything else with the utmost nonchalance and indifference . . ."⁷ The characteristic dandy gesture is an interesting gesture which comments on the way exclusive society arbitrates between the significant and the insignificant. It shows, in an exaggerated but honest manner, the trivialities of a society which has got its priorities wrong. Dandyism here becomes a protest against vulgarity and ordinariness and a call for perfection. Baudelaire saw in the dandy's extreme interest in personal appearance and material elegance only a

4 Aileen Ribeiro, "On Englishness in dress" in *The Englishness of English Dress*, Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin and Caroline Cox, ed. (New York: Berg, 2002).

5 Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 179.

6 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 207.

7 William Hazlitt, "Brummelliana," in *Selected Writings*, edited with an introduction by Jon Cook (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1991), p. 159.

symbol of "the aristocratic superiority of his personality".⁸ He regarded the supremacy of the bourgeois as the reign of mediocrity and ascribed to the dandy the specific goal of combating its triviality.⁹

When Bulwer's novel, *Pelham* appeared in 1828, Carlyle attacked it aggressively. Neither did he spare the book's author because he associated Bulwer with the main character in the novel, Henry Pelham, and because he thought the book defended a class of people to which the author himself belonged. In a letter to Napier, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, Carlyle writes: "I once proposed to Mr Jeffrey to make a sort of sally on Fashionable Novels . . . The *Pelham* and *Devereux* manufactures a sort of thing which ought to be extinguished in British literature."¹⁰

What Carlyle failed to recognize in Bulwer's *Pelham*, however, was the transformative and transitory qualities in the dandy. Pelham is acutely aware of the transitional nature of his time. He is equally alive to the responsibilities of his class and the need for adaptation to new realities. This is a reflection of Bulwer's belief in aristocratic values and recognition of the current weaknesses of the aristocracy. As in his other works, he promotes the rule of the aristocracy and believes that the class is capable of transforming itself to meet the requirements of the times. At the same time, he opposes the values and increasing power of the emerging middle classes. This advocacy of a Pelhamite kind of dandyism finds an echo in Baudelaire:

Dandyism arises especially in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful and aristocracy is only partially tottering or brought low. In the disturbance of such periods a certain number of men, detached from their own class, disappointed and disoriented, but still rich in native energy, may form a project of founding

8 Charles Baudelaire, "The Dandy," in *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*, trans. Norman Cameron, ed. with an introduction by Peter Quennell (London: The Soho Book Company, 1986), p. 55.

9 Domna Stanton, *The Aristocrat As Art: A Study of the Honnete home and the Dandy in Seventeenth-and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 79-80.

10 Quoted in Miriam M. H. Thrall, *Rebellious Fraser's: Nol Yorke's Magazine in the Days of Maginn, Thackeray, and Carlyle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), p. 69.

a new sort of aristocracy, which will be all the more difficult to break because it will be based on the most precious and indestructible of human powers - on those celestial gifts that neither toil nor money can bestow.¹¹

In the nineteenth century, advocates of aristocratic government revived the world of chivalry in search of leadership models. This is something that informs *Pelham*. Jerome McGann, in his analysis of the dandy as a manifestation of nineteenth-century romantic iconography, rightly identifies the argument about dandyism as an element in the conflict between aristocratic and bourgeois values. He points out the dandy's strong links with modernity and denounces the attacks of the anti-dandiacals of the period - Carlyle, Thackeray and Dickens - as "products of reactionary minds, in the strictest sense".¹²

Dickens was greatly influenced by Carlyle and his representation of the dandy is predominantly negative, particularly in *Hard Times*, a novel which he actually dedicated to Carlyle. His characterization in the novel is such that he makes three characters representative of the three social classes: Stephen Blackpool represents the working class, Josiah Bounderby stands for the middle class and James Harthouse for the aristocracy. Although Harthouse is not an aristocrat by birth, still he personifies, by his manners, the aristocrat for the middle-class characters of the novel. Tom, who is fascinated by the style of Harthouse and obviously influenced by him, becomes a criminal and is punished by imprisonment. Harthouse comes to Coketown in search of an opportunity to fill a vacuum in his life and to rise in society. Dickens's description of Harthouse is typical of the unfavourable portrayal usually given to dandies:

Now, this gentleman had a younger brother of still better appearance than himself, who had tried life as a Coronet of Dragoons, and found it a bore; and had afterwards tried it in the train of an English minister abroad, and found it a bore; and had

11 Baudelaire, p. 57.

12 Jerome J. McGann, "The Dandy," *Midway* (Summer 1969), p. 16.

then strolled to Jerusalem, and got bored there; and had then gone yachting about the world, and got bored everywhere.¹³

So, these are examples of some of the extravagant escapades that Harthouse embarks on, yet still finds life tedious. He cannot bring himself to have an interest in anything. He is cynical, does not uphold any real values and is completely indifferent to individual suffering or the larger social problems. Harthouse is also very manipulative. He toys with people's emotions and disregards their feelings in favour of his own fancy. These actions probably stem from his need for accomplishment, a need which he satisfies by manipulating people wherever he sees the opportunity. A perfect example is shown in the following, where Harthouse is trying to find some leverage to gain Louisa's fancy:

‘Is there nothing,’ he thought, glancing at her as she sat at the head of the table, where her youthful figure, small and slight, but very graceful looked as pretty as it looked misplaced; ‘is there nothing that will move that face?’ Yes! By Jupiter, there was something, and here it was, in an unexpected shape. Tom appeared. She changed as the door opened, and broke into a beaming smile... ‘Ay, ay?’ thought the visitor. ‘This whelp is the only creature she cares for’.¹⁴

Harthouse is presented by Dickens as a dangerous man mainly because of his dandy polish - "a conscious polishing of but an ugly surface". He confesses to selfishness, irresponsibility and lack of principle, and he is not ashamed of it. His political alliance with Tom Gradgrind is not because he shares his ideas and principles; it is simply because it serves his purposes. He explains this to Louisa when they first meet:

I have not so much as the slightest predilection left. I assure you I attach not the least importance to any opinions. The result of the varieties of boredom I have undergone, is a conviction (unless conviction is too industrious a word for the lazy sentiment I

13 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), p. 158.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

entertain on the subject), that any set of ideas will do just as much good as any other set, and just as much harm as any other set.¹⁵

Carlyle's influence on Dickens's social theory resulted in a violent attack on dandyism as 'the perpetual stoppage'. But while Carlyle had assaulted the Pelhamite dandyism which disappeared with the Reform Bill, Dickens targeted 'new dandyism', the evils of which were apparent in the aristocratic tendencies to sneer at the 'vulgar', and to ignore injustices with a kind of snobbish sentimentality. Dickens's criticism of dandyism is also clear in the character of Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*. He strongly disapproves of Skimpole's dislike of the Bees, and of his lazy, irresponsible life. Skimpole is shown to be absolutely selfish and inconsiderate to the poor, and indifferent to human suffering in general. He does not refrain from taking money from Jo's persecutors to deliver them the poor boy. Irresponsibility, for Skimpole, is a way of life, a doctrine in itself. When Miss Summerson confronts him with her view that his conduct "seemed to involve a disregard of several moral obligations," he answers: "You know I don't intend to be responsible. I never could do it. Responsibility is a thing that has always been above me - or below me, I don't even know which".¹⁶ And he is made the more disgusting by the way he brings a sense of superiority to his behaviour. In answer to Miss Summerson's accusation that he betrayed Mr Jarndyce's confidence for a bribe he protests lightly and with an air of assumed impartiality:

I am exactly the man to be placed in a superior position, in such a case as that. I am above the rest of mankind, in such a case as that. I can act with philosophy, in such a case as that. I am not warped by prejudices, as an Italian baby is by bandages. I am as free as the air. I feel myself as far above suspicion as Caesar's wife.¹⁷

15 Ibid, p. 162.

16 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page with an introduction by J. Hillis Miller (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1971), p. 885.

17 Ibid.

A great deal of the criticism Bulwer's *Pelham* received was on the grounds of its being a dandy novel and its celebration of aristocratic values and ideals. This presupposes, as indicated earlier, a connection between the dandiacal and the aristocratic, and makes of this connection a formula for corruption. But the dandy is not necessarily an aristocrat; Brummell was not. Dickens himself had much of the dandy figure. Adolphus Trollope long remembered the shock of his first sight of Dickens in the 1840s. "We were at first disappointed," he recalled, "and disposed to imagine there must be some mistake! No! that is not the man who wrote 'Pickwick!' What we saw was a dandified, pretty-boy-looking sort of figure . . . with a slight flavour of the whipper-snapper genus of humanity."¹⁸ Bulwer at a later stage, intentionally or otherwise, presented a 'capitalist' dandy in the character of Baron Levy in *My Novel* (1853) and he was careful to present him as an agent of corruption, this time, of the aristocracy.

Thus, it becomes hard to associate the dandy with any one single class. It is equally hard to regard him always as an agent of corruption. Even Dickens's dandies have their bright qualities. They are good social critics; they expose to others what they do not usually admit about themselves. In recognising selfishness in themselves they show the selfishness of others; they take the burden of exposing the vices of society even at their own expense. Harold Skimpole's attitude towards the poor boy Jo is part of society's indifference to the misery of this boy. The difference between the two positions is that others camouflage their attitudes with religion or law, whereas Skimpole articulates it as plain selfishness. Moreover, these dandies enable others to discover qualities and virtues in themselves they were unable to recognise; or they increase the pleasure of enjoying these virtues. Skimpole is proud of doing his friends the favour of taking money from them, because he enables them to enjoy the virtue of generosity. Miss Summerson notices that these qualities delight her guardian Mr Jarndyce.

It seemed to me, that his off-hand childishness and carelessness were a great relief to my guardian, by contrast with such things, and were the more readily believed in; since, to find one perfectly

18 Quoted in Moers, p. 221.

undesigning and candid man, among many opposites, could not fail to give him pleasure.¹⁹

James Harthouse is the only man who makes Louisa realise that there is something called love, and that she too is able to love, even after being brought up under her father's strict Utilitarian principles. He was the man who showed her the other side of life, the side which goes beyond numbers and facts.

Richard Pine, in *The Dandy and the Herald*, tries to prove that the dandy's superiority in style is a reflection of his superiority in intellect. But his efforts to use *Pelham* to support his claims for the 'heraldic' nature of the dandy should be regarded with caution. He takes Bulwer's revision of the novel, toning down its dandiical content, as an indicator of the serious intellectual nature of the dandy. To explain his view he quotes Bulwer's Preface introducing his hero as "a personal combination of antitheses - a trifler in appearance, but rather one to whom trifles are instructive, than one to whom trifles are natural."²⁰ But this is not a definition of the dandy; it is a description of Bulwer's dandy. In writing *Pelham*, Bulwer was redrawing an updated picture of the dandy, giving him a more positive role to play, not only in the exclusive society, but in society as a whole.

Bulwer's presentation of the dandy in *Pelham* reflects his life-long belief in the notion of aristocratic leadership. As in most of his works, he shows a realization of the weaknesses of the class, but focuses more on the necessity and possibility of reforming it so that it becomes qualified for leadership. Presenting an aristocratic hero, Henry Pelham, who is converted from irresponsibility and playfulness to maturity and seriousness shows the immense potential the class has if it just wakes up to its responsibilities and the dangers surrounding it and the nation. Thus, no other alternative is considered. To Bulwer, this was the only acceptable option.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 257.

²⁰ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Pelham; or, Adventures of A Gentleman* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1862, I: viii).

Henry Pelham offers an exposition of the evasive and devious nature of the aristocracy. He shows the ability of the aristocracy to move from one system of ideas to another in the same manner that an actor moves from one role to another. Pelham does make this movement from the aristocratic patrician stage to the Utilitarian stage of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In the course of this movement the whole idea of dandyism and, more widely of aristocracy, is redefined. John Oakley is right in concluding that the novel "brings the idiom of the dandy - of Romanticism, evangelical Christianity, and even Benthamism - into a new and coherent relation."²¹ But it is hard to see how this leads to his thesis that the novel can be taken as an example of "an 'abdication' of the aristocracy and gentry in favour of groups more suited to the time".²² This paper argues that the process of reform is presented by Bulwer as essential to the reconstructing of a reformed, liberal, and popular aristocratic order. The reformed aristocracy suggested by Bulwer has to acquire the seriousness of tone and purpose of the rising middle class, and an adequate knowledge of the condition of the poor. The structure of the novel itself is an embodiment of this principle. Pelham is brought up to the standards of high fashionable life with its fascination, pretension and corruption. Then he discovers the emptiness of his life and the trivialities of his class; his discovery spurs him to go beyond his egoism and get involved with questions of public concern. The presentation of such a hero responded to great popular demand, for the novel became a tremendous commercial success.

The popularity the novel achieved and the acclaim it received from some reviewers is proof enough of the great interest of a considerable part of the reading public in the aesthetics of the fashionable novel. The large number of copies sold indicates clearly that its readership was not confined to the aristocracy; it was read widely among the middle class. Amy Cruse, in *The Victorians and Their Books*, is certain that "when any book had an exceptionally large sale it is safe to

21 John Oakley, "The Reform of Honour in Bulwer's Pelham," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47, no. 1 (June 1992), p. 71.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

say that this was due to the middle class".²³ The question this raises is why middle-class readers would read a book that disparages them? The answer can be found in the fascination of aristocratic life, values and manners to the middle class.

The fascination stems, to a large extent, from the spectacular nature and theatricality of aristocratic life; and the fact that for the aristocracy, show was functional and a value in itself. Aristocrats saw themselves as actors moving on a large stage. In this context, John Oakley rightly observes that Pelham is presented in a succession of masks on different stages.²⁴ Presenting himself under masks is part of the theatrical tradition of fashionable life, and he is driven into it by his mother:

And now, my dear son, before I enter into a subject of great importance to you, I wish to recall to your mind that pleasure is never an end, but a means - viz., that in your horses and amusements at Paris - your visits and your liaisons - you have always I trust, remembered that these were desirable as the methods of shining in society. I have now a new scene on which you are to enter . . .²⁵

The show is obviously not complete without language; and Bulwer's reformed dandy learns how to speak all the languages of his society without losing his own. Bulwer wanted the novel to be about a dandy who commands his style, not one who is enslaved by style; the man who makes the tailor, not the man who is made by the tailor. The dandy here is not what he appears to be; he is sometimes even the opposite. This is Lady Roseville describing Pelham:

While you seem frivolous to the superficial, I know you have a mind not only capable of the most solid and important affairs, but habituated by reflections to consider them. You appear

23 Amy Cruse, *The Victorians and Their Books* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), pp. 221-2.

24 John Oakley, "The Rhetoric of Reform: Edward Bulwer and Aristocratic Representation in the Social Order, 1828-41," Ph. D. dissertation (Southampton University, 1989), p. 167.

25 Bulwer, *Pelham*, I: 157.

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 - no, nor even into a venial dereliction of principle.²⁶

Adam Smith, back in the 1770s, observed that, in order for someone to master a profession he should concentrate his efforts on a limited area. In *The Wealth of Nations* he comments: "in consequence of the division of labour, the whole of every man's attention comes naturally to be directed towards some one simple object."²⁷ As people of the same profession tended to meet each other more than they met people of other professions their languages became so limited that it became difficult for them to understand each other, or at least the language of one group sounded remote or irrelevant to another group. Dickens presents an example in *Bleak House* in the character of Mr Guppy, the apprentice lawyer who speaks to Miss Summerson about his love for her as if he were speaking to a colleague, using the same legal jargon. After giving her a list of his assets and qualifications and family history he asks for permission "to file a declaration - to make an offer!" For his mother is "eminently calculated for a mother-in-law".²⁸

Bulwer, however, was more concerned with language as an expression of the power and hegemony exercised by groups which speak a certain language. Adam Smith's observations are again relevant here. According to Smith, in primitive societies each individual could perform all the functions necessary for his survival. Later, these functions devolved more and more on to be performed by different groups and individuals. In such societies every man was a warrior and in one way or another a statesman who can decide what is good and what is bad for his society:

Though in a rude society there is a good deal of variety in the occupations of every individual, there is not a great deal in the whole society. Every man does, or is capable of doing, almost

26 Ibid., II: 167.

27 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 1: 20.

28 Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 175.

everything which any other man does, or is capable of doing. Every man has a considerable degree of knowledge, ingenuity, and invention; but scarce any man has a great degree. . . . In a civilised state, on the contrary, though there is little variety in the occupations of the greater part of individuals, there is an almost infinite variety in those of the whole society. These varied occupations present an almost infinite variety of objects to the contemplation of those few, who, being attached to no particular occupation themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupation of other people. The contemplation of so great a variety of objects necessarily exercises their minds in endless comparisons and combinations, and renders their understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive.²⁹

The argument here is that, in Pelham, we see the transformation of the dandy into a responsible Victorian gentleman. As we find in the novel, although the gentleman did not engage himself professionally in any occupation, he possessed some knowledge about all professions, at least in their relation with the whole structure of society. Professional men did not possess that virtue, since everyone was interested only in the immediate results of his own activity, and could not comprehend the general interest of the nation. Private interests became public only for the propertied gentleman. Moreover, for the gentleman to do something is a contradiction in terms; for as Henry Fielding wrote in *Tom Jones*: to be "bred a gentleman" was to be "bred up to do nothing . . . the wisdom of the learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure: and he that hath little business shall become wise".³⁰

As the gentleman was not engaged in any single occupation, yet knew something about all occupations, his language was a clear illustration of this quality. He was believed to speak a language universally intelligible; his usage was common in the sense that it was neither infected by any one profession nor confined to the dialect of a certain area. The importance of such a language was believed to come

29 Adam Smith, 2: 783.

30 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones*, Book VIII, Ch. viii, quoted in John Barrell, *English Literature in History: An Equal Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 33.

from the necessity to understand and describe society in an objective and disinterested manner. Dr Johnson writes that "as any action or posture long continued, will distort and disfigure the limbs; so the mind likewise is crippled and contracted by perpetual application to the same set of ideas . . . [so] there are few among men of the more liberal professions, whose minds do not carry the brand of their calling, or whose conversation does not quickly discover to what class of the community they belong".³¹ The task of understanding and describing the relationship between different professions and classes of society, and consequently leading society, should then be open only to those who perform no regular profession.

Bulwer, like all those who concerned themselves with the role of the disinterested landed gentleman, was keen on distinguishing between the 'true gentleman' and the merely fashionable gentleman. Pelham's meeting with Brummell (the character of Russelton) shows Pelham's superiority; he is shown to be a man of education and talent, not merely a man of fashion like the Beau. This concern with the roundedness of the gentleman's personality, which came to Bulwer from eighteenth-century thinkers, lived on not only in *Pelham* but in fact in most of his other works.

Selecting a hero who lived in Regency England, Bulwer was aware of the many weaknesses of the aristocracy, particularly in that period, and naturally aware of the severe criticism directed against the high society of which he was a member. He tried to sound as impartial as he could. In the second edition of 1828, he made it clear that Pelham represents a certain part of the British Regency society: "I have drawn for the hero of my Work such a person as seemed to me best fitted to retail the opinions and customs of the class and age to which he belongs . . ."³² This identification is presented at the very beginning of the novel through the brisk record Pelham gives of his family:

I am an only child. My father was the younger son of one of our oldest earls, my mother the dowerless daughter of a Scotch peer.

31 Dr Johnson, *The Rambler* 173, no. 12 (November 1751); no. 99 (February 1751), quoted in Barrell, p. 34.

32 Bulwer, *Pelham*, I: viii.

Mr Pelham was a moderate Whig, and gave sumptuous dinners; Lady Frances was a woman of taste, and particularly fond of diamonds and old china.³³

The detached ironic tone Pelham uses in his narration establishes his own personality at this stage, and traces the origins of his personal qualities in his upbringing and family background: "The end of the season was unusually dull, and my mother, after having looked over her list of engagements, and ascertained that she had none remaining worth staying for, agreed to elope with her new lover".³⁴ Pelham's father is an example of high class good society whose most distinguished trait is a "calm, imperturbable quiet . . . they eat in quiet, move in quiet, live in quiet, and lose their wife, or even their money, in quiet". To link this with his mother's elopement, he appreciates that his father not only said nothing about the event, but even made friends with his wife's lover and "invited him to dinner twice a-week for a whole twelvemonth".³⁵ His uncle, who will later take a significant part in his education, is on the other side of the camp: "He was, as people justly observed, rather an odd man: built schools for peasants, forgave poachers, and diminished his farmers' rents; indeed, on account of this and similar eccentricities, he was thought a fool by some, and a madman by others".³⁶

Pelham's description of his father's behaviour here is put in a way to appear normal and unshocking; but in his judgement of his uncle's actions he needed to recruit the condemnation of other people belonging to the same class. Idleness and moral dissipation are the constitution of this class, while doing something, particularly something good, is abnormal and a behaviour which is likely to earn social condemnation. Bulwer's choice of narrative rather than dramatic presentation, and the choice of the hero as the narrator seems to serve a purpose. Pelham, with his dandiacal observing eye - "what individual could ever escape my notice?"³⁷ - is a complacent witness who enjoys the trivialities and degeneration of his society up to a point. His sins lie in his complacency

33 Ibid., I: 1.

34 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

35 Ibid., I: 4.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p. 99.

rather than in his commitment to the moral values of his class. It is true that the novel gives a portrayal of Regency society, but it is essentially about Pelham's development and transformation in this society.

Pelham's preoccupation with high life was in itself sufficient to attract criticism. *Fraser's* for instance did recognise Bulwer's criticism of the aristocracy and of dandyism, but their point was that even writing about the immorality of the higher classes was in itself immoral. They wanted to erase the existence of the whole class from literature. Bulwer himself saw that certain parts of the aristocracy, especially those in office or with claims to office, were beyond redemption, but he had no doubt that certain sections could, and in fact should, be saved and reformed.

This is the group - the fraction of a class - to which Bulwer is appealing, as he does in another Book, *England and the English*, to wake up and face the responsibilities the time requires. It is the group that Matthew Arnold came to call the 'aliens', and defined them as "persons who are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general humane spirit, by the love of human perfection".³⁸ Pelham, in his adventures, shows a great deal of knowledge and experience waiting to be put to use. He seems effeminate but he has not only masculine but even military competence. Politicians try to fool him only to find that he can outwit them. In the Preface to the 1840 edition Bulwer writes that in *Pelham* he wanted to prove that "the lessons of society do not necessarily corrupt, and that we may be both men of the world, and even, to a certain degree, men of pleasure, and yet be something wiser - nobler - better."³⁹ And in the Advertisement to the 1848 edition Bulwer finds that the formula he prescribed in 1828 was bearing fruit:

The popular changes in the constitution have brought the several classes more intimately into connection with each other; most of the affectations of fashion and exclusiveness are out of date. We have not talked equality like our neighbours, the French, but insensibly and naturally, the tone of manners has admitted much of the frankness of the principle, without the necessary rudeness

38 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 109.

39 Bulwer, *Pelham*, I: xiv.

of the pretence . . . There is a far greater earnestness of purpose, a higher culture, more generous and genial views, amongst the young men of the rising generation than were common in the last. The old divisions of party politics remain; but among all divisions there is a greater desire of identification with the people. Rank is more sensitive of its responsibilities, property of its duties.⁴⁰

But the world of *Pelham* is not a world in which aristocrats identify themselves with 'the people'; it is the world of exclusiveness. Bulwer's point is that this world, bad as it is, does not necessarily corrupt those who are aware of its limitations. Here lies the difference between dandyism represented by Russelton (Brummell)⁴¹ and dandyism as one dimension of the gentleman. Bulwer probably refers here to his own experience, for he moved in and out of Regency fashionable life, yet he was able to discover its limitations and criticise it harshly. This is what he had to say about Almack's, the exclusivist club:

How unintellectual, how uncivilised, such a scene, and such actors! What a remnant of barbarous times, when people danced because they had nothing to say! . . . We go to these assemblies to sell our daughters, or corrupt our neighbours' wives. A ballroom is nothing more or less than a great market-place of beauty".⁴²

Pelham meets Russelton in Calais, and although he found him "singularly entertaining" in spite of "his bad witticisms," he shows that his (Pelham's) mind is not limited to dandyism per se, represented by Russelton, and that he is able to dissect and criticise this master dandy on the grounds of what he did with his dandyism:

I soon saw that Russelton was a soured and disappointed man; his remarks on people were all sarcasms - his mind was overflowed with a suffusion of ill-nature - he bit as well as growled . . . People who have been employed for years upon trifles have not

40 Ibid., I: xxii.

41 Bulwer makes clear that the character of Russelton is made after Brummell by making him mouth some of the most famous maxims of the Beau.

42 Quoted in Moers, p. 46.

the greatness of mind which could alone make them indifferent to what they have coveted all their lives, as most enviable and important.⁴³

Dandyism is not then a value in itself; its value comes from what is made out of it. By presenting the dandy gentleman, Bulwer is offering a means for what Robin Gilmour, in *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*, describes as "social and political accommodation between the aristocracy and the middle classes".⁴⁴ As remarked above, middle-class critics were, nevertheless, not very pleased with this accommodation partly because the novel suggested another kind of accommodation, this time with the poor, 'vulgar' and 'criminal'.

Pelham's transformation comes after his uncle, Lord Glenmorris, introduces him to James Mill's *Essay Upon Government*, when a "new light had gleamed upon [him]".⁴⁵ He goes on to read Mill's articles in the *Encyclopedia*, then proceeds to Bentham's works and those of the political economists. These studies lead him to believe in the inseparability of "public policy" from "private morality". The conversion comes when he transcends the limit between exclusive dandyism and responsible gentlemanliness:

I ceased to look upon the world as a game one was to play fairly, if possible - but where a little cheating was readily allowed: I no longer divorced the interests of other men from my own: if I endeavoured to blind them, it was neither by unlawful means, nor for a purely selfish end.⁴⁶

It is important to point out, however, that Pelham does not become a Utilitarian. His understanding of Utilitarianism is mainly focused around the responsibility of the individual and the ability of the individual action to increase human happiness. It is not, for instance, the Utilitarianism that Dickens presents in *Hard Times*.

43 Bulwer, *Pelham*, I:199.

44 Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 2.

45 Bulwer, *Pelham*, I: 227.

46 *Ibid.*, I: 230.

The boundaries between dandyism and gentlemanliness are, however, very elusive. Great figures from classical antiquity like Alcibiades and Caesar, according to Baudelaire, were among the most brilliant representatives of dandyism.⁴⁷ A man like the Duke of Wellington, for instance, had been a dandy, and had been called 'the dandy' by his troops in the Peninsula, and valued his position as an English gentleman above his military successes and honours. Lord Byron, too, had accepted the social leadership of the dandies and adopted something of their poses in *Beppo* and *Don Juan*.⁴⁸ The amazing thing is to find that, in such a period and among such great men, a man like Brummell would be considered 'great'. Brummell's 'greatness' lay completely in his devotion to style; and it was this devotion and the defiance of the claims of usefulness that irritated and troubled the Victorians. As Gilmour has observed, this potentially intellectual pose gave dandyism a kind of integrity, and came to be seen by Oscar Wilde and the French inheritors of English dandyism as a stance for the artist and the intellectual in rebellion against bourgeois society.⁴⁹ Devotion to style required the dandy to transcend the drives of utility, greed, ambition or any other strong emotion. Vivian, in Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying," advocates this theory:

As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art.⁵⁰

Bulwer never expressed such views himself. On the contrary, he always emphasised the instructive and useful nature of art. And in *Pelham* he consciously departed from the Byronic tradition in order to present a more positive hero. But this does not mean that there are no

47 Baudelaire, p. 54.

48 "I had a tinge of dandyism in my minority," wrote Byron in 1825, "and probably retained enough of it to conciliate the great ones at five-and-twenty. I had gamed, and drank, and taken my degrees in most dissipations, and having no pedantry and not being overbearing, we ran quietly together. I knew them all more or less, and they made me a member of Watier's [the Dandy Club]". Stanton, p. 35.

49 Ibid., p. 52.

50 Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *Selected Writings*, with an introduction by Richard Elman (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 11-12.

traces of Byronism in the book. Glanville, Pelham's friend, with his "burning enthusiasm for romance," and "feverish fervour of his temperament" clearly bears the insignia of that tradition. Although Bulwer followed the lead of the English Cantos of *Don Juan*, in which Byron determines "to show things as they really are," he suggests that handsome, clever, rich young men need not be necessarily melancholy misanthropes. Glanville presents a reformed version of the Byronic hero, a hero who, to Pelham, joins natural energy with 'sound' Utilitarian principles:

It was singular that, in his parliamentary display, as in his ordinary conversation, there were none of the wild and speculative opinions, or the burning enthusiasm of romance, in which the natural inclinations of his mind seemed so essentially to delight. His arguments were always remarkable for the soundness of principles on which they were based, and the logical clearness with which they were expressed. The feverish fervour of his temperament was, it is true, occasionally shown in a remarkable energy of delivery, or a sudden or unexpected burst of the more impetuous powers of oratory; but these were so evidently natural and spontaneous, and so happily adapted to be impressive of the subject . . .⁵¹

Pelham symbolises the expanded role of the gentleman, and with him the role of the gentry, who are capable of representing and leading the nation. In this light Bertrand Russell's idea that "the concept of the gentleman was invented by the aristocrats to keep the middle classes in order" becomes valid.⁵² The notion of the gentleman appealed to the middle class for its social and moral implications. Socially, the gentleman ethos occupied a special position in the traditional social hierarchy; it shared the prestige of the landed aristocracy without being exclusively aristocratic. Gentlemanliness was a rank which allowed ambitious and successful members of lower social classes to emulate the aristocracy. And the moral dimension was continuously emphasised in

51 Bulwer, *Pelham*, II: 2.

52 Cited by Alan Brien, *Sunday Times* (London, 1 August 1971), quoted by Walter L. Arstein, "The Survival of the Victorian Aristocracy," in *The Rich, the Well Born, and the Powerful*, ed. F. C. Jaher (London: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 236.

order to make the role subject to modification and modernisation. It is this accentuation of the moral aspect of the gentleman that made James I say to his old nurse: "I'll mak' your son a baronet, gin ye like, Luckie, but the de'il himsel' could na mak' him a gentleman."⁵³

As outlined above, finding a common language free from inflections and class prejudice was a major preoccupation for nineteenth-century intellectuals and writers. The middle class, being too busy with their own affairs, and their language being the reflection of their own interests - as shown in the encounter between Pelham and the wine merchant Combermere St Quintin - could not possibly provide that common language. The aristocracy, on the other hand, with their cosmopolitan nature, disinterestedness and leisure, were seen by writers like Bulwer, as capable of moving freely among different classes and of finding the proper solutions for these problems. In other words, they and not the middle class were more qualified to govern. Still, the debate was often conducted in a more subtle and sophisticated manner.

As has been demonstrated, the stances taken towards the dandy figure by Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer-Lytton reflect different class biases and ideological positions. But, as the paper tried to show, these positions are far from being unequivocal. Despite the outright denunciation of the dandy in Carlyle's work, representations of the figure in the writings of Dickens and Bulwer are more nuanced to reflect the complicated relationship between aristocratic and middle-class values.

⁵³ Quoted in Gilmour, p. 3.

Bibliography

- Arnold, Matthew. (1988) *Culture and Anarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Arstein, Walter L. (1973) "The Survival of the Victorian Aristocracy," in *The Rich, the Well Born, and the Powerful*, ed. F. C. Jaher. London: University of Illinois Press.
- Barrell, John. (1983) *English Literature in History: An Equal Wide Survey*. London: Hutchinson.
- Baudelaire, Charles. (1986) "The Dandy," in *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*, trans. Norman Cameron, ed. with an introduction by Peter Quennell. London: The Soho Book Company.
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. (1874) *England and the English*. London: George Routledge & Sons. The edition published by The University of Chicago Press, 1970, and edited with an introduction by Standish Meacham is also consulted.
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. (1862) *Pelham; or, Adventures of A Gentleman*. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons.
- Carlyle, Thomas. (1987) *Sartor Resartus*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cruse, Amy. (1962) *The Victorians and Their Books*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Dickens, Charles. (1971) *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page with an introduction by J. Hillis Miller. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin.
- Dickens, Charles. (1981) *Hard Times*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Gilmour, Robin. (1981) *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Hazlitt, William. (1991) "Brummelliana," in *Selected Writings*, edited with an introduction by Jon Cook. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGann, Jerome J. (Summer 1969). "The Dandy," *Midway*.
- Michell, Leslie. (2003) *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters* London: Hambledon.
- Moers, Ellen. (1960) *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

- Newey, Vincent. (2004) *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens: Novels of Ideology, Novels of the Self*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate.
- O'Cinnede, M. (2007) "The Silver-Fork Novel across Romantic and Victorian Views: Class, Gender and Commodity Culture, 1820-1841". *Literature Compass*, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 1227-1240.
- Oakley, John. (June 1992) "The Reform of Honour in Bulwer's Pelham," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47, no. 1.
- Oakley, John. (1989) "The Rhetoric of Reform: Edward Bulwer and Aristocratic Representation in the Social Order, 1828-41," Ph. D. dissertation. Southampton University.
- Ribeiro, Aileen. (2002) "On Englishness in dress" in *The Englishness of English Dress*, Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin and Caroline Cox, ed. New York: Berg.
- Schmid, Susann. (2002) "Byron and Wilde: The Dandy in the Public Sphere" in Julie Hibbard *et al.* eds. *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: versions of Wilde during the last 100 years*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi B.V.
- Smith, Adam. (1976) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stanton, Domna. (1980) *The Aristocrat As Art: A Study of the Honnete home and the Dandy in Seventeenth-and Nineteenth-Century French Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Thrall, Miriam M. H. (1934) *Rebellious Fraser's: Nol Yorke's Magazine in the Days of Maginn, Thackeray, and Carlyle*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wilde, Oscar. (1961) "The Decay of Lying," in *Selected Writings*, with an introduction by Richard Elman. London: Oxford University Press.

Received 4/8/2010