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*Disraeli, the Launching of “The Representative”,
and the Anonymous Letter: A New Hypothesis?*

Abstract: It is well known that John Murray’s preparatory activities for the launch of “The Representative”, a daily paper published between January and July 1826, had a significant impact on the young Benjamin Disraeli’s decision to try his hand at fiction writing. His first dandy novel was almost immediately read as a satirical rendition of episodes and characters related to that unsuccessful publishing venture. The present short note discusses one recent hypothesis concerning the specific political pressures that originally motivated the distinguished publisher and the fledgling politician to embark on the risky attempt to establish a conservative newspaper that was meant to rival the “Times”.

Vivian Grey, part I, Benjamin Disraeli’s first dandy novel published in 1826, is routinely associated with so-called silver-fork fiction, a narrative subgenre purporting to deal with the “sayings and doings” of the most exclusive upper-class circles. These novels are often characterized by a peculiar mix of parliamentary politics and fashionable entertainment, their episodes largely revolving around events associated with the London “Season” (the Royal drawing rooms and levées, the dinner parties, the Almack balls...) or with country-house vacations during the summer recess of Parliament; and their characters including the aristocratic grandee, the domineering society hostess, the dandified young man, the rich but vulgar *parvenu*, the marriageable heiress. Much of the curiosity generated by these (often anonymous) publications was linked to the presumption that their authors were themselves members of the nobility, and that they used fiction obliquely to divulge, and comment upon, high-society peccadillos and political maneuvering.¹

¹ Critical interest in silver-fork fiction has increased significantly with the turn of the millennium, spawning a wide critical biography and the reprinting of some of these previously forgotten novels (see the six-volume edition of *Silver Fork Novels 1826-1841*, edited by Harriet Devine Jump and others and published by Pickering

They were, in fact, often advertised and received as *romans-à-clef*. Such was certainly the case with Disraeli's *Vivian Grey*, though the facts thinly disguised behind its satirical portrayal of lords, ladies and their minions would eventually be traced back to recent business negotiations within the upper echelons of the publishing industry. They concerned John Murray, perhaps the most distinguished publisher at the time and a family friend of the D'Israelis, his entourage and his preparations for the establishment of a new conservative daily paper to rival the "Times". Its title – apparently devised by the young Benjamin – was "The Representative": it was launched on 25 January 1826, but it failed to impress the public and attract advertisers, and was discontinued by the end of July.² *Vivian Grey*, part I, was published anonymously towards the end of April 1826, while this unsuccessful publishing venture was unfolding; it (allegedly) allowed its readers to peep into the private ambitions, quarrels, misunderstandings and betrayals that had preceded the launching of the paper, deprived it of a proper editorship and delivered it to its unmitigated failure.

The personal circumstances that induced the twenty-one-year-old Benjamin Disraeli to turn to fiction have long been known to his biographers and critics.³ However, given the secrecy that was maintained at the time regarding the authorship of the book and the embarrassment that was generated when the author's name became known, many aspects and implications of this biographical episode remain a subject of perplexity and speculation. One such matter is the young Benjamin Disraeli's degree of involvement and responsibility in the

& Chatto in 2005). The two most comprehensive book-length studies to date are Edward Copeland, *The Silver Fork Novel: Fashionable Fiction in the Age of Reform* and Cheryl A. Wilson, *Fashioning the Silver Fork Novel*.

² The "Representative" is nowadays fully accessible/searchable on the British Newspapers Archive.

³ The most authoritative accounts are to be found in Robert Blake, *Disraeli*, pp. 23-50; and Jane Ridley, *The Young Disraeli*, pp. 30-51. A time-honoured source of information is Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of John Murray, with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the House, 1768-1843*, pp. 180-218. Some new information, and plenty new conjectures on the episode, are provided by Regina Akel, *Benjamin Disraeli and John Murray: The Politician, the Publisher and the Representative*, whose focus on the "anonymous letter" has prompted the writing of this note.

launching of the short-lived newspaper. Conjectures thereon have long been based on the fictional account of the episode he seems to be giving in *Vivian Grey*, Part I. The text of the novel suggests that Disraeli was the originator of this publishing venture, and that it was mainly as a consequence of his eloquent pressures and contagious enthusiasm that the normally very cautious publisher John Murray embarked on such a risky enterprise.

Drawing on hitherto untapped, neglected or forgotten sources, Regina Akel's recent book attempts to rectify some of such prevailing assumptions. To this end, she has meritoriously gathered much interesting material, and has taken the trouble actually to read the "Representative", opining that it was, among other things, its high-Tory orientation (adverse to Catholic emancipation, and to the abolition of slavery in the Colonies) that doomed it to failure. She fails, however, to provide a persuasive new narration, partly due to her lack of full historical awareness,⁴ which makes her grip on her highly political subject uncertain. Especially, she fails to convince the informed reader of the soundness of her main revisionary argument, i.e., that the project of an ultra-Tory newspaper to rival "The Times" was originally hatched by a cabal of Tory grandees bent on undermining George Canning's liberal inclinations – a thesis that is at loggerheads with consolidated biographical lore,⁵ but also, as I will show, with facts.

That scheming Tory potentates might be connected with Murray's newspaper, and that they may have affected the way Disraeli disguised the story of the "Representative" in his novel, is not a new surmise. In her authoritative biography of the young Disraeli, Jane Ridley argues that there seems to be a connection between the story narrated in

⁴ This lack is especially apparent in her assumption that George Canning – at the time the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs – was favourable to "universal suffrage" (Akel, *Benjamin Disraeli and John Murray*, pp. 9-10, p. 24). Though Canning was "progressive" regarding several important issues, he was in fact very stubbornly averse to parliamentary reform, fully believing that the current electoral system was such as to allow for progressive social and economic measures. For an authoritative treatment of Canning's complex political action and political position at the time of his "hegemony", see Elie Halevy, *The Liberal Awakening (1815-1830)*, pp. 155-236.

⁵ That "[t]he new paper was to be Canningite" is treated as a matter of course by Disraeli's most eminent biographer. Blake, *Disraeli*, p. 27.

Vivian Grey, and the intrigues of the Duke of York and the Marquess of Hertford against Canning in 1825. Ridley suggests that the "Representative" was planned, originally, as a Canningite paper, but that there might have been an attempt to hijack it by the adverse faction of the Tory party; thus, the fictional Marquess of Carabas might be a mixture of Hertford (whom Disraeli did not know personally) and John Murray.⁶ Akel, who surprisingly does not include Ridley among her sources, contends, on the other hand, that Hertford, the Duke of York, and others delivered the (sort of) turn-key "plot" of the ultra-conservative paper to Murray and his associates, and then lost interest and dropped out of the scheme leaving the distinguished publisher in the lurch.

Akel's crucial piece of evidence is one short anonymous letter addressed to "Mr Canning" in a (perhaps contrived) feminine hand, which was included in Stapleton's edition of Canning's official correspondence, published in 1887, and was in fact reprinted in Ridley's book, having first been spotted in connection with *Vivian Grey* by Lucien Wolf, in his Introduction to the 1904 "centenary edition" of the novel.⁷ The letter reads as follows:

The Ultra-ultra journal called *Murray's Paper* will be brought out on January 1 next, in Great George Street, Westminster.

When Lord Hertford's boast (to turn out nineteen of Mr Canning's friends), uttered only a few days previous to the late attempt to dissolve Parliament, was defeated, the confederates then turned their attention to a morning paper, at the suggestion of Street, late of the *Courier*, and this is it!

The bantling will appear under the auspices of the Duke of York, and the Marquis.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THE PRESS

Thomas George Street, J. Wilson Croker, Lockhart of Edinburgh, and Mr Watts, late principal parliamentary reporter to the *Morning Chronicle*, are to be joint editors. They intend to make a dead set at *The Old*

⁶ Ridley, *The Young Disraeli 1804-1846*, p. 46. The same line of argument as to "The Representative" being originally conceived as a Canningite paper has been recently pursued by Robert O'Kell, *Disraeli: The Romance of Politics*, pp. 9-33.

⁷ Lucian Wolf, "Introduction", p. xxxv.

Times (as far as reporting goes), and finishing the *New* one. As to the poor *Post*, and the milk and water *Herald*, they are also to be annihilated.⁸

Stapleton argues that, though it is undated, the letter must have been written “somewhere about the summer of 1825, for it particularly refers to the question of the dissolution of Parliament in the ensuing autumn”.⁹ Akel does not question this dating, and states that the letter, being written in the summer 1825, bears witness to the fact that even the “impressive building [of Great George Street, Westminster] destined to house the *Representative*” was chosen neither by Murray nor by Disraeli but by the powerful “others” who had hatched the plot. Akel states: “Judging by this letter the basic structure of the project had been decided before it was handed on to Murray, who was then commissioned to implement and finance it”.¹⁰

Indeed, if the dating of the letter were reliable, its mention of the Great George Street offices would be most surprising, given that we know from Disraeli’s letters to Murray that the architect George Basevi (Disraeli’s cousin) and the young Benjamin were still busy looking for suitable premises elsewhere in October 1825.¹¹ It would be equally surprising that the name of John Gibson Lockhart, Walter Scott’s son in law, should be specifically mentioned, on so early a date, as prospective *co*-editor of the paper, given that – as Akel herself shows – Murray seems to have originally planned to make him the editor of the paper, Lockhart being first informed by William Wright’s letter in (roughly) mid-September,¹² and subsequently contacted by Murray via his young envoy Disraeli on 20 September. We also know that he was not at all pleased with the prospect, and took some weeks to negotiate an agreement, which would eventually include collaboration with, but not full editorial responsibility of, “The Representative”. It was, in fact, only on

⁸ Edward J. Stapleton (ed.), *Some Official Correspondence of George Canning*, I, pp. 377-378.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 378.

¹⁰ Akel, *Benjamin Disraeli and John Murray*, p. 26.

¹¹ See Benjamin Disraeli, Letter to John Murray, [London, October 1825], in Benjamin Disraeli, *Letters: 1815-1834*, p. 45.

¹² William Wright, Letters to J.G. Lockhart, 12 Sept. 1825, quoted in Akel, *Benjamin Disraeli and John Murray*, p. 27.

20 October that Lockhart signed deeds which involved "giv[ing] up his professional practice at the Scotch Bar" and moving to London to edit the "Quarterly Review" as well as "to aid and assist" John Murray in the publication of a (still unnamed) daily morning paper.¹³

Since so much of what we know for sure seems not to tally with what we learn from this anonymous letter – should it really be dated summer 1825 –, it is wise to reconsider its text, and also the contextual facts invoked by Stapleton. The letter refers to the "late [defeated] attempt to dissolve Parliament", which suggests it was written sometime *after*, and not before, rejection by the Cabinet of the proposal that Parliament should be dissolved. With the formidable help of the British Newspaper database, nowadays it is easy to ascertain that it was only on 24 September 1825, that the news that there would be no dissolution of Parliament was imparted to the general public. The following quotation is extracted from the "Morning Post" of Saturday, 24 September 1825:

We rejoice to have it in our power to put an end to the general anxiety created by the expectation of an immediate Dissolution of Parliament. The subject was amply canvassed in the late Cabinet Council, and, we are authorized to state, it has been finally determined that there shall be *No Dissolution of Parliament* this year. There never was a time, certainly, at which an Administration could have more confidently appealed to the gratitude and sense of a nation than at present: but as there is no fear of an interruption of the peace, prosperity, and general contentment which we enjoy, there is also no reason for hastening an appeal, which, whenever it is made, will find the people fully as sensible of the advantages and blessings of our enlightened system of policy, as they can possibly be now.¹⁴

Our retrospective knowledge of the forthcoming financial crash of December 1825 (which would badly injure – among so many other

¹³ Akel's account of the signing of the deeds (*Benjamin Disraeli and John Murray*, pp. 41-42) confirms the information previously provided by Charles C. Nickerson, *Disraeli, Lockhart, and Murray: An Episode in the History of the "Quarterly Review"*.

¹⁴ "The Morning Post", Saturday 24 September 1825, p. 2. The "Post" prided itself on often being the first to acquire and spread important news, given its contacts with the most exclusive and fashionable circles of the metropolis. The news was confirmed by "The Times" on the following Monday, 26 September 1825, p. 2.

investors, speculators and businessmen – Benjamin Disraeli and his associates in the launching of the “Representative”) certainly casts an ironic light on the smug satisfaction in the prosperity of the nation this article exudes. Nonetheless, this news-item provides reliable evidence that the dissolution of Parliament, having been on the cards for the whole summer, was finally rejected only towards the end of September 1825. This makes it most likely that the anonymous letter was written some weeks after, in October-November 1825, when Lockhart’s role had been defined, and Murray and his associates had actually identified 25 Great George Street as a suitable location for their headquarters.¹⁵

In short, though Akel provides compelling evidence that the actual editorial line of the newspaper as published in the early months of 1826 was pro-slavery and anti-Catholic, she fails to persuade the informed reader that the newspaper was originally conceived by the anti-Canning faction of the Tory party and merely entrusted to Murray for its realization.

It remains, no doubt, legitimate to conjecture on the mysterious anonymous missive, especially in view of the fact that Canning himself seems to have given credit to similar rumours regarding Lockhart, as shown in a letter to Walter Scott, dated 17 February 1827, where he utters his conviction that Lockhart had been “invited from Scotland for the very purpose of attacking [...] the measures to which I am supposed to be favourable, and, personally, myself”.¹⁶ What we know for sure, however, is that it was speculations in Latin American mines in winter 1824-25 that cemented the alliance of Murray, Disraeli and the City merchant banker John Diston Powles, the three men who were jointly to own the “Representative”.¹⁷ It is equally a fact that Disraeli’s earliest published pamphlet – far from being hostile to Canning – targeted the ultra-conservative octogenarian Lord Eldon (subsequently referred to as “Lord Past Century” in *Vivian Grey*), who threatened to dampen

¹⁵ Akel herself states that “the account book of the *Representative* registers on 12 November 1825 a withdrawal of £1.155 handed to John Basevi ... for the purchase of the property” (p. 48).

¹⁶ Quoted in Andrew Lang, *The Life and Letters of John Gibson Lockhart*, II, p. 8.

¹⁷ The memorandum of the agreement signed by Murray, Disraeli and Powles on 3 August 1825 has been published in a footnote to Disraeli’s *Letters: 1815-34*, p. 31.

the current speculative fever with restrictive measures meant to protect British investors and national interests.¹⁸

It seems, therefore, very unlikely that Disraeli and his business partners should have deliberately embarked on a journalistic-political venture aimed at undermining the very Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs who, with his liberal recognition of the former Spanish colonies, had done so much to boost investment in, and trade with, South America, on which economic trend – as young Ben would say – they rested their “sheet anchor”.¹⁹ Disraeli was notoriously given to embellishment, optimistic misrepresentation and sometimes downright lying; but there is no reason to doubt that, in spring 1825, he genuinely believed (or fervently hoped) that the new morning paper would be – as he wrote at that time – “under the immediate patronage of Mr Canning”.²⁰

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¹⁸ The spirited youngster’s strictures on the ‘venerable’ Lord Eldon and his old-fashioned economic notions are part of Disraeli’s argument in his (anonymously published) *An Inquiry into the Plans, Progress and Policy of the American Mining Companies* (1825): see especially pp. 124-131 of the third edition. Eldon’s satirical counterpart, “Lord Past Century”, is rumoured to be on the verge of retirement (this opening up interesting opportunities for advancement in the forthcoming Cabinet reshuffle) in Benjamin Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, I, p. 41.

¹⁹ “On Mexican mines I rest my sheet anchor” is what Benjamin wrote in a letter (apparently never actually posted) to one of his creditors, conjecturally dated April 1825. Benjamin Disraeli, Letter to Robert Messer, [London, April 1825?], in Disraeli, *Letters: 1815-34*, p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

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