

The background of the cover is a vibrant red with a glossy, wavy texture that creates a sense of depth and movement. The waves are curved and flow from the top right towards the bottom left.

John Sutherland  
Vanity Fair

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W. M. THACKERAY

# *Vanity Fair*

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*A Novel without a Hero*

*Edited with an Introduction by*  
JOHN SUTHERLAND

*With 193 Illustrations by the Author*

OXFORD  
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WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY was born in 1811 in Calcutta. In 1817 he was sent to England to be educated as a gentleman. From Charterhouse school, he went to Cambridge in 1829. His career at university was undistinguished, and led into an unsettled young-manhood. After false starts in the law in art (which he studied in Paris) and journalism he compounded his misfortunes with an imprudent marriage in 1835. Tragically, his wife went mad five years later, leaving Thackeray with two young daughters to provide for. His first successes in authorship came with publications (of a largely satirical nature) in *Fraser's Magazine* and *Punch*. Triumph came with the publication of *Vanity Fair* (1847–8). This serialized novel promoted Thackeray to the rank of Dickens's principal rival in fiction. It was followed by the more autobiographical *Pendennis* (1848–50) and the historical *Henry Esmond* (1852), works which consolidated Thackeray's reputation without equalling the runaway popularity of his first full-length novel. Thackeray's energies flagged somewhat in the second half of his writing life. He lectured in America in 1852 and 1855; stood unsuccessfully for parliament as an Independent Liberal in 1857. His stature as a leading man of letters was confirmed in 1859, when he took over the editorship of the new *Cornhill Magazine* (a post he held until 1862). Thackeray's last years were his most prosperous. But since 1850, his health had never been good, and his writing suffered correspondingly. He died suddenly in December 1863.

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## **VANITY FAIR**

*Explanatory Notes*

# INTRODUCTION

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By the best reckoning we can make, Thackeray began serious work on *Vanity Fair* (as the novel was eventually to be called) in late 1844–early 1845. Up to this point his career, in and out of writing, had been chequered. He was born a gentleman, so brought up and educated; Charterhouse, Trinity College Cambridge, European travel, Inns of Court—his youth followed a high road to Victorian success. Had he not gambled away part of his patrimony and lost the rest in a bank crash, not idled at college, not been bored by law, and above all not compounded everything with a horribly unlucky marriage, Thackeray might have entered the leisured, lettered, professional life for which birth and upbringing had destined him. One can imagine him, in later years, a mellowly Fieldingesque magistrate; an MP regularly prosing away in the heavier journals; a subtle diplomat or—most likely of all—a historian. For of all literary men, it was the historians (Macaulay notably) that Thackeray most revered. Had he lived longer, in his late prosperity he would certainly have written the history of Queen Anne’s reign that he promised himself. Failing all else, the young Thackeray could have married money; he was charming and personable enough. Instead he chose Isabella Shawe. She brought him no dowry, no connections (except those of an Irish mother-in-law, whom he punished relentlessly in fiction to the end of his life), gave him two surviving daughters but went incurably mad in 1842.

Thackeray finally achieved membership of the Athenaeum, in 1851. But he did it with a difficult instrument of entry—the bestselling novelist’s pen. Nor was his path to sales success in fiction easy. Few authors can have had a tougher or more wide-ranging apprenticeship. From 1835 to 1845 he ‘wrote for his life’. His output was prodigious, and bewilderingly various. To short order he turned in reviews and essays of a social, political or historical kind as the nature of the journal required. He produced reportage, travel books, comic squibs and journalism (for a while in the 1830s, he was even a newspaper proprietor), ‘sketches’, social physiologies and short fiction. All that he wrote was anonymous or pseudonymous. His pre-*Vanity Fair* pen-names and assumed personae are legion: *intelligible*, Yellowplush the footman, Our Fat Contributor’, Major Gahagan the fiery Irish warrior, Barry Lyndon the picaro soldier of fortune, Ikey Solomons Jr. the fence, Launcelot Wagstaff and George Fitz-Boodle—bon bourgeois club gents, Mr. Snob (for London), Mr. Squab (for Calcutta), and his favourite cockneyfied Michaelangelo Titmarsh. Obscure but versatile, Thackeray even put himself forward as an illustrator to Harrison Ainsworth and Charles Dickens, novelists of his generation who had made a faster and more brilliant start. It is a curious speculation how literary history would have been rewritten, had they commissioned him rather than Phiz and Cruikshank.

By early 1845, Thackeray had a substantial body of published work behind him. But he had published nothing in itself substantial. *Vanity Fair*, when it finally appeared in January 1847, took him with one jump to the top of the tree with Dickens. It made his name (literally, being published under the superscription ‘W. M. Thackeray’) and his fortune. Riding *Vanity Fair*’s success he became, with Dickens, the best paid novelist of the age. Not *quite* as well paid, admittedly. (Bradburn and Evans came to reckon his maximum price per monthly part at £250 and Dickens’s an astronomical £600.) But for many discriminating readers, Thackeray was the more highly regarded of the two. (See, for instance, Jane Carlyle’s verdict on reading four of *Vanity Fair*’s instalments: ‘beat Dickens out of the world!’)

The story of *Vanity Fair* is easily summarized and stripped down into shapes and patterns. It follows, through their turns of fortune, the careers of two women. One is good, stupid, bourgeois and (initially) rich; the other is clever, selfish, bohemian and (initially) poor. They leave their school at Chiswick in the same coach, in 1813. Both have vexed courtships and marry in 1815 to ‘disoblige



their families' (as Jane Austen would say). A great historical event, Waterloo, lies athwart their newly-wed lives. Amelia's husband dies on the battlefield; Becky's husband survives. Both wives give birth to a son in 1816. There follows a decade of mounting triumph for Becky culminating in presentation to her monarch; a decade of intensifying misery for Amelia culminating in separation from her child. Then, in 1827, there is a spin of the wheel; Becky is plunged into (deserved) ruin, Amelia comes into (deserved) good fortune. But with an ironic twist, Thackeray brings both heroines into final equilibrium. As we first met them, Regency girls, together in a coach, so we leave them, now two early-Victorian ladies, either side of the charity stall which declares their mutual respectability in the eyes of the world.

Before Waterloo, the business of the novel is marriage, family disfavour and disinheritance. After Waterloo, as the heroines' lives separate, the great issue is marital fidelity. Two triangular relationships develop. Becky is faithless to her increasingly worthy husband Rawdon with the lecherous Marquis of Steyne. Amelia is faithful to her dead husband, the worthless George, denying the steadfast love of Dobbin. In so doing, both women sin.

Around their see-sawing careers and the congruent geometry of the post-marital affairs, Thackeray creates a narrative of panoramic historical sweep and of subtle ironic effects. It was work designed to be meditated on by fellow novelists, as well as consumed by the paying reading public. Gordon Ray is surely right in his insistence that Thackeray labours in *Vanity Fair* to raise the tone of mid-nineteenth-century fiction and with it the status of the novelist. (This, incidentally, was in line with Carlyle's stern judgement that the novelists of England had hitherto shirked their God-given mission. Thackeray, one might paraphrase, found the English novel sloppy romance; he left it solid realism.

This Thackerayan correction entailed the lash as well as good example. Among his many parts, he is a supreme parodist. Like that of his master, Fielding, Thackeray's fiction is founded on a repudiation of the fashionable falsity of the day. And like Fielding again, Thackeray does not merely disdain, but on occasion scornfully recreates in all its absurdity what he despises. Did he so choose, he could do it better is the implication of the exercise. Most of the currently popular novels shied at *Vanity Fair* have since died a death so complete that they will be unknown to the modern reader. Thackeray, it might even be argued, did his work rather too well, helping burlesque into extinction such genres as the 'Newgate', 'silver fork', and Napoleonic soldier of fortune novel.

It is instructive to look carefully at the beginning of [Chapter VI](#), 'Vauxhall', with its challenging opening: 'We might have treated this subject in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner.' Good as his word, Thackeray proceeds to offer hilarious samples of these alternative manners. The burlesque parade makes multiple parody of Mrs. Gore, Bulwer Lytton, G. P. R. James, Douglas Jerrold, Eugene Sue, Harrison Ainsworth, Victor Hugo, Mrs. Trollope, G. W. M. Reynolds and even (though Thackeray was chary of picking this particular fight) Dickens himself. The satiric overture to [Chapter VI](#) was shortened from the original manuscript version for the first printed issue of *Vanity Fair*, and further reduced for the next revised edition of the novel, in 1853, leaving the comparative stump which is printed in the text here (see note to [p. 60](#)). But elsewhere, the project was expanded. In April 1847 ([Chapter VI](#) was first published in February) Thackeray launched in *Punch* a series of parodic novelettes, 'Novels by Eminent Hands' (the title hits at Ainsworth, see the following note on the composition and publication of *Vanity Fair*). These vastly extend the *Vanity Fair* burlesques, and are agreed to be among the best things of their kind ever written.

As Gordon Ray puts it, *Vanity Fair* signals clearly and early the kind of novel Thackeray will not write; that is to say, the kind of novel the majority of his writing and reading contemporaries affect. Throughout *Vanity Fair*, and explicitly in [Chapter VI](#), Thackeray makes the pharisaical assertion that he is not as other novelists are. But, as critics have come round to noticing, this *ensor morum*

*literariorum* would often seem to have a dangerously soft spot for his victims. *Vanity Fair*, for all its show of repudiation, frequently conforms to the fiction it purports to chastise. With its ‘arsenical’ ending (Becky poisoning Jos) *Vanity Fair* is as much of the Newgate genre as Lytton’s sensational *Lucretia* (1846). K.J. Hollingsworth, the authority on this early shoot of crime fiction, goes so far as to claim that *Vanity Fair* is the Newgate novel to end Newgate novels. So too, Matthew Rosa sees Thackeray’s novel as the *summum genus* of silver forkery. It has certainly survived as the greatest of Waterloo novels (who now remembers the multitudinous works of W. H. Maxwell, or Lever’s *Charles O’Malley*, the bestselling novel of 1841 which Thackeray put down hilariously with his spoof, ‘Phil Fogarty. A Tale of the Fighting Onety-Oneth’?). Thackeray was loftily contemptuous in his two reviews of *Coningsby*, affecting to find Disraeli’s romance of power politics in the ‘saloons of the mighty’ obnoxious and absurd. (See also ‘Codlingsby’, by the dubiously eminent hand of ‘B. de Shrewsbury, Esq.’) But who is the arch villain of *Vanity Fair*? Why, Steyne, avowedly based on the Marquis of Hertford, the same aristocrat who modelled for the all-powerful Monmouth in *Coningsby*.

Thackeray, we may say, has a more complex and intimate relationship with the modes of fashionable fiction of the age than his apparently dismissive satirical manner would suggest. Neither is it easy to fix his feelings about the period in which *Vanity Fair* is principally set—the dissolute Regency and reign of George IV. Here, again, we detect in Thackeray mixed feelings of nostalgia and severe moral criticism. But at least we are on firm ground with the age’s figurehead. Of all the historical figures whom Thackeray loathed, the bloated ‘first gentleman of Europe’ was the blackest of beasts. Even Marlborough in *Esmond* is treated with more tenderness than ‘the great simulacrum’ Thackeray’s ink boils whenever he describes Florizel. He often did describe him. More or less full-length portraits are found in *Punch* (see, particularly, *The Georges*, *Punch*, 11 October 1845), in *The Snobs of England* (see particularly [Chapter II](#), ‘The Snob Royal’), and—most vituperatively—in *The Four Georges* where the fourth lecture is devoted to an hour-long diatribe against the last Hanoverian. Thackeray’s theme is simple. The Prince Regent represents the sink of corruption against which the present, Victorian, age is the wholesome reaction:

He is dead but thirty years, and one asks how a great society could have tolerated him? Would we bear him now? In this quarter of a century, what a silent revolution has been working! how it has separated us from old times and manners! How it has changed men themselves!

In *Vanity Fair*, the fourth George is referred to frequently. He actually appears on stage twice (and speaks once) at the apogee of Becky’s career; in the charade scene at Gaunt House and in the Drawing-room presentation in 1827—Becky’s moment of glory. On neither occasion can Thackeray, with a satiric attack of commoner’s humility, bring himself to describe, nor even name, the ‘great personage’:

What were the circumstances of the interview between Rebecca Crawley, *née* Sharp, and her Imperial Master, it does not become such a feeble and inexperienced pen as mine to attempt to relate. The dazzled eyes close before that Magnificent Idea. Loyal respect and decency tell even the imagination not to look too keenly and audaciously about the sacred audience-chamber, but to back away rapidly, silently, and respectfully, making profound bows out of the August Presence. (p. 604)

But while miming loyal blindness at the incandescence of the Hanoverian sun god, Thackeray insinuates his derogatory view of the Prince Regent and his dandified parasites with the namesake Osborne, and George Osborne’s very fat friend, Jos. (‘William’ Dobbin is significantly named for the decent, if maladroit, ‘Silly Billy’. One of his first royal edicts on coming to power in 1830 was to restrict the extravagant military uniforms so beloved of the ‘padded booby’ George. Dobbin embodies that ‘change’ Thackeray eulogizes in *The Four Georges*.)

*Vanity Fair*, then, is an historical novel. In particular the middle-class social life of the Regency (i.e. 1811–20) is reconstructed with apparently personal familiarity. Thackeray, however, was born in the year George was declared Regent. He could scarcely have been conscious of Waterloo, four years later. But the victory remained for him, as for many Victorians, the age's great event. Indeed, with the English 'saving revolution' of 1688, the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, Waterloo could easily be conceived as the most monumental occurrence in modern history. The close-run thing in Belgium was the foundation of Britain's century of triumph and the spread of imperial red over the world's map. And had the battle been lost, history would probably have delivered a bloody English Revolution, rather than the Reform Bill of 1832. Nor was it just the European balance of power which was rearranged by Waterloo. The victory had profound social consequences; it marked a moment of regeneration for the British aristocracy. Dandyism fell; Brummell was disgraced in 1815—a fall 'as great as Napoleon's' it was said. The Duke of Wellington was himself a 'dandy general' and led an army whose fashionable regiments fought brilliantly. (Hence, of course, the famous 'won on the playing fields of Eton' proverb.) Thackeray's 'silent revolution' can more plausibly be dated from 1815 than from 1830, when George died. Despite his monarchic radiance in mid-1820s *Vanity Fair*, George's last ten years were spent in almost total social eclipse and public unpopularity.

But despite his fascination with Waterloo, and its profound effect on the novel's five main characters and the world they inhabit, Thackeray's treatment of the battle is tantalizing in the highest degree. The suspense builds from Dobbin's 'the regiment's called away' to the Duchess of Richmond's eve of battle ball, from which officers slip out one by one, some to death, some to glory. We arrive to within earshot of the cannonade at Quatre Bras. But then, at the most teasing moment, we are denied satisfaction (which as thrill-seeking and *paying* readers we legitimately demand) by Thackeray's mock-humble and maidenish retraction:

We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants. When the decks are cleared for action we go below and wait meekly. We should only be in the way of the manoeuvres that the gallant fellows are performing overhead. We shall go no farther with the —th than to the city gate... (p. 361)

As a matter of literary record, the reader indignantly retorts that Thackeray is an excellent military novelist. Any number of examples could be given; but for the nearest turn to [Chapters IV, V, VI](#) of *Barry Lyndon*, which Thackeray was writing virtually up to the month when he began *Vanity Fair*. This rollicking autobiography of an eighteenth-century soldier of fortune demonstrates the skill which Thackeray disowns, with infuriating modesty, at the start of the ninth number of *Vanity Fair*.

The novelist teases at other similarly exciting moments in the novel's action. He will not, for instance, conduct us into the penetralium of Gaunt House, giving us, instead, serpentine, 'Tomeavesian' gossip. What we crave is reliable eye-witness report of what's going on at this climax of Becky's English campaign. 'Great personages' pop up momentarily on the edge of *Vanity Fair's* narrative, only to pop down. Thus the Duke of Wellington himself rides past the novel's heroes and heroines in a Brussels public park. It is his sole appearance and what does Thackeray give us? Peggy O'Dowd's chauvinist Hibernian irrelevance: "the Wellesleys and Moloneys are related; but, of course, poor I would never dream of introjuicing myself unless his Grace thought proper to remember our family tie.' The Duchess of Richmond's Brussels ball on 15 June—that conjunction of brilliant social glitter and carnage—is famous from at least two other literary presentations. But Thackeray's thinned account keeps off-stage Byron's 'fated Brunswick'; the glamorous hostess; the martial guests of honour and indeed all personages above field rank. *Charles O'Malley*, by contrast, has the hero on

the most hob-nobbing terms with the ducal hostess and Commander-in-Chief. The ‘great captain’ in Lever’s narrative actually ‘introjuices’ himself to the hero (‘know your face well: how d’ye do?’) with the lack of reserve which suggests that the brash Moloneys and the Wellesleys might indeed be related.

No more than with Thackeray’s battlefield reticence can we put this omission down to authorial inadequacy. The depiction of Marlborough in *Esmond*, of Washington in *The Virginians* (and probably the imminent depiction of Paul Jones in the unfinished *Duval*) testify that Thackeray was capable of rendering the portrait of a military chief as he was a military fight—when he chose to do so. *Vanity Fair*, then, is an historical novel in whose historical fabric there are gaping, but evidently carefully placed, holes. Thackeray gives us Regency London without Brummell, Byron or the Regent (how easy it would have been to send the Osborne-Sedley-Dobbin party to Vauxhall on the festive night of 13 July: see note to p. 63); the great Brussels ball without grandes; the frontline in 1815 without Waterloo, Wellington or Napoleon; and, later in the novel, Weimar without Goethe. An historical novel, we might call it, without everything conventionally historical.

The artful anticlimaxes in *Vanity Fair*, and particularly the frustrating vacancy around Waterloo, are partly explained by Thackeray’s determination to avoid romantic stereotype. Other factors are his ambivalence about British imperial might, and his circumstances while actually composing *Vanity Fair*. To take this last (and probably least) consideration: the novelist was evidently very pressed for time and space during the writing of the middle sections of his narrative. He intended to get the action to the battle at least two numbers earlier than he actually managed. But what with the marriages and all the falling-out between relatives in the ‘hundred days’ between March and June, *Vanity Fair* was fairly bursting at the seams. Of course, with a narrator as deft as Thackeray, pressure could not have been the deciding factor. In fact, as the Tillotsons point out, Thackeray’s gimmick of telling the story of Waterloo indirectly through its domestic repercussions had been aired as early as 1842, during a visit to Charles Lever’s house near Dublin. As reported, Thackeray ‘seemed much inclined to “laugh at martial might”, although he still held to the idea that “something might be made out of Waterloo” even without the smoke and din of the action being introduced.’ In Lever’s *Charles O’Malley*, published in 1841, smoke and din is prominent and the hero observes the epic encounter at Napoleon’s side.

Silence in the face of Waterloo was probably also encouraged by Thackeray’s perplexity when he went to visit the battlefield, a few weeks before embarking on his novel. What he describes (in a ‘Little Travels and Roadside Sketches’ piece, published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, January 1845) is strikingly like Orwell’s painful sense of British greatness, lying underfoot in the mouldering carcasses of the expendable ‘natives’ whose sweat, suffering and hunger is empire’s real foundation. Walking over the place where thousands of uncommemorated private soldiers were cut, blasted or bled to death, Thackeray felt pride—as what Englishman would not. But he also felt ashamed of a pride so paid for by others’ sacrifice. Moreover, the strength of his mixed feelings induced a conviction that here was a place where one ought to be decently quiet, as in a church:

Let an Englishman go and see that field, and he *never forgets it*. The sight is an event in his life; and, though it has been seen by millions of peaceable *gents*—grocers from Bond Street, meek attorneys from Chancery Lane, and timid tailors from Piccadilly—I will wager that there is not one of them but feels a glow as he looks at the place, and remembers that he, too, is an Englishman.

It is a wrong, egotistical, savage, unchristian feeling, and that’s the truth of it. A man of peace has no right to be dazzled by that red-coated glory, and to intoxicate his vanity with those remembrances of carnage and triumph. The same sentence which tells us that on earth there ought to be peace and

good-will amongst men, tells us to whom GLORY belongs.

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One cannot know for certain, but I suspect that until he actually came to writing it, Thackeray kept open the important question of how he should treat Waterloo. We know, for instance, that he ordered an early copy of G. R. Gleig's *Story of the Battle of Waterloo* in June 1847. He evidently devoured the book when it arrived (see notes to [Chapters XXVII–XXXII](#)). And he must have been struck by one feature in particular. Gleig, at one point, complains at the feeble powers of the 'pen and pencil' (a phrase Thackeray had used in his novel's title) when it comes to describing this battle of battles. Moreover, the most vivacious by far of Gleig's chapters are those dealing with the furious carnival in Brussels before Waterloo, and the stiltedly entitled chapter 'State of Feeling Where the War was not' which records, with lively detail, the wild currents of pessimism and rumour that swept over Brussels during the three days of fighting. Thackeray plundered these sections for *Vanity Fair*'s ninth number. With one notable exception (see note to [p. 406](#)), the stodgier battle chapters seem to have inspired him less. It is possible, too, that having read Gleig, the novelist felt disinclined to compete with the military historian on his own ground.

To summarize. There is no need to retract, nor even to modify the assertion that *Vanity Fair* is an historical novel. But the sense of historical period and the passage of world-shaking events around the characters is conveyed obliquely. Most obviously by the introduction of minor period detail such as seven shilling pieces and hessian boots. Thackeray inserts material of this kind very judiciously—but it is a simple device, equivalent to theatrical 'props'. More complex is the way in which he throws up a London subtly different from that familiar to his 1848 readers. Thus, in [Chapter XXII](#), Dobbin meets George at the old Slaughter's Coffee House (it stood in St. Martin's Lane until 1843) before his furtive marriage cum elopement with Amelia:

It was about half an hour from twelve when this brief meeting and colloquy took place between the two captains. A coach, into which Captain Osborne's servant put his master's desk and dressing-case had been in waiting for some time; and into this the two gentlemen hurried under an umbrella, and the valet mounted on the box, cursing the rain and the dampness of the coachman who was steaming beside him. 'We shall find a better trap than this at the chutch-door,' says he; 'that's a comfort.' And the carriage drove on, taking the road down Piccadilly; where Apsley House and St. George's Hospital wore red jackets still; where there were oil-lamps; where Achilles was not yet born; nor the Pimlico arch raised; nor the hideous equestrian monster which pervades it and the neighbourhood;—and so they drove down by Brompton to a certain chapel near the Fulham road there.([p. 262](#))

Misfortune is predicted in the proverbially unlucky rain which falls on the bride and groom. Other predictions are contained in the urban landscape. This is early 1815. Apsley House, on Hyde Park Corner, was to become the residence of the Duke of Wellington, victor of Waterloo. Wyatt encased it in Bath stone in 1828 ('red coat' means literally 'brick' but also has a military significance here, as does St. George's Hospital, which is to care for Waterloo wounded). Wyatt was also responsible for the heroic statue of Wellington—weighing forty tons—erected at a cost of £30,000 by public subscription, in 1846. This monstrosity, as Thackeray and many of his contemporaries thought, also stood at the south-eastern entrance to the Park. (It figures, in caricature, on the serial cover—see notes.) The Achilles statue was subscribed for (£10,000), and inscribed by 'the women of England.' It was also dedicated as a tribute to Wellington, and was raised in 1822. It was cast partly from enemy cannon captured at Waterloo.

This elaboration of scenic detail serves a number of purposes. It emphasizes how London has changed (omnibuses in 1846 serve this part of London; oil-lighting gave way to gas in 1828). More

thematically, we feel the marriage threatened by futurity, a futurity centred on Waterloo. These monuments to victory are also, we sense, George's gravestone. Amelia, although she does not know it, will join the 'women of England' in making a widow's sacrificial donation.

In the above example, Thackeray dwarfs a major novelistic event (the marriage of two principal characters) by throwing gigantic historical shadows across their bridal path. Examples can be found where—for artistic effect—he does just the opposite. In the following, the dizzying European crisis of 1813–14 is shrunk by reflection in Amelia's preoccupation about her engagement to George:

Meanwhile matters went on in Russell Square, Bloomsbury, just as if matters in Europe were not in the least disorganised. The retreat from Leipsic made no difference in the number of meals Mr. Saml took in the servants' hall; the allies poured into France, and the dinner-bell rang at five o'clock just as usual. I don't think poor Amelia cared anything about Bienne and Montmirail, or was fairly interested in the war until the abdication of the Emperor; when she clapped her hands and said prayer—oh, how grateful! and flung herself into George Osborne's arms with all her soul, to the astonishment of every body who witnessed the ebullition of sentiment. The fact is, peace was declared... Lieutenant Osborne's regiment would not be ordered on service. That was the way in which Miss Amelia reasoned. The fate of Europe was Lieutenant George Osborne to her. His dangers being over, she sang *Te Deum*. He was her Europe; her emperor: her allied monarchs and august prince regent. He was her sun and moon; and I believe she thought the grand illumination and ball at the Mansion House, given to the sovereigns, were especially in honour of George Osborne. (p. 137)

There are ironies at work here. Amelia's naive perspective is both admirable and—in a very loaded word which Thackeray used about his 'Vanityfairians'—'selfish'. Soon she is to discover that the great convulsions of European history (which will ruin her father and slaughter her husband) are no respecters of girlish romance, however good and worthy the girl.

In the second half of the novel, after Waterloo, the historical background to *Vanity Fair* fades somewhat. As we follow the fortunes of Thackeray's characters over this most troubled of eras, one has the odd impression of social tranquillity. Perhaps, as he looked back in a spirit of 'De Juventute' that is how it seemed to Thackeray in 1847–8. *Vanity Fair* is blind to Peterloo, corn law riots, industrial revolution, reform agitation. Even the great Bill itself sneaks in only parenthetically with a reference to Sir Pitt's disappointed retirement from public life after 1832. From the 1820s onwards, things gradually melt into the Victorian present. The novel's last numbers feature many fewer historical markers than their early counterparts. Imperceptibly, the historical texture merges if not into the 'now' of 1847–8, then into the Victorian reader's well-remembered yesterday. It is a fine and very moving effect in the novel.

Students of literature are routinely told that Thackeray is an 'omniscient' novelist; indeed, that with Fielding he is probably the perfect specimen of the type. He himself tells us, repeatedly and with apparent complacency in *Vanity Fair*, that 'the novelist knows everything'. But just as with the historical backdrop, the front of stage drama has its holes. The reader is again teased by what this allegedly omniscient novelist would seem not to know, will not acquaint himself with, or declines to impart. Omniscient he may be; omnidictive he is not.

Most provoking of the text's silences is that concerning Jos's death. He dies in mysterious circumstances on the continent, sometime in the early 1830s, while in the dangerous company of Becky Crawley. From his first encounter with her, some twenty years before, Jos has been in danger from this fatal woman. In 1813, she almost netted him; but George, unwilling to have a governess in the family ('low enough without *her!*') frightened the fat man off. At Pumpnickel, despite Dobbin's

efforts, she finally lands her prey. Becky cannot marry Jos (Rawdon, her estranged husband, is still staving off the fevers of Coventry Island). But she lives with her victim until he dies—prematurely. She is his insurance beneficiary; the rest of his nabob's wealth has mysteriously evaporated. And in later life, Becky is a *very* prosperous lady, we are told. When she first set her hat at Jos in Russell Square, she was netting a purse; now, at last it would seem, the purse is comfortably full.

How does Jos die? The insurance people are suspicious. Their solicitor swears it is 'the blackest case that ever came before him'. Thackerayan innuendo confirms our sense that Becky helped Jos out of the world. Her solicitors are ominously named Messrs. Burke, Thurtell and Hayes. Burke, with Hare, was the Edinburgh body snatcher who killed and sold the corpses. John Thurtell was a murderer hanged in 1824. Catherine Hayes was a husband killer, celebrated by Thackeray in his anti-Newgate satire, *Catherine* (1839).

There is another broad hint in the penultimate full-plate illustration to the novel, 'Becky's second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra'. Her first appearance as the Greek uxoricide was in the charade at Gaunt House, just before she betrayed Rawdon into the hands of the bailiffs. Here we feel she will use the knife that—somewhat melodramatically—Thackeray shows her holding. (An ironic, Hogarthian print of the good Samaritan is behind Jos, who vainly implores an implacable Dobbin to help him.)

It all points one way. But why does Thackeray not tell us straight out? It is a mote that he seems deliberately to have left to trouble generations of readers. And when asked in later life by just one such troubled reader 'did Becky kill Jos?' the novelist is reported to have merely smiled and answered, 'I don't know.' This paradox of a novelist who 'knows everything' but does not know if one principal character murders another may be partly explained by the way in which the narrator's implied social status and personality emerge in the closing pages. In the last double number the diplomat Tapeworm fills in Becky's unsalubrious background to a startled Dobbin, and, in an interesting aside, we are told that 'it was at that very table years ago that the present writer had the pleasure of hearing the tale' which, in his turn, he passes on to us as *Vanity Fair* (p. 849). Pumpnickel is transparently Weimar, and Thackeray, the young man, was there for his 'Lehrjahre' in 1830–31—the presumed date in which these chapters are set. It's an odd little play with the mask. But the important thing is that this 'I' who flits briefly into our view is definitely one of the Dobbin set (see p. 793). As a gentleman, Dobbin's behaviour towards Mrs. Crawley is exemplary in its averted gaze. He will not help Jos, in spite of that desperate man's pleas. He 'rigidly declines to hold any communication' with the tainted wife. In Thackeray's Christmas Book, *Our Street* (1848) there is a cameo portrait of 'A Woman whom Nobody Knows'. Of course, everyone in the street does know her in the literal sense of the verb and everything about her circumstances as well. But since she is a kept woman and 'fallen' no one may 'know' her socially. At the end of *Vanity Fair*, it would seem that the newly identified and gentlemanly narrator is similarly disabled. He can no more 'know' Becky, or her sordid doings, than gentlemanly Dobbin can.

'Was she guilty?' The narrative asks that question of Becky (but gives no direct answers) at two crucial junctures. First in the liaison with Steyne; secondly after Jos's death. It is, of course, odds on that Becky was thoroughly guilty of both these and many like offences. Would the notoriously lecherous Steyne have given Becky a cheque for over a thousand pounds, provided for her son and companion, have given her diamonds (which she feels obliged to hide from her husband) and have hung around Curzon Street for *ten years* (see note to p. 693) were he not enjoying with her what he more flagrantly enjoys with the Countess of Belladonna? So too with Jos: any open-minded reader concurs with the insurance office's suspicion.

But if we pass a verdict of guilty, we have on our hands an extraordinary Victorian novel. English

fiction of this period was ruled by canons of poetic justice, quite Mosaic in their severity. There is no adulteress I can think of who escapes capital punishment in the pages of mid-Victorian fiction and only one other murderer (Paul Ferroll, in Mrs. Archer Clive's very eccentric 1855 romance). Yet at the end of *Vanity Fair*, Becky and Amelia are found in what is apparently a condition of perfect social equality—both ladies of impeccable respectability. Becky may even be happier in her mind than Amelia. For with that *amari aliquid* that Thackeray liked to introduce at the end of his novels, we find that the long-deferred marriage is not entirely happy, and Mrs. Dobbin is troubled that, after all, her husband does not love her. (I think, incidentally, Chesterton misreads when he sees in Becky's final victory over society, 'the energy of a dead woman... like the rhythmic kicking of some dead, bisected insect'. Better Becky's kicking than the 'parasitic' green growth of Amelia round Dobbin's oak.)

There are for this soi-disant omniscient narrator, mysteriously impenetrable parts of Amelia's life as well. When she returns as a newly-married woman to Fulham, she goes up to her bedroom and contemplates the 'little white bed' of her maidenhood. She contrasts it in her mind with the 'great funereal damask pavilion' in the West End Hotel which George has chosen for their honeymoon. He, meanwhile, is off at the play and she is evidently very unhappy. She prays: 'Have we a right to repeat or overhear her prayers?' asks the narrator. Yes, we answer—Vanity Fairian readers that we are. But Thackeray chides us: 'these, brothers, are secrets, and out of the domain of Vanity Fair, in which our story lies.' We are not, after all, to know.

Yet Thackeray knows that the reader, in his 'Tomeavesian' way will be impelled to put two and two together. Amelia is miserable—but why? She has her George at last; he has not yet taken to consorting with Mrs. Highflyer or offering elopement to her best friend. A clue to her unhappiness and what seems rather like guilt as she contemplates the virginal white bed, may be found in her mother's welcome:

All people have their ways of expressing kindness, and it seemed to Mrs. Sedley that a muffin and a quantity of orange marmalade spread out in a little cut-glass saucer would be peculiarly agreeable refreshments to Amelia in her most interesting situation. (p. 319)

What rings oddly here is the phrase, 'interesting situation'. 'Mrs. Dickens is in a very uninteresting situation again' Dickens will tell a correspondent by way of announcing his wife's tiresomely predictable pregnancy. Later in *Vanity Fair*, Peggy O'Dowd informs the new regimental wife that 'Mrs. Bunny's in an interesting situation—faith, and she always is.' And Mrs. Sedley's tender attention to her daughter's possibly upset stomach confirms this sense that Amelia is with child. But, we are told, Amelia has only been married 'a few days' (nine, to be exact). Post-marital pregnancy surely cannot be on the cards so soon after the wedding night. So—the reader presumes—Amelia and George must have jumped the gun. (He would not be the only fornicator in *Vanity Fair*; see note to p. 125). This would explain her apparent remorse before the symbol of maidenly purity and such things as Dobbin's otherwise too urgent 'George, she's dying' in [Chapter XVIII](#). It would also explain the oddly proleptic note that he sends up to her, by way of proposal: 'Dearest Emmy—dearest love—dearest wife, come to me.' She may be his Emmy and his love; but she is not yet George's wife, at least not in name.

Having raised this unworthy speculation, one has to pursue it. Becky marries some time in March and we are told, quite precisely, that little Rawdon is born a year later on 23 March, Amelia is married 25 April, we are as precisely told. But we are never told the day or month that little George is delivered by the widow. Old Osborne visits Brussels 'towards the end of autumn' (September-October, presumably; soldiers are still sunning themselves in parks). Dobbin tells him that 'Amelia will be a mother soon'. What 'soon' means is unclear. 'A day came when she was a mother' is all we



get. If Amelia were only four or five months gone, could Dobbin have said ‘soon’?

In this question of Amelia’s pregnancy I am, of course, pressing too hard on what is, at most, an enigmatic passage of narrative. But the fact is that Thackeray—the novelist who knows everything—does not choose to disclose the intimate post-marital thoughts of his good heroine and in the vacuum that he leaves, speculation breeds—as he knew it would. And if my speculation on this matter seems far-fetched, read Neal B. Houston’s ‘A Brief Inquiry into the Morality of Amelia in *Vanity Fair*’ (*Victorian Newsletter*, 1966, pp. 23–4). This ingenious essay discovers an affair between Dobbin and Amelia in Brussels after George’s death and postulates that little Georgy is, in fact, Dobbin’s son.

In the apparatus which surrounds his text (i.e. the allegorical monthly cover, the frontispiece, the preface-cum-epilogue ‘Before the Curtain’) Thackeray splits his narrative persona into four parts. There is the ‘manager of the performance’—narrator we may say. There is harlequin, the popular entertainer (looking ruefully, however, at his own visage in a cracked mirror). There is ‘the man with a reflective turn of mind’ wandering through the fair and observing his fellow men—Thackeray the worldly reporter of the Victorian social scene. And finally, there is ‘the moralist who is holding forth on the cover’.

All commentators find *Vanity Fair* a powerfully moral novel. None more so than Charlotte Brontë who used *her* preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (1848) to salute Thackeray in terms appropriate to an old testament prophet:

There is a man in our own days whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society, much as the son of Imlah came before the throned kings of Judah and Israel; and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital—a mien as dauntless and as daring. Is the satirist of ‘*Vanity Fair*’ admired in high places? I cannot tell; but I think if some of those amongst whom he hurls the Greek fire of his sarcasm, and over whom he flashes the levinbrand of his denunciation, were to take his warnings in time, they or their seed might yet escape a fatal Ramoth-Gilead.

But what is the central moral contention of *Vanity Fair*? Gordon Ray is in no doubt. The novel is part of an ambitious programme to which, in the largest sense, all Thackeray’s mature writing devotes itself: namely, ‘redefining the gentlemanly ideal to fit a middle class rather than an aristocratic context’. *Vanity Fair* answers that perennial Thackerayan question ‘What is it to be a gentleman?’ It does not, of course, to resemble in any particular the ‘first gentleman in Europe’, Becky’s adored monarch. Indeed rank—as bestowed by birth and ancient lineage—would seem a positive disqualification. Nor are so morally ignoble in *Vanity Fair* as the nobly born. Pitt and Steyne (pit and stain) are exactly what their dynastic names imply. Nor does hard work, rewarded by merited business success, make the gentleman. There is no less a gentleman (in the true Thackerayan meaning) than the self-made merchant, John Osborne. This brute is trapped in the rank system by his slavish lordolatry, just as the aristocratic objects of his worship are trapped by their arrogant hauteur and self-regard:

The old gentleman pronounced... aristocratic names with the greatest gusto. Whenever he met a great man he grovelled before him, and my-lorded him as only a free-born Briton can do. He came home and looked out his history in the peerage: he introduced his name into his daily conversation: he bragged about his Lordship to his daughters. He fell down and basked in him as a Neapolitan beggar does in the sun. (p. 152)

So much for the City of London.

When the negative images and antitypes are withdrawn, what we are left with as the representative of Thackeray's 'ideal of gentlemanliness' is William Dobbin. This paragon, as we know, was a later arrival in the novel (see the following note on composition and publication). He is not physically prepossessing ('no Adonis' as George complacently says, thinking of a fellow officer who is rather handsome). Dobbin has a lisp, a gaunt yellow face and—what especially irritated contemporary reviewers—big clumsy feet. Are we then to admire above all others a clod who cannot see through George Osborne—who plays Man Friday to this simulacrum of the Great Simulacrum fully as blind as old Osborne worships his lords? As a *cavaliere-servente* Dobbin wastes the best years of his life on a woman he finally (when it's too late) recognizes as 'unworthy of my love'. It is not an impressive record. As Chesterton put it: 'we may sum up Thackeray's view of life by saying that amid all the heroes and geniuses he saw only one thing worth being: a fool.'

Why, one may go on to ask, is Dobbin so much nobler than Fred Bullock? Bullock, of course, says things to Jane Osborne like: 'Gad... Eels will be sorry he cried off. You may be a fifty thousand pounder yet,' and we hate him for it. After his marriage to the Osborne daughter, he truckles to aristocracy, setting up his carriage (with bullocks *or* on the panels), toadying to the Castletoddys (already polluted by alliance with the mulatto heiress, Miss Swartz). But, when all is considered, is a fox generically more ignoble than Dobbin the carthorse? What was Dobbin senior? A greengrocer. And who, one may ask, finally ends up with a lion's share of Osborne's tallow-begotten wealth (sweated—if we wish to pursue the question, out of greasy hides imported from Russia)? None other than Colonel Dobbin, via his wife, eventual heiress to the bulk of Osborne's fortune.

The distinction between Bullock and Dobbin lies not in their comparable origins, or their rise in the world, but in the course of life they devote themselves to. In his maturity, Fred is a Lombard Street banker (rather a good one, it would appear). He works. In his maturity, Colonel Dobbin (ret'd.) lives the life of an eighteenth-century squire, with no other occupation than the writing of his 'History of the Punjaub' (a Shandyan project, we understand, like George Warrington's history of the Revolution in *The Virginians*). The Colonel has 'professional' status but is, in every sense, retired from active engagement with society. What, one wonders, would Dobbin do without the unearned income that supports his gentlemanly leisure?

This question of work (the great Carlylean imperative) is vexing when one applies it to Thackeray's 'ideal of gentlemanliness'. For what his 'true' gentleman and lady have in common with the abhorred drones of the peerage is necessary idleness. To work in *Vanity Fair* is, as Arnold Kettle observes, to take a terrible risk with one's identity. There is a graphic illustration when the well-meaning but naive Amelia resolves to earn her living so as to keep Georgy from his grandfather's clutches:

Amelia thinks, and thinks, and racks her brain, to find some means of increasing the small pittance upon which the household is starving. Can she give lessons in anything? paint card-racks? do fine work? She finds that women are working hard, and better than she can, for twopence a day. She buys a couple of begilt Bristol boards at the fancy stationer's, and paints her very best upon them—a shepherd with a red waistcoat on one, and a pink face smiling in the midst of a pencil landscape—a shepherdess on the other, crossing a little bridge, with a little dog, nicely shaded. The man of the Fancy Repository and Brompton Emporium of Fine Arts (of whom she bought the screens, vainly hoping that he would re-purchase them when ornamented by her hand) can hardly hide the sneer with which he examines these feeble works of art. He looks askance at the lady who waits in the shop, and ties up the cards again in their envelope of whity-brown paper, and hands them to the poor widow and Miss Clapp, who had never seen such beautiful things in her life, and had been quite confident that th

man must give at least two guineas for the screens. They try at other shops in the interior of London, with faint sickening hopes. ‘Don’t want ’em,’ says one. ‘Be off,’ says another, fiercely. Three and sixpence have been spent in vain—the screens retire to Miss Clapp’s bedroom, who persists in thinking them lovely, (p. 622)

It’s a terrifying, if momentary, glimpse of the world of the industrial base described in Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850) and Hood’s ‘Song of the Shirt’ (1843). The clothes on the backs of these characters (with whose genteel hardships we commiserate) are, we suddenly realize, sweated out of exploited seamstresses and tailors, working for wages that would not keep the Sedleys in tea. This passage reminds us that in *Vanity Fair* wealth always comes from wealth. We rarely if ever see the source of exploitation or labour. By the time money reaches George and Amelia from old Osborne, or Dobbin from his father, or Becky from Jos, it has been washed clean of tallow grease, grocer’s grime and Indian sweat.

As significant is the calculus implied in the above episode. If Amelia doesn’t find work, she will lose Georgy. If she does find work, she will lose caste; she will no longer be a ‘lady’. Which is the greater loss? It is a dilemma found elsewhere in *Vanity Fair*. George Osborne is odious, of course. But his question to Dobbin, on learning that he is cut off with a mere £2,000, is a good one:

What the deuce am I to do with two thousand pounds? Such a sum won’t last two years... Do you suppose a man of my habits can live on his pay and a hundred a year?... You must be a fool to talk so to Dobbin. How the deuce am I to keep up my position in the world upon such a pitiful pittance? I can’t change my habits. I *must* have my comforts. I wasn’t brought up on porridge like MacWhirter, or on potatoes, like old O’Dowd. Do you expect my wife to take in soldiers’ washing, or ride after the regiment in a baggage waggon? (p. 295).

What would he and Amelia have done, had he survived? He has neither the wit nor the skill at play to live on ‘nothing a year’ like the Crawleys. At best the Osbornes would have sunk to that most pathetic of conditions in Thackeray’s world, ‘shabby gentility’. More likely, George would have drunk, wasted and womanized his family into the gutter—his only remaining hope that the ‘governor’ would come round and pension his vices. One thing we may be sure of; George Osborne would never have soiled his hands with work.

The amount of work not done in *Vanity Fair* is prodigious. The Colonel, as we have seen, would seem to spend the second half of his life on a book which he is unlikely to finish, and which few will want to read. The other Colonel, Rawdon Crawley, passes the ten years after Waterloo in retirement, living on nothing a year and doing nothing. (Even his cardsharpping is eventually given up.) Jos retires from the Indian service in 1827 (not a very onerous burden, we understand) and devotes the remainder of his life to wandering the continent. Pitt Crawley spends the years 1813–25 apparently occupied with polishing up his pamphlet on malt. On coming to his inheritance he enters parliament on one of his rotten borough’s two seats. But he does not speak in the House nor hold any political office. And with the Reform Act, he retires to Queen’s Crawley, to decay in gentlemanly style.

In these inactive lives, the passage of time ceases to have meaning. Jos and Dobbin return from India in 1827. Between then and 1831, when they relieve their ennui with a jaunt to Pumpernickel, these gentlemen do nothing, apparently, but escort Mrs. Osborne (who, in her turn, is doing nothing). When he breaks with Amelia over her taking up Becky again in Pumpernickel, Dobbin returns to active soldiering for a couple of months. But she promptly writes her letter, he comes back, resigns his commission and thereafter dedicates himself to a married life of doing nothing except his Indian history.

Dobbin’s Newfoundland dog-like fidelity is an impressive measure of his virtue; he could well

take Henry Esmond's motto 'je meurs où je m'attache'. But it is hard not to feel that a man of his evident talents is burying what God has lavishly given him. Surely, in the prime of his life he could be better occupied than in carrying Mrs. Osborne's shawls; arranging her travel tickets; chatting with her dinner guests; taking her son to the theatre? But Dobbin is caught in a peculiar contradiction, how to reconcile the stern Carlylean imperative 'Work and Despair Not' with the Ciceronian 'Otium cum dignitate'. It was a contradiction that Thackeray was to return to in his subsequent great panoramic novels of the nineteenth century, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, *Philip*, all of which deal with the question of putting the gentleman to work.

# THE COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION OF VANITY FAIR

THE composition and publication of *Vanity Fair* raises a number of crucial and often controversial issues. It is not established for certain when Thackeray first conceived the novel. The Tillotsons surmise that he began writing it in late 1844. Ray goes for February 1845 (I tend to agree with him: see note to p. 36). But the Tillotsons are right to point out that, whenever he actually put pen to paper Thackeray had the germ of the novel in his mind for some years (see, for instance, the conversation with Lever, discussed in the Introduction).

The manuscript of *Vanity Fair* which survives is incomplete and enigmatic as regards composition. It comprises some 110 handwritten pages, taking the narrative up to the end of [Chapter XIII](#). It is generally agreed that the earliest layer of composition is represented by [Chapters I—IV](#), substantially as we have them in the printed text, together with an early version (A) of [Chapter VI](#) ('Vauxhall'). [Chapter V](#) which introduces Dobbin, was evidently afterthought. When Thackeray devised Dobbin, and inserted [Chapter V](#) between the postponed and the actual Vauxhall visits is not clear. But since the chapter contains no reference to 'Vanity Fair', one assumes that it was some time before October–November 1846, when he hit on the novel's eventual title. At the same time as Dobbin was introduced, Thackeray would seem to have written a new [Chapter VI](#) (hereafter 'VIB') substantially cannibalizing the old VIA, but accommodating Dobbin in place of his morally neutral precursor, Captain Tawney. By this date, Thackeray evidently knew that his novel was to be brought out in monthly numbers, and he formulated the cunning courtship of Jos by Becky as the climax of the first number and the debacle at Vauxhall as the nucleus of the second number. This spreading out of material left some gaps. [Chapter VII](#) does not exist in manuscript, and may have been written late in the day, to plump out the second number. (It contains nothing in terms of narrative information that is not given briefly, at the beginning of [Chapter VIII](#).) [Chapter VIII](#) bears evidence of two stages of composition—one early, and one very late since it incorporates sententious allusions to 'Vanity Fair', and a reference to the novel's monthly cover illustration.

It is logical to assume that Thackeray made up the original I–IV, VIA group to show interested publishers. It could stand as the introduction to a three-volume novel, or of a serial either in magazine or monthly part form. That Thackeray intended this unit as a sample is borne out by the neatness with which he put these opening chapters on paper, in his 'sloping' hand. At this time, the work was entitled, provisionally, 'Novel without a Hero' and 'Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society' (both survive as subtitles). It is known that Thackeray submitted the opening of 'Novel without a Hero' to the publisher Colburn, since a fragment of letter has survived, dated May 1845, asking for his 'Novel without a Hero' material back. Presumably, what Colburn had (and evidently gave an advance for) was I–IV, VIA. He was, on the face of things, an odd publisher for Thackeray to have had dealings with; certainly if the novelist foresaw the importance of *Vanity Fair* to his career. Colburn, at this period was legitimately regarded as a book trade rogue.

Nevertheless, Thackeray was clearly in with Colburn in 1844–5, and in that year contributed regularly to his *New Monthly Magazine*, with a string of Launcelot Wagstaff papers. Colburn himself edited his magazine from 1843 to June 1845, but it was not his proper line of work and he was apparently on the lookout for an editor to take over the task. It is conceivable that Thackeray may have had himself in mind for this post; he was keen for anything that paid at this time. If so, he was disappointed when, in June 1845, Colburn sold the *New Monthly Magazine*, lock, stock and barrel to Harrison Ainsworth, who took over as proprietor, editor and main contributor. One of Ainsworth's first acts, according to his biographer S. M. Ellis, was to mollify Thackeray over the rejection of his

‘Pencil Sketches of English Society’.

For whatever reason, Thackeray at this period suddenly turned angry and somewhat spiteful towards Colburn and Ainsworth. Ainsworth, for instance, put out an advertisement on taking over Colburn’s journal, that henceforth the *New Monthly Magazine* would be notable not just for the quality of its contributions but the ‘eminence’ of its contributors. This provoked Thackeray to an immediate squib in *Punch* (‘Immense Opportunity’, 5 July 1845). Later, Thackeray was to expand his indignation into the full-blown parodic series, ‘Novels by Eminent Hands’ (April–October 1847). In *The Snobs of England*, he attacked the injudicious ‘eminent hands’ advertisement yet again (see [Chapter XXXVIII](#)) and was further sarcastic about Mrs. ‘Wallop’ and the ‘Countess of L——.’ (see [Chapters III](#) and [XVI](#)). Thackeray had been a regular, if not frequent, contributor to the *New Monthly Magazine* since 1838; after 1845 he never published in the magazine again. In *Pendennis* (1848–50) Colburn is lampooned as the publisher ‘Bungay’—a portrait which implies no lost love. All of this suggests that Thackeray was piqued both with Colburn (whom he may have thought had let him down) and with Ainsworth (who may have turned him down). It is possible that he did not like the idea of his work being passed on to the new proprietor-editor like so much office-stock.

It is part of literary lore that as well as being rejected by (or withdrawn from) Colburn, the *Vanity Fair* proposal was turned down by a string of other imperceptive publishers. Thackeray himself testified to this, in a letter to an unknown correspondent in the early 1860s, claiming that he had ‘tried 3 or 4 publishers’ with the novel, before finding one who would take it. In America in 1855 Thackeray was evidently telling the same tale. A reporter in the *New York Daily Times* (19 December 1855) records:

I have seen Mr. Thackeray for the first time and a stately man he is and a kindly, as I have convincing reason to know. I learned to my astonishment that his novel of ‘Vanity Fair’, the first of his series of successful novels, was refused by the magazine editor to whose order it had been written, price five dollars a page, by Mr. Thackeray’s own publisher and by sundry others, before he could find any of ‘the trade’ willing to undertake it.

There is some mystery here. In 1845, Thackeray was far from unknown, or struggling in his profession. He had numerous contacts; had published with many of the great houses and in the leading journals of the day. If he was turned down so universally, it is likely that the reason was that he was asking too much, or offering too little by way of sample.

If it was the I–IV, VIA group that Colburn had, we can be fairly sure that Thackeray did not foresee *Vanity Fair* as it was to emerge in all its narrative complexity two years later. There are some internal clues as to what he may originally have had in mind. Without Dobbin, the whole conception would have been more negative. Becky’s epistolary narrative is extensively used in the earliest layer of composition, and it is possible that Thackeray felt he might rest a substantial part of the subsequent narrative on her outrageously amoral communications with Amelia. ‘Novel without a Hero’ implies Carlylean-corrective tone, and something less morally sententious than what later emerged in 1847. ‘Pen and Pencil Sketches’ promises fiction less structured, something along the lines of the opportunistic and panoramic *The Snobs of England* (which ran in *Punch* from February 1846 to February 1847). Having just finished a male rogue’s progress, *Barry Lyndon* (published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, January–December 1844) there may have been the intention to provide a female rogue’s progress for Colburn’s magazine.

At this point, we encounter a major controversy. Gordon Ray ‘has deduced from late corrections which Thackeray made to early stretches of *Vanity Fair*’s MS narrative (especially in [Chapters VIII](#)

and IX) that the writer underwent a ‘change of heart’ in the period 1846–7. One record of this change he argues, is to be found in additions to the *Vanity Fair* manuscript—particularly the long sententious tailpiece which directly addresses the reader at the end of [Chapter VIII](#). Ray points out that Thackeray’s life was revolutionized during these two years. He had his first literary successes. He was reconciled with his daughters, and set up home at 13 Young Street. The shift from bohemian-club to domestic-familial lifestyle was radical. It resulted, according to Ray, in a new sense of ‘responsibility’ in the author. The unregenerate Thackeray of I–IV, VIA was savage, misanthropic, and typified by *Barry Lyndon*—that most bitter of fictions. The early sections of *Vanity Fair* shape the same way. A new Thackeray of 1846–7 is evident in the additions to the second and third numbers (they are, incidentally, written in Thackeray’s later upright hand). A morally positive dimension is laid over the early narrative and substantially informs the later composition of the bulk of the novel.

This change of heart, and its allegedly critical impact on the composition of *Vanity Fair* is controversial. But it is undeniable that as well as settling down with his family, Thackeray in 1845–6 settled down for the first time with an employer. The proprietors of *Punch* were Bradbury and Evans. Good-natured and easy-going, they tended to let the journal run itself under the genial management of Mark Lemon. Bradbury and Evans, as it happened, were also Dickens’s publishers, since his break with Chapman and Hall in 1845. For Dickens, they provided a form of publication specially tailored to his unique talents. This was the novel in monthly numbers, delivered to the reader in twenty instalments, each of 32 pages and illustrated, costing one shilling each.

Fortified by his growing reputation as the leading *Punch* man, Thackeray evidently tried his ‘Novel without a Hero’ sample on *Punch*’s proprietors. His encounter is recalled by Henry Vizetelly, who met Thackeray on the way to see Bradbury and Evans:

In little more than half an hour Mr. Thackeray again made his appearance and with a beaming face gleefully informed me that he had settled the business. ‘B&E’ said he, ‘accepted so readily that I am indeed sorry I didn’t ask them another tenner I am certain they would have given it.’ He then explained to me that he had named fifty guineas per part, including the two sheets of letterpress a couple of etchings and the initials at the commencement of the chapters. He reckoned the text, I remember, at no more than five and twenty shillings a page, the two etchings at six guineas each, while, as for the few initials at the beginning of the chapters, he threw these in. Such was Mr. Thackeray’s own estimate of his commercial value as an author and illustrator A.D. 1846.

(Thackeray eventually got £60 per monthly number.) In coming to terms with him, it was natural for Bradbury and Evans to offer the Dickensian serial form, just as a year earlier it had been logical for the magazine proprietor Colburn to offer serialization in the *New Monthly Magazine* at a pound (five dollars) a page.

The contract with Bradbury and Evans was a great step for Thackeray. But triumph was by no means guaranteed. Other writers pulled at the Dickensian bow, but found the novel in monthly numbers too much for them. (Charles Lever, for instance, was taken up by Chapman and Hall after Dickens’s defection, but had a notable failure with the *Knight of Gwynne* in 1847. Harrison Ainsworth’s *Mervyn Clitheroe*, in 1851, was so unsuccessful that serial publication was aborted after the fourth number.) Ominously, the contract which Bradbury and Evans made with Thackeray did not specify how many instalments *Vanity Fair* was to run to. There was, reportedly, some gloomy thought of closing down after the third number. And as late as the fifteenth, it was apparently unsure whether the novel was to go to eighteen or the full Dickensian twenty.

Thackeray was well used to magazine serialization. (*Barry Lyndon* and *Catherine*, for instance, had

been serialized in *Fraser's Magazine*.) But he had done nothing in monthly numbers. Unlike portions for magazines, the length of the Dickensian instalment was inflexible; and chapters needed to be shorter and tighter. More than with magazine serialization it was necessary to devise suspenseful climaxes. (Thackeray entirely rewrote the fine ending to the first number, 'Mr. Joseph entangled', see note to p. 43.) And there was the added problem of the intratextual illustrations, which for *Vanity Fair* Thackeray was himself to provide. But length and pace were probably Thackeray's main problem. Before 'Novel without a Hero' was renamed *Vanity Fair* (i.e. before October–November 1846) Thackeray had the group I–IV, VIA set up in galley and page proof. (We know this, since he cannibalistically used bits of the proof in putting together Chapter VIB). It over-ran to 35 or more pages—which may have been another reason for splitting up and dispersing his material, postponing Vauxhall to the second number.

Thackeray was evidently pleased with his deal with Bradbury and Evans. The novel was to be advertised and published under his own name. Moreover, he was allowed some idiosyncratic variations from the Dickensian pattern. *Vanity Fair* would be published from the *Punch* Office which was now Thackeray's main literary base. The work was to have an appropriately jaunty *Punch* flavour to it with cartoons, capital vignette illustrations and a free and easy Charivari manner (see note to p. 8).

This *Punch*-flavoured 'Novel without a Hero' was originally scheduled for publication in May 1846. But in the event, it had to wait until January 1847. The reason for the delay must be guessed at. Possibly Thackeray was too busy with 'Snobs'. But it is more likely that the publication of *Dombey and Son* (which began to come out in October 1846) pushed Thackeray's serial aside. Dickens was surefire, and Bradbury and Evans's main literary property. Whether or not Pickens's precedence was the cause, the delay allowed Thackeray leisure to work over his manuscript (he evidently had about three numbers in hand by the end of 1846). While at Brighton in the autumn of 1846, he is reported to have hit on the brilliant title, *Vanity Fair*. Allegedly, the Bunyanesque idea 'came upon him unaware in the middle of the night'. He 'jumped out of bed and ran three times round his room, uttering as he went, "Vanity Fair, Vanity Fair, Vanity Fair".' Less dramatically, Brighton would also seem to have inspired the names of principal characters—notably Steine and Crawley; doubtless the Prince Regent's favourite residence also heightened Thackeray's sense of the novel's period.

Thackeray by this stage had made two significant design changes to his original 'Novel without a Hero'. The innovation of Dobbin and the degradation of George Osborne into a despicable, underbred dandy (see note to p. 48) gave him the opposition required for his 'redefinition of the gentlemanly ideal' theme. And 'Vanity Fair' gave him the perfect moral perspective on the social world of the novel. In themselves, Bunyanesque denunciations of modern times were nothing new. In the May 1846 issue of *Blackwood's Magazine* there was, for instance, an article by George Moir, 'The Modern Pilgrim's Progress' which satirized the contemporary world as a new Vanity Fair. In 1843, Nathaniel Hawthorne brought out a short story, 'The Celestial Railroad', which employed the same extended literary allusion.

But Thackeray's use of the 'Vanity Fair' motif is more subtle than Moir's or Hawthorne's. This is a novel principally set in Mayfair—then as now the most fashionable area of residential London. Mayfair is so called, because the old May Fair used to be held there, just north of Piccadilly, from the middle ages up to the eighteenth century. As Timbs's *Curiosities of London* describes this annual orgy, the May Fair was:

not for trade... but for musicke, shows, drinking, gaming, raffling, lotteries, stage plays and drolls. with boothes for jugglers... prize fighters... mountebanks, fire-eaters, ass racing, sausage tables, dice tables, ups and downs, merry go rounds, bull baiting, grinning for a hat. running for a shift, hasty



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