Unlike Carlyle's, Thackeray's interest in the process of becoming lies less in its manifestations in cataclysmic, revolutionary events than in its movements in society and in social classes. In his works time creates and time destroys, but it is never explosive. Even where momentous episodes of history occur in his fictions, they are always in the background, serving as backdrops in front of which more local incidents of change take place. As the narrator in *Pendennis* observes, "When we talk of this man or that woman being no longer the same person . and remark changes [in him or her], we don't calculate that circumstance only brings out the latent defect or quality, and does not create it. [O]ur mental changes are like our grey hairs or our wrinkles—but the fulfilment of the plan of mortal growth and decay."¹ As "a Whig & a Quietist,"² Thackeray believed that the big historical moments are essentially like the smaller ones, incidents in the process of becoming. The world is the same everywhere, whether it be England in the time of the later Stuarts (as in *Henry Esmond*) or America at the time of the Revolution (as in *The Virginians*). *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose:* this is the basic irony of Thackeray's novels, which, in their delineation of social mobility, offer themselves as fiction that is true.

Perhaps nowhere is Thackeray's concern with the irony of
change more evident than in *Vanity Fair*, his second novel but the first to touch on a historical event of outstanding importance. Apparently his early conception of the book was that it would deal with the Battle of Waterloo. In 1842 during a visit in Ireland to Charles Lever, whose novel *Charles O'Malley* (1839) had centered on that battle, the author discussed Waterloo with two experts on the subject. He listened to their explanations of the armies' manoeuvres but concluded that he would "never understand the least about such matters." Although he wished to write on the subject himself, he then "did not see his way clearly," for he was "much inclined to 'laugh at martial might'" while also holding "to the idea that 'something might be made of Waterloo.'" This report of his remarks provides a clue to Thackeray's attitude toward his novel: from the beginning he would approach his material in a serious as well as humorous fashion, from the standpoint of one who is both interested and disinterested in the action.

In the finished novel there is evidence everywhere of this admixture, not least (as in the case of *The French Revolution*) in the narrator's consideration of the literary genre of his work. When it appeared in serial parts (1847–48), *Vanity Fair* bore on its title page the subtitle "Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society"; when published as a book (1848), it was subtitled "A Novel without a Hero." Within the work itself it is more frequently referred to as a history (pp. 80, 151, 454, 641), "of which every word is true" (p. 602), composed by one calling himself a historian (p. 553) and a chronicler (p. 217). But it is also termed a "Comic History" (p. 475), "a homely story" (p. 55), a "mere story-book" (p. 180), a "tale" (p. 504), a "genteel and sentimental novel" (p. 130), and a "play" (p. 666). In addition it contains many passages of burlesque and parody of contemporary writers, employs epic epithets in a comic manner, and subtly suggests that the story to be expounded is of epic nature. In sum, the work confesses itself to be what Schlegel insisted was the essential form of a work of romantic irony, namely, an arabesque, a generic potpourri.
Presiding over this variegated mixture is a narrator whose roles are diverse and whose dress is that of a clown. Shown on the title pages of the serial issues and the book is the buffo, called in the prologue ("Before the Curtain") "the Manager of the Performance" (p. 5). He introduces the "Puppets" in "the Show" to follow, then "retires, and the curtain rises" (p. 6). But who is this "Manager" dressed in motley and, on the title page of the book, looking into a cracked mirror in which we can see a face reflected? Apparently he is partially to be identified with the author himself, because Thackeray in one of his illustrations depicts himself holding an actor’s mask and a jester’s wand (p. 87) and says, a few pages earlier, that the figure "holding forth on the cover" is "an accurate picture of your humble servant" (p. 80). This partial congruence is discernible in the prologue, where the actor both is and is not the stage manager. There we are told, in the third person, about the manager and the scene he looks on and then, in a switch to the first person, about the moral, the scenes, the scenery, and the illumination by "the Author’s own candles" (that is, his illustrations). A few more words are uttered, seemingly in propria persona, followed by a brief final paragraph in which it is related how the manager bows to his audience and retires as the curtain rises.

This partial identity of the author with the Manager of the Performance in the prologue suggests the manner in which Vanity Fair is narrated. For after the curtain rises, the narrator appears in two roles: as a detached, seemingly objective, third-person omniscient narrator looking down on his creation and commenting upon its characters and events and, at the same time, as a character in his work who suffers the same limitations of knowledge as the other actors. Thus while we find him proclaiming himself "the novelist, who knows everything" (pp. 318, 351), we also see him admitting to ignorance: "I don’t know in the least" (p. 35); "I think" (p. 80); "My belief is" (p. 150); "It seems to me" (p. 151); "I wonder" (p. 188); "I hope it was" (p. 591). Indeed, on certain occasions he claims to have information about
Various matters only because it was provided by other characters in the fiction:

- as Captain Dobbin has since informed me (p. 207)
- I was told by Dr. Pestler (p. 377)
- it was only through Mrs. Bute (p. 386) that the circumstances were ever known
- Tom Eaves knew all the great folks and the stories and mysteries of each [and told the narrator about Gaunt House] (p. 453)
- Tapeworm poured out such a history about Becky and her husband and supplied all the points of this narrative (p. 644).

Further, he apologizes for his inability to render certain scenes accurately because of his linguistic inadequacy:

- as no pen can depict (p. 16)
- If I had the pen of a Napier, or a Bell's life, I should like to describe this combat properly (p. 49)
- Who can tell the dread with which that catalogue was opened and read! (p. 340)
- it does not become such a feeble and inexperienced pen as mine to attempt to relate (p. 463).

Lastly, the narrator cannot make up his mind whether this book subtitled "A Novel without a Hero" does or does not have any heroic characters. Early on he alludes to "the heroine of this work, Miss Sedley" (pp. 19–20), yet at the end he calls Amelia "our simpleton" and "a tender little parasite" (pp. 637, 661). Then he decides, "If this is a novel without a hero, at least let us lay claim to a heroine [Becky]" (p. 288), wherupon he is concerned to show her up as anything but heroic. He calls Dobbin, who is morally the most attractive person in the book and thus worthy of the sobriquet "rugged old oak" (p. 661), "a spooey"
The author enjoys the Godlike ability to be both immanent and transcendent, both in and out of his creation. Not infrequently he even portrays himself as one of the dramatis personae:

The other day I saw Miss Trotter (p. 113)
I have heard Amelia say (p. 163)
I saw Peggy with the infantine procession (p. 218)
It was on this very tour [of the Rhine] that I had the pleasure to see them [Dobbin and Amelia] first, and to make their acquaintance (p. 602).

This is the character who is "the writer of these pages" (p. 73), "an observer of human nature" (p. 152), "moi qui vous parle" (p. 484), "the present writer [who] was predestined to write [Amelia's] memoirs" (p. 603). Most often he is portrayed (or portrays himself) as a painstaking historian who verifies the accuracy of his narrative ("the present writer went to survey with eagle glance the field of Waterloo" [p. 261]), as a moralist ("Here is an opportunity for moralising!" [p. 140]), and as a keen "observer of human nature" (p. 152). Yet this particularized "I" can upon occasion become the generalized "I here introduced to personify the world in general" (p. 350).

This confusion about the proper identity of the "I" is reflected in the narrative process, which is chiefly characterized by frequent interruptions of the story that serve to break the fictional illusion. First, the narrator never lets us forget that he is indeed the Manager of the Performance and manipulator of the characters and the situations in which they are engaged. In certain scenes, he says, "I intend to throw a veil" (p. 66), "bring our characters forward" (p. 81), "adroitly shut the door" (p. 571), and "dwell upon this period" (p. 601). He mounts the stage "to introduce [his characters]" and then "step[s] down from the platform [to] talk about them" (p. 81). He explains why some incidents are in-
cluded or omitted: “We are not going to write the history [of Mr. Sedley’s last years]; it would be too dreary and stupid” (p. 549). He comments on the composition and arrangement of his work: “Although all the little incidents must be heard, yet they must be put off when the great events make their appearance, and hence a little trifling disarrangement and disorder was excusable and becoming” (p. 236); “here it is—the summit, the end—the last page of the third volume” (p. 661) (which in fact it is not).

Second, the narrator intrudes material of marginal relevance into his narrative. He recollects events of the past: “I know an old gentleman of sixty-eight, who said to me one morning at breakfast” (p. 18); “the writer cannot but think of it with a sweet and tender regret” (p. 73); “I remember one night being in the Fair myself” (p. 148); “I look back with love and awe to that Great Character in history” (p. 459). He apostrophizes his characters: “You [Amelia], too, kindly, homely flower!” (p. 167); “My dear Miss Bullock, I do not think your heart would break in this way” (p. 171); “Ah! Miss Ann, did it not strike you?” (p. 581); “Goodbye, Colonel—God bless you, honest William!—Farewell dear Amelia” (p. 661). He apostrophizes a friend: “Do you remember, dear M——, oh friend of my youth?” (p. 459). He addresses “ladies” (p. 48) and “young ladies” (pp. 172, 652) on matters of taste and decorum and, as we shall presently see, he constantly speaks to the reader.

Third, while commenting at length on the morality of Vanity Fair, the narrator anticipates and attempts to ward off disparaging comments that might be made about the work at hand:

[Certain] details, I have no doubt, JONES, who reads this book at his Club, will pronounce to be excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultrasentimental. Yes; I can see Jones at this minute . . . taking out his pencil. Well, he is a lofty man of genius, and admires the great and heroic in life and novels; and so had better take warning and go elsewhere. (p. 15)
In a footnote in the first edition the narrator vouches for his accuracy: “If anybody considers this an overdrawn picture I refer them to contemporaneous histories” (p. 106). He refuses to include certain matter because of the offense it might offer to his readers’ sensibilities, speaking of incidents “hardly fit to be explained” (p. 130) and so “pass[ed] over with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands” (p. 617), of language “which it would do no good to repeat in this place” (p. 158), and of curses which “no compositor in Messrs. Bradbury and Evans’s [Thackeray’s publishers’] establishment would venture to print were they written down” (p. 273).

Adding to the curious mixture of the fictional and the real is the narrator’s treatment of history. The story takes place over the period 1813–30, and Thackeray was at pains to depict as accurately as possible the historical events and period coloring. He has his fictional characters encountering historical personages under perfectly credible circumstances—for example, Lord Steyne and Philippe Egalité (p. 452), Becky and King George IV (p. 459). Almost no detail is amiss in the historical framework: in the Waterloo episode we can easily believe that “Napoleon is flinging his last stake, and poor little Emmy Sedley’s happiness forms, somehow, part of it” (p. 167). Yet having taken such effort with the historical details, Thackeray then presents the most jarring anachronisms, which serve in effect to undo the historical picture so carefully constructed. Here are some examples:

- It was the last charge of the Guard—that is, *it would* have been, only Waterloo had not yet taken place (p. 49).
- Had orange blossoms been invented then , Miss Maria would have assumed the spotless wreath (p. 113).
- Varnished boots were not invented as yet (p. 207).

Further, the narrator adds comments on how Apsley House and St. George’s Hospital look different at the present time from the way they were in 1815, on how the Pimlico triumphal arch and “the
hideous equestrian monster which pervades it and the neigh­bourhood” did not exist then (p. 206). Finally, in his drawings—the “Pencil Sketches” of the subtitle of the serial publication—Thackeray did not represent his characters in the fashions of the early nineteenth century but in those of his own time. In a note he explained:

It was the author’s intention, faithful to history, to depict all the characters of this tale in their proper costumes, as they wore them at the commencement of the century. But when I remember the appearance of people in those days, I have not the heart to disfigure my heroes and heroines by costumes so hideous; and have, on the contrary, engaged a model of rank dressed according to the present fashion. (p. 65)

Real and unreal, fact and fiction—the intermixture almost induces vertigo. What appears at first to be a representation of fact turns out to be but a reflection of a reflection, an infinite regress of distance from the thing itself, as on a box of Quaker Oats. The narrator even seems to allude to the operation of this mirroring effect: “The great glass over the mantel-piece, faced by the other great consol glass at the opposite end of the room, increased and multiplied between them the brown Holland bag in which the chandelier hung; until you saw these brown Holland bags fading away in endless perspectives, and this apartment seemed the centre of a system of drawing-rooms” (pp. 414–15). The center only seems, the fact turns out to be an illusion. Here the narrative approaches the pure negativity that de Man sees as characteristic of all irony. But almost immediately the buffo narrator assumes an existential posture and returns to the world of meaning as he reverts to his role of moralist, saying that it is just as well that the actors in such a world rarely see matters for what they are: for is a person “much happier when he sees and owns his delusion?” (p. 421).

The sense of mimesis, of acting roles, of not being fully in
control of their actions is shared by most of the characters. Vanity Fair is after all inhabited, as the Manager of the Performance tells us, by "actors and buffoons" engaged in their "performances" (p. 5), in charades and other "little dramas" (p. 492). Becky is "a perfect performer" (p. 66), with a wide repertory of both speaking and singing parts (p. 659). She can, for example, act "in a most tragical way" (pp. 143–44) or can assume "the part of a Maintenon or a Pompadour" (p. 463). She is, says Lord Steyne, "a splendid actress and manager" (p. 506). Amelia, after her husband's death, plays the role of "the poor widow" (p. 406) who acts "like a tragedy Queen" (p. 448), while her son, much given to acting, "liked to play the part of master" (p. 547). Jane Osborne is "content to be an Old Maid" (p. 416), just as Dobbin, a devoted playgoer, accepts the role of Faithful Unrequited Lover. Miss Horrocks "rehearsed the exalted part" of Lady Crawley, and Sir Pitt "swore it was as good as a play to see her in the character of a fine dame" (p. 389). In one role Lady Southdown was "as magnificent as Mrs. Siddons in Lady Macbeth" (p. 397), while Lady Steyne constantly assumed "tragedy airs" (p. 469). Although the younger Pitt Crawley disapproved of some of Becky's roles and "reprobad in strong terms the habit of play-acting" (pp. 508–9), he is not, in fact, averse to acting roles in which he "had got every word by heart" (p. 398). The narrator continually reminds us that we are witnessing scenes, tableaux, and acts (for example, pp. 66, 143) in "the drama" of *Vanity Fair*.

Acting is tiring, and from time to time the actors express a desire to leave the stage. "I have spent enough of my life at this play," says Dobbin to Amelia, thinking to bid farewell to his role of Loyal Suitor (p. 648). "O brother wearers of motley," asks the narrator, "Are there not moments when one grows sick of grinning and tumbling, and the jingling of cap and bells?" (p. 180). The answer is of course yes, but for the actors in *Vanity Fair*, no matter how much they may think otherwise, there is no alternative. For they are victims of fate—or of the drama, as it were. As the Manager of the Performance says, they are puppets offer-
ing a "singular performance" (p. 6). The "famous little Becky Puppet," "the Amelia Doll," "the Dobbin Figure," "the richly-dressed figure of the Wicked Nobleman" (p. 6)—all are at the mercy of the author-manager: their life is in him, and when he chooses, they must inevitably retire from the stage. "Come children," he says at the end, apparently to his readers who have witnessed the drama, "let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out" (p. 666). As the buffo of commedia dell'arte says, "La commedia é finita."

The final words of *Vanity Fair* signal, to some extent, the role of the reader in the work. Throughout, the reader is addressed in various ways: as "kind reader" (p. 373), "beloved reader" (pp. 108, 189, 484), "respected reader" (pp. 222, 350), "dear reader" (p. 373), "astonished reader" (p. 418), "ingenious reader" (p. 553), and "dear and civilised reader" (p. 601). Most tellingly, however, he is apostrophized, in the manner Carlyle addresses him in *The French Revolution*, as "brother" (pp. 81, 180, 251, 374, 454, 585, 586), as one who is asked to join in the creation of the drama. Of him the narrator will "ask leave, as a man and a brother" (p. 81), to present his characters and begin the play. And as "brother wearers of motley" (p. 180) readers will be called upon to "picture" the scene (p. 131) and to "suppose" time to have passed (p. 347), distances to have been travelled (p. 372), characters to feel in a particular way (p. 437). "My friend in motley," the narrator says, "your comedy and mine" (p. 585) are not at all unlike, and this commedia of *Vanity Fair* is a joint endeavor based on similar interests and situations. Thus "you and I are never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action [Waterloo]" (p. 314). "You and I, my dear reader," have "our friends" in common (p. 373). As visitors to the fair we see "our friends the Crawleys," "her ladyship, our old acquaintance," or "Miss Briggs, our old friend" (pp. 426, 418, 400). Grandees are not among our mutual acquaintances, and hence into their portals "the beloved reader and writer hereof may hope in vain to enter," although they can console themselves "by thinking
comfortably how miserable our betters may be” (pp. 484, 454). Yet both may imagine what occurs within the great mansions of London, and describing the Gaunt House dinner that Becky attended, the narrator, in a generous gesture of sympoetry, even allows the reader “the liberty of ordering [the dinner] himself so as to suit his fancy” (p. 474).

The liberty of ordering is also granted to the reader at the end of the book, as he is left free to invent the subsequent action. For the puppets are shut up in the box for only a time. There is no reason why the novel ends as it does other than it had to end somewhere. In the fifteenth number (chap. 52) Thackeray was evidently already mindful of the difficulties of closure, for he has his narrator say: “Our business does not lie with the second generation [of Crawleys] otherwise the present tale might be carried to any indefinite length” (p. 504). What he decided was “to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story—we ought all to be with our own and all other stories” (Ray, Letters 2:423). There is no death or wedding at the end, such as characterized the popular fiction of the time. Rather there is Becky, who “chiefly hangs about Bath and Cheltenham,” never seeing her son or former friends (who avoid her when they accidentally meet); and Dobbin and Amelia thoroughly domesticated, he still writing his “History of the Punjaub.” So much for the surface, beyond which we are told nothing. “Which of us is happy in this world?” asks the narrator in the last paragraph. “Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?” There is no answer, only the decision to shut the puppet box, “for our play is played out.”

The sense of play in Vanity Fair—of the author’s amusing himself with his characters, their actions, and, to a certain extent, his readers—is pervasive. It is not only for his personal entertainment that Thackeray dangles his puppets before us and thwarts our expectations of what a novel should be. For all his foolery, he nevertheless has a moral design, not a vulgar one of telling us what and what not to approve or condemn but a more subtle one
that invites us to see that moral judgment is not always easy. He reminds us that he and we alike are not only visitors to but also participants in the fair, the *Vanitas Vanitatum* (p. 666), subject to all its many distractions, foibles, and sins. Here, says the narrator, "*moi qui vous parle,*" you and I, dear reader, are "brothers," not only to each other but to all the other fairgoers as well.

Thackeray is, however, unwilling to let us leave the fair so readily, with a sermon for farewell. He knows that literature is not life, and he wants us to have a like awareness. By constantly breaking the fictional illusion in order to address his audience, he deprives us of the comfort to be derived solely from reading for the plot. He wants us, as he asks of a reader of another of his novels, to "take the trouble to look under the stream of the story" (Ray, *Letters* 2:457). In fiction, he effectively suggests, it is easy for the reader to make judgments, especially if, as is usually the case, he is guided by the author to certain conclusions. In life, however, such determinations are more problematical, because we can never have in our possession all or, frequently, even an adequate number of facts to make considered judgments possible. To prove his point the author calls upon us to decide certain matters. For example, did Becky kill Jos Osborne? Did she commit adultery with Lord Steyne? What did old Osborne want to say before he died? "But who can tell you the real truth of the matter?" (p. 24). "What *had* happened?" (p. 517). "Was she guilty or not?" (p. 538). Questions such as these are scattered throughout the text. We are not told the answers, and consequently we shall never be sure what they are; at best we can have only a kind of moral intuition about them.

We are not provided with answers because, it turns out, the author, for all his vaunted omniscience, does not have them. When asked whether Becky did indeed kill Jos Sedley, Thackeray himself said, "I don’t know!" In quest of the truth about the events in the story his narrator goes to extraordinary lengths. He interrogates Miss Pinkerton's servants about incidents at the school, talks with Dobbin about George and Amelia's wedding.
asks Dr. Pestler about Amelia’s rearing of her son, discusses with Tom Eaves what went on in the Steyne household. Further, the narrator examines various documents in order to render accurate “this veracious history” (p. 455). He consults the East India Register about Jos’s career in India, looks into Road Books describing Lord Steyne’s country homes, examines closely the map of Pumpernickel, reads through old newspapers for accounts of battles and parties and for biographical information. Yet from none of these can he gain reliable evidence.

When near the end of his “history” the narrator reveals that he is but repeating an old scandal told to him by Tapeworm, we discover that we have no warrant at all, certainly not from the author, that any of the story is true. Like the narrator we can only “suspect” and “doubt” and join him in saying, as the author said in real life, “I don’t know” (p. 35). It is not so much that the narrator has tricked us but that his claim “to know everything” is like that of the gossips Tom Eaves, Wenham, and Lord Tapeworm, who also claim to know everything: it is inferential, largely dependent upon hearsay and fragmentary documentary information. The “historian’s” early claim to omniscience is, finally, shown to be baseless.

For, the narrator implies, in the world of lies that is Vanity Fair how can we believe anything? Language, both oral and written, is not to be trusted. As Carlyle discovered when writing his history, what a speaker reveals about a certain situation is but an account from his or her own angle of vision. And egoists that we humans are—whether Becky, Amelia, or any of the other actors at the fair—we see what we want to see and put into words that which shows us to best advantage in our quest for social mobility. “The world,” the narrator says, “is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face” (p. 19). Words, our only means of access to “history” and “truth,” must therefore always remain highly suspect. Thackeray would have us see that any linguistic report, whatever its claim to objective truth,
is simply a perspective, often “dictated by interested malevolence” (p. 619).

When we have finished the novel, the illustration on the title page takes on a meaning unforeseen in the beginning and becomes for us the “illumination” Thackeray speaks of in the prologue. The cracked looking glass in the hand of the Manager of the Performance shows, we now understand, a shattered image of self, a fragmented and discontinuous self. What the author, who had presented himself as, inter alia, omniscient narrator, puppeteer, historian, and moralist—what the author sees in his work is, in the last analysis, himself. It is a mirror held up not to nature but to himself and his “brother,” the reader, “mon semblable, mon frère.”

Unlike Bunyan’s pilgrim, who passes through Vanity Fair on a straight road and looks neither to the left nor right, Thackeray’s characters are hemmed in by the confines of the fair itself. Like Christian, they strive; but unlike him they seek for what is not worth having, as in their walk around the fair they take the sham for truth. And having achieved the status they sought, they find they are basically unaltered; only the circumstances have changed, and they themselves are subject to “the plan of mortal growth and decay” spoken of in Pendennis. As the narrator, in his role as transcendental buffoon, asks in the final paragraph, who has his desire or having it is satisfied? It was the genius of Thackeray to dramatize the irony of becoming in very Victorian terms—by showing us Vanity Fair as the theater of social mobility, replete with both meaning and meaninglessness.