Charles Kingsley's name is probably not among the first to come to mind in a discussion about nineteenth-century novelists and metafiction. This Anglican minister—whose demeanor while delivering lectures in history to Cambridge undergraduates was "grave as a church and earnest as an owl" (Huxley 113), whose commitment to Christian Socialism and radical principles of reform was serious enough to impede his preferment to a bishopric (Huxley 28), and whose first two novels reflected his outrage at the inequities of the English class system—seems, at first glance, to be unlikely company for Thackeray in an arrangement of mid-century novelists. Kingsley has long held the reputation of an eminently earnest Victorian novelist.

Indeed, George Eliot, who claimed that her "dominant feeling toward [Kingsley's] work in general is that of high admiration" (Essays 132), objected to the novelist's "perpetual hortative tendency." As she put it in a review of one of Kingsley's later novels, "He can never trust to the impression the scene itself will make on you, but true to his cloth, must always 'improve the occasion'" (Essays 126). Eliot confessed that she would have liked Kingsley's novels better had he avoided his often illogical "hobbyhorse" (128) and had he not made of each character "a text to preach from" (129). What Eliot's review calls Kingsley's "parsonic habit" (129) in narration characterizes the image of Kingsley as novelist that survives in criticism today.
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THE "MASCULINE CHRISTIAN" AND INTERVENTION

For all his personal and parsonic earnestness, though, Kingsley also stands as an emblem of the "muscular" or "masculine" Christian of his era. The traditionally heroic ideals he propounded in his later historical romances, the militaristic patriotism he evinced in his writings on the Crimean War, the outspoken stand he repeatedly took against the dangers of celibacy (which he feared would spread with Catholicism and Tractarianism), his devotion to outdoor sport (especially shooting and fishing) and to the gentlemanly hobby of naturalistic study, his habit of grasping a scythe or pick and pitching in to work alongside his parishioners—all point to his public self-portrayal as a strongly masculine clergyman. His narrative techniques in his first "novel of protest," Yeast (1848), are gendered masculine, too. In the narrator's ironic stance and in the novel's frequent excursions out of realistic conventions into highly literary self-consciousness, Yeast provides a revealing contrast to Mary Barton.

In their origins, Yeast and Mary Barton (which was published during the same year that Yeast was being serialized in Fraser's Magazine) have much in common. Both are their authors' first novels. Both address contemporary class inequities, and both depict tragic consequences for upper-middle-class families who neglect their "duty" to the impoverished classes. Both make some reference to Chartism (though Alton Locke, Kingsley's second and last novel of protest, more closely resembles Mary Barton on this count). Both (unlike Alton Locke) have extradiegetic narrators. And both authors took their inspiration from firsthand observation of the living conditions of the poor. Kingsley the clergyman—like Gaskell the clergyman's wife—had become familiar with cottagers living in conditions squalid enough to satisfy the reforming zeal of a Dorothea Brooke; although direct financial intervention in their troubles was beyond his very limited means, he was to argue for reforms ranging from Chartism to public sanitation throughout his career.

Yeast dramatizes Kingsley's concern for various causes by tracing a luxury-loving dilettante's progress as he falls in love, begins to recognize the "condition of the poor," comes to know an admirable gamekeeper, loses his own fortune, and finds Christian faith. The hero's beloved fiancée dies, from a fever contracted while visiting impoverished tenants on her family's land, but the hero escapes England for a paradise even more remote than
Jem Wilson and Mary Barton’s retreat in Canada: accompanied by his faithful gamekeeper friend, he follows a “prophet” to a fictional utopia. The story resembles *May Barton* in its depiction of wretched conditions, its rendition of political and religious debates among characters, its attention to relations among the classes, and its resorting to subplots of romantic love, as well as in its conclusion.

*Yeast* has commanded less attention than *May Barton* from readers and critics alike. Not a best-seller in its own day, it has enjoyed no revival of the sort that the gynocritical revolution has brought about for Gaskell’s novels. What little criticism of *Yeast* there is has focused mainly on the novel’s content as an indicator of its author’s political or religious positions. ³ Probably no one would venture to argue that *Yeast* is a carefully crafted novel; indeed, the circumstances under which Kingsley wrote it militated against painstaking craftsmanship. He composed the final chapters, as his most recent biographer says, “under great strain,” simultaneously writing, running his parish at Eversley without a curate, commuting to London on the train once a week to lecture young women on Early English Literature at Queen’s College, and maintaining an overwhelming correspondence with strangers seeking his spiritual and practical advice. Worse, the editors at *Fraser’s* requested Kingsley to speed up the ending during the novel’s serialization because so many readers found the work objectionable. Finishing the novel brought Kingsley to a state of collapse that was to last a year, during which he could neither write, read, nor talk without exhausting himself (Chitty 112–118). Critics seeking examples of aesthetic perfection in form or style have dismissed *Yeast* as an obviously flawed piece of work. But looking at it from a descriptive, rather than an evaluative, position reveals a social-problem novel that treats issues very similar to those in *Mary Barton* while establishing a relation between text and reader that is quite different. For Charles Kingsley was a minister, while Elizabeth Gaskell was (only) a minister’s wife; whereas she was writing as a woman, he was emphatically writing as a man.

Writing, as Kingsley did, for serialization in a magazine, the editor and audience of which were unenthusiastic about the work, probably contributed to the establishment of a different kind of author-reader relationship from the one that dominates Gaskell’s first novel. Whereas Gaskell’s narrator expresses a confidence in her narratee’s sympathy which she was not
to lose until later in her novelistic career, Kingsley was producing install­ments with the knowledge that not only the public but even his most respected colleagues disliked what he was writing. The tone the narrator takes toward “my dear readers” is understandably exasperated by the time he gets to the epilogue, which collapses the novel’s denouement in a remarkably discursive account of the flaws the narrator expects readers to find in the novel (364). Even more salient in the context of this study, though, is the stance Kingsley’s narrator takes in the early installments of Yeast, before he could predict readers’ responses with such glum certainty. Like Gaskell’s narrator, Kingsley’s frequently intervenes, and his interventions (like hers) often address narratees directly. But unlike the narrator of Mary Barton, the narrator of Yeast is seldom, if ever, “engaging.”

To sketch out the difference: Gaskell’s engaging narrator never names her narratee anything other than “you”; Kingsley’s distancing narrator addresses groups such as “fair ladies” (72) or narrows down his designation of “you” to “reader” (19, 42, 96, 147). Gaskell’s engaging narrator always speaks directly to “you,” never referring to “the reader” in the third person; Kingsley’s distancing narrator speaks about “my reader(s)” (18, 20, 40, 41, 173, 269) more often than he speaks to “you, reader.” The most signifi­cant difference, however, is the contrast between the two narrators’ atti­tudes toward readers, characters, and the act of writing a novel. Whereas Gaskell’s engaging strategy leads her to treat readers and characters as though they were equally real while insisting upon the veracity of what she writes, Kingsley’s distancing approach draws the narratee’s attention repeatedly to the fictionality of the characters and the literary nature of the text. Kingsley’s intentions may have been as solemn as Gaskell’s, and his commitment to political reform even more earnest than hers: nevertheless, his novel-with-a-purpose presents itself as being a text that is explicitly “about” its own textuality.

Yeast on Yeast: Protest Fiction as Metaliterature

This self-conscious literariness surfaces most often in Yeast in two kinds of narrative interventions: explicit comments about the conventions of writing fiction, and ironic claims (sometimes separated by brackets from
the narrative proper) about the author's procedure in composing this novel. The narrative tone is set with an example of the first type. *Yeast* opens with a curiously metaliterary paragraph that firmly establishes the narrator's function as the framer of the story: "As this my story will probably run counter to more than one fashion of the day, literary and other, it is prudent to bow to those fashions wherever I honestly can; and therefore to begin with a scrap of description" (1). The ensuing description runs briefly through a country landscape, a few local personages, and the hero, Lancelot Smith, but soon stops short for another comment on current writing conventions:

But what is a description, without a sketch of the weather?—In these Pantheist days especially, when a hero or heroine's moral state must entirely depend on the barometer, and authors talk as if Christians were cabbages, and a man's soul as well as his lungs might be saved by sea-breezes and sunshine . . . we must have a weather-description. (2)

Ironically (and perhaps, at this point, predictably), the narrator postpones the weather description for two and a half pages more, embarking first on a satirical transcript of a weather-diary Lancelot kept in his youth and then giving a brief history of the hero's tastes in reading. After a couple of mock-formal apostrophes ("Draw, draw the veil and weep, guardian angel!" [4]; "O fathers! fathers! and you, clergymen, who monopolize education!" [5]), the narrator pulls himself up once again: "But where is my description of the weather all this time?" (5).

Nor do these Shandean shenanigans end with the novel's opening pages. Later in the first chapter, the narrator still hesitates to commit himself to a description ("Up, into the labyrinthine bosom of the hills,—but who can describe them? Is not all nature indescribable?" [14]). And, throughout the novel, the narrator subscribes to the literary convention that challenges the power of language to transmit visual images. After a detailed, two-page delineation of one of Lancelot's sketches, the narrator remarks, "Descriptions of drawings are clumsy things at best; the reader must fill up the sketch for himself by the eye of faith" (175).

In light of so much narrative game playing, one might well wonder: Faith in what? Evidently, the narrator is not referring to anything like faith in the fiction's veracity. These last two interventions resemble Gaskell's
narrative observation on the setting of Mary Barton's opening scene, which would move readers "if you could see or I properly describe" it. Both narrators draw attention to their responsibility for rendering the setting in language, but nowhere does Gaskell draw comparisons between her own activity and that of other literary voices, as Kingsley so pointedly does in his novel's very first paragraph. While Gaskell's engaging narrator asks the narratee to draw mental comparisons between the contents of her text and the extra-novelistic world, Kingsley's narrator openly invites comparisons between his text and other texts. This strategy of underlining the novel's status as one among many literary constructs, one that presents itself as resisting prevailing fashions in literature just as it challenges bourgeois fashions in politics, establishes a distancing narrative stance that implies: This novel, like other texts, is a fictional construction; this is not real.

Kingsley's narrator reinforces this suggestion with the second kind of intervention I have mentioned, asides that remark upon his narrative choices in constructing this story. These are sometimes marked as intrusions by Kingsley's unusual habit of placing them in brackets to set them apart from the progress of the story. Still in the vein of Sterne, the narrator interpolates an ironic observation: "[Here, for the sake of the reader, we omit, or rather postpone, a long dissertation on the famous Erototheogonic chorus of Aristophanes's birds, with illustrations taken from . . . the Vedas and Proclus to Jacob Boëme and Saint Theresa]" (18); the irony is, of course, that the postponed dirty joke never recurs. An even more pointedly metaliterary example occurs in a longish bracketed paragraph in which the narrator exhibits the parallels between his heroine, Argemone Lavington, and a character in a Tennyson poem. Within this aside, Kingsley's narrator pretends to confess; "[I should have honored myself by pleading guilty to stealing much of Argemone's character from The Princess, had not the idea been conceived, and fairly worked out, long before the appearance of that noble poem]" (31)

The reference to Tennyson is not the only instance of the narrator's defending himself against presumed charges of plagiarism. In a more serious vein, he places his hero in a squalid scene where Lancelot wanders "from farm to hamlet, and from field to trampers tent," in hopes of "finding out . . . for himself" the answer to the "Condition-of-the-Poor question" (132). "Hopeless and bewildered" by the accounts he has read in "blue
books, red books, sanitary reports, mine reports, factory reports," Lancelot decides to look into the matter personally. The narrator remarks,

What he saw, of course I must not say; for if I did the reviewers would declare, as usual, one and all, that I copied out of the *Morning Chronicle*; and the fact that these pages, ninety-nine hundredths of them at least, were written two years before the *Morning Chronicle* began its invaluable investigations would be contemptuously put aside as at once impossible and arrogant. I shall therefore only say, that he saw what every one else has seen.

(132–133)

Never mind that the claim of having written 99 percent of "these pages" over two years ago contradicts Kingsley's biographer's account of the novelist's frantically composing the installments at the last minute to meet deadlines: no narrator can be held accountable for failing to speak the author's literal truth. Consider the rhetorical strategy of this passage, though. As in the evocation of Tennyson, the narrator does not defend his portrayal on the basis that it is drawn from life; his defense rests instead on the claim that he wrote it (or in the case of Argemone, "conceived" and "worked [it] out") before he read other written versions of similar material. Predicting that the novel will be criticized for being derivative, the narrator makes claims for the literary originality of his work without making claims for its authenticity. On the contrary, he closes the scene of Lancelot's investigations with another resort to a literary parallel: "He at last ended by a sulky acquiescence in Sam Wellers memorable dictum: 'Who it is I can't say; but all I can say is, that somebody ought to be wopped for this!'" (133). Argemone resembles the "Princess," and Lancelot feels the way Sam Weller feels, because—the narrative stance seems to suggest—these figures are creatures of fiction.

*Yeast's* rhetorical insistence on its own fictional status is logically inconsistent with the intended function of a novel of protest: if the characters are, as the narrator calls them, "my puppets" (367), then the world they inhabit must be a puppet stage and the social problems they encounter might be no more real than the characters are. One of the features that renders this novel's narrator most distancing is his refusal either to address or attempt to circumvent this logical dilemma. In fact, it would be fair to say that the narrative discourse of this text is at war with its story.
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The distancing narrator of Yeast repeatedly places the narratee in the position of acknowledging that the text is a fictive creation. In one late passage that explains the novel's title, the narrator interrupts an account of Lancelot's developing political convictions:

And here I beg my readers to recollect that I am in no way answerable for the speculations either of Lancelot or any of his acquaintances; and that these papers have been, from beginning to end, as in name so in nature, Yeast—an honest sample of the questions which, good or bad, are fermenting in the minds of the young of this day, and are rapidly leavening the minds of the rising generation. (269)

Kingsley's narrator, like Gaskell's, goes on to disclaim any agreement with the attitudes he is reporting. But here the intervention draws attention to the physical textuality of the novel in the references to "these pages" and to the title. The narrator also emphasizes his self-consciousness about having invented the text: rather than pretending that Lancelot is "real," or that the novel's contents reflect the integrity of someone's actual experience, the narrator transforms the character into a composite figure foreshadowing the controversial subjects of the "new journalism" of the 1970s. He represents "an honest sample" of questions that concern his generation; the narrator's source for the character is not firsthand observation of someone real, but rather a piecing together of prevailing attitudes. To be sure, this is true to some extent for all Victorian novelists' activity in creating characters, because to write novels is inevitably to invent. The difference between a distancing narrator such as Kingsley's and an engaging one such as Gaskell's lies less in the authors' real-life activity as novelists, than in the attitude their narrators take toward the presentation of that activity.

Part of the pointed literariness of Kingsley's narrative stance is his frequent use of apostrophe, a figure which Gaskell's narrator invariably avoids. This 379-page novel contains at least fourteen formal apostrophes. Some of them invoke abstractions in the traditional apostrophic formula: "O Bigotry! Devil, who turnest God's love into man's curse! Are not human hearts hard and blind enough of themselves without thy cursed help?" (332); and "Blest pity! true mother of that graceless scamp, young love" (18). More often the apostrophes are directed to the characters, in a habitual
pattern that leads the narrator to raise a question in the character's mind, then answer it in his own voice. The pattern produces interventions closely resembling one another in form: "Certainly, vicar" (224); "True, Argemone" (41); "True, Lancelot" (144); "Not yet, Lancelot" (326); "Peace! Poor Lancelot!" (119). In each of these instances the narrator follows the apostrophe with a paragraph that discusses the characters' limitations, detailing the flaws in the characters' thoughts and perceptions and guiding the narratee through a superior reading of the situation. Doubtless, these are the passages that Eliot saw as transforming Kingsley's characters into "text[s] to preach from." Eliot was using text in the sermonic sense of a quotation requiring commentary and preceding exhortation in the preacher's rhetorical routine. But for our purposes, Eliot's objection to the characters' transformation into "texts" takes on different resonances: the apostrophes (with the attendant exegesis) textualize the characters by drawing attention to the fact that they are in, and of, a text. The apostrophes pull the narrative focus back from the characters' consciousnesses, thus underscoring the distance between the characters and the commenting narrator. The commentary that follows the apostrophes injects a perspective on the characters' thoughts that places narrator and narratee in the privileged position of observers who can know what the characters cannot.

*Yeast* is not devoid of direct address to the narratee. But in a novel that consistently presents itself as a literary text, it is not surprising to find that many of the narrator's direct comments to the narratee refer to the composition of the novel. In this respect, the instances of direct address differ from the engaging strategy of imitating a conversational arrangement where the narrator has information she transmits to an interested narratee. An engaging narrator tells her reader about "facts"; a distancing narrator talks about the fiction. Some of Kingsley's interventions might be taken for engaging addresses to the narratee, in that superficially they resemble such lines in Gaskell's novel as "I must tell you—I must reveal the dreadful secret." Kingsley gives that conversation between narrator and narratee an ironic twist, though, when he interpolates teasing questions: "Lord Michampstead was thinking of cheap bread and sugar. Do you think that I will tell you of what Lancelot was thinking?" (116). The question prompts the narratee to notice the narrator's way of telling the story—of course, the narrator rather gleefully does not "tell you" the hero's thoughts.
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Again and again, the narrator disappoints the hopes he attributes to his narratee. In a characteristic example, he withholds information, professes concern for the narratee's desires, and then refuses to deliver what the narratee is supposed to want:

Whether he was afraid of her—whether he was ashamed of himself or of his crutches, I cannot tell, but I dare say, reader, you are getting tired of all this soul-dissecting. So we will have a bit of action again, for the sake of variety if for nothing better.

Of all the species of lovely scenery which England holds, none, perhaps, is more exquisite than the banks of the chalk-rivers. (42)

As the leisurely descriptiveness of this last sentence implies, the promised "bit of action" is put off for another couple of pages of scene painting, philosophizing, and plot foreshadowing. This narrator—who operates within the great comic tradition of Fielding and Sterne, even when, as in this scene, he eventually focuses his attention on the wretched living conditions of the poor—delights in the game of toying with the expectations of his reader. The air of mutual confidence and presumed ingenuousness that characterizes the engaging narrator is notably absent from Yeast's passages of direct address.

An engaging attitude is by no means absent from all of Kingsley's writing. From time to time, the narrator of Yeast embraces the narratee in a brotherly "we": "Do not we all learn love so?" (18); "[Lancelot] meant to keep his promise, as we all do" (154); "What are we all doing from morning to night, but setting up our own fancies as the measure of all heaven and earth?" (121-122). Within a framework of engaging narrative strategies, such questions and observations would contribute to the accumulated sense of similarity between the real and fictional worlds. In the context of this novel's distancing pattern of interventions, however, these appeals to an affinity between narrator, narratee, and characters do little to offset the self-conscious literariness of the text. Furthermore, to compare this narrator's stance toward "you" with the use of direct address in Kingsley's sermons and his political writing is to see that Kingsley could exploit the power of engaging address when he so chose.
KINGSLEY AND THE PRIVILEGE TO SPEAK

Kingsley exploited almost every public forum available to him for the expression of his serious convictions on social, political, and religious matters. He composed and delivered weekly sermons and university lectures, he addressed a public pamphlet to the soldiers fighting the Crimean War, as “Parson Lot” he contributed pro-Chartist essays to Politics for the People, and in his own name he wrote on issues such as sweatshop conditions for Fraser’s and conducted a notorious theological debate with Cardinal Newman for years. It is hardly surprising that in his novel Kingsley evinces so little urgency to say something in a serious way about real-world issues—his opportunities to do so elsewhere were manifold.

Kingsley’s own awareness of the privilege he enjoyed in his role as public speaker is revealed in a biographical detail: in private conversation, he suffered all his life from a severe stutter, but in the pulpit or on the podium he almost never stammered unless he tried to improvise. Even then, he had far less difficulty saying something in public than at home, and he attributed his success to his attempts to “remember I was not speaking on my own authority, but God’s” (Chitty 68). In situations where he spoke not for God but for himself, speaking was less easy. The first time he spoke at a meeting in London of Chartist sympathizers, listeners were so taken aback by his stammer that they wondered if he might be drunk (Chitty 123). Still, he did speak. As an Anglican minister, an official voice for an institution to which he was devoted, he found himself in a position to speak.

It was a position a woman (even a minister’s wife) could not share, a position that allowed Kingsley the leisure to “play” when he turned his attention to writing fiction. In later novels—historical romances, children’s stories, retellings of myths, adventure tales—he indulged still more openly in that play than in his social-problem novels. Certainly, as George Eliot’s review laments, Kingsley continued to maintain a preacherly stance in the didactic content of his narrators’ remarks. But the attitude that novel writing is first and foremost a way to make a contribution to the world of literature—that a novel is, broadly speaking, an aesthetic and entertaining artifact, even if the novel’s story fits the category of “fiction with a purpose”—is already incipient in Yeast’s pattern of distancing interventions.
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PUNCH AND THE PUPPET MASTER: WHO IS SPEAKING IN VANITY FAIR?

Could Kingsley have been thinking of Thackeray when he wrote in Yeast of "our most earnest and genial humorist, who is just now proving himself also our most earnest and genial novelist" (20)? The accompanying allusion to a coarse-mannered baronet, who is almost certainly Thackeray's Pitt Crowley, implies that Kingsley did have Thackeray in mind.

To think of Thackeray as a "genial" novelist is to join the ranks of readers and critics who have enjoyed the loquacious humor of Vanity Fair's narrator. Unlike Kingsley's, this narrator has recently been a magnet for positive critical attention, as focusing on the narrator has become the typical strategy for defenders of Thackeray's art. As Michael Sundell explained the situation over fifteen years ago:

Sympathetic, scholarly, and otherwise sensible critics continue to be thrown off balance by outdated attacks on [Thackeray's] cynicism or sentimentality, on his authorial intrusions, and even on his intelligence. Too often they fight again the critical battles which have already been won, conveying the impression that Thackeray still needs to be proven artistically respectable. In defending him, some concentrate excessively on the narrative brilliance of Vanity Fair, which only an ideologue or a fool could deny. (514)

Sundell is certainly right to question critics' continued defensiveness about the obviously brilliant narrative manipulations of Vanity Fair. And yet, surely not every critic who returns to the debate over how the narrator operates is merely tilting with ideologues and fools. Discussion of the Vanity Fair narrator circles around disagreements over the novel's many-layered structure of ironies. With its simultaneous floutings and exploitations of novelistic convention, this "novel without a hero" has long been seen as fundamentally ironic.6

What, then, could Kingsley have meant by calling its author an "earnest" novelist? The appellation hardly makes sense unless, indeed, Kingsley's narrator is not speaking in earnest himself. To be earnest is to be determined, eager, zealous, serious, to show deep sincerity or feeling, to treat one's subject matter as vitally important, not trivial or petty. When a
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A novelist creates a narrator who presents himself as "Manager of the Performance" of a puppet play, who implies that he is a "quack" (objecting, as he surveys Vanity Fair, to the "other quacks, plague take them!" [33]), and who is depicted in many of the novelist's own illustrations as strongly resembling a Punch puppet himself, the novelist is obviously not "in earnest." And though Kingsley may have genuinely considered Thackeray to be "earnest" as well as "genial," Dickens was the first among many commentators who have "regretted Thackeray's feigning of a 'want of earnestness'" (Olmsted xiii). The narrator's self-presentation in "Before the Curtain," the illustrations, and the frequent narrative interventions in Vanity Fair combine to subvert any earnestness this novel might have demonstrated. What could be less vitally important, more trivial and petty, than the activities or observations of puppets?

And yet, constructed as it is on this basic assumption, the novel repeatedly dismantles its own foundations by making the characters' activities matter, by infusing enough life into them to have inspired numerous critical debates of the kind that treat characters as though they were real people. And the narrator, though he may sometimes look like the clownish, silent Punch, has plenty to say, much of it sounding zealous and serious enough. Indeed, many of Thackeray's early, more hostile critics took the narrator's comments to represent Thackeray's own moral standards, which for decades constituted the center of debate over the value of his novels.  

Thackeray criticism continually returns to a set of questions which an appreciation for distancing strategies might help resolve. From the beginning, Vanity Fair's interpreters and evaluators considered whether Vanity Fair is an example of the kind of moral "history" Thackeray's narrator and his journalistic personae argued novels should be. If Vanity Fair is, on the one hand, a work of realistic moral fiction, why does the narrator "repeatedly shatter the illusion by flaunting the inauthenticity of his fictions?" (Segel, "Truth and Authenticity" 55). Or, on the other hand, "If Thackeray's preaching does not lead to moral clarification for the reader, why does he offer his text as a sermon?" (Rawlins 172). What, in brief, is the textually encoded relation between this novel and its audience's real world? In the past two decades, Thackeray's critics have answered each of these questions positively and ingeniously; typically they conclude that Vanity Fair is, in the final analysis, a realistic and didactic text that makes its moral points about the world by maintaining a special, intimate relation
between the chatty narrator and his readers. Of the recent arguments that seek to demonstrate how *Vanity Fair*'s realism operates, Wolfgang Iser's is doubtless the most sophisticated and influential. I want, therefore, to point to some problems posed by Iser's essay on *Vanity Fair* that it shares with most critical work on Thackeray's narrators. The basic difficulty is this: to use *Vanity Fair* as a model for realistic narrative techniques is to run into logical inconsistencies and to overlook this novel's fundamentally ironic, metafictional nature.

In *Vanity Fair*, Iser comments, "the narrator regulates the distance between reader and events" (106) and "the reader is continually placed at a distance from the characters" (108). Iser's complex argument isolates the "esthetic effect" of this novel in the activity the narrator continually assigns to the "reader," who is supposed to maintain a critical distance from the characters and events, supply personal judgments where the narrator's ironic or contradictory statements leave "empty spaces" (106), and ultimately turn those critical judgments "back upon himself" (119). Choosing *Vanity Fair* as his sole example of the "realistic novel," Iser emphasizes that this text's realism inheres not in its contents but in its effect, which "depends on activating the reader's critical faculties so that he may recognize the social reality of the novel as a confusing array of sham attitudes, and experience the exposure of this sham as the true reality" (112). Iser observes that the novel therefore "remains as 'real' now as it was" in 1848, because "In *Vanity Fair* it is not the slice of life, but the means of observing it that constitute the reality" (119–120).

Iser's choice of *Vanity Fair* as his model for the reader's role in realism is, however, problematic. Of all the canonic English novels of the realist period, *Vanity Fair* is the one that makes the least pretense of presenting a slice of life: as "Before the Curtain" makes clear, the novel is only a slice of a fair—a festive time and place where the participants are absorbed in "playing out" roles donned for the occasion. The "bullies... bucks... knaves... policemen... and yokels" are held up for observation alongside the "actors and buffoons." And the Manager of the Performance suggests that this slice of a fair will be doubly enacted, because the characters filling these roles will be played by puppets. Iser does not ignore this metafictional framing of *Vanity Fair*. He acknowledges that the narrator's "reliability is reduced by the fact that he is continually donning new masks: (105) ranging from the Manager, to a novelist, to a character relating a story

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that he overheard in conversation. Because Iser is trying to account for this
text as an example of realism, he is forced into a perplexing conclusion
about the effect of this "Protean narrator": "If the narrator is an independent
character, clearly separated from the inventor of the story, the tale of the
social aspirations of the two girls Becky and Amelia takes on a greater
degree of objectivity, and indeed one gains the impression that this social
reality is not a mere narration but actually exists" (106). But, as Iser seems
rather suddenly to forget, this narrator is usually not "an independent
character." In order for an actual reader to get the impression that Vanity
Fair's social reality "actually exists," he or she would have to overlook, as
Iser here does, those parts of the narrative frame that do identify the
narrator with "the inventor of the story."

Iser goes to some length to show that his reader's sense of Vanity Fair as
real arises from the narrator's habit of offering alternative assessments of
character's motives and morals, and letting the reader choose or fill in the
definitive judgment for "himself" (117–119). His argument for the novel's
effect of reality rests, too, on the observation that as the reader begins to
realize "for himself the extent to which consideration of personal gain
shapes the natural impulses of human conduct, . . . the difference between
the reader and the characters in the novel is eliminated" (115–116). The
first of these two realistic effects—the personal investment in a story that
one has partly helped to create—would be more clearly illustrated, I think,
by analysis of an engaging narrator's open-ended questions to a narratee.
Thackeray's distancing narrator appears to offer alternatives among which a
narratee might choose. But the narrator's irony, which often slides into
bitter sarcasm, usually makes it tolerably clear which judgment a flawed
narratee would make and which one a self-respecting actual reader is sup­
posed to want to make. And, as Iser acknowledges, by the end of the novel
the "correct" reading becomes explicitly clear (112). The open-endedness is
an illusion, just as the narratee who can't tell which option to choose is a
fictive figure.

The point in Iser's argument where the conflation of the reader and the
narratee poses the biggest problem, though, is the second of those realistic
effects, the idea that the reader will "reflect on his own situation" while
reading. Iser assumes that the reader will find himself guilty of the ego-
centricity and greed for which he has been censuring the characters, and
thus will recognize that differences between reader and characters are "eliminated." In this context Iser describes the concept of a narratee without distinguishing it from an implied reader; "Just as the author divides himself up into the narrator of the story and the commentator on the events in the story, the reader is also stylized to a certain degree, being given attributes which he may either accept or reject" (114). This precisely defines the practice of the distancing narrator, who characterizes narratees so completely as to place a necessary distance between them and actual readers. Iser, however, denies this distance; "Whatever happens, [the reader] will be forced to react to those ready-made qualities ascribed to him" (114). True, the narratee might be forced to react: as a function of the text, a narratee is entirely under the author's control. But an actual reader cannot be forced by a text to do anything. The power struggle between the distancing narrator and his narratees may prompt the actual reader to step back even further from the fictional world, to maintain the distance that the novel's metafictional frame has already established.

In *Vanity Fair* that distance dominates the implicit relation between the narratee and the actual reader. The narrator's stance toward the narratee, the characters, and the act of narration fits the distancing model of humorous metaepipsis; the narrator moves himself and his narratees inside and outside the diegesis with unpredictably unsettling glee. In addition to the ironies he raises in his addresses to narratees, Thackeray's narrator pushes the metafictional potential of the realist novel to the limit. He does so primarily by making a game of one central, difficult question for realist fiction: Who is speaking?

Who indeed? In "Before the Curtain" the narrator refers to "the Manager of the Performance" in the third person, alternating these references with a more personal "I" (33–34). Yet the Manager takes credit for the ensuing spectacle, and "acknowledge(s) the kindness with which it has been received" (34). Is this "Manager," then, the author? The puppet master? A preacher in motley? Another puppet? A customer at the fair? He implies, as I have mentioned, that he is a "quack" (33); later, the narrator addresses his audience as "brother wearers of motley," adding that his object is "to walk with you through the fair" (229). At the beginning of the sixth chapter he is a "piper," and the accompanying illustration shows a recorder-wielding Punch hypnotizing a small animal with his "mild tune"
(88). As Janice Carlisle has pointed out, Thackeray's line drawings for the original edition depict the narrator sometimes with a clown's face, sometimes as Punch, and even (at the end of Chapter 9, entitled "Family Portraits") as a befuddled-looking caricature of William Makepeace Thackeray with a comic mask and a clown's staff in his lap (Carlisle 36–39). At times the narrator pretends to distinguish himself from his creator. He says that the cover illustration of a "moralist" (a thin and therefore distinctly un-Thackeray-like orator in clown's garb) is "an accurate portrait of your humble servant" (95), but makes no reference beyond the sly chapter title to the cartoon of the novelist in Chapter 9.

As this changeable narrator introduces characters he places them and himself on a stage, asking leave "as a man and a brother... occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them: if they are good and kindly, to love them and shake them by the hand: if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader's sleeve" (117). (Building upon the many layers of irony, this passage placing the narrator and characters on a public stage occurs in a chapter called "Private and Confidential.") But at the end of the novel, the actors shrink down into puppets that the narrator shuts into a box (797). The narrator, like the characters, is a chameleon: existing on many different diegetic levels, adopting the appearances of many different figures, he differentiates himself from any one real person or fictional character. His shifting identity accentuates his fictive status.

So, too, does the brief reference to the narrator's having met the characters at the imaginary town of Pumpernickel. In this scene he places himself for the first time among the principal participants in Vanity Fair, recording the crowd's observations of Amelia, Jos, Dobbin, and their party. This is also one of the few passages where the narrator pretends to claim that his story is true: "It was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to see them first, and to make their acquaintance" (721). Coming as it does so late in the narrative, the assertion is obviously a joke: all the references to puppets, plays, and pipers make the truth of this history highly unlikely. The claim also casts doubt on the narrator's authority for reporting "truly" on the private thoughts of all the characters. The narrator has already made a Shandean witticism about the possibility of proving the novel's truth through examining its temporal structure. Reversing Tristram's perplexities about how
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much longer it takes to narrate events than to enact them, Thackeray's narrator claims,

And if you calculate the time for the above dialogue to take place—the time for Briggs and Firkin to fly to the drawing-room—the time for Miss Crawley to be astonished and to drop her volume . . .—and the time for her to come downstairs—you will see how exactly accurate this history is, and how Miss Crawley must have appeared at the very instant when Rebecca had assumed the attitude of humility. (188)

An absurdly humorous suggestion, this calculation would only reinforce the sense of this scene's carefully orchestrated resemblance to a meticulously timed stage farce. And the narrator's suggestion raises more questions about the history's truth-status than it can answer: if these actions "really" took this precise amount of time, how does the narrator know?

Sometimes the narrator offers authenticating sources for his information, such as the Peeping-Tom, eavesdropping footman at Lord Steyne's, Tom Eaves. The sources are not always such minor characters; at one point the narrator claims that Dobbin supplied him with a small detail: "The bride was dressed in a brown silk pelisse (as Captain Dobbin has since informed me)" (259). To claim a source for so minor—and, for that matter, so public—a detail, when hundreds of pages' worth of information goes unattributed, is to spoof the very idea that there could be anything true about this history.

When he pretends to be the gatherer and reporter, rather than the creator, of his facts, the narrator draws attention to their fictionality only indirectly. But he is not always so coy about his position. Early on, he admits that he can report Jos's thoughts of Becky because "novelists have the privilege of knowing everything" (62). The narrator even more pointedly asserts the novelist's unique perspective on Rebecca herself: "If, a few pages back, the present writer claimed the privilege of peeping into Miss Amelia Sedley's bedroom, and understanding with the omniscience of the novelist all the gentle pains and passions which were tossing upon that innocent pillow, why should he not declare himself to be Rebecca's confidant too?" (192). Accordingly, he proceeds to reveals Becky's thoughts.

"The omniscience of the novelist" is precisely the issue here: it is a
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perspective that can only exist in fiction, can never be duplicated in life or even in the writing of history, and is inevitably the source of any heterodiegetically narrated novel. With this fact in mind, I find it odd that Iser claims "it is not the slice of life" in *Vanity Fair* but "the means of observing it that constitutes the reality." Why try to reconcile Thackeray's jubilant jumble of narrative claims with the label of "reality"? There is nothing literally realistic about the omniscient perspective, despite the fact that it is regarded as a convention of literary realism. But his chameleon narrator's insistence on his own fictive nature and on the powers accompanying his status provides constant reminders that the "means of observing" in this novel is as fictitious as the "slice of life" it observes. Thackeray's fiction points again and again to its own fictionality. The one real aspect of the "means of observing" in such a novel is the fact that actual readers really have to exercise memory and imagination to read it, similar to the reading activity Iser describes. But this is true of all narrative texts, not only of realist novels. Iser seems to reverse the novel's relation to realism when he claims that "*Vanity Fair* aims not at presenting social reality, but at presenting the way in which such reality can be experienced" (113). The novel's story is full of details representing "social reality": meticulous descriptions of costume and setting, elaborately represented dialogues, and humorous and serious analyses of relations among the classes, to give just a few examples. The mode of experiencing reality that the text presents is the most fictive thing about it.

In another context (that of the novel's ending), Ina Ferris has persuasively argued that "Thackeray's realist resistance to ending leads finally to a transgression of the logic of realism itself. The uneasy nineteenth-century ending ... may well be less a gesture of realist fidelity than of antirealist dissent" (290). *Vanity Fair*'s narrative interventions are, it seems to me, a complex expression of antirealist dissent, a continual reframing and rephrasing of the impossibilities inherent in realist fiction. Despite the fact that Thackeray's *story* draws on so many conventions of the realist novel, sometimes subverting them and sometimes using them straight, the *discourse* of this novel consistently draws away from realism and into metafiction. The ironic distance this inevitably places between the actual reader and the contents of the text is reproduced in the narrator's stance toward his narratees. The narrator repeatedly attempts to startle the actual reader out of slipping into communion with the numerous narratees in the text.
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DISTANCING STRATEGIES AND "MY READERS"

The question of "distance"—as Iser's analysis shows—is not easily resolvable for *Vanity Fair*. Commentators have usually taken it for granted that Thackeray's narrator, while placing a distance between himself and his characters, establishes a close relation with his reader. This sense of intimacy is, for example, in the background of Iser's assumptions about the novel; it is also one basis for Robert Polhemus's account of the satirically comic effect of *Vanity Fair*. As Polhemus puts it, Thackeray uses the narrator "to create a psychic distance from experience and characters necessary to satiric comedy and also to establish an intimacy between performer and audience." This intimacy, bringing narrator and reader together, paradoxically serves to distance the reader from the fiction; the closeness of the narrator and reader encourages the reader to view *Vanity Fair* with an eye as skeptical as the narrator's and (according to Polhemus) to withhold any sympathy "that would distract us for long from the corrupt farce of *Vanity Fair* as a whole" (152). Some actual readers might disagree with this conclusion about the satire's effect. Anyone who has led a class discussion of *Vanity Fair* knows that despite all the narrator's antics, some readers ("touched," like Becky, "in spite of [themselves]" [366]) cheer for Becky when she flings Johnson's Dictionary back at Miss Pinkerton's Academy, some are moved by Rawdon Crawley's developing affection for his son, and some yearn with Dobbin for his ultimate marriage to Amelia. Still, what's at issue here is the narrator's strategy, not its actual effects. Just as the narrator's irony can fail to obliterate actual readers' sympathies for the characters, his conspiratorial intimacy with his narratee is far from consistent. In fact, the narrator sets up numerous inscribed readers only to knock them down like the puppets that are his characters, leaving the actual reader no solid footing vis à vis the text.

Thackeray's narrative strategies run the gamut of ways to create distance between the actual reader and the narratee. The first of these is his commenting to narratees who are named. A narratee may have a name as specific as "Miss Smith," as the narrator calls the generically envious woman reader who is unimpressed by Amelia's reluctance to rebel against George's faithlessness: "I know Miss Smith has a mean opinion of her. But how many, my dear Madam, are endowed with your prodigious strength of mind?" (292). The flawed narratee—impatient, unsympathetic, and
prudish—is sometimes addressed without a proper name, simply as "madam":

a polite public will no more bear to read an authentic description of vice than a truly refined English or American female will permit the word breeches to be pronounced in her chaste hearing. And yet, madam, both are walking the world before our faces every day, without much shocking us. If you were to blush every time they went by, what complexions you would have! (737–738)

In both examples, the narrator begins with a third-person reference to the figure embodying objectionable attitudes, "Miss Smith" and "a truly refined . . . female." Both references turn, though, to direct address, implicating narratees in the readerly crimes. The strategy is to embarrass actual readers who do share the narratee's feelings of impatience or prudishness out of identifying with these objects of the narrator's scorn. Thackeray's narrator can use this strategy simply and directly, as in his defense of Becky's "setting her cap" at Jos: "I don't think, ladies, we have any right to blame her" (31), or in his sugar-coated but unmistakably bitter attack on yet another unsympathetic lady reader who judges Amelia for her tenderheartedness: "My dear Miss Bullock, I do not think your heart would break in this way" (219).

Even more frequently, the narrator names figures of readers whom he does not deign to address. Strictly speaking, these are not really narratees. If the narratee is the figure to whom the narrator is speaking, these are third parties to that transaction, objects under discussion in the narrative conversation. In this respect they resemble characters, but they exist on a diegetic level separate from the world of Becky and Amelia, because they are represented as reading about that world, not participating in it. The most famous of these named readers is probably "JONES, who reads this book at his Club" and "will pronounce [it] to be excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultra-sentimental." The narrator emphasizes Jones's character-like status while having some fun with this reader's inappropriate attitude:

Yes, I can see Jones at this minute (rather flushed with his joint of mutton and half-pint of wine) taking out his pencil and scoring under the words "foolish, twaddling," etc., and adding to them his own remark of "quite true." 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. (43–44)

Occurring in the novel's first chapter, this remarkably metafictional move supplies an amusing portrait of a bad reader to instruct us on how not to read the novel. What's wrong with Jones is not his objection to sentiment; the narrator obviously disavows any faith in straight-faced, earnest sentimentality. Jones's problem is that in his eagerness to find the "great and heroic" in the book he does not recognize the distanced position the narrator offers on the "foolish, twaddling" parts. While Jones underlines the words, the actual reader, standing at a comfortable distance, can laugh. The narratee's position in the passage is less comfortably clear. Who is the narratee here? Perhaps the narratee gets the joke at Jones's expense, or perhaps the narratee is presumed to share Jones's prejudice. In such a questionable situation, the actual reader might hesitate to identify with the narratee, since that figure may be inscribed as a poor reader.

*Vanity Fair* is full of such shifting references to readers who may or may not represent the narratee. Opening Chapter 12, "Quite a Sentimental Chapter," with a sketch of another superficial reader, the narrator quotes her before twitting her: "We don't care a fig for [Amelia], writes some unknown correspondent with a pretty little handwriting and a pink seal to her note. 'She is *fade* and insipid,' and adds some more kind remarks in this strain, which I should never have repeated at all, but that they are in truth prodigiously complimentary to the young lady whom they concern" (146). The intervention proceeds to detail "similar remarks by good-natured female friends" that "the beloved reader, in his experience of society" is likely to have heard. Here, the "beloved reader" is pointedly inscribed as male. The narratee, then, must either be a man who recognizes the hypocritical back-biting typical of the kind of woman the narrator has in mind, or a person, male or female, who doesn't "care a fig for [Amelia]" and therefore must take the criticism the narrator directs at the "unknown correspondent" and all her "good-natured" sisters. An actual reader who is female has no choice but to be distanced by this intervention; an actual reader who is male can form a positive link between himself and the narratee only by agreeing with the passage's bitter attitude toward female friendships.

And, lest the male reader should get too comfortable in his relation to the narrator, the sarcasm is turned against him later in this strikingly unsentimental chapter. Discussing Amelia's "blind devotion" to George,
the narrator remarks, "It is in the nature and instinct of some women. Some are made to scheme, and some to love; and I wish any respected bachelor that reads this may take the sort that best likes him" (153). Like most of the narrator's comments, this one is ironic: if you read the phrase "that best likes him" in the archaic sense of "that he likes best," the wish is a pleasant one. But if you interpret the phrase in its modern sense, that is, "the type that likes him the best," it takes on a sardonic edge. The narrator's wish for his modern bachelor-reader is that he will end up with the sort of woman who finds him most attractive, be she loving or scheming.

If this narrator is intimate with his readers, it is an intimacy characterized by teasing, bantering, and needling that constantly moves in one direction: only the narrator can tease, for the narratee and the actual reader have no opportunity, as it were, to answer in kind. As Roger Wilkenfeld observes,

Much of the power of *Vanity Fair* resides in Thackeray's tough perception that there is an inevitable separation between the artist who creates and the readers and spectators who look. The artist may provide any number of imaginative access routes to his show but when he chooses to "shut up the box" he does not wait for a signal to act. We who have been metaphorically associated with "yokels" are finally identified as "patrons" but the nominal substitution is no more consoling than the displacement of one engraved fool by another. (318)

Though he does present himself at times as an "engraved fool," the narrator has all the power. The narratee, on the one hand, must submit to sardonic criticism (or, as Iser puts it, is "forced to react to those qualities ascribed to him"). The actual reader, on the other hand, is consistently placed at a distance, outside the combative exchange between narrator, inscribed readers, and narratees.

As often as the narrator refers to "readers" as the objects of his comments, rather than the receivers of what he has to say, he also speaks surprisingly often to "you." Despite all the references to "the astonished reader" (506), "the respected reader" (359), "the beloved reader" (159), "the good-natured reader" (87), "the observant reader" (159), "some carping reader" (147), or "every reader of a sentimental turn" (186), the narrator is not incapable of addressing a reader directly. In the context of the
narrator's sardasms and jokes at his narratees' expense, though, even the most potentially engaging passages of direct address represent distancing moves on the narrator's part. Typically the *Vanity Fair* narrator's addresses to "you" are either sarcastic or accusatory.

We have already seen examples of sarcasm in the narrator's third-person references to his "readers," and the tone carries over into speeches directed at them as well. For instance, his advice to "young ladies" directly reverses his admiration for Amelia's "weakness," so evident elsewhere in the text: "Be shy of loving frankly; never tell all you feel, or (a better way still), feel very little... [N]ever have any feelings which may make you uncomfortable, or make any promises which you cannot at any required moment command and withdraw. This is the way to get on, and be respected, and have a virtuous character in *Vanity Fair*" (220). The obvious verbal irony of such wise counsel to the narratee casts a shadow over other passages in the novel that might, in a different context, look engaging. When Thackeray's narrator says "You and I, my dear reader" (453) the actual reader might be supposed to wish to identify with this beloved narratee. Yet the narrator has so often used terms of endearment ironically that they take on a permanent taint of sarcasm. The narratee might be happy to have the narrator salute him as "my dear," but the actual reader attentive to textual strategies will be more cautious: he or she must reconsider the tenor of that phrase when the narrator—so unremittingly critical, in story as in discourse, of Becky Sharp—refers to her in her most unlovable moments as "our dear Becky" (593) or "our beloved Rebecca" (557). Considering the pall of sarcasm Thackeray's narrator throws over the adjectives "beloved" and "dear," we should not be surprised that earnest novelists like Gaskell and Stowe seldom, if ever, address a "dear reader": Thackeray ruined the phrase for serious use.

When he is more in earnest, Thackeray's narrator is perhaps even less engaging. He openly criticizes narratees for behavior that has nothing to do with reading novels; on matters extratextual as well as textual, he speaks to narratees who are hopelessly flawed. He accuses the narratee of tormenting little boys by sending them to boarding school: "Who feels injustice; who shrinks before a slight; who has a sense of wrong so acute, and so glowing a gratitude of kindness, as a generous boy? and how many of those gentle souls do you degrade, estrange, torture, for the sake of a little loose arithmetic, and miserable dog-Latin?" (77). Considering the degrading experi-
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ences Dobbin undergoes in the setting of a boys' school—not to mention Thackeray's own notoriously unhappy memories of his boarding-school experience—there is no reason to read this passage as pure sarcasm. But the actual reader who is not a sadist will automatically be distanced from the narratee in the passage. If the reader has no connection to any boys, he or she will deflect the question as irrelevant to actual circumstances; if he or she manages boys' educations through another medium than boarding school, the reader can consider the question to be directed to someone else, a narratee who is not the actual reader. And the reader who does send boys to boarding school is unlikely to want to equate that with the decision to "degrade, estrange, torture" them. In any case, the actual reader is actively discouraged from identifying with the narratee.

In less drastic instances, too, the narrator continually badgers the narratee for presumed faults. Usually they are moral or ethical errors that the narratee is imagined to share with the characters (and sometimes with the narrator himself). These failings include the respectable characters' willingness to socialize with Lord Steyne despite his deservedly terrible reputation: "In a word, everybody went to wait upon this great man—everybody who was asked: as you the reader (do not say nay) or I the writer hereof would go if we had an invitation" (553). Or the Crawleys' humoring their unpleasant but wealthy aunt: "You yourself, dear sir, forget to go to sleep after dinner, and find yourself all of a sudden (though you invariably lose) very fond of a rubber" (124). Or Becky Sharp's behavior as she sinks even lower into a life of degradation: "The actions of very vain, heartless, pleasure-seeking people are very often improper (as are many of yours, my friend with the grave face and spotless reputation; but that is merely by the way); and what are those of a woman without faith—or love—or character?" (738). In each of these examples, the narrator forces the narratee to acknowledge similarities between the erring characters and himself. The relation between narrator and narratee is perfectly summed up in the narrator's dictum: "do not say nay." It would be possible, of course, to read these passages as serious exhortations that are meant to jolt actual readers into awareness of their own culpability in the foibles of Vanity Fair: Iser, Carlisle, and other critics certainly read them this way. But in the context of the novel's pattern of distancing interventions—the metafictional frame, the changing identity of the narrator, the sardonic dismissals of bad readers and the sarcastic comments to "you"—the nature of these accusatory pas-
sages seems to shift. Perhaps the narrator is no more in earnest in these little speeches than elsewhere in the text, perhaps the actual reader is no more obliged to identify with these narratees than with "Miss Smith" or "JONES," perhaps the novel's distancing machinery lets the actual reader off the hook. Perhaps the novel is no more than a puppet show depicting a fair—maybe it is all for fun.

WHAT NOVEL WRITING IS FOR: THACKERAY'S GAME

In his characteristically metafictional mood, Thackeray's narrator takes a moment to discuss the kind of novel he is writing and to contrast it with a few of the more popular forms of nineteenth-century fiction. This meditation is introduced by the passage in which the narrator draws attention to his responsibility as entertainer, confessing, "I know that the tune I am piping is a mild one." Playing into the narratee's supposed preference for excitement, he immediately adds, "(although there are some terrific chapters coming presently)" (87). Before embarking on his account of unremarkable occurrences at Vauxhall, the narrator catalogues the choices the novelist has rejected among alternative settings for this story:

We might have treated this subject in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner. Suppose we had laid the scene in Grosvenor Square. . . . Or instead of the supremely genteel, suppose we had resorted to the entirely low, and described what was going on in Mr. Sedley's kitchens. . . . Or if, on the contrary, we had taken a fancy for the terrible, and made the lover of the new femme de chambre a professional burglar . . . we should easily have constructed a tale of thrilling interest, through the fiery chapters of which the reader should hurry, panting. (88)

The ellipses in the quotation represent details the narrator supplies for each of these possible kinds of novels, demonstrating, in a sentence or two for every option, his imaginative capacity to operate within all of the genres he suggests. "But," the narrator concludes,

my readers must hope for no such romance, only a homely story, and must be content with a chapter about Vauxhall, which is so short that it scarce deserves to be called a chapter at all. And yet
it is a chapter, and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in everybody's life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of the history?

Let us then step into the coach with the Russell Square party, and be off to the gardens. There is barely room between Jos and Miss Sharp. (88)

At first glance, this intervention appears to be a claim for the realism of *Vanity Fair*. It could have been a romance or a sensation-novel, a Silver Fork or Newgate blockbuster, but it is not; it merely treats the ordinary experiences of unexceptional characters. The argument takes the point a step further with the comparison of this chapter to those "little chapters in everybody's life" that turn out to have greater consequences in one's "history" than one might have expected. This fiction is like life, the intervention implies, and what's more, life—divided here into "chapters" as novels are—is like fiction.

At the same time, though, the passage emphasizes one respect in which fiction is definitely not like life: the fiction is under the novelist's arbitrary control and operates at his pleasure. I like the narrative "we" in this excerpt: it joins the narrator and the novelist into a unified figure who gets to choose what kind of a story *Vanity Fair* will be, what kinds of details it will convey, and what kind of denouement it will have. This figure mounts the stage here to remind the readers that it is, indeed, a stage. The transition from the intervention back to the action further emphasizes the fictionality of the narrative, as the narrator invites us to try to squeeze into the coach between Jos and Becky. We cannot. For all the narrator's pretended claims to the contrary, life and fiction are two separate realms—as the narrator knows very well and will not allow the actual reader to forget.

When, at the end of the novel, Thackeray's narrator steps back again from the fiction to say, "Come children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out" (797), the move is hardly surprising. The novel has been an entertainment—a moral play, perhaps, but a play nonetheless. In order to grasp the radical difference between Thackeray's distancing narrative strategies and Gaskell's engaging approach, one need only consider how unthinkable it would be for Gaskell's narrator to refer to John and Mary Barton, Jem Wilson, and Job Legh as "puppets." Even if she were to use it metaphorically, the image would obliterate her consistent
treatment of her characters as "real," autonomous people. Thackeray's approach, like Kingsley's, is more playful. The distancing narrator represents the male author's access to a metaliterary realm, where novels refer to themselves and to other novels, as much as (or, in these cases, more than) they refer to life. As I argue in Chapter 7, it is no coincidence that the Victorian authors who took access to that playful realm in their texts were male.

What is Thackeray's game? Kingsley is not, after all, the only reader to have considered him "earnest": one camp of twentieth-century critics persists in taking the narrator's preacher pose seriously, treating the exhortative passages as though they were straightforwardly moralistic messages for the edification of "the reader." The self-mockery implied by the preacher's presenting himself in motley, however, should not be overlooked. This narrator is only playing preacher, as he is playing historian, and as his characters are playing out the play. Readings of *Vanity Fair* informed by more recent literary theory have suggested that Thackeray's text expresses profound doubts about the ability of narrative fiction to do more than play: it is, in Ferris's phrase, a pointedly "uneasy narrative" (289). Ferris sees in the *Vanity Fair* narrator an awareness that metaphor inevitably detaches signs from that which they signify (302); Robin Ann Sheets, too, notes that in the world of *Vanity Fair*, words invariably "have their own meaning . . . apart from reality. . . . When words do not correspond to some objective, communally held body of meanings, but become arbitrary and subjective tokens, then literary art ceases to function as a mimetic structuring of extra-literary reality" (430). In a similar vein, Jack Rawlins has shown that Thackeray's narrator mimics a whole range of verbal styles, not only to undercut or parody selected modes of discourse, but also to discredit language and hence "the authorial process" altogether (158, 160). Still, each of these critics views Thackeray through a lens colored by assumptions about the didactic purposes of realist fiction, and each concludes that Thackeray's fiction isn't (as Ferris puts it) "mere linguistic play—far from it" (303). Each finds a message (one could almost say a moral) in Thackeray's text, as though it were still necessary to defend nineteenth-century novels against anyone who doubts their seriousness.

I do doubt that *Vanity Fair* is "serious," and yet I would never mean to imply that it is therefore not good. If we look at this novel's narrative
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discourse against the backdrop of other novels by Thackeray's contemporaries, we can see that it differs strikingly in its self-presentation and narrative stance from such earnest realist fictions as *Mary Barton*. The difference lies in the novels' relative relations to play: I call the difference one of gender, but not one of quality or value. I argue in Chapter 7 that men's and women's social circumstances played a significant role in their choices of narrative stance. Before examining that role, though, I want to inquire into the rhetoric of texts whose authors "cross gender" in writing them. The next two chapters look at women authors who sometimes use distancing strategies and men authors who sometimes employ engaging techniques—not to write "better" novels on any aesthetic or moral grounds, but rather to manipulate the rhetoric of prose fiction to their own ends.