Chapter Eight

A special presentation copy of the first issue of *Vanity Fair* in book form that Thackeray gave to an aristocratic friend bore on its inside cover a sketch drawn by the author depicting Punch in livery handing out the book with a bow. So he called attention to its origins—evident enough to the growing number of readers who followed it initially through its part publication. As the first of Thackeray's "independent" novels—published, that is, separately rather than in the pages of a magazine—it marks an important milestone in his career, but in the yellow-wrapped form in which it first emerged, it obviously had not fallen far from the Mahogany Tree. In its first version, the title of *Vanity Fair* was set in twig-shaped capitals recalling the first masthead of *Punch*. The grotesque illustrations and decorated initials resembled those that had loomed up before the eyes of subscribers to *Punch's Almanack*. Nor could the clown figure along with the framework of the children's pantomime and puppet show come as a surprise to those who had been with this magazine from its beginnings. "Pantomime . . . may be considered as the natural form of the visible language,—literature being taken as the artificial. This is the most primitive, as well as the most comprehensive of all," proclaimed the first number of *Punch; or, The London Charivari*. "Indeed, if we consider for a moment that all existence is but a Pantomime, of which Time is the harlequin changing to-day into yesterday, summer into winter, youth into old age, and life into death, and we but the clowns who bear the kicks and buffets of the scene, we cannot fail to desire the general cultivation of an art
which constitutes the very existence of life itself." At the same time, these opening words of the debut number warned subscribers not to be misled by the title into "a belief that we have no other intention than the amusement of the thoughtful crowd." The Merry Master Punch may have a traditional reputation as a creature of "a rude and boisterous mirth," the editor notes, but "when we have seen him parading in the glories of his motley, flourishing his baton . . . in time with his own unrivalled discord, by which he seeks to win the attention and admiration of the crowd, what visions of graver puppetry have passed before our eyes!"

Graver puppetry indeed. In reviewing Eugène Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris*, the future stage manager likened the elemental appeal of innocence threatened by villainy as dramatized in this thriller to "that exciting contest between the white-robed angel of good and the black principle of evil, which, as children we have seen awfully delineated in the galanty-show, under the personifications of the devil and the baker." He would be as a child again: "And the subject is interesting, let us say what we will: if galanty-shows are not now what they were some scores of years since, that is: still is it a stirring and exciting theme." To be sure, in Thackeray’s version the white robe is not spotless, and the black one is greyed, but what he was to refer to as "that strange and awful struggle of good and wrong which takes place in our hearts and in the world" renews itself in *Vanity Fair*. Of another French writer, the dramatist Scribe, he complained, as we have noticed, that "in his hands [characters] are ‘marionettes’ to be shifted about at his pleasure: without character, colour, or physiognomy.” As implied in the curtain speech that provides the prologue to *Vanity Fair*, such criticism was not leveled at this puppet master, whose dolls “have given satisfaction to the very best company in this empire.” Furthermore, "The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire; the Amelia doll, though it has a smaller circle of admirers, has yet been carved and dressed with the greatest care by the artist.” In reviewing Scribe he accused that popular comedian of turning history into "a sad farce," and of bringing "art into contempt" by his flippancy. "If any subject might thus be trifled with,” he objected, “fictitious writing would cease to be regarded as a medium of truth of any kind. Fiction should assume the cap and bells, and Imagination go out as a pantomime clown.” Exactly. What he learned from Reybaud and other masters of “comic philosophy” was confirmed by his colleagues around the Mahogany Tree who convinced him that the Merry Master Punch can be “a teacher of no mean pretensions.”
The various "performances" promised by the manager-author in his curtain speech also bear a close relationship to the "Heads" announced in the opening number of *Punch* and maintained by subsequent issues: Politics ("with no party prejudices"); Fashions ("information on the movements of the Fashionable World" furnished by Mrs. Punch, who is acquainted with the "elite"); and Police News ("under the direction of an experienced nobleman"). Along with the serious business of life, Master Punch also gives due attention to its recreative side, as subsumed under the Fine Arts, Music and the Drama, Sporting, and Facetiae. In *Vanity Fair*, accordingly, we are offered "laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling... bullies pushing about, bucks ogling the women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the lookout." Thus at the outset we are led to expect an amalgam of politics, social life, crime, and sport, and an admixture of the serious and the humorous. The "scenes of all sorts" presumably are intended to meet all wants and needs: "some dreadful combats" for those interested in diplomacy or its continuation on the battlefield; some "grand and lofty horseriding" for the sportsmen in the audience; "some scenes of high life" for the fashionables and their hangers-on; for ordinary folk, "some of very middling deed." In addition there is "some love making for the sentimental," "some light comic business" for the light-minded, and the artistic should be pleased with the assurance that "the whole [is] accompanied by appropriate scenery, and brilliantly illuminated with the Author's own candles."

Whatever the pretensions of *Punch*, its "light comic business" was undoubtedly what drew most readers. "Ah!... nothing now succeeds unless it's in the comic line," complains Mr. Cobbington, the fictitious bookseller in G. W. M. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London*—which in going about its night business is not without its own lighter moments:

"We have comic Latin grammars, and comic Greek grammars; indeed I don't know but what English grammar, too, is a comedy altogether [continues Cobbington]. All our tragedies are made into comedies by the way they are performed; and no work sells without comic illustrations to it. I have brought out several new comic works which have been very successful. For instance 'The Comic Wealth of Nations': 'The Comic Parliamentary Speeches'; 'The Comic Report of the Poor Law Commissioners,' with an Appendix containing the 'Comic Dietary Scale,' and the 'Comic Distresses of the Industrious Population.' I even propose to bring out a 'Comic Whole Duty of Man.' All these books will sell well: they do admirably for the nurseries of the children of the aristocracy. In fact they are as good as manuals and text-books."10
Reynolds's mouthpiece could well be describing some of the *facetiae* advertised in the monthly parts of *Vanity Fair*, such as Percival Leigh's *Comic Latin Grammar* and *Comic English Grammar*. Corresponding to the “Comic Wealth of Nations” is Douglas Jerrold's *Twiddlethumb Town*, concerned with “the speculations, sayings and doings of the Twiddlethumblings—their social and political condition—their customs and manners.”

One of Thackeray's closest friends among the *Punch* humorists was Gilbert Abbott A'Beckett, whose specialty was the illustrated comic textbook. Himself a barrister and presumably knowing whereof he spoke, A'Beckett manages in *The Comic Blackstone* (1846) to make the law an ass in a manner worthy of W. S. Gilbert after him. As he makes darkness of Blackstone in this book, he makes light of Hume and Lindgard in *The Comic History of England* (1847), an unbuttoned chronicle extending from the landing of Julius Caesar and the Roman legions through the reign of George III. Convinced that the “food is certainly not the most wholesome which is the heaviest and least digestible,” A'Beckett is determined “to blend amusement with instruction by serving up in as palatable a shape as he could, the facts of English history.” His device of a children's primer for adults is suggested immediately by the woodcut on the title page representing “Clio Instructing the Young British Lion in History,” the lion depicted literally as a cub in the lap of the muse. The plates designed by John Leech are the visual counterpart of the author's iconoclastic view of the great captains and kings: a phalanx of Roman soldiers is beaten down by a single barbarian with a club; William the Conqueror falls flat on his face as he lands on the English shore; a roly-poly Henry VIII greets a hook-nosed Francis I on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, while beneath them a French poodle sniffs an English bull.

One of Thackeray's biographers has suggested that A'Beckett borrowed a leaf or two from Thackeray's earlier (and unsuccessful) *Punch* series *Miss Tickletoby's Lectures on English History*. If so, in his invocation to “The Muse, whoever she be, who presides over this Comic History” in *Vanity Fair* (chap. 50), Thackeray could well be returning the compliment. A'Beckett deliberately did not carry forward his history beyond the reign of George III on the ground that “we are very desirous to avoid taking any liberty with the names of living persons, and perhaps giving pain or offence, which might be the result were we to venture nearer to our own times than the reign of the grandfather of her Present Majesty.” The less reticent comic historian of *Vanity Fair* begins his account...
“while the present century was in its teens” as the opening reads. To an extent he carries forward his *Punch* colleague’s *Comic History of England* through the Regency. Like its predecessor, it is “illuminated” with historiated initials, caricatures, cuts, and plates. The wrapper drawing, with its upside-down statue on Nelson’s Pillar and the Punch figure occupying the place of the Duke of Wellington in the monument at Hyde Park, both dimly perceptible in the background, prepared readers for a somewhat cockeyed view of history. Their expectations were borne out by the pictures inside some of the initials, like the one introducing “Crawley of King’s Crawley” (chap. 7), where we see an Elizabethan courtier kneeling before an obese queen drinking beer from a pitcher. A later one shows Napoleon pacing in his prison cell, a clown bowing before him (chap. 18). Becky herself is transformed into Napoleon with a spy glass looking out over the sea in the initial picture that opens “A Vagabond Chapter” (chap. 64). At the beginning of the chapter called “Georgy Is Made A Gentleman” (chap. 56), little Georgy Osborne, presumably in line with his pampered upbringing, is represented in the crown and robes of the Prince Regent.

In this “comic history,” moreover, history is reduced as well as caricatured. The epical title of chapter 2, “In Which Miss Sharp And Miss Sedley Prepare To Open The Campaign,” introduces early the “dreadful combats” promised by the manager. The mock military motif is repeated by other chapter headings: “Rebecca Is In Presence Of The Enemy,” referring to the launching of her attack on Jos Sedley; “In Which Amelia Joins Her Regiment,” and “In Which Amelia Invades The Low Countries,” announcing the Brussels episodes. “Venus Preparing The Armour of Mars,” the subject of one of the full-page plates, turns out to be a short, lumpy Mrs. O’Dowd packing the war implements of the sleeping (and inaudibly snoring) Major O’Dowd. The end of the Battle of Waterloo is represented in another plate by a fat-faced, short-legged, and visibly uncomfortable Jos Sedley fleeing on a horse. Consistent with this petticoat history, it is Becky Sharp’s victory at Waterloo (the Duchess of Richmond’s ball) rather than the triumph of the Duke of Wellington in the field that this chronicler chooses to narrate, just as later we witness her Elba rather than that of Napoleon. So at once, the great is diminished and the commonplace magnified.

The publishers of *Vanity Fair: Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society*, Bradbury and Evans, made a particular point of Thackeray’s connection with their magazine, identifying the clown figure
depicted on the cover as "Author of . . . the 'Snob Papers' in 'Punch' &c &c." One of the early reviewers dubbed the author "Thack the Snob Killer," and others too were quick enough to connect the "Papers" with the *Pen and Pencil Sketches*. "The 'Snob Papers' in *Punch* have before evinced the author's knowledge of the springs of action," affirmed a review used to promote the novel, "but we were hardly prepared, though our expectations were warm on the subject, for such a deep insight into the human heart as is here represented."16 In format, certainly, "The Snobs of England" (later reprinted as *The Book of Snobs*) prefigured *Vanity Fair*, with its monthly installments also decorated by pictorial initials of the author's design. From the literary standpoint the novel extends the papers by giving soul and specific personality to the generic abstractions of the "Snobbium Gatherum."

*Vanity Fair* qualifies as a *Book of Snobs* no less than the series that was coming to an end just as *Vanity Fair* was beginning. Here too are Respectable Snobs (Lord Steyne, Lord and Lady Huddlestone-Fuddlestone), Clerical Snobs (the Bute Crawleys), Great City Snobs (Sedley, Osborne), Country Snobs (the Crawleys), Military Snobs (George Osborne, General Tufto), Irish Snobs (Mrs. O'Dowd), Continental Snobs (The Prince of Pumpernickel and his court), and all manner of Party-Giving and Dining-Out Snobs (including the antisocial but politically ambitious Sir Pitt Crawley). Hardly anybody, in fact, in the world of this novel is free from the taint of snobbery in one form or another, defined in Thackeray's dictionary as "the mean admiration of mean things."17 One of the papers, "Snobs and Marriage," in its sweeping indictment of the "ephemeral repertories" that were then drawing readers, looks forward in particular to *Vanity Fair*: "Does not the world love *Court Guides*, and millinery, and plate, and carriages? Mercy on us! Read the fashionable intelligence; read the *Court Circular*; read the genteel novels; survey mankind, from Pimlico to Red Lion Square, and see how the Poor Snob is aping the Rich Snob; how the Mean Snob is grovelling at the feet of the Proud Snob; and the Great Snob is lording it over his humble brother."18 Among the snobs of *Vanity Fair*, Miss Osborne, we notice, is addicted to the "Fashionable Reunions" section of the *Morning Post* (chap. 42); the *Court Guide* is conspicuous on Sir Pitt Crawley's desk, alongside his blue books, pamphlets, and Bible (chap. 54); and Jos Sedley consults the Travelling Peerage during his tour of the continent with Dobbin and Amelia (chap. 63). The "genteel novel" itself, as it surveys mankind from Pimlico to Bloomsbury Square and plummets
through the pecking order of society from the rich to the down-at-heel, serves as a reasonable facsimile of Punch's "fashionable intelligence" for all curious readers.

As for the principal social climber of this grand assemblage, it is additionally worth noting that a writer for Punch commented during the summer of 1845, when Thackeray was writing Vanity Fair, on an advertisement (signed by one A.B.) currently appearing in the Times seeking a "lady wishing for a situation as GOVERNESS in a gentleman's family residing in the country, to instruct two little girls in music, drawing and English; a thorough knowledge of the French language is required." The position, according to this account offered a comfortable home, but no salary. Observes Master Punch: "Does he regard the governess as a horse that he would work her like one, and in terms corresponding to keep and stabling? And lastly on what principle or pretence does he presume to call his family 'a gentleman's?' Answer that, A.B. Answer that!" This last certainly is one question the author of Vanity Fair raises.

The situation publicized by Punch was far from an unusual one, the plight and social status of the governess figuring prominently both in fiction and in journalism during this decade. Back toward the onset of the century, the "celebrated philosopher . . . Miss Edgeworth" (as Thackeray refers to her in his first novel) had urged in her treatise Practical Education: "It is surely the interest of parents to treat the person who educates their children, with that perfect equality and kindness, which will conciliate her affection, and which will at the same time preserve her influence and authority over her pupils." Writing of a period closer to the time when Vanity Fair takes place than when it was written, Miss Edgeworth is sanguine on the whole about the circumstances of these parents' assistants: "And it is with pleasure we observe, that the style of behaviour to governesses, in well bred families, is much changed within these few years. A governess is no longer treated as an upper servant, or as an intermediate being between a servant and a gentlewoman; she is now being treated as the friend and companion of the family, and she must, consequently, have warm and permanent interest in its prosperity: she becomes attached to her pupils from gratitude to their parents, from sympathy, from generosity, as well as from the strict sense of duty." She cautions affluent families, therefore, not against exploiting governesses, but against the opposite excess of over-indulging them—encouraging intimate social relations, making the teachers of their children "their com-
panion in all their amusements" to the extent that the young charges are neglected. Becky writes to her friend Amelia from Queen's Crawley that "I am to be treated as one of the family except on company days" (chap. 8), a situation that undoubtedly would have met with the approval of Miss Edgeworth, but probably little else about the regimen at this arcadian retreat would have. When it comes to cribbage with the young Miss Crawleys, as against the young Sir Pitt's sermons and pamphlets, we can easily guess what choice Miss Edgeworth would have proposed for Becky. The celebrated philosopher says nothing about the master of the household ogling and pinching the children's governess and is silent too about the said young gentlewoman's eloping with the master's son.

*Practical Education* also warns parents against choosing a governess from the ranks of entertainers. In one passage that we can imagine Thackeray's reading with amused interest, Miss Edgeworth cites the example of an opera dancer who applied for this coveted position with a genteel family. "Do I not speak good Parisian French? Have I any provincial accent?" asks the would-be lady in attempting to overcome the natural resistance of her prospective employer. "I will undertake to teach the language grammatically. And for music and dancing, without vanity, may I not pretend to teach them to any young person?" This case offers Miss Edgeworth occasion to raise the issue that concerned many early nineteenth-century parents—the value of exclusive attention to "accomplishments":

Without alarming those mothers, who declare themselves above all things anxious for the rapid progress of their daughters in every fashionable accomplishment, it may be innocently asked, what price such mothers are willing to pay for these advantages. Any price within the limits of our fortune! they will probably exclaim.

There are other standards by which we can measure the value of objects, as well as by money. "Fond mother, would you, if it were in your power, accept of an opera dancer for your daughter's governess, upon condition that you should live to see that daughter dance the best minuet at a birthnight ball?"

"Not for the world," replies the mother. "Do you think I would hazard my daughter's innocence and reputation, for the sake of seeing her dance a good minuet? Shocking! Absurd! What can you mean by such an outrageous question?"  

Thackeray for his part was acquainted with real-life counterparts of Miss Edgeworth's hypothetical opera dancer. For one example, there was the life history of his friend Lady Morgan, still a garrul-
ous gadabout in the 1840s, who was of theatrical ancestry, and whose rise from governess to an upper-class marriage and glittering social success on the continent bore a suggestive resemblance to the progress of Becky Sharp, which has been duly noted. He was on more intimate terms with a former governess "in a very sober, worthy family in England," identified simply as Pauline, whose story he tells briefly in one of his accounts from Paris sent to the Britannia in 1841. Here he relates how he renewed acquaintance with her at a masked ball during carnival time, when she tapped him on the shoulder, and subsequently he visited her in her quarters in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin, where, despite her wretched surroundings, she comported herself "with the air and politeness of a duchess." He muses on her eventual fate:

Madame or Mademoiselle Pauline must be now five-and-forty years old, and I wonder whether she still goes to the Carnival balls? If she is alive, and has a gown to pawn, or a shilling to buy a ticket, or a friend to give her one, or is not in the hospital, no doubt she was dancing away last night to the sound of Monsieur Dufrèsne's trumpets, and finished the morning at the Courtille.

and reviews her past:

Que voulez-vous? it is her nature. Before she turned Protestant, and instructed the respectable English family in whose bosom she found a home, where she became acquainted with all the elegancies of life, and habituated to the luxuries of refinement, where she had a comfortable hot joint every day with the children, in the nursery, at one, and passed the evening deliciously in the drawing room, listening to the conversation of the ladies, making tea, mayhap, for the gentlemen as they came up from their wine, or playing quadrilles and waltzes when her lady desired her to do so—before this period of her genteel existence, it is probable that Madame Pauline was a grisette.

At any rate, it is to the life of the grisette that she returns, even though, conjectures Thackeray (in the voice of Titmarsh), she could have found another situation as governess, with the good recommendation she received from her upper-class employer, "or have seized upon a promise of marriage from young Master Tom, at college, if she had been artful; or, better still, from a respectable governess have become a respectable stepmother, as many women with half her good looks have done."

In this essay Thackeray leads us to expect that we have not heard the last of this grisette, and thanks to the freedom allowed to the "sham historian," he eventually scrambled life and art in order to allow her to miss out on a chance to become a "respectable step-
mother," but yet to marry "Master Tom," to slip back to Bohemia, but to ascend once more to "respectability." As his account further proceeds, Thackeray makes clear that her life furnished him with more than the material of romance:

A fierce, honest moralist might, to be sure, find a good deal to blame in Madame Pauline's conduct and life; and I should probably offend the reader if I imparted to him secrets which the lady told me with the utmost simplicity, and without the slightest appearance of confusion. But to rightly judge the woman's character, we must take the good and the bad together. It would have been easy for us to coin a romantic, harrowing story of some monstrous seducer, in three volumes, who, by his superior blackness of character, should make Madame Pauline appear beside him as white as snow; but I want to make no heroine of her. Let us neither abuse her nor pity her too much, but look at the woman as we find her, if we look at her at all. Her type is quite unknown in England; it tells a whole social history, and speaks of manners and morals widely different from those which obtain in our own country. There are a hundred thousand Paulines in Paris, cheerful in poverty, careless and prodigal in good fortune, but dreadfully lax in some points of morals in which our own females are praiseworthily severe.

When the opportunity arose to impart Madame Pauline's "secrets" to the English public, Thackeray indeed made no "heroine" of her (the account was pointedly subtitled A Novel Without A Hero). Like the tolerant eclectics that this honest, but not fierce, moralist has trained us to be, we "take the good and the bad together." Moreover, to properly assess her character we must reconstruct her past, go back to her "education . . . first associates . . . first temptations," as with her predecessor Catherine Hayes. "On the wings of a novel," furthermore, we are propelled into the future of this demimondaine victim of fate and her own nature.

So we are reminded that Thackeray conceived his novel-without-a-hero as a "cynical and sentimental history" in addition to a comic one. Though his principal nonheroine was drawn from life, the scenario of her adventures was suggested, at least in part, by a novel—appropriately a French one. During one of his Paris visits Thackeray was much delighted, it will be recalled, by a satire he read and reviewed—Louis Reybaud's Jérôme Paturot. Among his short-lived careers, Jerome attempts writing, of which something has already been said, seeking advice from the editor of a feuilleton. Here is Thackeray's translation of the formula proposed by the editor for a tale suitable for family reading: "My dear, nothing easier. After you have written a number or two, you will see that
you can write seventy or a hundred at your will. For example you take a young woman, beautiful, persecuted, and unhappy. You add, of course, a brutal tyrant of a husband or father; you give the lady a perfidious friend, and introduce a lover, the pink of virtue, valour, and manly beauty. What is more simple? You mix up your characters well, and can serve them up hot in a dozen or fourscore numbers as you please.” Jerome, who considers himself above such crowd pleasing, scorns the editor’s advice, but not Thackeray, who was at this time still trying to find his way to the great public. We now know how he proceeded to “mix up” these characters in his own score of numbers. Amelia Sedley certainly answers to the “beautiful, persecuted, and unhappy” maiden, as does our darling Becky to her “perfidious friend.” There is a “brutal tyrant” of a father-in-law, if not father. Dobbin stands for the “pink of virtue [and] valour,” the “manly beauty” reserved for that “padded booby” George Osborne, who also qualifies as a cruel husband—if unwittingly so.

Reybaud’s satire seems also to have helped Thackeray limn out the character of the “perfidious friend.” Jerome marries a grisette named Malvina, and at one point we are told that once Jerome has risen to become a captain in the National Guard, “Ambition . . . seized upon the captain’s wife, who too was determined to play her part in the world, and had chosen the world of fashion for her sphere of action. A certain Russian Princess, of undoubted grandeur, had taken a great fancy to Madame Paturot, and under the auspices of that illustrious hyperborean chaperon, she entered the genteel world.” Becky, also a product of the bohemia of Paris and married to a captain, crashes the genteel world, like her counterpart, through charm, facility with words, and by the aid of patrons—in her instance a grande dame and a lord.

Just as Becky earns her introduction to court, Malvina, through her aristocratic connection, wins an invitation for herself and her husband to a Tuilleries ball, in anticipation of which she prepared “une resplendissante toilette.” This episode impressed Thackeray as “a description of the affair so accurate, that, after translating it, I for my part feel as if I were quite familiar with the palace of the French king.” The power of the novelist thus enables readers to enter genteel society along with the heroine.

And how much easier it is to enjoy this Barmecide dance in the description of honest Paturot than to dress at midnight, and pay a guinea for a carriage, and keep out of one’s wholesome bed, in order to look at King Louis Philippe smiling! What a mercy it is not to be a
gentleman! What a blessing it is not to be obliged to drive a cab in white kid gloves, nor to sit behind a great floundering racing-tailed horse of Rotten Row, expecting momentarily that he will jump you into the barouche full of ladies just ahead! What a mercy it is not to be obliged to wear tight lacquered boots, nor to dress for dinner, nor to go to balls at midnight, nor even to be a member of the House of Commons, nor to be prevented from smoking a cigar if you are so minded! All which privileges of poverty may Fortune long keep to us! Men do not know half their luck, that is the fact. If the real truth were known about things, we should have their Graces of Sutherland and Devonshire giving up their incomes to the national debt and saying to their country, "Give me a mutton chop and a thousand a year!"  

It follows then that the Barmecide feast that we enjoy at Saint James's Palace, ushered into the midst of "the very best of company," should be treated by the narrator as a vicarious experience: "We are authorized to state that Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's costume de cour . . . was of the most elegant and brilliant description"; "This may be said, that in all London there was no more loyal heart than Becky's after this interview"; "The particulars of Becky's costume were in the newspapers—feathers, lappets, superb diamonds, and all the rest." The author belongs not with those "who wear stars and cordons," but with those "who, in muddy boots, dawdle up and down Pall Mall, and peep into the coaches as they drive up with the great folks in their feathers." He even questions the ability of "such a feeble and inexperienced pen as mine to attempt to relate" the interview between Becky and her Imperial Master: "The dazzled eyes close before that Magnificent Idea. Loyal respect and decency tell even the imagination not to look too keenly and audaciously about the sacred audience-chamber" (chap. 48). "Loyal respect and decency," however, do not prevent this Asmodeus of Mayfair turned "fashionable intelligencer" to insinuate much about what goes on behind the dazzling exteriors into which we are offered tantalizing peeps. As already noted, his reading of that "course of French humbug" called Jérôme Paturet led him to conclude that "if there be any writer in England who has knowledge and wit sufficient, he could do well to borrow the Frenchman's idea and give a similar satire on our own country."  

In concocting his "similar satire," Thackeray had at hand, of course, those "pictures of genteel life," composed by "authors . . . connected with the fashionable world," the fine company of "literary snobs" to which he had introduced readers of Punch. In re-
viewing one of these "pictures," Disraeli's *Coningsby*, Thackeray remarked that the "secrets of high life" seemed to have a natural appeal to all readers from squires down to lady's maids. Some of the chapter headings of *Vanity Fair* promise more "secrets of high life": "Private and Confidential"; "Family Portraits"; "A Quarrel About An Heiress"; "A Marriage And Part Of A Honeymoon"; "Gaunt House"; "In Which The Reader Is Introduced To The Very Best Of Company"; "Returns To The Genteel World." These and other such titles subliminally recall the scandal chronicles disguised as society novels that had swamped readers between *Vivian Grey* and *Vanity Fair*—such as *The Exclusives*, *A Marriage in High Life*, *Family Records*, *Memoirs of a Peeress*, *The Debutante; or, The London Season*, *The Man of Fortune*, and *The Woman of the World*. The authors of "the genteel novels" whom Thackeray mildly needles in *The Book of Snobs* intrude themselves in various ways, obvious and subtle, in *Vanity Fair*. Mrs. Guy Flouncey, the charming, witty social climber of *Coningsby*, has been suggested as one of the prototypes of Becky Sharp, as Lord Monmouth, the cynical aristocrat of that sociopolitical fantasy, anticipates Lord Steyne. The title of Mrs. Gore's *Peers and Parvenus* clearly pinpoints the targets of Thackeray's satire. In a review Thackeray referred to her *Sketches of English Character* as a series of "worldly lectures" bearing the implicit moral that "the world is the most hollow, heartless, vulgar, brazen world, and those are luckiest who are out of it." This title, yoked with her *Sketch Book of Fashion*, a series of vignettes looking back to Regency London and Brighton, and *The Fair of May Fair*, a cynical-sentimental anthology of marital manoeuvering, flirtation, and adultery in which love matches are contrasted with marriages of convenience, almost yields the first title that Thackeray gave to his "worldly lectures"—*Vanity Fair: Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society*. Among other of his so-called literary snobs, Samuel Warren's still popular *Ten Thousand a Year* is echoed in the most famous of the chapter headings of *Vanity Fair*—"How To Live Well On Nothing A Year." The concluding chapter, "Which Contains Births, Marriages, and Deaths" copies the newspaper columns of the day, but also twists about the subtitle of Theodore Hook's *All in the Wrong; or, Births, Deaths, and Marriages*.

A number of these novelists belonged to the ménage of Henry Colburn, who early laid claim to be the first to give the reading public "delineations of the most refined society, by its most refined members," and thereby to have "rescued the annals of Polite Life from the Swiss, the valet, and the lady's-maid, the rip, the roué, and
the blackleg." Colburn's rescue operation was not so thoroughgoing as he had hoped, for fictitious autobiographies of servants purportedly exposing the "secrets" of their betters continued to abound, as variously represented by the journal Figaro in London (1831–38), edited by Gilbert A'Beckett before he went to Punch, Matthew James Higginson's Peter Priggins the College Scout (1841), and Lady Blessington's Memoirs of a Femme de Chambre (1846). In the face of Colburn's claim, Charles Yellowplush's editor affirms that this literary footman offers "the only authentic picture of fashionable life which has been given to the world in our time." That later reincarnation of Yellowplush, Charles Jeames De La Pluche, Esq, presents a disenchanted view of the haut monde through the pages of Punch. Aspiring to form "a noble kinnexion" with "Harrystoxy," this cockney manservant comes a cropper through some unfortunate "muccantile speculations," and reconciles himself to becoming just plain James Plush, manager of the aptly named Wheel of Fortune Public House, frequented by butlers and footmen of the nobility. Hence he knows whereof he speaks: "People phansy it's hall gaiety and pleasure the life of us fashnabble gents about townd," he confides to his diary. "But I can tell 'em it's not hall goold that glitters. They dont know our momints of hagony, hour ours of studdy and reflechshun. . . . they little think that leader of the tong, seamingly so reckliss, is a careworn mann! and yet so it is." Among the "fashnabble gents" with whom De La Pluche claims acquaintanceship during his brief foray into society is one "Mr. Mills, my rivle in Halbany." This gentleman is none other, one presumes, than John Mills, author of D'Horsay; or, The Follies of the Day (1844), probably the most sensational scandal chronicle of the decade, published in the same year as Coningsby. In his book Mills deplores the various reminiscences of "high life below stairs" that had been foisted on the public, and the signature "A Man of Fashion" on the title page was obviously intended to give his own account the stamp of authenticity. Ostensibly based upon the career of Lady Blessington's consort, this novel gained notoriety in its day because of its open and often malicious representation of other well-known aristocrats—notably the Marquess of Hertford, prototype of both Disraeli's Lord Monmouth in Coningsby and Thackeray's Lord Steyne, here depicted as a debauche in the last stages of moral and physical degeneracy. Striking similarities in point of view and tone with Vanity Fair indicate that Thackeray must have had more than a casual acquaintance with the book, if not with the author.
The author of this murky calendar of calumny professes a serious aim, to distill "the essence of the age in which we live" out of a series of "cursory glances at life" (preface). His somewhat ramshackle epic of the ton, which sweeps through London and its environs, taking in Curzon Street, Hyde Park, Crockford's, Tattersall's, the Queen's Bench, along with assorted taverns, race tracks and gambling halls, is intended as a warning to the unwary. His heightened and metaphorical language is in keeping with this end. Hyde Park on a July afternoon is denounced as "a hot-bed of vanity" where "the votaries of fashion were thronging the ring . . . to flit their painted wings in the hour prescribed" (chap. 6). To this philosophical man of fashion who veers between "the vein sentimental" and scorn for human vanity, "effects are so often the reflection of such secret and hidden causes, that to attempt to dive beneath the surface and peep at their source and spring, is a futile expenditure of exertion and labour." Nevertheless, "as far as within the compass of our abilities to lay bare the machinery working the woof of the adventures, and pulling the strings of our puppets on the stage, we will to the work with a will, and make them dance a jig to as merry a tune as was ever scraped on a catgut" (chap. 16). In line with his moral purpose, this puppet master justifies even the invasion of privacy: "Shall we, with the power of Asmodeus, skip o'er wall and roof, and, stripping the substantial curtain of bricks and mortar from all its inward secrets,—lay them bare to the prying, peeping eyes of our companions? Yes, or how can we expose 'follies of the day' and vices of the night?" (chap. 10). In the long run, he declares, "should the result . . . prove to a single sceptic how fruitless it is to join the gaudy train of Folly, how painful to make pleasure the business of existence, they [the author's efforts] will meet with a reward more than commensurate to the exertion." The way clearly was prepared for the melancholic theater manager who takes over in Vanity Fair and is ready to stoop even to "the Tom Eavesian way of life" to make his point.39

In his own "delineations of the most refined society," Thackeray adopts neither the "below stairs" vantage point nor that of the "man of fashion." Lady Blessington, a fashionable authoress who had pushed her way into society, has a character remark: "The middle class is indeed, most estimable, possessing much of the quality of its favourite beverage, beer, having neither the froth attributed to the fashionable portion of the highest class, nor the dregs which pertain to the lower."40 The historian of Vanity Fair, following her lead, identifies himself neither with the froth nor the dregs, addressing
himself rather to "our gracious public—situated between Saint Giles's and Saint James's." Posing as a solid member of the middle class, he dissociates himself from the ranks of the society novelists when he approaches Gaunt House, as emphatically as he had from those of the military novelists at Waterloo. Appropriately, at the great ball at Lord Steyne's mansion, he places himself not with the guests inside, but with the outsiders looking in, "the honest newspaper fellow who sits in the hall and takes down the names of the great ones who are admitted to the feasts." At other times, he is the snapper up of trifles "at second hand," out of the gossip sheets beloved by "Party-Giving and Dining-Out Snobs." "It is only by inquiry and perseverance that one sometimes gets hints of these secrets," he affirms, "and by a similar diligence every person who treads the Pall Mall pavement and frequents the clubs of the metropolis, knows either through his own experience or through some acquaintance with whom he plays at billiards or shares the joint, something about the genteel world of London" (chap. 37). Playing on the title of a popular exemplary memoir of the day, "The pursuit of fashion under difficulties," he suggests, "would be a fine theme for any great person who had the wit, the leisure, and the knowledge of the English language necessary for the compiling of such a history." Thackeray announces his credentials for the undertaking, along with his intention to elevate the general readers' passion for gossip into moral teaching, while he appeals adroitly both to their social climbing instinct and their desire for self-improvement.

With the mock awe he expresses from time to time, the narrator of *Vanity Fair* brings his readers to the threshold of Gaunt House, but draws back: "Dear brethren, let us tremble before those august portals. I fancy them guarded by grooms of the chamber with flaming silver forks with which they prong all those who have not the right of the entrée" (chap. 51). This Hadean image had been rendered more vivid by the grotesquely designed initial that originally headed chapter 47 ("Gaunt House") containing two spread-out silver forks, a tiara suspended between them, dangling from the hands of a horned imp. Here too is an emblem for the kind of novel Thackeray was parodying and improving in *Vanity Fair*. We are enabled to scale "the heights of fashion with the charming enchanters of the silver-fork school," he had written in *The Paris Sketch Book*. These words appear in his essay "On Some French Fashionable Novels," which generally gave him more delight, as we
have already observed, than their counterparts in his own country. The qualities that attracted him in French fashionable novels appear in some remarks in his review of *Lettres parisiennes*, an intimate diary by Mme Emile de Girardin, that sound like a slap at Henry Colburn and his stable:

And hence the great use of having real people of fashion to write their own lives, in place of the humble male and female authors, who, under the denomination of the Silver Fork School, have been employed by silly booksellers in our own day. They cannot give us any representation of the real authentic genteel fashionable life, they will relapse into morality in spite of themselves, do what they will they are often vulgar, sometimes hearty and natural; they have not the unconscious wickedness, the delightful want of principle, which the great fashionable man possesses, none of the grace and ease of vice.

This “delightful want of principle . . . grace and ease of vice” is certainly a part of the make-up of Becky Sharp (“I’m no angel,” she remarks early in her story, and her creator readily agrees). Candid self-revelation is among the literary qualities Thackeray typically singles out for admiration in his review of the *Lettres parisiennes*, together with naturalness and spontaneity of feeling, expressed with grace and urbanity. The “sermon” contained in these letters is to him moral without dullness: “every page, on the contrary, is lively and amusing—it sparkles with such wit as only a Frenchman can invent—it abounds with pleasing anecdote, and happy turns of thought. It is entirely selfish and heartless, but the accomplished author does not perceive this: Its malice is gentlemanlike and not
too ill-natured: and its statements, if exaggerated, are not more so than good company warrants." Here one can almost feel Thackeray groping his way toward his own mode of social satire, lively and witty like his French model, but more engaged morally. He does suggest in this review that "for the benefit of the vulgar and unrefined, the vicomte's work ought to be translated, and would surely be read with profit." Furthermore he conjectures the sort of readers who might benefit from such a work: "Here might the country gentleman's daughter who, weary of her humdrum village retirement, pines for the delights of Paris, find those pleasures chronicled of which she longs to take a share... and... ask is this the fashionable life that I have been sighing after—this heartless, false, and above all, intolerably wearisome existence, which the most witty and brilliant people in the world consent to lead?"44

Thackeray supplied his bourgeois readers with *morceaux choisis* culled from some of his favorite fictitious memoirs in "On Some French Fashionable Novels" and other essay-reviews, from which it is easy to infer his predilection for panoramas of social life and manners, written with wit, verve, and moral sophistication. It is customary to compare Thackeray with Balzac because of the extensive compass of *La comédie humaine* and the device the two writers shared of carrying over characters from novel to novel, but from available evidence Thackeray seems to have preferred two of Balzac's lesser disciples,45 whom he considered more refined. We know of Thackeray's admiration for Charles de Bernard, shared by Mrs. Gore, who edited several of his novels for the British public and praised him as "the philosophic satirist of a state of society, unhinged by revolutions and characterised by demoralization, wearing the smoothest and most tempting surface."46 Thackeray also devotes some space in his essay on French society novels to another literary aristocrat, le Comte Horace de Viel-Castel, great-nephew of Mirabeau, author of several novels of manners (*Le faubourg Saint-Germain, Le faubourg Saint-Honoré, La noblesse de la province*) that attempted to survey the peerage of the realm as Balzac had the middle classes, along with cultural history (*Collection de costumes, armes, et meubles, pour servir à l'histoire de France depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu'à nos jours*) and historical studies of the period of the French Revolution. Speaking for his readers, whose easy shockability he well understands, Thackeray expresses an embarrassed delight over "that remarkable *naïf* contempt of the institution called marriage" reflected in Monsieur de Viel-Castel's novels, and "the wonderful rascality which all the conversationists betray."47
The population of Viel-Castel's books, as Thackeray characterized it, is the "crème de la crème de la haute volée," whose quality this historian finds considerably diluted under the new regime. Le faubourg Saint-Honoré and its successors can be described as a series of requiems for an aristocracy cut off from both its glorious past and its rural roots, frittering away their lives in ostentation and dissipation "dans ce grand bazar que l'on nomme Paris." Le Comte de Viel-Castel transforms the faubourgs into the glorious and decadent sort of spectacle that Thackeray was to make of Mayfair. In Le faubourg Saint-Germain (1837–38) he poses as a jaded ennuyé, warning a young country cousin away from the metropolis where people die old and worn out ("vieux et usés"). To this disenchanted Parisian, the provinces are infinitely preferable to the capital, which somehow freezes the natural impulses and affections, makes people overly civilized and sophisticated, vying to outshine one another in society, engaged in dissimulation and role playing. The dazzling jewels of the matrons and belles of this society are just so many overvalued "faux semblants." Thackeray is not as prone to find virtue among the rural gentry (v. "Arcadian Simplicity," in which we dine with the Crawleys) as is the Count de Viel-Castel, who was descended from a prominent provincial aristocratic family, but Vanity Fair makes us equally aware of urban vice. In sounding his funeral knell over the faubourg Saint-Germain, Viel-Castel invokes, as Thackeray does from time to time, the passing of the ancient kingdoms of the East ("C'est le Bas-Empire, dont passe le convoi. . . . C'est Sardanaple sur son bûcher de mort"). Here, impervious to their impending fate, the inhabitants live, like the citizens of Vanity Fair, without God in the world ("ne croyant plus aux lois divines, il ne peut plus croire aux lois humaines").

Viel-Castel having turned to the comedy of manners as the vehicle for his jeremiad, one can enjoy the "wonderful rascality" betrayed by his characters, as did Thackeray who translated some of their conversation for his readers. The count introduces us into the homes as well as the ballrooms of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. We overhear the gossip and the backbiting in the salons of the Blacours, where diplomats mingle with the demimondaine, where state business is conducted, and where reputations are made and unmade. Scenes are carefully set, the personages are elegantly dressed, and their "paroles flétrissantes" wing past us. (Thackeray translated a chapter entitled "Un bal," whose epigraph is "Vanitas Vanitatum.") Viel-Castel propelled his plots through the kinds of characters—innocents from the provinces, young wives, old husbands, superannuated flirts, worldly mistresses—and situations—
marriages of convenience, misalliances, philandering, and adultery—that later deteriorated into boulevard farce, but for him they reflect a corrupt society. As critic of society, the author lectures intermittently to the reader on conventions, rails against the hypocrisy of the marriage laws, and denounces the tradition of female education that leaves young ladies completely unprepared for life. One thinks of Amelia Sedley while reading that “pendant vingt ans, la vie des femmes s’écoule entourée d’un mensonge perpétuel; elles doivent, pendant vingt ans, marcher sourdes, aveugles et insensibles au milieu de nos villes corrompues.”

The publisher’s title for Viel-Castel’s massive novel—*Etude sur les moeurs du faubourg Saint-Germain*—clearly aligns it with the collective title of Balzac’s great series—*Etudes de moeurs au XIXe siècle*—and establishes its claim to be taken seriously as social history. Furthermore, the function that Viel-Castel assigned himself as “sténographiant la chronique contemporaine” interestingly anticipates Balzac’s famous announcement in the “Avant-propos” to the collected *Comédie humaine*: “La société française allait être l’historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire.”

Thackeray’s Paris experience, it becomes increasingly obvious, furnished him with models aplenty of the novelist as both sociologist and chronicler, anatomist and diagnostician of social and moral ills. In his review of the aforementioned “lively, witty, and unwise” *Lettres parisiennes* of Mme de Girardin, he raises some leading questions:

And is it so? Is it true that the women of Madame de Girardin’s country, and of fashionable life, are the heartless, odious, foolish, swindling, smiling, silly, selfish creatures she paints them? Have they no sense of religious duty, no feeling of maternal affection, no principle of conjugal attachment, no motive except variety, for which they will simulate passion (it stands to reason that a woman who does not love husband and children, can love nobody) and break all law? Is it true—as every French romance that has been written time out of mind, would have us believe? Is it so common that Madame de Girardin can afford to laugh at it as a joke, and talk of it as a daily occurrence?

Since these are among the questions that Thackeray was to ask and attempt to answer in his probing of English society, living “without God in the world,” his conclusion to these remarks has an ironical ring: “If so, and we must take the Frenchman’s own word for it—in spite of all the faults, and all the respectability, and all the lord-worship, and all the prejudice, and all the intolerable dulness of Baker Street—Miss . . . had much better marry in the Portman
Square, than in the Place Vendôme quarter.” In *Vanity Fair*, as we know, he was to offer clear evidence that marriages in Portman Square are not necessarily made in heaven any more than those in the Place Vendôme.

The principal marriage whose tribulations we follow in *Vanity Fair* that unites a governess of nondescript French origin with an English buck signalizes Thackeray’s grandest achievement in this book—the wedding of the Silver Fork novel of England with the French *Etudes de moeurs*. As critic, translator, and eventually transplanter to English soil of French novels, Thackeray allied himself with fellow writers who were endeavoring to overcome an endemic English literary Gallophobia. One of these was Mrs. Gore, who in 1841, in her introduction to translations of two of Charles de Bernard’s novels, acknowledged that these tales of Parisian high life “as full of truth as of polished and deliberate corruption” may seem to represent life “in a form somewhat too naked” for its present audience. In extenuation she asserted that these novels are no franker than those of Fielding, Richardson, and Smollett or widely read dramas that deal with illicit love or adultery, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Jane Shore*, and *Venice Preserved*. She offered a basic reason for the greater frankness of contemporary French writers over English in dealing with such matters: “In France, young persons are not permitted to read novels, and the middle classes have little taste for works of this nature. It is probably a safeguard to the purity of our own schools of fiction, though a considerauble injury to all others, that novels are placed in the hands of persons of immature judgment and experience. On the Continent fiction is considered a recreation for persons careworn with the business of life, and too firm of principle to be injured by light or frivolous pastimes.” Here Mrs. Gore urged not so much a liberalizing of English moral standards regarding literature, as a wider tolerance of French ones. If English readers could overcome their antipathy, they would be richly rewarded, she promised, for French novels offered valuable insight into French society and politics.

Two years before, the more belligerent G. W. M. Reynolds had openly castigated the English public for their prudery toward the French. Reynolds was well informed on the writers of France, having spent a number of years as a journalist there, and in 1839 he compiled an anthology of excerpts in translation entitled *The Modern Literature of France* with the hope of overcoming the prejudices engendered in readers by what he regarded as an unduly hostile
press. In his preface to this collection he attributed this animus to both political and ethical causes—a lingering bitterness from Napoleonic days, fear of a repetition in England of the violence of 1830 that brought Louis Philippe to the throne, as well as the alleged immorality of the novels. Reynolds took particular umbrage at a Quarterly Review article that went so far as to lay the blame for the 1830 revolution on “a depraved taste in literature” rather than on social oppression. In general he defends both the French character and French literature, contrasting the honesty and open-mindedness of both with English hypocrisy.

“Because we read in French Novels of intrigues, adulteries and murders, do they exist the more in France than in England on that account?” Reynolds asks. “Or does the critic in the Quarterly mean to argue that every wife is unfaithful to the marriage-bed in France, that every husband revenges her wrongs, and that every lover kills himself in despair? Are English women always pure, is vengeance unknown in Britain?” He proceeds to answer his own question:

No—we never take up a paper without reading a case of crim con, we see, alas! too often terrible instances of the most deadly vengeance. . . . Perhaps the critic whose terrible misrepresentations we have taken some pains to correct, is not aware that the average amount of crime in England preponderates over that in France; and that there are more murders, more robberies, more infanticides, and more unnatural crimes registered in the annals of turpitude and delinquency in the former than in the latter country. An appeal to the “Newgate Calendar” and to a collection of the “Gazette des Tribunaux” will bear us out in our assertion.

As we shall see presently, Reynolds set out to write a Newgate Calendar for his own times in his scurrilous and scandalous novel The Mysteries of London, quite detailed in its “annals of turpitude and delinquency,” particularly among the upper classes. This is the kind of matter, Reynolds implies in his introduction to The Modern Literature of France, that the polite novelists of England avoid, but that journalists batten on. So Thackeray insinuates in his backhanded way in Vanity Fair: “The novelist, it has been said before, knows everything, and as I am in a situation to be able to tell the public how Crawley and his wife lived without any income, may I entreat the public newspapers . . . not to reprint the following narrative and calculations” (chap. 36).

Reynolds attacked English novelists en masse for their evasiveness, complaining that English fiction was still as prim and unrealistic as the serious novel had been in France before 1830 when “moral lessons were taught through the medium of almost impos-
sible fictions.” But nous avons changé tout cela. “Now the French author paints the truth in all its nudity; and this development of the secrets of nature shocks the English reader, because he is not yet accustomed to so novel a style. To depict truth, in all its bearings, consistently with nature, is a difficult task; and he who attempts it must occasionally exhibit deformities, which disgust the timid mind.” A balanced representation of life, Reynolds insisted, includes “much to please” together with “much that will be abhorrent to the virtuous imagination,” but “the strict conventional usages of English society prevent the introduction of highly-coloured pictures into works of fiction; and thus in an English book which professes to be a history of man or of the world, the narrative is but half told. In France the whole tale is given at once; and the young men, and young females do not there enter upon life with minds so circumscribed and narrow that the work of initiation becomes an expensive or ruinous task.”

Assuming, along with the more conventional novelists of his age, that the novel is a handy instrument for the moral education of the young, he questioned the received view that reading about sin will make one sinful, or that the cause of morality is served by prettifying life. The French writers, he was convinced, better prepared young readers for life by freeing them of false illusions. Against the English tendency to represent good invariably overcoming evil, he much preferred the unflinching honesty of French writers, who “carry their system to such an extent, that they do not hesitate to represent vice triumphant, and virtue levelled with the dust; for they assert that the former invariably prospers, and the other languishes without support; whereas the English points to a different moral in his fiction.”

Thackeray too had occasion to observe that “a French satirist has a certain advantage which, with our modest public, an English novelist cannot possess. The former is allowed to speak more freely than the latter.” This “modest public” is treated to a certain amount of condescension in Vanity Fair: “The times are such that one scarcely dares to allude to that kind of company which thousands of our young men in Vanity Fair are frequenting every day, which nightly fills casinos and dancing-rooms, which is known to exist as well as the Ring in Hyde-Park or the Congregation at St. James’s” (chap. 49); “We must pass over a part of Mrs. Rebecca Crawley’s biography with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands—the moral world that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name” (chap. 64). At times he deliberately
leaves the story "but half told," in Reynolds's words, leaving it to his readers to supply the other half: "And so, when Becky is out of the way, be sure that she is not particularly well employed, and that the less that is said about her doings is in fact the better" (chap. 64); "Whether my lord [Steyne] really had murderous intentions towards Mrs. Becky . . . and the factotum objected to have to do with assassination; or whether he simply had a commission to frighten Mrs. Crawley out of a city where his lordship proposed to pass the winter . . . is a point which has never been ascertained" (chap. 64).

What Reynolds condemns—the prudishness of the English audience—provides Thackeray with his main satirical thrust as he adroitly manages to sustain "that lightness and delicacy of touch which the world demands" in presenting his sordid subject matter, and maintains a moral tone proper to the "congregation" of all ages that he represents on his "gaudy yellow cover."

Thackeray's remarks on the greater liberty of expression enjoyed by French writers occurred in his review of Eugène Sue's *Les mystères de Paris*, a work that alternately fascinated and repelled him. In a letter to Chapman and Hall, publishers of the *Foreign Quarterly Review* where this essay appeared, he suggested that it should be done "in a moral tone, with thanks for the cessations of the kind of thing in England," but in the review he wrote that "perhaps the best parts of M. Sue's books are the most hideous." The next year Thackeray was commissioned by a publisher named Giraldon to do a translation of Sue's crime story, a project that fell through when he was not promptly paid. Others jumped in, however, and by mid-decade this scabrous tale was available to a wide public in weekly numbers, with illustrations. Moreover, Sue spawned innumerable imitators, and shortly every capital in Europe, as well as many a town in America, had its "mysteries." Thackeray's own "sneaking kindness" for this underworld fantasia, whose taste and style he had felt obliged to condemn, creeps into a passage in the manuscript version of the "Vauxhall" episode of *Vanity Fair* (subsequently excised): "[Our gracious public] has never been hanged before Newgate any more than it has danced at the Queen's ball, hence accounts either of the prison or the palace are the most welcome to it: and a novel which should be made to bring these two buildings together, and which should pass abruptly from the Queen's boudoir to Bow Street and vice versa—such a novel as the famous French 'Mystères de Paris' for instance should be sure of acquiring great success, and creating a general sympathy."
Thackeray does manage the circuit between "palace" and "prison" to an extent in *Vanity Fair*, elevating us to the "extreme heights" of society when we go along with Becky on her presentation at court, and dropping us to its depths, as we accompany Rawdon to "Mr. Moss's mansion in Cursitor Street," as it is euphemistically called (chap. 53). But where Thackeray peeps, Sue's English disciple G. W. M. Reynolds plunges. *The Mysteries of London* juxtaposes Disraeli's "Two Nations" in a series of "highly colored pictures" of his own illustrating the stark contrasts of life in the metropolis, "the most gorgeous pomp . . . placed in strong relief by the most deplorable squalor," as Reynolds points out in his introduction, all revealing a "mighty panorama of grandeur and misery." Accordingly chapters entitled "The Boudoir," "The Masquerade," "The Royal Breakfast," and "Crockford's" are interspersed among others entitled "Newgate," "The Dungeon," "The Old Bailey," and "The Road to Ruin." To complete the span we are introduced not only to high life and low life, but also to some of what Thackeray calls the "middling" areas—"A City Man-Smithfield Scenes"; "The House of Commons"; "The Ex-Member for Rottenborough"; "Alderman Sniff-Tomlinson and Greenwood."

Even to students of the period, the prurience of *The Mysteries of London* has tended to live after it, whereas its polemics are buried with its bones. Reynolds had serious enough reasons for writing the book. Knowing of his ardent championship of French "naked" realism, one readily understands why he served up his meat raw to what he regarded as a pabulum-fed public. His radical politics further motivated his shock tactics, one of his intentions being to awaken the apathetic multitude to social injustice. He is explicit on this point in the epilogue to the first volume: "For we have constituted ourselves the scourge of the oppressor, and the champion of the oppressed; we have taken virtue by the hand to raise it, and we have seized upon vice to expose it; we have no fear of those who sit in high places; but we dwell as emphatically upon the failings of the educated and the rich, as on the immorality of the ignorant and poor." Although Reynolds claims a sense of balance, a reader may easily conclude that he weighs the scales of iniquity in the direction of the top levels of society, especially in such chapters as "Scenes in Fashionable Life," which looks in on the unhappily married Harboroughs of Tavistock Square (an episode following close on "The Wrongs and Crimes of the Poor" dealing with girls
forced into prostitution because of poverty); “The Forger and the Adulteress,” taken up with the characteristic recreations of the Harboroughs; and “Aristocratic Morals,” in which this unexemplary pair catch one another with paramours. Depravity is flushed out in high places in other episodes, such as “The Intrigues of a Demirep”; “The Fall” (in which the Rector of Saint David’s is seduced by Lady Harborough); “The Mysteries of Helmsford House”; “The Aristocratic Villain and the Low Miscreant,” “The History of a Gamester,” and “The Tortures of Lady Ravensworth.” In the course of the two “series” and hundreds of pages of *The Mysteries of London*, Reynolds certainly bludgeons home his message: “Crime is abundant in the city; the lazar-house, the prison, the brothel, and the dark alley, are rife with all kinds of enormity, in the same way as the palace, the mansion, the club house, the parliament, and the personages are each and all characterized by their different degrees and shades of vice.”

Thackeray must have had in mind the audience of Sue and Reynolds, who by this time were legion, in a teasing address to his readers intruded early in *Vanity Fair*: “I warn my ’kynd friends,’ then, that I am going to tell a story of harrowing villainy and complicated—but, as I trust, intensely interesting—crime. My rascals are no milk-and-water rascals, I promise you. When we come to the proper places we won’t spare fine language—No, no! But when we are going over the quiet country we must perforce be calm. A tempest in a slop-basin is absurd. We will reserve that sort of thing for the mighty ocean and the lonely midnight. The present Number will be very mild. Others—But we will not anticipate those” (chap. 8). He was acquainted undoubtedly with Reynolds’s habit of addressing his readers as “my kind friends,” and two of the chapter headings in *The Mysteries of London* are “The Thames Pirates” and “A Midnight Scene of Mystery.” On the surface Thackeray seems here to be reopening his attack on the Newgate novelists begun in *Catherine*: “The public will hear of nothing but rogues; and the only way in which poor authors, who must live, can act honestly by the public and themselves, is to paint such thieves as they are: not dandy, poetical, rose-water thieves; but real downright scoundrels, leading scoundrelly lives, drunken, profligate, dissolute, low, as scoundrels will be.” The subject is still the candid treatment of crime and sin, it is true, but by now the author has shifted his emphasis. He is no longer faced with the “rose-water thieves” of Ainsworth and Bulwer, or “whitewashed saints” like “Poor Biss Dadsy” of *Oliver Twist*, but with the “downright scoundrels” of Sue,
Reynolds, and company. In 1847 his point about "fine language" refers not to the Plato-quoting villains of Bulwer, but to that master of thieves' argot, Reynolds. The parody crime story "The Night Attack," included in the first version of the "Vauxhall" chapter of *Vanity Fair*, meets Reynolds on his ground, particularly in the dialogue of the two brigands:

"Mofy! is that your snum?" said a voice from the area. "I'll gully the dag and bimbole the clicky in a snuffkin."

"Nuffle your clod, and beladle your glumbanions," said Vizard, with a dreadful oath. "This way, men; if they screak; out with your snickers and slick! Look to the pewter room, Blowser. You, Mark, to the old gaff's mopus box! and I," added he in a lower but more horrible voice, "I will look to Amelia!"

The manuscript version in addition explains one of these sentences, in imitation, one suspects, of Reynolds's numerous footnote glossaries of the obscure underworld slang that riddles much of his text.

By the time *Vanity Fair* was published in book form, the thief talk had disappeared. The author has covered his tracks, presumably in keeping with his new role as "fashionable intelligencer." In *Catherine*, Thackeray, through his mouthpiece "Ikey Solomons," was determined to shock his audience out of their too easy responsiveness to the sentimentalization of criminals; in the more "civilized" world inhabited by the population of *Vanity Fair*, he feels obligated instead to tone down the sensationalism of the "mysteries." In this rarefied world, after all, it is appearance mainly that counts. As against Reynolds's frontal attack, therefore, Thackeray chooses to sideswipe. He is deferential to "madam" and to "the most squeamish immoralist," working within their confined code. Becky, we are assured, "did everything that was respectable, and that is why we dwell upon this part of her career with more fondness than upon subsequent parts of her history, which are not pleasant" (chap. 64). Of course there is talk: "Some people, who took the trouble to busy themselves in the matter [of her separation from Rawdon], said that she was the criminal, while others vowed that she was innocent as a lamb, and that her odious husband was in fault" (chap. 64). When Rawdon finds himself in Mr. Moss's establishment in Cursitor Street, it is clearly implied that he is no stranger to the place: "We have not thought it necessary in the previous course of this narrative to mention these trivial little domestic incidents," the author apologizes, "but the reader may be assured that they can't unfrequently occur in the life of a man who
lives on nothing a-year" (chap. 53). There is more than an intima­tion of immorality in the past history of the Steynes of Gaunt House: “And let us, my brethren who have not our names in the Red Book, console ourselves by thinking comfortably how miserable our betters may be, and that Damocles, who sits on satin cushions, and is served on gold plate, has an awful sword hanging over his head in the shape of a bailiff, or an hereditary disease, or a family secret, which peeps out every now and then from the embroidered arras in a ghastly manner, and will be sure to drop one day or the other in the right place” (chap. 47).

If Thackeray prefers to hide behind the damask what Reynolds exposes under the glare of gaslight, the gentler writer after all is tactfully addressing an audience given to evasion and concealment, as he reminds them in the opening of the last monthly number:

There are things we do and know perfectly well in Vanity Fair, though we never speak them, as the Ahrimanians worship the devil, but don’t mention him: and 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. . . . It is only when their naughty names are called out that your modesty has any occasion to show alarm or sense of outrage, and it has been the wish of the present writer, all through this story, deferentially to submit to the fashion at present prevailing, and only hint at the existence of wickedness in a light, easy, and agreeable manner, so that nobody’s fine feelings may be offended. (Chap. 64)

The author of Vanity Fair may choose to address himself to the prudent rather than to the prurient, like the author of The Mysteries of London, but he is no less vehement than his rival in his castigation of hypocrisy and humbug, and the two writers employ equally vivid imagery to embody evil. “The transition from the young man about town to the man upon the town is as natural as that of a chrysalis to a butterfly,” writes Reynolds. This vivarium is transformed before our eyes into a swamp: “These men upon the town constitute as pestilential a section of male society as the women of the town do of the female portion of the community. They are alike the reptiles produced by the great moral dung-heap.” Moreover, the entire city is infested:

The visitor to the Polytechnic Institution, or the Adelaide Gallery, has doubtless seen the exhibition of the microscope. A drop of the purest water, magnified by that instrument some thousands of times, appears filled with horrid reptiles and monsters of revolting forms.
Such is London.

Fair and attractive as the mighty metropolis may appear to the superficial observer, it swarms with disgusting, loathsome, and venomous objects wearing human shapes.\textsuperscript{69}

One of these could be that "syren" Becky Sharp, but her creator stands by his faith to the social code: "In describing this syren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable and decorous, and has any the most squeamish immoralist in Vanity Fair a right to cry fie?" (chap. 64).\textsuperscript{70} In accordance with his assumed virtue, Thackeray poeticized his reptilian imagery with mythological associations. Here mermaids "twanging their harps and combing their hair" as they bask upon their rocks are contrasted with

\textit{Vanity Fair}, chapter 44, initial letter O (Becky as a Lorelei). (From volume 2 of \textit{The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray} [Centenary Biographical Edition]; reproduced by permission of John Murray, Ltd.)

these same creatures beneath the surface transformed into "fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims." Several numbers before, readers had encountered a Lorelei adorning a chapter heading, here shown with her tail underneath the water. Other chapter emblems are more grisly, like one showing Dobbin on a charger defending himself against a winged serpent (chap. 14), another whose initial is made up of
coiled snakes (chap. 23), and still another representing Hecate brandishing her snaky wand (chap. 63).

One episode of *The Mysteries of London* evokes the gaudy luxury of Crockford’s, where “the whole magic scene was brilliantly lighted up with innumerable wax candles, the lustre of which was reflected in the immense mirrors.” The manager of *Vanity Fair* prefers to “illuminate” his scene with his “own candles,” and they do light up some of the byways and hidden alleys that G. W. M. Reynolds had stalked. There are “mysteries” in *Vanity Fair*, most of which remain so. One relates to how the Sedleys’ prosperity has been built up. While Mrs. Sedley enjoys her customary round of social life and shopping, we are informed that “Papa conducted his mysterious operations in the city—a stirring place in those days when war was raging all over Europe, and empires were being staked” (chap. 12). Just as mysteriously, but presumably bearing some connection with the necromancy of high finance and high statesmanship, this prosperity suddenly collapses. Later the author admits to his readers certain limitations to his omniscience: “With regard to the world of female fashion and its customs, the present writer can only speak at second hand. A man can no more penetrate or understand these mysteries than he can know what the ladies talk about when they go upstairs after dinner” (chap. 37). Tom Eaves, one of the author’s sources of information, on the other hand, is said to be well up on “all the great folks of London, and the stories and mysteries of each family” (chap. 47). As for Becky’s successful seasons in the social world: “We must be brief in descanting upon this part of her career. As I cannot describe the mysteries of freemasonry, although I have a shrewd idea that it is a humbug: so an uninitiated man cannot take it upon himself to portray the great world accurately and had best keep his opinions to himself whatever they are” (chap. 51). When we pick up Becky in Germany, having lost sight of her for a time following upon her fall in fortune, our curiosity about her is squelched by the narrator: “Her history was after all a mystery. Parties were divided about her” (chap. 64).

Such phrases indicate that with *Vanity Fair* Thackeray meant to make his own unique contribution to the numerous “mysteries” that had been crowding the bookstalls since Eugène Sue conducted readers of the *Journal des débats* on a vicarious tour of the sinister streets of Paris. Thackeray might have given to his version the title of that “admirable novel” by the “eminent” writer Snooks, whose “Mysteries of Mayfair” he later recommended to the readers of *Punch*, though his own fell short of the 281,000 a week sale of that
delectation in numbers. In his essay “On Some French Fashionable Novels,” it is true, Thackeray had professed a preference for “men of genteel society” over those “in a state of convulsive crime,” but it is evident from the “mysteries” he refers to with their hints of hidden evil that the urban and the suburban (in the French sense) worlds are not really so far apart. The most dramatic incident in *Vanity Fair* involves crime, whether in word, or in deed (Becky may be technically correct in affirming “I am innocent,” but that is hardly the point). The devious working out of Becky’s intrigue with Lord Steyne, leading to her repudiation by her husband and the “wicked nobleman” both, is Thackeray’s dusty answer to Reynolds’s question: “Are English women always pure, is vengeance unknown in Britain?” Becky is certainly not among the English women Reynolds alludes to who have committed infanticide, but she is guilty of the more insidious sin of child neglect. As for other “French” themes like murder, the fact that Becky could be accused of poisoning Jos Sedley, whether or not she actually had, says sufficient for her reputation. Of the lesser crimes registered by Reynolds, outright robbery may not be committed in *Vanity Fair*, but its citizens are not above cheating at cards, welshing on debts, and depriving tradespeople of their just due. By allowing himself French license in subject matter but employing English reticence in treating it, this “manager” in effect obtains the best of both worlds—as we have come to expect from his eclectic outlook. Moreover his mincing tone is admirably suited to a world where sin is sublimated and concealed, where cruelty tends to be mental rather than physical, where people think thoughts that they do not speak out and do things that “good” people just do not talk about. “Quand on parle à tout le monde, il faut parler comme tout le monde,” he had learned from the editor whom Jerome Paturol meets. Our adaptable author consequently speaks to the men and women of *Vanity Fair* in the language of *Vanity Fair*—innuendo.

It is not of course the Mysteries of Mayfair alone that engage this Snooks of *Vanity Fair*. His “survey of the bustling place” ranges wide, beginning at a girls’ school in Chiswick Mall, ending at a fair somewhere in London, stopping off at Queen’s Crawley, Brighton, Brussels, and the Rhine country in between. Its span encompasses town and country, the continent, even India. Socially it plumbs all the ranks of society, but scrambles them with snobbish servants, parvenu merchants, penurious baronets, and corrupt peers. It is a world that seems on its surface to be governed by fortuity and mischance. A sudden downturn in the city following Napoleon’s
defeat brings poverty to the Sedleys of Bloomsbury and transfers them to genteel poverty in the Fulham Road. The whim of a maiden aunt defeats the expectations of Captain and Mrs. Crawley. It is a world too where people are difficult to fathom. A Rawdon Crawley unexpectedly demonstrates pride, tenderness, and courage; the meek and simple Lady Jane Sheepshanks reveals unsuspected reserves of moral strength. The calculating Becky Sharp, herself tripped up by so many miscalculations, eventually proves capable of a selfless act in bringing Dobbin and Amelia together. The "mysteries" exposed in Thackeray's universe are the mystifications of life itself—sudden rises and falls, unaccountable turns in fortune, the "chronicle of Fate's surprises" as he was to express it in his poem "Vanitas Vanitatum," and the greater surprises of human character. "Man is a Drama—of Wonder and Passion, and Mystery and Meanness, and Beauty and Truthfulness, and Etcetera," his audience read in one of the Snob Papers.

The sense of an audience as heterogeneous and variegated as the world of Vanity Fair dominates the manager throughout the performance. His addresses appeal to different kinds of readers: "If Miss Rebecca Sharp had determined in her heart upon making a conquest of this big beau [Jos Sedley], I don't think, ladies, we have any right to blame her" (chap. 3); "All which details, I have no doubt, JONES, who reads this book at his Club, will pronounce to be excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultra-sentimental" (chap. 1); "Every reader of a sentimental turn (and we desire no other) must have been pleased with the tableau with which the last act of our little drama concluded" (chap. 15, referring to Sir Pitt's proposal); "We don't care a fig for her [Amelia]," writes some unknown correspondent with a pretty little handwriting and a pink seal to her note" (chap. 12); "Perhaps some infatuated swain has ere this mistaken insensibility for modesty, dullness for maiden-reserve, mere vacuity for sweet bashfulness, and a goose, in a word, for a swan" (chap. 13, referring to George Osborne's courtship of Amelia); "I throw out these queries for intelligent readers to answer" (chap. 23).

The Manager does not address children and adolescents openly, but the audience gathered around the long-eared clown-moralist on the wrapper includes a little boy in a military suit and a baby in its mother's arms. Our "week-day preacher" seems to have recognized along with Mrs. Gore that English novels, unlike French, "are
placed in the hands of persons of immature judgment and experience," and he is certainly aware of young ears in his congregation. The toy box on the title page of the first edition in book form continues the children's show framework of the speech "Before the Curtain" ("The famous little Becky Puppet," "the Amelia Doll," "the Dobbin Figure," "the Little Boys' Dance," "the Wicked Nobleman," "Old Nick"). This motif was sustained for the first readers of the narrative that follows by scattered "illuminations" in initial letters, such as two boys in paper hats playing soldier (chap. 5); two children peeping through the holes of a picture box (chap. 20); or a tot in a clown suit walking on stilts (chap. 20). With the world of children's fun and games the Manager began, and to it he reverts in his farewell to the reader, which is, however, on a note far removed from the "happy ever after" of children's fantasies: "Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it is satisfied?—Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out." This comedy is finished now that "the famous little Becky Puppet" has had her Jos by the "leading strings," and that "the Dobbin Figure" has at long last captured his "Amelia Doll." The clown holding forth on the barrel has not only reduced war, politics, and society to the level of "comic history"; he has also brought his deep fable within the comprehension of "Great and Small Children" (to whom that "Fireside Pantomime" The Rose and the Ring later was addressed)—be they actually children, like little Georgy or little Rawdon; merely child-minded, like Amelia Sedley, and Rawdon Crawley, before his eyes are opened; retarded adults, like Lord George Hunt of the Straight Waistcoat, kinsman of Lord Steyne, who is given to playing with the dolls belonging to his keeper's baby; or those who would become as children again, like virtually all of us.

In the midst of the frolic we are offered hints aplenty that the child's world is not all sugar plums—particularly in a grisly cut showing a little boy and girl crouched under two crossed swords on a wall, accompanying the comparison of the ill-starred family of Gaunt House to the household of Damocles (chap. 47). So evil threatens innocent minds, as the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, and it is forced on our minds that Vanity Fair, in common with many didactic novels of the age, addresses itself to the nature and nurture of the young idea. Opening in a school and ending with a call to children from play, it superimposes the class-
room upon its more obvious theatrical frame. The author’s educational qualifications are established by the titles scattered about here and there of the “improving” books beloved of early nineteenth-century parents and teachers. Fenelon’s Téléméaque is given as a prize to Dobbin at Doctor Swishtail’s Academy. Amelia purchases The Parent’s Assistant of Miss Edgeworth and Thomas Day’s Sandford and Merton for Little Georgy. Polly Clapp, daughter of the Sedleys’ landlady, reads Fatherless Fanny along with The Scottish Chiefs. Addressing his readers early in the novel where he has been describing the schooling of Dobbin and George Osborne under the supervision of Doctor Swishtail, the author seems to undercut all such guidance: “If people would but leave children to themselves; if teachers would cease to bully them; if parents would
not insist upon directing their thoughts and dominating their feelings—those feelings and thoughts which are a mystery to all (for how much do you and I know of each other, of our children, of our fathers, of our neighbour, and how far more beautiful and sacred are the thoughts of the poor lad or girl whom you govern likely to be, than those of the dull world-corrupted person who rules him?)" (chap. 5). The "world-corrupted" Becky Sharp, to be sure, hardly answers to the model "Good French Governess" of Miss Edgeworth's *Moral Tales*. In a subsequent novel, we find Becky reading the kind of pamphlets that Lady Emily Southdown writes and outwardly performing those acts of charity that this religious peeress would approve of. If there seems to be a lack of inner conviction to the conversion of this "Fatherless Fanny," so much for the moral effects of books, our worldly teacher seems to be saying. He appears to set more store by living example—as with little Rawdon under the care of Lady Jane, and even the spoiled Georgy, once he is adopted by Dobbin. Ultimately "those feelings and thoughts which are a mystery to all" were the "mysteries" that most fascinated Thackeray, and so we are led to expect that the theme of the influence of parents on children for good and bad, latent in *Vanity Fair*, will become central in the more purely domestic novels that follow.

It is amply demonstrated that the world is "a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falsenesses and pretensions," in this cynical-sentimental-comic history. Yet in some ways we seem to "advance over ruins," to invoke Victor Cousin once more. Gaunt House may go the way of the Seraglio occupied by the decaying Padishah of Constantinople and Hyde Park Gardens the way of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon: Sir Pitt Crawley, "both out of pocket and out of spirits" after the passage of the First Reform Bill, "prophesied the speedy ruin of the Empire"; and the preacher in cap and bells likened all humanity in a passage (which he subsequently canceled) to Homer's "race of leaves"; but Dobbin's country place, in Hampshire, we note, is called "the Evergreens." There are other signs of life and hope stirring. We learn that there was "a perpetual crossing of pony-chaises" between Dobbins' establishment and the adjacent one of Queen's Crawley, now superintended by Lady Jane, who inherits the title of Lady Crawley that Becky Sharp had aspired to. We learn also that Lady Jane becomes godmother to the child of Dobbin and Amelia, and that both young Rawdon and young Georgy are rivals for the hand of Lady Jane's daughter. It appears to be in the union of those en-
franchised by the Reform Bill (Dobbin is the son of a grocer become the “best of gentlemen”) and the squirearchy rooted in the land and in Christian principle that Thackeray pins his hopes for the regeneration of the realm. He seems, at any rate, willing to retain the best elements of the aristocracy and the middle class alike, while rejecting the worst.

All in all, in what he chooses as well as in what he avoids, the author of *Vanity Fair* could say, along with his fellow contributor to *Punch*, the author of *The Comic History of England*, that far from having “a contempt for what is great and good,” he has “so much real respect for the great and good that he is desirous of preventing the little and bad from continuing to claim admiration on false pretenses.”

Both satirists remained faithful to the credo of the Punch figure, who announced on his first appearance in motley, flourishing his baton: “The noble in his robes and coronet—the beadle in his gaudy livery of scarlet and purple, and gold—the dignitary in the fulness of his pomp—the demagogue in the triumph of his hollowness—these and other visual and oral cheats by which mankind is cajoled, have passed in review before us, conjured up by the magic wand of *Punch*.”

Some years before Thackeray conceived *Vanity Fair*, a friend of his had defined satire as “a glass in which the beholder sees every face but his own.” To the contrary Thackeray, who, as we have already observed, shows us on the title page of the first edition in book form a clown looking at himself in a cracked glass; nor did he intend to exclude himself from his bill of indictment in *The Book of Snobs*, which was signed “By One of Themselves.” “Do I wish all Snobs to perish? Do I wish these Snob Papers to determine?” he asks at the end of one of them. “Suicidal fool! art not thou, too, a Snob and a brother?”

He echoes these words in a chapter in *Vanity Fair* where he requests the permission of his readers, “as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them [my characters], but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them” (chap. 8). He makes a point too about being dressed not in clerical garb, but in the same way as his “congregation,” and indeed clown suits and foolscaps are perceptible among the listeners, old and young, gathered around the barrel, as depicted on the yellow cover.

Identifying himself with his audience is one means by which this satirist attempts to soften the blows of Master Punch’s castigating rod. His disposition is another. “The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face,” as he expli-
icates the picture on the title page, following Montaigne’s philoso-
phy, to which he adds: “Frown at it, and it will in turn look sourly
upon you; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly kind companion;
and so let all young persons take their choice” (chap. 2). The choice
that our “laughing philosopher” makes here, in keeping with this
world where all is vanity, is to abandon the sour visage of the clown
on the title page in favor of the urbane smile. He is prepared,
moreover, to accommodate his mood to suit the mingled throng at
the booths. At the beginning of one chapter, Vanity Fair is de-
scribed as a place where “Satire and Sentiment can visit arm in arm
together; where you light on the strangest contrasts laughable and
tearful: where you may be gentle and pathetic, or savage and cyni-
cal with perfect propriety” (chap. 17). Emotional attitudes that
had tended to be dissociated in Thackeray’s previous writings are
here brought together in a nimble fusion of his “genteel,” “romantic,”
“facetious,” and “terrific” manners, providing “something for
everyone.”

“My dear sir, when you have well studied the world—how su-
premely great the meanest thing in the world is, and how infinitely
mean the greatest—I am mistaken if you do not make a strange
and proper jumble of the sublime and the ridiculous, the lofty and
the low,” to recall once more the curtain lines of Ikey Solomons, the
putative narrator of Catherine.*

Transmuted into the Manager of
the Performance from the erstwhile master of Grand Guignol tab-
leaux, he has by now indeed “well studied the world,” its humbugs
and its honest men, its poor, rich, and shabby genteel, its preoccu-
pation with getting and spending, and brings to the little universe
of Bloomsbury and Mayfair the cosmopolitan outlook of the
traveler. The result is another “strange and proper jumble,” but of
different elements—the naïveté of the children’s play blended with
the sophistication of the society novelist, the haut monde linked with
the underworld of thieves’ literature, all “illuminated” with the
whimsicality, diablerie, and grotesquerie of the comic magazine.
But we are led to the same conclusion: “Well, Snobbishness per-
vades the little Social Farce as well as the great State Comedy,”
Thackeray’s audience had already read in The Book of Snobs.83
Those who had been with him from the beginning of his writing
career knew his various versions of the “little Social Farce.” With
Vanity Fair he graduated to “the great State Comedy.” From now on
there was to be more of the pathos and tragedy of humanity. “I
have corrected the last corrections: and say now Amen and Good
Luck to Vanity Fair,” Thackeray wrote to his publisher in the letter
that accompanied the final proofs. "May the public relish it, may the publishers profit, may the author be always honest and kind hearted." The publishers did profit from it eventually, the public relished it gradually, though at first they noticed the honesty more than the kind heart lurking beneath. "I am beginning to see the folly of my ways & that people are a hundred times more frank, kind and good-natured than a certain author chooses to paint them," he wrote to a friend a year after *Vanity Fair* made its debut and while it was still running in monthly parts. "He shan't wear yellow any more: it is he who is jaundiced and not the world that is bitter: in fine . . . I will have my next book in rose colour and try and amend." As things turned out, he retained the yellow cover, but he modified his "jaundiced" view of the world.


2. Here let us sport,
   Boys, as we sit;
   Laughter and wit
   Flashing so free.
   Life is but short—
   When we are gone,
   Let them sing on
   Round the old tree.

   From "The Mahogany Tree," *Punch*, 9 January, 1847; *Works*, 13:51 (referring to the tree around which the *Punch* staff gathered for their weekly dinners).


6. "English History and Character on the French Stage," *Foreign Quarterly Review*, April 1843, p. 168; *New Sketch Book*, p. 178. In "The Puppet Frame of *Vanity Fair*," *English Language Notes*, September 1968, pp. 40-42, Myron Taube contends that this device as well as the "Before the Curtain" speech were "afterthoughts" for Thackeray, suggested by a chance conversation with a friend while he was at work on the last number, but it seems obvious that both puppets and clowns were very much on his mind earlier. The additional detail of the barrel top possibly owes its origin to a piece of light verse, "The opinions of one fond of liquor," found in Thackeray's Commonplace Book dating from his year in Weimar. The last lines of the first stanza read:

   I rate him an ass, who despising his glass
   For place & preferment will quarrel
   My creed I do hold with the Cynic of old
   For he stuck all his life to the barrel!

   (Weimar MS, 1830-31, Morgan Library, New York City)

7. Advertisements in the various numbers quote laudatory reviews from newspapers outside London such as the *Western Times*, *Bristol Courier*, and *Chester Courant*, as well as from Ireland (*Cork Examiner*) and Scotland (*Dumfries Courier* and *Edinburgh Weekly Register*).


11. Advertised in *Vanity Fair*, no. 12 (December 1847).


15. *Punch*, 22 August 1846, p. 78, contains a cartoon captioned “Proposed Statue of Punch at Hyde Park Corner” representing the Punch figure in place of the statue of the Duke of Wellington. For further details on the topicality of this drawing, see Joan Stevens, “*Vanity Fair* and the London Skyline,” *Costerus*, n.s. 2 (1974): 13–41. This article is copiously illustrated, showing the real counterparts of monuments caricatured by Thackeray.

16. Felix Farley’s *Journal*, *Western Times*; both quoted in no. 13 (January 1848).

17. As a modern critic puts it: “Almost every sin in Vanity Fair can be traced, beyond personal weakness, to the fundamental laws of money and class; to fawn upon the rich and kick the poor is a Christian law of the land. The poison in *Vanity Fair* infects even the servants” (A. E. Dyson, “*Vanity Fair*: An Irony Against Heroes,” *Critical Quarterly*, Spring 1964, p. 20).


21. Ibid.

22. In particular by Lionel Stevenson in his article “*Vanity Fair* and Lady Morgan,” *PMLA* 48 (June 1933): 547–51. Glorvina O’Dowd bears the first name of the heroine of *The Wild Irish Girl*, and in *Florence Macarthy* appears a family named Crawley who name their children after viceroys and secretaries of state. Lady Morgan reviewed *The Irish Sketch Book* in the *Athenaeum*, 13 May 1843. That Thackeray was closely acquainted with her at this time is further attested by a letter of 4 December 1847 in the Fales Library, New York University (unpublished), in which he declines her invitation to dinner.


27. Ibid., p. 394.

28. Ibid., p. 396.

29. See above, p. 128.


32. *Morning Chronicle*, 4 May 1846; *Contributions*, p. 142. Her novel *The Hamiltons* (1834) expresses the moral indignation with the corruption of George IV found in *Vanity Fair*. There also are analogous characters, e.g. the sweet, innocent young wife Susan (Amelia), betrayed by her self-centered husband Augustus (George Osborne) who has an affair with the hypocritical Caroline Cadogan (Becky). However, Thackeray’s first recorded reference to this novel is in a letter to Mrs. Gore in 1850 (Letters, 2:724-25) commenting on the reprint that came out that year.


37. According to Michael Sadleir, Mills “was certainly a member of the very world whose antics he therein describes. Undoubtedly, therefore, his story was founded on fact, and we may assume it to have reflected current gossip, if nothing more substantial” (*The Strange Life of Lady Blessington* [New York: Farrar, Straus, 1947], p. 261). D’Horsay is, of course, the notorious dandy Count D’Orsay, who in this novel rather improbably reforms after a wild course of gambling, debt, and dissipation. The book was reprinted in 1902 with a “Key” supplied by Joseph Grego. According to Grego, it was “instantly suppressed” when first published. Sadleir comments that “one is less surprised that it should have been withdrawn than that in 1844 it should ever have been published.”

38. In one episode the marquis, knowing that he is on the point of death from an unnamed disease, has a valet arrange a tryst with two prostitutes at a hotel in Richmond as a last fling. So feeble has he become that he can only recline in a moribund state while the ladies of the evening cavort naked before him. “Poor old man! What, pity him!” comments the author, “the debauched sensualist, the heartless roué, the gamester—he who never evinced a latent spark of virtue among his glaring vice, revelling in crime even in his impotent age and dotage” (chap. 14).

Thackeray merely hints at an Italian mistress after Lord Steyne breaks off his affair with Becky, and also implies that he is not above hiring assassins to exact revenge.


40. Lady Blessington, *Strathern* (1845), chap. 1 (Lord Wyndemere speaking). In chap. 1 of *Memoirs of a Femme de Chambre*, one of Lady Blessington’s characters adopts a point of view we associate with Thackeray, purporting to reveal “en dés-habillé” the minds and characters of society figures normally seen by the world “only in full costume, with their manners as scrupulously got up for the occasion as is their dress.” In this same chapter the author thinks of herself, like Thackeray, as Asmodeus, and justifies authorial omniscience.

41. The allusion is to George Lillie Craik’s *The Pursuit of Learning under Difficulties* (1830). In this same chapter Thackeray refers to “the apprentices in the Park” among those who envy the dandies strolling with their chères amies in this popular place of assembly, a far cry from the industrious apprentice extolled by Craik.

42. See above, pp. 122-23.


44. “New Accounts of Paris,” p. 471. In the book Thackeray reviewed, Mme de Girardin used the male pseudonym of le Vicomte de Launay.

45. The influence of Balzac remains a vexed, tantalizing, and unresolved question. Although Thackeray was generally unenthusiastic about Balzac in his public pronouncements, the two authors have frequently been linked, both in Thackeray’s time and in our own. The year after his death, for one outstanding example, the *Dublin University Magazine* (December 1864) made an extended comparison. W. C. D. Pacey, in “Balzac and Thackeray,” *Modern Language Review* 36 (April 1941):
suggests several analogies, but also cites an article that appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* of 1849, calling attention to the difference that Balzac reveled in details of corruption, whereas Thackeray merely suggested it. The tendency to couple their names is further indicated in the first French translation of *Vanity Fair* (Lafoire aux vanités, 1855), where it is referred to, in the preface, as “cette comédie humaine.” (The translator, however, likens Becky to la Baronne d’Ange, a figure in a light risqué comedy then in vogue.) The Balzac novel closest to *Vanity Fair* is *Cousine Bette*, published in book form about the same time, but it has been pointed out that Thackeray could have read it the year before in *Le constitutionnel*, one of the papers taken at the Reform Club, where he did some of his writing (see A. Carey Taylor, “Balzac et Thackeray,” *Revue de littérature comparee* 34 [July–September 1960]: 354–69). However, Raymond Maitre, in “Balzac, Thackeray, et Charles de Bernard,” *Revue de littérature comparee* 24 (April–June 1950): 278–93, emphasizes Thackeray’s affinities with de Bernard in such matters as urbanity of tone, grace of style, and delicate feminine psychology.

46. Preface to *The Lover and the Husband* (English version of de Bernard’s *Gerfaut* [London, 1841]).


48. Dedication to Cécile de Vareil, the first part of *Le faubourg Saint-Honoré* (Paris: Librairie de Charles Gosselin, 1839). Gosselin also published several of Charles de Bernard’s novels, including *Les ailes d’Icare*, part of which Thackeray translated in *The Paris Sketch Book*. *Les ailes d’Icare*, as well as *Le faubourg Saint-Honoré*, it might be added, were first issued in yellow wrappers.


51. *Le faubourg Saint-Germain*, vol. 1, chap. 5.

52. *Le faubourg Saint-Germain*, vol. 2 (Madame la duchesse), introduction. It is amusing to see that Viel-Castel encountered some of the kind of audience response Thackeray was to meet. In this introduction he confides to a patron that he has been accused of immorality, of abusing his privilege of entering society for his own profit, of malicious caricature, of betraying secret confidences, and of all manner of inaccuracy and distortion. He hastens to assure his confidante that he paints “d’après nature.”


55. Reynolds’s coverage is comprehensive, taking in virtually all the novelists then in vogue (e.g., George Sand, Balzac, Sue, Soulié, Dumas, Ricard, Merimée, de Kock, Janin, Hugo, Lacroix) as well as important poets such as Lamartine and Béranger and intellectuals such as de Tocqueville and Michael Chevalier; his concluding chapter is devoted to national airs and songs.


58. Ibid., pp. xvii–xviii.


63. Among the numerous on record are *Mysteries of Berlin*, *The Mysteries of Marseilles* (attributed to Emile Zola), and *Mysteries de Napolés* (published in Lisbon); in America there were *Mysteries of New Orleans*, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (both by “Ned Buntline,” the promoter of Buffalo Bill), *Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, by a Californian, *Mysteries of Three Cities—Boston, New York, and Philadelphia*,
and The Mysteries of Nashua; or, Revenge Punished and Constancy Rewarded. Perhaps the coup de grace was rendered by James Buel's Mysteries and Miseries of America's Great Cities (1883). For an account of the tremendous vogue of this book, see Pierre Chaunu, Eugène Sue et la seconde république (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1948), p. 16.

64. Reprinted in Vanity Fair, Riverside ed. (1963), appendix B, p. 676.

65. George H. Ford is misleading in calling Reynolds "the Mickey Spillane of the Victorian Age" (Dickens and His Readers [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955], p. 79). According to his own testimony, Spillane had no other intention than to write the kind of books he himself could enjoy, whereas it becomes immediately clear that Reynolds had a "purpose" in his sensationalism.

Thackeray appears to have had regard for Reynolds as both man and author. While Vanity Fair was appearing in monthly parts, Thackeray reported on a meeting of the working classes at Kennington Common presided over by Reynolds, for the Morning Chronicle (14 March 1848). In this article he characterized Reynolds's speech championing the Chartist cause as "temperate." At a dinner of the Royal Literary Fund on 10 May 1858, Thackeray referred to Reynolds as "a great Novelist, a member of my own profession . . . standing upon Kennington Common in the van of liberty, prepared to assume any responsibility, to take upon himself any direction of government, to decorate himself with the tricolour sash, or the Robespierre waistcoat" (Melville, Life, 2:66-67; cited by Ray, Contributions, p. 94 n).

66. The devious windings of the story defy synopsis, but it has a framework of sorts in the moral trials of two brothers, Richard and Eugene Markham, the first of whom proves incorruptible, despite the sordid environment in which he moves, while the other progressively deteriorates and eventually dies a violent death.

67. Thackeray's acquaintance with Reynolds goes back to his student-journalist days in Paris. In his autobiography James Payn recalled: "Thackeray told me that the first money he ever received in literature . . . was from G. W. M. Reynolds" (Some Literary Recollections [London: Smith, Elder, 1884], p. 34). The exact nature of their association, long a matter for scholarly conjecture, has recently been clarified by the discovery of a file of the Paris Literary Gazette edited by Reynolds, in which are to be found five articles contributed during 1835, signed "W.M.T." See Jean Guivarc'h, "Deux journalistes anglaises de Paris en 1835 (George W. M. Reynolds et W.M.T.)," Etudes anglaises 28 (April-June 1975): 203-12. Here reprinted for the first time is one of Thackeray's pieces, "England," from the Gazette of 10 November 1835.

68. "The Night Attack" is reprinted, minus the "gloss," in the Riverside ed., appendix B, pp. 672-73. As is suggested by the Tillotsons, this parody is a complicated pastiche. Apart from the atmosphere of Sue and Reynolds, there are definite echoes of the opening of Bulwer's Paul Clifford (reissued in 1848), as well as the perennial Pelham (chap. 82). In addition, John Sutherland has pointed out a verbal correspondence between the opening words of "The Night Attack" and the beginning of G. P. R. James's Agincourt, first published in November 1844 (see his "A Date for the Early Composition of Vanity Fair," English Studies, February 1972, p. 4). There may be a further guying of G. P. R. James in the cartoon Thackeray drew in the manuscript of this chapter showing a masked highwayman holding up a kneeling fat lady on the road. James's The King's Highway is advertised in part I of Vanity Fair.


70. Cf. also: "Every schoolboy, pre-admonished that the Syrens were scaly monsters with soft faces and sweet voices, is enabled to jest upon the folly of their victims. But the danger of the temptation consisted in the glassy waters, which, concealing their deformities, allowed them to be perceived only as the fairest of the fair" (Mrs. Gore, Cecil a Peer [1841], chap. 1).


73. See above, pp. 127-28.

74. This turn in the Sedleys' fortunes is anticipated in "The Second Funeral of Napoleon," where high politics and war are juxtaposed with ordinary life in connection with an intrigue involving Turkey, England, and France at the time of the removal of Napoleon's remains from Saint Helena: "You, my dear, must know as
well as I, that the balance of power in Europe could not possibly be maintained in any such way; and though, to be sure, for the last fifteen years, the progress of the old robber [Sultan Mehemet Ali] has not made much difference to us in the neighbourhood of Russell Square, and the battle of Nezib did not in the least affect our taxes, our homes, our institutions, or the price of butcher's meat, yet there is no knowing what might have happened had Mehemet Ali been allowed to remain quietly as he was; and the balance of power in Europe might have been—the deuce knows where" (Works, 4:685).

75. Works, 6:470.

76. The Newcomes, chap. 13. Miss M. T. Wigglesworth, the genteel authoress of The Orphan of Pimlico; a Moral Tale of Belgravian Life, identifies herself as "many years Governess in the Nobilitys families." Her writing furthermore is endorsed by "The Rev. Mr. Oriel, The Rev. Mr. Thurifer and other revered clergy of the district." This sport was brought out posthumously in 1876 under her father's name by Anne Thackeray. Its date of composition is unknown.

77. Lord Steyne is depicted as an oriental potentate, reclined on a sofa in turban and Persian slippers, leering, teeth bared, in the picture inside the initial that begins chap. 52. In chap. 49 the intimidated female entourage of Gaunt House is referred to as "Lord Steyne's Harem." These are among reminders of Thackeray's Eastern voyage of 1844, a more extended one being the charade played out in Turkish costume at the ball at Levant House (chap. 51) led by that "elegant dandy and Eastern traveller" Bedwin Sands, acting as master of revels.


79. Conclusion to "The Moral of Punch."

80. The Tin Trumpet; or, Heads And Tales, For The Wise And Waggish . . . By The Late Paul Chatfield, M.D. [Horace Smith]. (London: Printed for Whittaker & Co., 1836), 2:135. This was among humorous books in Thackeray's library, and was actually attributed to him until the belated revelation of its authorship.


82. See above, p. 165.


84. Undated letter to Bradbury and Evans in Morgan Library, New York City (MA 2011 ex/V/9/A). Since this chapter was completed, the letter has been printed in Edgar Harden's "Thackeray and His Publishers . . .," Papers on Language & Literature 12 (Spring 1976): 170.

85. The most specific account of its economic fortunes is Robert L. Patten, "The Fight at the Top of the Tree: Vanity Fair versus Dombey and Son," Studies in English Literature 10 (Autumn 1970): 759–72. According to Patten, Vanity Fair actually lost money during its serial run, not making up the 1,200 pounds contracted by the publishers until 1850. However, the bound volumes and the cheap edition of 1853 were successful, and by 1859 Thackeray had earned over 1,700 pounds for his first popular novel. It appears that the successors to Vanity Fair with which Thackeray took firm hold of the public boosted its sales.