The Puppeteer's Responsibility: *Vanity Fair* Revisited

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> Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.[1]

This famous line, of course, ends William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. When the novel was published in book form, Thackeray wrote a preface that he called "Before the Curtain" in which he returned to the metaphor of puppets, referring to his characters as the "Becky Puppet" and the "Amelia Doll," thus implying that he himself is a puppeteer, a puller-of-strings.[2] Luckily this description is only true in the most obvious and perfunctory sense.

Thackeray at his best shows himself to be not a puppeteer but an artist. One might well think the 'responsibility'[3] of the artist would be most apparent in authorial digressions, such intrusions having been seen by some modern critics as one of the weaknesses in *Vanity Fair*.[4] Almost from the time the novel emerged as an art form, there arose a debate about the propriety of authorial intrusion, particularly in introducing apparently extraneous matter into the text. In a famous letter Jane Austen wondered if *Pride and Prejudice* might not have been improved by the introduction of what she elsewhere called desultory matter: "The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling;–it wants shade; –it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter–of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense–about something

unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte–or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile."[5] And in another letter she referred to her sister's dislike of such, calling the dislike her sister's "starched notions."[6]

Thackeray does intrude in his narrative from time to time, but he does nothing so daring as to introduce an essay on Bonaparte. His intrusions are more in the form of comments on his characters or on the novel form in general. These seem to me, whether one calls them extraneous or not, to be quite interesting to the student of the novel, giving us as they do some idea of Thackeray's aesthetic. The burden of his remarks is simply that he is a "realistic" novelist, that is, he is attempting to write something that corresponds to real life and eschews the 'romance' of so much fiction:

> When two unmarried persons get together, and talk upon delicate subjects as the present, a great deal of confidence and intimacy is presently established between them. There is no need of giving a special report of the conversation which took place between Mr. Sedley and the young lad; for the conversation, as may be judged from the foregoing specimen, was not especially witty or eloquent; it seldom is in private societies or anywhere except in very high-flown and ingenious novels. (70-1)

He criticizes novels even more pointedly later when he provides a sort of false ending to the novel with the marriage of George and Amelia:

> Was the prize gained–the heaven of life–and the winner still doubtful and unsatisfied? As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier, the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if the drama were over then: the doubts and struggles of life ended;

> as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but to like each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition. But our little Amelia was just on the bank of her new country, and was already looking anxiously back towards the sad friendly figures waving farewell to her across the stream, from the other distant shore. (310)

Both these 'intrusions' carry implicitly a criticism of other novels, novels that present something less than reality as Thackeray knew it.

But there is another kind of extraneous matter that is not so interesting and not so easily justifiable. And of this Thackeray is not so guiltless. The matter of which I speak is not easily defined, and there are sure to be differences of opinion as to what in any given novel is or is not to be classified as falling into this category.[7]

Henry James opened something of an aesthetic Pandora's Box when he called the novels of George Eliot "fluid puddings" and those of Tolstoy "loose baggy monsters." It seems to me that this has been taken as a law prohibiting as extraneous anything which is not integral to a tight, close pattern preordained by the author. Iris Murdoch has designated such novels as "crystalline" in her famous essay "Against Dryness." Dame Iris is championing the 19th-century novel, which she finds superior to characteristic 20th-century novels–"crystalline" novels and their opposite, "journalistic" novels. The idea of close, tight patterns was anathema to the great 19th-century novelists. They did not fear the contingent or worry about the blurring of their central design in the way that most modern novelists seem to.

The extraneous that I am speaking of is that in a novel which is not imaginatively realized and fused with the rest of the work by the power of the

imagination. One feels a falling off. The author's pen is engaged but his imagination is not. This is perhaps something that the writer does not have much power to control. The very greatest writers–Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dickens, and our contemporary novelist Vikram Seth–are almost always imaginatively engaged, always able to bring to life anything they turn their hand to and to make anything, simply by the intensity of the imagination, a part of the form of their work. By this definition some scenes or narrative that are essential to the plot or the characters or the overall structure of a novel may be judged extraneous, but I shall begin with the most readily identifiable sort of extraneous matter, that which we recognize at once as padding.

Padding, we might think, is not such a problem for the writer because it can be so easily excised. Indeed, when Thackeray published *Vanity Fair* in book form he omitted a passage from Chapter 6 that George Henry Lewes had criticized for its irrelevance.[8] Serial publication of novels was not conducive to keeping out such passages of padding.[9] Thackeray, like so many other writers, had to deliver at regular intervals a certain number of words, comprising a certain shape or enclosed form. This must have contributed significantly to the problem of extraneous matter in *Vanity Fair*. If this were the sole cause, however, we would expect to find some padding in every installment. We cannot, however, ignore the brilliance of the first six installments of *Vanity Fair*, in which we find no matter that is by my definition superfluous.

Everything in these six installments (Chapters 1-22) is vividly realized. One feels oneself in the presence of a talent equal to Dickens, who had a genius for making everything come to life, for recreating the most common and ordinary scene, making the reader even today feel and see in all its detail the place, the people, the scene. Dickens must have made his contemporary

readers feel that they were, through his genius, seeing the ordinary, familiar world for the first time. We find the same quality on a smaller scale in Jane Austen's novels. Thackeray, then, began well with *Vanity Fair*, but he was not able to sustain the extraordinary imaginative level.

When we come to Chapter 24, the second chapter of the seventh installment, we find something that jars us. Dobbin goes to Mr. Osborne as an envoy to announce George's marriage to Amelia, and we see the disastrous effects of the news: the striking of George's name from the family Bible and Mr. Osborne's making a new will. Then Dobbin invites Mr. Osborne's clerk, Mr. Chopper, to have dinner with him one day. It is at this point that we find a distinct paling of the vividness of the novel. There is no reason why Thackeray should not have Dobbin and Chopper dine, no objection to what some might consider desultory matter. What one *does* object to is that what follows is dull and inert. Chopper's home life is perfunctory and lifelessly conveyed. The dinner at the Slaughters is a non-event. Thackeray does not make much attempt to dramatize the dinner, and the narrative is sluggish. That Chopper gives Dobbin a letter from Mr. Osborne lends some purpose to the episode, but purpose does not make a scene live.

If we compare the dinner at the Slaughters with the scene preceding it, Dobbin's call on the General who is the Colonel of his regiment, we can see the difference. The General comes to life in a few sentences as he takes snuff, offers his finger to Dobbin to shake, and pens a note to a French actress. There are no such touches at the Slaughters, though there is an attempt to give life to the scene by the introduction of young Stubbles, whose tears as he writes to his mother lend no life to him. When the tears drip off the end of his nose, it seems pure calculation on Thackeray's part. In isolation the weakness in the dinner scene might not seem so apparent, but when we compare this

desultory dinner with those in Dickens' *Bleak House*, the Revd Mr. Chadband's little repast with the Snagsbys, or the dinner that Bart Smallweed, Tony Jobling, and Mr. Guppy enjoy in a pothouse, we can see all too clearly the distance that separates Thackeray from Dickens.[10] Whatever the reason for Thackeray's failure in Chapter 24, it is a diminishing of imaginative power that recurs again and again as the novel proceeds.

One might at first be inclined to say that this is no more than a matter of Homer nodding, but that is something distinctly different. We are able to overlook some instances of Thackeray's nodding, such as his sometimes saying that Becky and Rawdon live at 201 Curzon Street and at others giving their house number as 101, or Mrs. Crawley's signing her letter to Miss Pinkerton, Martha Crawley, while a few hundred pages later we find Bute Crawley calling his wife Barbara, a slip that is particularly confusing since Miss Pinkerton's name *is* Barbara. The momentary diminishment of power in Chapter 24 heralds a much more serious breakdown, which is especially evident in the chapters following the marriage of George and Amelia and continues through the Belgian sequence.

The eighth installment (Chapters 26-29) seems to me to be the weakest in the novel–this despite the Waterloo episode's often being thought one of Thackeray's great set pieces. Chapter 26 recounts George and Emmy's removal from Brighton to a grand hotel in Cavendish Square, London. Though the chapter does convey that significant decline into something less than ecstasy that Amelia feels now that she is married, the general quality of the chapter is weak. Amelia's misgivings, George's going to collect his £2000, and Amelia's being sent out shopping are all, however specific, somehow generalized, which is perhaps the result of their being perfunctory. They never reach the intensity and immediacy of felt life of the earlier

installments.

The same is true of chapter 27. The comic portrait of Peggy O'Dowd is amusing and lays the groundwork for her important function in the Waterloo episode. But even here we discover in the texture of the chapter a certain thinness, a lack of strong color, a sense that Thackeray's pen is driven by necessity rather than by imagination.

The weakness we find in Chapter 28 may have the same identifiable characteristics as those of the preceding two chapters, but the source of failure is not so obscure and ambiguous. We can here turn to Jane Austen yet again for enlightenment. Jane Austen's comments in her novels and more pointedly in her letters are simple, straight-forward, and common-sensical. One of the best sources of her ideas is a series of letters to her niece Anna, who decided to emulate her aunt and write a novel. Jane Austen would read chapters of her niece's work and return them with comments. On one occasion she remarks: "Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the Manners there, you had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations. Stick to Bath & the Foresters. There you will be quite at home."[11] Thackeray would have benefited immensely from having known and heeded this principle. Without insisting that this dictum is an inflexible general aesthetic principle, it certainly seems sound for writers of realistic novels with a strong tendency towards novels of manners as opposed to historical romances. In going to Belgium with his characters, Thackeray carries us into a world where neither he nor his readers are at home.

If we compare the eighth and even the ninth installments of *Vanity Fair* to the first five, we have in those later installments, a sense of being in a world less fully imagined, a world more confined and restricted, a world lacking in what might be called fictional space. In the first five installments, Thackeray

is in the world of the novel, strolling about and showing it to us, as he says in "Before the Curtain" that he intends to do: "There are scenes of all sorts. . . the whole accompanied by the appropriate scenery and brilliantly illuminated with the Author's own candles" (34). The feeling of spaciousness comes as much from our sense of what Thackeray does not show us as it does from what he shows us. We have a sense that there is a whole world of contingencies existing but unnamed and unimaged in the London and Queen's Crawley sections of the beginning of the novel. But in the Chatham segment, Chapter 27, we are in territory unfamiliar not only to ourselves but to Thackeray too. All of the exuberance of the comic portrait of Peggy O'Dowd with her blunt, vulgar Irishness cannot create the spaciousness that we wish for. The same is true for the Brussels episode. Chapter 28 is obviously the weakest in the novel with its touristic view of Brussels and its pleasures; we are not *in* Brussels and neither is Thackeray.[12] Instead of accepting the existence of the world confidently and wandering about in it as he did in London and Hampshire, he is somewhat frantically trying to create a world and at the same time to people it with his characters. He cannot manage this. We end with a Brussels that exists only in Thackeray's mind, not the real city at all. Ironically, it seems from this example that the writer *cannot* go to a place that is unfamiliar to him. It is not so much a problem of false representation, which Jane Austen warned of, as it is of no representation at all.

The best parts of the Brussels section come when Thackeray moves in closer to examine those characters who are already familiar to us–Peggy O'Dowd, for instance, now becomes quite real. But Thackeray's attempts to create space through the introduction of characters such as Jos Sedley's valet, Isidore, or the maid Pauline and her soldier lover, Regulus, don't fully

succeed. Perhaps Thackeray himself was too conscious of what he was doing as a strategy to make it succeed.

In installments eleven through fifteen (Chapters 36-53) we are back in England save for some rather brief narrative reports of Becky's Parisian adventure, and the novel improves, though it does not return to the high standard set by installments one through five. The problem in installments eleven through fifteen is not geographical but social. Let us consider another authorial comment, this one in the text of the novel itself: "We must be brief in descanting upon this part of [Becky's] 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 upon himself to portray the great world accurately, and had best keep his opinions to himself whatever they are" (587). The author's opinions are not the problem, though, but his failure to enable us to inhabit the great world. When Becky rises to the highest level of society and consorts with Lord Steyne, we are very much on the outside looking in.

Thackeray cannot catch the internal tone of the great world, its habits and concerns. Conversations strike one almost invariably as stilted and forced. Thackeray's authorial disclaimer is the most obvious indication of his own lack of confidence. Especially in chapters 49 and 51 we can see how he tries to compensate for his weakness. In chapter 49 he resorts to sentimentality and surprise, making Lady Steyne respond kindly to Becky, who is ignored by the other ladies at Gaunt House. In chapter 51 he attempts to dazzle us with a showy set-piece in his description of the charades at Gaunt House, the activity being meant to show us the rich and the idle trying to amuse themselves. We need only look to Jane Austen's brilliant treatment of the amateur theatricals in *Mansfield Park* to see how flat and inert are the Gaunt House charades.[13]

Jane Austen's characters remain real people, but Thackeray's degenerate into the subjects of reports in newspaper social columns. This sort of stylization Dickens uses to excellent effect in *Our Mutual Friend* with the Veneerings' dinner parties.

The forays into imaged high life do not, thankfully, dominate installments eleven through fifteen in the way that Brussels necessarily has to dominate installments six through ten, so the weakness does not so much undermine the later installments. The weaknesses point to a fault that Thackeray might more easily have avoided than he could have those of the Brussels sequence. Early in the novel Thackeray offers an authorial disclaimer to writing about the *beau monde*, and insists on common life as the subject of his book: "I know that the tune I am piping is a very mild one. . .and must beg the good-natured reader to remember, that we are only discoursing at present about a stockbroker's family in Russell Square, who are taking walks, or luncheon, or dinner, or talking and making love as people do in common life. . . ." (87) He continues to speculate playfully on the way in which his story could be reset in high life or given the equally exotic flavoring of low life. Then he concludes: "But my reader must hope for no such romance, only a homely story, and must be content with a chapter about Vauxhall, which is so short that it scarce deserves to be called a chapter at all. And yet it is a chapter, and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in everybody's life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of the history?" (88). When the story does lead into the great world, the author pretends to know nothing about that world. Unfortunately we find ourselves more and more outside the unromantic, bourgeois life we are promised at the beginning of the novel and taken more and more into a world that is fictional, novelistic, exotic: all too like the sort of fiction the narrator has earlier denigrated. The reader can

only go where the writer himself is able to go, and just as Thackeray is really unable to enter the higher social world, we too are debarred from it. We have not the real world of Society but an unreal, fanciful and utterly unconvincing simulacrum of that world.

The strength of *Vanity Fair* lies in Thackeray's ability to weave into the fabric of the novel the vivid, myriad contingencies of real life, and in his being able, except in those instances that I have mentioned above, to create a sense of fictional space.[14] These two aspects of his genius–the creation of contingencies and the creation of fictional space–are bound up together, are perhaps interdependent, for the use of detail is an important means of conveying the spaciousness of reality itself.

Thackeray makes the particular world of *Vanity Fair* real by the use of concrete details and concrete images which fix the world and the characters in our minds.[15] We could if we chose make lengthy lists of the characters' possessions, their personal habits and idiosyncrasies, their likes and dislikes. Certain objects take on the importance of characters, turning up at intervals, becoming as familiar to us as our own favorite possessions. What would *Vanity Fair* be without Becky's silk purse (which is a very real but probably rather insignificant object that takes on symbolic resonance when considered metaphorically as an image of Becky's fortune-hunting), or without George's letter to Becky curled like a serpent in the nosegay presented to Becky at the ball the night before the battle of Waterloo and turning up again as the means by which Amelia's stupid romantic illusions are shattered? Or without Amelia's piano or the picture of Jos on an elephant or "that miniature," as Mrs. Sedley bitterly refers to Amelia's picture of George? Such details not only have symbolic and thematic significance, they form in the aggregate a substantial physical world of reality in which the characters live.

In turn, Thackeray and his characters speak of physical objects which convey to us feelings and attitudes which, if described in the abstract, would have far less reality and would carry far less force than they do when connected with the concrete material world. At the beginning of chapter 13 the narrator remarks: "[George] was seen lighting his cigar with one [of Amelia's letters]" (154) and we need no further elucidation of George's real feelings towards the girl he is going to marry.[16] In chapter 26 after George and Amelia are married, they are installed at a fine hotel at Cavendish Square; even though George has been disinherited, he squanders the little money he has. Dobbin tries, without success, to persuade George to live more prudently, and the narrator finally comments: "Nor did Dobbin try and convince [George] that Amelia's happiness was not centred in turtle-soup" (308). The turtle soup is both quite literal (a dish that might easily be procured at a fine hotel) and stands metaphorically for all the luxury that George carelessly provides in lieu of the affection Amelia wants. In chapter 44 we have another instance of substitution of a material object for affection, but this time even the object itself is withheld from the person desiring love: "Whenever Mrs. Rawdon wished to be particularly humble and virtuous, this little shirt used to come out of her work box. It had got to be too small for Rawdon long before it was finished" (518). Becky is not interested in making her child think she loves him: she is interested, from time to time, in the benefit of posing as a virtuous mother. Such use of material objects is one of the most striking characteristics of Thackeray's genius–and indeed one he shares with most great novelists. He embodies in concrete form the moral and emotional lives of his characters.

Thackeray uses the same method in dialogue when characters are themselves describing their feelings and attitudes. When Becky leaves Miss

Crawley's house to join Rawdon, to whom she is secretly married, Miss Crawley exclaims: "'Good gracious, and who's to make my chocolate?'" (202). The response catches the essence of Miss Crawley's character–her utter selfishness, her relating everything inexorably to herself. This vivid comment comes back to us hundreds of pages later when we are told that Rawdon brings Becky 'coffy' in bed every morning: Becky has become the tyrant Miss Crawley was, and Rawdon has become the servant.

Mr. Sedley's remark when Dobbin tells him that Amelia and George are going to marry, makes all the old man's grief and bitterness concrete with a single image: "'I'm a broken old man–ruined by that damned scoundrel–and by a parcel of swindling thieves in this country who I made, sir, and who are rolling in their carriages now'" (242). Everything is contained in the image–the sense of Mr. Sedley's being immobilized, fixed, at the end of his road, while his old business friends move forward and prosper. (In the 19th century only the very affluent could afford to keep their own carriage--other people traveled by post-chaise or hansom cab, so the image carries not only the sense of movement and energy but of wealth as well.)

Later when Dobbin imparts the same news to Mr. Osborne, the old man angrily says: "'My son and heir marry a beggar's girl out of a gutter. D–him, if he does, let him buy a broom and sweep a crossing'" (276). Mr. Osborne's image, like Miss Crawley's chocolate, reveals his own selfishness, but like Mr. Sedley's image it shows a preoccupation with money and power. Poor wretches sweeping crossings were a not uncommon sight in London, as one sees in the character of Jo in Dickens' *Bleak House*. Mr. Osborne's remark then shows his awareness of that world beyond his comfortable house in Russell Square, thus taking us outside those narrow confines. It is one of the rare moments when we can actually pin down an instant in which

Thackeray conveys that spaciousness which is so satisfying in *Vanity Fair*.

Characters are physically brought before us by a similar method, the use of contingent detail. Hence we know that Lady Crawley, whose sudden death so upsets Becky's scheme at Miss Crawley's, is remembered for her perpetually watering eyes; Miss Horrock's ribbons become more and more splendid as she rises in her position at Queen's Crawley; and Dobbin bites his nails and later in the novel begins to carry a bamboo cane. Miss Crawley wears a coffee-colored wig, and Rawdon dyes his mustache. Jos grows a mustache–generally the prerogative of military men–when he goes to Belgium, is ridiculed for it by Peggy O'Dowd, and has Isidore, his valet, shave it off when he starts to flee from Brussels. At a memorable moment Captain Rawdon comes out of his dressing room "performing a duet on his head with two huge hair brushes" (290). We see him in that moment being his own most private, most ordinary, mundane self, doing those things that human beings do so automatically as to be unconscious of them.

The sense of space, of roominess, is further enhanced by the introduction of characters who are only tangential to the central story but are a part of the form of the novel, the fully imagined world of the novel, illustrating Nabokov's remark that the novel is the true democracy where everyone has the right "to live and breed."[17] These characters give the sense of life going on independently of the main story. The purest example of this in *Vanity Fair* is the mention of Edward Dale,[18] who escapes having any real part in the novel: "Edward Dale, the junior of the house, who purchased the spoons for the firm, was, in fact, very sweet upon Amelia, and offered for her in spite of all. He married Miss Louisa Cutts (daughter of Higham and Cutts, the eminent corn-factors) with a handsome fortune in 1820; and is now living in splendour, and with a numerous family, at his elegant villa, Muswell Hill. But we must not

let the recollections of this good fellow cause us to diverge from the principal history" (209)

The so-called Hottentot Venus figures more prominently than Mr. Dale, turning up with the regularity of the portrait of Jos and of Amelia's piano, but she too comes close to being drawn into the story. Mrs. Crawley's former butler, Raggles, is not so fortunate. He is peripheral to the story, a casual victim of Rawdon and Becky's living on 'nothing a year':

> As luck would have it, Raggles' house in Curzon Street was to let when Rawdon and his wife returned to London. . . . This was the way, then, Crawley got his house for nothing; for though Raggles had to pay taxes and rates, and the interest of the mortgage to the brother butler; and the insurance of his life; and the charges for his children at school; and the value of the meat and drink which his own family. . . consumed; and though the poor wretch was utterly ruined by the transaction, his children being flung on the streets, and himself driven into the Fleet Prison: yet somebody must pay even for gentlemen who live for nothing a year–and so it was this unlucky Raggles was made the representative of Colonel Crawley's defective capital. (437-8)

Thackeray presents these characters in an irresponsible way, and yet they remain in the reader's mind as palpable presences, a part of that company that includes the urchins outside the church on the wedding day of George and Amelia. They are as naturally a part of the landscape of the novel as the grey drizzling rain on that same wedding day.

The irresponsibility with which Thackeray presents these minor characters also characterizes his presentation of major characters. This brings us to what is perhaps the most controversial aspect of Thackeray's art. The view against

which I shall argue is that expressed by J.I.M. Stewart in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Vanity Fair*. According to Professor Stewart, Thackeray generally makes as much a mess of the creation of characters as he does of such facts as names and addresses. He argues that the characters "begin behaving 'out of character' in the interest of some suddenly glimpsed effective turn or incident in the story."[19] He continues: "[Thackeray's] weakness is less that he fails to create his people successfully than that he is intermittently deficient in a sense of responsibility towards them when created. In *Vanity Fair* the most coherent are of a secondary order: Miss Crawley, Rawdon Crawley, Jos Sedley, the first Sir Pitt. These have roles, in which they are sustained. But the major characters, although unquestionably 'there,' lack a little stability."[20]

I do not disagree with Professor Stewart's perception but rather with his evaluation of what he finds in what he perceives. I agree that Thackeray's characters sometimes behave 'out of character;' I believe that Thackeray is deficient in a sense of responsibility towards his characters; I agree that the most coherent or stable characters are the secondary ones, and that the major characters lack stability. But whereas Professor Stewart takes these things as signs of creative failure, I take them as signs of creative success. When I consider real people, which is what Thackeray's narrator invites us over and over to do, I cannot help but notice that they are forever surprising me by behaving out of character, that their personalities are not coherent in the novelistic sense, and being incoherent, their personalities lack stability. I can, then, only conclude that a novel which presents people behaving 'in character' and possessing coherent and stable personalities has failed to depict an essential element of real people.

There are two different views that we may take of the secondary characters.

As secondary characters they may not be so fully drawn as to encompass their instabilities. On the other hand, that Miss Crawley, Jos Sedley and the first Sir Pitt are coherent personalities, are stable, and always act 'in character'may be more an indication of their egotism, their lack of imagination, and their stupidity than an indication of Thackeray's having perfected in them the method of creating characters that fulfill the author's responsibility to his creations. In fact, he has only succeeded in creating a very particular kind of character, the sort of person who either consciously or instinctively makes himself into a stereotype. The three characters named above lack depth in life as they do in art. I exempt Rawdon Crawley from this list because though he is simple, he is not without an independence from his own character. He is able to assert his own integrity and independence by leaving Becky, whereas the first Sir Pitt, Miss Crawley, and Jos never have anything but the illusion of independence. Thackeray gives his characters the freedom to have or *lack* independence and integrity.

Thus we come to the heart of the idea of Thackeray's 'irresponsibility.' It does not seem to me to be a sound aesthetic principle to require that an author be responsible for his characters in the sense of forcing them to behave 'in character.' To take such responsibility is to rob one's characters of their independence, of that freedom which all real people have and can exercise if they wish. It is by allowing most of his characters such independence and freedom that Thackeray finds yet another means of creating fictional space. His characters own themselves and move about in a manner that reveals their own space. They are not in bondage to their creator or to themselves. They are free to act 'in character' or they are free to act on whimsy that is out of character. They are at liberty to change chameleon-like in response to whomever they are with and in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

Our sense of that freedom makes us admire Thackeray's art and also makes us like his characters. We might be amused by the first Sir Pitt, by Miss Crawley and by Jos, but I do not think we ever imagine for a moment that they would be very interesting people to know. However morally reprehensible we find Becky and George, or however dull we find Amelia and Dobbin, there is an independence, a freedom in their characters which attracts us, makes us take an interest in them. The same is true of certain minor characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Sedley or Mr. Osborne or Peggy O'Dowd. These characters have inner lives which make them more complex than their external lives would lead one to believe. Sir Pitt, Miss Crawley, and Jos Sedley have so wholly make their external lives their inner lives–or vice versa–that they have destroyed that tension between the internal and the external.

We cannot pin down these great characters in *Vanity Fair,* cannot say that Becky Sharp is definitively this or that. We can say that these characters are real, that they are silly, selfish, blind, stupid, generous, sentimental, clever and so forth. But such tags only point the way along a path into a labyrinth of the dense obscurity of human reality. Professor Stewart is puzzled by Dobbin's continuing admiration of George Osborne, but he ignores the fact of Dobbin's seeing George clearly and yet remaining faithful to him. His plodding, animal-like affection for George prepares the way for Dobbin's showing the same devotion to Amelia. Such does not make Dobbin a fool; it makes him Dobbin, and forms the coherent part of his personality. Such coherence is given reality not in its isolation but in the context of those contingent parts of Dobbin's character which are not stable. The most obvious example of this comes near the end of the novel when Dobbin realizes that Amelia has hardly been worth the effort: "'No. . . it was myself I deluded, and persisted in

cajoling; had she been worthy of the love I gave her, she would have returned it long ago. It was a fond mistake. Isn't the whole course of life made up of such? and suppose I had won her, should I not have been disenchanted the day after my victory?" (786).

To my mind, far more telling details come when we discover that Dobbin laughs at Peggy O'Dowd, is disliked by both Amelia and Becky, and has a deep dislike for Becky. Here we sense that there is more than one way of looking at honest Dobbin and we find that honest Dobbin, tranquil, kind, and bland as he might usually appear from the outside, actually responds variously to the world and its people. He can even laugh at them.

What is true of Dobbin is also true of Becky and Amelia. Both women have the rich texture of real personalities. But it is not their personalities that I want to conclude with. It is Thackeray's use of their stories. If we clear away all the marvelous contingencies of which I have been speaking we would find the central pattern or paradigm of *Vanity Fair*, the double plot in which the fortunes of two young ladies in Regency society are traced. What is wonderful here is that through the double plot[21] Thackeray creates both unity and space. No one would question that Amelia's story is somehow indefinably enhanced by Becky's or Becky's by Amelia's, and yet when we look closely at the novel we find that Becky and her Crawleys, Becky and her career in Curzon Street, would have all been as they are if Amelia had never been heard of; and the Bloomsbury and Fulham of the Osbornes and Sedleys might have had the whole book to themselves for all that Becky essentially matters to them.

The point at which Becky is crucial to Amelia (and appropriately Amelia is never crucial to Becky) provides the strongest link between the two plots: Becky's finally in utter exasperation showing Amelia the note George gave

her at the Waterloo ball. The note destroys Amelia's last illusion about George. But this is not really necessary to Amelia's story. Thackeray undercuts the novelistic drama of the scene at its end. When Becky orders Amelia to write to Dobbin to return, Amelia confesses that she has already written. To have insisted on such a crude causal connection would have destroyed space and diminished the reality of the novel, but instead Thackeray implicitly makes fun of just such causal connections that are usually the stuff of the plots of novels.

Until the end, then, Amelia maintains her own independence and freedom, possession of her own fate, as certainly as Becky does. The final effect is that though Amelia and Becky belong to the same novel, the same world, it is a world with the space of reality where people pursue independently their own ends and in their successes and failures are always responsible, each individually, for their own fates. In giving them this freedom, Thackeray maintains his own irresponsibility. The responsibility of the artist is quite different from the responsibility of the puppeteer. Indeed, one might say that the responsibility of the artist is to be irresponsible. Thackeray's abdication of a puppeteer's control gives lie to his own favorite image of himself as author. It is the greatest gift a novelist can bestow on his characters.

Notes

1 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 797. All subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.

2 A.E. Dyson, "*Vanity Fair*: An Irony Against Heroes," CQ, VI (1964), 11-31, remarks of this image: "In the opening pages. . . he presents himself as a puppet-master,the sole creator of his characters, and their destiny. By the laws of art, this is self-evidently true: all writers do invent their characters, and decide what their fate is to be. By the laws of great art, however, it is a half-truth at best."

3 Throughout this essay I am indebted to John Bayley, "The'Irresponsibility' of Jane Austen," *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp.1-20.

4 See, for example, Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Cape, 1954); Arnold Kettle, "*Vanity Fair*," in *An Introduction to the English Novel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); and Kathleen Tillotson, "*Vanity Fair*" in *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

5 Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters* , Deidre Le Faye, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 203.

6 Ibid. p. 203.

7 Tillotson, of course, argues that *Vanity Fair* is unified and that serial publication required unity: "Thackeray nevertheless makes us feel *Vanity Fair* a unity. This has sometimes been underestimated, and the novel apologized for as loose, rambling, and casual, though admitted to be rich and comprehensive. . . . It is a contention of this whole study that both novelists and critics of this time were interested in 'unity'. . . ."

8 "Note on the Text" in Penguin edition of VF, p. 25.

9 Tillotson argues, however, that "the serial novel, serially written, is. . .really the less likely to be loose and rambling; only some degree of forethought makes such writing even possible; and the reader's interest, spread over a year and a half, will not be held unless there is a genuine continuity and a firm centre of interest."

10 See Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Chapters XX and XV.

11 Jane Austen, *Letters*, p. 269.

12 Charlotte Bronte evades the problem in part by calling Brussels Villette, but on a deeper level one has no sense of Brussels/Villette as a real place at all. It is a projection of Lucy Snowe's own consciousness.

13 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Chapters 12-18.

14 Dyson notes this as a particular quality of the novel: "To an unusual degree we have the sense of a real world going on all round the main characters, full of diversity and colour, full of characters who appear and disappear, enacting at the edge of our consciousness the same patterns of sin and anxiety which hold the centre of the stage."

15 John Loofbourow, *Thackeray and the Form of Fiction*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 73-91, comments that Thackeray creates "a narrative medium whose expressive images convey the novel's emotional event. . . . "

16 Henry James uses a similar image for a similar purpose in *Washington Square* when Morris Townsend so memorably sits in the absent Dr. Sloper's study and smokes cigars.

17 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 124.

18 Tillotson remarks that "In the shadow, just beyond every character, but ready to catch the spotlight for a single instant when needed, seem to be all the people the character has ever met." She gives the history of Edward Dale as an example of this.

19 J.I.M. Stewart, 'Introduction,' *Vanity Fair* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 11.

20 Ibid., pp. 11-12.

21 See Tillotson and Dyson for full discussions of the effectiveness of the double plot in *Vanity Fair.*