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The Dissociation of Sensibility in Vanity Fair

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the confusion of three historical periods (Late Stuart, Regency, and Victorian) in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Aspects specific to each of these periods in costume, modes of behaviour, speech, and societal codes, mores, norms and value systems are intermingled, so that although the novel itself is set during the Regency, the ethos is drawn indiscriminately from both of the other periods as well, resulting in a subliminal unease in the reader. This historical confusion does not rise to the surface of the book but instead works subconsciously. Therefore, one of the themes of the novel – the triumph of Victorian propriety and practicality over Regency fecklessness and romanticism – can also only be apprehended subconsciously.

Looking at Trollope's reflection of Victorian norms, Thackeray's own evocation of late Stuart-early Hanover norms in *Henry Esmond*, and Dickens' very different use of such out-of-period elements in *Bleak House* clarifies the extent of the confusion in *Vanity Fair* among these periods.

In this paper I have untangled some of the threads specific to each of the three periods in question, examined the effect of the historical melange, and demonstrated that this confusion contributes to the underlying thematic thrust of the book.

Many commentators on *Vanity Fair* indicate in their remarks, explicitly or implicitly, that something prevents the novel's being felt as a fully unified work of art, but there is a difficulty in accounting for this perception although many, noting it or subliminally aware of it, have attempted to explain it (or explain it away).

Edward Wagenknecht is straightforward in his declaration that this "is not a highly unified book," and he suggests that the source of the problem lies in its compositional history in which "the material of many earlier papers was taken up."¹ Dorothy van Ghent discusses the difficulty posed by the stark contrast of the authorial comments and the mental operations of the characters. "We feel that two orders of reality are clumsily getting in each other's way: the order of imaginative reality ... and the order of historical reality ... The fault becomes ... striking" when Thackeray, unforgivably, suggests the possibility of his kissing Amelia himself.² Where is the line between the fictional character and the historical author who pictures himself kissing her? Where, indeed, is the line between the fictional world and the real world? This blurring of the boundaries between the world of the novel and the world of experience is one source of the sense that we have elements that have not been sufficiently integrated to give an impression of unity. We are afflicted "with a sense of confused perspectives between the author's person and his work, his opinions and his creation." Aesthetic control has been signally relaxed.³

Hillel Daleski develops van Ghent's remarks, elaborating on and analyzing five different types of shift in the point of view which "establish a general fluidity that facilitates radical movements away from the fictional world itself." He discusses the shift "from the fictional world to the putative real world of the reader," a shift sometimes "so sharp that it is subversive of the dramatic action" and notes that "sometimes the narrator changes focus as well as dimension." In addition to shifts from the fictional world to the putative real world, there are shifts to the real, real world rather than, or in addition to, the putative real world. Sometimes the novelist presents himself as a historical novelist and sometimes, reversing the roles, he presents the fictional characters as personal acquaintances of his own and, therefore, not in fact fictional at all. Or rather, he creates a world midway between the fictional and real worlds in which real persons (like himself) and fictional characters exist side by side and freely interact.⁴

In addition to this problem of multiple worlds, there is Thackeray's own "confusion as to where the compositional center of his book lies," in the Becky story or that of Amelia. Thackeray apparently intended them to be the equally

balanced but opposite poles of moral valence, but he failed to make them equivalent.⁵ Daleski does not specifically speak of this sense of disunity, but he does note that Amelia and Becky are embodiments of the 'Madonna' and 'whore' which, polar opposites in the conscious, are a unity in the unconscious,⁶ and this remark can be coupled with Walter Allen's comment that Thackeray had an "emotional fixation on the 'good woman', for all it was the 'bad' that aroused his creative energy,"⁷ a case in which the psychologically unified character is broken into its component parts and thus produces a splintering of unity.

Alan Horsman, without exploring the implications of his remark, notes that Thackeray, in judging his characters, implies that the reality is quite different from the expressed assessment, so there is a dichotomy between what the narrator says about his characters and what he implies about them, a dichotomy which is a bit more extreme than irony by itself accounts for.⁸ Barry Qualls, also without connecting his remark to any sense of disunity in the resulting novel, notes that in *Vanity Fair* the majority of the characters see time as a focus on the past, in terms of stasis and insulation from progression. The notable exception is Becky, who is focused on the future.⁹

One cause of this sense of an incompletely integrated vision has, so far as I know, never been explored, although J.B. Priestley approached it in noting that Thackeray was "unlucky in his ... time" in that "he could not afford to alienate the middle-class [Victorian] family readers on whose support he depended", a dependence which limited both his themes and treatment so that he "dared not explore and describe these relations [between men and women] frankly" as he wished to do, that is, in the 18th Century mode; "time and circumstance were too much for the sharply ... perceptive artist in him." The persona he adopts to deal with this limitation is "poised between humorous acceptance [a la Fielding] and moral disapproval ... [a la] mid-Victorian society, though still occasionally revealing ... the depth and fire of his real creative mind."¹⁰

I believe that this source of the dissociation in *Vanity Fair* lies in a certain ambivalence in Thackeray himself. Although temporally existing in the mid-Nineteenth Century, his emotional affinity was to the late Seventeenth Century and the Eighteenth Century. In those earlier times he felt himself at home, and he was drawn by his instincts and emotional prepositions to them. As Arthur

Pollard says, "Thackeray was at home with the writers of that era" and he admired Fielding's "candid portrait of life, and especially of sexual relations ... whilst at the same time he regretted that the mores of his time forbade him to imitate it."¹¹ Thackeray resented the restrictions imposed on the writer by Victorian morality and yet could not but accept it as an improvement on the morals of the earlier age. He was thus torn between what his mind approved and what his literary sensibility yearned for. His solution was to use the earlier period with gusto while prudishly disapproving of the very liberty he relished and ultimately rejecting it. He set one of his greatest books (*Henry Esmond*) during the last days of Queen Anne and the accession of George I, and among its characters are some of the great writers of that age. It is "a remarkable tour de force, recreating the age of Queen Anne as few ages have ever been recreated by a novelist anywhere."¹² Thackeray, then, was perfectly capable of writing a historical novel that was faithful to the earlier period in which it was set.

Those books (*Pendennis* and *The Newcomes*) set during his own century and bound by its social codes are signally less successful. Thackeray disliked much about his own period and yet he was unable to free himself from it. This is reflected in *Vanity Fair* with its setting during the Regency, centering on the battle of Waterloo, which straddles the two periods. It has, metaphorically, one foot in the Eighteenth Century and the other in the Nineteenth Century and it culminates during the Victorian period, thus reflecting Thackeray's own spiritual and artistic dual loyalties and ultimate accession to the standards of his own day.

Thackeray lived from 1811 to 1863, and *Vanity Fair* was published in 1847-48. Both the author's life and the date of publication place it in the milieu of Victorian England. Thackeray, however, felt that the restrictions imposed by Victorian propriety were detrimental to the artist's freedom to create fully developed portraits such as those in Fielding's *Tom Jones*, which he greatly admired. Indeed, as Arnold Kettle notes, the method of *Vanity Fair*, with the shifting point of view and authorial commentary – and emotional coloring – which distance the reader from the scene, is essentially that of *Tom Jones*. This method necessitates that "the novelist ... encompass in his own personality an adequate attitude to what he is describing."¹³ The corollary is that if the author's attitude is ambivalent, this ambivalence will be reflected in the book, the unity of which depends upon all the

characters being "to the world from which they are taken."¹⁴ When, therefore, the characters are taken from different worlds, the unity of the book is impaired.

Thackeray envied Fielding the possibility of creating fully developed characters, complete with gonads and sexual appetites and proclivities, and resented the strictures of his own period against creating such full-blooded characters. Fielding, he said in his introduction to *Pendennis*, was the last novelist to be "permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN." And the turn of phrase clearly demonstrates a certain envy since he himself was not so permitted. He clearly felt the attractions of earlier periods as strongly as the claims of his own, which he nevertheless acknowledged as binding on him.

Vanity Fair itself opens somewhat before 1815 (the year of Waterloo) and closes somewhat after 1832 (the year of the Reform Bill, the passage of which is referred to at the very end of the novel, on p. 793).¹⁵ The fact that this is a historical novel cannot, however, in and of itself, account for this problem of lack of artistic unity. What we find in *Vanity Fair*, unlike Thackeray's other historical novels, such as *Henry Esmond* and *Barry Lyndon*, is a curious mixture of elements drawn from widely different periods.¹⁶ The Victorian period is represented, and so is that of the Regency-George IV. In addition, there are elements that hark back to Thackeray's beloved Eighteenth Century.

Thackeray's affinity to this period is expressed not only in *Henry Esmond*, which is set in the years leading up to 1714, and its sequel, *The Virginians*, but in *The English Humourists* and *The Four Georges* as well. Arthur Pollard is not the only one who has noted Thackeray's affinity to the Eighteenth Century and his ease in the age of Addison and Steele.¹⁷ Walter Allen, commenting on the ambiguity which "saturates" Thackeray's novels, says, "Thackeray was in spirit an eighteenth-century novelist born out of his time and in the wrong period ... the Victorian age crippled him."¹⁸ van Ghent's comment about Lord Steyne, "above the economic strife and therefore free of conventional moral concerns",¹⁹ could equally apply to *Henry Esmond's* Lord Mohun.

There are three distinct value systems, each with its associated cultural codes and normative mores: that of the setting (Regency-George IV), that of the setting for Thackeray's other great historical novel (*Queen Anne*), and that of the time of writing (Victorian). They diverge, converge, and are interwoven, so

that the reader is constantly forced to readjust his mental balance as the ethos of the novel disconcertingly shifts among them, sometimes one and sometimes another being predominant, often within the same scene or paragraph (or even sentence, as in the very first paragraph of the text, discussed below).

I would suggest that it is this mixture of both textual details and underlying attitudes appropriate to three different periods which creates the sense of dissociation. The ethos of each period is different, not only in the relative weight and value placed on various aspects of the human condition but also in the evaluation of various modes of behaviour. These differences are in some cases relative (the proper balance between the logical and emotional faculties, for example) and in some cases absolute (the admissibility of wealth as a valid substitute for breeding is a good instance). In *Vanity Fair*, these cultural codes (Eighteenth Century, Regency, and Victorian) at best co-exist in uneasy proximity. At worst, they are in active opposition to each other.

This confusion is evident as early as the first paragraph of the text. In "Before the Curtain", we read, "There ... are bullies pushing about, bucks ogling the women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the lookout ..." [p. 33]. The 'knaves picking pockets' can be found in all three periods (and before and after), but the 'bullies pushing about' seem to me early Eighteenth Century, the term 'bucks' is properly applied only to the Regency period, and 'policemen on the lookout' could not exist before the mid-Victorian period when the police were first instituted.

A relatively minor example of this confusion of periods occurs when Becky, writing her first letter to Amelia from Queen's Crawley, expresses shock at the portraits of women "with long ringlets, and oh! my dear! scarcely any stays at all" [p. 112]. But this shock is completely out of place. Stays were a Victorian mainstay and were not used during the Regency period. It is appropriate for *Scarlett O'Hara* in the 1860's to be shocked at the portrait of her grandmother dressed in thin muslin without any stays, but since that was the prevailing fashion of the Jane Austen period, as Thackeray perfectly well knew, and as can be readily confirmed by reference to any portrait of the Empress Josephine, it is completely inappropriate for Becky Sharp (who had herself never worn stays at

all during a life passed in the Regency) to make such a remark, however natural for William Makepeace Thackeray in his own Victorian milieu.

Indeed, much of the pictorial confusion between the Regency and Victorian periods was quite deliberate. Thackeray's own illustrations show a basically Victorian mode of costuming larded with those few Regency elements noted specifically in the text, such as neckcloths and turbans. In the Norton Critical Edition, which reproduces the original illustrations, we find the following explanation: "It was the author's intention, faithful to history, to depict all the characters of this tale in their proper costumes, as they wore them at the commencement of the century. But when I remember the appearance of people those days, and that an officer and lady were actually habited like this – [a small sketch of a couple in complete Regency dress] I have not the heart to disfigure my heroes and heroines by costumes so hideous; and have, on the contrary, engaged a model of rank dressed according to the present fashion (Thackeray's note)".²⁰ This ostensible reason seems to me an inadequate explanation, since the effect of this alteration in costume is to blur the sense of the historical setting. The Victorian period, established in the illustrations, is sometimes denied in the text – but sometimes not, as in Becky's horror at the lack of stays. It is as though, consciously or not, Thackeray was deliberately erasing the boundary line between two periods and permitting them to coalesce into a never-never era, giving him the freedom to rove temporally among normally distinct and differentiated historic times, a freedom that he used to import both later and earlier modes – and not only those of fashion – into his tale.

This deliberate pictorial distortion is reflected, perhaps equally deliberately, in the entire fabric of the novel. The Victorian social eminence of trade is sometimes affirmed and sometimes, as in the pre-industrial age, denied. The Victorian priority of cash over land (or at least their equality) is sometimes affirmed and sometimes, as in the earlier agriculturally-based age, denied. Regency flair and zest co-exist uneasily with Victorian propriety and sobriety, and the expressed view of other points of divergence between the two periods is equally ambivalent, the weight of approval shifting between them erratically. There is – possibly – an implication that all social modes and mores, the style and design of belief and behaviour no less than those of fabric, cut, and

accessories, are part of the whirligig of fashion, constantly altering in obedience to the changing diktat of Vanity Fair.

For example, Reverend Bute, who is squarely in the easy-going but outmoded tradition of the hunting clergyman (while his wife is a spiritual twin of Austen's thoroughly Regency Mrs. Norris), maintains that his nephew Rawdon is "an infernal character – he's a gambler – he's a drunkard – he's a profligate in every way. He shot a man in a duel – he's over head and ears in debt ... this scoundrel, gambler, swindler, murderer ..." [pp. 139-40]. That the murder in the course of a duel and the general drinking and indebtedness are equally characteristic of Rawdon's 'infernal' character is but one example of the general split in sensibility present throughout the novel. 'Scoundrel, gambler, [and] swindler' are all as appropriate to the Eighteenth Century *Barry Lyndon* as to the Regency Rawdon, although the portrait of Rawdon in its entirety (as apart from his uncle's rather jaundiced description of him) is less Eighteenth Century than Regency. And his uncle clearly takes exception to his love of dueling. But dueling was socially approved during the Eighteenth Century, a social approval that waned steadily until, by the mid-Victorian period, it was no longer part of the social code of acknowledged – and approved – behaviour. The out-of-century attitude toward dueling, like the out-of-century costumes, creates a sense of temporal displacement, although in the opposite direction. Whereas the costumes are half a century too late for the action of the story, Reverend Bute's attitude toward dueling is too early.

We see an actual duel in Henry Esmond involving Lord Mohun, Lord Castlewood, and Henry. This is seen as a normal part of life. There is nothing shameful or secret about it. Even though Henry spends a brief time in prison as a result, no one in the novel thinks the worse of him – or of anyone else – for using this method of settling personal differences. On the contrary, it is seen as appropriate and manly. And this is the precise attitude Rawdon takes about the duels in which he is involved. Indeed, when Rawdon challenges Lord Steyne to a duel, this is initially seen as natural and right, the appropriate way of responding to his suspicions. But for the typical Victorian attitude, we can turn to Anthony Trollope and the duel fought by Phineas Finn and Lord Chiltern. Trollope, almost an exact contemporary of Thackeray, can always be taken as a

touchstone of Victorian normality, and in *Phineas Finn*, published in 1869, we find, "Few Englishmen fight duels in these days. They who do so are always reckoned to be fools".²¹ The duel is done "on the sly", fought in Flanders, and kept secret as public knowledge of it would, to say the least, not help Phineas' career. Lord Chiltern later comments that "I rather think what we did was absurd".²² In other words, Regency Reverend Bute's attitude to dueling reflects the mid-Victorian period (in which it was considered 'absurd'), but Rawdon's insouciant attitude is that of the Eighteenth Century. Neither reflects the time of the setting; both are out of phase, the one too early and the other too late for the England in which both presumably exist.

Reverend Bute's description of Rawdon is, on the whole, however, a description of a typical Regency buck. Nor is Rawdon the only character who is presented as such. At Jos's first entrance into the novel, he is described: "A very stout, puffy man, in buckskins and Hessian boots, with several immense neckcloths, that rose almost to his nose, with a red-striped waistcoat and an apple-green coat with steel buttons almost as large as crown pieces (it was the morning costume of a dandy or blood of those days)." [p. 55]

A few pages later he is yoked with Beau Brummell as one of "the leading bucks of the day" (at least in his presentation of himself) and is further described: "lazy, peevish, and a bon-vivant; ... [fond of] indolence and ... good living ... [who] took the hugest pains to adorn his big person, and passed many hours daily in that occupation. His valet made a fortune out of his wardrobe; his toilet-table was covered with ... pomatums and essences ... ; he had tried, in order to give himself a waist, every girth, stay, and waistband then invented... . he would have his clothes made too tight, and took care they should be made of the most brilliant colours and youthful cut. When dressed at length, in the afternoon, he would issue forth to take a drive with nobody in the Park ... He was as vain as a girl." [pp.59-60]

Throughout the novel, we are reminded of those boots and those waistcoats, which are even more ubiquitous than Mrs. Major O'Dowd's turbans (like them, part of the Regency-George IV fashion scene).

Jos's father confirms this portrait. Jos, says Mr. Sedley, "all the while... is only thinking of himself, and what a fine fellow he is." He is "vain, selfish, lazy,

and effeminate" and gives himself "airs as a man of fashion" [pp. 67 and 89, respectively]. When Amelia remarks that "I think he loves his pipe a great deal better than his ---" [p. 54], we mentally correct 'pipe' to 'waistcoats' and agree that in Jos's scale of values both pipe and waistcoats are far more important than sisters. Indeed, Jos shows every sign of growing up to be Mr. Turveydrop from Bleak House, a character who consciously and explicitly takes the Prince Regent for his model and sees himself as a 'model of deportment' and the last exemplar of Regency modes. He, however, is presented as an anachronism, and because this is deliberately made manifest, Mr. Turveydrop, never having progressed beyond the style of his earliest days, is seen as being out of step in his fictional world, but not felt by the reader as a disturbing element in the ethos of Dickens' novel. But the description of Jos is subliminally felt as a disturbance. He is described as 'a dandy or blood', but the term 'blood' is an earlier usage than 'buck', which replaced it. The term 'dandy' arises later. These three words reflect the linguistic fashions of three different periods.²³ Clearly, Thackeray's use of them together and almost interchangeably requires a rapid shift in the reader's mental focus which in turn creates subconscious unease.

Consider the following description: a "clown, indolent, selfish, and lying ... a man of fashion and extravagant artistic tastes, disreputable sexual morals, [and]... physical grossness".²⁴ This is a description, not of Jos (as it might seem) but of the Prince Regent, the great friend and patron of that Beau Brummell who was known for his "elegance and style," and was the "virtual dictator of Regency fashion" from about 1800 to about 1813.²⁵ Jos seems to have been consciously modeled on the Prince Regent, a "turgid Regency buck", and a "bloated, Humpty-Dumpty-like bulk", Beau Brummell's "fat friend".²⁶ van Ghent, concentrating on Jos's psychological and metaphorical significance, also singles out for comment "his obesity and his neck cloths and his gorgeous waistcoats".²⁷ In short, Jos is a typical Regency buck in appearance, but he is also a member of a very Victorian family.

Only the 'disreputable sexual morals' in the description of the Prince Regent cannot be attributed to Jos. But he is not the only Regency buck in *Vanity Fair*; George is just as much attached to his waistcoats as is Jos – we recall that he borrows money from Dobbin to buy a gift for Amelia and then spends the

money on a new waistcoat for himself [p. 158] – and also sees himself as a 'man of fashion'. If George lacks Jos's physical grossness, he more than makes up for it in his possession of those 'disreputable sexual morals'. As Musselwhite remarks, George is "the wastrel and rake ... , the gambler and profligate, the spoilt son and heir ... Thackeray's former ideal of himself, the ideal of the Regency dandy. His model, of course, was Beau Brummell" also a 'George'.²⁸ And George, like Jos, is a member of a very Victorian family. Becky, incontestably the sharpest observer in the novel, sums him up as "that selfish humbug, that low-bred Cockney dandy, that padded booby, who had neither wit, nor manners, nor heart" [p. 789].

Among them, then, Rawdon, Jos, George, Mrs. Bute, and Mrs. Major O'Dowd (with her Austenian passion for match-making as well as her turbans) carry the burden of the Regency theme in the orchestration of *Vanity Fair*. And all of these characters except Mrs Major O'Dowd are members of incontestably Victorian families. It would not be remarkable if the sons of Regency families were to exhibit a generally Victorian sensibility, or if the younger brother were to embody a Victorian ethos in contrast to an older brother's Regency mode, since that would reflect the flow of social evolution in which the younger relative can be expected to be the more up-to-date and the older one the more representative of the earlier ways, as indeed Rawdon's father harks back to the prior period of the Georges and Rawdon himself is typical of the later Regency, which is not dissimilar, but what about Rawdon's older brother who is, it seems, not only of a later generation than his father (which is the usual progression) but of his younger brother? Here we have a reversal of the pattern. In *Vanity Fair* the sons of mercantile Victorian families and the younger brother of a very Victorian older son embody a Regency sensibility.

This reversal of the flow of time creates a jarring effect, since one expects characters to reflect the period which formed them, and, clearly, older characters were bred at an earlier period than their younger relatives and can be expected to reflect older modes of behaviour. If a character in a novel is not in tune with his times, however, and other characters (or the author) comment on it, the temporal displacement is absorbed into the fabric of the fictional world and ceases to be felt as a disturbing element. This does not happen in *Vanity Fair*

where the natural progression is reversed. It is as if the younger characters were molded at an earlier period than the older ones, and nobody notices. That the resulting unease is felt only subconsciously, like that caused by the mingling of terms from different periods, makes it all the more disturbing.

The Victorian theme, as implied above, can be traced in another group of characters. Our first introduction to Mr. Sedley sees him "rattling his seals like a true [Victorian] British merchant" [p. 57], and the Sedley family (with the obvious exception of Jos) is quintessentially Victorian middle-class, "in the process of physical destruction because of its lack of shrewdness in an acquisitive culture," as the Osborne family (with the equally obvious exception of George) is the embodiment of Victorian middle-class "acquisitive shrewdness and ... necessarily accompanying denial of ... human impulses".²⁹ Mr. Osborne is, indeed, a spiritual twin of Dickens' great exemplar of the Victorian commercial culture, Mr. Dombey, in his placing of money above all other considerations, whether emotional or familial.

Mr. Sedley, too, is an avatar of Mr. Dombey. The Sedleys' disaster is essentially that of the Dombey (bankruptcy), springs from similar causes (insufficient attention to or acumen in business), is met in a similar way (public auction of the family's possessions), and has similar consequences (the ultimate reconciliation of the estranged father and daughter). But *Dombey and Son* is set later than *Vanity Fair* so the business elements are appropriate to the period. Another literary parallel is the similar disaster that overtakes George Eliot's Tullivers: the bankruptcy, the cause thereof, the public auction, and the ultimate reconciliation of the estranged pair (here brother and sister rather than father and daughter), but although *The Mill on the Floss* is set earlier than *Dombey and Son*, it is later than *Vanity Fair*, and this highlights how Victorian the bankruptcy cluster of events in Thackeray is. And, to continue the Victorian commercial theme, as Arnold Kettle remarks, "Old Osborne . . . is every successful 19th Century businessman ... a whole world and its values come crowding up as he leans over and speaks to his grandson when he hears of old John Sedley's death".³⁰

'You see,' said old Osborne to George, 'what comes of merit and industry, and judicious speculations, and that. Look at me and my banker's account. Look at

your poor grandfather Sedley and his failure. And yet he was a better man than I was, this day twenty years – a better man, I should say, by ten thousand pounds.' [p. 704]

Here is the Victorian voice of Mr. Dombey, measuring worth only in terms of money. This is also the voice of the Osborne and Dobbin girls, assessing the loveableness of both Amelia and Miss Swartz in terms of the banker's balance.

Another aspect of the Victorian ethos is apparent when we consider the Southdown-Crawley family. Pollard identifies Lady Jane as an Evangelical in the Victorian mode which ultimately "won the day,"³¹ but here I think he errs. The Evangelical theme is not carried by Lady Jane but by her mother and husband. Lady Southdown, in her do-gooding, overbearing, and repressive social servicing, is cut from the same mold as Dickens' Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby. And the younger Sir Pitt, with his Evangelical sermonizing, his "meritorious industry", [p. 120] and his air "pompous as an undertaker" [p. 113] is "a very polite and proper gentleman" of "rigid refinement" [p. 119]. He may be a hypocrite, but he is a very Victorian model of that species, with his "canny self-renovation through connivance with the economy and morality of the dominant middle-class".³²

This is not to imply that Lady Jane is not cut from a Victorian pattern; she is so, but from another piece of goods. For Lady Jane is the quintessential Victorian 'angel in the house'. She may not approve of her mother's passion for bestowing tracts on all and sundry (and indeed clearly does not) nor of her husband's actions on all points, but her opposition to both is muted by her 'duty' and she usually permits her own ideas and desires to be over-ridden and give way to those of the authority whom she feels bound to bow to and obey, first her mother and later her husband, and she habitually defers to them and effaces herself. Her loyalties are never in question, and they bind her, but she is perfectly capable of standing against both where she is convinced that they are in error, not stridently and argumentatively but with quiet, but none the less clear, resolution.

In other respects, also, Lady Jane is a touchstone of proper Victorian ladyhood. In her love for children, her own, her all-but-abandoned nephew, young Rawdy, and the fatherless George, she presents a marked contrast to both

Becky, who has no use for her son except when she can profitably make use of him, and Amelia, who dotes on and idolizes her own son but seems quite indifferent to anyone else's offspring. Amelia "lived upon [Georgy] ... This child was her being. Her existence was a maternal caress. She enveloped the ... creature with love and worship. [He was] "her heart and her treasure – her joy, hope, love, worship – her God, almost!" [pp. 425 and 577, respectively]. Amelia's maternal effusions are so wildly extravagant that we may almost miss the fact that Lady Jane's maternal emotions, though quieter and calmer, are in fact deeper than hers.

In this, as in most other respects, Amelia is a caricature of Lady Jane – and of the Victorian feminine ideal. Our first description of her is in Miss Pinkerton's letter, a description which is backed up two pages further on by the authorial voice: "the amiable Miss Sedley, whose industry and obedience have endeared her to her instructors and whose delightful sweetness of temper has charmed her aged and youthful companions" [p. 40]. Her charm and amiability, however, owe at least as much to her father's financial standing as to her own temper, just as Miss Pinkerton's negative view of Becky owes a good deal to her position as a charity student. Miss Pinkerton's attitudes towards her students are comparable to Miss Minchin's in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Sara Crewe*, or Mrs. Pipchin's in *Dombey and Son*, and are equally to be ascribed to the Victorian preoccupation with financial standing.

Amelia's steadfast loyalty to her unworthy fiance is not in the least altered when he makes her his wife and, in short order, his widow and the mother of his posthumous son. One can be quite sure that even had he survived Waterloo Amelia would never have changed her attitude – unless, indeed, Becky had accepted his invitation to run away with him (something that supremely level-headed young woman was most unlikely to do), and even then Amelia would probably have exonerated George as the victim of a siren and thrown the entire blame on Becky, as she does on several occasions of less immediate consequence.

This blind loyalty to George, Amelia's habitual self-effacement, and her humbleness and gentleness all reflect the same qualities in Lady Jane but in an exaggerated form. Unlike Lady Jane, who does think for herself even if she is

muted about expressing those thoughts, Amelia "took her opinions from those people who surrounded her ... being much too humble-minded to think for [herself]" [p. 313]. Amelia is "so gentle and unassuming that she always yielded when anyone chose to command, and so took ... orders with perfect meekness and good humour" [p. 179].

Lady Jane too obeys orders – up to a point; when she feels herself in the right to disagree, which she does on more than one occasion, she quietly places herself in opposition, which Amelia never does. No one could say of Lady Jane what Kettle says of Amelia: that she lives "life through a submission that is not even an honest submission, exploiting her weakness, deceiving even herself".³³ For Lady Jane, although compliant, is not weak. Her obedience is a positive quality, whereas Amelia's is a negative one. "Directly [Amelia] understood it to be her duty, it was ... her nature to sacrifice herself" [p. 660], but she gains no self-respect from her sacrifices: "in the midst of all these solitary resignations and unseen sacrifices, she did not respect herself any more than the world respected her; but I believe thought in her heart that she was a poor-spirited despicable little creature" [p. 662]. As J.I.M. Stewart remarks, Amelia reflects "a conflict of feelings in Thackeray and in his society as to what women ought to be".³⁴

Lady Jane is throughout honest with herself as well as with others. She embraces her lot as the result of her positive choice with which she is happy, whereas Amelia accepts "her lot with a passivity that the Victorians may have thought rather more noble than later readers have done".³⁵ Although both characters are drawn from the Victorian ideal, no one would say of Lady Jane, as is said of Amelia, that she "was so utterly gentle and humble as to be made by nature for a victim" [p. 690]; although Lady Jane is indeed both gentle and humble, she is never perceived by the reader as being victimized.

Lady Jane loves and admires her husband in the normative Victorian manner, but Amelia hero-worships hers. George "was her Europe: her emperor: her allied monarchs and august prince regent. He was her sun and moon." Amelia "loved [him] with all her heart ... She thought about him the very first moment on waking; and his was the very last name mentioned in her prayers. She never had seen a man so beautiful or so clever: such a figure on horseback: such a dancer: such a hero in general. Talk of the Prince's bow, and what was it to

George's? She had seen Mr. Brummell ... Compare such a person as that to her George! Not amongst all the beaux at the Opera ... was there any one to equal him. He was only good enough to be a fairy prince; and oh, what magnanimity to stoop to such a humble Cinderella!" [pp. 151-53, passim]. The references to the Prince Regent and to Beau Brummell jar, and no wonder! They seem almost to have been tacked on and tucked in, inserted because the author happened to remember in which period his story was set, rather than being an integral element in Amelia's consciousness. They are anachronisms in a passage that is purely Victorian in its ethos, although singularly appropriate in reference to that Regency buck, George Osborne. If they are not anachronistic, then Amelia is out of her proper period. This is the only passage in which the dichotomy of periods blatantly rises to the surface; other such passages, for example those in which the confusion is expressed by out-of-period language or attitudes, are apt to float below the reader's conscious notice.

Amelia, in her "obstinate, irrational, and thoroughly unwarranted fidelity to Osborne's memory",³⁶ is out of place in the Regency setting, but thoroughly at home in the Victorian one where her attitude is only marginally different from that of Queen Victoria herself after Prince Albert's death, and the difference has more to do with the worthiness of the object than with the behaviour of the subject.

This ego-massaging of the male animal must have been intensely appealing to the Victorian (or any other) male who felt it was what he deserved but was unlikely to find outside the pages of this book. Not only does she worship her husband and son, but she thoroughly repents of her disobedience to her father and returns chastened to the parental household after her clandestine marriage ends in death (certainly), disgrace (possibly) and disillusionment (potentially). What a splendid object-lesson the Victorian pater familias must have thought Amelia provided for his own women-folk as he read *Vanity Fair* aloud to his family in the evening!

Perhaps because Amelia's "sufferings ... [expose]the various oppressions of husband, father, and father-in-law",³⁷ the Victorian period is brought to life in her acquiescence. And yet those 'oppressions' also seem a caricature. It is true that the actual Mr. Barrett oppressed his daughter Elizabeth far more completely than the fictional Mr. Sedley does his Amelia, but she took steps (literally) to

escape that oppression. The fictional Helen Graham (in Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*) took similar steps to escape the 'oppressions' of her husband, far worse ones than Amelia's. And Lady Jane merely ignores her father-in-law, whose behaviour may be assumed to have depressed her, if it does not directly oppress her. The caricature in Amelia's case stems from the fact that she is the object of these 'oppressions' from all three sources, and that instead of attempting to ameliorate them or escape them altogether, she seems to invite and welcome them as a proof of her own position in the world. She feeds on her wrongs.

Her personality is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Victorian ideal and is designed to appeal to the Victorian ideal gentleman: "almost all men who came near her loved her ... wherever she went she touched and charmed every one of the male sex ... it was her weakness which was her principal charm: a kind of sweet submission and softness, which seemed to appeal to each man she met for his sympathy and protection" [p. 458], so it is no wonder that the Regency buck, the rake George, rather despises her, or that the Victorian ideal gentleman, Dobbin, adores her. For Dobbin is as much the ideal Victorian gentleman as Lady Jane is the ideal Victorian gentlewoman. The son of a family 'in trade', both he and his father rise, in the approved Victorian fashion, by their own efforts and worth to a respected place in society. The Miss Dobbins adopt the same means of assessing worth as does the Osborne family (both the Dobbin and Osborne girls have nothing but scorn for Amelia and cannot enough express their admiration and affection for the rich Miss Swartz), but Dobbin's values are less those of the great man on 'change than of the Warden of Barchester Cathedral. He is a 'true' gentleman "whose aims are generous, whose truth is constant, and not only constant in its kind but elevated in its degree; whose want of meanness makes them simple: who can look the world in the eye with an equal manly sympathy for the great and the small" as opposed to those who have well-made coats, excellent manners, and are "in the inner circles ... of the fashion." His "thoughts were just, his brains were fairly good, his life was honest and pure, and his heart warm and humble" [p. 720]. Dr. Arnold would have approved of him. So would Queen Victoria. His portrait may owe as much to the Prince Consort as Jos's and George's owe to the Prince Regent. If he strikes the

Twentieth Century as "so properly upright as to be a bore",³⁸ he is an upright bore in the most Victorian fashion, and if he is more than a bit wooden, that too is appropriate. Becky sums him up with her usual shrewdness: "What a noble heart that man has" [p. 776], and the sort of nobility of which Dobbin is a walking pattern is the sort of nobility that Tennyson's King Arthur embodies: generous aims, constant truth, elevated and just thoughts, 'manly sympathy for the great and the small', an honest and pure life, and a heart both warm and humble. Our problem with Dobbin may simply be that his brand of nobility has steadily declined from its Victorian heyday and is now completely out of fashion.

The obvious contrast to Amelia is, of course, Becky. If the former is based on the Victorian ideal of womanhood, the latter has nothing to do with that ideal. Like Jos, George, and Rawdon, she harks back to an earlier period. David Musselwhite takes Thackeray's description of Beau Brummell, the consummate Regency dandy, written in May of 1844 (in a review of Jesse's *Life of George Brummell Esq.* in the *Morning Chronicle*) as a prefiguration of Becky in his social triumphs against all odds, his debts, his flitting to Europe to escape his creditors, and his out-facing of monarchs, as well as in his "simplicity, elegance, and neat impudence of mind" and his socially dubious antecedents,³⁹ all of which makes Becky as much the female analog of George Brummell as George Osborne is his male analog. The immorality, greediness, and corruption of Becky's world, as van Ghent analyzes it⁴⁰ however, seem to me more reminiscent of the world of Beatrix Castlewood than of Jane Austen's Bath, and I would place Becky's world a century earlier than the world of Jos, George, and Rawdon and a century and a half earlier than that of Dobbin, Amelia, the younger Sir Pitt, and Lady Jane.

In short, Becky, with her demure manner, her charm, her ability to act whatever part seems best fitted to advance her social ambitions, her basic frigidity, her lack of any real emotion for others and her ability to counterfeit such emotion when she chooses, her refusal to conform to others' expectations of her, her independence of the rules of proper conduct (except when it suits her to conform), her "aggressive egoism",⁴¹ and her basic defiance of convention and determination to be the mistress of her own life, bears not a little resemblance to Beatrix Castlewood. David Cecil's comments apply equally to

both of these heroines: "the spirited buccaneer amid the ordered fleet of humanity, out at all costs to get what pleasure and power she can ... inevitably heartless and unscrupulous. But she is also courageous, unrancorous, and so far as it does not interfere with her own comfort, good-natured".⁴² There is a certain resemblance, also, between Becky and Thackeray's Barry Lyndon, another charming but thoroughly unreliable character, whose career appropriately set in the Eighteenth Century, has more than a few parallels to that of Becky. Becky, indeed, could be paralleled in reality only by such as Lady Hamilton and Sarah Churchill.

If Becky's "treatment of husband and child offended against the domestic pieties of Victorian England",⁴³ as they surely did, they are more than balanced by Amelia's worship of her menfolk. But the 'domestic pieties of Victorian England' really have very little to do with the young Becky, whether one considers her a Regency analog of Beau Brummell or an Eighteenth Century analog of Barry Lyndon. And not the strictest Victorian moralist could object to the reformed Becky of the last chapter (although Amelia can and does, less because of her general morals – or lack thereof – than because she has shattered Amelia's idealized vision of George as a proper Victorian husband).

For Becky retires at last to Bath and Cheltenham where she "busies herself in works of piety. She goes to church, and never without a footman. Her name is in all the Charity Lists." She is generous to the poor and runs charity stalls at bazaars [pp. 796-97]. In short, she has metamorphosed into the Victorian ideal of proper conduct. But then, she had claimed earlier that she could be "a good woman" on £ 500 a year [p. 495], and although we are not told the amount of the allowance meted out to her by her son, we may perhaps guess at it, for Becky has certainly become 'a good [Victorian] woman', "a charitable dowager, a pattern of respectability".⁴⁴

Pollard attributes some of the power of the book to "the contrast between the raffishness of its Regency setting and the changed manners of three decades later",⁴⁵ and comments that there is a recurring conflict in Thackeray between "Triumphant Evangelicalism bringing a new puritanism with it" and "the laxer ... morals of the Georgian era" which it was ousting.⁴⁶ I believe that the situation is far more complex than this would indicate, although there is a hard core of

truth in it, for both the "systems of values and elements of the cultural code"⁴⁷ are much larger than he indicates.

Among the female characters, Amelia, Mrs. Sedley, Lady Jane, Lady Southdown, and both the Dobbin and Osborne girls, for example, represent various aspects of the Victorian ethos, whereas Miss Crawley and Mrs. Bute are at home in the Regency pattern. And Becky, an analog of Beatrix Castlewood, draws her life force from the Eighteenth Century. With the men, the equivalent contrast is between Victorian Mr. Sedley, Mr. Osborne, and Dobbin, each in his own way, Regency George, Rawdon, and Jos, and Eighteenth Century Lord Steyne and the elder Sir Pitt Crawley, who comes "almost straight out of Fielding".⁴⁸ One immediately notes that those in the Eighteenth Century group possess the greatest semblance of independent life and those in the Victorian group the least.

The Eighteenth Century group and the Regency group may be taken together (although there are subtle differences between them) and placed against the Victorian group. I would suggest that in fact there are two constellations of characters, one based on the Late Stuart-to-Regency norm, and the other on the Victorian norm. For the first group, the emphasis is on deportment (like Mr. Turveydrop), fine clothes, extravagance, being a "gay young (or old) dog", sexual license, recklessness, spendthriftiness, daring, glitter, and so on. The key term for this group is irresponsibility. Its collective members are Becky, Jos, George, Rawdon, the older Crawleys, and Lord Steyne.

For the second group, the emphasis is on character, sobriety, drabness, responsibility, sexual continence (at least in public), caution, thriftiness, getting ahead in the world, and so on. The key term for this group is earnestness. Its collective members are Amelia, Dobbin, Mr. and Mrs. Sedley, Mr. Osborne, the younger Sir Pitt Crawley, Lady Jane Crawley, and Lady Southdown. Mrs. Bute Crawley exhibits character traits from both groups.

The novel can then be read as the shift of norms from Eighteenth Century-Regency to Victorian culture, even though there are no lack of Victorian elements at the beginning of the book, such as Becky's reaction to women without stays. It is as if Thackeray, having reveled in the freedom provided by the earlier setting, has resigned himself to a properly Victorian moral

denouement, giving in to the pressures of his own time. At the beginning, the most prominent characters are those representing the earlier norms, and they are drawn with a liveliness and gusto that reflect the author's liking for them and their ways. By the end, these characters are all either dead, irrelevant, chastened, or "reformed" and the Victorian group, wooden and all but lifeless, have taken over center stage and are successful (happy is another matter, but then, in Victorian terms, success is far more important than happiness).

Thus Becky, the central character, begins in Eighteenth Century-Regency Bohemian zest, descends to Victorian Bohemian degradation, and ends in proper Victorian piety, living in Bath and Cheltenham, those faded centers of fashionable Regency elegance, haunted by the ghosts of Jane Austen and Beau Brummell. Both towns declined in the beginning of the Nineteenth Century (like their prominent inhabitant), becoming faded and reformed into proper – Victorian – gentility.

Footnotes

- 1 Edward Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the English Novel* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1954), P. 271.
- 2 Dorothy van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (Harper & Row: New York, 1953), p. 140.
- 3 *Ibid.* 140-41.
- 4 Hillel Daleski, *Unities: Studies in the English Novel* (University of Georgia Press: Athens, Ga., 1985), pp. 1-17, *passim*.
- 5 van Ghent, p. 143.
- 6 Hillel Daleski, *The Divided Heroine* (Holmes and Meier: New York, 1984), p. 14.
- 7 Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1958), p.179.
- 8 Alan Horsman, *The Victorian Novel* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1990), p. 83.
- 9 Barry Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1982), pp. 6-7.
- 10 J.B. Priestley, *Literature and Western Man* (Mercury Books: London, 1962), p. 181.
- 11 Arthur Pollard, "Surtees, Thackeray, and Trollope", *Sphere History of Literature: The Victorians*, Arthur Pollard, ed. (Sphere Books: London, 1987), p. 117.
- 12 Priestley, p. 180.
- 13 Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel*, rev. ed. (Harper & Row: New York, 1951), pp. 147-48.

- 14 Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (Viking Books, 1921), p. 95.
- 15 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, J. I. M. Stewart, ed. (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968). All quotations except where otherwise noted are from this edition.
- 16 George Henry Lewes, in a review in *Athenaeum* 12 August 1948, pp. 794-7, reprinted in Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Peter Shillingsburg, ed. (Norton Books: New York, 1994), pp. 753-58, notes that "Thackeray becomes suddenly aware of the discrepancy between the costume of the period in which he has laid his scene and the costume in which he has depicted the characters in his pictorial illustrations" and adds that "He has been guilty ... of the same confusion of periods throughout the work. Sometimes we are in the early part of the present century – at others we are palpably in 1848." Lewes, however, merely notes this confusion without exploring it.
- 17 Pollard, p. 117.
- 18 Allen, p. 177.
- 19 van Ghent, p. 142.
- 20 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Norton edition, note 4, pp. 63-64.
- 21 Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, Notes by Jacques Berthoud, 1982, (Oxford University Press [World's Classics]: Oxford, 1987 printing), Vol. I, p. 353.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 98.
- 23 The New Shorter OED, 1993 edition, gives 'blood' as 'A rowdy, a roisterer; a dandy, a rake' (mid-Sixteenth Century) and 'A leader of fashion' (late Nineteenth Century); as the usage here combines both meanings it may be considered as reflecting the shift from the earlier to the later definition, and thus roughly the late Seventeenth Century. 'Buck' as 'A dashing fellow, a dandy' is early Eighteenth Century. And 'dandy' as 'A man whose style of dress is ostentatiously elegant or fashionable; a fop' is late Eighteenth Century. Since words tend to enter literature later than they enter language, it seems reasonable to shift the dates of the OED forward by approximately fifty years, which gives early Eighteenth Century for 'blood', late Eighteenth Century for 'buck', and middle Nineteenth Century for 'dandy', placing each of the words successively in each of the periods I am considering.
- 24 J. P. Kenyon, *Dictionary of British History* (Sphere Books: London, 1988 edition).
- 25 *Idem.*
- 26 David E. Musselwhite, "Notes on a Journey to *Vanity Fair*", *Partings Welded Together* (Methuen: London, 1987), pp. 130 and 135, respectively.
- 27 van Ghent, p. 146.
- 28 Musselwhite, p. 132.
- 29 van Ghent, p. 142.
- 30 Kettle, p. 157.
- 31 Pollard, p. 119.
- 32 van Ghent, p. 142.
- 33 Kettle, p. 155.
- 34 Thackeray, *Introduction*, p. 15.

- 35 Pollard, p. 119.
36 Idem.
37 Idem.
38 Idem.
39 Musselwhite, p. 135.
40 van Ghent, p. 143.
41 Ibid., p. 145.
42 David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1934), p. 80.
43 Pollard, *ibid.*
44 Cecil, p. 67.
45 Pollard, *ibid.*
46 Ibid., p. 122.
47 Professor Leona Toker of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in a note to the author.
48 Pollard, p. 120.

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