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## Empty Houses: Thackeray's Theater of Interiority

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The nineteenth century has long been justifiably regarded as the golden age of the realist novel, the period when long narrative fiction achieved undisputed cultural respectability and intellectual seriousness. But some of the most innovative recent critical work in Victorian studies has addressed the struggles and uncertainties attendant on the novel's quest for cultural hegemony. I'm thinking in particular of books like Emily Allen's *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* and J. Jeffrey Franklin's *Serious Play: The Cultural Form of the Nineteenth-Century Realist Novel*. Despite the differing emphases and arguments of these works, they share an acute awareness of the theater's central role in nineteenth-century English culture. Allen and Franklin both argue that the novel consolidated its cultural centrality by means of a strenuous competition with its theatrical other.

Allen demonstrates, for example, that novelists conjured the image of theater to create distinctions between *novels*: the figure of theater drew off energies of embodiment, femininity, and mass entertainment that the serious novel needed to render abject in order to establish itself as a private, disembodied, respectable artistic object. Franklin's account similarly emphasizes a model of generic competition, whereby novelists like William Makepeace Thackeray and George Eliot discipline theatrical characters in order to supplant what Franklin calls "the subject of performance" with "the subject of reading" (126). Allen and Franklin are both drawing on and contributing to the important work of historians who have traced the transformations in dramatic culture over the course of the nineteenth century. A series of changes in theater architecture, playwriting, acting styles, and urban planning affected English theatergoing in profound ways that have been summed up as effecting a gradual "novelization" of the theater. The disappearance of the last big urban fairgrounds, the shortening of theatrical bills of fare to make evening entertainment coincide with the suburban commuter trains, the introduction of family-oriented

matinees, the evaporation of the stage apron and thus the curtailing of interaction between actor and audience, the eventual triumph of the proscenium arch so that stage action receded and took on the air of a parallel reality, the increased emphasis on realism in stage design and on decorum and passivity in audiences, the developing interest in psychological realism in characterization: together, these developments transformed a theatrical and public culture to reflect the new prominence of the private, domestically oriented, psychologically absorbed form of the realist novel.<sup>1</sup>

The critics I've mentioned have understandably argued that the major realist novelists are quite happy about, if not themselves complicit in, this disciplining of theatrical culture. As I've indicated, these critics assume that antagonism sets the terms for the relations among artistic forms: the decline of the theater coincides with the novel's victory. This model makes intuitive sense—and as I've suggested, it has brought a new dynamism to the study of the novel's evolution. But I would like to question the notion that the models of “contest” (Franklin 87) and “competition” (Allen 17) provide the only, or best, lens through which to comprehend the relations between genres. It seems important, for example, to recall that some of the writers most closely associated with the novel's cultural prestige, among them George Eliot, Henry James, and, later, James Joyce, attempted to write for the stage. Strangely—but not, I want to suggest, entirely coincidentally—these are also among the novelists we most associate with the refinement of techniques for representing consciousness. That these authors are frequently described as apostles of inwardness, and that they could be vocal about their distaste for the actual theater, should not blind us to the fact that at crucial moments in their novelistic careers, the theater seemed to hold a promise—occasionally financial, but also aesthetic and ethical—that the novel did not. The strange theatrical interludes in these exemplary novelistic careers, I'd suggest, should at the very least prompt us to reconsider the model of generic competition.

I'll focus on a revealing stretch in the career of Thackeray—a writer whose volubly expressed contempt for “sham” and pretense might make him seem the most antitheatrical of Victorian novelists. To be sure (as generations of critics have shown) it is possible to demonstrate that Thackeray's hatred of theatricality coexists with a powerful attraction to it. This is a valuable insight, but it is not my point here. In

fact, I want to suggest that focusing on Thackeray's moral ambivalence about an abstraction called "theatricality" may obscure his attachment to a very real theatrical culture. The coordinates of this attachment are more ethical than moral—more concerned, that is, with the social spaces the theater creates and the forms of life it fosters than with the necessity of judging the fact of performance according to a rubric of right-or-wrong. I'll be examining Thackeray's 1854 play entitled *The Wolves and the Lamb* alongside his 1860 short novel, *Lovel the Widower*, a narrative he derived from that play after repeated efforts to have it staged were frustrated. In tracing the unexpected mutations the story undergoes in its retreat from the theater, I'll also suggest that this late novel's most innovative formal and tonal features derive from its melancholic relation to a lost possibility of performance.

The novelistic voice Thackeray creates in *Lovel*, I'll argue, conveys a palpable nostalgia for a dwindling mid-Victorian theatrical world that, as we have seen, was ceding symbolic centrality to an increasingly valorized private and domestic sphere. I hope that this analysis of how Thackeray's theatrical desire shapes his fiction indicates that we need a more capacious model of generic interaction than one that understands literary forms as engaged in a kind of Darwinian struggle for survival.<sup>2</sup> I want to remind us that writers don't always know what's good for "their" genre, or even which genre is "theirs." And even if we can be sure that the novel was in competition with the theater, we should recall that competitors view one another with longing and desire as well as with enmity, and that victors often ambivalently memorialize the values of their defeated rivals. Far from triumphing in the eclipse of the theater, some of the period's most interesting novelists registered their own ascendancy ruefully. Further, this sense of loss actually produced some of the literary techniques that we now regard as most characteristically novelistic: I'll conclude by suggesting that the stream of consciousness that is among the novel's best-known techniques for representing psychic experience in fact takes its form from the novel's frustrated theatrical desire.

Thackeray wrote *The Wolves and the Lamb* in 1854, at the height of his fame. He intended the play for the Olympic Theatre in the West End, but the manager there rejected it after a hasty reading, as did the manager of the Haymarket to whom Thackeray next submitted it. In fact its only performance occurred at a housewarming party Thackeray threw when he and his daughters moved into their large house at

Palace Green, Kensington, in 1862. The playbills Thackeray had printed up for the party claimed that this was a performance by the “W. M. T. House Theatricals”: the pun’s reference to an “empty house” alludes first of all to the fact that the furnishings hadn’t yet arrived at Palace Green on the occasion of this performance; secondly, it reminds the spectators of the play’s inability to command the attention of a real theatrical “house”; thirdly, and most interestingly, by metaphorically hollowing out the space of domestic felicity, it sounds a strangely melancholic note on the occasion of a housewarming.<sup>3</sup>

This somewhat sour pun is all the more striking when we consider the blandly orthodox domesticity celebrated in the play itself. *The Wolves and the Lamb* is a routine domestic comedy of the type that was increasingly finding favor in mid-century London.<sup>4</sup> And perhaps one reason for the failure of Thackeray’s play to gain a place on the stage is the unconvincing eagerness with which it mimics the ascendant hominess of the West End theater. The play’s headnote indicates that the stage represents “two drawing-rooms opening into one another” (373). In offering his hypothetical viewers this image of the domestic receding into itself, it is as if Thackeray wants to recall us to the derivation of “drawing room” from the word “withdraw,” while at the same time doubling and intensifying the scene’s domesticity.

This visual frame offers an apt introduction to the plot of the play, which pays similarly insistent homage to the space of the home. The lamb of its title is the widower Milliken, a “wealthy City Merchant” (372) who falls in love with his children’s governess Julia Prior. When it’s revealed that Miss Prior’s previous employment was dancing in an “Oriental ballet,” Milliken’s respectable in-laws are of course horrified (412). But by far the most surprising thing about the revelation of Julia’s theatrical past is how anodyne it proves—how easily contained in the space of the home. In notable contrast to Thackeray’s other theatrically marked heroines like *Vanity Fair*’s Becky Sharpe, *Pendennis*’s Blanche Amory, or *Henry Esmond*’s Beatrix—all of whom prove unable to change their performative stripes, and accordingly provoke their creator’s denunciation—Julia proves fully assimilable in the Milliken family. The marriage comes off in the end, and Julia shows herself more than willing to repress her theatrical past in exchange for a position in the Milliken home. It is as if, in the context of a theatrical culture busy making itself over in the image of the home, Thackeray can barely work

up his customary fervor over the theatrical; he seems only able to rehearse, mechanically, the domestic ideology the form demands of him.

The only bump in these proceedings is provided by a strangely peripheral character with the suggestive name of Captain Touchit. An old friend of the hero who is simply visiting the house as the action transpires, this character remains entirely marginal to the unfolding of the play's action, with little real place in any summary of its plot. Thackeray signals Touchit's externality most clearly by positioning him as the only character who recognizes the incongruity of the play's relative lack of interest in the question of theater. Touchit does this by insisting on verbally reminding the other characters of the theatrical medium in which they exist. Stumbling onto the play's climactic scene, for example, he exclaims, "What is this comedy going on, ladies and gentlemen? The ladies on their elderly knees—Miss Prior with her hair down her back. Is it tragedy or comedy?—is it a rehearsal for a charade, or are we acting for Horace's birthday?" (437). The outburst hints at some of the multifariousness of the theatrical culture *The Wolves and the Lamb* otherwise ignores. If the play as a whole seems happily to participate in the domestication of the theater described by Allen and Franklin, it is only Captain Touchit who even seems to register that that eclipse is underway.

A connection to theatrical spaces outside the home in fact turns out to be precisely what most characterizes Touchit. A former tenant in the boarding house kept by the Prior family, Touchit is the only character with a living experience of Julia Prior's theatrical past. He is, moreover, much more eager than she to discuss it, to bring those alternate theatrical spaces briefly to verbal life on this stage. In his only tête-à-tête with Julia, and over her protests, he reminisces about one of their fellow-lodgers: "What a heap of play-tickets, diorama-tickets, concert-tickets he used to give you!" (401-02). But Julia quickly cuts short this drift into the past and into theatrical spaces distinct from the withdrawn drawing room in which they find themselves.

Touchit seems more firmly linked to theatrical culture than the actress Julia Prior, but there are indications at the end of the play that he may be discarded not on grounds of impropriety but of sheer irrelevance: "And you will come down and see us often, Touchit, won't you?" Milliken asks vaguely in the play's penultimate line, but the question goes unanswered by Touchit, who, a few lines earlier, has indicated his intention not to "interrupt this felicity" and to dine instead at his club (445). This non-exchange makes evident the increased demarcation

between inside and outside, home and world—between the spectacle of domesticity and the pleasures of the theater—that is characteristic both of the refortified Milliken home and of the paradoxically withdrawn theatrical space it occupies. Touchit is a container for the memory of these external spaces the play ignores, and his silence mirrors the play's confusion about what to do with this extra-domestic character. Touchit's exile from the conclusion of *The Wolves and the Lamb* suggests that a stage committed to mirroring the enclosure of the home can afford no space for the articulation of that theatrical memory.

Paradoxically enough, it is only in the novel that this character, an embodied repository of the theatrical past, will find his voice. *The Wolves and the Lamb* forces us to imagine Touchit's interior response to the play's final question; but the 1860 novel *Lovel the Widower*, which Thackeray adapted out of his failed play, opens with and is sustained by a torrent of Touchit's language. The emotional focus and innovative force of *Lovel the Widower* derive from the way it finds a narrative form for the experience of dramatic failure. Retreating from the scene of his theatrical frustration, Thackeray discovers a lush narrative expanse, a subtly contoured, acoustically rich space of interior consciousness. The story has remained essentially the same, but Thackeray has transformed its meaning by giving power of narration to the most peripheral character. The 1860 novel creates its flamboyant interior monologue out of that liminal space between theatrical past and domestic present inhabited by Captain Touchit.

"Who shall be the hero of this tale?" the novel opens. "Not I who write it" (197). The phrase signals a clear dissent from the famous Dickensian opening that is its most immediate point of reference: unlike David Copperfield, who coyly wonders *whether* he will turn out to be the hero of the life-story that bears his name, this narrator flatly refuses to move center stage. "I am but the Chorus of the Play," he clarifies—and takes off on a fifteen-page bravura rant in which we tour an echo chamber reverberating with past and present arguments, blandishments, resentments. No one else speaks, but we are nonetheless awash in voices:

I am but the Chorus of the Play. I make remarks on the conduct of the characters: I narrate their simple story. There is love and marriage in it: there is grief and disappointment: the scene is in the parlour, and the region beneath the parlour. No: it may be the parlour and the kitchen, in this instance, are on the same level. . . . I don't think there's a villain in the whole performance. There is . . . an old haunter

of Bath and Cheltenham boarding-houses (about which how can I know anything, never having been in a boarding-house at Bath or Cheltenham in my life?). . . .

The principal personage you may very likely think to be no better than a muff. But is many a respectable man of our acquaintance much better? . . . Yes, perhaps even this one is read and written by—Well? *Quid rides?* Do you mean that I am painting a portrait which hangs before me every morning in the looking glass when I am shaving? *Après?* Do you suppose that I suppose that I have not infirmities like my neighbors? . . .

I wish with all my heart I was about to narrate a story with a good mother-in-law for a character; but then you know, my dear madam, all good women in novels are insipid. This woman certainly was not. . . . Aha! my good lady Baker! I was a *mauvais sujet*, was I?—I was leading Fred [Lovel] into smoking, drinking, and low bachelor habits, was I? I, his old friend, who have borrowed money from him any time these twenty years, was not fit company for you and your precious daughter? Indeed! . . .

Before entering upon the present narrative, may I take leave to inform a candid public that, though it is all true, there is not a word of truth in it; that though Lovel is alive and prosperous, and you very likely have met him, yet I defy you to point him out; that his wife (for he is Lovel the Widower no more) is not the lady you imagine her to be. (197-202)

Are you talking to me? we may well ask. Where are we? *When* are we? Are you telling a story, conducting a quarrel, rehearsing a grudge, announcing a performance—speaking to a public, to Lady Baker, to yourself? How many of us are there in here? Certainly some of these sentences take up the tone of the stentorian moralist so despised by Thackeray’s modernist critics, just as some could be characterized as the “confiding garrulities” beloved of his nineteenth-century readers (Rideing 5). But Touchit’s narration displays a new mobility and restlessness that have led Geoffrey Tillotson to describe *Lovel* as anticipating the development of the “stream of consciousness” (27). This metaphor may be too placid, however, to account for a speech act that seems so fitful, so devious and panicked. In the opening pages of *Lovel*, we have entered a narrative space where the referential trajectory of language seems prone to odd inflections, where the scope of the audience and the status of the utterance are undergoing constant and seemingly unstoppable warpings: curse shades into entreaty, narration into quarrelsome conversation, reminiscence into hallucination.

Can we trace some of the contours of the shadow theater mapped out by this torrent of language? We are both “upstairs” and “downstairs” (in the “parlour” and the “kitchen”); we are at once in the

middle-class home (in the seat of “love and marriage”) and out of it (our speaker suspiciously disavows familiarity with “cheap boarding-houses”); we are at once at the threshold of Lovel’s story (“before entering upon the present narrative”) and after it (“he is Lovel the Widower no more”); we are on the stage but peripheral to its action. So multifarious, so nearly ubiquitous is this narrative voice, that it might seem the voice of casually authoritative omniscience—if it weren’t for the fact that it is so drenched in tones of spleen, loss, resentment, and sheer embodied breathlessness. It is as if this speaker were suffering in his person the exhausting effects of every narrative swerve, every spatial and temporal translation.

As I have indicated, the characterological location of this ubiquity that seems to have no place to rest is *The Wolves and the Lamb’s* Captain Touchit. But he appears here under a name that offers an embarrassingly bald explanation for his placelessness and for his quasi-paranoid narrative style: “I shall call myself Mr. Batchelor, if you please” (216). Meanwhile, his friend Milliken has been rechristened with a name, “Lovel,” that rounds out the domestic sphere’s logic of affective exclusivity. If, as our narrator assures us, “there is love and marriage in it,” Frederick *Lovel* is clearly where it’s at—and Mr. Batchelor is just as clearly out of it. The love/Lovel pun offered in the first lines of the story constitutes an almost crass joke against those who find themselves unaccommodated by the domestic present: it’s not merely that the bachelor is excluded from the domestic hearth but that this hearth has now explicitly become the space of “love.” The obviousness of this effect is clearly part of Thackeray’s intent and an important element of the story’s pathos. It is difficult, after all, to ignore the social abjection and sheer tactile need embodied in a Batchelor whose “real” name is Touchit.<sup>5</sup> Batchelor’s bitterness in these opening pages suggests that the wellsprings of Thackerayan narration lie in a resentment about the equation between domesticity and affective plenitude.<sup>6</sup>

As I began by noting, the genre that has been understood as best accommodating the increasing prominence of the private sphere is the novel. But Batchelor’s eminently novelistic voice is given its affective contours by his obsession with the memory of theater. His social need, that is, is a symptom of the disappearance of a “stage” that could accommodate him. If Tillotson is correct that Batchelor’s voice is an early example of the modernist stream of consciousness, *Lovel the Widower’s* theatrical background indicates that this technique for the exploration of interiority derives not from a push toward psychological

realism but from the vacuum created by the loss of a commonly accessible public culture. The stream of consciousness, in other words, would owe less to the representational demands of a generic “subject” than to the specific social melancholia of the *mauvais sujet* who is exiled from the domestic enclosure and who stubbornly holds onto a theatrical space fading into oblivion. Batchelor’s narration, I am suggesting, is a panicked report from an evaporating culture of theatricality.

Batchelor’s interior monologue is thus not a sign of his accommodation of the new novelistic order but a symptom of his alienation from it. The “subject of performance” is indeed rendered obsolete in *Lovel the Widower*, but this supersession is not only mourned by the novel, but mourned *as* one of its most well-known formal innovations. Far from being a triumphant alternative to the theatrical, novelistic interiority emerges as a container for an unaccommodated theatricality. George Levine has argued for Thackeray’s status as the novelist most representative of mid-Victorian realist conventions and most aware of their ethical limitations.<sup>7</sup> If we accept this description, *Lovel the Widower* makes movingly explicit the extent to which those conventions—especially the premium placed on privacy and psychology—derive from a soured appetite for publicity. I think that Thackeray’s attachment to that public world might prompt us to reconsider the antagonistic rubrics underlying the critical approaches with which I began. Do novelists really behave like good rational actors, playing to win in contests with generic opponents? Might not novelists, like everyone else, become perversely attached to their own losing ventures? Might not their very successes radiate the same ideological ambivalence as do their failures? I’ve argued that Thackeray’s Mr. Batchelor does not gleefully herald the invention of novelistic interiority as much as he grumblingly *makes do* with it. I want to close by suggesting that the extraordinary sensitivity of Thackeray’s narration to the contours of domestic, psychological, and theatrical space should alert us to the persistence of a public desire even in a form, like the psychological novel, apparently most given over to the public’s erasure.

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## NOTES

Thanks to Heather Love and Joe Rezek for their comments on this paper, and to Emily Allen for generously discussing these ideas with me at the 2005 NAVSA conference.

<sup>1</sup>Franklin and Allen both discuss these changes, which are explored as well in Baer, Booth, Davis and Emeljanow, Hadley, Innes, and Wiles.

<sup>2</sup>Moretti offers the strongest case for a Darwinian generic history. As I hope this paper will suggest, Moretti's application of the law of the jungle to the evolution of genre may underestimate the elements of nostalgia, ambivalence, and attachment to failure that can motivate human subjects and cultural production.

<sup>3</sup>On this play's composition and the housewarming production, see Ray, 2: 234, 391.

<sup>4</sup>See in particular Booth as well as Davis and Emeljanow.

<sup>5</sup>There is a striking resonance between Thackeray's Touchit and Henry James's Ralph Touchett from *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), both in name and in their position as observing bachelors. McMaster invokes James's string of bachelor/observers in describing *Lovel* (4). But she seems unaware of Batchelor's original identity as Touchit, and so does not point out the connection between one of James's better-known bachelors and Thackeray's frustrated theatrical ambition. The connection seems to me suggestive for a queer genealogy of Jamesian spectatorship: the question that the alluring Ralph frequently provokes in readers—namely, in what context *could* he perform?—has a very specific antecedent in Thackeray's failed play.

<sup>6</sup>In her incisive comments on *Lovel the Widower*, Sedgwick reads the novel as demonstrating the bachelor's "basic strategy" of "a preference of atomized male individualism to the nuclear family (and a corresponding demonization of women, especially mothers)" (192). My focus is on the abject back-story to the bachelor-narrator's "strategy" and "preference[s]," which I would thus read in more defensive, less voluntaristic, terms. I want to suggest that his "male individualism" and his misogyny are both informed by an exclusion from the family that is increasingly seen in the period as the mother's natural cultural location. Because Mr. Batchelor's character derives from a palpable envy, its coordinates are perhaps less aptly described as elements of a "preference" than as a manifestation of *amor fati*—making a virtue of necessity.

<sup>7</sup>For Levine's discussion Thackeray's realism, see 131–80.

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