

Thackeray: Styles of Fallibility

David Kurnick

Few writers have been more extravagantly praised for their style, and few more casually, brutally criticized. Strikingly, the praise and blame often come from the same people. In the first sentence of his introduction to a 1968 collection of essays on Thackeray, Alexander Welsh calls him one of the “great prose artists of our literature”; in the second, he calls him “careless and amateurish.”¹ John Sutherland’s *Thackeray at Work* (1974) considers the author’s manuscripts to rebut the notion of his cavalier compositional process, and yet cites approvingly the nineteenth-century opinion that *The Virginians* (1859) is “the worst novel anyone ever wrote.”² John Carey lauds Thackeray’s piercingly detailed realism – and accuses him of “bland and shallow idealizing.”³ This double evaluation, virtually a ritual in Thackeray criticism, can sometimes make it difficult to distinguish celebration from condemnation. When, at the dawn of the twentieth century, William Crary Brownell sought to counter the already-frequent claims that Thackeray’s narratorial interjections had vitiated his art, he did so with the following equivocal description of *The Adventures of Philip* (1861–2), Thackeray’s last completed novel: “*Philip* is a *tour de force* in prolixity. The proportion of Thackeray to Philip is prodigious.”⁴ Gift and curse appear to have merged.

This condition may be peculiar to Thackeray – or it may turn out that this liability to a forked evaluation is a feature of style judgments more generally. As we will see, part of the interest in considering Thackeray in relation to this topic is the way his career exacerbates the interpretive conundrums posed by the very notion of style. It’s noteworthy how *personal* these judgments are. Brownell’s words nicely illustrate style’s tendency to allow us to think we are achieving access to the writer’s person: in his formulation, Thackeray and Philip stand to one another not as creative artist and invented literary object but on a unified plane, equally available to our critical appraisal. Here again Thackeray’s case accentuates an entailment of the concept of style: the notion that style stands in

unusual proximity to the person had been common at least since Buffon claimed that “*Le style c’est l’homme même*.” But the unusual intimacy Thackeray’s critics permit themselves – the tone of almost familial entitlement with which they cut him down to a decidedly life size (“careless,” “worst ever,” “shallow”) – suggests that Thackerayan style intensifies to a provoking degree style’s illusion of personal closeness.

Just as Thackeray’s career heightens style’s fantasy of closeness to the person, so too does it anticipate the politically suspect connotations style has acquired. This is clearest in the praise of one of Thackeray’s most eloquent defenders. George Saintsbury’s 1931 book *A Consideration of Thackeray* praises what he calls Thackeray’s “faculty of surrounding everything he treated with the amber of style – of making everything interesting and everything original.” Saintsbury’s words startlingly associate Thackeray (by 1931, firmly established as an old-fashioned-Victorian realist) with the modernist goal first explicitly articulated by Flaubert: that of locating literary value in a style that would be indifferent to the moral or intellectual worth of content – indeed, the more unremarkable that content, the better it serves to foreground the virtuosity of style.⁵ Saintsbury’s praise also hints at the complaints lodged against the modernist religion of style by critics like Georg Lukács in his essays of the same decade: *reification* is not a term Saintsbury would use, but his talk of “the amber of style” suggests a paralysis that is not far from Lukács’s category; the resonance is even clearer when Saintsbury goes on to speak approvingly of Thackeray’s “ambient ether of phrase – surrounding, uniting, pervading all”: style is here not just de-animating but positively anesthetizing.⁶

Worse, Thackeray’s Victorian reputation is perfectly designed to support our present-day suspicion that any celebration of style is code for pernicious ideologies of social distinction. Juliet McMaster has noted that in the Victorians’ eternal critical comparisons between Dickens and Thackeray, the latter’s “simplicity of style and vocabulary” was always adduced in his favor as against the rhetorical extravagances of his rival.⁷ The classed nature of the comparison was explicit – Thackeray’s classical education and his (albeit abortive) studies at Cambridge provided a ready explanation for his much-discussed straightforwardness: writing in 1851, the critic David Masson applauded “a Horatian strictness, a racy strength, in Mr Thackeray’s expressions . . . which we miss in the corresponding passages of Mr Dickens’s writings, and in which we seem to recognize the effects of those classical studies through which an accurate and determinate . . . use of words becomes a fixed habit.”⁸ Eight decades later, Saintsbury would use nearly identical terms, noting Thackeray’s

“unforced adequacy and nature,” and praising his journeyman writings for the “infinite possibilities of strength and ‘race’ in them.”⁹ The scare quotes signal a new self-consciousness about the language of race. But the continuity justifies a skepticism about what we’re really talking about when we talk about Thackerayan style. As Amanpal Garcha notes, the invocations of “purity” in descriptions of Thackeray’s style point to its “success in signifying traditional Englishness” – an Englishness that can take on resonances of class and race as needed.¹⁰

Thackeray’s writing thus illuminates many of the animating ambiguities of the concept of style – its promise of a closeness to the person that can suddenly feel too close, its resemblance to a suffocating adornment, its status as a tool for classist and racist distinction. But perhaps the most unnerving thing about Thackerayan style, and the feature that brings it closest to the concept’s fundamental antinomy, concerns the question of whether or not he is totally in control of it – whether in fact the distinctive quality of Thackeray’s writing always deserves the name style. Jeff Dolven has labeled incoherence the “first limit of style” – the frontier beyond which the concept may become inapplicable. “It is difficult to assume the fractured manner of a self in disarray,” he writes, “and to the extent that the disarray seems real, it will feel wrong to speak of its style.”¹¹ Thackeray’s critics, faced with his apparently wandering attention to his own creations, his frequent errors of narrative and sometimes even grammatical consistency, are often forced to question whether the writing offers an analysis of incoherence or simply the thing itself. For every critic who confidently asserts that Thackeray is “a consummate artist very much in control of what he is doing,” another wonders, “How do we decide whether Thackeray succeeds in expressing confusion or is merely confused?”¹²

The question gets at the fundamental mystery of style’s relation to intention. On the one hand the notion of style is often associated with the recesses of the person – even, as in Roland Barthes’s account in *Writing Degree Zero*, with the intimacy of the body: a realm where questions of intention seem irrelevant.¹³ On the other, style is often taken to require a baseline of shaping intention. As Leonard B. Meyer puts it, “there are replicated patterns in the world . . . that would not normally be thought of as being ‘stylistic’; for example, the structure of crystals, the flowering of plants, the behavior of social insects, and even human physiological processes. Thus it would,” he concludes, “be abnormal usage to speak of the ‘style’ of someone’s breathing.”¹⁴ Taking these equally compelling accounts together, we are confronted with an image of style as what escapes intention and what testifies inescapably to its presence. Gérard Genette

turns the antinomy embedded in the notion of style into its very definition: “Style is a compromise between nature and culture,” he writes.¹⁵ It is precisely this ambiguity that Thackeray’s writing, as we will see, most startlingly straddles – as if his project is to find a way finally to stylize the un-stylizable, to manage the unmanageable fact of our universal submission to that boundary where human intention fails. At its most profound, Thackerayan style attempts to reach to that absolute limit on intentional behavior that is death.

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So style is a problem, and it is especially a problem for Thackeray. But it remains the case that Thackeray *has* a style, with specifiable attributes and effects. We might qualify these most efficiently by noting that Thackerayan style oscillates between two radically distinct affective temperatures. On the one side, a decidedly “hot” style, laden with sentimentality, anti-sentimentality, aggression, humor – a style that turns these emotions not only on its own narrative procedures but on its reader; a style that *gets in your face*. On the other, a “cold” style, insisting on swerving away from or rising above the emotional fray – a style that encases whatever passing event or excitement in a syntax that monumentalizes and generalizes it beyond recognition; a style that *turns away from us*. Thackeray’s writing achieves unparalleled effects of intimacy, and uncanny feats of distance. While these poles can be found throughout his work, and while any given passage modulates between them, the former effects are concentrated in the earlier work (this essay will focus on *Vanity Fair*) while the latter achieve their fullest articulation in *Henry Esmond*, one of the century’s oddest narrative experiments and one in which a writer whose great gift is to convey the sense of a distinctive personality stages a withdrawal into impersonality on the improbable ground of the autobiographical.

The unusual vividness of his intimate address to the reader is a hallmark of Thackeray criticism, in which the idea of the “the writer, in his slippers, deliver[ing] his comments from the fireside” reproduces itself like a meme. But the essay from which this quotation is drawn also refers to this speaker as having a “preaching vocation” – an equally common characterization of Thackeray’s narrator.¹⁶ The unremarked tension points to the curious multiplicity of this voice, which can seem to speak with the easy intimacy of a close friend or in the monitory tones of someone declaiming before a congregation or (as in *Vanity Fair*’s famous preface) to the revelers at a fair.¹⁷ Perhaps the most frequent, and surprising, vehicle of this acoustic suppleness in Thackeray is the

modest word “you.” Victorian novelists are of course notorious for their tendency to break fiction’s fourth wall in order to cajole or harangue or flatter or advise their reader. But none did so with Thackeray’s strange insistence on the second-person singular, and none used that pronoun to produce so much affective turbulence.

This preoccupation with the second person is evident from his earliest writing. In *The Yellowplush Papers* (which began appearing in *Fraser’s* in 1837), Thackeray’s Cockney footman narrator marks his stylistic peculiarity not only by buttonholing his reader but by rhetorically marking the fact that he is doing so: he is forever telling you that that he is telling you something. Recalling cramped lodgings: “they and their family were squeezed in it pretty tight, I can tell you”; defending his lowly origins: “let me tell you there’s more kindness among them poor disreputtable creaturs, than in half a dozen lords or barrynets”; employing Cockney slang to disparage a socially aspirant landlady: “the widow Buckmaster was the gray mare, I can tell you.”¹⁸ Thackeray would soon discard the affectation of Cockney spelling, but he never abandoned this penchant for marking the situation of readerly address. Indeed, the recursive telling-you-I’m-telling-you logic that emerges in this early work is the infrastructure of Thackerayan style, which depends on this constant testing of the communicative channel. Like an emcee checking a microphone, or like the Chinese actor praised by Bertolt Brecht who gives “an obvious glance at the floor, so as to judge the space available to him for his act,” the Thackerayan narrator is always underlining the fact of his performance, and in the process stressing the shape of the fantasmatic space we share with him.¹⁹

A differently inflected use of “you” – one that effects precisely this doubling of verbal and spatial effects – crops up in *The Yellowplush Papers*, when the narrator complains of the widow Buckmaster’s shoddy housekeeping:

The hall was a regular puddle: wet dabs of dishcloths flapped in your face; soapy smoking bits of flanning went nigh to choke you; and while you were looking up to prevent hanging yourself with the ropes which were strung across and about, slap came the hedge of a pail against your shins, till one was like to be drove mad with hagony.²⁰

The second person here at once summons the fantasy of vocal address and makes that fantasy the ground of an invasion of our personal space. Indeed, the images of a body assaulted in face, neck, and shins give flesh to the incursion that is occurring at the syntactic level: the body to which all of this is occurring is *yours*.²¹ Even in this early work, then, Thackeray’s use of

the second person – which will become virtually definitive of his style – proves remarkably supple in its effects, at once summoning the intimacy of oral storytelling and hinting at the ways that intimacy can turn to threat.²²

Thackeray's second person is so insistent that such connotations remain in play even when its use looks more conventional. In the preface to *The Book of Snobs* (1848), for example, Thackeray writes that “[y]ou must not judge hastily or vulgarly of Snobs; to do so shows that you are yourself a Snob. I myself have been taken for one.”²³ No overt reference is made to the intimacy of conversation; no dishcloths or washing pails are being pushed at the reader. And yet the sense of co-presence remains palpable; indeed, the uncomfortable proximity of speaker and addressee is the explicit theme of the passage, which inaugurates Thackeray's famously boomeranging use of accusation and self-accusation. In his essay on “Relations of Persons in the Verb,” the linguist Émile Benveniste claims that the pronouns *I* and *you* are “reversible” indications of position in dialogue that differ in their very essence from the implicitly absent third person.²⁴ Thackeray's style proceeds as a perpetually unfolding proof of Benveniste's axiom; the reversibility of the first- and second-person positions – their nature *as* positions rather than essences – is demonstrated and redemonstrated in Thackeray with a peculiar obsessiveness. However we choose to explain this obsession – a sensitivity to the anxious one-upmanship of life under consumer capitalism, or some more personal quirk (biography supplies the absent mother for which we may decide this fort-da game is attempting to compensate) – Thackeray's writing positions readers in a peculiarly intimate and volatile space of address.²⁵

Vanity Fair was appearing in installments when *The Book of Snobs* was published in book form, and Thackeray's masterpiece owes much of its distinctive tonality to the close quarters summoned by that address. Moreover, that intimacy has visible effects on style as it commonly understood – in the sinuous shape and sinewy texture of the sentences that coil themselves into that tight space. Late in the novel, the narrator is explaining that Lord Steyne's philandering has done nothing to impair his social standing. But the vector of condemnation, which might have been comfortably directed at the hypocritical “world,” instead heads straight for the reader – before curving back even more startlingly toward the speaker: “In a word everybody went to wait upon this great man – everybody who was asked: as you the reader (do not say nay) or I the writer hereof would go if we had an invitation.”²⁶ Strictly speaking, everything following the colon in the sentence is non-narrative in nature (as the shift in tense from past to present conditional, and the use of

the second person, indicate). This is of course precisely the type of chatty aside that Thackeray's critics decried as introducing needless static into the storytellers' art. But the complaint derives from a resolutely two-dimensional conception of that art, in which any narrative that does not move cleanly and only forward is deficient. The emotional energy of Thackeray's style derives from his willingness at any and all points to work (rhetorically speaking) at a 90-degree angle to the linear movement of story – to reach out to grab the reader by the neck and bring her close to a story she might have felt to exist in some safely parallel dimension. It is crucial to the effect of Thackeray's *you* that it arrives in the sentence as a quiet, nasty surprise – here, relegated to a subordinate clause that juts off the body of the sentence. It matters too that the direct injunction to the reader (“do not say nay”) comes embedded in a parenthetical aside: Thackeray's style is defined not only by his penchant for addressing the reader but by his weaving of that address seamlessly into the fabric of the story-world.

Vanity Fair thereby achieves an intermingling of what Benveniste calls the orders of history and discourse, so that we cannot rest easy in the assurance that any given sentence or paragraph will stay put in the realm of something that happened (and to someone else) and is not instead something that is happening now, to us.²⁷ The following sentence, which takes its cue from a summary of young Dobbin's loneliness at school, may seem to proceed from Thackeray's “preacher” persona – until, at the parenthesis, that preacher morphs into . . . what, precisely? Less a fireside friend or clubbable gossip than an intimately rancorous, almost Dostoyevskian scold:

If people would but leave children to themselves; if teachers would cease to bully them; if parents would not insist upon directing their thoughts, and dominating their feelings – those feelings and thoughts which are a mystery to all (for how much do you and I know of each other, of our children, of our fathers, of our neighbour, and how far more beautiful and sacred are the thoughts of the poor lad or girl whom you govern likely to be, than those of the dull and world-corrupted person who rules him?) – if, I say, parents and masters would leave their children alone a little more, small harm would accrue, although a less quantity of *as in praesenti* might be acquired.²⁸

Here again the swerve into discourse – the realm of *you* and *I* – occurs in parentheses. In Thackeray's play with the referential valence of the pronoun, *you* is first designated as someone overseeing the “beautiful and sacred” thoughts of children – and perhaps *you* are even encouraged to prepare yourself for congratulations as the sentence goes on to compare such innocent thoughts to those of some “dull and world-corrupted

person” . . . until the parenthesis reaches its conclusion and you realize that you and that unappealing person are one and the same. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to the “feline gratuitousness of aggression” of Thackeray’s writing. “At odd moments,” she writes, “one is apt to find kitty’s unsheathed claws a millimeter from one’s own eyes.”²⁹ The effect that Sedgwick pinpoints of Thackeray’s aggression appearing at “odd moments” – the sensation that this prose is waiting for you in ambush – is produced by just such tactics of syntactic delay, grammatical subordination, and pronominal reversal. The obliquity of the attack depends on a set of syntactic choices that can make this voice pass, on first reading, as polite; but it rewards the gift of increased attention with a nasty hiss.

The effect is so unmistakable that it frequently seems we are dealing not with a style but with a personality. As we have seen, an inevitable personification seems to attend stylistic judgments: we are less apt to say that a style favors the use of the second person in a subordinate clause than to pronounce it aggressive (or bitchy, or melancholic, or depressive, or disenchanting, or deflated).³⁰ Thackeray’s play with this illusion is nowhere more evident than in the little drawing he made to close *Vanity Fair*’s ninth chapter. The image represents a jester, sitting cross-legged on the ground and holding his grinning mask in his lap, staring at us with the proverbial melancholy of the clown. The bespectacled features are recognizably Thackeray’s, and the image thus functions as a pictorial emblem of style’s promise of access to the person. The effect is enhanced by the knowledge that Thackeray himself created this illustration. His much-remarked limitations as a draftsman (evident here in the odd proportion of body to head) are in their own way a promise of palpable access: our conventional metonymy suggests to us that we can see Thackeray’s “hand” here, and perhaps even take it in ours. The promise is of course factitious: in the immediately preceding sentence, the narrator (who elsewhere refers to himself as a bachelor) tell us that “my Julia and I” are longing to make a rich maiden aunt comfortable in hopes of a large endowment at her death . . . the “revelation” of self, in other words, occurs in closest possible proximity to an avowal of this voice’s gleeful faithlessness to any biographical consistency (104).

If style’s overt promise is to disclose the person, its hidden agenda (as D.A. Miller has argued) might be the opposite: to create a margin of distance from any particular biographical coordinates.³¹ Thackeray’s surprising will-to-impersonality seems designed to encase or contain the sheer emotional and tonal multifariousness that otherwise characterizes his style. That tonal suppleness, as we’ve seen, customarily entails a switch from the

plane of narration to that of discourse, a transition signaled by a move to the present tense and a shift to a direct address to the reader. The shift in *Vanity Fair* typically occurs mid-paragraph: a passage recounting, say, Mrs. Bute's investigation into the letters Rebecca left at Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Girls will suddenly issue in the famous observation that "Perhaps in *Vanity Fair* there are no better satires than letters. Take a bundle of your dear friend's of ten years back – your dear friend whom you hate now" (229); or a paragraph detailing Dobbin's attempt to convince a bankrupted Mr. Sedley to approve his daughter's marriage suddenly morphs into the narrator's avowal that "I don't know anything more dismal than that business and bustle and mystery of a ruined man: those letters from the wealthy which he shows you: those worn greasy documents promising support and offering condolence which he places wistfully before you . . ." (238), and so on. As such examples attest, these departures from the narrative plane can seem precisely to *characterize* our narrator – as pushy, or hectoring, or worldly wise.

But the identical stylistic feature can serve the diametrically opposed function of evacuating personality, as if this tonally mobile voice aspired to speak from some position beyond all partiality or situatedness. We can see the surprising tendency of Thackeray's overheated narrator to suddenly go cold before our eyes in the following paragraph about the Battle of Waterloo:

All of us have read of what occurred during that interval. The tale is in every Englishman's mouth; and you and I, who were children when the great battle was won and lost, are never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action. Its remembrance rankles still in the bosoms of millions of the countrymen of those brave men who lost the day. They pant for an opportunity of revenging that humiliation; and if a contest, ending in a victory on their part, should ensue, elating them in their turn, and leaving its cursed legacy of hatred and rage behind to us, there is no end to the so-called glory and shame, and to the alternations of successful and unsuccessful murder, in which two high-spirited nations might engage. Centuries hence, we Frenchmen and Englishmen might be boasting and killing each other still, carrying out bravely the Devil's code of honour. (405)

The hallmarks of Thackeray's style are here (the personal pronouns, the present tense, the move to generality). But "you and I" – no longer dialectically opposed positions of interlocution or accusation – have become a stabilized compound entity. The effect is of a conflict seen from a great height or distance, as what have hitherto been polarized roles are assimilated to a shared condition. This encasing and distancing

of conflict, this making-remote of what had been uncomfortably proximate, is accentuated by the following sentences, in which the implicitly English author-and-reader doublet of “you and I” cedes to a plural first person of “we Frenchman and Englishmen.” The substitution is notable not only for its agnosticism about national feeling (truly startling in a mid-Victorian novel) but for its temporal zooming-out, so that the conflict the novel is in the process of recounting becomes a tiny item in a long historical catalogue. The coldness of the view from these historical heights fully justifies George Levine’s claim that Thackeray is a “scientist of dead passions.”³² One stylistic result of this remoteness is to put the paragraph’s final pronoun under peculiarly intense semantic pressure: a “we” that first crosses national boundaries and then stretches centuries into the future becomes sufficiently difficult to cognize subjectively as to acquire shades of the third person – precisely the appropriate effect for a sentence asking readers to see ourselves(-cum-themselves) under the most alien aspect. Thus does Thackeray’s style allow his realism to achieve an almost science-fictional sense of defamiliarization: *we* incorporates *them*, and then recedes into the historical distance.

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This transformation of the performative valence of the pronoun – a relatively isolated effect in *Vanity Fair* – becomes the central stylistic innovation of *Henry Esmond*, the historical fiction that, almost unread today, was routinely cited throughout the second half of the nineteenth century as a serious candidate for the best novel in English. Set in the years around the turn of the eighteenth century, the novel is the autobiography of an apparently illegitimate member of an ardently Jacobite Anglo-Catholic aristocratic family. By the book’s end Esmond has been revealed as the family’s true head, rejected the Jacobite cause and Catholicism, and selected the more proper of two marital prospects: the book functions, in other words, as a prehistory of the official Victorian world of domesticity, sexual propriety, nationalism, and Protestant rectitude. But while *Esmond*’s plot affirms the propaganda of the moment in which it was written, its undercurrents roil with ironies and equivocations: Esmond’s renunciation of the Young Pretender, for example, is as much a matter of private distaste as principle, and his choice of the virtuous Rachel is haunted by a suggestion of sexual pathology (throughout the novel Esmond refers to the woman who will be his bride as his adoptive mother, while Rachel’s hatred of her rival – her own daughter Beatrix – never feels other than irrationally cruel). As important, the tone of triumphal certainty

that one might expect to infuse this historical allegory is utterly lacking – evacuated most devastatingly by the weird pronomial obliquity with which Thackeray writes: *Henry Esmond* is a fictional autobiography written (almost) entirely in the third person.

The effect would be bizarrely distancing in any writer. It is the more so in one whose style has been built on an incessant testing of the channel of communication between narrator and reader. If, as Benveniste argues, *you* and *I* transform the fixity of linguistic system into the performativity of discourse, Henry Esmond's insistence on referring to himself as *he* obeys a converse impulse, freezing a living scene of interlocution into something more remote. For veterans of Thackeray's previous style, reading *Esmond* is like watching an acquaintance turn away – perhaps with the coldness of contempt or indifference, or perhaps into the more total refusal of death.³³ “To the very last hour of his life,” the novel impossibly relates in its opening chapter, “Esmond remembered the lady as she then spoke and looked.”³⁴ The sentence is the first of many that force us, as Nicholas Dames has observed, to understand these reminiscences as “narrated throughout as if they are remembered at the point, or even *beyond* the point, of death.”³⁵ Even in the absence of such temporally incoherent sentences, the insistent use of the third person scores the book with a funereal tonality. In Benveniste's schema, if the first person is “the one who speaks” and the second is “the one who is addressed,” the third is “the one who is absent.” The third person, he elaborates, “is not a ‘person’; it is really the verbal form whose function is to express the *non-person*.”³⁶ *Esmond's* title page insists that these memoirs are “written by himself,” but the fact is constantly in danger of receding from consciousness: the book seems to proceed from some voice that is not quite there, some person who is no longer here.

Through this seemingly minor device, the novel achieves an unprecedented psychological complexity. When a teenage Henry observes a bitter exchange between his adoptive parents, the narrator (Esmond himself! one reminds oneself) reports that “a bystander, deeply interested in the happiness of that pair as Harry Esmond was, might see how hopelessly separated they were; what a great gulf of difference and discord had run between them” (165). Here, as throughout the novel, the third person creates a minor intrigue, so that even as we learn that Esmond clearly perceives the tension between his benefactors, we learn too that he wishes to introduce some disavowal of or doubt about that perception (“a bystander,” “might see”). Moreover, by this point in the novel it is clear to readers that the major source of tension between Rachel and

Francis is Rachel's desire for Esmond himself, and Francis's perception of it. The third person affords again a certain plausible deniability: we cannot know whether Esmond fails to perceive the sexual obsession his own narration has so scrupulously recorded, whether he represses any conscious awareness of it, or simply suppresses mention of it out of mortification or deference to the code of propriety. All of these possibilities – innocence, willful ignorance, shame, repression, prudery bordering on prurience – flourish in the margin opened by that third-person pronoun. John Sutherland comments aptly that *Esmond* reveals “a layer of motive astonishing in fiction of this period”; to a significant extent that psychological prescience derives from this modest pronomial innovation.³⁷

The stylistic effects that give rise to such characterological subtleties also make *Esmond* a meditation on the evolution of language. As a case in point, take the following paragraph, which details a contemplative moment just after Francis, Lord Castlewood says goodbye to his friend Lord Mohun, whom he suspects of trying to seduce his wife. The scene transpires in Castlewood's courtyard, whose central fountain becomes the fulcrum of a psychological tableau that is also a consideration of the historicity of forms of address:

Harry Esmond was witness of the departure . . . Lord Castlewood . . . walked up to the fountain in the centre of the court, and leaned against a pillar and looked into the basin. As Esmond crossed over to his own room, late the chaplain's, on the other side of the court, and turned to enter in at the low door, he saw Lady Castlewood looking through the curtains of the great window of the drawing-room overhead, at my lord as he stood regarding the fountain. There was in the court a peculiar silence somehow; and the scene remained long in Esmond's memory: – the sky bright overhead; the buttresses of the building and the sun-dial casting shadow over the gilt *memento mori* inscribed underneath; the two dogs, a black greyhound and a spaniel nearly white, the one with his face up to the sun, and the other snuffing amongst the grass and stones, and my lord leaning over the fountain, which was bubbling audibly. (187–8)

The relational complexity of the scene is dizzying: the episode that has just concluded would suggest that Francis is thinking about Mohun's treachery, and his wife's wandering eye. The vectors of spectatorship conform to that overt story: Francis contemplates his image in the water, Rachel watches him from above, and Esmond watches them both. And yet readers are aware that Rachel's passion is for Esmond, and that Francis knows this. Esmond's failure to mention (notice?) these facts do not prevent him from presenting a triangle we are invited to read quite differently: Rachel looks

down not at her husband but at her beloved ward, and Francis uses the reflective surface of the water to watch her do it. This second version turns Esmond, the would-be observer of an unhappy marriage, into a central (even *the* central) player in that unhappiness: a story that Thackeray's pronouns tell at a more basic grammatical level, as our narrator becomes not a living voice to which we respond but an object or image we watch from the outside. Esmond – precisely as *he* – becomes the object of a psychological irony; the exterior view invites us again to wonder what combination of modesty, cluelessness, and deviousness is being conveyed, and with what degree of conscious intention.

Questions of intention in fact haunt the passage at an even more fundamental semantic level. When Esmond first refers to his patron as “Lord Castlewood” and then, a few lines later, as “my lord,” it is entirely undecidable whether the second usage is Esmond's adoption of the proper form for referring to aristocracy or a slight slip of the third-person mask. The oscillation between the forms is constant throughout the novel: Esmond's eventual wife, for example, is referred to alternately as “Rachel,” “Lady Castlewood,” and “my lady” – the latter usage always entailing this ambiguity of voice, so that we cannot know whether it conveys the inexpressiveness of narrative convention or the intimacy of filial devotion, erotic vassalage, and sexual possessiveness. Those kinkier meanings, outlandish though they may seem, can never be definitively refused. For one, as we've seen, the plot of the novel fully supports them. More strangely, this second reading derives from a historical irony – one not available to Esmond himself. The deferential formula may be utterly conventional in the eighteenth century in which the novel is set; but by 1852, the year *Esmond* was published, a narrator can only refer to a fictional character as “my lady” and “my lord” in the mode of satire (as Thackeray himself does with the corrupt aristocrats in *Vanity Fair*).³⁸ The satirical mode, totally inappropriate to Esmond's personality, nonetheless haunts his every reference to his aristocratic patrons, and it opens the possibility for all the other unintended meanings the story sustains.

Esmond's confusion between intimate and conventional registers, then, is also a superimposition of time frames – a historico-linguistic irony to accompany the psychological one. Esmond's language has aged into something stranger than he can know, through a discrediting of the aristocratic ethos that is wholly posthumous to him. Though present-day readers tend to enjoy congratulating themselves on unearthing meanings in Victorian texts that the authors presumably would not have seen there,

it is far from clear that Thackeray hasn't engineered his novel's eerie alertness to such tectonic shifts in usage. This obsolescence, an inescapable feature of linguistic being in time, is also a central conundrum of stylistic analysis. Genette's essay on style culminates in a consideration of the historicity of literariness – the fact that what is considered a literary effect can and must mutate with historical change. He advocates a stylistic analysis that, in considering a text that has been thus altered by time, would “give credit both to the original (denotative) signifying intention and to the (connotative) stylistic value added by history.” (His example is the phrase *heureux succès* in a classical French text: a modern reader, understanding it as “happy success,” perceives an interesting pleonasm, whereas for the original author the phrase just meant “fortunate event”: it is the historically posterior, “wrong” reading that has acquired stylistic force.)³⁹

As we have seen, *Esmond* appears designed to produce this effect on every page, and Thackeray indeed has an eerily prescient feeling for the historical dimension of linguistic life. In his fascinating study *The Language of Thackeray* (1978), for example, K.C. Phillips speculates that it was Thackeray who came up with the portmanteau notion of “Oxbridge,” and who first labeled aristocratic names “double-barreled.”⁴⁰ Unlike, say, Dickens's indisputably Dickensian coinages (the Circumlocution Office, Podsnappery, and so on), Thackeray's contributions to the language are less matters of invention than of canalization or codification: his genius is not to invent from whole cloth but to make his style a vehicle for historical emergence (witness his dissemination of the concept of the “snob,” or the decisive role he played in the Anglophone popularization of the concept of “bohemia,” or the still-current sense he gave to Bunyan's “vanity fair”).⁴¹ When the narrator of *Pendennis* speaks offhandedly of “sexual jealousy” between the hero's mother and the young woman he loves, the contemporary reader may feel compelled to correct her initial impression that Thackeray is employing a strikingly modern idiom for erotic competition, reminding herself that for the Victorians “sexual” first referred to “pertaining to the sexes” and that therefore Thackeray's phrase really just means something like “the natural rivalry between women” – a smugly misogynist notion, to be sure, but one that has no necessary incestuous or otherwise unsavory undertones . . . until she realizes that the plot Thackeray has devised in fact wholly justifies the erotic connotation, and is forced to conclude that Thackeray's phrase sits at the undecidable boundary between the Victorian meaning and ours – and may in fact be the moment at which the modern idiom emerges in its full significance.⁴² Thackeray's uncanny prescience is

nowhere better illustrated than in the tonal and historical dislocations that open his writing to the pressure of history.

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Unless, of course, such moments are just the random signifying sparks thrown off by a sloppy writer: errors, slips, spots of inattention. As we've seen, Thackeray's most perceptive critics routinely note his carelessness, and fold the attendant ambiguity into their appraisals. Rae Greiner notes that one of Thackeray's earliest historical novels, *Barry Lyndon* (1844), is rife with "inconsistencies and mistakes" that capture "the lived stupefactions and half-understandings of historical . . . experience," while Amanpal Garcha argues that the air of bored laziness that infuses much of Thackeray's writing evinces a "disenchanted understanding of the relationship between money and the work of publication."⁴³ Each critic, in a move that gets to the heart of the enigma of Thackeray's style, attributes a deeper purposiveness to what might appear mere negligence. This paradox is most fully explored in Elaine Scarry's minutely observed essay on *Esmond*, which spends several patient pages cataloguing the inconsistencies – historical, geographical, topographical, psychological – that litter the novel's pages (the layout of the Castlewood courtyard, to which I have attributed so much importance, is, Scarry shows, utterly confused: the disposition of the rooms surrounding it, its orientation to the sun, its distance from a second courtyard – all shift wildly from chapter to chapter). The novel, she concludes, is a "tissue of small, almost imperceptible contradictions, each in isolation insignificant; collectively, devastating" to our sense the fictional world's solidity.⁴⁴ The inconsistencies are stylistic as much as logical, with multiple sentences that wind up a grammatical hash and others where *Esmond*'s narration wanders into the first person, sometimes, bewilderingly, for less than the space of a full clause.⁴⁵ *Esmond* is palpably the product of labor and research. But it can be hard reading it not to feel that Thackeray's "careful novel" (as he described it) is also a bit of a mess.⁴⁶

Scarry, having enumerated the items that constitute this mess, recruits the disorder to a larger purpose, arguing that "the problem of instability . . . penetrates language so deeply that it appears to be beyond [*Esmond*'s] control, out of his hands . . . While he is assuredly the victim of Thackeray's irony, he is also the victim of a larger irony in which Thackeray, too, plays victim."⁴⁷ For Scarry, that irony is the epistemological uncertainty that attends any act of historical reconstruction. But her phrasing points also to the uncertainty around authorial intention at the center of stylistic analysis. The notion of "playing victim" is far more peculiar than its idiomatic status

suggests, combining as it does the notion of purposive action with that of purposive action's absence. How do you play victim to the inevitability of slipping up, to the encroachment of carelessness that pursues every effort of craft?⁴⁸ How do writers play victim to their historicity – to the uncontrollable vagaries of interpretation and to the aging of their language? Or rather, what difference might there be between playing victim and merely – inevitably – *being* victim of these forces? Saintsbury characterized Thackeray's writing as “accidental” – rife with the signs of randomness and contingency – and the neologism, with its awkward past participle, seems exactly right.⁴⁹ We might by analogy say Thackeray's style is “worlded”: not in the sense of having a world so much as in the sense of being *done to* by the world, shaped and marked and dented by its movement. Thackeray's distinction is to have devised a style that hovers at the outer limit of what we understand style to be – to have taken up residence on that boundary where intention shades into lack of control, where the shaping hand of the artist cedes to the resistant medium of the page or the letter, where art cedes to objecthood, where *I* and *you* harden into *he* and *she*. Thackeray stylizes what cannot be stylized: his and our submission to error and to history.

Notes

1. Alexander Welsh, “Introduction,” in *Thackeray: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 1.
2. John Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work* (London: Athlone Press, 1974), 86. Sutherland reports that this was Douglas Jerrold's correction to Thackeray's acknowledgment that *The Virginians* was the “worst novel he ever wrote” (153).
3. John Carey, *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius* (1977; reprint, London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 154.
4. William Crary Brownell, *Victorian Prose Masters: Thackeray—Carlyle—George Eliot—Matthew Arnold—Ruskin—George Meredith* (London: Scribner, 1901), 13.
5. As Flaubert put it in an 1852 letter to Louie Colet, “What strikes me as beautiful, what I should like to do, is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments, which would hold together by itself through the internal force of its style.” See Gustave Flaubert, “On Realism,” in George G. Becker, ed., *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 90.
6. George Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 38, 217.
7. Juliet McMaster, *Thackeray: The Major Novels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 2.

8. See Donald Hawes and Geoffrey Tillotson, eds., *William Thackeray: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2003), 111. The point was echoed by Brownell when he praised Thackeray's "simplicity of both birth and breeding" and (in a disdainful side glance at Dickens) claimed that his writing was "the opposite, in this respect, of what we mean by the professional style. Its repetitions are not mannerisms." See Brownell, *Victorian Prose Masters*, 43.
9. Saintsbury, *A Consideration*, 28, 15–16.
10. Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 107.
11. Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style: Poetry before Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 29.
12. McMaster, *Thackeray*, vii; Winslow Rogers, "Thackeray's Self-Consciousness," in Jerome H. Buckley, ed., *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 160.
13. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (1953; New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 10.
14. Leonard B. Meyer, "Toward a Theory of Style," in Berel Lang, ed., *The Concept of Style* (1979; 2nd ed., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 23.
15. Gérard Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 88.
16. Mario Praz, "Thackeray as Preacher," in Alexander Welsh, ed., *Thackeray*, 50, 51.
17. I have elsewhere argued that, in modulating between these voices, Thackeray adopts a melancholic stance toward the rearrangement of social space, so that his narration becomes an acoustic mapping of the felt contraction of the public sphere in mid-Victorian England. See my *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 29–66.
18. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Yellowplush Papers* (1841; reprint, New York: Appleton, 1853), 12, 10, 13.
19. Bertolt Brecht, "On Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in John Willet, ed., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 92. The evocation of that shared space, Alicia Williams has argued, is a hallmark of Victorian novelistic address. Here and throughout, my thinking about the space implied by readerly address has been influenced by her work. See Alicia Williams, "The Politics of Address in George Eliot's Fiction," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 52.1 (Spring 2019): 64–83, and "Broadly Speaking: Democratic Address and the History of Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature," Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2018.
20. Thackeray, *Yellowplush*, 14.
21. Thackeray repeats the move a few years later in the opening sentence of *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840), which imagines the importunate newspaper boys "shoving Times, Herald, Penny Paul-Pry, Penny Satirist and other abominations into your face" as you await the departure of your France-bound packet boat. See William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Paris Sketch Book of Mr. M.A. Titmarsh* (1840; reprint, Cologne: Könemann), 11.

22. On the persistence of the oral in print culture, see Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
23. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Book of Snobs: By One of Themselves* (1848; reprint, Garden City: Dolphin, 1961), 14.
24. Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), 199.
25. Joseph Litvak argues that this narratorial tactic – foundational to *The Book of Snobs*, whose full title insists it has been written *By One of Themselves* – is cannily adapted to a market economy where the availability of a plethora of goods puts a premium on social distinction. Thackeray’s narrator stays one step ahead in the game of competitive sophistication by owning his implication in what he denounces. See Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
26. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847–8; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 597.
27. Garrett Stewart’s *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) notes the relentless variety of Thackeray’s address to the audience: *Vanity Fair*, he writes, “motivates and exhausts by turns the whole arsenal of Victorian rhetoric, as marked in particular by the shifting terms of its apostrophized readership . . . In attending the *Fair*, we stand convened, as well as accused” (50).
28. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 51.
29. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 192.
30. “Bitchy”: Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 192; “melancholy” and “depressive”: Litvak, *Strange Gourmets*, 133, 68; “disenchanted” and “deflated”: George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 138.
31. Miller’s *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* argues that Austen’s mastery of a supremely impersonal style is a fantasmatic cancellation of the stigma of bearing an abject personhood as an unmarried woman. In Miller’s account this is both a concrete social condition and a figure of social placedness more generally. D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).
32. See Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 165.
33. We might see Thackeray’s use of the third person here as a monument to the chattiness it supersedes, and thus as an instance of the “elliptical orality” that Lech Harris has identified as the marker of the historical advent of *style* as a value in Conrad: “Rather than the outward-facing posture of rhetoric, which seems to recognize and address the reader,” he writes, “the elliptical orality of *Lord Jim* suggests a narrative discourse that turns inward on itself.” Lech Harris, “Elliptical Orality: Rhetoric as Style in Conrad,” *Victorian Studies* 61.2 (Winter 2019): 246.

34. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 50.
35. Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 157.
36. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 197–8.
37. John Sutherland, “Introduction” to Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond*, 22.
38. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine De Bourgh is only once referred to as “my lady,” by the sycophantic Mrs. Bennet. See Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932–4), 2: 352.
39. Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, 137.
40. K.C. Phillips, *The Language of Thackeray* (London: Deutsch, 1978), 72, 184.
41. On Thackeray’s role in popularizing the idea of bohemia, see Antonia Harland-Lang, “‘The Myth of the Century’: Thackeray and Bohemia,” in Richard Salmon and Alice Crossley, eds., *Thackeray in Time: History, Memory and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2016).
42. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis* (1848–50; reprint: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 264.
43. Rae Greiner, “The Victorian Subject: Thackeray’s Wartime Subjects,” in Juliet John, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 37, 43; Amanpal Garcha, “Forgetting Thackeray and Unmaking Careers,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46.2 (June 2018): 532.
44. Elaine Scarry, “Untransmissible History in Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond*,” in *Resisting Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 107.
45. One example among many: Esmond reports that “We traveled through the night, Esmond discoursing to his mistress of the events of the last twenty-four hours” (124). Sutherland’s notes for the Penguin edition point to several syntactic quagmires.
46. Quoted in Sutherland, “Introduction,” 8.
47. Scarry, “Untransmissible History,” 136.
48. For D.A. Miller, such encroachment (as represented by the phonemic tics he finds in Austen’s unfinished novel *Sanditon*) signals the “decomposition” of style. See Miller, *Jane Austen*, 92.
49. Saintsbury, *A Consideration*, 37.