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FORGETTING THACKERAY AND UNMAKING CAREERS

By Amanpal Garcha

> The career has an active form of memory recorded in writing, and the constellation therein is an essential replacement for the memory and continuity missing elsewhere.
>
> — Paul Bové, "On Reading Bruce Robbins"

> "We are all hacks on some road or another."
>
> — William Thackeray, *Pendennis*

ONE OF THE PECULIAR CHALLENGES facing scholars who wish to write about Thackeray's fiction is locating a dominant critical account to argue against. The *MLA Bibliography* contains a great number of examples of scrupulously argued, compelling research into Thackeray's body of writing, but few if any of them have reached any kind of canonical status as the (or even one of the) interpretive accounts that define how critics understand his fiction. It can seem, for example, that Thackeray is either consciously or unconsciously evaded by many scholars seeking to develop overarching, defining accounts of the nineteenth-century novel. In two works that helped set the terms for decades of critical conversation about nineteenth-century literature – *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and *The Novel and the Police* (1988) – Nancy Armstrong and D. A. Miller each give at most a passing mention to Thackeray (he shows up four times in Armstong's book; never in Miller's). In their equally influential bodies of criticism, Mary Poovey and Catherine Gallagher provide no sustained – or even fragmentary – treatment of Thackeray's work. Moving into the twenty-first century, one would look in vain for a chapter on Thackeray in Amanda Anderson's *The Powers of Distance* (2001), Sharon Marcus's *Between Women*, and Alex Woloch's *The One vs the Many* (2003) – books that have provided us with key terms, issues, and methods to do our work. (To readers of this journal, it might be not necessary to say the following: Thackeray's fiction includes many illustrations of the phenomena discussed by these works – cosmopolitanism, female-female friendship, and minor characters – so his absence cannot be explained solely on this basis.) And to move backwards from the 1980s, Steven Marcus, J. Hillis Miller, and Raymond Williams produced pioneering analyses of the links between history, ideology, and Victorian literature, but Thackeray's writing played almost no part in their elaboration of those links, with Hillis Miller focusing on Thackeray only in one short essay and one book chapter among his large body of scholarship and Williams omitting him altogether from *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970).

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To say that several of the most ambitious, far-reaching critics over the past several decades have turned regularly to Dickens, Gaskell, the Brontës, Hardy, Eliot, and Trollope but have passed over Thackeray is not, again, to say that many, many excellent scholarly works on him have not been written – they have. It is rather to start thinking about questions that can, perhaps, only be answered speculatively: given Thackeray's great fame, in the nineteenth-century and still today, why doesn't he seem to fit with large-scale critical accounts of nineteenth-century culture and fiction? Or perhaps: why hasn't scholarship that does focus on Thackeray not gained the status of long-term, field defining work? One imagines that *Vanity Fair*, *Henry Esmond*, *Pendennis*, and *Barry Lyndon* played large parts in forming critics' sense of the period, so why have interpretations of *any* of those works not taken on the status of interpretations of *Jane Eyre*, *Bleak House*, *Mary Barton*, or *Middlemarch*? Through a discussion that touches on six fairly recent, excellent books, each of which devotes a substantial number of pages to Thackeray's work and together illustrate a diverse set of critical techniques – *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* by Richard Salmon (2013), *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* by Julia Sun-Joo Lee (2010); *London, Radical Culture, and the Making of the Dickensian Aesthetic* by Sambudha Sen (2012); *Thackeray in Time: History, Memory, and Modernity*, a collection of essays edited by Richard Salmon and Alice Crossley (2016); *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* by David Kurnick (2011); and *Object Lessons: The Novel as a Theory of Reference* (2016) by Jami Bartlett – this essay will elaborate the basis for asking these questions about how Thackeray has come to seem marginal to Victorian literary studies. It will also outline a theory about this marginality – a theory that suggests that some of the primary, defining aspects of Thackeray's fiction, particularly its self-consciousness about writing as a form of difficult paid work and its ambivalence about the concepts of authorial careers and professionalization, have led to the minor role that his fiction, and scholarship about his fiction, has played in twentieth- and twenty-first century treatments of Victorian culture.

The first point – Thackeray's focus on his writing as the product of paid labor – is, as I will continue to argue, a key to understanding both the other aspects of Thackeray's writing and his treatment by critics. While not all scholars address Thackeray's depressive, thoroughly disenchanted understanding of the relationship between money and the work of publication, most end up confronting it in one way or another. It may be that a critic, looking through the great number of pieces that comprise Thackeray's *oeuvre,* ends up wondering why Thackeray wrote in such diverse forms – short pieces of journalism, tales, histories, translations, biographical sketches, essays, art criticism (such as *Sketches after English Painters*), illustrations, Christmas books, lectures (such as *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*), travel literature (such as his book *From Cornhill to Cairo*), comic satires (including *The Book of Snobs*), and, of course, numerous novels. This critic might end up understanding Thackeray's constant production of writing, in seemingly any form that the market might welcome, in the same way as Thackeray understood his own busyness. In his letters, Thackeray describes his work as "a ceaseless whirl and whizz from morning to night, now with the book, now with the drawings, now with articles for Times, Fraser" (qtd. in Ray 251), and reports that he is spurred primarily by a despairing attitude toward money – "the horrible care and fear of want" that he felt especially in the years leading up to *Vanity Fair* (qtd. in Ray 273).

Alternately, a critic might end up reading through some of these minor pieces prompted by his "fear of want." In them, one finds many instances where Thackeray articulates his

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understanding that writing for publication means writing for money – and that even though money has no clear relationship to aesthetic quality, it is nonetheless the ultimate arbiter of writing's value. Thus, as Richard Salmon notes in *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession,* Thackeray in the "Epistles to the Literati" section of his *Yellowplush Papers* (1837–38) voices through a footman a conviction about authorship that he was to repeat in many different forms throughout his career: "Let not all be . . . fancying that . . . our books are to be immortal," Yellowplush tells Bullwig, the "fust of English writers."

> Let us not be too prowd . . . and fansy ourselves marters of the truth, marters or apostels. We are but tradesmen, working for bread, and not for righteousness sake. Let's try and work honestly but don't let us be prayting pompisly about our "sacred calling." (qtd. in Salmon 85)

Though Thackeray's productivity cannot be reduced to his desire for payment, such a desire cannot be separated from his productivity either. He understood his artistic labor as equivalent to that of "tradesmen, working for bread," and he stood ever ready to puncture any affectation – about his own or others' writings – that suggested published literature signifies much beyond an author's need to escape from under the pressure of debts, bills, or other pecuniary obligations.

Critics who manage not to hear Thackeray in his own words profess his economically minded, unsentimental sense of writing's value will nonetheless likely encounter it in others' words. The oft-cited biography by Gordon Ray takes as the organizing principle of its first volume that Thackeray primarily understood his writing efforts as directed toward attaining a financially "secure position." Thus, after years of "anxiously" trying to achieve "a success which continually evaded his grasp" as Ray puts it, Thackeray came to feel that the primary significance of *Vanity Fair* was its good sales, which allowed him "at last [to] attain financial security" (Ray 346–47, 428). Other, more recent scholars have focused on how Thackeray gave voice to his anti-romantic view of literary production while participating in the "Dignity of Literature" debate of the mid-nineteenth century. The debate, which played out in newspapers and novels, saw Thackeray rejecting what Craig Howes in his 1986 essay calls the "egregious pretensions" Thackeray detected among writers (including Dickens) claiming to make an "essential contribution to society" through their creative work (Howes 272). As Howes argues, Thackeray puts forth what he saw as the "'true' market-determined conditions of literary production" as opposed to the "poses" of "self-declared literary geniuses" who claim to write only for "artistic integrity" (269, 273, 271). Thackeray's jaded understanding of the literary market has remained a topic of scholars for decades now: the polemical position he occupied in the "Dignity of Literature" debate has been discussed by critics before and after Howes, and it is taken up by Salmon and Sen in the volumes under review here.

And, finally, critics who focus only on Thackeray's major fictional works will find him giving voice to the same jaundiced understanding of literary labor, as he does in *Pendennis*:

> A literary man has often to work for his bread against time, or against his will, or in spite of his health, or of his indolence, or of his repugnance to the subject on which he is called to exert himself, just like any other daily toiler. When you want to make money by Pegasus (as he must, perhaps, who has no other saleable property), farewell poetry and aerial flights: Pegasus only rises now like Mr. Green's balloon, at periods advertised beforehand, and when the spectator's money has been paid. Pegasus trots in harness, over the stony pavement, and pulls a cart or a cab behind him. Often Pegasus does his

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> work with panting sides and trembling knees, and not seldom gets a cut of the whip from his driver. (Thackeray 450; ch. 36)

So common is this type of sentiment in Thackeray's writing – a conviction that literary production is alienated labor, bereft of authenticity and completed only for money – that even scholars whose work has little to do with Thackeray's conception of the literary marketplace find themselves remarking on it. In one of his only treatments of Thackeray's legacy, J. Hillis Miller remarks that Thackeray helps illuminate "the conditions under which a man made a living as a professional writer in England during the Victorian period" and "how precarious and difficult the life of a journeyman writer was in Trollope's day and Thackeray's" (353).

Yet in these accounts of the relationship between writing and money-making one not only sees a thoroughly unromantic view of authorship, one also sees a variety of ways of understanding what *kind* of worker an author is. This variety might be understood in terms of degree of felt alienation. At one end of the spectrum is Thackeray's image of the writer-as-Pegasus: a figure who is thoroughly exploited. Pegasus has no control over what and how much he is asked to produce or how often he must work. In a less extreme position on the spectrum would be the "journeyman" – a skilled worker whose occupation is structured along less arbitrary demands. Though the journeyman might have to travel from town to town to earn his subsistence and though he is subservient to a master, he is part of a guild system that offers a path to becoming a master himself. His labor is less exploitative; his occupation, potentially more self-determined.

Even further away from Pegasus is the "professional," another term offered by Hillis Miller and one that is the focus of Salmon's book. Professionals are part of a modern, capitalist economy, but they occupy a fairly privileged, stable place within it. The economy recognizes them as possessing a high degree of knowledge and skill; that knowledge is valued; and while the market determines their compensation, professionals have a much higher degree of autonomy in terms of their schedules and working conditions than the lowly "daily toiler" to which Thackeray alludes in *Pendennis*. More so than any other major Victorian novelist, Thackeray presents the issue of the man-of-letters' relationship to the market as his writing's central problematic: it is the background issue that ends up defining many important aspects of his fiction as he tries to work through it in a number of sometimes confusing, contradictory ways.

Thackeray's uncertainty about the social and economic status of his work resembles academics' own. A similar problematic has been at the heart of literary criticism for at least a few decades; to scholars and other commentators, academic work is beset with questions not so different from the ones that form Thackeray's concepts of authorship. Are Ph.D.s in the humanities a "waste product," exploited and almost completely alienated from their labor (Bousquet)? Or, slightly less oppressively, are they members of a new intellectual "precariat," whose work resembles that of a different kind of journeyman – one who travels from place to place to try to subsist, but for whom security is never a possibility (Wade)? Or is academic work ultimately defined by the possibility of achieving professional respect and stability, in the form of a tenure-track job?

One effect of this resemblance has been Thackeray's somewhat ghostly, marginal presence in Victorian studies: unable to resolve our own sense of how to determine our work's worth, we see Thackeray as mirroring that inability; thus, his fiction never seems to invite the definitive, field-defining statements about Victorian literature and culture that Dickens's,

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Gaskell's, and Eliot's fiction welcomes. At the same time, as the books under review suggest, it is precisely the issue of the economic worth of writing that has drawn scholars to Thackeray: while we may have to wait for Thackeray to become central to the field, the critics who do tackle his work are helping to illuminate the Victorian origins of some of the issues important to academia's self-representation: the idea and significance of a professional "career," the difficulty of achieving, and sometimes even envisioning, a professional identity built around labor that can seem economically valueless, and the social, economic non-recognition that can be associated with labor that falls outside the kind organized by the ideal of a professional career.

This recent scholarship does not, of course, explicitly link Thackeray's treatment of these careerist issues to present-day academics' focus on them. Instead, the link is implicit: Thackeray's writing invites a sense of bewilderment from critics; this bewilderment is connected with the ideas of work and career he often foregrounds; these ideas touch on anxieties that are at the heart of present-day academics' self-image, which in turn prevents scholars from confidently or definitively pronouncing on Thackeray's work.

Such a complex chain of cause-and-effect may seem unlikely until one immerses oneself in Thackeray's writing and the scholarship about it. Such immersion makes it clear how far we are from having any stable critical reference points to guide our conversations about him. And though I have been describing some of the through-lines that connect five of the books under consideration here (all of them besides Bartlett's, which will be discussed further below), even these through-lines – the issues of writing, work, and commercial labor – have not produced much consensus as to the relevant scholarship about these issues that literary critics should reference. To illustrate, it's useful to contrast the bibliographies of some of the works under review with works about another author, Elizabeth Gaskell. Four essays about *Mary Barton* published over the past seven years, which I picked fairly randomly through a search of the MLA database, show at least some consensus about the scholarship that guides how we talk about Gaskell's novel (Recchio, Moulds, Fenton-Hathaway, Harner). In part because the topic of affect and sympathy has become a major one in Gaskell studies, Suzanne Keen's work appears in two of the articles. Hilary Schor – one of the most important authorities in Gaskell studies – appears in two as well. Though Woloch does not write about Gaskell, *The One vs the Many* shows up twice. And Catherine Gallagher's chapter in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (1985) on *Mary Barton* is referenced by all four essays.

When we turn to criticism of any single text by Thackeray in recent books, there is less consensus. Both David Kurnick in *Empty Houses* and Matthew Ingleby in his essay in *Thackeray in Time* analyze *Vanity Fair*, and as both bibliographies show, the critical archive about *Vanity Fair* is extensive. There is some commonality among the pieces – both refer to Gordon Ray's biography, published in the 1950s, and both to George Lukacs's *The Historical Novel*, written in the 1930s. But in terms of more recent work, only Andrew Miller's *Novels Behind Glass* (1995) is discussed by both Kurnick and Ingleby. In the case of Bartlett's chapter on *Barry Lyndon* and Jim Shanahan's essay on the same novel, the overlap is even less: despite the fact that *Barry Lyndon* has not received enormous amounts of critical attention, there are no works of critical or even historical research cited by both Bartlett and Shanahan.

It's as if the critics of the past few decades have not so much set up defined paths that scholars either follow or from which they make detours; instead, there's a kind of free-floating collection of responses to Thackeray. Each critic creates a fairly new set of concepts, ideas, and concerns in their encounter with his writing. Individual scholars' somewhat idiosyncratic

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approaches to Thackeray become even more striking when one keeps in mind the observation above: that both Thackeray and his scholars often focus on the same set of issues about writing and its relationship to the market. These two observations suggest that it may be precisely Thackeray's treatment of the issues of work, money, and career that critics have had trouble making sense of – they have tried and, in the eyes of subsequent scholars, failed to interpret these issues in a way that feels satisfactory. And these senses of failure and dissatisfaction might be owing to the fact that Thackeray is touching on some aspect of critics' own sense of themselves as workers that remains anxiously unresolved.

The issues of work and career appear most obviously in Salmon's book on the concept of the professional writer in Victorian England. They are also the focus of Sen's analysis of Thackeray, which centers on Thackeray's articulations of the relationship between fiction-writing and the market during the Dignity of Literature debate, and of Kurnick's work on how Thackeray's failed attempts at writing for the theater provide a key to understanding his fiction's aesthetics. The first few essays in the collection *Thackeray in Time* also address Thackeray's sense of writing as a kind of commerce, and several of the remaining essays show how Thackeray's choices of form and content in his fiction were, in part, responses to market conditions. Lee's interpretation of *Pendennis,* which traces how the novel registers discourses about abolition and slavery, allows us to see the ways Thackeray's understanding of the alienated labor of writing was shaped by debates about race and the politics of slavery.

The ways that these studies understand Thackeray's sense of commercial writing might be defined in terms of the tension between two different ideas about how one experiences the temporality of work. One conception is that of the career, an idea that is sometimes invoked in these studies and, as Nicholas Dames as well as others have shown, was taking on its modern meaning during the time Thackeray was writing. As Dames writes, "career activity is . . . a linear narrative of technical, means-oriented, rule-bound activity whose sole desideratum is upward progression in a correct sequence," and it is during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Thackeray's popularity was at its peak, that the idea of a career took hold to "create narratives, and forms of self-understanding" that allowed "irregular, profit-driven enterprises" to be "reshaped, streamlined, and organized into . . . a preplanned trajectory for individuals with a set sequence and nameable steps along that sequence, or a career" (250). The other is that of the "daily toiler," whose experience is not narrative – it is an experience of repetitive work that does not yield any sense of personal, economic, or bureaucratic progress. It may also be highly fragmented or discontinuous, so that the work of one day differs from the that of the next, in terms of the nature of the labor, the setting, and the money received, as the idea of the journeyman now invokes. While such labor can be exalted, as in Carlyle's "Gospel of Work," it more likely leads to a sense of alienation and meaninglessness, as many nineteenth-century thinkers recognized.

In *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*, Salmon lays out the ways that the budding sense of "professionalism," both for authors and workers in more clearly rationalized fields, was a matter of intense uncertainty and debate. This uncertainty is registered, in part, by the evolving sense of what professionalism meant, especially in relation to authorship. As Salmon shows, in the eighteenth century, to think of an author as a professional was to think of someone whose subsistence depended on the vagaries of the capitalist market. As Isaac D'Israeli put it, for authorship to be professionalized would mean that writers would be "disappointed, distressed, and . . . cast into the lot of a doomed labourer" (qtd. in Salmon 10–11). Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, professionalization in authorship

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meant something different: while the professional author was still paid by the market, he or she was to some extent insulated from the worst effects of its unpredictability. Since professionals were understood to be remunerated not just for the concrete products they churned out but also for their skill, reputation, and knowledge of their craft, writers embraced an ideal of professionalization as it offered "relative distance and insulation from the market" (Salman 12), a distance that could be conceived of as compatible with the "diligence and system" that might structure an author's sense of his career trajectory (12).

Thackeray engaged himself in the ongoing debate about whether an author might be regarded as a professional in the newer sense, a debate in which Dickens took the position that writers should be respected and protected in a way somewhat analogous to other kinds of knowledge-workers. According to Salmon, Thackeray's perspective was one that follows from the "disillusioned," "disenchanted" aesthetic that runs through his fiction: instead of thinking about authorship in terms of persistent economic security and social respectability, he repeatedly comes back to the fate of the "real 'penny-a-liner,'" the "literary hack" whose reputation is "ephemeral" and sees labor in terms of "cyclical transience" (86). From this perspective, *Pendennis* appears not a forthright story of career progression, in which the main character understands his relationship to authorship as one in which "diligence and system" will assist him in navigating a set path that leads to a fairly secure position as a professional author, but rather a skeptical articulation of a more uneven journey. This journey is one in which Pen does indeed become a "disciplined professional writer," but in which professionalism becomes equated with narrow "material self-interest" (93). The novel proceeds according to sense of "commercial cynicism," according to Salmon, "that authors must accept the transient conditions of their profession, writing for the day rather than for posterity" (97). In sum, *Pendennis* reflects Thackeray's undecidable or contradictory outlook on authorship: though he recognizes that writing can provide a stable source of income and respectability, he also sees that when it does, such an end might be coincidental, or arbitrary rather than evidence of authorship as offering true "professional" security.

Ultimately, Pen does not seem to move step by step through a narrative of systematic career advancement. He "move[s] inconclusively between opposing states of mind" (98), those of understanding writing as a rationalized, professional career and of understanding it as alienated labor, no different from that of the lowly daily toiler. This undecidability is registered by the contradictory form of *Pendennis*, which at once adheres to some of the conventions of the novel of apprenticeship but also refuses such a structure, as Thackeray seems intent on "preventing [Pen] from learning incrementally through acquired knowledge" (98).

As Dames suggests in his essay on the career concept and the work of Trollope, Trollope's growing popularity among academics seems tied to the fact that Trollope was much less ambivalent about whether work could become a career. For Dames, Trollope's narratives about bureaucratic and political careers attract attention of critics because, in part, "the academic 'careerist' continues to exert a fascination within a profession where making one's way, or whether there even is a way to be made, remains so fraught" (Dames 250). Yet while Trollope's life story as well as his novels does not question the very validity of the career-concept, Thackeray's writing does question it, often. As I have been suggesting, this questioning has resulted in critics' being drawn to Thackeray's ambivalence, as it seems to capture the "fraught" sense of our own situation, while also, collectively, not coming to any definitive sense of the precise meaning of Thackeray's portrayal of authorial labor. Salmon's

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articulation of the "inconclusive" nature of Thackeray's writing on this topic is representative of indefiniteness. Many scholars have addressed the subject – Peter Shillingsburg, Howes, John Sutherland – and others continue to do so, but collectively, those writing about him have perpetuated the inconclusivity, not reduced or resolved it.

So, among the books under review, one can see excellent, persuasive cases made for Thackeray's fiction as either putting forth a view of authorial writing as fully alienating, leaving the literary hack as no better than a "slave" (as Lee suggests in her examination of how, in *Pendennis*, Thackeray adopts a depoliticized, deracialized version of the transatlantic discourse about slavery), or as asserting that the "properly literary vocation of novel writing" is, precisely, a *vocation* that lends itself to "respectability" and distance from the despairing state of hacks (as Sen suggests in his discussion of how Thackeray dissociated himself from popular journalism and a radical critical consciousness [15]).

Lee's chapter in *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* focuses, in part, on an aspect of Thackeray's writing that scholars have noted but that, until Lee's work, has never received a sophisticated analysis: his use of motifs and language drawn from controversies about slavery, especially his periodic inclusion in his essays and fiction of the abolitionist phrase, "Am I not a man and a brother?" Lee's chapter, as well as her book as a whole, links a variety of issues related to slavery to Thackeray's choices in form and content. These issues include transatlantic exchanges of literary and political ideas, Thackeray's own experience of travel to America, and multiple discourses about racial and national identity in American and English literature. But the focus of the Thackeray chapter concerns Thackeray's representation of authorship as a kind of slave labor, in which the author is fully subjugated to market conditions. In appropriating abolitionist discourse, Thackeray simultaneously takes it away from the racial specificity that makes such discourse attentive to the plight of African and African American slaves while also broadening its resonance, so that such discourse addresses a more "universal" condition. "In manipulating abolitionist" language, Lee writes,

> Thackeray was . . . redefining what it meant to write a narrative of the slave experience. His objective in *Pendennis* is not to humanize slaves but to (satirically) dehumanize authors. Rather than depict a universal brotherhood, he depicts a universal chattelhood. Exploiting popular metaphors of slavery, Thackeray situates the hack writer in his own Atlantic labor economy, composing a slave narrative stripped of political ideology and racial specificity. (55)

In short, Thackeray "equates the life of the writer with that of the slave: both are the victims of free circulation and economic exploitation" (53). As Lee shows, there is ample evidence that *Pendennis* is not as ambivalent about the position of the commercial author as Salmon suggests. While Salmon locates a kind of equivocation in the novel about whether authorship is a means to professional respectability and at least partial autonomy, Lee's chapter suggests that this idea of Thackeray's "inconclusive" narration ignores the strong emphasis the novel places on Pen as an "opportunistic hack" (Lee 22) whose alienated condition Thackeray invokes as he argues against Dickens's sense of authorship as a respectable, professional identity that should be protected through legal and social means.

While Lee sees in Thackeray's novel a pronounced skepticism towards authors' efforts to represent themselves as creatively, economically, or intellectually better than any other toiler, Sen sees Thackeray's fiction as dominated by a wholly different, and in a sense almost wholly opposite, agenda. In *London, Radical Culture, and the Making of the Dickensian*

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Aesthetic, Sen locates a distinct political project at work in Thackeray's novelistic technique. This project is to further a "respectabilizing trajectory" in popular writing, wherein Thackeray in particular repudiates the "subliterary traditions" of radical writing and visual satire, both of which Sen associates with "powerful instrument[s] of political mobilization" among artisans and workers against English elites in favor of a "nuanced literary realism," a realism almost wholly devoid of confrontational energies (Sen 19, 8, 15). The sense we get of Thackeray in Sen's work is of someone who possesses a clear sense of his own superiority to the run-of-the-mill hacks. Particularly in his later work, Thackeray enforces a "distinction . . . between journalism and literature" (15). While the former is connected to "radical satire," the latter is more conservative. The "properly literary" writing of novels is a "self-conscious rejection of the resources of print and visual entertainment" as well as of the "language of radical politics" contained therein (11, 15).

The political quietism of Thackeray that Sen identifies can be reconciled with Lee's analysis of his use of abolitionary discourse: as Lee states, Thackeray's identification of authors with slaves is not meant to further a particularly progressive set of social aims. Yet Thackeray's vision of the artist's relationship to the commercial market in Sen's estimation is far different from that of Lee's. In Lee's reading of *Pendennis,* Thackeray makes no distinction between the novelist and the hack, between the "humbug" peddled by desperate magazine-writers and the equally false, equally market-driven prose published by novelists. Sen's reading of Thackeray produces a much different vision, one in which Thackeray strategically undertakes "a movement away from 'magazinery'" (Sen 15). Sen's invocation of the idea of a "vocation of novel writing" thus captures what he sees as Thackeray's understanding of the novelists' relationship to the market: unlike the hack, or the trembling, exhausted Pegasus, the novel writer has found a way to match a sense of his inner calling with the outer demands of the marketplace (Sen 4). Novel writing does not require a total submission of the self to the brutal logic of "free circulation and economic exploitation," as Lee puts it (53); instead, it allows the self to be insulated from such exploitation and enjoy a position much closer to the condition of the professional who has navigated a successful career.

These two critics thus have substantially different ideas about how Thackeray imagines his place in the market. And these differences are apparent not just in their opposing conclusions but also in the sense of their incommensurability. Our critical practice has rich resources to interpret ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox, but after reading Thackeray's critics, one might feel that our resources do not lend themselves to Thackeray's account of writing for money. Other Victorian novelists navigated complex, difficult paths through commercial barriers and constraints, but those paths have been easier to discuss comprehensively. So as Schor demonstrates in *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, we can make sense of Gaskell's ambivalent, yet ultimately triumphant, entrance into the literary market. Thackeray, though, in alternating between, and sometimes combining, two visions of commercial authorship – on the one hand, complete, almost meaningless subjection to monetary pressure; on the other, respectable, skilled activity, the benefits of which accrue over time – produces a vision of paid labor that is more difficult to assess synthetically and comprehensively.

Several of the essays in *Thackeray in Time* deal directly with Thackeray's navigation of the literary marketplace, in terms of how his fiction responds to the commercial environment in which he wrote and how his fiction represents that environment. While the issue of temporality is, of course, central to the pieces in the volume, often the "time" the essays discuss is the time

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of modern capitalism reflected in the rapid rate of publication. In his essay, Salman focuses on Thackeray's representation of what he felt to be the quickening pace of commercial literature. Thackeray's contributions to Cruikshank's 1839 *Comick Almanac* and his satires of literary fashion reflect his sense that authors have no other occupation in a modern, ever-evolving marketplace besides "the 'daily labour of writing, and . . . the provision of 'ephemeral news'" (Salman and Crossley 20). As a whole, the volume presents a version of Thackeray closer to the one Lee examines – someone who sees commercial authorship as inherently alienating - than the one Sen discerns.

Antonia Harland-Lang's essay on Thackeray's part in constructing the image of a literary bohemia populated by struggling, often desperate, writers shows how, even in his final novel, his imagination remained in touch with "frustrations about just how difficult it is to be distinctive in a demanding commercial world" even when one persistently tries "to raise oneself above popular mundanities" (42). Several of the volume's pieces emphasize Thackeray's thorough engagement with literary forms that were important primarily owing to their profitability: these pieces include Jim Shanahan's original analysis of Thackeray's adoption of the popular genre of the "Irish military novel" for the basic form and content of *Barry Lyndon,* Kate Forrester's essay on *The Rose and the Ring* in the context of booksellers' annual sales of Christmas books, and Alice Crossley's piece on *The Roundabout Papers*, monthly essays Thackeray wrote for *Cornhill Magazine* between 1860 and 1863 that "self-consciously reflect on their periodic composition" (124). While Shanahan, Forrester, and Crossley do not focus on the demands of popular writing, or Thackeray's sometimes bleak sense of its economics, their essays' foregrounding of Thackeray's immensely varied output and keen sensitivity to the market clearly resonates with Salmon's and Harland-Lang's conclusions about how Thackeray consistently perceived writing as work that is discontinuous, more responsive to the external vicissitudes of commerce than anything else.

The volume also focuses on Thackeray's depictions of remembrance, which works as a counter to the fragmenting temporality of the marketplace. For Crossley, Thackeray can use memory to creat a sense of "identity through time" (Salmon and Crossley 130) or a kind of "collective memory" of an "idealised past" (136); for Forrester, Thackeray's participation in the tradition of Christmas books is a way for him to imagine a kind of "magical" or ideal time, one that can act as a consolation for the pressures of modernity (53). But even in these essays, the problems of financial struggle, debt, and "consumer culture" become the impetus for Thackeray's efforts to imagine alternate temporalities to that of modern capitalism (134). There is a sense from the volume of Thackeray as disconcertingly alternating between seeing himself as engaged in episodic, unpredictable work and seeing himself as insulated from such hack work or as sometimes cynically submitting to the oppressively fragmented time of the market and able to inhabit a more comfortable, more linear, and more progressive time.

One name for this more meaningful temporality is, of course, a "career"; as Bové suggests in the epigraph to this essay, the professional's career is constructed in part through records of jobs held, of promotions, of works produced and in part through a logic of "continuity" and even inevitability that professionals and their audiences come to see as connecting those records. Sen's articulation of this logic is fairly simplistic: Thackeray moves from "magazinery" to novel-writing and, in the process, leaves behind periodical styles and their potentially progressive politics. The essays in *Thackeray in Time* certainly produce a different idea of Thackeray's trajectory, one in which he is consistently oscillating between forms and

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genres, and often returning to his magazine work, either by engaging in journalism or writing about it.

In *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*, David Kurnick analyzes another form, besides that of the journalistic "piece," that Thackeray does not so much abandon as insistently recall and even reproduce in his fiction: the form of the theatrical play. For Kurnick, Thackeray's and other novelists' experiments with writing for the stage need in part to be understood with reference to the "erratic trajectory of individual careers" (6). For by thinking in terms of the career, one can apprehend what Kurnick calls the "melancholy of generic distinction" (9) that lies at the heart of many of the aesthetic, political, and psychological effects he traces to novelists' failed attempts to write theatrical pieces. The theater offers an alternative to the privatized, domestically oriented space that the novel both portrays and valorizes. Its "collaborative" staging – in the form of the cast members, directors, and stage-hands necessary to present any play – and its "collective" orientation – in the form of an embodied audience for which the play is presented – form a rejoinder to the domesticated existence that novels foreground in their narratives and modes of consumption. The significance of novelists' failure to write successfully for the stage depends in at least two ways on the apprehension of their overall career. For one thing, it is only because these writers wrote successful novels that their theatrical failures become remarkable. After all, the numbers of failed playwrights are, of course, legion, so the bare fact of this kind of failure, while perhaps of sociological interest, is not a matter to attract the attention of a major work of literary criticism. For another, and far less obviously, such failures transformed how novelists understood success in the marketplace. While novel-writing provided them with monetary rewards and a kind of regard, such benefits provoked a powerful sense of melancholy as well – a melancholy rooted in a felt "failure to establish successful contact with an audience" that stage-productions provided (25). Their successes in the literary market were predicated on a partial relinquishment of a different version of success, one that would have provided them with a more public, more embodied form of social engagement.

For Kurnick, the literary career ends up having a counter-intuitive structure: failure does not end up being a stepping-stone to eventual success or, as today's business – and educational – writing might have it, an important "learning experience" that lets one find out and then overcome one's deficiencies. Instead, it represents a frustrated desire, a desire that is not overcome or wholly discarded, but persists. This frustration becomes articulated as a resistance to the very literary form, the novel, that was the vehicle for their authors' fame – and becomes an integral part of the aesthetic appeals of those novels. Kurnick sees *Vanity Fair* as an example of how novelists managed to, as Kurnick puts it, "vocationaliz[e] . . . failure, retroactively repurposing it as significant and productive of fictional experimentation" (25):

> We will see that the much remarked theatricality of *Vanity Fair* is a melancholy gauge of the reorganization of affective space at the Victorian mid-century to privilege the domestic hearth, and that Thackeray's affection for "the play" should be understood as a form of depressive dissent from this restructuring of social and intimate space. Moreover, the figure and reality of theater in Thackeray's career provide a social genealogy for two key features of his narrative technique. The first is the markedly melancholy attitude of the Thackerayan narrator, the second his interest in the representation of interior experience. Seen in proper relation to Thackeray's theatrical preoccupation, both features emerge as records of a traumatized reaction to the felt contraction of the public sphere. (31)

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In this passage as throughout his interpretation of Thackeray's work, Kurnick is not centrally concerned with the concept of the literary career in the Victorian period. The originality and persuasiveness of Kurnick's argument rests on his explication of how Thackeray's narratorial voice, his representations of theatricality, and his innovative fictional techniques express "the lost public culture that the theater signifies for him." As Kurnick shows, even Thackeray's interior monologues suggest "the intimate publicity" of a speech delivered "from the now evaporated apron of the old stage" (66). Yet Kurnick's analysis also stands as a contribution to critics' decades-long conversations about Thackeray's understanding of commercial authorship in an era when the idea of a career was taking shape. One may be tempted to envision a career in somewhat idealized terms, as a "linear narrative" that moves in "a correct sequence" along a trajectory of "upward progression," in Dames' words (250). Kurnick puts forth a different formulation, in which "incorrect" moves, in the form of failures and dead-ends, are vital to the story; in fact, these very failures become responsible for Thackeray's eventual success as he "vocationalizes" them into aesthetic innovations. Such a formulation threatens to turn the normal career concept inside-out: instead of a career driven by intentionally advantageous efforts, we see a career that has failure as its basis; it is the persistence of frustration, even anger, about the market's rejection of a desired form that ends up imbuing Thackeray's novels with value. Kurnick's argument thereby captures some of the same ambiguity about Thackeray's understanding of writing for money as seen in other recent criticism: while Thackeray's writings at times assert a version of professional authorship that follows the model of a progressive, predictable career, they also put forth an alternate version dominated by struggle, market failure, temporal regression or stasis, and depressive alienation.

Kurnick locates the source of Thackeray's unstable, disorienting style – which he describes as "saturated with disappointment, regret, resentment, bitterness, insecurity, sarcasm, sentimentality and rancorous anti-sentimentality, accusation and self-accusation" – in the author's unresolved ambivalence about his theatrical failure (Kurnick 31). Thackeray's style itself testifies primarily to his unstable sense of his writing's attachment to and distance from the market's mechanisms of determining value. This part of Kurnick's argument also resonates with that of other critics. While Thackeray's disorienting irony can capture several of modernity's more bewildering effects, for Salmon, it reflects Thackeray's "inconclusive" uncertainty as to whether commercial writing more closely resembles hackwork or respectable professional labor. In "'Fac simile!' Thackeray's Simulations of Eighteenth-Century Literary Figures," Richard Pearson's contribution to *Thackeray in Time*, Pearson associates Thackeray's undecidability with his "deconstruction of literary authorship, influence, celebrity, and legacy" (Salman and Crossley 84), that is, with an oscillating, contradictory sense of what it means to be a writer in the modern market. And Lee introduces her argument about Thackeray's representation of writing as a kind of deeply dehumanizing labor with an acknowledgment that Thackeray is "a difficult subject for the literary critic" because his "attitude of detachment" and his stylistic "coyness" prevent us from determining his position on political and economic issues (Lee 54). His overall aesthetic of ironic undecidability, for Lee, is deeply connected to his disillusioned view of literary labor.

Unlike other recent works about Thackeray, Jami Bartlett's chapter about *Barry Lyndon* in *Object Lessons: The Novel as a Theory of Reference* neither explicitly addresses his writing's relationship to the market nor gestures toward our or Thackeray's own understanding of his career. Yet it is instructive nonetheless as a case-study for how one might see critics'

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treatment of Thackeray's ironic style as reflecting a kind of professional unease about academics' own socioeconomic status. Bartlett's critical framework is far different from that of most scholarship on the Victorian novel. Rather than employing a type of historical or formalist approach, Bartlett works primarily in a strain of the philosophy of language – not the continental, poststructuralist strain familiar to our field but rather analytic philosophy. Bartlett reads novels as meditations on how linguistic reference operates in relation to real or imagined objects in the world. As Bartlett puts it, her exploration starts with the premise that "novels are constructed by an engagement with objects" and moves on to "develop the idea that the reference to objects is what is made by and what constitutes narrative" (21). As one might expect, though, the process of referring is by no means simple, straightforward, or without paradoxes, and Bartlett locates many complex referential dynamics at work in Thackeray's early novel. Lyndon, Thackeray's narrator, produces a "construction of the world as contingent," in part because he sees his own actions rooted in a subject "position between intention and accident" (Bartlett 90). Lyndon habitually employs "empty expression[s]" as he engages in the difficult attempt of "making meaning out of . . . objects," which Bartlett sees as "a process of . . . his attempts to refer them – often to refer to them as absent" (Bartlett 85–86). Thackeray's and Lyndon's fraught projects of stabilizing meaning and stabilizing reference ultimately remain unresolved, and their irresolution "prevents the narrative from landing anywhere" (87).

The specifics of Bartlett's argument might be less significant in the context of this overview of Thackeray's critics as their resonance with other accounts of Thackeray's ambiguous, slippery language: like Lee, Kurnick, Pearson, and many others over the last few decades, Bartlett foregrounds Thackeray's aesthetic of uncertainty. While Kurnick anchors this uncertainty in his wholly new concept of the literary career – a concept in which ambivalence, frustration, and roads-not-taken are equally if not more important than the literary achievements we usually see as definitional – Bartlett keeps it free-floating, as expressive of difficulties in language itself rather than difficulties in lived economic realities. Though Bartlett pays little attention to issues of money, it is not hard to see a connection between the referential undecidability she discusses and Thackeray's habitual focus on writing for pay. Lyndon is the author of his autobiography; he habitually creates fictions in the form of his cons and deceptions; and, as Bartlett notes, his plot follows "his precarious campaign for . . . fortune" (67). If readers feel like his narrative never ends up "landing anywhere," such a feeling comes from Lyndon's inability to construct a stable economic position for himself or to develop a continuous trajectory for his "career" as a fortune-hunter. Alternating between narrative coherence and fragmentation, *Barry Lyndon*'s undecidability shares the same structure as Thackeray's other ambiguous representations of work as sometimes taking the form of a secure, meaningful career and sometimes taking the form of alienating, meaningless toil. Though Bartlett does not reference economic, careerist issues, in other words, her reading of Thackeray's undecidable, reflexive, and disorienting style seems linked to his habitual treatment of those issues.

Such a reading of Bartlett's work as well as that of other critics discussed in this essay is admittedly symptomatic. The fact that Victorian studies cannot get a handle on Thackeray's writing and seems unable to make him central to large-scale, definitive accounts of Victorian culture is a function, I am arguing, of how his fraught representations of paid literary work, which seem constantly to move between professional respectability and abject hack work, touch closely on academics' own pronounced anxieties about their socioeconomic status.

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As Pierre Bourdieu suggests in his 1984 *Homo Academicus*, the academic career, "which is a strange obstacle race where everyone classifies and everyone is classified, the best classified becoming the best classifiers of those who enter the race" (17) is a matter of intense psychic investment for those who participate in it. Moreover, Bourdieu's work as well as that of some literary critics inspired by him, suggests that academic scholarship not only analyzes its objects of study but also registers, and emerges from, scholars' sense of their positions in competitive fields of power (Guillory, Liu, Garcha). No Victorian writer, I am suggesting, captures as precisely as Thackeray present-day academics' anxious sense that their professional identity is unusually precarious. While for Thackeray, this precariousness arose from the industrialization of writing, for us, it comes from the decades-long "crises in the humanities," increasing adjunctification, the specter of dwindling public funding, and a belief in the heightened hostility from an uncomprehending public. These factors have made it so that professionalization's comforts seem as illusory as Thackeray's representation of them. Now, the idea of scholarship as discontinuous, economically perilous work is one that seems intrinsic to humanities' sense of ourselves. Academics' experience of labor is more likely to resemble the fragmented unpredictability Thackeray illustrates so palpably. The comforts of a progressive career seem as illusory as Thackeray suggests. In sum, our vision of Thackeray and his work remains vitally linked to our understanding of ourselves and our academic labor.

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