

Thackeray's Waterloo: History and War in Vanity Fair

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Ever since the appearance of the first instalment of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in January 1847, reviewers and critics have been troubled by the novel's confusing mixture of historical references. To what extent is it 'about' 1815, or the 1840s? Throughout the work the author foregrounds the relationship between history and its representation, but in so playful a fashion that he adds to, rather than solves, the problem. 'Our surprised story now finds itself for a moment among very famous events and personages, and hanging onto the skirts of history',¹ his narrator comments at the opening of Chapter XVIII as the narrative's chronology reaches Napoleon's escape from Elba. The playful placing of the 'surprised' story in 1815 here serves only to *dis*-place it; on one level the narrative becomes a sort of time-machine which, wandering arbitrarily and innocently between one period and another, is never actually rooted anywhere. But on another the adjective 'surprised' is rendered ironic by the long build-up to the battle provided by the illustrations and chapter headings that have so consistently referred to it. For the reader, the irony suggests that a story might – and frequently does – profess one motive while secretly enacting another, and that this particular story's profession of innocence of involvement in history had best be regarded with a certain amount of scepticism. The constant slippage in the novel between historical fact and narrative fancy, those 'little chapters' which 'seem to be nothing and yet affect all the rest of the history' (52), lies at the heart of the critical confusion and has frequently led to discussions of Thackeray's 'unreliability' as a storyteller. But is his narrative style evidence of nothing more than sloppy technique?

Or should we try to read into the blending of periods some subtle commentary on his own?

Robert Bell, reviewing the novel for *Fraser's Magazine* in September 1848, recognised in it what he felt was both contemporaneity and universality, reading the history as allegory: 'The vices painted in this book lie about us as "thick as leaves in Vallambrosa". We tread amongst them every day of our lives ... Alas! There will always be a *Vanity Fair* in this world, of which this crafty book will be recognised as the faithful image.'² A month previously, however, George Henry Lewes – clearly wanting to read the book as straightforwardly historical – had praised Thackeray's 'fine faculty for historical romance',³ but taken him to task for what he saw as a lack of attention to historical accuracy which smacked of sheer carelessness:

He becomes suddenly aware of the discrepancy between the costume of the period in which he has laid his scene and the costume in which he has depicted the characters in his pictorial illustrations. All he does on the discovery is to notify the fact in a note, and flippantly pretend that the real costume was too hideous for his purpose. He has been guilty, however, of the same confusion of periods throughout the work. Sometimes we are in the early part of the present century – at others we are palpably in 1848. Writing from month to month encourages such laches, but for the sake of such a reputation as Mr. Thackeray has now arrived at, it will be well that he should be more upon his guard.⁴

Earlier still, in 1848, Abraham Hayward had called the novel 'a plain old-fashioned love story' which draws on an earlier time when 'the war fever was at its height: Napoleon was regarded as an actual monster: [and] the belief that one Englishman could beat two Frenchmen, and ought to do it whenever he had an opportunity, was universal, (perhaps beneficially so, for "those can conquer who believe they can")'.⁵ For Hayward, the pleasure of this text resides in what he sees as its invocation of a simpler, prouder, more youthfully confident Britain, a Britain with a passion and a purpose and a real monster to fight. For this reason, perhaps, Hayward chooses to overlook Thackeray's historical 'inaccuracies'; while noting that, in 1815 'tight integuments for the nether man were held indispensable ... [and that] this fact ... is forgotten in the woodcuts, Old Sedley, Mr Chopper, Rawdon Crawley &c. &c. being represented in trousers', he merely remarks on the fact as 'curious'.⁶ The inconsistencies trouble Lewes far more. For him, Thackeray's handling of past and present, text and illustrations points to a 'cavalier impertinence of manner as if he were playing with his subject'.⁷ Or, indeed, with his reader. For Lewes, this playful impertinence spoils the book, interrupting the necessary suspension of disbelief and trivialising a potentially serious subject.

Other critics have seen the interplay of relations between narrative and history in this novel as an exciting formal departure, or as evidence of contemporary social, political and economic anxieties. Charlotte Bronte

famously saw in Thackeray's novel the mark of 'an intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognised' and dubbed him 'the first social regenerator of the day'.⁸ More recently, David Musselwhite has read the complex interplay between the concerns of the 1840s and the doubtful glories of a remembered past as autobiography. For him, Thackeray's own precarious financial, emotional and professional position is being enacted in the novel's time-frame:

Thackeray postponed writing the Waterloo number twice and it is to be remarked how contorted the novel's time scheme becomes as Waterloo approaches ... Caught between a doting mother and a child-bride, for months separated from his daughters and without a house, in desperate financial straits and yet ambitious to make his way in the world, Thackeray, too, came close to a breakdown. Came close, that is, to his Waterloo.⁹

As attractive as the metaphor might be and as correct as Musselwhite's central placing of the pivotal scene of Waterloo assuredly is, his reading here is not, in the end, all that helpful. It consigns to an individual authorial history the relationship between the novel's production context and its preoccupation with, and yet marginalization of, Waterloo. In this reading Thackeray becomes Napoleon, a man of plentiful ambition, motivation and talent, but one fatally lacking in (emotional) resources and support. The blurring of boundaries between national identities, victors and vanquished, and authors and texts certainly raises some interesting questions in the context of this 'Novel Without a Hero' which centres on the battle of Waterloo, and I will return to it. Somewhat uncharacteristically, though, Musselwhite glosses over it; while elsewhere he explores with real insight the part played by the social, political and economic conditions of the 1840s in the novel's collapsing of historical time, here he settles for the suggestion that the significance of Waterloo in the novel lies in what it can tell us about the author.

Joan Stevens has provided a rather more useful reading of the battle's significance in her seminal analysis of the contemporary context of the London skyline depicted in Thackeray's original frontispiece. According to Stevens, not only would readers have recognised the name of the author and associated him with the lively and insightful reviews in the *Morning Chronicle* and the irreverent articles and sketches of *Punch*, but 'everybody, almost, would know also the setting of the woodcut. Associated as it is with the title, *Vanity Fair*, it points to and identifies the world of the novel, locating it for contemporary readers as positively "here" and "now", in London, and in the 1840s'.¹⁰ Stevens' argument hinges on her placing of the illustration (which depicts, among other things, statues of Nelson and the Duke of Wellington) in the context of contemporary public controversies around London's fondness for casting the nation's heroes in bronze. She is right to place it thus; *Punch* joined the controversy to an extent which the majority of Londoners

would have found it difficult (and Thackeray, as a regular *Punch* contributor, impossible) to ignore. Stevens somewhat underestimates the significance of this context, however, in assuming that because the running joke in *Punch* ‘came to a climax in September 1846’¹¹ (i.e. when Thackeray was working on the first instalments of *Vanity Fair*), public interest in the controversy in particular and Waterloo in general were factors only in its initial stages. In fact, statue jokes – centred particular on Matthew Wyatt’s 60-ton bronze Duke – continued several to an issue until the very end of 1847, to such an extent that *Punch* was finally forced to publish a public appeal to stem the flood:

The Last Appeal. We beg our correspondents will send us no more jokes upon statues, such as ‘*statu quo*’, ‘The Statue of Limitations’, and the like enormities, which every leader of every newspaper now commits. Though we are Editors, we have our feelings as well as other men.¹²

What it is important to note here is that Thackeray’s novel was surrounded, not just in its early stages but throughout most of its execution, by debates around the correct way to commemorate war heroes, in particular the ‘Hero of Waterloo’. It might, then, be possible to suggest that Waterloo itself was a subject which, far from seeming historically distant to most of Thackeray’s readers, may have occupied a conspicuous and important place in their sense of their own time. Seen in the light of this possibility, Thackeray’s narrative and illustrations – so consistently drawing on Waterloo imagery – might provide more than a contextual clue for his readers or a setting for his story. The battle which Stevens rightly sees as ‘the preoccupation, the hinge’¹³ of the narrative might, in fact, serve a still more important if now somewhat arcane purpose in Thackeray’s overall design.

It is my contention here that this is the case. I have found several recent critical approaches particularly helpful. Using Freud and Derrida to explicate the connection between memory/history and narrative, John Schad argues that the battle’s narrative purpose as a kind of structuring absence is to highlight the cultural repression of the uncomfortable associations that the memory of Waterloo evoked after the Peterloo massacre of August 1819.¹⁴ I want to build on this notion of a revisioned, re-emergent history which reflects on the 1840s, though I will assume (or, more correctly *resume*) a more contextual approach which will have a double focus. First I want to place *Vanity Fair* in the context both of its time and of other contemporary references to the Napoleonic Wars in the belief that this will help to illuminate Thackeray’s own position within or against a particular, historically specific discourse of war writing. Second, I want to explore what the novel’s relation to history might be able to suggest to us about the ways in which Britain may have re-imagined war and the past in this, a period of intense social and political unrest that would mark the end of a long period of relative peace. I

will argue that the pivotal position occupied by the ever-present but narratively absent battle must be read against contemporary discursive practices which subtly integrated a revised memory of Waterloo with the vigorously imperialist but resolutely individual middle-class ambitions of the novel's present. Here I am indebted to John Peck's work on *Vanity Fair* as a critique of middle classness. Rather than seeing the Waterloo setting merely as a 'brilliant move' which 'enables Thackeray both to comment on the developing order of his own day and to show the coming into existence of this new social order',¹⁵ though, I will suggest that it is a critique of the reshaping of the 'official' history of war which lies at the heart of Thackeray's satire of middle-class life.

How, then, did Charlotte Bronte come to see in the author of a book which, it is beginning to emerge, is 'about' the 1840s looking back on 1815, the 'first social regenerator of the day'? How can looking back on a nation's 'victorious past' energise – even rescue – the present?

The extent to which the 1840s were thought of as a 'present' in need of rescue and regeneration is indicated by the wistful tone of Hayward's enthusiastic review which saw in *Vanity Fair* a return to a glorious, romanticised British history. It is supported also by the types of novels that were achieving success at the time. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) enters the world of the working classes in order to show them as worthy, close-knit, clean and honourable. Gaskell was writing against prevailing middle-class wisdom which, formed through familiarity with the works of Chadwick, Mayhew and others, was accustomed to literary tours through the slums which combined horror, sympathy and a perverse kind of pleasure in approximately equal measures. Brave as it is, though, *Mary Barton* is only able to achieve narrative resolution by shipping the working classes off to a new life in a 'Little England' in Canada. Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845), both of which were reviewed by Thackeray for the *Morning Chronicle*,¹⁶ also explicitly take as their theme the 'Condition of England' question, and answer it by placing hope in an aristocracy pure enough in blood to command instantaneous, instinctive loyalty, but rendered sympathetic by a sojourn amongst the poor whom it will ultimately lead to happiness. Disraeli's solution was not exactly new. As Thackeray put it:

If we might venture to suppose that Disraeli had borrowed his ideas from anyone, we should say that the 'Hero Worship' of Mr. Carlyle had been carefully read by him. Young England, too, is pining, it appears, for the restoration of the heroic sentiment and the appearance of the heroic man.¹⁷

We know, then, that Thackeray was familiar both with the 'Condition of England' Question and with Carlyle's influential work of 1841, 'On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History', and that, judging by this review,

he probably viewed the idea of Hero-worship as social panacea with rather less enthusiasm than some of his contemporaries. In fact, as Robert P. Fletcher has shown, while Thackeray and Carlyle began an amicable acquaintanceship in the 1830s based on a shared ‘understanding of the symbolic process – an understanding that led both to debunk worn-out icons’¹⁸ by the 1840s their relationship was strained and at times quite vituperative. Thackeray was almost certainly addressing Carlyle’s ‘On Heroes’ in his 1840 *Paris Sketch Book*,¹⁹ but what we might also conjecture is that his ‘Novel Without a Hero’ was also intended in part as a form of reply to Carlylean philosophy. Fletcher has seen this possibility as evidence of Carlyle’s ‘search for the authority of history’ while Thackeray, having grown ‘more complacent about the proliferation of fictions and shams in Victorian society ... surrenders ... to the current rules of the game’.²⁰ However, this argument somewhat undermines Bronte’s vision of Thackeray as a ‘social regenerator’. The critical disagreement calls, I think, for a re-examination of the extent to which *Vanity Fair* engages – if at all – with contemporary problems and/or with contemporary debates about them.

The problems were many and varied. In Parliament, among the most widely debated issues were the repeal of the Corn Laws (1846) which marked the waning power of the landed gentry,²¹ working-class conditions, the Chartist movement which threatened a rise in working class power, the Irish Question, the situation in Europe (and particularly France), and the passing of the Limited Enlistment Bill. This last revolutionised Britain’s army, emphasising soldiering as a profession rather than a life sentence and going some way towards improving conditions in the ranks. *The Times* stressed both the extents to which these improvements mattered in Britain at the time, and the ways in which public opinion about war was changing:

The interest which was felt in the improvement of the army question may be supposed to be nearly universal throughout the country ... So long as war exists, or the chance of war, that is as long as human nature continues to be what it is, so long will it be necessary for a great country to keep on foot a standing army. To this idea, once most unpopular and once unconstitutional, Englishmen have at last reconciled themselves. They look upon it as an evil, but an indispensable evil ... The mighty empire of India and the undeveloped treasure of Australia would be deemed worth retaining by men who despised the glories of Waterloo or grew pale at the bloodshed of Badajoz.²²

Here the troubled present looks to history as a way of combining imperial (financial) and military goals in a manner which might appeal both to a dispossessed aristocracy and to a threatened bourgeoisie. Through the grimly businesslike tone the battle of Waterloo becomes a model for the protection of Britain’s imperial interests. If one can’t join in the traditional reverence for Waterloo, *The Times* seems to suggest, one must at least admire and support

the army which cut its teeth there, the same army which now safeguards one's interests abroad.

The effect of foreign relations upon the finances of individual speculators is a constant source of anxiety throughout the nineteenth century, and with good reason. During the build-up to the battle of Waterloo itself, *The Times* had reported that news of the rebellion was first received in London through the *Moniteur* of 11 March, and that speculation about its genuineness was already, five days later, being reflected in the touchiness of the stock exchange:

The Funds, in some degree [have] recovered their former depression. They are, however, still in a state of uncertain vacillation, liable to be easily influenced by slight rumours, but not yet likely to rise or sink very much until advice of more decisive operations is received.²³

The army and the middle classes had frequently, therefore, been involved in a peculiarly ambivalent relationship: while good defence is imperative for an empire, wars – still conducted in this period largely by the aristocracy – can be bad for business. Some kind of screen through which imperialist manoeuvres might be read as grim necessities – such as *The Times* provides above – is therefore crucial. When patriotic appeal fails, money talks. What is most interesting in this period is how the two are often invoked together, and how often they are thought of as inseparable. Both Thackeray and Dickens use middle-class financial ruin as plot devices in serialised novels which appear in the mid-forties, just as financial anxiety and instability are at their height, and both make the most of the ironic opportunities thus presented. For Dickens, the public shame and social ruin associated with Paul Dombey's bankruptcy is out of all proportion to the 'crime' in a world that is filled with cheats in currency of every description, including patriotism:

It was an innocently credulous and a much ill-used world. It was a world in which there was no other sort of bankruptcy whatever. There were no conspicuous people in it, trading far and wide on rotten banks of religion, patriotism, virtue, honour. There was no amount worth mentioning of mere paper in circulation, on which anybody lived pretty handsomely, promising to pay great sums of goodness with no effects. There were no shortcomings anywhere, in anything but money. The world was very angry indeed; and the people especially, who, in a worse world, might have been supposed to be bankrupt traders themselves in shows and pretences, were observed to be mightily indignant.²⁴

For Thackeray's John Sedley, financial ruin is a direct result of international scheming to destroy Britain – his own downfall cannot be imagined separately from the larger threat to his country:

I say that the escape of Boney from Elba was a damned imposition and a plot, Sir, in which half the powers of Europe were concerned, to bring the funds down, and to ruin this country. That's why I'm here, William. That's why my name's in the Gazette. Why, Sir? – because I trusted the Emperor of Russia and the Prince Regent. (201)

The relationships between winners and losers, nations and individuals and morality and profit are crucial to the works of both writers, and in *Vanity Fair*, despite (or perhaps because of) its Napoleonic setting, they say as much about the 1840s as 1815, as I will demonstrate. My point here, however, is that it is becoming possible to see how Britain's military past is being generally used in this period as a form of social cement. Working-class conditions, middle-class anxieties and foreign unrest loom large on the political agenda, and their address within the army is an appeal both to the agitators and to the ranks above them to unify in the memory of a glorious past and the promise of a fair, peaceful, but above all well-defended imperial future. This return to the past could, as Hayward put it, only be beneficial, for 'those can conquer who believe they can.'

The Wellington Statue controversy and the re-shuffling of the army were not the only Napoleonic issues in the public's eye at this time. A further indication of the high profile accorded to the Wars during this period is provided by the news of the proposed presentation of a medal to all British survivors of the Peninsular wars. Created on June 1, 1847 at the personal request of the Duke of Wellington, news of the medal prompted even the normally conservative *Illustrated London News* (which, incidentally, was firmly on the side of the Duke in the great statue debate) to exclaim:

Forty-one years from the date of the first land battle – that of Maida, fought in 1806 – and fifty-three from the first naval engagement – Howe's victory over the French fleet – comes the mark of honour to those engaged in them! What a weary heart-sickening interval! ... What a contrast to the more generous policy of those we fought against! Napoleon distributed the Cross of the Legion of Honour almost on the field of battle ... [Furthermore] every [British] man and officer engaged in the last conflict of the war [Waterloo] received a medal without exception [on 10 March, 1816], though some of the regiments and many of the officers saw service for the first time ... As in many other things, it is not till public opinion was strongly expressed on the subject that the Duke and the Government have given way.²⁵

While the *Illustrated London News* suggests in the same article that 'the spirit of the time has gone; we are in the midst of other days; and, though these triumphs are not forgotten, it is not underrating them to say they are less thought of than of yore', its emphasis on the strength of 'public opinion' indicates that the 'spirit of the time', far from being 'gone', was actually proving in some way important to uphold.

Five years earlier, enthusiasm for Napoleonic history and patriotism over the memory of Waterloo was certainly fresh for at least one contemporary middle-class tourist. In August-September 1841, an anonymous Scotsman took a trip through the battlefield, and a year later he published his impressions, a copy of which he respectfully presented to the Duke himself. These are worth quoting at length:

I cannot describe my feelings, neither before, during, nor after this visit. I had longed, almost from the day of the battle, to visit that hallowed spot! Hallowed it must forever be in the hearts of all true Britons! I had desired to see the field on which the immortal Wellington had won the freedom and peace of Europe – I had longed to tread on the very earth where our gallant army, our Scots Greys and Forty-Second, and Life Guards conquered, and where so many of them died for their country. I had wished above everything to see the chateau of Hougoumont, the glorious defence of which had saved Europe; and which, I understood, remained in all its honourable dilapidation, just as it was left after the dreadful fray ... Every stone, and tree, and house, as we approached, that bore the imprint of age, was to me an object of veneration and regard, as having seen all these scenes of surpassing interest ... but here I must notice the strange sort of breathless haste with which we set out and proceeded along. I did not observe the fact, until I felt myself perfectly overcome, and was obliged to stop. This, I suppose, is quite natural, and I believe no Briton ever approaches the field in a perfectly cool and collected state. *A person feels as if he were pushing forward to fight the battle over again.*²⁶ (emphasis mine)

This traveller with a compulsion to revisit and even repeat the past was not a lone fanatic. Thackeray himself refers to a sight-seeing tour through the battlefield, using it in *Vanity Fair* to suggest the levelling action of war on social pretensions as well as national allegiances, and the exposure of the inevitable reduction of both to self-interest:

When the present writer went to survey with eagle glance the field of Waterloo, we asked the conductor of the diligence, a portly warlike-looking veteran, whether he had been at the battle. '*Pas si bete*' – such an answer and sentiment as no Frenchman would own to – was his reply. But on the other hand, the postilion who drove us was a Viscount, a son of some bankrupt Imperial General, who accepted a pennyworth of beer on the road. The moral is surely a good one. (272)

Here Thackeray subtly blends victors and vanquished in a theme that is to recur throughout the novel; his narrator professes to be solidly English, but surveys the battlefield with an 'eagle glance', that symbol of Imperial France. His comic linking of memory and its commodification, however, is not mere invention; the anonymous Scotsman indicates that battlefield tourists were numerous enough to sustain quite a lucrative business:

And now let me say a word regarding the swindling and cheating that is carried on here, by everyone who can, by hook or by crook, lay their hands on a stranger. All the fine feelings in which a person would wish to indulge, are dispelled, by the swindlers who have congregated to this locality, to rob the unwary ... Even our guide, John Pirson, partaking of the spirit of extortion which seems to pervade every person here, could not be satisfied. We had bought a sketch of the battle, by General Muffling, from him, and a cannon ball, also a veritable button, found on the field, with the Imperial Eagle, and inscribed 'Garde d'Honneur' ... but still he ... tried me more than once after all this, with pieces of bombshell and other trifles, which he carried in his pockets.²⁷

There is no sense of irony here, not even a tacit awareness either of the absurdity of condoning the purchase of souvenirs at the same time as he condemns their sale, or of the significance of his choice of one souvenir over another. Obviously, though, for this particular traveller it is the mark of authenticity that matters: the sketch is signed, the button bears a legend. Waterloo is something fixable, finite (and under those terms, commodifiable); a shrine which all true Britons ought to visit and mark with an authenticated purchase, but only time has the right to erase. The irritation with which he reports on the exploitation of tourists is matched only by the near-reverence with which he reflects on the battle: 'Such mockery as this absolutely turns the dread seriousness with which the Field of Waterloo is viewed into ridicule – if that can possibly be done.'²⁸

It is unlikely, of course, that such breathless awe was universal. But a certain amount of reverence and patriotism around the memory of the battle which crystallised in its commodification was quite widespread: five years later *Punch* bears out the extent to which Napoleonic history and memorabilia are still popular:

Bonaparte Mania ... Fifty pounds were asked or offered – we don't remember which – for the shell of the identical egg NAPOLEON was eating when a shell of another description fell into the egg-cup, and he exclaimed, 'Ha, ha! that is a good sign; the yolk is broken, and thus will we break the yoke of oppression'.²⁹

A week later it comments with equal flippancy on the Peninsular Medal, carrying a cartoon which continues the theme of the material quantification of history in the shape of an 'Old Peninsular Man' greeting a prize pig with the words 'Hello! My boy, you've got your medal, I see.' The pig replies 'Yes! Yes! When do you get yours?' At which the veteran merely shakes his head.³⁰

The creation of the medal at this particular moment is significant. Not only does it serve to indicate how much the wars of 30–40 years before were still (or back) in the public imagination, but it might suggest that they were being kept there for a purpose. We could read this several ways. The creation of

the medal might be a reminder of former victories over an old enemy which would hearten a disillusioned Britain anxious about foreign affairs, particularly in France. It might be a means of maintaining the resurgent popularity of the Duke which had declined considerably during the 1820s and 1830s (particularly after Peterloo).³¹ Or it might be an attempt to narrow the gap between officers and men in response to class pressures, part of what Eric Hobsbawm has described as a ‘concentrated effort’ on the part of the middle classes in this period ‘to give themselves confidence and pride in their historic task’ by reshaping ‘the institutions of Britain in a manner suitable to industrial capitalism’.³² Probably all these possibilities were in play. However we read it, though, the minor controversies over the medal and the Duke’s statue, coupled with the major one over the radical changes to the army, meant that the worlds of 1815 and 1847–48 were in constant public dialogue throughout the composition and publication of *Vanity Fair*, and that discourses around Waterloo were therefore an integral part of the effort to understand, as well as to re-shape, the 1840s.

David Musselwhite has pointed out that as a journalist who covered the last great meeting of the Chartists and as the son of a woman living in Paris who sent him regular reports of the fighting, Thackeray was ‘a peculiarly privileged witness of what was happening in England and France in 1848’.³³ But he was also, significantly, an experienced professional who was by no means new to the task of representing, pictorially and in words, the world of 1815 for an 1840s audience. In December 1840 he had been present when the body of Napoleon was brought with great pomp and solemnity from St. Helena to Paris to be re-buried at Les Invalides. He wrote up the occasion in *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, calling it ‘humbug’ and ‘French bragadocio’ from beginning to end. He mocked the French official rhetoric that glorified the scars borne by its heroes, pointing out that ‘it is a known fact that cannon-balls make wounds and not cicatrices’.³⁴ He mocked the Anglo-French spirit of co-operation when ‘men get a character for patriotism in France merely by hating England’.³⁵ He mocked the absurd scenes of emotion amongst fake marble statues, pointing out that ‘one may respect the dead without feeling awe-struck at the plumes of the hearse’.³⁶ When *The Times* objected to his flippancy and conceit, he replied in an article in *Fraser’s*:

O you thundering old Times! Napoleon’s funeral was a humbug, and your constant reader said so. The people engaged in it were humbugs, and this your Michael Angelo [one of Thackeray’s many pen-names] hinted at. There may be irreverence in this, and the process of humbug-hunting may end rather awkwardly for some people. But surely there is no conceit. The shamming of modesty is the most pert conceit of all, the *precieuse* affectation of deference where you don’t feel it, the sneaking acquiescence in lies.³⁷

If there is evidence here of the ironic treatment of public hysteria over its heroes which was to achieve fruition in *Vanity Fair*, there is evidence also of the confidence of Thackeray's commentary on issues of Napoleonic history. He knew sham when he saw it; his commentary throughout *The Second Funeral* is informed as well as satirical. In fact, we know that he studied the Napoleonic Wars both while a student at Cambridge,³⁸ and later out of continuing personal interest.³⁹ We know also that when contemplating the writing of the Waterloo sequence in *Vanity Fair*, he wrote to a friend to request a copy of the newly-released *The Story of the Battle of Waterloo* by George Robert Gleig⁴⁰ and that he read it, since a reference to it appears in one of his footnotes to the first serialised edition.⁴¹ Given his background knowledge, then, and the evidence that he did some fairly careful research, how do we explain the historical 'inaccuracies' and the mixing of periods which drew the notice of several contemporary critics and infuriated at least one of them?

Significantly, alongside *Vanity Fair* Thackeray was also writing 'Novels by Eminent Hands, or *Punch's* Prize Novelists,' a series of ten three-part parodies of some of the most successful novels of the day. Among these is 'Phil Fogarty – A Tale of the Fighting Onety-Oneth By Harry Rollicker' which, commencing on Saturday 7 August 1847, is a send-up of a then hugely popular Napoleonic tale written by Charles Lever. Thackeray's version not only plays on a familiar connection and turns the French into Irishmen (one of the major villains being one Marquis de Mahony), thereby collapsing a current issue into a historical narrative, but his illustrations faithfully represent them wearing breeches, that very garment which Hayward noticed was lacking from the illustrations in *Vanity Fair*. Phil Fogarty and his comrades, however, are depicted wearing trousers, a device that serves to foreground the comic collapsing of eras and enemies. These are clearly meant to be contemporary characters revisiting the past in imperial France as a way of combating the problems of the present in Ireland. In this piece, Fogarty and his retinue are simultaneously those ostensibly 'present' and those forever safely removed, for whom the war is one glorious, boyish, morale-boosting adventure. The stilted posturings of the French/Irish enemy officers, the false camaraderie and exaggerated bravery of the British, and the utter incredibility of the meetings between our hero and all the famous names of the day from Madame de Stael to Napoleon himself, turns 'Phil Fogarty' into a farce explicitly about the glorification of past wars for the purposes of present expediency.⁴²

The mixture in *Vanity Fair* is more subtle than this, but it utilises many of the same devices and even, at times, the same jokes. On meeting Becky and Rawdon's party in Brussels Mrs O'Dowd fancies she sees a likeness to her brother 'Molloy Malony' in the earl of Uxbridge (281) and shortly afterwards refers to Wellington's familial relations with the Malonies (282). For the contemporary reader this strengthens Thackeray's theme of an ironic mixing of heroes and villains, past and present. As John Peck has suggested, the fact that

the irony either confused or irritated contemporary critics can be attributed to the specificity and originality of this critique: 'most novelists at the time presented their audience with an ultimately flattering reflection of itself; Thackeray does not.'⁴³ We must, I think, at least begin to suspect that Thackeray's 'cavalier impertinence with his subject' is as deliberate in the novel as it is in 'Phil Fogarty', and that it too centres on a subtle critique of discursive practices around the remembrance of war at times of national crisis.

For Richard Cobden, whose works were widely disseminated via parliamentary speeches, newspapers and pamphlets from the 1830s to the 1860s and with whose work it is therefore highly likely that Thackeray and a large part of his readership were familiar, peace is not merely the absence of war, but a complex preparation for it. While ultimately, as Daniel Pick has pointed out, Cobden 'recoils from' his own intimation that 'war might have become structural, built into the system, intrinsic to modernity,'⁴⁴ throughout his writings he is loud in his condemnation of the aristocracy's romanticization of war which leads to the 'erecting of monuments of warriors, the myriad memorials of battles in the names of bridges and streets' and is evidence of what he calls 'this bellicose national character.'⁴⁵ For Thackeray, however, the middle classes, not the aristocracy, are the real root of this bellicosity in the 1840s. While for Cobden 'war is never desired by 'the people', but only by politicians and military men whose ambition and cupidity are fired by prospects of advancement and profit,'⁴⁶ for Thackeray some at least of 'the people' are willing to share those prospects and imagine warfare in terms which will safeguard them. While lampooning the aristocracy in the characters of the Crawley family, bearers of one of the 'most respected of the names beginning in C, which the Court-Guide contained' whose current head is nonetheless taken by Becky for a servant (65–69), Thackeray's narrative rejects the 'genteel rose-water style' (50) of the popular courtly romance and concerns itself explicitly with preserving a 'middle course modestly amidst those scenes and personages with which we are most familiar' (52). Thackeray is writing for, about, and against the middle classes of which he is a part and whose culpability in matters politic both domestic and foreign is, he suggests, profound. Writing against a background of middle-class displacement of the aristocracy in areas of social power, articulating a Cobdenite notion of peace as war-preparation, Thackeray goes beyond Cobden in his invocation of a new ruling class for whom the romanticization of war disguises motives which are, in essence, largely fiscal. 'Vanity Fair' as a concept sits at the crossroads between war and commerce; *Vanity Fair* as a novel articulates and illuminates this position by placing the battle centrally yet, as Patricia Marks puts it, resisting 'the rhetoric of romantic ideology' in favour of 'the language of commerce'.⁴⁷

Thackeray explicitly posits an economic model of social relations. Almost all 'good' qualities in the novel are commodified; such heroism as there is

resides in ultimate self-interest: 'if this is a novel without a hero, let us at least lay claim to a heroine. No man in the British army which has marched away, not the great duke himself, could be more cool or collected in the presence of doubts and difficulties than the indomitable little aide-de-camp's wife' (299) the narrator enthuses. His enthusiasm, however, is not for Becky's bravery but for her avarice; the remark comes in response to her calculating assessment of her financial position as Rawdon marches away to battle. Old Sedley too walks around wearing his wealth, 'rattling his seals like a true British merchant' (19), and laughs uproariously at Becky Sharp's attempts to snare his son, for 'he was a coarse man from the Stock Exchange where they love all sorts of practical jokes' (23). This particular joke backfires: Becky ends up with Jos and Old Sedley loses everything in the war. But the connection and the joke centre here on Becky and Sedley's recognition of one another. Just like the old man, just like the Napoleon she has so often been equated with, Becky is a speculator, staking all on the best prospect that presents itself.

She loses so consistently, of course, that a real tension arises between the expectations which the narrative raises around its clever, selfish, lively, perspicacious heroine and its constant denial of her reward. David Cecil has seen in this tension a flaw, a compromising of the novel's consistency:

Becky, if she is to provide an ironical contrast to Amelia, ought to be treated with perfect justice. We should feel her, bad as she is, to possess some virtues denied to Amelia. And so she does, as her character was originally conceived. But Thackeray has not had the nerve to carry out his original conception. He seems to fear that he will make us like her so much that we forgive her faults. And thus, in order to restore a moral balance, he endows her with bad qualities foreign to her nature. Fear, conscious or unconscious, of public opinion, has made him run a flaw through his most striking character, and in doing so destroy the consistency of his most brilliantly conceived book.⁴⁸

But Becky has been designed, not just as an 'ironical contrast' to Amelia, but as a means of illuminating the hypocritical world of the other characters, the majority of whom share her faults but – significantly – seldom her failures. Only old Seldon and Napoleon fail as spectacularly – and fittingly, given their frequent linking with her in the text as the novel's other great speculators. The novel's narrative 'inconsistency' as described and criticised by David Cecil certainly flouts accepted novelistic conventions (balance, contrast, closure, particularly through socially beneficial marriage), but this inconsistency is integral to its design, for like its title it stands in a metonymic relation to the system it is designed to parody. Becky's 'flaw' – her consistent badness – is the necessary thorn in the reader's side, designed to prod to life and maintain an awareness of the king-pin of Thackeray's social critique. We are deliberately prevented from liking her wholeheartedly by the novel's

perverse encouragement to like the characters – Miss Jemima, Rawdon, Little Rawdie – whom she will mis-use, but we are left nonetheless with a lingering sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment at the book's end. After all, Becky is our main protagonist and she did everything *right*, everything she could, everything the other characters do to succeed – and yet she fails. Conventional happy-ending narrative closure is permitted only to Dobbin and Amelia, those worthy but uninteresting characters whom even Thackeray felt deserved each other and whose emotional reunion is represented with a certain sense of tedium, if not of scorn: 'She was murmuring something about – forgive – dear William – dear dear, dearest friend – kiss, kiss, kiss, and so forth – and in fact went on under the cloak in an absurd manner' (683). Becky's thorough badness – the villainy in her heroism or, perhaps more precisely in the context of this satire on the worship of greed, the heroism in her villainy – renders impossible either a conventionally 'good' or a conventionally 'bad' ending for her. The final illustration shows her serving wares at a charity stall with the caption 'Virtue Rewarded. A booth in Vanity Fair'; she performs 'goodness', she is wealthy and calls herself Lady Crawley, but she has no position in society and she is snubbed both by Amelia her oldest friend, and by her own son (688–89). There is no moralising here; Becky is not being punished for being 'bad', because the novel refuses to allow us to celebrate uncomplicatedly the happiness of the characters who are 'good'. The terms are quite simply and effectively destabilized in order to carry out their author's satirical design, which centres firmly on a questioning of the self-protective middle-class conventions which determine their meaning.

The positing of morality and class as performance through the notion of deception is crucial here. *Vanity Fair* famously announces itself as a text about performance, from the moment of the author's introduction, which takes the form of an overture complete with rising curtain and a sketch of the players in clown's costume. It is precisely because she is the daughter of an artist accustomed to selling representation and an opera girl accustomed to performance that Becky is rejected by the Miss Pinkertons, the Lady Janes and the Miss Crawleys; the latter is actually ready to forgive Becky's financially-motivated elopement with Rawdon until she learns her ancestry (168). Becky's flattery and falsehoods are intolerable precisely because they are in danger of professionalizing – and therefore exposing to the world – the performances by which other women secure their futures. Intolerable, too, is her genuine Frenchness. Not the gentle Frenchness of the aristocracy, but the common, dangerous Frenchness which threatens middle England, 'enthroning Napoleon at home linguistically'⁴⁹ as Patricia Marks has expressed it, it both exposes the pretensions of Miss Pinkerton (who does not know the difference (7), and shocks Amelia (who does (10)). Becky is precisely the wrong mixture of performance and genuineness and self-interest. Her presence as failure in the novel draws overt attention to the absurd arbitrariness of the

conventions which determine when the mixture is 'right': 'it was only from her French being so good, that you could know she was not a born woman of fashion' (289).

Not just a Napoleon invading society, Becky is the heart of that society's hypocrisy writ large in the language of commerce. After her greatest defeat, the revelation of her dalliance with Lord Steyne, Becky reflects that 'all her lies and her schemes, all her selfishness and her wiles, all her wit and genius had come to this bankruptcy' (535). The 'bankruptcy' referred to here is at once financial, social and moral. Money and social standing are inseparable as currency, but the characters depend above all upon the sustaining of performance as reality if they are not to go into liquidation. An example of this is Chapter XXXVI, 'How to Live Well on Nothing a Year' in which Becky and Rawdon 'are' wealthy until their performance of wealth is brought to an end by Rawdon's exposure of Becky's performances as both wife and mistress. In this text, 'commerce' depends for its value as much upon a codified belief system as upon hard currency.

Nowhere, though, is the deliberate exposure of the connection between self-interest and performance made more explicit than in the pivotal Waterloo scene that brings together nations and individuals in a mad scramble for profit masquerading as duty. Suvendrini Perera suggests that:

this imperial history recalls not only the triumphs of the glorious past but, equally, imperial defeats: the failed Napoleonic ambitions of the novel's present, as well as the competing imperial aspirations of 1848. The historical stage of *Vanity Fair* encompasses Plassey as well as Waterloo, Clive and the old campaigner Wellington ... as well as various Bonapartes.⁵⁰

The imperial sub-text of the battle of Waterloo certainly pervades this text, not only in the battle's ramifications for the aspirations of the characters (the ruin of Old Sedley, the death of George which enables the return to wealth of his son), but in the battle's constant appearance for contemporary readers coupled with Becky's fluctuating fortunes in her bid for social domination. Waterloo for her is an opportunity to make important social connections and a fast profit, nothing more nor less. The intimate connection between war and profit is made manifest in her. Chapter titles such as Chapter LIV, 'Sunday After the Battle' and Chapter XXVIII, 'In Which Amelia Invades the Low Countries' make the connection between war and social advancement explicit, permeating scenes both before and after the battle proper. Thackeray's initial vignettes continue to emphasise the link, depicting in one instance a clown bowing before Napoleon (Chapter XVIII, 177) and in another the figure of Becky dressed as Napoleon and gazing covetously at England (Chapter LXIV, 637), while the text equates her with Wellington (299). The relationship between Becky's casting as a villain by the illustrations and the other characters, and her casting as hero(ine) by the narrator

de-stabilizes these terms as comprehensively as Thackeray has destabilized notions of 'good' and 'bad'. The battle becomes a symbol for the material hopes of characters who are all both heroes *and* villains. Conventional notions of morality dissipate. National identity blurs. Individuals stand in for nations. The battle is the locus for the performance of imperial self-interest as national pride. Here, at last, is the Fairground itself.

The battle of Waterloo is also, however, implicit in the text as 'history', a site for imaginative re-visiting in times of national crisis. War represents value for money; one ticket provides unlimited re-entry. The incisive commentary on current issues that Thackeray's readers were likely to have recognised in 'Phil Fogarty' is less overt, but it is there nonetheless. In an ironic aside which draws on the anxieties about imperialism and competition which abounded in the 1840s, the presence of the British becomes a boon for Belgian tradesmen: 'It was a blessing for a commerce-loving country to be overrun by such an army of customers; and to have such creditable warriors to feed' (272). Ironic, too, is the reference to the current fashion for the literal re-drawing of this history, and for the displays of military strength which were familiar to all Londoners in the 1840s: 'As our painters are bent on military subjects just now, I throw out this as a good subject for the pencil, to illustrate the principal of an honest English war. All looked as brilliant, and harmless as a Hyde Park review' (273). Wellington and Napoleon are linked in an image of nations united through faith in a hero, and this must surely have resonated for a contemporary audience with Carlylean philosophy and almost a decade of Wellingtonian political posturing: 'Everybody had such a perfect feeling of confidence in the leader (for the resolute faith which the Duke of Wellington had inspired in the whole English nation was as intense, as that more frantic enthusiasm with which at one time the French regarded Napoleon)' (273).

Thus, before the contemporary reader's eye, is the history of 1815 re-written from the 'present' of the 1840s. When Thackeray invites us to 'lay down the History-book, and to speculate upon what *might* have happened in the world, but for the fatal occurrence of what actually did take place (a most puzzling, amusing, ingenious, and profitable kind of meditation)' (277), he locks the reader into an uncomfortable semantic grip between documented 'fact' and 'profitable speculation'. There is the 'History-book' on one side, under pressure from its constant ironic undermining by Thackeray's own current – and unreliable – 'history book' and his mock-authoritative tone. On the other is 'speculation', under pressure from its links with an unstable economy and its flavour in this text of individual self-interest. Nations are reduced to the level of greedy individuals, war rationale is exposed as mythical, Napoleon and Wellington, already linked on p. 273, appear as objects of veneration or hatred, as heroes or villains, only depending on one's point of view:

The august jobbers assembled at Vienna, and carving out the kingdoms of Europe according to their wisdom, had such causes of quarrel among themselves as might have set the armies which had overcome Napoleon to fight against each other, but for the return of the object of unanimous hatred and fear. (277)

Above all, though, the importance of historical narrative is stressed:

Could the Corsican but have waited in his prison until all these parties were by the ears, he might have returned and reigned unmolested. But what would have become of our story and all our friends, then? If all the drops in it were dried up, what would become of the sea? (277)

Here, Thackeray makes explicit the link between historical narrative and the individuals who not only comprise it, but actively make it what it is. The stress is on narrative (the 'sea', that which is fluid, ever-changing), not on fact. At this moment the reader is released from the grip of history book versus speculation by the realisation that they are actually one and the same. Like Becky, they realise that history is conveniently malleable and recyclable and that makes it potentially profitable: 'Who can tell you the real truth of the matter? At all events if Rebecca was not beginning the world: she was beginning it over again' (15).

Waterloo, then, is in this text that which is re-remembered, re-written, and above all re-(and mis-) represented. It is significant that the only character who brags about his deeds during the battle and to whom the word 'Waterloo' is forever attached (573) is Jos Sedley, who spent most of it trying to get away and is in consequence the novel's most unreliable witness as well as its most eloquent authority on the subject. At a deeper level, of course, the novel itself is an unreliable witness. Filled with references to the battle, hinging and relying on it, knowing all about it, it is nonetheless never actually 'there' at all. When Thackeray ducks, the reader must duck also. The action upon which everything turns remains, therefore, absent, off-stage, a mere legend which is open to all sorts of interpretations, as many and varied as his readers. Ultimately, Thackeray makes his readers write the battle for themselves, inviting them to join in a 'speculation' which is both philosophical and also unavoidably commercial.

The collapsing of past and present, hero and coward/villain, fact and fantasy, commerce and war at both a formal and a thematic level leads on one hand to reader confusion over the mixture of genres, as we have seen. But it leads on the other to an enduring impression of the unreliability of historical narrative itself which it is difficult to discard. I believe that it is this unreliability which lies at the heart of the novel. Profoundly aware of the social and political issues of the day, unconvinced by Carlyle's 'Hero-Worship' and surrounded by absurd attempts to re-cast Waterloo as a model of straightforward

morality and patriotism which might purify the present, Thackeray simply put them together. It was – as he very well knew through his work in *Punch* – precisely the juxtaposition of contemporary and Napoleonic references which lent the work both its comedy and its incisive social commentary.

In dubbing Thackeray ‘the first social regenerator of the day’, then, Charlotte Brontë was, perhaps, using contemporary jargon advisedly. She was pointing to Thackeray’s well-timed critique of current practices of remembering the war. She was applauding the fact that he was one of the few writers of his day not only to understand the self-interested nature of middle-class anxiety, but to point out that ‘cannon-balls make wounds, not cicatrices’ and that it has always been so. Though the satire in his novel is subtle, complex and at times confusing, it is, as I have attempted to show, so deeply rooted in contemporary references and so inextricably bound up with war and history as fantasy, that it could be seen to suggest that Britain’s future might more profitably be thought about in some other way than as an eternal ‘pushing forward to fight the battle over again’.

Notes

1 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero*, ed. Peter Shillingsburg (1847–48; London and New York, 1994), p. 177. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

2 Robert Bell, Review of *Vanity Fair*, *Fraser’s Magazine* (September 1848), 321–22.

3 George Henry Lewes, Review of *Vanity Fair*, *Athenaeum* (12 August 1848), 796.

4 Lewes, Review, 794.

5 Abraham Hayward, Review of *Vanity Fair*, the *Edinburgh Review* (January 1848), 53.

6 Hayward, Review, 53.

7 Lewes, Review, 794.

8 Charlotte Brontë, Preface to Second Edition of *Jane Eyre* (1848, London, 1994), p. 6.

9 David Musselwhite, *Partings Welded Together: Politics and Desire in the Nineteenth-century English Novel* (London, 1987), pp. 118, 131.

10 Joan Stevens, ‘*Vanity Fair* and the London Skyline’, *Costerus*, II (1974), 13.

11 *Ibid.*, 20.

12 *Punch*, vol. 13 (Saturday 20 November, 1847), 200.

13 Stevens, ‘*Vanity Fair* and the London Skyline’, 37.

14 John Schad, ‘Reading the Long Way Round: Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 26 (1996), 25–33.

15 John Peck, ‘Middle-Class Life in *Vanity Fair*’, *English: The Journal of the English Association* (Spring 1994), 43:175, 1–16.

16 *Coningsby* on 13 May 1844, *Sybil* exactly a year later on 13 May 1845. See William Makepeace Thackeray, *Contributions to the Morning Chronicle*, Gordon Ray (ed.) (Urbana, 1955), pp. 40–48, 77.

17 W. M. Thackeray, Review of *Coningsby*, the *Morning Chronicle* (13 May 1844), *Contributions to the Morning Chronicle*, Gordon Ray (ed.), p. 42.

18 Robert P. Fletcher, “The Foolishest of Existing Mortals”: Thackeray, “Gurlyle”,

and the Character(s) of Fiction', *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History*, 24:2 (Winter 1995), 113.

- 19 Fletcher, "The Foolishest of Existing Mortals", 115.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 21 Musselwhite, *Partings*, p. 139.
- 22 *The Times* (Saturday 22 May) 1847, p. 4.
- 23 *The Times* (Thursday 16 March) 1815, p. 3.
- 24 Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1844–46; London, 1970), pp. 908–9.
- 25 *The Illustrated London News* (Saturday 5 June) 1847.
- 26 Anonymous, *Notes Taken During a Month's Trip in August, 1841* (Glasgow, 1842), pp. 69–71.
- 27 *Notes Taken During a Month's Trip*, p. 76.
- 28 *Notes Taken During a Month's Trip*, p. 76.
- 29 *Punch*, vol. 13 (Saturday 18 September 1847), 103.
- 30 *Punch*, vol. 13 (Saturday 25 December, 1847), p. 253.
- 31 As John Schad has shown, the Peterloo massacre was 'indelibly written into the memory of Waterloo' due to the involvement of Waterloo veterans, some of whom not only carried out the massacre wearing their Waterloo medals, but were also, famously, both among the demonstration's organisers and, paradoxically, also among its victims ('Reading the Long Way Round', p. 26).
- 32 Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (Harmondsworth, 1968).
- 33 Musselwhite, *Partings*, p. 121.
- 34 W. M. Thackeray, *The Second Funeral of Napoleon* (1841), *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray Vol. XXII* (London, 1885), p. 352.
- 35 Thackeray, *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, p. 367.
- 36 Thackeray, *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, p. 373.
- 37 W. M. Thackeray, 'On Men and Pictures', *Fraser's Magazine* (July 1841), *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray Vol. XXV* (London, 1885), p. 203.
- 38 Ann Monsarrat, *An Uneasy Victorian: Thackeray the Man 1811–63* (London, 1980), p. 33.
- 39 Monsarrat, *An Uneasy Victorian*, p. 57.
- 40 W. M. Thackeray, Letter to John Murray (June 3, 1847), *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray Vol. II, 1841–1851*, collected and edited by Gordon N. Ray (Oxford, 1945), p. 294.
- 41 See Norton edition of *Vanity Fair*, p. 273.
- 42 *Punch*, vol. 13 (Saturday 7 August 1847), p. 57.
- 43 Peck, 'Middle-class Life', p. 6.
- 44 Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalization of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven and London, 1993), p. 27.
- 45 Quoted in Pick, *War Machine*, pp. 21–22.
- 46 Pick, *War Machine*, p. 23.
- 47 Patricia Marks, 'Mon Pauvre Prisonnier: Becky Sharp and the Triumph of Napoleon', *Studies in the Novel*, 28:1 (Spring 1996), pp. 76; 80.
- 48 David Cecil, 'A Criticism of Life', W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Peter L. Shillingsburg, (ed.) (London, 1994), p. 820.
- 49 Marks, 'Mon Pauvre Prisonnier', p. 80.
- 50 Suvendrini Perera, *Reaches of Empire: The English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens* (New York, 1991), p. 101.

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