

**FROM THE PENS OF THE CONTRIVERS:
PERSPECTIVES ON FICTION IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the way that moral and aesthetic concerns about the relationship between fiction and reality are manifested in the work of particular novelists writing at different periods in the nineteenth century. Chapter One examines an early-century subgenre of the novel that features deluded female readers who fail to differentiate between fantasy and reality, and who consequently attempt to live their lives according to foolish precepts learned from novels. The second chapter deals with the realist aesthetic of W. M. Thackeray, focusing on the techniques by which his fiction marks its own relationship both to less realistic fiction and to reality itself. The final chapter discusses Oscar Wilde's critical stance that art is meaningful and intellectually satisfying, while reality and realism are aesthetically worthless; it then goes on to explore how these ideas play out in his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

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I. Introduction

“What is your opinion of novels? An’t they all love and nonsense and the most impossible lies possible.”

“They are fictions, certainly,” said he.

“Surely, Sir,” exclaimed I, “you do not mean to call them fictions?”

“Why, no,” replied he, “not absolute fictions.”

“But,” cried the big lady, “you don’t pretend to call them true.”

“Why, no,” said he, “not absolutely true.”

-Eaton Stannard Barrett, The Heroine

In her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh writes, “*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). By definition, then, metafiction—fiction about fiction—is concerned with the relationship between fiction and reality; any consciousness of fictionality necessarily implies a corresponding awareness of an external reality and of some form of interaction between the two spheres. A number of novels written over the course of the nineteenth century address the fiction-reality relationship, with varying degrees of the self-consciousness required for a work to qualify as “metafiction” in the strict sense, and their treatments of this subject reflect people’s views, both moral and literary-critical, of the nature, aims, and influence of fiction.

The moral angle of the debate surrounding novels as an art form and a social force had to do with the understanding of fiction as a type of untruth that had the potential to corrupt readers’ understandings of reality. Compared to more traditional versified or epic modes of fiction, the novel, with its psychologically complex characters, detailed

descriptions of social interaction, and logical narrative progression, had an unprecedented potential for realism. In the words of an anonymous writer in 1853, “The flimsiest modern novel that ever young lady devoured, or critic sneered at, is infinitely superior in artistic arrangement and skilful continuity of plot to even the most readable of ancient fictions” (“The Progress of Fiction as an Art” 75). Furthermore, novels were proliferating wildly. Writing in 1857, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen remarks that “Upwards of a million of the cheap shilling volumes which ornament railway book-stalls are disposed of annually, and the effect of these publications on the whole mind of the community can hardly be exaggerated” (302). Ten years later, an anonymous critic suggests that “The popular passion for reading and for writing novels is one of the most important intellectual features of the age” (“Novel-Reading” 593), and Richard Holt Hutton concurs, asserting in 1869 that the novel has “attained in England a kind of ‘empire,’ which enables it to overshadow for the time almost every other kind of non-political literature” (649). As a result of the ubiquity of novels and novel reading, it was a common fear, especially early in the century, that impressionable readers would misconstrue the fictions contained in these novels as fact, imbibing fanciful notions that these readers would then attempt to apply to their own lives.

As concerns about the (im)morality of fiction gradually abated over the course of the century, discussion about the aesthetic value of realistic versus imaginative fiction intensified. Debate on the question culminated towards the end of the century in the opposing viewpoints of Henry James and Oscar Wilde, the former arguing that the air of reality is “the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits ... helplessly and submissively depend” (“The Art of Fiction” 33), and the latter having one

of his characters snort derisively that he hates “vulgar realism in literature” and that “The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 142). The only point that James and Wilde agree upon is that questions of art and questions of morality are quite separate affairs and must not be confused.¹

In the following pages, I examine three different approaches that nineteenth-century novelists use to articulate moral and aesthetic arguments about the relationship between truth and fiction. Though attempts to impose distinct chronological divisions upon continuous streams of thought are always somewhat arbitrary, these approaches can be loosely associated with particular texts produced in the early, middle, and late periods of the century, respectively, and my thesis is accordingly divided into three sections.

In the first section, I discuss a particular subgenre of the novel that emerged in the latter part of the eighteenth century and remained common during the early years of the nineteenth. Novels of this type tell the stories of deluded readers, usually female, who confuse fantasy and reality and foolishly attempt to live their lives according to precepts based on fictional conventions. The specific examples that I examine include Tabitha Gilman Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801), Charlotte Dacre’s *The Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (1805), Sarah Green’s *Romance Readers and Romance Writers: A Satirical Novel* (1810), Eaton Stannard Barrett’s *The Heroine. Or Adventures of Cherubina* (1813), and Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818).

The formulaic story of the deluded or “quixotic” reader that is employed by each of these novels inevitably implies a critique of the conventions of romantic and sentimental fiction, ridiculing these conventions as absurdly unrealistic. However, substantial variations from novel to novel in the delivery of the critique suggest different

¹ See James, “The Art of Fiction” (42-43) and Wilde, preface to *Dorian Gray* (vii).

motives behind it. Tenney, Dacre, and Green imbue their works with a spirit of serious didacticism that conveys a genuine concern about the dangers that may result from a reader's failure to mark the distinction between reality and fantasy; their critical gaze falls, not on their own novels, but on the potential dangers of misreading a different—more romantic or morally questionable—kind of fiction. Their concern with the relationship between truth and fiction pertains more to questions of morality than to those of literary artistry, reflecting their belief in the grave consequences facing the reader who confuses the two. The conclusions that are drawn regarding the other texts discussed within the novels are not overtly related to the novels themselves.

Barrett and Austen, on the other hand, approach the deluded-reader plot from a slightly different angle. Their novels are self-conscious—and thus, explicitly metafictional—in a way that the more didactic ones are not, and they clearly imply a relationship between the novels at hand and the ones that are parodied within them. By implicating themselves in their discussion of the truth-fiction dichotomy, and by redeeming their quixotic readers essentially unscathed at the end of the story, *The Heroine* and *Northanger Abbey* present versions of the quixote narrative that are less morally charged than driven by a literary-critical impulse. Though adhering closely to the same standard plot as the didactic works, their thematic effect is closer to the sort of self-interrogation that is typical of the mid-century novels discussed below. With its realistic style, *Northanger Abbey* in particular juxtaposes an alternative literary aesthetic against the gothic romantic mode that it gently parodies.

The second section of my thesis deals with the work of one prominent mid-nineteenth century realist, William Makepeace Thackeray, focusing primarily on the

novels *Vanity Fair* (1848) and *The History of Pendennis* (1850). While the didactic female quixote novels in the first chapter focus their critical gaze on the romances and sentimental novels that lead their heroines astray, Thackeray's writings comment on the degree of realism that is actually attainable in the realistic genre to which they themselves belong. Having rejected the improbable excesses of romantic fiction in favour of what George Levine refers to as "the high Victorian ideal of Truth or Sincerity" (9), Thackeray is faced with the problem of reconciling a plausible narrative with the unavoidable limitations of textuality and the conventions and assumptions already inherent in the novelistic form. He employs two basic strategies in order to emphasize the relative realism of his own work, and both involve a high degree of textual self-consciousness. The first is to point out the places in which his novels deviate from improbable fictional conventions to comply more closely with natural human characteristics or a more believable progression of events. The second is to open a window onto the contrived nature of his own texts and, where they adhere to the dictates of fictional conventions or narrative constraints, to broadcast an awareness of the fact. In this way, he attempts to compensate for a deficiency of plausibility *within* the necessarily artificial narrative structure by acknowledging a truth *about* that narrative structure.

Both of these strategies draw the reader's attention to the divergence between fiction and reality, but, unlike in the novels discussed in chapter one, the purpose of doing so is not to deter the reader from applying fictional standards to her lived reality. On the contrary, it is made clear throughout Thackeray's works that readers approach the real world and the world of fiction with significantly different expectations, based on two separate and inconsistent value systems. One of his primary purposes is to question this

double standard and readers' unthinking acceptance of blatantly unrealistic plot and character conventions. As in the earlier didactic texts, the reader is thus encouraged to recognize a distinction between reality and fictional conventions; this time, however, the author's goal is not to instill improved moral direction, but to spark the development of more critical reading habits and an exacting realist aesthetic standard.

The novels discussed in the first two sections of this thesis treat the subject of fiction and reality as though there is a clear distinction between the two; they represent reality as an entity that exists as an absolute unto itself, in unequivocal opposition to the artifice contained in novels. They also valorize reality as the standard by which fiction should be measured, in both moral and aesthetic terms. In the final section, however, I discuss a third approach to understanding the relationship between fiction and reality that effectively destabilizes the hitherto accepted fiction-reality dichotomy, and that furthermore values fiction as being more meaningful than reality. This approach corresponds most closely to what some modern critics understand by the term "metafiction," in that it explores "the possible fictionality of the world outside the fictional text" (Waugh 2).

In the theories and fiction of Oscar Wilde, which provide the focus for the third chapter, the traditional understanding of fiction as an imperfect reflection of reality is completely turned on its head. In contrast to works that assert, firstly, that truth and fiction are distinct entities and, secondly, that the value of fiction is proportionate to the degree of its resemblance to reality, Wilde's critical writings such as "The Decay of Lying" (1891) and "The Critic as Artist" (1891) famously suggest that life should seek to imitate art. Fiction is thus acknowledged to be and valorized as the guiding principle of

reality, rather than vice versa—a stance that represents a complete about-face from the early-century quixote novels' fervent backlash against the same idea. Many of the arguments found in Wilde's critical writings also surface in his gothic-fantastic novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and their treatment in this context appears, perplexingly, to both contradict and corroborate Wilde's accepted views on the nature of truth and fiction.

II. Fiction and the Female Quixote

What stuff are you reading here? Why you might as well read Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales, or a Defence of Witchcraft.

-Sarah Green, Romance Readers and Romance Writers

The "quixote novel" of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is a particular manifestation of novelistic concern with the relationship between reality and fiction, anchoring both plot and theme in the imagined consequences of a person's absurd and literal confusion between fact and fantasy. Beginning in 1752 with Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* and concluding with Sarah Green's *Scotch Novel Reading* in 1824, there was an explosion of novels that focused on the miseducation of the central character, almost always a young girl, through her overly credulous reading of romances or sentimental novels. Some instances of the genre employ the trope of the deluded female reader in order to critique the absurd excesses of romance from a primarily aesthetic standpoint, but many others embody a sincere warning against mistaking romantic fiction for a roadmap to the ways of the world.

While the female quixote genre is fiction's most explicit and sustained contribution to the discussion about the potential danger to readers of confusing fact and fantasy, social concerns about the strong influence and possible negative effects of reading fiction, along with the conviction that women are particularly susceptible to such effects, were common throughout the nineteenth century. It is evident that novels were one of the most readily accessible (and accessed) sources of information during this period, and the consequent assumption that they should exert some influence over their

readers is only natural. One anonymous writer in 1867 compares the effects of novel reading to the effects of any kind of enveloping education, implying that the degree of one's exposure to a source of information has more bearing on its capacity to influence than does its status as a fictional or non-fictional work. According to this critic, "Novel-reading, like a classical or scientific education, must have some definite effect upon the age that imbues itself in it.... The whole imagination of younger men and women is every day immersed in a vapour-bath of either a useless or useful kind, and it is idle to suppose that nothing on earth will come of it, either for good or evil" ("Novel-Reading" 593). The relatively realistic style of the novel, as compared to its forerunners in the realm of fiction, was also a major factor in its perception as an influential genre. With its psychologically complex characters, detailed descriptions of social interaction, and logical narrative progression, the novel's brand of verbal photography gives earlier versified and epic modes of fiction the air of vague, impressionist painting.

The belief that readers would accept information gleaned from fiction as a standard by which to govern their own conduct hinges on two assumptions: firstly, that people pattern their own beliefs and behaviour after the beliefs and behaviour that they observe in others, and secondly, that people respond similarly to events and characters whether they be real or fictional. Both of these convictions are held as a given by various critics writing at different points in the nineteenth century. Hugh Murray, for instance, asserts in 1805 that "The slightest observation may be sufficient to convince us, that man is, in many respects, an imitative being. His character, undoubtedly, is very much formed after that of those with whom he becomes acquainted, either by reading, or by the intercourse of life" (Murray 18). In Vernon Lee's much later fictional and critical text "A

Dialogue on Novels" (1885), the character of Baldwin, whose role as the central literary philosopher of the piece allows us to identify his beliefs as those of the author, expounds on the notion that, once consigned to memory, impressions derived from reading are virtually indistinguishable from those formed in real life. He argues that "a good third of what we take to be instinctive knowledge, or knowledge vaguely acquired from personal experience, is really obtained from the novels which we or our friends have read" (Lee 390). Furthermore, Lee's Baldwin suggests that the novel is capable not only of strengthening and reinscribing human tendencies as they already exist in real life, but also of introducing new tendencies. The novel, he argues, "has developed in us ... a number and variety of moral notes which did not exist in the gamut of our fathers" (389); he goes on to say that "the modern human being has been largely fashioned, in all his more delicate peculiarities, by those who have written about him; and most of all, therefore, by the novelist" (390).

Many critics throughout the century also predicated their belief in the novel's influence on the fact that it is a truly democratic form of literature, circulated among people of all classes, ages, and levels of education. Anthony Trollope draws attention to the ubiquity of novel reading among all echelons of society when he writes in 1870 that "We have become a novel-reading people. Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maid" ("On English Prose Fiction" 108). Concern about the novel's accessibility to undiscerning consumers of information is evident in the way that critics tend to qualify their assertions about the novel's influence over its readers by suggesting that the major novel-reading demographic consists of individuals who are young, inexperienced, uneducated, female, or otherwise intellectually

deficient, and therefore more susceptible to believing everything they read. Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, for example, claims in an 1857 article that, unlike men of the world, “the poor and uneducated take such words in their natural and undiluted strength” (308).

Particularly in the early part of the century, women are repeatedly identified as one of the groups whose grasp of reality is especially vulnerable to assault by foolish notions derived from reading fiction. *Practical Education*, an education manual produced in 1798 by Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, warns:

With respect to sentimental stories, and books of mere entertainment, we must remark, that they should be sparingly used, especially in the education of girls... We know, from common experience, the effects which are produced upon the female mind by immoderate novel-reading. To those who acquire this taste every object becomes disgusting which is not in an attitude for poetic painting; a species of moral picturesque is sought for in every scene of life, and this is not always compatible with sound sense, or with simple reality.... The difference between reality and fiction is so great, that those who copy from any thing but nature are continually disposed to make mistakes in their conduct, which appear ludicrous to the impartial spectator. (332-33)

The fact that these comments read like a roadmap to the generic female quixote narrative attests to the strong relationship that existed between this literary paradigm and genuine social concerns about women’s reading.

Ironically, it could be argued that the repetition of the trope of the female quixote in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century may have contributed to the construction of the figure of the deluded female reader in the popular understanding—effectively transforming a fantastic “type” into a generally acknowledged truth about readers, and female readers in particular. This idea is supported by twentieth-century critic Walter J. Ong’s observation that an author of fiction will typically “fictionalize in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were

fictionalizing in their imaginations audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers, and so on back to the dawn of written narrative” (11). Since, as John Tinnon Taylor observes, “Few young women have ever been beset by such extravagant fancies as were generously ascribed to the girls who patronized the eighteenth-century circulating libraries” (69), it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the anxiety-inducing “specter of the novel-reading automaton” (Warner 142) frequently evoked in non-fictional tracts by critics and moralists may have gained some credibility thanks to the repetitive incarnation of the female quixote in fictional texts. In other words, the widely accepted view of real female readers as unable to distinguish between fiction and reality may owe something to the apparent mutual corroboration offered by numerous copies of a fictional quixotic prototype.

The purpose of the literary criticism that occurs in the didactic female quixote novel is outward-looking: it questions the relationship to reality of fiction *other* than the text at hand. Indeed, the apparent lack of textual self-consciousness in some of these novels is striking, considering that their central precept is the necessity to recognize the fictionality of fiction. Self-interrogation is not on their agenda, however; these works seek specifically to convince the reader that other types of fiction—variously, romances,²

² A number of nineteenth-century writers offer definitions of the distinction between the novel and the romance; in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne famously asserts that, “When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” (xi). Similarly, an anonymous 1841 review in *The Athenaeum* explains that “the Novel, while it strives to arrest our attention by exciting our sympathy and surprise, appeals to the observant and reasoning faculties also;—the Romance, on the contrary, addresses itself to the imagination alone, and, most often, requires for its full enjoyment an absolute torpor of both observation and reason” (Rev. of *Charles Chesterfield; or, the Adventurers of a Youth of Genius* 369). For her part, Jane Austen, novelist extraordinaire, writes in an 1816

sentimental novels, or the scandalous writings of free-thinking novelists—are unrealistic, and that it is potentially harmful to perceive them as sources of information about the world. In the following section, I will examine the tactics employed to this end in Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801), Charlotte Dacre's *The Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (1805), and Sarah Green's *Romance Readers and Romance Writers: A Satirical Novel* (1810).

These “didactic female quixote novels,” as I have labelled them for the purposes of this discussion, are characterized by their relatively ungentle treatment of the quixotic heroine, who inevitably recognizes the error of her ways when it is already too late to escape their tragic consequences. *Female Quixotism* has been referred to as the first American burlesque novel (Shepperson 114), and it demonstrates that the popularity of the female quixote theme was not restricted to Britain alone. Tenney's book tells the story of Dorcas Sheldon, a wealthy girl of middling attractions whose compulsive reading of sentimental novels leads her to form exalted and unrealizable ideas about love. Dorcas, who romantically re-christens herself “Dorcasina,” foolishly rejects two eminently suitable suitors whose courtship strategies are too mundane for her taste. Throughout the story, she is repeatedly rescued from the mocking advances of fortune-hunters, only to end up old, ugly, and alone. Though the tone of Tenney's writing is humorous, the barbed jokes are almost always made at Dorcasina's expense; other characters in the novel respond to her with a mixture of ridicule and disgust—or contempt-tinged pity at best—and the reader is encouraged to do the same.

letter to James Stanier Clarke: “I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter” (384).

In contrast to *Female Quixotism* and the other novels discussed in this chapter, *The Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* is utterly humourless in its approach to punishing its heroine for her ready acceptance of precepts contained in ill-chosen fiction. As the title suggests, the narrative is conveyed in the form of a confessional letter written by the heroine, Cazire, now a nun in the convent of St. Omer. The letter is addressed to her bastard son. The epistolary frame, in which Cazire immediately begins to lament the foolish course that has brought affairs to their present miserable state, prepares the reader from the outset to perceive Cazire's unwise reading as a nefarious force in her life. Despite the pleas of her valiant suitor, St. Elmer, Cazire indulges her insatiable appetite for romances and, even more damagingly, for novels that question absolute moral truths and advocate the consummation of love outside the bounds of marriage. This course of reading leads to her seduction by the unscrupulous free-thinker, Lindorf. Following her seduction, Cazire attempts to resist the passions that have been planted in her mind; she marries the forgiving St. Elmer but then allows herself to be seduced by another villain, Fribourg, who subsequently kills St. Elmer in a duel before committing suicide.

Confessions is an example of a book that appears to lack any awareness that it subscribes to some of the very conventions that it writes against, and this point is underscored by later criticism of Dacre's own fiction (which she wrote under the *nom de plume* "Rosa Matilda"). An anonymous critic in 1870 writes that "If it has been [a girl's] particular misfortune to have read only one or two of the Rosa-Matilda novels, she may very probably have a notion that the proper thing for her lover to do, in proposing to her, is to go down on his knees, place his hand on his heart, and swear ridiculous vows" ("The Uses of Fiction" 7). Anthony Trollope, demonstrating that he, at least, has not fallen

victim to the “dangerous, though charming power” (*Confessions* 62) that Dacre unselfconsciously attributes to overly romantic fiction, likewise makes reference to “the Rosa Matilda school of fiction, than which the desire to have something to read has produced nothing in literature more vapid or more mean” (“Novel-Reading” 118).

Sarah Green, the last of the didactic quixote novelists whom we will examine, has been described by Archibald Shepperson as “by far the most vindictive of the anti-liberal novelists” (127). Her *Romance Readers and Romance Writers* is in some ways a cross between Tenney’s and Dacre’s works: it subjects its romance-reading heroine, Margaret (who prefers to be known as Margaritta), to the same kind of mockery that is found in *Female Quixotism*, while leading her along the path to corruption and seduction that is followed by Cazire in *Confessions*. This novel also presents us with a second reader, the aristocratic Isabella, whose preferred destructive reading material consists of unprincipled French and German works. Both girls meet with similar unfortunate ends, clearly underscoring Green’s point about the inevitability of the outcome that she associates with unwise reading. Margaret’s romantic notions lead her to blunder her way through a series of blackly comic misadventures until, having been introduced to Isabella’s brand of literary poison, she ultimately becomes pregnant by a young nobleman who seduces and abandons her largely out of contempt for her romance-induced foolishness. Isabella, too, ends up seduced and abandoned. Throughout the novel, Margaret is constantly compared to her sister, Mary, whose general superiority is carefully associated with her own laudable reading habits.

Female quixote novels are often uninventive in selecting specific delusions to inflict on their respective heroines, and the same types of incidents and misapprehensions

are repeated across many examples of the genre. Common follies include the heroine's belief that the truth of her birth has been concealed from her; her mistaking of a lowborn servant, often Irish, for a nobleman in disguise; and her exploration of some mysterious (or absurdly mundane) edifice in the hopes of uncovering its dark, Gothic, and—to the knowing reader—palpably nonexistent secrets. *Female Quixotism* and *Romance Readers* are rife with such conventions; however, it is not my purpose to enumerate all the instances of delusional behaviour that occur in the plots of these particular novels. Rather, I intend to examine the broader thematic elements that relate more literally to the lessons that the authors of these books intend for their readers to take away with them, and to the opinions of moralists and literary critics of the day. These books are addressed to the female quixote presumed to lurk in the heart of every young girl. Their direct concern is not that novel readers routinely fancy themselves to be displaced heiresses with outrageously embellished names, but that their reading may cause them to lose sight of the everyday truths that society endorses.

The most important of these truths, because of their centrality to women's lives, are those pertaining to love, marriage, and the preservation of virtue. Throughout the nineteenth century, perhaps the most commonly observed and criticized feature of fiction is its singular preoccupation with love. On the ubiquity of the subject, an 1856 article entitled "On the Treatment of Love in Novels" comments that "It is the only ingredient that enters into every dish. In the composition of the novel it answers to the garlic of the Spanish *cuisine*—whatever else may vary the flavour, love is indispensable" (269). Writing in 1870, Anthony Trollope offers a similar assessment of the composition of novels, arguing that "love stories are their mainstay and the staff of their existence. They

not only contain love stories, but they are written for the sake of the love stories. They have other attractions, and deal with every phase of life; but the other attractions hang round and depend on the love story as the planets depend upon the sun” (“On English Prose Fiction” 108). In a later article, Trollope recognizes the impact that the novel’s dealings with love had on its reception as a genre, saying, “No doubt that fear which did exist as to novels came from the idea that this matter of love would be treated in an inflammatory and unwholesome manner” (“Novel Reading” 128). This assertion is supported by much evidence from the earlier period to which he alludes.

Defending the novel in 1802, for example, James Sands bewails the way that novelists “are charged with representing Love as uncontrollable, omnipotent, and everlasting, to the incalculable detriment of society” (xviii). The writers who make the accusations to which Sands is alluding are emphatic in their explanations of why such depictions of love are so detrimental, and their arguments take two general forms. The more common of these contentions is that reading about love endangers women’s virtue by making them susceptible to seduction. In her 1798 education manual, *The Boarding School*, Hannah Webster Foster accordingly writes, “Novels are the favourite, and the most dangerous kind of reading, now adopted by the generality of young ladies. I say dangerous, because the influence, which, with very few exceptions, they must have on the passions of youth, bears an unfavourable aspect on their purity and virtue” (280). Hannah More’s *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* similarly claims that novels “take off wholesome restraints, diminish sober mindedness, impair the general powers of resistance, and at best feed habits of improper indulgence, and nourish

a vain and visionary indolence, which lays the mind open to error and the heart to seduction” (216).

The second argument against the suitability of love stories for young, female readers is that such stories foster false expectations of the world and lead girls to feel dissatisfied with their actual lots in life. Anna Laetitia Aiken Barbauld writes in 1810:

Love is a passion particularly exaggerated in novels. It forms the chief interest of, by far, the greater part of them. In order to increase this interest, a false idea is given of the importance of the passion. It occupies the serious hours of life; events all hinge upon it; every thing gives way to its influence, and no length of time wears it out. When a young lady, having imbibed these notions, comes into the world, she finds that this formidable passion acts a very subordinate part on the grand theatre of the world.... and is often little consulted even in choosing a partner for life. (182-83)

Florence Nightingale offers a complete and unusual reversal of this idea in her mid-century tirade against the injustice of women’s position in society, *Cassandra*. She suggests that the importance attributed to passionate love in fiction is not spurious, but utterly in keeping with the natural leanings of the human spirit. The burden of absurdity, she argues, lies rather in the system by which real-world marriages are typically contracted:

...[I]n a few rare, very rare, cases, such as circumstances, always provided in novels, but seldom to be met with in real life, present—whether the accident of parents’ neglect, or of parents’ unusual skill and wisdom, or of having no parents at all, which is generally the case in novels—or marrying out of the person’s rank of life, by which the usual restraints are removed, and there is room and play left for attraction—or extraordinary events, isolation, misfortunes, which many wish for, even though their imaginations be not tainted by romance-reading; such alternatives as these give food and space for the development of character and mutual sympathies. (1596)

Nightingale's pointed assertion that a person's imagination need not be "tainted by romance-reading" in order to desire the improbable events typical in novels implies that fictional love plots reflect just and innate female longings that are unnaturally suppressed by society. She thus rebuts the charge that novels are blameable for inspiring women with dreams of impossible events, placing the guilt instead with the tyrannical social system that has senselessly reduced the true love match to an almost entirely fictional phenomenon. The didactic quixote novels, however, side resoundingly with the conservative critics and moralists on this issue. As indicated in the brief synopses above, all three of the novels in question identify the truly destructive aspects of novel reading with the way that novels depict love.

Throughout most of British history, the majority of marriages—particularly among the middle and upper classes—were based chiefly on pragmatic factors, with virtually no importance given to love or personal concerns. According to Lawrence Stone, however, the eighteenth century brought an important shift "from giving priority to economic and social considerations to giving equal or more weight to solidly based and well-tryed mutual affection," leading to the new standard of the companionate marriage (273). Wendy Jones defines companionate love as being in many ways akin to friendship, involving mutual esteem and affection and lacking the element of sexual desire (27). Later in the eighteenth century, the ideal of companionate love gave way in turn to that of sentimental love: a synthesis of romantic and companionate love in which "The reasonable criteria of companionate love ... inspire the passionate affect of romantic or physical love" (Jones 28). Thus, the standard view was that men should choose their brides "for such enduring companionate qualities as chastity, sobriety,

industry, frugality, cleanliness, knowledge of domestic affairs, good temper and beauty—in that order” (Stone 287). Jones argues that socio-economic factors contributed greatly to the rise of this brand of marriage for love, which was a useful tool for justifying the intermingling of newly moneyed classes with old, titled families. As she puts it, “the purely utilitarian marriage of wealth and status was unacceptable, at least in theory, to élites of both groups. Love emerged as the only acceptable motive for marriages across class boundaries” (19-20).

Despite this shift, society continued to frown upon purely romantic and impractical love, along with its attendant specter of lust, as a basis for marriage. Though it had long been familiar as a prominent literary phenomenon, romantic love and its potentially anarchic consequences simply had no place in the real world. While a degree of rationally motivated, sentimental love was useful in facilitating the business of awkward interclass marriages, the rampant passions of lust and romantic love could have the patently undesirable result of eliminating class concerns altogether as a criterion for marriage (Jones 23). Lawrence Stone describes the characteristics of this dangerous, spontaneous, and anti-rational form of love as follows:

The key elements of the romantic love complex are the following: the notion that there is only one person in the world with whom one can fully unite at all levels; the personality of that person is so idealized that the normal faults and follies of human nature disappear from view; love is often like a thunderbolt and strikes at first sight; love is the most important thing in the world, to which all other considerations, particularly material ones, should be sacrificed; and lastly, the giving of full rein to personal emotions is admirable, no matter how exaggerated and absurd the resulting conduct may appear to others. (282)

Obviously, an emotional ideal that places so much emphasis on individualism and personal desires was not conducive to the social and economic interests of families or

classes, and this was ample reason to keep romantic love confined to the realm of fiction. It is this motive that largely informs the didactic strategy of the female quixote novels.

The chief danger attributed to the fiction of romantic love—and, by extension, to the writings that propagate the notion—is its power to render young women susceptible to seduction. Indeed, Lawrence Stone reports that “Both Dr. Johnson and Mary Wollstonecraft regarded [lust and romantic love] as the same thing, romantic love being no more than a purely artificial emotion invented by novelists and adopted by men as a cover for sexual desire” (284). In Dacre’s *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* and Green’s *Romance Readers and Romance Writers*, the romantic notions imbibed by the heroines serve just this purpose, bringing them to eventual ruin; in Tenney’s *Female Quixotism*, the same sordid fate is averted only through the repeated intercession of Dorcasina’s friends and family.

Towards the beginning of *Female Quixotism*, Tenney firmly establishes her position on the subject of romantic love when she has her narrator refer to “the airy delusions and visionary dreams of love and raptures, darts, fire and flames, with which the indiscreet writers of that fascinating kind of books, denominated Novels, fill the heads of artless young girls, to their great injury, and sometimes to their utter ruin” (4-5). This passage emphatically conveys three points: that romantic love is a strictly fantastic phenomenon, consisting merely of “airy delusions” and “visionary dreams”; that novels are unquestionably at fault for unleashing this force on the imaginations of innocent young women; and that its effects are at best injurious and at worst utterly ruinous. Tenney thus paraphrases the view accepted among her contemporary critics and moralists

and introduces the opposition between truth and fiction that underpins the rest of the narrative.

At one point, Dorcasina explicitly outlines the tenets of her novel-inspired philosophy of love, declaring, “love must be sudden, ardent, violent, and mutual. Matches made upon this foundation can alone be productive of lasting felicity” (204). Elsewhere, she pledges that she will never “renounce my darling, my favourite ideas of everlasting love and eternal constancy, upon which I build all my hopes of worldly happiness,” saying that she “could almost as easily renounce my religion” (77). All of these statements echo Stone’s description, quoted above, of the typical characteristics of romantic love. Throughout *Female Quixotism*, love acts as the guiding principle and consuming obsession of Dorcasina’s existence—a false idol, as her own allusion to religion suggests. She is, in effect, in love with love itself. Her assertions about the nature of love and her expectations about the role it will play in her happiness are infused with a spirit of dramatic irony that is designed to inspire the reader with a cynical attitude towards the romantic ideal espoused by the ridiculous Dorcasina.

Dorcasina’s single-minded preoccupation with love makes her vulnerable to the predatory advances of several unscrupulous men. As the heiress to a considerable fortune, she presents an alluring target for suitors willing to take advantage of her foolish predilections, despite being “a middling kind of person” (5) in the way of physical appeal. In one instance, a lower-class Irishman named Patrick O’Connor determines to act out Dorcasina’s absurd courtship fantasies in order to gain her heart and her money. Tenney thus addresses the anxiety that the precepts of romantic love can lead to inappropriate alliances between classes. Though O’Connor’s plot, and those of

Dorcasina's other false suitors, are foiled through the agency of her friends, the idea that romantic delusion provides a vehicle for exploitation is constantly present throughout the novel.

Tenney also provides a counterpoint to Dorcasina's treasured ideal of love by endorsing more pragmatic and realistic motives for marriage. At the beginning of the novel, Dorcasina and her father are visited by Lysander, a respectable and most eligible family friend. Dorcasina, however, is disappointed when, contrary to the process described in her treasured novels, Lysander does not fall instantly in love with her. The narrator explains, "Her mind being so warped by the false and romantic ideas of love, which she had imbibed from her favourite authors, she never considered that the purest and most lasting affection is founded upon esteem and the amiable qualities of the mind, rather than upon transitory personal attractions" (11). The use of the words "affection," "esteem," and "amiable" makes it clear that Tenney is alluding to the model of companionate love. Lysander does eventually come to admire Dorcasina, but she is sorely disappointed by the subdued and rational manner of his courtship. When the match between them fails as a consequence of her "whimsical and romantic" (13) response to his advances, Lysander feels relieved to have escaped a "connexion with a woman whose ideas of matrimonial happiness were too exalted ever to be realized" (14). This comment evokes the critical and moralistic commonplace, alluded to earlier, that novel-inspired notions of love result in disappointment with the way that marriages are transacted in the real world. Much later in the novel, when Dorcasina is forty-five years old, she is once again courted by a legitimate suitor. Again, she is disgusted by the businesslike tone of

his suit, and this time her rejection of the safe, mundane marriage is made to seem even more contemptible due to her advanced age and increasing physical grotesqueness.

When Dorcasina is finally cured of her romantic delusions, she is old, physically repulsive, and alone in the world. The novel ends with her own words, set out in a letter to a distant friend, which underscore the illusory character of the romantic ideal that has led her to this final, tragic state. She sums up her experience by saying, “this imprudent indulgence has been the cause of my ruin. I now find that I have passed my life in a dream, or rather a delirium; and have grown grey in chasing a shadow, which has always been fleeing from me, in pursuit of an imaginary happiness, which, in this life, can never be realized” (323). The use of terms such as “dream,” “delirium,” “shadow,” and “imaginary” provides a redundancy of images associated with insubstantiality, lest the progress of the preceding narrative has left the reader with any doubt that the romantic vision of love is, in fact, nonexistent. Finally, in order to firmly anchor the blame for inspiring this false and destructive vision, Dorcasina provides her friend with advice to follow should she ever have daughters:

Withhold from their eye the pernicious volumes, which, while they convey false ideas of life, and inspire illusory expectations, will tend to keep them ignorant of every thing really worth knowing; and which, if they do not eventually render them miserable, may at least prevent their becoming respectable. Suffer not their imaginations to be filled with ideas of happiness, particularly in the connubial state, which can never be realized. Describe life to them as it really is, and as you have yourself found it, chequered with good and evil. (325)

The novel thus ends with an explicit warning that misery and a loss of respectability are the likely result of confusing the “chequered” truth of the world with the cheerful falsehoods found in those “pernicious volumes,” novels.

While Tenney focuses on the idea that novel reading can lead to elevated expectations of—and, ultimately, pathological disappointment with—the state of love and courtship in the real world, *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* and *Romance Readers and Romance Writers* present an even bleaker vision. In *Female Quixotism*, Dorcasina ends up miserable, but with her virtue uncompromised; Cazire in *Confessions* and Margaritta and Isabella in *Romance Readers* are not so fortunate. Though Dacre and Green touch on the notion that reading inspires unrealizable ideals, the peril that they emphasize most strongly is the one alluded to by such moralists as Hannah Forster Webster and Hannah More: that of seduction. According to both Dacre and Green, there are varying degrees of danger inherent in different kinds of reading. Romances and sentimental novels, while fostering indolence, a surfeit of imagination, and foolish longings for love, also uphold certain moral standards; the type of passion that they advocate is impractical and unrealistic, but it is not untrammelled lust. The novels written by French and German free-thinkers, on the other hand, endorse free love and extramarital relationships, threatening to corrupt the sexual mores of young women by introducing them to “false” notions about the legitimacy of such unconventional unions. In these cases, the truth-fiction distinction that the quixote novels seek to emphasize rests more in the realm of morality than that of practicality; Dacre and Green accuse the free-thinking novelists of substituting licentious lies for the real world’s absolute moral truths about the sanctity of marriage.

Late in Dacre’s *Confessions*, St. Elmer, who is the intensely admirable husband of the heroine, Cazire, reflects on his earlier prediction of the possible fates that her reading habits might bring upon her, saying, “I perceived with acute regret that, led away by a

wild and fallacious enthusiasm, you would become unfit for the uniformity of wretched existence, and sink into misery and gloom, or fatally change the scene by wandering in the paths of error” (3.28). His assessment corresponds neatly with the two major streams of concern about the effects of novel reading during this period—that a fiction-inflamed imagination can only be miserable among the mundane truths of existence, and that such an imagination may be easily seduced into wandering the paths of error—as well as with the two types of novel that have led Cazire to these very ends.

The distinctions between bad reading material and worse reading material, along with their respective dangers, are clearly defined throughout *Confessions*. The first, and less serious, threat is that posed to the imagination of the heroine, Cazire, by romances. Writing her confessions at the end of her sordid, novel-reading career, Cazire laments, “my imagination wander[ed] uncontrolled in the fairy regions of fiction and romance, my heart seduced by its resistless power, while my reason seemed like a distressed pilot in a storm, essaying in vain to rule the boisterous gales which threatened its destruction” (1.67). Cazire’s inability to bring her reason to bear on the fantastic material that she reads thus results in her internalization of foolishly romantic ideas, and her view of the world is skewed by an excess of imagination. This passage reflects the common nineteenth-century assumption that women were virtually incapable of reading critically, and that their feeble rational powers were easily overcome by any fanciful assertion.

As in *Female Quixotism*, the model of companionate love is invoked and compared to the type of amorous transports experienced by romantic heroines. Cazire lists the forms of devotion that her reading has led her to desire of a suitor, contrasting them to the far more subdued emotions usually attendant on a companionate attachment:

...[H]is eyes, his actions must declare his love, his idolatry; he must adore me with enthusiasm, shun, detest those whom I hated, admire, esteem those I loved, think no sacrifice too great for me, not his life if mine could be preserved, and despite even that if I existed no longer; know no happiness but in my society, lament to quit and joy in returning to it, watch over my couch in sickness, and droop when I grieved, listen with transport to my slightest wishes, let nor *ennui* nor satiety blast our peace, but look on me as his world, his treasure, and his life. Never, never could I meet a being who would love me thus; none other could possess my love; better then never taste the dangerous stream but in its highest, purest state, or inevitable wretchedness would be our mutual lot; for I disdain the thought of a "luke-warm attachment," a "sincere regard!" (1.118)

Interestingly, this passage suggests that Cazire is perfectly aware that her romantic demands are unrealistic, but that she is unable to moderate her desires despite her recognition of their impossibility. Compared to the acknowledged fiction of the romantic ideal, the types of "attachment" or "sincere regard" cited as desirable foundations for marriage strike her as hollow. Dacre thus reinforces the idea that women's rational faculties are ineffectual by implying that, once unattainable visions of love are introduced into the female brain, even the conscious recognition of their impossibility is not sufficient to displace them. The implication is that, after being exposed to such compelling fancies, a girl is irreversibly condemned to a lifetime of longing and disappointment.

Ironically, while this dissatisfaction allegedly results from scenes of romantic ecstasy insinuating themselves into the imagination, Dacre suggests that the greater threat, that of seduction, is carried out through appeals to the faculty of reason:

Some of the books I perused were more calculated than others to corrupt the understanding; these were most dangerous; they tolerated the free sentiments they infused, and spoke to the susceptible heart in a language wholly irresistible; love was painted happy only when *unfettered*; I felt, as I became enslaved with the brilliancy of the language and speciousness of the arguments, that they *must* be

just: thus did my sentiments become more dangerous than ever, for they assumed the garb of reason. (1.71)

While romances play on the feminine excess of imagination, the novels espousing philosophies of free love are specifically calculated “to corrupt the understanding” by assuming “the garb of reason” and taking explicit advantage of women’s scant capacity for logic. Thus, unlike in the case of her purely romantic ideas, Cazire does not even perceive the falseness of the notions that she imbibes from the more immoral publications. Ultimately, this gives them the power to displace the romantic ideal, the two attitudes towards love being essentially antithetical. Though romances advocate passionate love and often culminate in elopements, their attitude towards extramarital relations is distinctly prudish.

The relative severity of the threat posed by each sort of literature is made clear by the fact that the villains of *Confessions*, free-thinkers who encourage Cazire in her reading of novels with indecent leanings, warn her against the imaginative excesses of romance. The first, named Fribourg, writes in a letter:

...[R]emember, Cazire, that real life, and life depicted in romance, are widely different; through all its variations, the former seldom concludes happily; the latter is twisted from the breast of probability; events are made subservient, and the false imagery ends in a delusive peace; romances corrupt the imagination, and fill it with visions of chaotic inconsistencies. (1.221)

These could pass for the words of a strict moralist, rather than those of a confirmed libertine who ultimately seduces Cazire and kills her saintly husband in a duel. Lindorf, the father of her bastard child, also refers contemptuously to sentimental love as “the romantic dream of novel reading misses, the wild effervescence of an enthusiastic brain”

(2.43). The laudable pragmatism that his assessment seems to espouse when taken out of context is undermined by the fact that Lindorf is not advocating the alternative of companionate love, but rather of another sort of love entirely.

In *Romance Readers and Romance Writers*, the difference between romances and those works of a more insidious and corrupting tendency is articulated still more explicitly. Initially, the taste of the anti-heroine, Margaret, runs strictly to romance novels, and Green offers the standard criticisms about the effects of these works on the imagination. Margaret's infinitely more admirable sister, Mary, comments that she does not get much use out of their subscription to the circulating library because "Margaret sends for such incredible, such marvellous kind of works, that I shut the books with disgust, and seldom have patience to read them through" (1.10). Unlike Margaret, Mary is capable of discerning the difference between reality and the fantastic worlds of romance, and she therefore has no interest in reading about the latter. This suggests that only individuals who *cannot* make this important distinction, and who are therefore at risk of being seriously misguided by their reading, enjoy romances. As a young lady of altogether laudable habits, Mary herself is far better amused by reading the books of her "small and elegant library, from the best approved writers of female improvement" (1.12)—from the very authors, that is to say, who pen the conduct manuals proscribing Margaret's brand of reading.

In her romance-reading phase, Margaret is depicted as an even more than usually stupid and contemptible quixote figure, obsessed with her reading and subject to ridiculous misconceptions of the real world. However, it is noted several times that her father, a man of "solid sense, untainted religion, virtue, and honesty" (1.8) never forbids

her to read romances, because their morals are “irreproachable and strict in the extreme” (2.14). Green characterizes romances as well-intentioned, if absurdly improbable, works whose undesirable spurring of the imagination might ultimately be outgrown. These ideas are illustrated by the following passage, which also intimates Margaret’s father’s belief that her fascination with romances may actually help to stave off more nefarious types of literary influence:

...[T]o entirely prohibit those kind of books (the morals of which, however absurd their incidents and events, were unexceptionable) would be only to teach the gaining them by stealth; and then, works of a more dangerous tendency might corrupt the heart and undermine the principles of his girl: while the works she now perused, only ensnared the imagination for a time; and as her years increased, he hoped she would be able to see the folly of giving credit to them, and only draw from them those sentiments and feelings which they were intended by their authors to inspire;—an admiration of their ingenuity, and the grandeur and sublimity of their language; with an abhorrence of vice, and a sincere love and veneration for virtue. (1.46)

Green thus represents romances as combining an unfortunate lack of realism with genuinely admirable morals—such as may help to undermine any threat to Dorcasina’s virtue in *Female Quixotism*—whereas the “works of a more dangerous tendency” are, as in *Confessions*, accused of conveying false morals to susceptible minds by clothing them in a realistic guise.

The latter vessels of corruption are put into Margaret’s hands through the agency of the second delinquent reader in the text, the aristocratic Lady Isabella:

Like Margaritta, she was very fond of modern publications, but her studies were of a different kind, and all consisted of false systems ... for her lighter reading she perused the loose sentiments contained in the French novels of *Faublas*; *Le Fils naturel*, and all the dangerous works of Diderot, and other revolutionary writers. The effects of such studies on a mind like that of Lady Isabella’s may well be conceived; marriage she held in utter contempt, openly expatiated on the folly of

all the outward ceremonies of religion, and was a very pretty female atheist.
(1.16)

Green's intense disapproval of Isabella's status as "a very pretty female atheist" forms an interesting inversion of her criticism of Margaret's excessive credulity. While Margaret is mocked for too-readily believing the literal events described in fictional works, Isabella is decried for disbelieving in the importance of those doctrines relating to the sanctity of marriage and religion that society holds to be self-evidently valid. As in *Confessions*, the danger of the corrupting novels lies in the way that they appeal to the reason, rather than to the imagination, requiring no suspension of disbelief in order to validate the "false systems" they outline. This idea is articulated when Isabella tells Margaret, "I am the most romantic creature living; but quite in a different way; I never go beyond probability; and the romances I peruse, shew me, if not the *exact* picture of human life, at least what it ought to be: I'll send you some of *my* books; they will not stuff your brain with ideas of ghosts, magic and witchcraft" (2.11). The similarity to the pattern of Cazire's downfall in *Confessions* is thus continued, with Isabella's derisive attitude towards the improbability of Margaret's romances paralleling the words of Fribourg and Lindorf.

After perusing such works, on Isabella's recommendation, as Madame de Staël's *Delphine* and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise*, Margaret languishes for "a congenial soul of the opposite sex, with whom she could experience the extatic raptures proceeding from the unrestrained and delightful union of hearts, where no vulgar 'human tie' should render common their moments of superlative bliss" (2.14). Her newfound disbelief in the "human tie" of marriage makes her vulnerable to the seductive wiles of a dastardly young nobleman, and she soon finds herself pregnant and abandoned. Isabella, by this time, is in

precisely the same situation, and this redundancy in the narrative serves to suggest the uniformity of the fates of young women who take to reading French novels. Ultimately, though Margaret's family comes charitably to the aid of both girls, neither has a happy end: Margaret is forced to live out her life under an assumed name, in the guise of a widow, and we are told that Isabella longs for death, looking "anxiously forward to that period, when she shall receive the unalloyed happiness promised to the truly penitent" (3.69).

In contrast to the relative unselfconsciousness of the didactic novels, which focus their criticism on texts other than themselves, the more humorous instances of the female quixote genre do tend to manifest an awareness of their own textuality. The didactic texts' sober conviction of the intellectual and moral danger of unwise reading is replaced in these novels by a playful critique of the aesthetic conventions of the romance genre. Though Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Barrett's *The Heroine. Or Adventures of Cherubina* share many conventions with the works discussed above, the overall effect is therefore quite different. One way of understanding the difference is in terms of the distinction between parody and satire. In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon distinguishes between the two by pointing out that, while "the object of parody is always another work of art," satire "is both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention" (16). It is clear that most female quixote novels incorporate both parodic and satiric tendencies, lampooning not only the quixotic reader, but also the excesses of the fictions to which she subscribes; however, these tendencies are present in markedly different proportions. According to Hutcheon's definition, works such as those of Tenney

and Green are predominantly satirical in their aims. They effect their moral purpose by focusing on the description of the deluded reader and her foolish actions, without drawing attention to textual similarities and differences between the work at hand and those that it parodies. The parodic element thus becomes secondary in these novels, the resemblance in plot structure between the parodied and parodying texts being essentially a function of the female quixote's novel-induced behaviour. Driven by a conviction of the genuine moral danger posed to young women by novel reading, these works are more interested in criticizing the effects of reading than in setting themselves up for comparison to the maligned reading material.

Austen and Barrett, on the other hand, place far more emphasis on the parodic elements of their respective novels. Though satire is inseparable from any ironic treatment of the female quixote theme—quixotism being a quality associated with the *reading* of literature, rather than with literature *per se*—these authors appear to play the satirical angle more for its entertainment value than with a strong didactic purpose. *Northanger Abbey* and *The Heroine* share an overt awareness of their own status as literary creations, and of their own purposeful deviations from the works that they parody. Hutcheon argues that one of the characteristics of parody is that it “self-consciously and self-critically recognizes its own nature” (27), and the inward turn of the parodic gaze that is implied by this description is a great deal more evident in these two examples of the female quixote narrative than in their more didactic counterparts. This self-reflexivity contributes an extra layer of sophistication to the irony with which these works treat the topic of novels and novel reading. Also, because they do not appear to be holding up their heroines as sincere and sober warnings against the dangers of reading,

the tone in which Austen and Barrett write implies a greater complicity with their own readers—a shared wink over the mutually acknowledged fictionality of all fiction, not least the work at hand.

Like the didactic novelists, then, these authors employ the means of female quixotism to illustrate the disparity between fiction and reality, but to a different end. The point, in the two parodic novels here discussed, is not that readers should avoid patterning their lives after fictions, but rather that fictions should aim to be more true to life. As Hutcheon comments, parody “marks the interaction of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique” (Hutcheon 101), and these works clearly have an interest in promoting an alternative aesthetic to the one that drives the fiction they critique, however sympathetically. In order to achieve this goal, *The Heroine* and *Northanger Abbey* employ considerably different strategies. Barrett’s quixote figure, Cherubina, is a farcical extreme who comments continually and outrageously on her own slavish adherence to the conventions of gothic fiction. In the spirit of textual self-consciousness, many of her remarks carry a distinct double-entendre with respect to her situation as the *ipso facto* heroine of Barrett’s own fiction, as well as of her own fantasy world. Austen’s Catherine Morland, in contrast, is depicted with a much higher degree of realism than her various sisters in quixotism. In *Northanger Abbey*, the ironic self-consciousness belongs entirely to the narrator, freeing Catherine herself to behave in the relatively natural manner characteristic of Austen’s later fiction. This juxtaposition of the parodic and realistic styles is Austen’s way of supplementing her good-humoured critique of gothic fiction with the suggestion of an alternative to it: her own realistic and understated style of writing.

On the subject of *The Heroine*, Archibald Shepperson writes, “Barrett cannot be given entire credit for the improvement that took place in the English novel in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century.... But a share of the credit certainly belongs to Barrett, whose book was readable, witty, timely, and, what is more to the point, was widely read” (172). Indeed, though it has since fallen into near-oblivion, having been out of print since 1927 (Horner 3), *The Heroine* was enormously popular in the decade after its publication in 1813, and it was received by nineteenth-century critics with great enthusiasm. In “On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement,” Trollope incorporates an endorsement of Barrett’s novel into his criticism of the type of writing it mocks, saying, “The only story which I can recommend to my hearers as connected with the Minerva Press is a satire on its productions called the ‘Heroine,’ written by Mr. Barrett ... a burlesque, and a very excellent burlesque” (98). Edgar Allan Poe also waxes enthusiastic in his 1835 review of *The Heroine*:

There are few books written with more tact, spirit, *näiveté*, or grace, few which take hold more irresistibly upon the attention of the reader, and none more fairly entitled to rank among the classics of English literature than the *Heroine* [sic] of Eaton Stannard Barrett. When we say all this of a book possessing not even the remotest claim to originality, either in conception or execution, it may reasonably be supposed, that we have discovered in its matter, or manner, some rare qualities, inducing us to hazard an assertion of so bold a nature. This is actually the case. Never was any thing so charmingly written: the mere style is positively inimitable. (41)

Poe acknowledges the fact that Barrett’s work belongs squarely to the much-exercised tradition inaugurated by Cervantes, but his fervent praise of the novel indicates that something sets it apart from the run-of-the-mill quixote novel. The stylistic sparkle that

so impresses Poe relates to a quality of *The Heroine* that is essentially lacking in many of its forebears: its witty self-referentiality.

As Poe suggests, the basic plot and premise of the novel are entirely typical of its genre. Cherry, an inveterate romance reader, tires of her prosaic and uneventful life, rechristens herself “Cherubina,” and sets out to experience adventures worthy of a heroine. Along the way, her romantic imagination leads her into many comical misunderstandings of people and events. Ultimately, her ultra-rational childhood friend, Stuart, rescues her from her own delusions and, having expounded on the importance of learning about life from life itself rather than from fiction, marries her. The narrative is epistolary, taking the form of a one-sided series of letters from Cherubina to her former governess, also a habitual novel reader, who has been dismissed by Cherubina’s father for kissing the butler. The plot is set in motion when the disgraced governess takes revenge on her former employer by suggesting to Cherubina that she is not, in fact, her father’s daughter, but a child of mysterious origin.

Unlike Cazire’s after-the-fact epistolary narration in *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer*, Cherubina’s telling of her own tale is to-the-moment. Despite her eventual reform at the hands of Stuart, therefore, the narrative is not coloured by teleological didacticism; instead, most of the novel is rendered from the perspective of a heroine in the process of gleefully abandoning herself to her fantasies. Because the story is told entirely in the first person, Cherubina not only fills the role of the deluded reader, but also acts in the usual capacity of the third-person narrator, commenting directly on the conventions of romantic novels and her own relationship to them. Her simultaneous awareness of the romantic formula and explicit acknowledgment that her “ambition is to be a Heroine” (1.14) in her

own story underline Cherubina's status as a textual entity. She is an emphatically two-dimensional character, observing the progress of her own fiction and herself as a player within it, even as the external reader does the same. Paul Lewis, an extraordinarily humourless modern critic of *The Heroine*, complains that "It is difficult to take Cherry seriously as a character because Barrett, failing to create a plausible psychological history for her, treats her as the *reductio ad absurdum* of Gothic readers" (48). What Lewis apparently fails to grasp is that Cherubina's implausibility is, in many ways, the point. We are not *supposed* to take her seriously as a character, and she is in fact intended more as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the gothic heroine than of the gothic reader, as Barrett's title indicates.

In a preface headed "The Heroine to the Reader," Cherubina immediately introduces herself as a fictional construct. She explains that all fictitious personages are incarnated on the moon, and she goes on to describe her interactions with various famous examples. For instance, she meets Don Quixote himself and finds him to be a kindred soul (5); she also encounters "the Radcliffian, Rochian, and other heroines" (6) and says of them, "they tossed their heads, and told me pertly that I was a slur on the sisterhood; while some went so far as to say that I had a bad design upon their lives. They likewise shunned the Edgeworthian heroines, whom they thought too comic, moral, and natural" (6). Barrett thus establishes his novel and its heroine as not only parodying, but also belonging to the tradition of fiction; unlike the outward-looking commentary provided by the didactic quixote-novels, Barrett's fiction never loses sight of its own nature. The self-referential tone of the text is further reinforced by the explicit critiques made of *The Heroine* by some of the other inhabitants of the moon. Junius, for example, says to

Cherubina, “the writer who sent you amongst us, had far too much to say, and too little to do” (7), and Tristram Shandy bets,

...[Y]ou will get miserably mauled by their reverences, the Reviewers. My life for it, they will say that your character is a mere daub drawn in distemper—the hair too golden—an eyelash too much—then that the book itself has too little of the rational and argumentative; that the fellow merely wrote it to make the world laugh,—and, by the bye, to make the world laugh is the gravest occupation an author can chuse.... In fine, Madam, it will appear that the work has every fault which must convict it ... but which will leave it not the ninety-ninth part of a gry the worse in the eyes of fifteen millions of honest Britons. (8-9)

Apart from drawing attention to Cherubina’s hyper-fictionality, Tristram Shandy’s remarks also underscore the chief motive underlying Barrett’s novel: humour. Despite the token “rational and argumentative” passage in which Stuart discusses the inadvisability of drawing one’s ideas solely from romances, *The Heroine* makes no concerted effort to advance the conservative ideas about novel reading that figure so prominently in many other quixote-novels. Barrett unapologetically identifies his purpose as being to make people laugh, and the primary object of the joke is clearly fiction itself, not its readers. Cherubina is too blatantly unrealistic to serve as a sincere warning against excessive romanticism, but the mockery of gothic conventions is quite proportional to their absurdity.

The irony inherent in Cherubina’s triple role as would-be heroine, actual heroine, and inadvertent commentator on the silliness of narrative conventions is evident early in the story. At the beginning of the first volume, she envies her governess’s having been “cast upon the world, unprotected and defamed; while [she is] doomed to endure the security of a home, and the dullness of an unimpeached reputation.” She laments, “For me, there is no hope whatever of being reduced to despair. I am condemned to waste my

health, bloom, and youth, in a series of uninterrupted prosperity” (1.14). By having the heroine of a novel describe her own situation and aspirations in such terms, rather than assigning the task to a cynical, third-person narrator, Barrett leaves no doubt about the fact that she is not intended to be even remotely lifelike.

Indeed, her comments are continual reminders that she not only aspires to be a heroine, but *is* the heroine of *The Heroine* itself—a pen-and-ink creature in an artificial universe. Though the comparisons that she makes between herself and the heroines of romance serve mainly to underline the differences between the types of fiction in question, they also keep in view the connection between Barrett’s novel and the texts it parodies, pointing out the contrived nature of both. In fact, Cherubina puts herself forth as the purposeful contriver of her own story; her imitation of romantic tropes is self-conscious and wilful, designed to produce a book of memoirs to rival the most fantastic of romances. Thus, at one point she asserts,

I see plainly, that if adventure does not come to me, I must go to adventure. And indeed, I am authorised in doing so by the example of my sister heroines; who, with a noble disinterestedness, are ever the chief artificers of their own misfortunes: for, in nine cases out of ten, were they to manage matters like mere common mortals, they would avoid all those charming mischiefs which adorn their memoirs. (1.39)

As this passage demonstrates, Barrett’s technique of embedding his critique of romance’s more hamhanded plot devices within Cherubina’s own enthusiastic endorsements of the same lends *The Heroine* a devastatingly deadpan humour. Her commentary extends also to stylistic issues, as when she notes,

You see I relate the several conversations, in a dramatic manner, and word for word, as well as I can recollect them, since heroines do the same. Indeed, I cannot

too much admire the fortitude of these charming creatures, who, even while they were in momentary expectation of losing their honors, sit down with the utmost unconcern, and indite the sprightliest letters in the world. They have even presence of mind enough to copy the vulgar dialect, uncouth phraseology, and bad grammar of villains, who, perhaps, are in the next room to them, and who would not matter [sic] annihilating them with poignard, while they are mending a pen. (1.23)

Apart from conveying the irony of Cherubina's evident admiration for impossibly thorough and accurate epistolary accounts and other romantic conventions of dubious credibility, her ruminations on the mechanics of composition remind us that we are, in fact, reading a constructed text. The reader is thus explicitly encouraged to examine the narrative and stylistic strategies not only of Cherubina's cherished romances, but also of the work at hand.

Many female quixote figures tend to understand the incidents described in romances as true events, entirely independent of their storybook contexts; in Cherubina's mind, however, heroines' lives are firmly associated with written narratives. While she does believe that romances are the true memoirs of heroines, she also views their experiences as being structured according to explicitly literary conventions—and considers the ultimate purpose of experience to be the generation of novels. She conceives of her life as a text and describes its progress in terms of volumes, pages, and plots. At one point, for example, she instructs her unromantically overweight, respectable, and middle-class father to “never again attempt to get [himself] thrust into the pages of a romance” (1.105); she also opines that a would-be suitor “did not shew much judgment in urging [her] to matrimony, before [she] had undergone adventures for four volumes” (1.102). Similarly, when she leaves a shop without paying for a bonnet, she tells the irate shop owner,

...[A]s I like your face, I mean to implicate you in my plot, and make you one of the *dramatis personae* in the history of my life. Probably you will turn out to be my mother's nurse's daughter. At all events, I give you my word I will pay you at the *denouement*, when the other characters are provided for; and meantime, to secure your acquaintance, I must insist on owing you the money. (1.65-66)

Cherubina is not merely attempting to work elements of romance into her life, but working expressly to mould her life into an actual romantic narrative. Thus, we as readers are made privy to the trope-by-trope composition process of a failed romance—and of a successful parody.

Ultimately, then, *The Heroine* retools the conventional female quixote story into an instrument for critiquing the undeniable excesses of romance writing, rather than the popularly alleged—and no doubt exaggerated—problems caused by romance reading. In presenting us with a heroine who is so overtly a figment of fiction that she refers to herself as a character in a story, Barrett creates such a high level of comedic self-consciousness in the novel that there is no room for the articulation or demonstration of a serious alternative aesthetic. In using pure parody to playfully highlight the artistic failings of romance, however, *The Heroine* is successful, and, according to Shepperson, it had a “salutary influence on the taste of novel writers and novel readers” (172) in its time.

One of the novel writers to whom Barrett's novel appealed is Jane Austen. In a letter dated 2 March 1814, Austen writes, “I finished *The Heroine* last night and was very much amused by it ... It diverted me exceedingly ... I have torn through the third volume ... I do not think it falls off. It is a delightful burlesque particularly on the Radcliffe style”

(qtd. in Homer and Zlosnick). Austen's own famous contribution to the female quixote genre, *Northanger Abbey* (composed c.1798-1803, published 1818), shares *The Heroine's* relative unconcern with the dangers of novel reading and goes a step farther to actively celebrate the writers and readers of fiction, with the author proudly including herself in both categories. Even as a parody of gothic conventions, Austen's approach is comparatively gentle and sympathetic. Linda Hutcheon cites her work as exemplifying a use of parody that challenges "the definition of parody as the conservative ridiculing of artistic fashion's extremes" (11), and, indeed, Austen's attitude towards the texts she parodies tends more towards fond ribbing than genuine criticism. In a well-known passage, she celebrates the novel as a form "in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (34). Like Barrett, Austen has written a novel that is openly conscious of its own status as fiction, and, what is more, that explicitly classes itself alongside the gothic and sentimental novels in which its heroine indulges. Despite its positive attitude towards these other works, however, *Northanger Abbey* does mark the differences between itself and them, thereby implicitly endorsing an alternative, more realistic ideal of fiction.

In terms of the characterization of her heroine, Austen has followed essentially the opposite course from Barrett; in contrast to the cardboard cut-out that is Cherubina, Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* is more believable as a person than virtually any other example of the female quixote figure. In the first volume of the novel, Catherine is pointedly depicted as being essentially practical and unromantic, responding to people

and situations as any normal individual might be expected to do. When she leaves her home and family, for example, her departure is conducted “with a degree of moderation and composure, which seem[s] rather consistent with the common feelings of common life, than with the refined susceptibilities, the tender emotions which the first separation of a heroine from her family ought always to excite” (18). Later in the novel, Austen describes a scene in which the hero, Henry Tilney, is “talking with interest to a fashionable and pleasing-looking young woman, who lean[s] on his arm, and whom Catherine immediately guesse[s] to be his sister; thus unthinkingly throwing away a fair opportunity of considering him lost to her for ever, by being married already” (49).

Her behaviour in the second volume, when she visits Northanger Abbey and is victim to a number of far-fetched, gothic fancies, does border on the forehead-slappingly silly; however, Catherine at least has the sense to be aware of and embarrassed by the absurdity of her notions, even as she embraces them in order to satisfy her “craving to be frightened” (173). Catherine’s credulousness is somewhat more moderate than the typical quixote figure’s wholesale abandonment to her delusions. Though she searches a mysterious cabinet for hidden secrets, she does so while telling herself that she “never from the first ha[s] the smallest idea of finding anything in any part of the cabinet” (148), and, when the roll of papers that she discovers in the cabinet turns out to be a collection of bills, she is ashamed by “the absurdity of her recent fancies” (150). Her paranoia may be extreme by real-world standards—but the very fact that we are tempted to judge her by such standards attests to the unusual degree of realism that Austen has introduced to the conventional quixote story. Catherine is an essentially lifelike character, contained in, and controlled by, a self-consciously fabricated text.

The self-awareness of *Northanger Abbey* is conveyed entirely through the voice of the narrator. From the outset of the novel, Austen draws attention to her technique of allying a realistic style with pointedly unrealistic fictional conventions. She opens by describing Catherine as overwhelmingly average and consequently ill-suited to the traditional role of heroine, then asserts her own power, as the author of the story, to contrive for her credibly middle-of-the-road heroine an improbably romantic narrative context—a love story. Thus, the narrator informs us that there are no suitable love interests in Catherine’s neighbourhood, “But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way” (16). This self-conscious narrator surfaces repeatedly throughout the story to disrupt the appearance of an unmediated relation of events, reminding us that the “pen of the contriver” (203) governs all that occurs. She exhibits no hesitation in alluding to “the rules of composition” (218) that dictate the progress of her novel, often with complete disregard to the demands of realism, mocking these rules even as she adheres to them. In order to achieve an appropriate ending of “perfect felicity” (217), for instance, Austen must provide both of her deserving female characters with conventional, happy marriages. To this end, she contrives to introduce a suitable husband for one of them on the second-to-last page, legitimating his presence in the story by identifying him as the man whose laundry bills Catherine has discovered in the mysterious cabinet—and cheerfully pointing out the dishonesty of her own device.

This juxtaposition of the realistic and parodic modes in *Northanger Abbey* strikes many readers as incongruous. Frank Kearful suggests that “at times the fiction presented seems purely (i.e., structurally) satiric and at other times purely novelistic, with the result

that our expectations are made to work at cross-purposes” (514). Thus, Catherine’s early pragmatism conflicts with her delusional actions in the second volume, and the conventional progression and resolution of the plot are at odds with the narrator’s ironic commentary on these very conventions. In order to understand this contradiction in the text, according to George Levine, we must accept “a separation of plot from the primary concerns of the novel” (71). Though the action of the story is structured around the traditional female quixote storyline, Austen’s main purpose in *Northanger Abbey* is neither to condemn romantic fiction as hopelessly absurd, nor to offer her readers solemn warnings against confusing fiction and reality. As Levine writes, “In the bracing sanity of Austen’s world, we could hardly expect her to be unaware of the illusoriness of all fictions (or for that matter to think it worth her trouble to write novels to prove it)” (66). Rather, her aim is to provide a humorous illustration of the artifice inherent in all fiction, her own relatively realistic brand included. The novel is offered not in the spirit of didactic revelation, but rather in the same tone of complicity with her readers as her laughing commentary on the absurdity of certain social conventions.

Austen’s use of the quixote-narrative thus foregoes the serious moral underpinnings that are present in the work of such authors as Tenney, Dacre, and Green. Not only does she, like Barrett, emphasize the clichéd nature of literary conventions, she also extends the scope of her critique to include the type of realism found in her own fiction, as well as the more melodramatic modes of gothic and romantic fiction. In turning a critical gaze inwards to accentuate its own handling of the balance between realism and formulaic fictional conventions, *Northanger Abbey* provides a complex bridge between the outward-looking, didactic female quixote genre and the type of self-

interrogating fiction exemplified by the novels of William Thackeray, whose work is the subject of the next chapter.

III. Truth and Fiction in Thackeray

Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art.... If truth is not always pleasant, at any rate truth is best, from whatever chair—from those whence graver writers or thinkers argue, as from that at which the story-teller sits....

-W. M. Thackeray, Preface to Pendennis

As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, William Thackeray was a man exasperated with artifice. He believed that “humbugs and falsenesses and pretensions” (*Vanity Fair* 70) were rampant in both society and literature, and he determined that his fiction should expose, rather than perpetuate, this tendency towards fraudulence. His agenda as a novelist was therefore twofold: to honestly depict the surfeit of falseness in the world and to reduce the degree of “humbug” involved in the production and consumption of fiction. Thus, as Juliet McMaster writes in her book *Thackeray: The Major Novels*, “The emphasis on the incongruity between romance and reality, or between the pose and the truth, is both subject and technique in *Vanity Fair*” (32). As a literary technique, this emphasis on the fiction-reality divide is an important part of Thackeray’s aesthetic.

In this chapter, I will argue that, while novels such as *Vanity Fair* and *The History of Pendennis* share the didactic quixote novels’ rejection of romantic excess, their motives for highlighting the gap between fiction and reality are fundamentally different. By forcing the reader’s gaze to shift between the fictional world of the novel and the reality of lived experience, Thackeray insists that we employ the same standards for analyzing both—and that those standards be the ones that we have developed through interaction with the real world. Unlike Tenney, Dacre, and Green, who caution readers

against approaching life with expectations learned from the artificial realm of fiction, Thackeray demands that we discard such expectations when approaching fiction itself. He is not concerned that readers will “misread” the real world due to novel-induced fantasies, because it is clear to him that people’s attitudes towards fiction and reality are all too distinct; as Jack P. Rawlins observes in *Thackeray’s Novels: A Fiction that Is True*, “We read romantic novels with an easy moral absolutism and live according to a more pragmatic creed.... Thackeray asks us to account for the discrepancy” (13). In doing so, he seeks to cultivate a more discerning readership for a brand of fiction that attempts to escape the unnatural absurdities of romance.

Like the works of Barrett and Austen discussed in the last chapter, Thackeray’s writing is intensely self-reflexive, interrogating its own position, as realist fiction, between the poles of reality and romance. His novels are peppered with explicit allusions not only to the implausibility of accepted narrative conventions, but also to the distinction between literary realism and reality itself. A notorious feature of Thackeray’s fiction is his use of a wry, intrusive, and decidedly opinionated narrator to comment on the characters and the action; often, the narrator steps in to point out where a text adheres to and deviates from the frequently opposing dictates of realism and fictional convention. In fact, so prolific are such critical interludes in Thackeray’s writing that Rawlins has described his works as “dissertations on the novel, with a novel provided for discussion” (234). With respect to literary matters, the purposes of the commentary are, firstly, to assert the importance of verisimilitude in fiction and to draw attention to the realistic elements of the text at hand; secondly, to encourage readers, often by addressing them directly, to be critical of their own inconsistent expectations for fiction and reality; and,

thirdly, to acknowledge the limitations of the novel as a mode of representing reality by openly referring to its artificial elements, thus compensating for lapses of realism *within* the narrative by offering truths *about* the narrative.

There is nothing understated about the literary criticism that Thackeray embeds in his novels; his aesthetic goals are asserted through a combination of overt disdain for the implausible elements of conventional fiction and pointed observations on the relative realism of his own characters and tales. In the *Atlantic Monthly*'s 1865 review of a new American edition of *Vanity Fair*, Edwin Percy Whipple comments that Thackeray writes with the assumption that "the preliminary condition of an accurate knowledge of human character is distrust of ideals and repudiation of patterns" (par. 2). This assumption is at the heart of Thackeray's theory of realistic fiction, and, as a result, his vision of realism defines itself not only with reference to its similarity to reality, but also in terms of its difference from romantic texts. His resistance to formulaic narrative structures and modes of characterization exemplifies a propensity that Walter M. Kendrick identifies as definitive of naturalism in the late nineteenth century: "the tendency to consider as properly 'real' only what ha[s] not been made literary by other writers, to concentrate on subjects that ha[ve] been thought too ordinary or unglamorous for literature" (70).

Thackeray's primary complaint against romantic fiction is that its tone and subject matter tend to be elevated beyond any resemblance to the daily lives of real people. In his critical study of Thackeray's work, fellow novelist Anthony Trollope has the following to say about "the condition of Thackeray's mind in regard to literary products":

The 'humbug' of everything, the pretence, the falseness of affected sentiment, the remoteness of poetical pathos from the true condition of the average minds of men and women, struck him so strongly, that he sometimes allowed himself to feel,—or at any rate, to say,—that poetical expression, as being above nature, must be unnatural. He had declared to himself that all humbug was odious, and should be by him laughed down to the extent of his capacity. (*Thackeray* 67)

Because he is reacting against a tradition of rendering fictional subjects in idealized hues that are “above nature,” Thackeray insists repeatedly throughout his fiction on the comparatively debased nature of his own subjects and characters. As we shall see, this tactic of defining the realistic in strict opposition to the type of fiction that features noble ideals and valiant actions led many nineteenth-century critics, particularly of *Vanity Fair*, to accuse him of misanthropy and cynicism.

As both Kendrick and Trollope suggest, however, Thackeray's idea of appropriately natural, “low” subject matter does not only exclude the actively improbable, but also imposes strict limitations on permissible levels of the merely extraordinary. Early in the novel, he informs us expressly that, in contrast to more conventional fiction and in defiance of his readers' presumed tastes, his book will devote space to chronicling the experiences of unremarkable people, “who are taking walks, or luncheon, or dinner, or talking and making love as people do in common life, and without a single passionate and wonderful incident to mark the progress of their loves” (44). Though he promises that “When we come to the proper places we won't spare fine language,” he qualifies this pledge with the reproofing reminder that “when we are going over the quiet country we must perforce be calm. A tempest in a slop-basin is absurd” (71).

The chiding tone of these passages reveals Thackeray's suspicion that his realistically understated pictures of common life may meet with a less-than-enthusiastic reception on the part of readers conditioned to admire tempests wherever they may be found. These hypothetical aficionados of glory and world-altering events are incarnated in the text when the narrator conjures up Jones, whom he envisions as perusing *Vanity Fair* at his club and pronouncing the details of the story so far to be "excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultra-sentimental" (5). In response to this imagined declaration, the narrator remarks caustically of Jones, "Well, he is a lofty man of genius, and admires the great and heroic in life and novels; and so had better take warning and go elsewhere" (5). It is clear that, in Thackeray's eyes, the haughty Jones is in fact far from being a "lofty man of genius." Rather, he is a pretentious fool who hypocritically dismisses the tame details of Amelia's life as irrelevant, when his own reality consists of sitting smugly in his club, eating mutton and scribbling scornful notes in the margins of novels. By introducing the markedly unromantic figure of Jones into the text alongside his central characters, Thackeray attempts to deflate anticipated complaints against his decision to portray life outside the realm of the "great and heroic." Posed in his condescending attitude, Jones reminds us that we, too, are engaged in nothing more heroic than reading a novel, and that we should judge events in *Vanity Fair* by the standards of our own mundane lives.

Even when the story veers towards what appears to be legitimate ground for narrative "tempests"—the Battle of Waterloo—Thackeray pointedly declines the opportunity to document military heroics and grand events. As his leading male characters join the ranks of the massing army, he turns the narrative gaze away from

them, stating, “We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants. When the decks are cleared for action, we go below, and wait meekly” (275). One reason for Thackeray’s aversion to the battlefield relates to Kendrick’s aforementioned observation about the reluctance of authors in pursuit of truth to seek it in themes that have already “been made literary” through countless narrative iterations. This explanation comes to mind when the narrator complains, in the wake of the departing soldiers, “Time out of mind strength and courage have been the theme of bards and romances; and from the story of Troy down to to-day, poetry has always chosen a soldier for a hero. I wonder is it because men are cowards in heart that they admire bravery so much...?” (283). Here, Thackeray is highlighting his determination to steer clear of the specious patterns laid down by “bards and romances,” implying that courage is prevalent in traditional, epic literature precisely because of its scarcity in the real world—and, by extension, that fictional conventions can become entrenched as such by virtue of their very remoteness from truth.

Rather than following his literary predecessors down what he perceives as the overly well-worn path of traditional, militaristic heroism, therefore, Thackeray elects to remain with the “non-combatants,” in the familiar environment of the domestic sphere. This decision demonstrates that his vision of realism is founded not only on the plausibility, but also on the relevance of the chosen subject matter. Opportunities for the spectacular demonstration of heroism do exist in the real world—but the majority of people pass their lives without participating directly in grand or world-altering events. Writing in 1844, James Moncreiff suggests that novels can fill a unique function in documenting the real state of the world at a particular time, by dealing “with little

things—with common occurrences—ordinary goodnesses and faults—which are beneath the notice of moralists or philosophers” (437). Thackeray appears to share this view of the novel’s role and chooses to populate his own works with truths of a different order than those contemplated by the “graver writers and thinkers” that he alludes to in the epigraph at the head of this chapter.

In addition to pointing out his own affinity for subject matter that is inconsequential by romantic standards, Thackeray emphasizes the relative realism of his fiction by contrasting his characters to traditionally idealized heroes and heroines and comparing them to people in the real world. The project of redefining the roles and characteristics of a novel’s central characters looms large in his overall agenda of providing fictional conventions with a realist makeover, and this is made evident in the subtitles and prefatory matter of *Pendennis* and *Vanity Fair*, as well as in some examples of correspondence detailing his objectives.

By titling *Vanity Fair* with that famous proclamation, “A Novel Without a Hero,” Thackeray identifies from the outset what he perceives to be the most important deviation that he, as an author in pursuit of truth, has made from the conventional novelistic pattern: his refusal to provide his readers with a single character with whom they can expect to sympathize completely or consistently. This purpose is underscored by an 1847 letter from Thackeray to his mother in which he writes, “My object is not to make a perfect character or anything like it. Don’t you see how odious all the people are in the book (with the exception of Dobbin)—behind whom there lies a dark moral I hope” (qtd. in Dyson 17). A similar indication of the priority that he places on depicting

flawed characters is present in the preface to *Pendennis*, where he declares that the goal of the novel is to honestly represent one of “the gentlemen of our age ... with the notorious foibles of their lives and their education”; he goes on to complain that, “Since the author of *Tom Jones* was buried, no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN” (lvi). While the subtitle of *Vanity Fair* is representative of the way that Thackeray defines his realism in terms of its difference from the romantic formula, the quotation from the preface to *Pendennis* is an example of how he underscores the plausibility of his characterizations by comparing them to real people.

In an 1838 essay entitled “On Art in Fiction,” Edward Bulwer-Lytton comments on the response that an author can expect to receive when attempting to achieve realism by depicting either villains with good qualities or good characters with foibles and infirmities. His plaintive conclusion is that “in both these applications of art, you will be censured by shallow critics and pernicious moralists” (223), and, indeed, the flawed denizens of *Vanity Fair* drew heaps of criticism onto Thackeray’s head when the novel was published. One reason for this is that none of the characters (including Dobbin, despite Thackeray’s aforementioned concession that the latter is not “odious”) is entirely spared from the author’s scathingly satirical gaze; as a result, the novel lacks a firm moral centre. While there was ample precedent in fiction for the judicious use of characters credibly marbled with positive and negative attributes, it was widely felt that the chief protagonist of a work, at least, ought to present an admirable role model. According to Hugh Murray’s *Morality of Fiction* (published in 1805), for example, the bulk of a novel’s inhabitants “may be mixed and imperfect characters”—provided that the leading

character, “in whom the reader takes the deepest interest, and with whom he feels disposed, as it were, to identify himself,” is a paragon of perfection (31).

Because a novel had to have at least one character earmarked for the reader’s unqualified admiration in order to be considered morally legitimate, Thackeray’s artistic decision to populate *Vanity Fair* entirely with flawed characters (and to encumber the best of the lot with a “dark moral”) received a great deal of negative attention among critics. While it might seem to a modern reader that his delineation of the faults and virtues of his creations is pretty even-handed, many of his contemporaries—presumably because accustomed to a more rose-tinted brand of fiction—are struck by what they perceive as the exaggerated darkness of his vision. Critic Robert Bell, for example, has reservations on the count of the novel’s excessively and unrelentingly negative picture of human nature. His 1848 review, though positive on the whole, complains that

It does not enter into the design of *Vanity Fair* to qualify [the] bitter ingredients with a little sweetness now and then; to shew the close neighbourhood of the vices and the virtues as it lies on the map of the human heart, that mixture of good and evil, of weakness and strength, which, in infinitely varied proportions, constitutes the compound individual. (63)

In this passage, Bell entirely discounts the elements of sweetness, virtue, and strength that do figure in *Vanity Fair*—and, interestingly, Thackeray does not disagree with this perception in the letter he directs in reply to Bell’s criticism. Rather than arguing that most of his characters are, in fact, invested with some form and degree of goodness, he simply writes, “If I had put in more fresh air as you call it my object would have been defeated. It is to indicate, in cheerful terms, that we are for the most part an abominably foolish and selfish people ‘desperately wicked’ and all eager after vanities” (Letter to

Robert Bell 67). The tone of both Bell's complaint and Thackeray's response testifies to the fact that, for a work of fiction in the mid-nineteenth century, *Vanity Fair* was acknowledged to convey an unusual and even shocking level of misanthropy.

Even Elizabeth Rigby Eastlake, who indicates in an 1848 article that she greatly admires the novel and agrees that it conveys the true condition of humanity, concedes, "In one light this truthfulness is even an objection. With few exceptions the personages are too like our every-day selves and neighbours to draw any distinct moral from" (602). She goes on to note that "without a little conventional rouge no human complexion can stand the stage-lights of fiction" (602). Other supporters of the novel struggle to redeem it from a moral standpoint by attempting to efface the slurs that Thackeray has pointedly cast against some of the "better" characters. Anthony Trollope, for example, seeks to reclaim Amelia as a moral touchstone in the story by asking confidently, "Which attracts you, Amelia,—Thackeray's Amelia, who is not clever but good; or Becky Sharpe, who is all intellect and all vileness" ("On English Prose Fiction" 110). Unfortunately, this rhetorical question has the potential to backfire in the mind of any reader who feels that Thackeray's satirical bite is never more justly applied than when he refers to Amelia as a "tender little parasite" (*Vanity Fair* 667).

By rejecting the idea of the traditional hero, therefore, Thackeray runs counter not only to literary tradition, but also to the accepted wisdom on constructing a moral text. Throughout *Pendennis* and *Vanity Fair*, frequent narrative allusions to the fallibility of the main characters serve to remind us that he is resolute in his commitment to portraying life as he sees it, rather than as romantics and moralists might wish it to be. His descriptive asides are designed to encourage readers to discard the expectations with

which they typically approach literary figures and instead base their responses on their experience of the real world. In *Pendennis*, the text's self-conscious realism centres primarily on the character of Arthur Pendennis.

Arthur Pendennis—or Pen, as he is called—is undoubtedly “the chief personage and godfather” (349) of the novel. He is by no means a hero in the other sense of the word, however, and his occupation of the central role in the story without the traditional qualifications provides a major thematic focus of the novel. At the same time, Thackeray makes it clear that he is not out to demonize his protagonist; rather, he asserts that “our endeavour is merely to follow out, in its progress, the development of the mind of a worldly and selfish, but not ungenerous or unkind or truth-avoiding man” (414). In keeping with this stated goal, Pen is described by the narrator as being “weak as well as very impetuous, very vain as well as very frank, and if of a generous disposition, not a little selfish, in the midst of his profuseness, and also rather fickle, as all eager pursuers of self-gratification are” (114). Pen's friend George Warrington, a bastion of common sense, provides a similarly even-handed assessment of Pen's strengths and weaknesses when he says, “bating a little wilfulness, and a little selfishness, and a little dandification, I don't know a more honest, or loyal, or gentle creature” (350). Nonetheless, the flaws in Pen's character influence the course of the story more than his positive traits, leading him to spend money recklessly, to fall irresponsibly in love with a series of inappropriate women, and to treat his mother and his adopted sister Laura Bell with a complete lack of consideration.

As with *Vanity Fair*, the subtitle of *Pendennis* is telling, informing us that the protagonist's history details “His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest

Enemy.” Two-thirds of the way through the novel, the narrator refers back to this promise, remarking wryly, “Those kind readers who have watched Mr. Arthur’s career hitherto, and have made, as they naturally would do, observations upon the moral character and peculiarities of their acquaintance, have probably discovered by this time ... who was that greatest enemy, artfully indicated in the title-page, with whom he had to contend” (336). In a twist on the conventional novelistic situation, therefore, Pen’s career is plagued, not by an external villain of the moustache-twirling variety, but by his own shortcomings. Thackeray’s explicit allusion to the subtitle highlights the implied contrast between the standard devices responsible for plot-driving conflict and his own, more true-to-life emphasis on human weakness.

Interestingly, not only is Pen imperfectly constituted to inspire and hold a reader’s sympathies, he is also substantially less sympathetic than his main foil in the novel. His faithful friend Warrington is superior to the designated “chief personage” in countless ways, and he actually becomes a rival of sorts for the affections of Pen’s destined love-match, Laura. Rather than simply presenting us with a realistically fault-ridden protagonist moving through a world populated entirely with characters of equally mixed characteristics, Thackeray has created what could in some ways have been a traditional love story, with the more likely hero displaced by a flawed everyman.

Pen’s flaws are revealed most starkly when they are presented in direct comparison to Warrington’s virtues, and Laura’s relationship with both men provides plenty of opportunity for such comparison. From the time that Pen and Laura are children, Pen’s mother, Helen Pendennis, intends for them to marry. When Pen reaches college age, however, he has two imprudent love affairs with other women before

resignedly and dispassionately proposing to marry Laura in accordance with Helen's wishes. Offended by the manner of Pen's proposal, Laura, who loves him deeply, refuses his offer of marriage, and Pen subsequently becomes involved with another woman below his station. Later, when a period of excessive working, eating, drinking, smoking, "dissipation and society" (336) causes Pen to fall ill, Laura and Warrington are thrown together at the side of his sickbed—where they fall in love.

Unlike Pen, who responds to Laura's selfless adoration with ingratitude and selfishness, Warrington values Laura in proportion to her extraordinary qualities, and his own virtues make him a worthy match for her. The narrator describes theirs as a relationship

between two persons whose honour was entirely spotless,—between Warrington, who saw in intimacy a pure and high-minded, and artless woman for the first time in his life,—and Laura, who too for the first time was thrown into the constant society of a gentleman of great natural parts and powers of pleasing: who possessed varied acquirements, enthusiasm, simplicity, humour, and that freshness of mind which his simple life and habits gave him, and which contrasted so much with Pen's dandy indifference of manner and faded sneer. In Warrington's very uncouthness there was a refinement, which the other's finery lacked. In his energy, his respect, his desire to please, his hearty laughter, or simple confiding pathos, what a difference to Sultan Pen's yawning sovereignty and languid acceptance of homage! (351-52)

There is little doubt that, in a more conventional novel, Laura would end the story in the arms of the better man. In Thackeray's world, however, such poetic justice is not to be delivered, and the union between Warrington and Laura is prevented by his being already trapped in a marriage with another woman. As a young man of eighteen, Warrington explains, he was seduced by the "coarse artifices and scoundrel flatteries" (380) of a yeoman's daughter. He discovered too late not only that she was a dull woman

of limited understanding, but also that she had married him for his money while carrying on an affair with a man of her own station. Upon learning as much, he left her to her lover, settling all of his money upon them in an annuity. In conveying his story to Laura and the Pendennises, Warrington laments, "I was the boyish victim of vulgar cheats.... I was made for a better lot than this, I think: but God has awarded me this one—and so, you see, it is for me to look on and see others successful and others happy, with a heart that shall be as little bitter as possible" (381). Indeed, Thackeray, playing the role of God with relation to his characters, has made Warrington for the lot of hero and awarded him the misfortune of having to look on as a far less deserving man claims his happy ending in marriage to the heroine. Thackeray uses Warrington to demonstrate that fictional conventions dictating a system of just rewards have no more place in his novel than in the real world.

In order to make this point clear, Pen's relative unworthiness of Laura is noted on a number of occasions in the story and by various parties. When Pen comes to understand that Laura would have married Warrington if not for his unfortunate situation, he is himself struck with the realization of his own inferiority:

"He deserved you better than I did," poor Arthur groaned forth, with an indescribable pang at his heart. "I am but a selfish wretch, and George is better, nobler, truer, than I am. God bless him!"

"Yes, Pen," said Laura, reaching out her hand to her cousin, and he put his arm round her, and for a moment she sobbed on his shoulder. (447)

Later, once he has come to his senses and proposed a second time, and with proper feeling, Pen is accepted by Laura, whose old affection for him has never died. The two announce their engagement to Laura's friend, Lady Rockminster, who voices the

probable opinion of many readers when she replies, “It is all very well, but I should have preferred Bluebeard” (487)—“Bluebeard” being her nickname for Warrington, and not (to Pen’s small credit) an allusion to the legendary wife-killer by the same name. Despite his being a more desirable match for Laura than a murderous pirate, however, it is readily and repeatedly acknowledged that Pen has been granted a wife who is “a thousand times too good for him” (493), while Warrington has been cheated of her.

In the final lines of the book, Thackeray takes the opportunity to spell out the two-pronged moral of the story—which is, equally, a statement of certain principles upon which his concept of realism is founded. He writes,

If the best men do not draw the great prizes in life; we know it has been so settled by the Ordainer of the lottery. We own, and see daily, how the false and worthless live and prosper, while the good are called away, and the dear and young perish untimely,—we perceive in every man’s life the maimed happiness, the frequent falling, the bootless endeavour, the struggle of Right and Wrong, in which the strong often succumb and the swift fail: we see flowers of good blooming in foul places, as, in the most lofty and splendid fortunes, flaws of vice and meanness, and stains of evil; and, knowing how mean the best of us is, let us give a hand of charity to Arthur Pendennis, with all his faults and shortcomings, who does not claim to be a hero, but only a man and a brother. (504)

The first idea conveyed in this passage is that, since the real world is unfair, fiction should emulate its lottery-style distribution of fortune. Directed towards readers who, like Lady Rockminster, would have preferred to see a different ending, the narrator’s catalogue of life’s regular injustices implies that an ending’s legitimacy depends on its being consistent with reality, not on whether it is emotionally gratifying.

The second implication is that, though Pen is not the best man in the story, neither is he utterly undeserving of our sympathy. Thackeray entreats us to evaluate Pen not as a fictional construct whose faults are detailed in print the better for us to condemn him, but

as a realistic entity who must not be defined entirely through either his strengths or his weaknesses. The necessity of evaluating Pen by realistic standards—of maintaining an awareness of “how mean the best of us is”—is an idea that recurs throughout the novel. In direct addresses to his readers, he repeatedly points out that the criteria by which we are inclined to judge the characters in novels would be ludicrously exacting if applied to the people whom we encounter in the real world. The narrator engages us most directly on the subject of our presumed prejudice in judging Pen when he says, “I would not wish to say of poor Arthur Pendennis that he was worse than his neighbours, only that his neighbours are bad for the most part. Let us have the candour to own as much at least. Can you point out ten spotless men of your acquaintance? Mine is pretty large, but I can’t find ten saints in the list” (115). The people we know, he suggests, are flawed, and we routinely forgive them their faults; therefore, fictional characters, such as Pen, should be similarly both flawed and forgiven.

Thackeray likewise suggests that our attitude towards the probability of certain events in fiction is inconsistent with what we are likely to find believable in day-to-day life. He supposes, for example, that Laura’s passion for Pen might be puzzling to readers of conventional novels, in which admirable young women customarily fall in love with men of superior qualities. The narrator therefore poses a hypothetical question about this subject on behalf of the imagined reader: “Arthur, being so languid, and indifferent, and careless about the favours bestowed upon him, how came it that Laura should have such a love and rapturous regard for him ...?” (352). His answer to the question again demands that we compare the situation to similar cases in the real world, rather than to fictional tradition:

[T]he greatest rascal-cut-throats have had somebody to be fond of them, and if those monsters, why not ordinary mortals? And with whom shall a young lady fall in love but with the person she sees? She is not supposed to lose her heart in a dream, like a Princess in the 'Arabian Nights;' or to plight her young affections to the portrait of a gentleman in the Exhibition, or a sketch in the *Illustrated London News*. You have an instinct within you which inclines you to attach yourself to some one.... So then Laura liked Pen because she saw scarcely anybody else at Fair Oaks ... and because his mother constantly praised her Arthur, and because he was gentlemanlike, tolerably good-looking and witty, and because, above all, it was of her nature to like somebody. (352)

Romantic ideals are thus shown to be at the root of the confusion, which is resolved by appealing to the commonsense knowledge that we can only love the people we chance to know. After all, no deserving young lady in the real world has the benefit of an omnipotent narrator to ensure that, in the words of Jane Austen, "Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way" (*Northanger Abbey* 16).

In *Pendennis*, then, Thackeray undermines the convention of the idealized hero by replacing him with a flawed protagonist and insisting that we measure the usurper charitably, by real-world standards. In *Vanity Fair*, the strategy of realistic characterization is, like everything else in the novel, less straightforward. As with *Pendennis*, our sympathies are divided and problematic; we are presented alternately with the good and bad sides of "all the principal characters in this 'Novel without a Hero'" (*Vanity Fair* 49). Early in the book, the narrator begs leave not only to introduce the characters, but also "to step down from the platform, and talk about them: if they are good and kindly, to love them and shake them by the hand; if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader's sleeve; if they are wicked and heartless, to abuse them

in the strongest terms which politeness admits of" (71). He does provide this promised commentary, but not in such a way as to guide us towards uncomplicated assessments of them. None of the characters is met exclusively with love, laughter, or abuse, but rather with different combinations of these responses. Instead of putting us in a position of omniscient moral authority, the narrator, with his oscillating sympathies and ambiguous reports, forces us to assay characters and situations as we do in life—with uncertainty.

Despite Thackeray's suggestion that the characters in *Vanity Fair* are "odious," he does not make wholesale condemnation of them easy. Becky Sharp, Amelia Sedley, Rawdon Crawley, Jos Sedley, and even George Osborne are all invested with at least some modicum of merit. Becky is no doubt the example foremost in Thackeray's mind when he refers to his characters as "desperately wicked" and "eager after vanities" (Letter to Robert Bell 67), but even she is not made up merely of unrelieved odiousness. In addition to being selfish, deceitful, mercenary, unfaithful, and possibly even murderous, she is also, as the narrator points out, funny, clever, good-humoured, and knowledgeable about the world (70-71). She is an excellent judge of character and situations, and she does not hold grudges. A good example of this is when Dobbin informs her that she is "not a fit companion" (651) for Amelia and she nonetheless decides to intercede with Amelia on his behalf, thinking, "what a noble heart that man has ... and how shamefully that woman plays with it!" (653).

Though there is no doubt that Becky's career is in many ways a sordid one, the narrator declines to tell us unequivocally whether she is actually guilty of the two most serious charges against her: that of cuckolding her husband with Lord Steyne, and that of being responsible for Jos Sedley's death. With respect to the former accusation, the

narrative leaves the question of her culpability pointedly hanging: “Was she guilty or not? She said not; but who could tell what was truth which came from those lips, or if that corrupt heart was in this case pure?” (517). This conspicuous use of *dubitatio* draws attention to Thackeray’s capricious refusal to play the all-seeing novelist when it comes to exposing a crime that could paint a character irretrievably black—though he repeatedly notes elsewhere in the book that “The novelist . . . knows everything” (346). By leaving the reader unaided in weighing the evidence against Becky, refusing us the traditional advantage of omniscience, he reduces our information resources to approximate those that we would have at our disposal in judging a real human being.

Similarly, at the end of the book, when Jos insures his life—presumably at Becky’s prompting, with her as a beneficiary—and dies three months later, the narrator neglects to make any categorical assertion about Becky’s actual role in this dubious situation. The solicitor of the insurance company swears that it is “the blackest case that ever ha[s] come before him” (670); however, Becky is acquitted and “her character established” (670). As Robert Fletcher observes, “For every piece of evidence of Becky’s guilt there is an extenuating circumstance, a sympathetic reading of the incident, or a complete displacement of responsibility” (397), and our suspicion of her consummate villainy is thus continually undermined.

In “On Art in Fiction,” Bulwer-Lytton advises that “In the delineation of a criminal, the author will take care to show us the motives of the crimes—the influences beneath which the character has been formed. He will suit the nature of the criminal to the state of society in which he is cast” (223). Thackeray, in his characterization of Becky, follows this prescription to a tee. Becky is a product of Vanity Fair, her selfish

motivations forged in the crucible of a society preoccupied with money, status, and surfaces. Poor and alone in the world, she comments at one point that it is easy to be good and virtuous if one is rich, and the narrator vouches for the validity of this observation, saying, “who knows but Rebecca was right in her speculations, and that it was only a question of money and fortune which made the difference between her and an honest woman?... A comfortable career of prosperity, if it does not make people honest, at least keeps them so” (406). Given her disadvantaged background, her sparkling positive attributes, and the narrator’s refusal to confirm her delinquency in the matters involving Lord Steyne and Jos Sedley’s death, it is difficult to condemn Becky absolutely. A.E. Dyson compares Thackeray’s attitude towards Becky to the way that “one might speak of a naughty but not wholly unsympathetic child” (15), and this is an apt description of the narrative ambiguity that preserves Becky from the role of conventional villain.

Similarly, none of the characters in the novel has the consistent nobility of purpose necessary to hold our sympathy in the manner of a traditional hero or heroine. Thackeray uses the terms “hero” and “heroine” ironically and whimsically throughout the novel, applying them to first one character and then another in order to emphasize his flouting of the rule that a novel must have a hero. At one point, for example, the narrator archly declares Becky herself to be a heroine. The scene occurs midway through the book, when the reader has already had considerable opportunity to become acquainted with Becky’s character; we are told, “If this is a novel without a hero, at least let us 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” (280). Taken out of context, this

statement could be misread as an earnest suggestion that Becky, by virtue of her strength, intelligence, and pragmatism, might have some claim to the title of heroine of the novel. In light of the nature of the “doubts and difficulties” in question, however, and the form of her “cool and collected” response, Thackeray’s irony in claiming her as such at this point in the book is almost deafening. The scene takes place immediately after Becky’s husband, Rawdon Crawley, has ridden away to war, and his departure is the occasion for one of Becky’s most unsympathetic moments in *Vanity Fair*. Rawdon’s obvious love for his wife and distress at their parting are contrasted with the callous indifference of Becky herself, who, we are told, has “wisely determined not to give way to unavailing sentimentality” (279) on the occasion. Instead, she spends the morning calculating how much money she will be left with “should circumstances occur” (280) that render her a widow, and this cheerful industry of “disposing, ordering, looking out, and locking up her properties in the most agreeable manner” (280) is what prompts the narrator’s facetious observation about her heroism in the face of adversity.

Dobbin and Amelia are, respectively, the most likely candidates for the roles of hero and heroine, but their claims are also undermined by the oscillating sympathies of the text. Though the narrator asserts protectively that Amelia is “a dear little creature” and declares that “a great mercy it is, both in life and novels, which (and the latter especially) abound in villains of the most sombre sort, that we are to have for a constant companion so guileless and good-natured a person” (4), we are also told that she is a “weak mother” (443) and a “tender little parasite” (667) who is “not brilliant, nor witty, nor wise overmuch” (373). Protestations of Amelia’s worth abound in the text, and she does embody far more conventional female virtues than her “sharp” counterpart;

however, her behaviour in the story often betrays such a foolish and narrow view of the world that it is difficult for the reader to identify with her. Her self-destructive obsession with the unworthy George Osborne is founded on a wilful blindness to his faults; her suffocating love for her son is a selfish and cloying extension of her unhealthy idolatry of his father; and her usage of Dobbin, who truly loves her, is ungrateful and shallow.

Amelia's rejection of Dobbin is founded on his physical unattractiveness, and this unworthy motive contributes to Amelia's abasement in the text. The narrator describes Dobbin as having "very long legs, a yellow face, and a slight lisp" and goes on to say, "He certainly had very large hands and feet, which the two George Osbornes used to caricature and laugh at, and their jeers and laughter perhaps led poor little Emmy astray as to his worth" (603). When Amelia denounces Dobbin for supposedly insulting the memory of her husband, the narrator makes it clear that the alleged slight is not the true motive for her attack:

...[W]hat is constancy, or merit? One curl of a girl's ringlet, one hair of a whisker, will turn the scale against them all in a minute. They did not weigh with Emmy more than with other women. She had tried them—wanted to make them pass—could not—and the pitiless little woman had found a pretext, and determined to be free. (650)

Her rejection of a good man on the grounds of his physical awkwardness, along with her devotion to George and his "beautiful black, curling, shining whiskers" (42), demonstrates her allegiance to the empty ideals of *Vanity Fair*. This fault is further aggravated by the selfish way in which she seeks to take advantage of Dobbin's love, knowing that she has no intention of returning it: we are told, "She didn't wish to marry

him, but she wished to keep him. She wished to give him nothing, but that he should give her all” (652).

If Amelia’s treatment of Dobbin contributes to her discredit, his adulation of her constitutes the entire grounds for his. As noted earlier, Thackeray identified Dobbin as the only character in the book who does not deserve to be described as odious, and he is indeed the figure who comes closest to unadulterated worthiness. The narrator declares that Dobbin is a true gentleman, saying, “his thoughts were just, his brains were fairly good, his life was honest and pure, and his heart warm and humble” (603); he is adored by “All the poor, all the humble, all honest folks, [and] all good men” (654) who know him. Despite being a genuinely good man and a thorough gentleman, however, Dobbin’s disproportionate veneration for Amelia disqualifies him from being a hero who commands our unmitigated sympathy. Just as Amelia is devalued as a potential heroine by her blind passion for George, Dobbin is deflated as an object of our empathy by squandering all of his merit, strength, and goodness in pursuit of a woman who does not deserve him—and he himself draws our attention to the fact. After Amelia has declared that she will never forgive him for insulting George’s memory by suggesting that he was unfaithful, Dobbin sadly relinquishes his quest for her heart, telling her “you are not worthy of the love which I have devoted to you. I knew all along that the prize I had set my life on was not worth the winning; that I was a fool, with fond fancies, too, bartering away my all of truth and ardour against your little feeble remnant of love” (652). In case the reader suspects that Dobbin is being unfairly self-deprecating in his appraisal of the situation, the narrator offers support for his position, commenting that “This history has

been written to very little purpose if the reader has not perceived that the Major was a spooney” (645).

Thackeray’s ambiguous and shifting attitudes towards his characters thus undermine the monolithic categories of protagonist and antagonist, depicting the inhabitants of *Vanity Fair* as realistic figures to be judged with uncertainty. As in *Pendennis*, poetic justice has little influence in determining the outcomes of their respective stories; most of the characters are dealt some consolations and some regrets, not necessarily in proportion to their merits. By the time that Dobbin, for instance, attains the goal that is conventionally reserved for “the summit, the end—the last page of the third volume” and is finally united with “the prize he has been trying for all his life” (666-67), the triumphant moment is soured by his prior realization that Amelia is unworthy of him and that he has wasted his life in pursuing her. In “Before the Curtain,” Thackeray’s preface to the novel, he writes of his overall creation,

[T]he general impression is one more melancholy than mirthful. When you come home you sit down in a sober, contemplative, not uncharitable frame of mind, and apply yourself to your books or your business.
I have no other moral than this to tag to the present story of “Vanity Fair.” (xiv)

Thus, Thackeray’s only moral purpose in the novel is to honestly depict the Vanity Fair that he sees in the world around him—a mishmash of happiness and sadness, virtue and vice, which at the end of the day leaves an impression “more melancholy than mirthful.” Accordingly, he caps the vacillating careers of his characters with a conclusion that avoids explicit positive or negative moral sanctions and aims simply, as he writes in his letter to Robert Bell, “to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story” (67).

In the preceding pages, I have discussed some of the ways in which Thackeray seeks to assert the relative realism of his novels by explicitly contrasting them to more conventional, romantic fiction and by encouraging readers to respond to the characters and stories as they would to people and episodes in real life. However, this strategy of directly addressing the reader in order to draw attention to the mechanisms of realism automatically entails an acknowledgment that the fiction at hand—however realistic—is fiction. Beyond the consciousness of fictionality that is implicit in any comment on a novel's relationship to other fiction, Thackeray also incorporates explicit observations on the conventions and limitations that the nature of his art forces him to observe, even as he mocks their implausibility. His theory of realism, therefore, involves pointing out not only the realistic aspects of his tale, but also the artifice and contrivances that are necessarily a part of its telling.

In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James famously criticizes Trollope's use of confidential narrative asides to the reader as a "betrayal of a sacred office" (26), arguing that the realist author has a responsibility to treat his story as truth, rather than as make-believe. It is peculiar that James has chosen to launch this accusation against Trollope, rather than against Thackeray, whose opinionated narrative presence is far more pervasive. Ironically, even Trollope himself argues in his study of Thackeray that his fellow writer's "most besetting sin in style" is that he "indulges too frequently in little confidences with individual readers" (*Thackeray* 201). For Thackeray, however, the relationship of both writer and reader to the text constitutes an important part of the reality that he seeks to represent, and, as George Levine suggests, "The Jamesian attempt

to create illusion sufficiently powerful to make us forget we are reading a novel would have seemed to [him] misguided” (142).

Vanity Fair, in particular, contains frequent allusions to its own status as a constructed artefact. Most prominent of these, perhaps, is the puppet-show metaphor that surfaces in the preface, entitled “Before the Curtain,” and in the final lines of the book (as well as in Thackeray’s original illustrations), bracketing and heightening the impact of all the intervening episodes of fictional self-consciousness. By picturing himself as the “Manager of the Performance” sitting over a devitalized “Becky Puppet,” “Amelia Doll,” and “Dobbin Figure” (“Before the Curtain” xiv-xv), Thackeray draws attention to his own agency in creating the characters and determining the course of the action. When, in the concluding sentence of the novel, the narrator declares, “let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out” (671), we are again jarringly reminded that, however natural the characters and events of the novel are made to seem—however “uncommonly flexible in the joints” (“Before the Curtain” xiv-xv) the puppets may be—they are not an extension of reality, but part of a purposefully orchestrated work of imagination.

Throughout his weaving of the realist tapestry that is *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray plants visible seams for the reader to appreciate. His commentary about the art of fabricating a novel includes observations on his active decision-making in matters of style, on the necessity of certain plot devices, and on the artifice inherent in his selective use of the omniscient narrative perspective. However, while the novel’s self-awareness is intense, it does not penetrate—as it does in Barrett’s *The Heroine*, for example—into the inner reaches of the fiction, where the characters reside and the main action is carried out. Rather, the novel’s self-reflexivity is restricted to the level of the narrative occupied by

the narrator, that liminal space between story and reader, fiction and reality. Thus, the self-conscious interludes do not disrupt the realistic progress of the story itself, only our experience of it.

At the beginning of the “Vauxhall” chapter (chapter 6), for instance, the narrator ruminates on the different styles in which the story might have been written. He muses, “We might have treated this subject in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner” (44), then proceeds with speculations about the sorts of characters and incidents that *Vanity Fair* might have encompassed were it rendered in one of these or various other non-realistic styles. Concluding this digression with the assertion that his readers must be content with the “homely story” (45) that he has elected to deliver, he accordingly returns to the main storyline with a description of an evening outing to the Royal Gardens; meanwhile, the characters participating in this outing remain oblivious to their own status as imaginary figments controlled by an omnipotent puppet-master. Thus, Thackeray reminds us that our perception of the novel’s action is mediated by his stylistic decisions—but the substance of the realist tale itself is preserved intact.

The author’s manipulating hand is similarly apparent when Becky and Rawdon fail to regain the good graces of Miss Crawley, the wealthy aunt who disowns her once-beloved nephew upon his marriage. As the young couple’s pecuniary difficulties are largely responsible for the course of their participation in the story, the decision to leave them penniless is necessary to the plot, and the narrator asserts as much. We are told that Rawdon and Becky are denied Miss Crawley’s forgiveness “doubtless in order that this story might be written, in which numbers of their wonderful adventures are narrated—adventures which could never have occurred to them if they had been housed and

sheltered under the comfortable uninteresting forgiveness of Miss Crawley” (144). Again, the credibility of the core narrative is not exactly undermined, as the possibility of being disowned is a fact of life as well as of fiction—but at the same time, Thackeray admits that even realist texts must be guided by the dictates of good storytelling.

The use of the selectively omniscient narrator is another example of how Thackeray emphasizes the unnatural and mediated quality of our experience of the realist narrative. Though sometimes he disclaims the power to know the whole truth about his characters, there are other occasions when he reminds us that novelists not only “have the privilege of knowing everything” (22), but also have complete control over what *we* are allowed to know. In one of his asides to the reader, he asks:

If, a few pages back, the present writer claimed the privilege of peeping into Miss Amelia Sedley’s bedroom, and understanding with the omniscience of the novelist all the gentle pains and passions which were tossing upon that innocent pillow, why should he not declare himself to be Rebecca’s confidant too, master of her secrets, and seal-keeper of that young woman’s confidence? (139)

The novelist’s ability to whimsically “declare himself,” implicitly or otherwise, to be the confidant of whichever character he chooses is fundamental to the transfer of information between author and reader. The mechanics of storytelling often require that we have access to certain information that we could not plausibly have by other means than narrative omniscience—for example, knowledge of a character’s internal “pains and passions.” While there is nothing unrealistic about Amelia’s and Becky’s innermost thoughts and feelings in and of themselves, Thackeray’s capacity to provide access to them is certainly beyond the scope of what any historian of non-fictional events could offer.

In addition to drawing attention to the controlling consciousness responsible for shaping the naturalistic narrative, Thackeray's metafictional interludes occasionally comment on specific limitations, inherent and otherwise, of fiction that aspires to represent reality. One of these has to do with the insufficiency of language to properly convey certain scenes. At one point in *Pendennis*, Pen seeks to comfort a young girl who has fallen in love with him, and Thackeray declines to transcribe the "little ejaculations of pity and sympathy" (315) that he utters in doing so. These words, he says,

need not be repeated here, because they would be absurd in print. So would a mother's talk to a child be absurd in print; so would a lover's to his bride. That sweet artless poetry bears no translation: and is too subtle for grammarians' clumsy definitions. You have but the same four letters to describe the salute which you perform on your grandmother's forehead, and that which you bestow on the sacred cheek of your mistress; but the same four letters, and not one of them a labial. (315)

Thackeray finds words, the raw material of the writer's art, to be unequal to his purpose for two reasons. The first of these springs from the disparity between spoken and written language. As he points out, much of what is actually said in the real world cannot be translated into print without compromising the artistic design of a text; in the context of the novel, where words are laid down with a degree of care alien to the spontaneous exchanges of everyday life, the realistic can easily sound absurd. In his own discussion of literary realism, Trollope makes a similar observation about the linguistic compromise that the novelist must maintain:

[I]n very truth the realistic must not be true—but just so far removed from truth as to suit the erroneous idea of truth which the reader may be supposed to entertain. For were a novelist to narrate a conversation between two persons of fair but not

high education, and to use the ill-arranged words and fragments of speech which are really common in such conversations, he would seem to have sunk to the ludicrous, and to be attributing to the interlocutors a mode of language much beneath them. Though in fact true, it would seem to be far from natural.
(*Thackeray* 185)

Ironically, therefore, artifice may in some cases accomplish the goals of realism more effectively than genuine realism itself.

Thackeray's second complaint about language relates to its inadequate potential for conveying nuance, both in spoken and written forms. By omitting the word "kiss" from his description of the problem, he demonstrates that the shaded meanings of the term are almost obscured by the word itself, being more forcefully conveyed by circumlocution. His further, playful objection that not one of the letters that make up the derided expression is "a labial" also causes the reader to reflect on the notion that the relationship between language and the reality it is supposed to represent is arbitrary—the lips do not even come into play when we refer to one of their most meaningful actions. With such a feeble tool at his disposal as the English language, Thackeray is suggesting, he is at a distinct disadvantage in attempting to convey an accurate sense of reality.

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray also identifies another impediment that realist novels of the day faced in attempting to depict the whole truth about the world: the moralistic embargo on detailed descriptions of vice. Because Becky's tale involves a variety of offences against propriety, the text delicately avoids going into specifics about many of her doings. The need for decorum gives Thackeray occasion to comment on the hypocrisy involved in prohibiting novel writers from expounding on subjects that are accepted as a matter of course in the real world:

We must pass over a part of Mrs. Rebecca Crawley's biography with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands—the moral world, that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name. There are things we do and know perfectly well in *Vanity Fair*, though we never speak of them—as the Ahrimanians worship the devil, but don't mention him; and a polite public will no more bear to read an authentic description of vice than a truly refined English or American female will permit the word "breeches" to be pronounced in her chaste hearing. And yet, Madam, both are walking the world before our faces every day, without much shocking us. (618)

While Thackeray protests against this perceived discrepancy between what is morally acceptable in life and what is morally acceptable in fiction, many critics of his time and through the remainder of the nineteenth century maintained that separate standards are necessary because the ways that people respond to reality and to fiction are fundamentally different. In Vernon Lee's 1885 composition "A Dialogue on Novels," for example, it is argued that depictions of the vulgar aspects of life are inappropriate because a literary work is a distillation of reality presented directly to the intellect to be "assimilate[d] ... into our conscious ideas" (364). Therefore, the argument runs, vulgarity in fiction is not justified by a corresponding vulgarity in the world it depicts because "fiction *is* fiction. Because fiction can manipulate things as they are not manipulated by reality; because fiction addresses faculties which expect, require, a final summing up, a moral, a lesson, a something which will be treasured up, however unconsciously, as a generalization" (376).

As we have seen, Thackeray's interpretation of realism combines a determination to depict everyday life as he sees it with an emphatic awareness of the elements of bias and artifice inherent in his work; his earnest portrayal of the world is supplemented by

equally earnest observations about the art of narrative. He seeks to cultivate among his readers a consciousness of the discrepancy between the standards by which fictional characters and plots and real people and situations are respectively judged. Unlike the didactic quixote novelists discussed in the first chapter, however, his interest in the relationship between reality and novelistic content is motivated by the aesthetic purpose of promoting more rigorous reading and writing practices, rather than by the moral purpose of protecting people's lifestyles from the influence of fiction.

At the beginning of this chapter, I made reference to the two-pronged nature of Thackeray's concern with "humbug": his distaste for the artificial applies as much to the real-world *Vanity Fair's* general disregard for truth as it does to implausible literary conventions. I have focused on the latter prong up to this point, but, in concluding my study of Thackeray, I would like to turn my attention briefly to the first. The reason behind Thackeray's preoccupation with decrying the vanity, falseness, and insincerity that he perceives in society is that he is himself a staunch believer in the existence and value of certain absolute and fundamental truths—including love, morality, and God. Anthony Trollope, in discussing Thackeray's work, staunchly defends his friend against charges that he is a cynic by drawing a careful distinction between cynicism and satire. *Vanity Fair's* depiction of the false and wicked aspects of life, Trollope argues, is not intended to undermine the idea that people hold the potential to achieve "the true nobility which was dear to him" (*Thackeray* 95), but rather to fiercely expose the agents that corrupt our noble inclinations; therefore, he says, the word "cynic" is "as inappropriate to the writer as to the man" (*Thackeray* 207). Indeed, in his own writing, Thackeray does not imply that the odiousness he seeks to uncover in the characters of the novel is the

inevitable state of humanity, but only, to use his own words, of “a set of people living without God in the world” (qtd. in Dyson 17).

Thackeray’s indictment of the view that the world contains no absolute truths is most strongly conveyed in the passage of *Pendennis* that sees Pen defending his own newfound scepticism to Warrington. Pen argues that the world contains many layers of “truth,” which is “changed and modified constantly” (412), subject to development and decay. He scoffs at the way that “We admire this man as being a great philosopher, and set down the other as a dullard, not knowing either, or the amount of truth in either, or being certain of the truth anywhere” (413). Pen’s disbelief in the objective validity of various religions, philosophies, and moral standards meets with a scornful response on the part of his much wiser friend, who declares that he “had rather live in a wilderness of monkeys and listen to their chatter, than in a company of men who denied everything” (413). At the end of Pen’s disquisition on the indefinite nature of truth, it emerges that the whole tirade has been produced in defence of his decision to marry a woman for money rather than love; upon this revelation, Warrington exclaims, “This is the meaning of your scepticism, of your quietism, of your atheism, my poor fellow. You’re going to sell yourself, and Heaven help you!” (415). Implicit in Warrington’s disapproval of the proposition is Thackeray’s own unequivocal belief in the importance of love and the immorality of marrying for mercenary reasons, and his position is also made clear when the narrator comments deprecatingly, “it will be seen that the lamentable stage to which [Pen’s] logic at present has brought him, is one of general scepticism and sneering acquiescence in the world as it is” (414). Despite his depictions of the rampant falseness

that he perceives in “the world as it is,” Thackeray is obviously convinced of both the existence of objective truth and the importance of pursuing it.

In contrast, the writer whose ideas will be examined in the next chapter questions the existence of a firm division between truth and fiction, suggesting that many elements of what people accept as “reality” are in fact human inventions without any kind of objective validity. The aesthetic theories emerging in the late nineteenth century at the hands of Oscar Wilde reject altogether the truth-venerating tendency of Thackeray and other realists. Instead, they valorize lies, performances, and all other forms of fabrication—art, that is to say, for art’s sake.

IV. The Shifting Truths of Oscar Wilde

... [T]o him Life itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation.

-Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

Despite the enormous differences in the motivations behind and execution of their respective works, Thackeray and the quixote novelists have certain important commonalities in their dealings with the relationship between truth and fiction. One of these is a shared belief in the existence of an objective reality, or truth; another is the tendency to valorize this reality, whether for moral or aesthetic reasons, as the proper determinant of literature's subject and style. Oscar Wilde, in stark contrast, rejected these notions. In sparkling compositions that frequently substitute sophistry and rhetorical pyrotechnics for earnest and logical reasoning, he decries the artistic validity of realism, nature, and sincerity. This *fin-de-siècle* poster child of the aesthetic movement not only scoffed at the notion of absolute truth and touted the value of fantasy and artifice as literary techniques, he also argued that life itself should be governed according to these principles—as “the first, the greatest, of the arts” (*Dorian Gray* 94). In this chapter, I will describe Wilde's convoluted and often paradoxical theories about the nature of truth and fiction as they are set forth in the essays and dialogues published collectively under the title *Intentions* in 1891; I will then examine the perplexingly contradictory fashion in which these theories play out in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The destabilization of the categories of truth and fiction that runs as a thematic current through much of Wilde's writing is often reflected in the form of the writings

themselves. Many of his texts feature a marked interpenetration of fiction and art criticism, illustrating the very indeterminacy of purpose and belief that his theories uphold. Two of his major works of criticism, “The Critic as Artist” and “The Decay of Lying,” are structured as dialogues between fictional characters (Gilbert and Ernest in the former, and Cyril and Vivian in the latter), one of whom expounds theories about art while the other serves as a critical sounding board. By expressing his own aesthetic arguments through a dual fictional mouthpiece, Wilde introduces an element of uncertainty into our reading of his intentions and demonstrates his preference, examined more closely later in this chapter, for changeable poses rather than firm stances. Accordingly, Lawrence Danson understands Wilde’s use of the dialogue form as a technique that allows him to “take up and put down the masks” (37) by which he can rise above the dull monotony of human nature. On a practical level, the argument that truth is relative and transient is not best served by locking oneself into an unequivocal theoretical position, and, as Julia Prewitt Brown writes in *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art*, Wilde’s use of the dialogue also implicitly suggests “that *truth itself is contradictoriness*” (93).

This blurring of the boundaries between the genres of fiction and criticism is also visible in Wilde’s narrative prose. For example, the short story “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” embeds an elaborate theoretical reading of Shakespeare’s sonnets into a tale about an art forgery. Likewise, *Dorian Gray* is centrally concerned with questions about the nature and influence of art and fiction. In a letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer*, Wilde himself describes his novel as “an essay on decorative art,” explaining that “It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism” (247). Whether or not this concise summary

of the novel's purpose is entirely accurate or comprehensive, there is no doubt that the exploration of aesthetic theory forms a large part of its agenda.

The genre-bending quality of Wilde's fiction-framed criticism is the practical extension of one of his central arguments in "The Critic as Artist": that there is, in fact, no division between the creative and the critical faculties. "The antithesis between them," he writes, "is entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name." He goes on to explain that "there is no fine art without self-consciousness and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one" ("The Critic as Artist" 832). Beyond undermining the distinction between fictional and non-fictional modes of writing, this identification of creativity with "self-consciousness and the critical spirit" hints at a broader argument regarding the processes of understanding and self-definition through which individuals build their lives and identities. A person's critical faculties are employed daily in evaluating and responding to the people, events, and situations that he comes across in the real world. By equating self-consciousness, criticism, and art, Wilde plants the germ of the idea that the wilful evolution of a self-conscious and intellectually active individual results in something much akin to a work of art.

The Essays and Dialogues

As I have suggested above, Wilde's essays and dialogues outline a vision of the relationship between fiction and reality that is largely a reversal of the views expounded by Thackeray and the quixote novelists. In the quixote novels, the confusion of the realms of fantasy and reality is fraught with absurdity at best and danger at worst; inevitably,

these texts conclude by reasserting the boundaries between life and fiction, restoring the erring quixote figure, much chastened, to her “real” self. Thackeray, while recognizing that fictitious or affected attitudes and poses are a very real part of society itself, deplors this proliferation of artifice. In both cases, reality, with its correlates of honesty, sincerity, and truth, is regarded as the gold standard of moral and aesthetic value—and fiction, associated with falseness, insincerity, and lies, is admired mainly in proportion to its realism. From the Wildean perspective, however, beauty, rather than mundane truth, is the highest ideal, and the greatest beauty results from the deliberate creation of aesthetically pleasing form, which is alien to nature. Thus, in Wilde’s theories, artifice (which “The Decay of Lying” proudly and pointedly acclaims by its most pejorative name) supplants nature as the ultimate good.

At the most basic level, Wilde’s enthusiasm for the patently invented manifests itself in his staunchly anti-realist philosophy of fiction. The rejection of literary realism forms a major vein of “The Critic as Artist,” and it constitutes the very foundation of “The Decay of Lying”; in discussing the latter, Lawrence Danson comments that the question of realism is “the contemporary polemical context in which the essay has to be understood” (47). By the late nineteenth century, realism was firmly entrenched as the predominant mode of the novel, and Wilde’s views represent a departure from the status quo. In the same way that the opinions of early- to mid-century, pro-realist theorizers emerged in response to the heyday of romanticism, Wilde’s critical stances are rooted in a backlash against the success enjoyed by the realist movement. In “The Decay of Lying,” Vivian, who acts as the major representative of Wilde himself, says that he hopes

his article will prompt “a new renaissance of art” (778), and he begins his argument by explaining why such a rebirth is necessary.

Vivian takes as his starting point the type of thinking exemplified by the theories of Henry James, Wilde’s contemporary and critical opposite. James provides an extreme statement of the realist doctrine in his essay “The Art of Fiction,” asserting that “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (25). In Vivian’s assessment, “The loss that results to literature in general from this false ideal of our time can hardly be overestimated” (779). The consequence of the widely felt imperative to take the subject-matter of fiction directly from life, he argues, is that “the modern novelist provides us with dull facts under the guise of fiction” (779). Vivian (and, by extension, Wilde) thus characterizes realism as an unwelcome intrusion of the actual into the rightful territory of the fantastic. In “The Critic as Artist,” the Wilde-figure named Gilbert reiterates this rejection of reality as a suitable subject for fiction, explaining that “Whatever actually occurs is spoiled for art.... To be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic” (865). According to Wilde, therefore, insight, innovation, and the expression of the unexpected are the legitimate goals of art. As Vivian summarizes bluntly, “All bad art comes from returning to life and nature, and elevating them into ideals.... As a method Realism is a complete failure” (“D of L” 798-99).

A further notion about the appropriate origins of artistic inspiration that surfaces in both “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” is the idea that art should draw and expand upon matter already ensconced in the artistic tradition. “The proper school to learn art in is not life but art” (“D of L” 787), says Vivian, and Gilbert elaborates that

“The great artists, from Homer and Aeschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale” (“C as A” 839). This argument relates to the major reason for Wilde’s objection to the realist enterprise of imitating life, which is that the unrefined materials of life and nature lack aesthetic form and, consequently, are deficient in beauty and meaning. Elements appropriated from literary sources, Wilde suggests, are useful to the artist because in them the rough stuff of reality has already been translated into artistic convention (“D of L” 798-99); the imaginative medium has imbued the vulgar and formless with elegance and significance.

In an 1884 article, Robert Louis Stevenson writes, “The novel which is a work of art exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material ... but by its immeasurable difference from life, which is designed and significant, and is both the method and the meaning of the work” (“A Humble Remonstrance” 345). This critique of realism describes the characteristic of art that, in Wilde’s mind, is the quality that makes imaginative artistic products superior not only to realistic art, but also to reality itself: *form*. Throughout the dialogues, Wilde repeats the idea that art, by virtue of its consciously instilled form, is “more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon” (“C as A” 838). True aesthetic satisfaction, he feels, is derived from that which departs from the natural in, to use Stevenson’s words, a “designed and significant” fashion.

According to Wilde, nature itself is displeasing on an aesthetic level because it fails to be meaningful in a way that appeals to our intellectual sense of beauty. This argument is most explicitly delivered in “The Critic as Artist” when Gilbert declares,

“Life! Life! Don’t let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. It is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament” (851). Wilde thus suggests that, relative to art, which the mind designs in accordance with the demands of its own sensibilities and under conditions unfettered by the shackles of circumstance and possibility, nature appears fatally imperfect. His “artistic and critical temperament” craves a “correspondence of form and spirit”—which may be understood as the combination of a conscious purpose with the perfect expression of that purpose—that is simply not present in the arbitrary unfolding of life. In its carefully distilled and coherently stylized impressions of life, therefore, art provides a potent alternative to lived experience. As evidence of this power, Gilbert alludes to “books that can make us live more in one single hour than life can make us live in a score of shameful years” (“C as A” 850), and elsewhere he notes:

After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own.... I can fancy a man who had led a perfectly commonplace life, hearing by chance some curious piece of music, and suddenly discovering that his soul, without his being conscious of it, had passed through terrible experiences, and known fearful joys, or wild romantic loves, or great renunciations. (“C as A” 823)

“The Decay of Lying” also visits the idea that reality, in its uncultured amorphousness, is inferior to the smartly fashioned and purposeful realm of art. In his opening lines, Vivian asserts baldly, “What art really reveals to us is nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition.... Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place” (“D of L” 777). Wilde thus positions art as being prior to nature in our

comparative perceptions; where Thackeray and others take reality as the central standard against which art is measured, Wilde reverses the two. Throughout the dialogues, rather than reading art as a derivative of reality, he critiques reality as a failed aspirant to the status of art.

Due to its lack of innate form, therefore, unspoiled nature strikes Wilde as a thorough aesthetic failure. The dialogues do, however, provide for the possibility of its redemption by suggesting that the human intellect has the means to *impose* pleasing, artificial form upon life: through language, through postures, and through art-influenced modes of perception. Thus, life has the potential to rank alongside literature as one of “the two supreme and highest arts” (“C as A” 828) when a creative will applies itself to shaping the raw material provided by nature. Wilde writes, “The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age” (833). In referring to “the age,” a quantity that encompasses all the transient, artificial trappings that demarcate the different phases of mankind’s existence, Wilde evokes an aspect of reality that is undeniably a human invention. Further, he suggests that the spirit of the age is derived from the artistic creations that influence people’s behaviour and their perceptions of the world—from visual art, literature, and especially language, which is “the parent, and not the child, of thought” (“C as A” 834). As Gilbert declares, “Find expression for a sorrow, and it will become dear to you. Find expression for a joy, and you intensify its ecstasy. Do you wish to love? Use Love’s Litany, and the words will create the yearning from which the world fancies that they spring” (“C as A” 865). Thus, the idea that artistic innovation inaugurates corresponding changes in the reality of those

exposed to art is at the root of Wilde's famous statement that "Paradox though it may seem ... life imitates art far more than art imitates life" ("D of L" 789).

The two strands of his argument in support of this stance relate, respectively, to the imitative instincts of human beings and the role played by individual perception in defining reality. He suggests that "the true disciples of the great artist are not his studio-imitators, but those who become like his works of art" ("D of L" 790) by consciously or unconsciously patterning their behaviour after literary models. The basis of life, he argues, "is simply the desire for expression, and art is always presenting various forms through which the expression can be attained" ("D of L" 792). The examples that Wilde brings forward to illustrate his point range from the reasonable, to the intensely dubious, to the entirely fabricated. An example that falls into the first category is his reference to young boys who are inspired by the shenanigans of fictitious youths to "pillage the stalls of unfortunate apple-women, break into sweet-shops at night, and alarm old gentlemen ... by leaping out on them in suburban lanes, with black masks and unloaded revolvers" ("D of L" 790). Credulity is more strained by his suggestion that Hamlet invented "the pessimism that characterises modern thought" and "The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy" ("D of L" 790). His story about a friend named "Mr. Hyde" who finds himself caught up in a precise re-enactment of the opening scene of Stevenson's novel is manifestly not true—but, Vivian says, "it should have been" ("D of L" 791).

Cyril, Vivian's attentive listener, concedes that people's lives may follow patterns ordained by artistic precedent and defies him to demonstrate that nature does the same. Declaring himself to be "prepared to prove anything" ("D of L" 793), Vivian develops

his argument around the idea that nature imitates art because our experience of reality is defined by our perceptions: “what is nature?... She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing” (“D of L” 793). The distinction that Wilde draws between *looking* and *seeing* is at the heart of his reasoning here, gesturing to the division between the actual physical objects and phenomena that exist in nature and our experience of these objects and phenomena. The reality that he is interested in is not that of nature as it may exist outside of human perception, which seems to him crude and irrelevant; it consists rather of the world as it presents itself to the intellect. In the following passage, Vivian illustrates the importance of *seeing*—that is, of physical perception tempered by critical consciousness—in defining our reality:

At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till art had invented them.... Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold. (“D of L” 793)

In his essay “Art, Life and Reality,” David Novitz suggests that Wilde is inconsistent in this discussion of the London fogs, wavering back and forth on the question of whether objects exist regardless of whether or not we perceive them (Novitz 303). He also accuses him of being “unable to divorce his more innocuous epistemological claims about art (namely, that it influences our perception and shapes our behaviour) from the bolder, more strident, metaphysical claim that art is the source and causal origin of everything.” Wilde, Novitz continues, “hopelessly overstates his case by

contending that it [art] is causally responsible for everything” (304). It seems, however, that Novitz’s criticism springs at least partly from his having overlooked Wilde’s carefully drawn distinction between looking and seeing, and that his reading of the flippant, hyperbolic flourishes that abound in Wilde’s writing is too literal. In order for Vivian’s argument to make sense, we must realize that there are two simultaneous orders of reality in question here, exemplified by the physical fogs (looked at but not seen), which inflict colds on the uncultured, and the impressionistic fogs that are seen when nature comes to the attention of a cultured consciousness. It is the latter form of reality that holds significance for the aesthete. Wilde clearly acknowledges that unperceived fogs are real enough to exert palpable effects, but the reality that he is interested in is that which “quicken to life” in the mind. Nature undeniably exists, plodding reliably along without relevance, but it does not exist in any *important* sense until human thought imposes some form of meaning upon it. When understood in these terms, Wilde’s argument may remain highly debatable, but it is not the rhetorical failure that Novitz suggests.

Because of the role played by perception in determining reality as it exists for the individual mind, Wilde conceives of this reality as a variable and relative thing. According to the dialogues, there is no such thing as absolute truth either in life or in art, only artistic and moral standpoints. Any approach to viewing or structuring one’s reality is therefore legitimate, provided that it imposes some kind of form and meaning on life. In choosing an attitude or stance to adopt, sincerity and genuine conviction are immaterial. A pose is simply “a formal recognition of the importance of treating life from a definite and reasoned standpoint” (“C as A” 855), and, given the indeterminate nature

of truth, no such standpoint is more correct than any other. Correctness is not at issue; Wilde's goal is to bend reality into an aesthetically satisfying form and style.

His disregard for the notion of objective truth is reinforced in the essays and dialogues by repeated arguments against the value of consistency in criticism or elsewhere. According to "The Critic as Artist," the true critic will "always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty," but he "will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought or stereotyped mode of looking at things" (861). No single critical stance is more valid than any other; rather, "each mode of criticism is, in its highest development, simply a mood, and ... we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent" ("C as A" 859). Thus, the inconsistent and self-contradictory critic is more honest in his stance than he who supports a single, coherent view, because multiplicity is the closest approximation of truth. Caprice and flamboyant insincerity are represented as a laudable alternative to the more unimaginative and hypocritical practice of endorsing one arbitrarily chosen belief above all others. Accordingly, Gilbert argues that the true critic "will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions" and that "What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (861). Vivian of "The Decay of Lying" agrees, saying, "Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice. Not I. Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word 'Whim'" (778).

In accordance with this sentiment, Wilde concludes his essay "The Truth of Masks" with a resounding declaration that he is not above carrying out his principles

regarding inconsistency. After arguing at length in favour of staging Shakespeare's plays with careful attention to the historicity of costumes and sets, he writes:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.... The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks. (893)

As Lawrence Danson points out in *Wilde's Intentions*, "the retraction is not just a witty formal gesture: it states a real fact. Between the publication of the essay in its original form as 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume' (*Nineteenth Century*, May 1885) and revision for *Intentions* in 1891, Wilde had changed his mind, or reshuffled his terms" (60). Indeed, "The Truth of Masks" was published in *Intentions* alongside "The Decay of Lying," which argues explicitly and contrarily that art has no responsibility to be historically accurate ("D of L" 794-796).

The indeterminacy that Wilde identifies as being the proper state of criticism extends also to other areas that are customarily viewed in terms of absolutes. On the subject of morality, he writes, "Virtues! Who knows what virtues are? Not you. Not I. Not anyone" ("C as A" 846), and on the subject of religion, "The Creeds are believed, not because they are rational, but because they are repeated. Yes; form is everything. It is the secret of life." ("C as A" 865). Unlike Thackeray, who argues that objective and definable truths do exist, Wilde professes to understand reality as an irreducibly multifarious quantity, from which society arbitrarily selects particular instances to exalt as truth. Thus, he writes, "To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In

matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood" ("C as A" 860).

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Read as an extension of Wilde's theoretical writings, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is something of a paradox. While it contains and illustrates many of the same ideas about art that are present in the dialogues, these ideas are largely undermined by the overall tendency of the story itself. In particular, his claims about the indeterminate nature of truth, especially in matters relating to morality, are brought into question by the novel's dispensation of definite moral sanctions. The book's preface asserts that "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" and goes on to say, "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (vii). However, these claims are incongruously affixed to a novel with an unmistakable moral. *Dorian Gray* tells the tale of a man who carries Wilde's own theories about life and art to a lived extreme—and, disconcertingly enough, it frames the result as a horror story.

In some respects, the novel is perfectly consistent with its author's professed critical beliefs. In accordance with his anti-realist criticism, his appreciation for traditional literary paradigms, and his view that "The supreme pleasure in literature is to realise the non-existent" (Letter to the editor of the *St James's Gazette* 240), Wilde has fashioned in *Dorian Gray* a fantastic incarnation of the Faust legend. The young Dorian is captivated by the beauty of a portrait painted of him by his friend Basil Hallward. Under the influence of Lord Henry Wotton, who preaches a Wildean creed of amoral

individualism and the supremacy of art and beauty, Dorian reflects aloud that he would give his soul in order to remain young while the portrait grows old in his stead. Over the course of the following years, as Dorian is moulded by the will of Lord Henry into a living work of art and immerses himself in a career of dissipation, the picture becomes increasingly aged and hideous while Dorian remains perpetually unmarred by the ravages of time or sin. Ultimately, Dorian seeks to destroy the portrait and its evidence of his iniquitous life; however, as he plunges a knife into the canvas, he assumes his rightful loathsome appearance, and the portrait is restored to its original perfection. The subject of the novel thus belongs squarely to the realm of gothic fantasy, rather than to the realistic mode that Wilde scorns.

The critical themes of *Dorian Gray* are also consistent with those of the dialogues in that the narrator occasionally espouses theories and observations that might have been lifted directly from those very writings—and which, in some cases, duplicate them almost verbatim. This shift into the opinionated narrative voice is typically marked by a corresponding shift into the universalizing, present tense used in essay writing. At one point, for instance, the narrator describes fashion as that “by which what is really fantastic becomes for a moment universal” (94). This statement reflects the idea that the barrier between what is fantastic and what is real is far from impermeable, and that art really does govern life. The narrative departs on a more substantial tangent into Wilde’s own critical meanderings when it comments that civilized society

feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals.... For the canons of good society are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it. It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality, and should combine the insincere character of a romantic play with the wit and beauty that make such plays delightful to us. Is insincerity such a terrible

thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. (104)

This passage not only expresses Wilde's accustomed preoccupation with the importance of imposing form upon life, it does so using almost exactly the same words as "The Critic as Artist."³ Interestingly, following this pointed delving into the thoughts of the narrative or authorial "I," Wilde immediately moves to disown the comments by writing, "Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray's opinion" (104). This strange introduction of uncertainty to what begins as a bold assertion of one of Wilde's favourite views hints at the inconsistency that characterizes the relationship between the critical writings and *Dorian Gray*.

One of the perplexing features of the novel is the role played in it by Lord Henry Wotton. Of the characters in the novel, he represents the nearest embodiment of Wilde-as-critic, spouting countless theories and epigrams of the variety found in the essays and dialogues. Like Vivian and Gilbert, he advocates posing, inconsistency, and form, and he denies the existence of objective truths. However, given Henry's position in the story, his endorsement of these critical and philosophical propositions hardly comes across as sound evidence of their validity. As the instigator of Dorian's fatal pledge and his fall into dissipation, Lord Henry (or "Harry," as he is, significantly, called by Dorian) unmistakably acts the part of the devil figure in the Faust paradigm—the most dubious source of information imaginable.

³ Compare the final lines of this excerpt to the passage cited earlier from "The Critic as Artist," which reads, "What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (861).

As befits the fictional incarnation of Wilde's critical persona, Henry is the consummate poseur. At the beginning of the novel, Basil Hallward says to him, "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (4). Henry's aunt echoes this sentiment later in the book, when she comments to a friend, "He never means anything that he says" (28). Indeed, Henry's activities in the novel consist of a great deal of clever talk and no corresponding action; he is certainly not one of those "tedious people" derided in "The Decay of Lying" for carrying out their principles "to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice" ("D of L" 778). His ideas, in accordance with Wilde's idea of truly artistic criticism, are as brilliantly rendered as they are shallow, insincere, and transient. In the following passage, Wilde describes how, through a dazzling display of sophistry, Henry impresses his lunch companions by transforming a ludicrous epigram—the idea that "To get back one's youth, one has merely to repeat one's follies" (30)—into an almost credible philosophy of life:

He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure ... danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. Facts fled before her like frightened forest things. (30)

This bravura performance involves precisely the kind of insincerity, artistic flair, and disregard for truth that Vivian applauds in "the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind" ("D of L" 778). When one of Henry's lunch companions asks him if he means everything that he has said, Henry replies that he has quite forgotten it all (*DG* 31). Later, he summarily expresses his disregard for constancy of every kind when he says,

“Faithfulness is to the emotional life what consistency is to the life of the intellect— simply a confession of failure” (36).

He also shares Vivian’s and Gilbert’s views about art’s general superiority to life and the importance of form in generating meaning. At one point, Dorian quotes one of Henry’s maxims on the subject to Basil, saying, “If one doesn’t talk about a thing, it has never happened. It is simply expression, as Harry says, that gives reality to things” (79). This assertion is reminiscent of Vivian’s ruminations on the London fogs in “The Decay of Lying.” Similarly, Henry’s argument that people are naturally more moved by a Greek tragedy than by a real death because “the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style” (73) is a pseudo-logical extension of the observations made by Vivian and Gilbert about life’s unappealing lack of design.

Lord Henry’s opinions about the non-existence of an objective, external morality also parallel the views contained in the dialogues. These ideas are central to the contradiction that exists between *Dorian Gray* and the dialogues, because Dorian’s punishment ultimately implies that distinct categories of good and evil do exist. According to Lord Henry, however, moral standards are merely artificial constructs of a particular time and place, and that the highest good in fact comes of an individual’s being in harmony with his own desires. “Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one’s age,” he says, and he goes on to argue that “for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality” (57). Thus, he encourages Dorian to reject “the false ideals of our age” (16) in favour of a “new Hedonism” (17), and to follow his every whim with no regard for conventional morality, giving “form to

every feeling, expression to every thought, [and] reality to every dream” (13). Lord

Henry’s advice is strikingly similar in spirit to a passage spoken by Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist”:

What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. (835)

The speciousness of Lord Henry’s various opinions—many of which, as we have seen, are also central to Wilde’s other writings—is not implied merely by Dorian’s final downfall. On several occasions in the novel, Henry’s most ardent follower, Dorian himself, describes Henry’s influence as a seductive but nefarious factor in his life, referring to his arguments as “wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories” (56). Later, at the point in the novel when Dorian is closest to redemption, he makes the following resolution: “He would not see Lord Henry any more—would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward’s garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things” (67). Given the proximity between Henry’s and Wilde’s respective theories on a number of issues, the use of words such as “wrong,” “poisonous,” and “impossible” in descriptions of Lord Henry’s ideas confirms the deep uneasiness that exists in the relationship between *Dorian Gray* and the more theoretical works in the Wildean canon.

While Lord Henry plays the role of diabolical aesthetic theorist, Dorian Gray serves as the empirical test case for his theories. Not only is Dorian himself presented as a living work of art, shaped by Lord Henry’s influence, but he adopts to a practical

extreme his mentor's notions about the superiority of art over life. His inordinate devotion to art manifests itself first in a passionate love affair with a young Shakespearean actress named Sybil Vane and then in his destructive fascination with a book lent to him by Lord Henry.

Dorian's infatuation with Sybil Vane begins when he sees her playing in a dingy London theatre's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Steeped in Lord Henry's influence, he has internalized the Wildean view that literary constructs are "more marvellous, more enduring, and more true" ("C as A" 838) than any product of the real world and is captivated by the possibility of possessing in life one who embodies, chameleon-like, the superior aesthetic form of countless fictional heroines. Confessing his passion to Henry, Dorian comments that, while "Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination" (37), Sibyl "is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual" (40). From the beginning, therefore, he loves her because her talent as an actress allows the real Sibyl Vane to be subsumed in the fictitious roles she plays. Glorifying in the way that she brings works of art to life, Dorian exults, "Lips that Shakespeare taught to speak have whispered their secret in my ear. I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth" (55).

Thus, when Sibyl's newfound love awakens her to the vibrancy of life and, consequently, dulls her acting ability, Dorian's interest in her vanishes instantly. Informing her that he loved her because she "realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art" (63), and that without her art she is nothing, he breaks their engagement. Later that night, she kills herself. When Lord Henry visits Dorian the next day and tells him of her death, he counters Dorian's feelings of grief and

remorse with renewed assurances that Sibyl's life was worth far less than her art. He says, "Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are" (75). Cheered by Henry's insistence that Sibyl's mundane life was meaningless outside its relationship to art, Dorian resolves that when he thinks of her, it will be as "a wonderful tragic figure sent on to the world's stage to show the supreme reality of Love" (77).

In this way, Dorian consoles himself by denying the importance that is conventionally placed on human life. Instead, he embraces an extreme interpretation of the idea that art is more significant than life. Despite the fact that this belief in art's pre-eminence is a staple of Wilde's aesthetic philosophy, Dorian's dealings with Sybil Vane are by no means validated by the text. To the contrary, it is when he rejects the real Sybil, divested of the alluring veil of her art, that the fateful portrait first betrays traces of cruelty about the mouth (66). In a fashion that seems calculated to undermine one of Wilde's favourite maxims, therefore, Dorian's horrific downward spiral is effectively initiated by his excessive regard for art and corresponding disdain for reality.

The events of the second half of *Dorian Gray* are largely motivated by another instance of Dorian's moulding of life to suit his artistic sensibilities: his compulsive imitation of the actions and ideas contained in a "poisonous book" (DG 92) lent to him by Lord Henry. The significance of this book⁴ to Wilde's overall treatment of the relationship between fiction and reality is twofold. Firstly, the subject of the book is closely related to Lord Henry's (and Wilde's own) argument that all human values,

⁴ Dorian's "poisonous book" was identified by Wilde during his trial as Karl Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884), a major text of the Decadent movement (Hyde 130).

beliefs, and passions are artificial, arbitrary, and transient, fit to be tried on and discarded at will. The following passage describes its nature:

It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin. (91)

Experimenting indiscriminately with various forms, postures, and moods, the young Parisian is a figure consistent with Wilde's description in "The Critic as Artist" of the true aesthetic adventurer, who, "constant only to the principle of beauty in all things, will ever be looking for fresh impressions, winning from the various schools the secret of their charm, bowing, it may be, before foreign altars, or smiling, if it be his fancy, at strange new gods" ("C as A" 859). Through continual posturing, he frees himself from the monotonous bounds of a constant, natural character, in a way that is heartily advocated by the dialogues.

The second thematic function of Dorian's involvement with this book is to illustrate Wilde's contention, expressed in "The Decay of Lying," that living reflections of fictional types are "simply the inevitable result of life's imitative instinct" ("D of L" 790). "For years," the narrator informs us, "Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it" (92). The life of the young Parisian is a fictional realization of the theories that Lord Henry presents to Dorian at the beginning of *Dorian Gray*, and the

book's influence is an extension of Henry's. It is the chief force governing Dorian's behaviour from shortly after the death of Sibyl Vane until the end of the novel.

After Henry introduces him to the book, Dorian immediately begins to identify himself with its central character. According to the narrator, "The hero, the wonderful young Parisian ... became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (93). Thus, Dorian sets out to actualize this compelling fictional paradigm of existence, and he embraces as his own the young Parisian's quest to attain the most varied experience of life possible:

[H]e would often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature, abandon himself to their subtle influences, and then, having, as it were, caught their colour and satisfied his intellectual curiosity, leave them with that curious indifference that is not incompatible with a real ardour of temperament.... (96)

In his search for diverse perspectives on the world, Dorian flirts with models of belief ranging from Roman Catholicism to Mysticism to Darwinism, but, we are told, "he never [falls] into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system" (97). Ultimately, therefore, the philosophy that he has acquired from the poisonous book is founded on a rejection of the notion that truth exists in any absolute or enduring sense. According to this philosophy, the identity of an individual is also a composite and nebulous quantity:

[Dorian] used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion.... (104)

Given this belief in the multiplicity of all things, Dorian's borrowed program of experiential promiscuity involves no regard for conventional morality, which is predicated on the idea that there are fixed and objective standards of right and wrong. He therefore engages in countless unspecified criminal activities (many of which, it is hinted, involve a strong element of sexual perversion), and when Basil Hallward comes to warn him that people are speaking of him "as something vile and degraded" (109), Dorian shows him the grotesque state of the once-beautiful portrait and then stabs him to death.

Eventually, reality reasserts itself as an incontrovertible element in Dorian's artificial life. This avenging force initially takes the form of Sibyl's brother, James Vane, a sailor who is the very embodiment of artless plebeianism. Born to an actress, he "hate[s] his mother's affectations" (47) and "detest[s] scenes of every kind" (51), and he is therefore a most appropriate agent for the punishment of aesthetically motivated crimes. Happening across Dorian eighteen years after his sister's death, James determines to kill him; however, he himself is killed in a chance accident, and justice is miscarried. After his brush with death, Dorian resolves to change his ways, but the resolution comes too late. As an experiment, he performs a good deed and runs to see if doing so has relieved his portrait of some of its hideousness, but the only effect is that the picture sports a new hint of cunning and hypocrisy (163). Contemplating this development, Dorian reflects that the portrait "ha[s] been conscience" (164) to him, and he decides to destroy it. The result of this action is his own death. This harsh conclusion to his career of atheism implies that, to use Dorian's own rueful words, "The soul is a terrible reality" (158)—and that definite categories of good and evil do exist, after all.

Shortly before his final, fatal encounter with his portrait-conscience, Dorian says to Lord Henry, “you poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that. Harry, promise me that you will never lend that book to any one. It does harm” (160). Thus, it is made clear that Dorian’s downfall is directly linked to his enactment of a literary prototype. His emulation of the young Parisian illustrates Wilde’s argument that life imitates art in the sense that “one ha[s] ancestors in literature, as well as in one’s own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one [is] more absolutely conscious”(DG 105). On the surface, *Dorian Gray*’s picture of a reader becoming captivated by a fictional role is reminiscent of the quixote theme examined in the first chapter of this thesis. However, the influence that the poisonous book exerts over Dorian is fundamentally different from that experienced by the heroines of the female quixote novels, because it lacks the element of delusion. Unlike the quixote figures, whose application of fictional conventions to their own lives results from a literal inability to tell fiction from reality, Dorian consciously gives in to the impulse to pattern his life after a fictional model because it fascinates him. He views the young Parisian as an appealing formal type and imitates his behaviour as an aesthetic experiment. In short, he imitates him *because* he recognizes that this hero is a work of art, not due to a failure to recognize the fact.

The matter of the poisonous book plants yet another paradox in the way of unravelling the tangled relationship between *Dorian Gray* and Wilde’s other writings. Though both the content of the book and Dorian’s imitative appropriation of its precepts appear to be in perfect accord with many of the principles that Wilde expounds in the dialogues, the book is repeatedly described as a poisonous and evil force that helps to

drive Dorian to his horrific end. Because Lord Henry is responsible for giving the book to Dorian, its poisonous nature also emphasizes his problematic dual role as Wilde-figure and devil incarnate. Together with the tragic outcome of the Sibyl Vane episode, the destructive nature of the poisonous book, and the evil associations of the novel's resident aesthetic theorist, Dorian's final demise seems to undermine many of the ideas that Wilde himself stands for. Towards the end of the novel, Henry says to Dorian, "Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets" (160). Indeed, Dorian's life has been devoted to that pursuit of art and artifice so enthusiastically prescribed by Wilde's criticism, but he is ultimately faced with the (reality of the) reality that he has sought to deny.

Thus, *Dorian Gray* does have a moral, and to all appearances it is a moral that flies in the face of many ideas that Wilde advances in his criticism—including the oft-repeated argument that "The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" (Letter to the editor of the *St. James's Gazette*, 25 June 1890, 237). There are several possible ways of coming to terms with this contradiction, though most of them offer only a partial or imperfect explanation of Wilde's purpose in arranging his novel as he has.

In a letter to the editor of the *St. James's Gazette*, Wilde himself admits that "there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*" (26 June 1890, 240); he goes on to write, "Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book" (241). One reason why he has allowed himself to fall into this "artistic error" is suggested by further comments on the subject in his correspondence, where he says, "When I first conceived the idea of a

young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth ... I felt that, from an aesthetic point of view, it would be difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place” (Letter to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* 245). The moral element is here treated as something fundamental to the literary paradigm that Wilde has chosen to adapt; it is thus inherited by *Dorian Gray* as an integral part of the Faust legend, rather than being actively introduced by Wilde himself. While this idea may account for the existence of a moral in the story, however, it does not satisfactorily explain why Wilde has seen fit to achieve this moral by means of trampling his own critical views. Why are Dorian’s transgressions made to spring so directly from his adherence to such Wildean philosophies as those that are spouted by Lord Henry and contained in the poisonous book?

Perhaps the answer may be found in the way that these theories are implemented by Dorian—or rather, in the very fact that they *are* implemented. It could be that his fatal flaw is not his choice of philosophy, but the literalness with which he enacts it. We are told that “no theory of life seem[s] to him to be of any importance compared with life itself,” for “He [feels] keenly conscious of how barren all intellectual speculation is when separated from action and experiment” (*DG* 97). As a result of this need to translate theories out of the intellectual realm into that of lived experience, Dorian may be one of those whom Vivian derides as “the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice” (“D of L” 778). Where Lord Henry, as we have seen, restricts the expression of his amoral proclivities entirely to the verbal and theoretical sphere, Dorian puts them into effect in the real world. At one point, he declares of one of Henry’s flippant aphorisms about love and marriage, “I am putting

it into practice, as I do everything that you say” (34), and this statement tidily summarizes the failing for which, perhaps, Wilde ultimately punishes him: his inability to be content with drawing experience from art alone. This argument is supported by evidence found in Wilde’s other writings, where the idea that art, rather than life, is the proper, sterile arena for experiencing various sensations and emotions crops up several times. In “The Critic as Artist,” for instance, Gilbert argues explicitly that “nothing that one can imagine is worth doing, and ... one can imagine everything” (851). We must go to art for everything, he says, because life “makes us pay too high a price for its wares, and we purchase the meanest of its secrets at a cost that is monstrous and infinite” (851). Elsewhere, in his own voice, Wilde also states, “It is proper that limitations should be placed on action. It is not proper that limitations should be placed on art” (Letter to the editor of the *St. James’s Gazette*, 27 June 1890, 243).

Dorian’s literal enactment of Lord Henry’s artfully drawn theories may also constitute a transgression against Wilde’s idea of the importance of individualism, and this idea is inherent in *Dorian Gray* itself. Early in the novel, Henry ironically informs Dorian,

There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view.... [T]o influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions.... He becomes an echo of some one else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. (13)

In the context of this passage, Dorian’s story can be read, not as that of an individual’s self-realization in the face of society’s artificial mores, but as the chronicle of his obliteration by a more powerful personality. There is no doubt that he becomes the

receptacle for his mentor's every thought, and Lord Henry is diabolically conscious of the fact. At one point he reflects,

There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume: there was a real joy in that.... (26)

However, the notion that the uninfluenced development of an individual's "natural thoughts" and "natural passions" is part of life's ultimate purpose appears itself to be strongly at odds with Wilde's professed disdain for nature and penchant towards art and artifice of every kind.

Thus, it seems that the inconsistencies presented by *Dorian Gray* might be best understood as evidence of its author's stance on the legitimacy of paradox and inconsistency in all artistic and critical endeavours. The prevalence of this theme in Wilde's criticism has already been discussed at some length earlier in this chapter; it surfaces again in *Dorian Gray*, concisely expressed by a minor character who attends the luncheon where Lord Henry shows off his virtuosity at proving the patently absurd. Mr. Erskine of Treadley, described as a quiet "old gentleman of considerable charm and culture" (27), responds to Henry's performance by saying, "the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When the Verities become acrobats we can judge them" (29). Treadley's summation may be the most appropriate tagline not only for the conflicted relationship between *Dorian Gray* and the dialogues, but for Oscar Wilde's own existence.

Wilde did not merely theorize that life should be a work of art, in which beauty and creativity are the only measures of value and all truths are relative. He also behaved as though this were the case, inventing himself as the supreme embodiment of affectation and whimsy. However, his affection for posing and contemptuous dismissal of moral standards did not go over well with a number of his contemporaries; the world does not gladly tolerate one who denies the ambient beliefs of his time. Ultimately, as Bruce B. Clark suggests, “the philosophy that poisoned Dorian ... destroyed Wilde also” (247), both as it was lived and as it was expressed on paper. With their unapologetic rejection of conventional truths, Wilde’s irreverent compositions served as evidence for the prosecution in his trial for gross indecency—the outcome of which sealed his well-known and tragic fate.

V. Conclusion

Mere words! Was there anything so real as words?

-Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

The rhetorical question that I have appropriated for the epigraph to my conclusion provides a tidy—albeit decidedly oversimplified—summary of the issue binding together the various fictions that have been examined in the foregoing pages. The thread connecting these works is their intense thematic concern with the nature of fiction itself: its conventions, its value, and, most importantly, how it relates (or should relate) to reality. Frequently, the authors of these texts have invested them with implications about the production and consumption of fiction that extend beyond the realm of literature to address the dichotomy between truth and untruth more generally.

The didactic quixote novels discussed in the first chapter demonstrate a concern with the effect of fiction on readers' perception of reality; this concern is chiefly moralistic in its motivation. Emerging in response to the proliferation of popular romantic and sentimental fiction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the "female quixote" theme reflects the anxiety that impressionable readers might lose sight of the fictionality of fiction and attempt to apply its romantic precepts to their own lives. The chief threat perceived in this possibility was that women's virtue might be compromised through their rejection of the model of companionate love and marriage that was endorsed by society as one of the world's incontrovertible realities. Thus, the quixotic "heroines" of writers such as Tabitha Gilman Tenney, Charlotte Dacre, and Sarah Green are brought by their romantic credulity to suffer misery and degradation; they are

emblems of the moral danger attendant on the confusion of fiction and reality, or lies and truth.

In their more comedic renditions of the quixote theme, Eaton Stannard Barrett and Jane Austen also emphasize the disparity between reality and the conventions of romance, but their interest in the subject is more artistically than morally motivated. Rather than extending to their readers a warning about the dangers posed to life by the uncritical consumption of fiction, Barrett and Austen offer textually self-conscious interpretations of the quixote paradigm that underscore the negative effects of absurd romantic excesses on the quality and status of fiction itself.

As one of the major realist authors of the mid-century, William Thackeray is similarly concerned with promoting realism in fiction for fiction's own sake, rather than for moralistic reasons. Where the didactic quixote novelists caution their readers against attempting to apply fictional models of the world to lived reality, Thackeray attempts to deter his readers from approaching fiction itself with an uncritically accepting attitude towards fictional convention. His own realistic novels are therefore interspersed with episodes of commentary designed to draw attention to the relative verisimilitude of his own writing, as well as to point out the places where it lapses unavoidably into the realm of the improbable. Thackeray's enthusiasm for realism in fiction is an extension of his love of truth in life; while his literary-critical interludes demonstrate his distaste for fiction of an overly fantastic cast, the content of his novels broadcasts his coincident disgust with the artificiality that he perceives in the society he christens "Vanity Fair."

Thus, the didactic female quixote novelists deride unrealistic fiction for its potentially destructive influence on readers' lives, and Thackeray, an advocate of truth in

any context, criticizes its low standard of credibility from an aesthetic standpoint. In contrast, Oscar Wilde's discussions of the relationship between fiction and reality valorize imaginative fictions as being more aesthetically satisfying, and therefore *better*, than realistic fictions. His perspective therefore represents a complete reversal of those discussed in the first two chapters, which range from belittling fiction entirely to valuing it only insofar as it resembles reality or propounds accepted truths. Wilde's championing of artifice and the unnatural extends beyond a simple rejection of realism in fiction, representing also his stance on life beyond literature and the traditional arts; he argues that life is given beauty and significance through the imposition of artifice. What is more, rather than trying to divorce his concept of fiction from any negative associations with lying and posturing, he explicitly endorses these forms of fabrication as means of introducing creativity and invention into daily life. By suggesting that life is itself an art form, and that such socially accepted "realities" as religions and systems of morality are made up of arbitrary beliefs that come and go with the tides of fashion, Wilde questions the very categories of truth and fiction that underpin the arguments of the earlier writers. His theories regarding the nebulous nature of truth are played out in the contradictory relationships that exist among many of his own writings.

As we have seen, the writings of nineteenth-century novelists offer a variety of implicit responses to the question that heads this chapter. These range from the didactic quixote novelists' emphatic insistence that mere words must never be mistaken for reality; to Thackeray's belief that words must aspire, however unsuccessfully, to approximate the real as best they can; to Wilde's view that the only important reality is constituted by the cleverest words being spoken or written at a given moment. Whether it

was conceived in moral or aesthetic terms, the fiction-reality divide thus provided a rich vein of matter to the pens of the contrivers of nineteenth-century fiction.

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