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Edited By

# DOROTHY J. HALE

*An Anthology of Criticism and Theory  
1900–2000*

 **Blackwell  
Publishing**

PB256

100

The  
Novel

# 36

## The Implied Reader

*Wolfgang Iser*

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Wolfgang Iser was born in Marienberg, Germany, and educated at the universities of Leipzig, Tübingen, and Heidelberg, where he received his Ph.D. in 1950. After teaching English literature at the universities of Glasgow, Heidelberg, Würzburg, and Cologne, Iser joined the new University of Konstanz, where he remained from 1967 until 1991; since 1978 Iser has also taught at the University of California, Irvine. Together with Hans Robert Jauss, Iser developed what became known as the "Konstanz School" of reception theory, which holds that reading is an interactive experience. Iser articulated this idea in *Der implizite Leser* (1972; translated as *The Implied Reader*, 1974), and *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer* (1976; translated as *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 1978). In his more recent work, including *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989), and *The Range of Interpretation* (2000), Iser (who now writes in English) has expanded his focus to consider the effect of reading and the nature of readers. Iser is a Fellow of the Heidelberg Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Academia Europea, an Honorary Foreign Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the recipient of the Werner Heisenberg Medal.

From *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974 (1972), from ch. 5, pp. 101–20. Copyright © 1974 by the Johns Hopkins University Press. Reprinted with permission of the Johns Hopkins University Press.

## The Reader as a Component Part of the Realistic Novel: Esthetic Effects in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*

### I

"You must have your eyes forever on your Reader. That alone constitutes... Technique!"<sup>1</sup> Ford Madox Ford's exhortation to the novelist draws attention to one of the few basic rules that have governed the novel throughout its relatively short history. This awareness as a prerequisite for steering the reader has always exerted a fundamental influence on the form of the narrative. From the start the novel as a 'genre' was virtually free from traditional constraints and so the novelists of the eighteenth century considered themselves not merely as the creators of their works but also as the law-makers.<sup>2</sup> The events they devise also set out the standards regarded as necessary for judging the events; this is shown clearly by Defoe and Richardson in their prefaces and commentaries, and especially by Fielding in the innumerable essays with which he permeates his narrative. Such interventions are meant to indicate how the author wants his text to be understood, and also to make the reader more deeply aware of those events for the judgment of which his own imagination has to be mobilized. With the author manipulating the reader's attitude, the narrator becomes his own commentator and is not afraid to break into the world he is describing in order to provide his own explanations. That this is a deliberate process is demonstrated by a sentence from Fielding's *Tom Jones*: "And this, as I could not prevail on any of my actors to speak, I myself was obliged to declare."<sup>3</sup>

And so the novel as a form in the eighteenth century is shaped by the dialogue that the author wishes to conduct with his reader. This simulated relationship gives the reader the impression that he and the author are partners in discovering the reality of human experience. In this reader-oriented presentation of the world, one can see an historical reflection of the period when the possibility of a priori knowledge was refuted, leaving fiction as the only means of supplying the insight into human nature denied by empirical philosophy.

The author-reader relationship, which was thus developed by the eighteenth-century novel, has remained a constant feature of narrative prose and is still in evidence even when the author seems to have disappeared and the reader is deliberately excluded from comprehension. While Fielding offers this reassurance to his readers: "I am, indeed, set over them for their own good only, and was created for their use, and not they for mine,"<sup>4</sup> Joyce, at the other end of the scale drops only the ironic information that the author has withdrawn behind his work, "paring his fingernails."<sup>5</sup> The reader of modern novels is deprived of the assistance which the eighteenth-century writer had given him in a variety of devices ranging from earnest exhortation to satire and irony. Instead, he is expected to strive for himself to unravel the mysteries of a sometimes strikingly obscure composition. This development reflects the transformation of the very idea of literature, which seems to have ceased to be a means of relaxation and even luxury, making demands now on the capacity of understanding because the world presented seems to have no bearing on what the reader is familiar with. This change did not happen suddenly. The stages of transition are clearly discernible in the

nineteenth century, and one of them is virtually a half-way point in the development: the so-called 'realistic' novel. An outstanding example of this is Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Here, the author-reader relationship is as different from the eighteenth-century 'dialogue' as it is from the twentieth-century demand that the reader find for himself the key to a many-sided puzzle. In Thackeray, the reader does have to make his own discoveries, but the author provides him with unmistakable clues to guide him in his search.

The first stage in our discussion must be to modify the term 'author'. We should distinguish, as Wayne Booth does in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, between the man who writes the book (author), the man whose attitudes shape the book (implied author), and the man who communicates directly with the reader (narrator): "The 'implied author' chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read;... he is the sum of his own choices.... This implied author is always distinct from the 'real man' - whatever we may take him to be - who creates a superior version of himself, a 'second self', as he creates his work."<sup>6</sup> The narrator, of course, is not always to be identified with the implied author. In the novels of the nineteenth century it happens again and again that the narrator moves even further and further away from the implied author by virtue of being an actual character in the story itself. Traces of this kind of narrator are already apparent in Dickens's novels, and in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* he is a complete character in his own right. It is almost as if the implied author, who devised the story, has to bow to the narrator, who has a deeper insight into all the situations. What the implied author describes is interpreted by the narrator to a degree far beyond what one might normally deduce from the events. One is bound to ask the purpose of this clear though sometimes complex separation between narration and commentary, especially in a 'realistic' novel which is supposed to represent reality as it is. The justification lies in the fact that even a realistic novel cannot encompass total reality. As Arnold Bennett once remarked: "You can't put the whole of a character into a book."<sup>7</sup> If the limitations of the novel are such that one cannot reveal a complete character, it is even more impossible to try to transcribe complete reality. And so even a novel that is called realistic can present no more than particular aspects of a given reality, although the selection must remain implicit in order to cloak the author's ideology.

### II

Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is also governed by this principle, which is clearly reflected by the different titles of the original version and the final one. The first, consisting of eight chapters, was called "Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society," indicating that the reality described was meant primarily as a reproduction of social situations; the final version, "Vanity Fair," is concerned less with depicting social situations than with offering a judgment of them. This quality is commented on by Thackeray himself in a letter written a few years after the publication of *Vanity Fair*: "...the Art of Novels is... to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality - in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically."<sup>8</sup> "Sentiment of reality" implies that the novel does not

represent reality itself, but aims rather at producing an idea of how reality can be experienced. Thus *Vanity Fair* not only offers a panorama of contemporary reality but also reveals the way in which the abundance of details has been organized, so that the reader can participate in the organization of events and thus gain the "sentiment of reality." This is the reason why the novel continues to be effective even today, though the social conditions it describes are only of historical interest. If the past has been kept alive, this is primarily due to the structural pattern through which the events are conveyed to the reader: the effect is gained by the interplay between the implied author who arranges the events, and the narrator who comments on them. The reader can only gain real access to the social reality presented by the implied author, when he follows the adjustments of perspective made by the narrator in viewing the events described. In order to ensure that the reader participates in the way desired, the narrator is set up as a kind of authority between him and the events, conveying the impression that understanding can only be achieved through this medium. In the course of the action, the narrator takes on various guises in order to appear as a fully developed character and in order to control the distance from which the reader has to view the scenes unfolded before him.

At the start of the novel, the narrator introduces himself as "Manager of the Performance,"<sup>9</sup> and gives an outline of what the audience is to expect. The ideal visitor to 'Vanity Fair' is described as a "man with a reflective turn of mind";<sup>10</sup> this is an advance indication of what the reader has to accomplish, if he is to realize the meaning of the proceedings. But at the same time, the Manager promises that he has something for everyone: "Some people consider Fairs immoral altogether, and eschew such, with their servants and families: very likely they are right. But persons who think otherwise, and are of a lazy, or a benevolent, or a sarcastic mood, may perhaps like to step in for half an hour, and look at the performances. There are scenes of all sorts: some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business."<sup>11</sup> In this way the Manager tries to entice all different types of visitors to enter his Fair – bearing in mind the fact that such a visit will also have its after-effects. When the reader has been following the narrator for quite some time, he is informed: "This, dear friends and companions, is my amiable object – to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private."<sup>12</sup> But the reader will only feel miserable after walking through the Fair if, unexpectedly, he has come upon himself in some of the situations, thereby having his attention drawn to his own behavior, which has shone out at him from the mirror of possibilities. The narrator is only pretending to help the reader – in reality he is goading him. His reliability is already reduced by the fact that he is continually donning new masks: at one moment he is an observer<sup>13</sup> of the Fair, like the reader; then he is suddenly blessed with extraordinary knowledge, though he can explain ironically that "novelists have the privilege of knowing everything";<sup>14</sup> and then, toward the end, he announces that the whole story was not his own at all,<sup>15</sup> but that he overheard it in a conversation.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of the novel the narrator is presented as Manager of the Performance, and at the end he presents himself as the reporter of a story which fell into his hands purely by chance. The further away he stands from the social reality depicted, the

clearer is the outline of the part he is meant to play. But the reader can only view the social panorama in the constantly shifting perspectives which are opened up for him by this Protean narrator. Although he cannot help following the views and interpretations of the narrator, it is essential for him to understand the motivations behind this constant changing of viewpoints, because only the discovery of the motivations can lead to the comprehension of what is intended. Thus the narrator regulates the distance between reader and events, and in doing so brings about the esthetic effect of the story. The reader is given only as much information as will keep him oriented and interested, but the narrator deliberately leaves open the inferences that are to be drawn from this information. Consequently, empty spaces are bound to occur, spurring the reader's imagination to detect the assumption which might have motivated the narrator's attitude. In this way, we get involved because we react to the viewpoints advanced by the narrator. If the narrator is an independent character, clearly separated from the inventor of the story, the tale of the social aspirations of the two girls Becky and Amelia takes on a greater degree of objectivity, and indeed one gains the impression that this social reality is not a mere narration but actually exists. The narrator can then be regarded as a sort of mediator between the reader and the events, with the implication that it is only through him that the social reality can be rendered communicable in the first place.

### III

The narrator's strategy can be seen even more clearly in his relations with the characters in the novel and with the reader's expectations. *Vanity Fair* has as the subtitle, *A Novel without a Hero*, which indicates that the characters are not regarded as representing an ideal, exemplary form of human conduct, as established by the conventions of the eighteenth-century novel. Instead, the reader's interest is divided between two figures who, despite the contrast in their behavior, can under no circumstances be regarded as complementary or even corrective. For Becky, no price is too high for the fulfillment of her social ambitions; her friend Amelia is simple and sentimental. And so right at the beginning we are told:

As she is not a heroine, there is no need to describe her person; indeed I am afraid that her nose was rather short than otherwise, and her cheeks a great deal too round and red for a heroine; but her face blushed with rosy health, and her lips with the freshest of smiles, and she had a pair of eyes which sparkled with the brightest and honestest good-humour, except indeed when they filled with tears, and that was a great deal too often; for the silly thing would cry over a dead canary-bird; or over a mouse, that the cat haply had seized upon; or over the end of a novel, were it ever so stupid.<sup>17</sup>

The details of such a description serve only to trivialize those features that were so important in the hero or heroine of the traditional novel. These details give the impression that something significant is being said about the person described, but the succession of clichés, from the round red cheeks and sparkling eyes to the soft-hearted sentimentality, achieve their purpose precisely by depriving the character of its repre-

sentative nature. But if Amelia is deprived of traditional representative qualities and is not to be regarded as the positive counterpart to the unscrupulous, sophisticated Becky, then the novel denies the reader a basic focal point of orientation. He is prevented from sympathizing with the hero – a process which till now had always provided the nineteenth-century reader with his most important means of access to the events described – as typified by the reaction of a reviewer to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: "We took up *Jane Eyre* one winter's evening, somewhat piqued at the extravagant commendations we had heard, and sternly resolved to be as critical as Croker. But as we read on we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, *Vanity Fair* seems bent on breaking any such direct contact with the characters, and indeed the narrator frequently goes out of his way to prevent the reader from putting himself in their place.

This occurs predominantly through the narrator's comments on the particular patterns of behavior developed by Amelia and Becky in critical situations. He reveals the motives behind their utterances, interpolating consequences of which they themselves are not aware, so that these occasions serve to uncover the imbalance of the characters.<sup>19</sup> Often the behavior of the characters is interpreted far beyond the scope of the reactions shown and in the light of knowledge which at best could only have been revealed by the future.<sup>20</sup> In this way the reader is continually placed at a distance from the characters. As Michel Butor once pointed out, in a different context: "If the reader is put in the place of the hero, he must also be put in the hero's immediate present; he cannot know what the hero does not know, and things must appear to him just as they appear to the hero."<sup>21</sup> In *Vanity Fair*, however, the characters are illuminated by a knowledge to which they themselves have no access. They are constantly kept down below the intellectual level of the narrator, whose views offer the reader a far greater stimulus to identification than do the characters themselves. This detachment from the characters is part of the narrator's avowed intention: "... as we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them, but occasionally 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."<sup>22</sup> The characters in this novel are completely hedged in by such judgments, and the reader sees all their actions only when they have been refracted by the narrator's own critical evaluations. The immensity of his presence makes it impossible for the reader to live their lives with them, as did the reviewer we have quoted, during his reading of *Jane Eyre*. The actual gap between the characters' actions and the narrator's comments stimulates the reader into forming judgments of his own – thereby bridging the gaps – and gradually adopting the position of critic himself.

It is mainly this intention that shapes the composition of the characters, and there are two dominant techniques to be observed. The first part of the novel reproduces letters which Becky and Amelia write to each other. The letter makes it possible to reveal the most intimate thoughts and feelings to such a degree that the reader can learn from the correspondents themselves just who they are and what makes them 'tick'. A typical example is Becky's long letter telling Amelia all about her new surroundings

at the Crawley family's country seat. Becky's impressions end with the spontaneous self-revelation: "I am determined to make myself agreeable."<sup>23</sup> Fitting in with present circumstances remains her guiding principle throughout her quest for social advancement. Such a wish is so totally in keeping with her own character that the maneuvers necessary for its fulfillment constitute for Becky the natural way to behave. Thus we see that in society, self-seeking hypocrisy has become second nature to man. In the letters, however, Becky's self-esteem remains so constant that she is clearly quite unaware of her two-facedness. The obvious naiveté of such self-portraits is bound to provoke the reader into critical reaction, and the heading of the chapter that reproduces Becky's letter is already pointing in this direction, for the unmistakably ironic title is: "Arcadian Simplicity."<sup>24</sup> Thus the self-revelation of the letter actually justifies the narrator for not taking the character as it is, but setting it at a critical distance so that it can be seen through. Elsewhere we read: "Perhaps in *Vanity Fair* there are no better satires than letters."<sup>25</sup> But the intention of the satire is for the reader himself to uncover, for the narrator never offers him more than ironic clues. The narrator's keen concern to give the impression that he never commits himself to ultimate clarity reveals itself at those times when he accidentally reaches an 'understanding' with his reader, but then remembers that such an exchange of experiences goes beyond the limits of his narrative: "... but we are wandering out of the domain of the story."<sup>26</sup>

The second technique designed to rouse the critical faculties of the reader is revealed in Amelia's almost obsessive habit of "building numberless castles in the air... which Amelia adorned with all sorts of flower-gardens, rustic walks, country churches, Sunday schools, and the like."<sup>27</sup> This day-dreaming is typical of Amelia,<sup>28</sup> who devises these beautiful visions as an escape from the narrow confines of her social existence. Her whole outlook is governed by expectations that generally arise out of chance events in her life and are therefore as subject to fortuitous change as the social situations she gets into. The dependence of these often very sentimental day-dreams on the circumstances of the moment shows not only the fickleness of her behavior but also the disoriented nature of her desires, the fulfillment of which is inevitably frustrated by the apparently superior forces of her environment. The projection of hopes which cannot be realized leads to an attitude which is as characteristic of Amelia as it is of Becky, who for different motives also covers up what she really is, in order to gain the social position she hankers after.<sup>29</sup> Despite the difference in their motives, both Amelia's and Becky's lives are largely governed by illusions, which are shown up for what they are by the fact that whenever they are partially realized, we see how very trivial the aspirations really were.<sup>30</sup> The characters themselves, however, lack this awareness, and this is hardly surprising, as their ambitions or longings are often roused by chance occurrences which are not of sufficient lasting importance to give the characters a true sense of direction. Becky certainly has greater drive in her quest for social advancement, and one would therefore expect a greater degree of continuity in her conduct; but this very ambition requires that she should adapt her conduct to the various demands made by the different strata of society; and this fact in turn shows how malleable and therefore illusory are the conventions of social life. What is presented in Becky's life as continuity should not be confused with the aspirations of the eighteenth-century hero, who went forth in order to find out the truth about himself; here it is the expression of the many-sided sham which is the very attribute of social reality.

When the narrator introduces his characters at the beginning of the novel, he says of Becky: "The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire."<sup>31</sup> As the characters cannot free themselves from their illusions, it is only to be expected that they should take them for unquestionable reality. The reader is made aware of this fact by the attitude of the narrator, who has not only seen through his 'puppets', but also lets them act on a level of consciousness far below his own. This almost overwhelming superiority of the narrator over his characters also puts the reader in a privileged position, though with the unspoken but ever-present condition that he should draw his own conclusions from the extra knowledge imparted to him by the narrator. There is even an allegory of the reader's task at one point in the novel, when Becky is basking in the splendor of a grand social evening:

The man who brought her refreshment and stood behind her chair, had talked her character over with the large gentleman in motley-coloured clothes at his side. Bon Dieu! it is awful, that servants' inquisition! You see a woman in a great party in a splendid saloon, surrounded by faithful admirers, distributing sparkling glances, dressed to perfection, curled, rouged, smiling and happy: — Discovery walks respectfully up to her, in the shape of a huge powdered man with large calves and a tray of ices — with Calumny (which is as fatal as truth) behind him, in the shape of the hulking fellow carrying the wafer-biscuits, Madam, your secret will be talked over by those men at their club at the public-house to-night. . . . Some people ought to have mutes for servants in *Vanity Fair* — mutes who could not write. If you are guilty, tremble. That fellow behind your chair may be a Janissary with a bow-string in his plush breeches pocket. If you are not guilty, have a care of appearances: which are as ruinous as guilt.<sup>32</sup>

This little scene contains a change of standpoints typical of the way in which the reader's observations are conditioned throughout this novel. The servants are suddenly transformed into allegorical figures with the function of uncovering what lies hidden beneath the façades of their masters. But the discovery will only turn into calumny from the standpoint of the person affected. The narrator compares the destructive effect of calumny with that of truth and advises his readers to employ mutes, or better still illiterate mutes, as servants, in order to protect themselves against discovery. Then he brings the reader's view even more sharply into focus, finally leaving him to himself with an indissoluble ambiguity: if he feels guilty, because he is pretending to be something he is not, then he must fear those around him as if they were an army of Janissaries. If he has nothing to hide, then the social circle merely demands of him to keep up appearances; but since this is just as ruinous as deliberate hypocrisy, it follows that life in society imposes roles on all concerned, reducing human behavior to the level of play-acting. All the characters in the novel are caught up in this play, as is expressly shown by the narrator's own stage metaphor at the beginning and at the end. The key word for the reader is 'discover', and the narrator continually prods him along the road to discovery, laying a trail of clues for him to follow. The process reveals not only the extent to which Becky and Amelia take their illusions for reality but also — even more strikingly — the extent to which reality itself is illusory, since it is built on the simulated relationships between people. The reader will not fail to notice the gulf between 'illusion' and 'reality', and in realizing it, he is experiencing the esthetic effect of the novel: Thackeray did not set out to create the conventional illusion that involved the

reader in the world of the novel as if it were reality; instead, his narrator constantly interrupts the story precisely in order to prevent such an illusion from coming into being. The reader is deliberately stopped from identifying himself with the characters. And as the aim is to prevent him from taking part in the events, he is allowed to be absorbed only to a certain degree and is then jerked back again, so that he is impelled to criticize from the outside. Thus the story of the two girls serves to get the reader involved, while the meaning of the story can only be arrived at by way of the additional manipulations of perspective carried out by the narrator.

This 'split-level' technique conveys a far stronger impression of reality than does the illusion which claims that the world of the novel corresponds to the whole world. For now the reader himself has to discover the true situation, which becomes clearer and clearer to him as he gets to know the characters in their fetters of illusion. In this way, he himself takes an active part in the animation of all the characters' actions, for they seem real to him because he is constantly under obligation to work out all that is wrong with their behavior. In order that his participation should not be allowed to slacken, the individual characters are fitted out with different types and degrees of delusion, and there are even some, like Dobbin, whose actions and feelings might mislead one into taking them for positive counterparts to all the other characters. Such a false assumption is certainly perceived, even if not intended, by the narrator, who toward the end of the novel addresses the reader as follows: "This woman [i.e., Amelia] had a way of tyrannising over Major Dobbin (for the weakest of all people will domineer over somebody), and she ordered him about, and patted him, and made him fetch and carry just as if he was a great Newfoundland dog. . . . This history has been written to very little purpose if the reader has not perceived that the Major was a spooney."<sup>33</sup> What might have seemed like noble-mindedness was in fact the behavior of a nincompoop, and if the reader has only just realized it, then he has not been particularly successful in the process of 'discovering'.

The esthetic effect of *Vanity Fair* depends on activating the reader's critical faculties so that he may recognize the social reality of the novel as a confusing array of sham attitudes, and experience the exposure of this sham as the true reality. Instead of being expressly stated, the criteria for such judgments have to be inferred. They are the blanks which the reader is supposed to fill in, thus bringing his own criticism to bear. In other words, it is his own criticism that constitutes the reality of the book. The novel, then, is not to be viewed as the mere reflection of a social reality, for its true form will only be revealed when the world it presents has, like all images, been refracted and converted by the mind of the reader. *Vanity Fair* aims not at presenting social reality, but at presenting the way in which such reality can be experienced. "To convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality" is Thackeray's description of this process, which he regarded as the function of the novel. If the sense of the narrative can only be completed through the cooperation of the reader (which is allowed for in the text), then the borderline between fiction and reality becomes increasingly hazy, for the reader can scarcely regard his own participation as fictional. He is bound to look on his reactions as something real, and at no time is this conviction disputed. But since his reactions are real, he will lose the feeling that he is judging a world that is only fictional. Indeed, his own judgments will enhance the impression he has that this world is a reality.

How very concerned Thackeray was to confront the reader with a reality he himself considered to be real is clear from the passage already quoted, in which the narrator tells



the reader that his object is to walk with him through the Fair and leave him "perfectly miserable" afterward. Thackeray reiterates this intention in a letter written in 1848: "my object...is to indicate, in cheerful terms, that we are for the most part an abominably foolish and selfish people...all eager after vanities...I want to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story – we ought all to be with our own and all other stories."<sup>34</sup> For this insight to take root in the reader, the fictional world must be made to seem real to him. Since, in addition, the reader is intended to be a critic of this world, the esthetic appeal of the novel lies in the fact that it gives him the opportunity to step back and take a detached look at that which he had regarded as normal human conduct. This detachment, however, is not to be equated with the edification which the moral novel offered to its readers. Leaving the reader perfectly miserable after his reading indicates that such a novel is not going to offer him pictures of another world that will make him forget the sordid nature of this one; the reader is forced, rather, to exercise his own critical faculties in order to relieve his distress by uncovering potential alternatives arising out of the world he has read about. "A man with a reflective turn of mind" is therefore the ideal reader for this novel. W. J. Harvey has remarked, in a different context:

A novel...can allow for a much fuller expression of this sensed penumbra of unrealized possibilities, of all the what-might-have-beens of our lives. It is because of this that the novel permits a much greater liberty of such speculation on the part of the reader than does the play. Such speculation frequently becomes, as it does in real life, part of the substantial reality of the identity of any character. The character moves in the full depth of his conditional freedom; he is what he is but he might have been otherwise. Indeed the novel does not merely *allow* for this liberty of speculation; sometimes it *encourages* it to the extent that our sense of conditional freedom in this aspect becomes one of the ordering structural principles of the entire work.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV

The aspect of the novel which we have discussed so far is the narrator's continual endeavor to stimulate the reader's mind through extensive commentaries on the actions of the characters. This indirect form of guidance is supplemented by a number of remarks relating directly to the expectations and supposed habits of the novel-reader. If the fulfillment of the novel demands a heightened faculty of judgment, it is only natural that the narrator should also compel the reader – at times quite openly – to reflect on his own situation, for without doing so he will be incapable of judging the actions of the characters in the novel. For this process to be effective, the possible reader must be visualized as playing a particular role with particular characteristics, which may vary according to circumstances. And so just as the author divides himself up into the narrator of the story and the commentator on the events in the story, the reader is also stylized to a certain degree, being given attributes which he may either accept or reject. Whatever happens he will be forced to react to those ready-made qualities ascribed to him. In this manner the double role of the author has a parallel in that of the reader, as W. Booth has pointed out in a discussion on the narrator:

... the same distinction must be made between myself as reader and the very often different self who goes about paying bills, repairing leaky faucets, and failing in generosity and wisdom. It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author's. Regardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full. The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement.<sup>36</sup>

Such an agreement can, however, be reached along widely differing lines, for instance through disagreement – i.e., a subtly instituted opposition between reader and narrator – and this is what happens in *Vanity Fair*.

When the narrator pretends to be at one with the reader in evaluating a certain situation, the reverse is usually the case. For instance, he describes an old but rich spinster who is a member of the great Crawley family, into which Becky is going to marry, in fulfillment of her social aspirations:

Miss Crawley was... an object of great respect when she came to Queen's Crawley, for she had a balance at her banker's which would have made her beloved anywhere. What a dignity it gives an old lady, that balance at the banker's! How tenderly we look at her faults if she is a relative (and may every reader have a score of such), what a kind good-natured old creature we find her!... How, when she comes to pay us a visit, we generally find an opportunity to let our friends know her station in the world! We say (and with perfect truth) I wish I had Miss MacWhirter's signature to a cheque for five thousand pounds. She wouldn't miss it, says your wife. She is my aunt, say you, in an easy careless way, when your friend asks if Miss MacWhirter is any relative. Your wife is perpetually sending her little testimonies of affection, your little girls work endless worsted baskets, cushions, and footstools for her. What a good fire there is in her room when she comes to pay you a visit, although your wife laces her stays without one!... Is it so, or is it not so?<sup>37</sup>

By using the first person plural, the narrator gives the impression that he is viewing through the reader's eyes the many attentions paid to the old lady with the large bank balance; for the reader such conduct is scarcely remarkable – indeed it is more the expression of a certain *savoir vivre*. By identifying himself with this view, the narrator seems to reinforce rather than to oppose this attitude, which is symptomatic of human nature. But in pretending merely to be describing 'natural' reactions, he is in fact seeking to trap the reader into agreeing with him – and as soon as this is accomplished, the reader realizes for himself the extent to which consideration of personal gain shapes the natural impulses of human conduct.

In this way, the difference between the reader and the characters in the novel is eliminated. Instead of just seeing through them, he sees himself reflected in them, so that the superior position which the narrator has given him over the pretences and illusions of the characters now begins to fade. The reader realizes that he is similar to those who are supposed to be the objects of his criticism, and so the self-confrontations that permeate the novel compel him to become aware of his own position in evaluating that of the characters. In order to develop this awareness, the narrator creates situations in which the characters' actions correspond to what the reader is tricked into regarding

as natural, subsequently feeling the irresistible urge to detach himself from the proceedings. And if the reader ignores the discreet summons to observe himself, then his critical attitude toward the characters becomes unintentionally hypocritical, for he forgets to include himself in the judgment. Thackeray did not want to edify his readers, but to leave them miserable,<sup>38</sup> though with the tacit invitation to find ways of changing this condition for themselves.

This predominantly intellectual appeal to the mind of the reader was not always the norm in the realistic novel. In Dickens, for example, emotions are aroused in order to create a premeditated relationship between the reader and the characters.<sup>39</sup> A typical illustration of this is the famous scene at the beginning of *Oliver Twist*, when the hungry child in the workhouse has the effrontery (as the narrator sees it) to ask for another plate of soup.<sup>40</sup> In the presentation of this daring exploit, Oliver's inner feelings are deliberately excluded, in order to give greater emphasis to the indignation of the authorities at such an unreasonable request.<sup>41</sup> The narrator comes down heavily on the side of authority, and can thus be quite sure that his hard-hearted attitude will arouse a flood of sympathy in his readers for the poor starving child. The reader is thus drawn so far into the action that he feels he must interfere. This effect, not unlike the tension at a Punch and Judy show, enables Dickens to convey contemporary reality to his readers. He follows traditional practice insofar as he brings about a total involvement of the reader in the action. In Thackeray things are different. He is concerned with preventing any close liaison between reader and characters. The reader of *Vanity Fair* is in fact forced into a position outside the reality of the novel, though the judgment demanded of him is not without a tension of its own, as he is always in danger of sliding into the action of the novel, thereby suddenly being subjected to the standards of his own criticism.

The narrator does not aim exclusively at precipitating his reader into such situations of involuntary identification with the characters. In order to sharpen the critical gaze, he also offers other modes of approach, though these demand a certain effort at discrimination on the part of the reader – for instance, when he wishes to describe, at least indirectly, the various aspects of the important love affair between Amelia and Osborne:

The observant reader, who has marked our young Lieutenant's previous behaviour, and has preserved our report of the brief conversation which he has just had with Captain Dobbin, has possibly come to certain conclusions regarding the character of Mr. Osborne. Some cynical Frenchman has said that there are two parties to a love-transaction: the one who loves and the other who condescends to be so treated. Perhaps the love is occasionally on the man's side; perhaps on the lady's. Perhaps some infatuated swain has ere this mistaken insensibility for modesty, dullness for maiden reserve, mere vacuity for sweet bashfulness, and a goose, in a word, for a swan. Perhaps some beloved female subscriber has arrayed an ass in the splendour and glory of her imagination; admired his dullness as manly simplicity; worshipped his selfishness as manly superiority; treated his stupidity as majestic gravity, and used him as the brilliant fairy Titania did a certain weaver at Athens. I think I have seen such comedies of errors going on in the world. But this is certain, that Amelia believed her lover to be one of the most gallant and brilliant men in the empire: and it is possible Lieutenant Osborne thought so too.<sup>42</sup>

Apparently simple situations are taken apart for the reader and split up into different facets. He is free to work his way through each one and to choose whichever he thinks

most appropriate, but whether this decision favors the image of the cynical Frenchman or that of the infatuated swain, there will always remain an element of doubt over the relationship under discussion. Indeed the definite view that Amelia has of her relationship with Osborne acts as a warning to the reader, as such a final, unambiguous decision runs the risk of being wrong.

The reader is constantly forced to think in terms of alternatives, as the only way in which he can avoid the unambiguous and suspect position of the characters is to visualize the possibilities which they have not thought of. While he is working out these alternatives the scope of his own judgment expands, and he is constantly invited to test and weigh the insights he has arrived at as a result of the profusion of situations offered him. The esthetic appeal of such a technique consists in the fact that it allows a certain latitude for the individual character of the reader, but also compels specific reactions – often unobtrusively – without expressly formulating them. By refusing to draw the reader into the illusory reality of the novel, and keeping him at a variable distance from the events, the text gives him the illusion that he can judge the proceedings in accordance with his own point of view. To do this, he has only to be placed in a position that will provoke him to pass judgments, and the less loaded in advance these judgments are by the text, the greater will be the esthetic effect.

The "Manager of the Performance" opens up a whole panorama of views on the reality described, which can be seen from practically every social and human standpoint. The reader is offered a host of different perspectives, and so is almost continually confronted with the problem of how to make them consistent. This is all the more complicated as it is not just a matter of forming a view of the social world described, but of doing so in face of a rich variety of viewpoints offered by the commentator. There can be no doubt that the author wants to induce his reader to assume a critical attitude toward the reality portrayed, but at the same time he gives him the alternative of adopting one of the views offered him, or of developing one of his own. This choice is not without a certain amount of risk. If the reader adopts one of the attitudes suggested by the author, he must automatically exclude the others. If this happens, the impression arises, in this particular novel, that one is looking more at oneself than at the event described. There is an unmistakable narrowness in every standpoint, and in this respect the reflection the reader will see of himself will be anything but complimentary. But if the reader then changes his viewpoint, in order to avoid this narrowness, he will undergo the additional experience of finding that his behavior is very like that of the two girls who are constantly adapting themselves in order to ascend the social scale. All the same, his criticism of the girls appears to be valid. Is it not a reasonable assumption then that the novel was constructed as a means of turning the reader's criticism of social opportunism back upon himself? This is not mentioned specifically in the text, but it happens all the time. Thus, instead of society, the reader finds himself to be the object of criticism.

## V

Thackeray once mentioned casually: "I have said somewhere it is the unwritten part of books that would be the most interesting."<sup>43</sup> It is in the unwritten part of the book that



the reader has his place – hovering between the world of the characters and the guiding sovereignty of the “Manager of the Performance.” If he comes too close to the characters, he learns the truth of what the narrator told him at the beginning: “The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face.”<sup>44</sup> If he stands back with the narrator to look at things from a distance, he sees through all the activities of the characters. Through the variableness of his own position, the reader experiences the meaning of *Vanity Fair*. Through the characters he undergoes a temporary entanglement in the web of his own illusions, and through the demand for judgment he is enabled to free himself from it and to get a better view of himself and of the world.

And so the story of the two girls and their social aspirations forms only one aspect of the novel, which is continually supplemented by views through different lenses, all of which are trained on the story with the intention of discovering its meaning. The necessity for these different perspectives indicates that the story itself does not reveal direct evidence as to its meaning, so that the factual reality depicted does not represent a total reality. It can only become total through the *manner* in which it is observed. Thus the narrator’s commentary, with its often ingenious provocations of the reader, has the effect of an almost independent action running parallel to the story itself. Herein lies the difference between Thackeray and the naturalists of the nineteenth century, who set out to convince their readers that a relevant ‘slice of life’ was total reality, whereas in fact it only represented an ideological assumption which, for all the accuracy of its details, was a manipulated reality.

In *Vanity Fair* it is not the slice of life, but the means of observing it that constitute the reality, and as these means of observation remain as valid today as they were in the nineteenth century, the novel remains as ‘real’ now as it was then, even though the social world depicted is only of historical interest. It is in the preoccupation with different perspectives and with the activation of the reader himself that *Vanity Fair* marks a stage of transition between the traditional and what we now call the ‘modern’ novel. The predominant aim is no longer to create the illusion of an objective outside reality, and the novelist is no longer concerned with projecting his own unambiguous view of the world onto his reader. Instead, his technique is to diversify his vision, in order to compel the reader to view things for himself and discover his own reality. The author has not yet withdrawn “to pare his fingernails,” but he has already entered into the shadows and holds his scissors at the ready.

#### NOTES

- 1 Ford Madox Ford, “Techniques,” *The Southern Review* I (1935): 35. The dots are part of the original text and are used by Ford to accentuate “Technique.”
- 2 See Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (Everyman’s Library) (London, 1948), “Author’s Preface”: xxxii; and *Tom Jones* (Everyman’s Library) (London, 1962), II, I: 39; also Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Woman Comprehending the most Important Concerns of Private Life* (The Shakespeare Head Edition) (Oxford, 1930–31), VII: 325.
- 3 Fielding, *Tom Jones*, III, 7: 93.
- 4 *Ibid.*, II, 1: 39.

- 5 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London, 1966), p. 219. The full sentence reads: “The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.”
- 6 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 74 f. and 151. [See also pp. 154–83 in this book.] Kathleen Tillotson, *The Tale and the Teller* (London, 1959), p. 22, points out that Dowden, in 1877, had already differentiated between the author as an historical person and the author as narrator. He calls the narrator of George Eliot’s novel “that second self who writes her books.”
- 7 Quoted by Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (Columbia Paperback) (New York, 1966), p. 290; see also Hans Blumenberg, “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans,” in *Nachahmung und Illusion* (Poetik und Hermeneutik, I), ed. H. R. Jauss (Munich, 1964), pp. 21 f.
- 8 William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers*, ed. Gordon N. Ray (London, 1945), II: 772 f. For an historical discussion on the relationship between commentary and story, see Geoffrey Tillotson, *Thackeray the Novelist* (University Paperbacks) (London, 1963), pp. 209 ff.
- 9 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I (The Centenary Biographical Edition), ed. Lady Ritchie (London, 1910), p. liii.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. liv.
- 11 *Ibid.*, for the irony of the author’s commentary, see Ulrich Broich, “Die Bedeutung der Ironie für das Prosawerk W. M. Thackerays unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von ‘Vanity Fair’” Dissertation, Bonn, 1958, p. 78.
- 12 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I: 225.
- 13 This comes out strikingly in his remark at the end of the novel: “Ah! *Vanitas Vanitatum!* which of us is happy in this world?” Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, II: 431; there are also less striking instances, when the author pretends that he does not quite know what is happening in the minds of his characters; *Vanity Fair*, I: 236.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 15 See Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, II: 344. This is the first definite statement that the author “the present writer of a history of which every word is true” makes the personal acquaintance of important characters in his novel at the ducal Court of Pumpernickel.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 404. John Loofbourow, *Thackeray and the Form of Fiction* (Princeton, 1964), p. 88, suggests: “In *Vanity Fair*, the Commentator is a dimension of dissent.”
- 17 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I: 6.
- 18 Quoted by Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford Paperbacks, 15) (Oxford, 1961), pp. 19 f.
- 19 See Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I: 67, 94 f., 108 f., 146, 210 ff., 214, *passim*.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 26 f., 32, 37 f., 291, 296 f.; II: 188, *passim*.
- 21 Michel Butor, *Repertoire*, transl. H. Scheffel (Munich, 1965), II: 98.
- 22 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I: 95 f.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 112 ff.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 26 *Ibid.*, II: 31.
- 27 *Ibid.*, I: 146.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 39 f., 145, 317 f.; II: 39 f., 277 f., 390, 401, 408, and 423 f.
- 29 *Ibid.*, II: 151 f., 209, *passim*.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 31 *Ibid.*, I: lv. On Becky the puppet, see H. A. Talon, *Two Essays on Thackeray* (Dijon, no date), pp. 7 f.

- 32 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, II: 112.
- 33 Ibid., p. 399. Re the character of Dobbin, see Talon, *Two Essays*, p. 31; re the name, see J. A. Falconer, "Balzac and Thackeray," *English Studies* 26 (1944/45): 131.
- 34 Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers*, II: 423.
- 35 W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London, 1965), p. 147.
- 36 Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 137 f.
- 37 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I: 103 f.
- 38 Ibid., p. 225, and Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers*, II: 423.
- 39 "Make 'em laugh; make 'em cry; make 'em wait" was the principle underlying Dickens's novels; see Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, p. 21.
- 40 See Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens) (London, 1959), pp. 12 f.
- 41 Ibid., pp. 13 f. — especially p. 14, with the ironic comments of the author.
- 42 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I: 145. A key to such passages lies in the reflections conveyed to the reader near the beginning of the novel, as to whether what follows should be narrated in the "genteel . . . romantic, or in the facetious manner" (I: 59). Thus the author opens up a view of other modes of narration which would inevitably show the events in a different light. In this way, the author indicates to the reader what consequences are linked with a change in perspective.
- 43 Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers*, III: 391.
- 44 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, I: 12.