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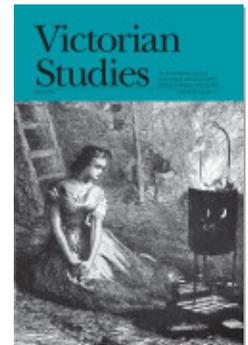
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# Experiencing History and Encountering Fiction in *Vanity Fair*

CRISTINA RICHIERI GRIFFIN

In March 1842, the painter Robert Burford's newest panorama, *View of the Battle of Waterloo*, was opened to the public at the panorama rotunda in Leicester Square. By the 1840s, there was certainly no shortage of representations of this decisive 1815 battle. Famous treatments included Walter Scott's oft-criticized 1815 poem, *The Field of Waterloo*; Joseph Mallord William Turner's more celebrated 1818 painting by the same name; and Philip Astley's popular equestrian drama, *The Battle of Waterloo*, which was first performed in 1824 and subsequently ran for decades. Reviews of Burford's scene suggest that it achieves a caliber all its own, both because of the piece's form—according to a review in the *Spectator*, the panorama “enables the spectators to form a better idea of the carnage at Waterloo than any description or small picture can convey” (307)—and, significantly, because of the piece's belated composition. Though the panorama form's inventor, Robert Barker, had depicted the Duke of

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**ABSTRACT:** William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) puts forward a theory of historical experience. Though the novel revolves around the Napoleonic wars, the narrator famously avoids recounting this military history as it occurs. This essay argues that the narrator finally encounters history in a way that he can both narrate and experience when, five chapters from the end of the novel, he appears as a character in the fictional town of Pumpnickel, which belatedly rehearses the Napoleonic wars through its aesthetic representations. With the narrator's appearance, *Vanity Fair* offers a self-reflexive historiography that trumpets belated aesthetic revivals—the fictional town, the fictional novel—as the best and perhaps the only ways to confront not only military but even personal, domestic history.

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Wellington's defeat of Napoleon in Belgium just one year after the battle, a review in the *London Saturday Journal* declares that Burford's 1842 panorama offers "a more complete representation" precisely because it was produced one generation after the event:

Of course, this narrative, as well as the picture itself, must be much more perfect in its details than the first painted panorama, or its *Guide*. Scarcely a year has elapsed since 1815, without some additional light being thrown upon the mighty conflict, by officers engaged in it. The details of great events, we know, are sifted by time. . . . Of these advantages Mr. Burford has doubtless availed himself, and has thus been enabled to produce a more complete representation of the Field than his predecessor, Mr. Barker, could possibly accomplish. (188)

While Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) would warn of the potential corrosive effects of time upon even the most momentous of remembered events—"year by year our memory fades" (101.23)—this reviewer avers the opposite. Nor was Burford's panorama alone in implying that the Napoleonic wars can be best represented in retrospect. William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) also famously confronts the representational challenges inherent in narrating both the violence and the scale of the Napoleonic wars. Yet critical discussions of this important novel have missed Thackeray's analysis of historical representation and his theory—though of course he would not have called it that—of the historical novel.

As a historical novel, *Vanity Fair* revolves around the Napoleonic wars and their aftermaths even as the omniscient narrator avoids directly recounting this military history, particularly occluding the Battle of Waterloo as it occurs. Fifteen years later, however, this stalemate between the narrator and a seemingly unnarratable world historical event begins to break down in the fictional German town of Pumpnickel. When the characters visit this town from 1830 to 1831 (five chapters from the end of the novel), the otherwise unseen omniscient narrator reveals that he, too, was a visitor there: "It was at the little comfortable ducal town of Pumpnickel. . . that I first saw Colonel Dobbin and his party," he seemingly casually announces (793). Even amid the episodic expanse of *Vanity Fair*, the Pumpnickel portions are significant in scope (since the narrator spends six detailed chapters on the locale) and in event (since, in addition to the narrator's appearance, these chapters also include Becky Sharp's revelation of George Osborne's infidelity to Amelia Sedley as well as Colonel Dobbin's long-awaited betrothal to the same). Yet while no reader

misses the import of the Napoleonic wars to this novel, it is easy to see how *Pumpnickel* could seem merely symptomatic of the latter half of the novel's supposed ahistoricism. In attending to the temporal markers in *Vanity Fair*, David Kurnick has recently argued that by the second half of the novel time becomes "dehistoricized," eradicating any distinctions between, for instance, the characters' experiences in early 1830s *Pumpnickel* and the "blurry, empty temporality" of the mid-nineteenth-century present when the novel was first serialized in *Punch* (35).<sup>1</sup> I argue in contrast that *Pumpnickel* functions most crucially as an aestheticized space for belatedly rehearsing the Napoleonic wars: with his appearance in this town, the narrator is finally able to encounter history in a way that he can both narrate and experience.

*Pumpnickel* resuscitates history through a series of artistic projects. By revivifying the earlier battles between the British and the French through the town's skirmishing singers, combatting artworks, and especially a war-reproducing orchestral performance, *Vanity Fair* grapples with how to experience the past and how to represent that experience—or, more accurately, how to experience the past *through* its belated representations. And *Vanity Fair* raises these questions at a time when many aesthetic revival movements—Arthurian, Gothic, Medieval, Moorish, Byzantine, Romanesque—were saturating the Victorian present with architecture, poetry, clothes, and visual arts designed to recuperate a bygone age. Walter Pater, whom Carolyn Williams has called "the greatest theorist of 'revival' as an epistemological, aesthetic, and historical project" (82), takes as his natural starting point that "anything in the way of an actual revival must always be impossible" (Pater 86). In his review of the "mediaevalism" of William Morris's poetry, Pater suggests that even as Morris's verse "renews on a more delicate type the poetry of a past age," "like some strange second flowering after date" (80), this renewal can never "repress" the history that occurred between the medieval age and the nineteenth century; as a result, even the poetry's "second flowering" of medieval verse never fully brings the present "face to face" with the past (86). Two decades before the publication of Pater's 1868 review, *Vanity Fair*'s *Pumpnickel* enacts the revival that Pater declares "impossible"—because for Thackeray revival is not only possible, but also necessary for producing historical experience. The narrator's representation of *Pumpnickel* generates the possibility of radical contemporaneity

between the characters' present moment in the early 1830s and the not-so-distant past of the Napoleonic wars of the mid-1810s. The town's artistic iterations of the Napoleonic wars might occur over a decade and a half later, but they transform this event into an ongoing and copresent mental experience. Pumpnickel's visitors, including the narrator, inhabit the past by residing in its present fictionalizations. With this productive collusion between Napoleonic wartime and the characters' German tour fifteen years later—in which the past serves as the aesthetic condition for the present and, in turn, the present's aestheticization makes the past comprehensible—Pumpnickel is anything but ahistorical. It is a current critical commonplace that Thackeray simply dodges the depiction of Waterloo in his most important novel. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, Pumpnickel's fictional space not only resuscitates history but also reveals the novel's potential for representing the complicities between past and present. *Vanity Fair* lays bare how the novel's historical capacity emerges out of a history of national violence and produces its own belated aestheticization of this past; Pumpnickel realizes fiction's ability to make the unnarratable past narratable, to resuscitate violent historical events as a copresent experience.

In this essay's final section, I further suggest that *Vanity Fair* extends this theory of representing historical experience beyond the Napoleonic wars, as the narrator reveals that not only the military past but also the personal pasts, the domestic histories he recounts, are also impenetrable except through their belated aestheticization. And it is the narrator's appearance in Pumpnickel—his admission that his omniscient perspective finds its roots within his experiences as a character—that accomplishes this historical work.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the majority of *Vanity Fair*, the omniscient narrator's point of view remains productively panoramic, since he peers across oceanic expanses (from England to the Continent) and reports multiple plots as they occur simultaneously to the two female protagonists (Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp). And yet, as his incarnation in Pumpnickel makes clear, his narration of history requires his firsthand experience not with history as it occurs, but rather with history after-the-fact: not with the war itself as it transpired but with the belated artistic revivifications of the Napoleonic wars as he encounters them in Pumpnickel, and not with his characters' domestic lives as he first sees them in Pumpnickel but with those lives as he experiences

them through the stories he weaves when self-consciously and retrospectively creating his novel. That is, *Vanity Fair's* narrator insists that history—whether personal or military, calmly quotidian or epically violent—must be experienced through the immersive detachment of encountering fiction. While Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) depicts the eponymous protagonist, wounded and confined to his bed, depending on the real-time narration of Rebecca in order to experience the Norman-Saxon battle erupting outside his window, *Vanity Fair* shows how military and personal pasts converge when both prove unable to be experienced firsthand except, paradoxically, through the double remove of belatedness and aestheticization.

What we encounter in *Vanity Fair*, then, is a self-reflexive historiography: a novel aware of its own creation of history through the power of fiction. In this sense, *Vanity Fair* not only revises Scott's historical novel form but also evokes postmodern genres such as meta-historical romance and historiographic metafiction. Such genres follow from nineteenth-century historical novels and capitalize on historical fiction's capacity for self-reflexivity, for recognizing, in Amy J. Elias's terms, that "postmodern metahistorical romance . . . remembers memory as the human narrativization of History, as the only way possible for human beings to articulate the unrepresentable, absent past" (96) or, in Linda Hutcheon's words, that both fiction and history "actually refer at the first level to other texts: we know the past (which really did exist) only through its textualized remains" (119). For Elias, Hutcheon, and—over a century and a half earlier—Thackeray, any immersive experience of history requires the distance and meditation offered by the fictional form. Focusing on the self-reflexivity of not only *Vanity Fair's* famously metafictional narrator but also this narrator's historiography helps us to understand how the belated aestheticization Pumpernickel offers becomes necessary for the novel's narration of an otherwise unnarratable history.

## I.

Set one generation prior to that of Thackeray's 1848 readership, *Vanity Fair* is often considered, in Kathleen Tillotson's phrase, a novel of the "recent past" (93). In representing the rise, close, and aftermaths of the Napoleonic wars, the Battle of Waterloo—which the narrator dubs "the greatest event of history" (339)—impacts every character

in the narrative and reverberates to its final scenes in Pumpnickel. Even the most oblivious of the novel's characters, Amelia Sedley, finds her domestic existence entangled within Napoleon's "fateful rush" (211), such that "Napoleon is flinging his last stake, and poor little Emmy Sedley's happiness forms, somehow, part of it" (212). Though Waterloo stands as the novel's historical centerpiece, Thackeray's narrator famously declines to detail the battle itself, making it at once the most resounding catalyst and most conspicuous elision within the narrative.<sup>3</sup> For an author who composed battle scenes for other novels—*Barry Lyndon* (1844) and *Henry Esmond* (1852), to name two—and whose oeuvre addresses the Napoleonic wars repeatedly, this void is eye-catching.<sup>4</sup> Just before embarking on the *Vanity Fair* chapters that take place in Brussels, Thackeray wrote to his editor to ask for an advance copy of G. R. Gleig's soon-to-be bestseller *Story of the Battle of Waterloo* (1847), and the only footnote Thackeray includes in *Vanity Fair*—a novel littered with historical references and events that are not bolstered by footnotes—is to Gleig, as if Thackeray is proving his extensive research into the battle even if his narrator refuses to narrate it. This absence is all the more conspicuous since, in the same letter, Thackeray outlines his plans to place *Vanity Fair's* narrator (here figured under Thackeray's oft-used pseudonym, Michael Angelo Titmarsh) specifically "at Waterloo": "If the book is ready (and only awaiting the 18th for publication) would you kindly let me have a copy? Titmarsh at Waterloo will be a very remarkable and brilliant performance, doubtless" ("Letter to John Murray" 2:294).

When *Vanity Fair's* narrator then dodges the battlefield, he signals that experiencing this violent history and narrating it in "brilliant performance" may, on the contrary, be meaningfully at odds. When Dobbin, George, and Becky's husband Rawdon Crawley head into battle, the narrator suggests that his hypothetical presence at Waterloo would place him "in the way of the manœuvres that the gallant fellows are performing overhead" (361). The narrator has visited the Waterloo site, however, long after the fighting has ceased: "When the present writer went to survey with eagle glance the field of Waterloo, we asked the conductor of the diligence, a portly warlike-looking veteran, whether he had been at the battle. '*Pas si bête* ['I'm not a complete idiot'] . . . was his reply" (336). Even as the narrator volleys from the distanced "eagle glance" of projected omniscience to the viewpoint of a war reporter, he still refuses to recount

the battle. Instead, he echoes the reticent footsteps of the conductor, a man who, as his reply “*Pas si bête*” implies, is smart enough to stay out of the way. While the narrator of Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* occasionally cuts through the distance of his third-person perspective to recount his wartime experiences with a first-person posture (285), *Vanity Fair*’s narrator stays on the outskirts of the Napoleonic wars: with his visit to “the field of Waterloo” postdating the battle and the narration of this visit preceding it, his engagements with Waterloo bookend but omit the battle (336). The title of Gleig’s book suggests the battle’s narratability—it is not just *The Battle of Waterloo* but *Story of the Battle of Waterloo*—yet in *Vanity Fair* the narrator’s avoidance suggests that this moment of the world historical event is, on the contrary, unnarratable.

We could adduce multiple reasons why the Battle of Waterloo is initially unnarratable in *Vanity Fair*. In the nineteenth century, the scale of Waterloo was unmatched both because of the battle’s political ramifications and its historical magnitude—since it marked a shift between over a dozen years of war (following from years of French revolutions) to decades of relative peace—and because of the battle’s extensive brutality and violence. Waterloo left tens of thousands dead and concluded a war with approximately three million military casualties, if not more, to say nothing of civilian deaths—numbers that were unprecedented in modern Europe. The *Spectator*’s review of Burford’s *View of the Battle of Waterloo* suggests that the unwieldy scale of Waterloo’s violence resists representation by all forms except the panorama: “but the heat and fury of the contest—all, in short, that would address the eye at any given moment—a panoramic painting alone can depict” (307). We can imagine that the magnitude of Waterloo might have registered as all the more foreboding for Thackeray and his 1848 readers who looked back at the battle while violence was again erupting in the revolutions spreading across Europe.<sup>5</sup> And yet, though the epic scope of Waterloo helps us to see clearly that it is initially unnarratable, *Vanity Fair* pinpoints this battle as not the exception but the rule: Waterloo might be “the greatest event of history,” but this battle in this novel teaches us how all history, whether great or trivial, might resist contemporaneous representation.

The elision generated by Waterloo’s unnarratable history begins to shift when the characters journey to Pumpnickel. When the narrator visits this German town on holiday and first sees Dobbin,

Amelia, her brother Jos Sedley, and her son little Georgy Osborne, nearly fifteen years have passed since the Battle of Waterloo and the end of the Napoleonic wars. Nonetheless, their leisurely German tour is littered with remnants of the Napoleonic battlefield. This link is indicated by the very first mention of a tour “am Rhein,” which transforms the earlier invasion of British soldiers onto the Continent into the now “stout trim old veterans” who “have invaded Europe any time since the conclusion of the war” (783). On board their packet steamer, a couple of the novel’s minor characters from the Waterloo chapters crop up in this return to the Continent: Jos recognizes Earl and Lady Bareacres whom he remembers seeing in Brussels “in the eventful year ‘15,” though remarkably they now look “rather younger” than a decade and a half earlier (786). The Dobbin-Osborne-Sedley party only finds its way through the Rhineland to Pumpernickel thanks to Dobbin “having a good military knowledge of the German language” (787). In such a context, the narrator reports that, where fifteen years ago Amelia had joined “her regiment” prior to Waterloo (325), she is now “attended by her two aides de camp, Georgy and Dobbin,” as they travel through Germany (787). What was once an invasion for a war that Amelia assumed required travel “not so much to a war as to a fashionable tour” is now not so much a fashionable tour as a figurative war (322).

The characters’ German tour begins to join two temporalities: the early 1830s postwar Europe of the characters’ present travels and the past war-torn Europe circa Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. As a result, the characters experience their present moment in the Rhineland principally in relation to a resuscitated history, to the ineradicable past events of Waterloo and the Napoleonic wars. This return suffuses the present moment with more than what Georg Lukács would call a “felt relationship” with that past (53). Instead, the present moment threatens to disappear into a resurrection of the past. Take, for instance, Amelia’s two “aides de camp” for whom the German holiday proves to be not only a literal vacation but also a metaphorical military operation since, in touring the Continent, Dobbin and “the delighted George fought the campaigns of the Rhine and the Palatinate” (787). The figurative fighting here goes beyond merely sustaining the vestiges of the Napoleonic wars fifteen years later. In playing the part of the soldier alongside Colonel Dobbin, our youngest “aide de camp” momentarily stops being little “Georgy” (the nickname he is given

throughout the majority of the novel, including while in Germany) and becomes “George” (the name of his deceased father, who fought alongside Dobbin and was killed in the Battle of Waterloo). With name and place at variance, the narration here makes it momentarily difficult to discern which George Osborne this Colonel Dobbin fights alongside in his “campaign”: the George of Waterloo or the Georgy of Pumpnickel. This reverberation of the Napoleonic wars at once swallows its youngest participant into a previous age, subsuming son into father, and also resurrects a past moment of battle, reinvigorating father within son. Moving in either direction, the German tour collapses Napoleonic wartime and the amorphous “any time since”: Georgy into George, or Germany-touring Earl and Lady Bareacres into appearances impossibly “younger than in the eventful year ‘15.”

Once the characters reach Pumpnickel, where the omniscient narrator will first become acquainted with them and begin to formulate the histories he will tell, his recapitulations of the past diverge from the metaphors of war to its aesthetic representations. Throughout the Pumpnickel chapters, this fictional town flaunts its almost obsessive attention to the arts, a defining feature that echoes in the town’s real historical corollary: the German ducal capital of Weimar. Due in no small part to the influence of the Duchess Regent Anna Amalia (a composer herself) alongside the lure of Weimar’s celebrities and longtime residents, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, this continental cultural hub developed a reputation as the so-called Athens on the Ilm beginning in the late eighteenth century and attracted innumerable art-hungry tourists, including Thackeray, well into the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The astute Victorian reader did not need to be familiar with Thackeray’s travels in order to gather that Pumpnickel parallels this famous tourist destination, since the fictional duchy reproduces some of Weimar’s most well-known landmarks, including its “Hof—or Court—Theatre” (793). Within this artistically charged space, the Napoleonic battlefield is transformed into skirmishing singers and warring artworks that echo the battles fought fifteen years earlier by rehashing the unrelenting *mêlées* between the French and the British in an international space. These artistic standoffs surface in Pumpnickel’s daily political milieu, since inhabitants must pledge fidelity to either the French-supported singer or her English-supported counterpart:

“these two women were the two flags of the French and the English party at Pumpnickel, and the society was divided in its allegiance to those two great nations” (805). In honor of a royal Pumpnickel wedding, the English and French factions also create a form of illuminated painting, called a transparency, that places lamps behind dyed gauze to generate a stained glass effect. The British transparency for this event is particularly combative: it not only represents France as the allegorical “Discord” in hasty retreat but also, according to the admittedly biased narrator, “beat the French picture hollow” (808). With a defeated France depicted in a piece of artwork that “beat” its French foe, Pumpnickel’s artistic projects envelop one British victory within another.

The narrator predicts earlier in the novel that though Waterloo and the Napoleonic wars appear to have drawn to a close, “you and I . . . are never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action. . . . Centuries hence, we Frenchmen and Englishmen might be boasting and killing each other still” (405). These unending artistic battles in Pumpnickel incline toward boasting and away from killing, but nonetheless they encapsulate the “still”-ness of the Napoleonic wars. In the German town, the wars are present and unchangingly “still” even as they are also ever-returning and enduring, “still” surfacing decades later in their aesthetic reverberations. The future’s relation to history is thus conditionally framed in the eternal present tense of the aesthetic and the literary: as imagined actors who “might be boasting and killing each other still.” In the context of this aesthetic perpetuity, Pumpnickel functions as the site of history’s revival: though the ducal town is, according to the narrator, “in a time of profound peace” (804), Pumpnickel nonetheless provides a platform for reprocessing wartime Brussels within post-Napoleonic Germany, allowing its inhabitants to actively know and re-know history in a recurrent present. As a consequence, war is at once everywhere and nowhere, all the time and long gone in the duchy.

In part, one might conclude that Pumpnickel’s repeated aestheticizations diminish the vast scale of the Napoleonic wars by reducing the battles to comparatively minor squabbles in what the narrator refers to repeatedly as the “little” ducal town (793, 797, 800). Even this fictional duchy’s name, an aesthetic project itself, appears ripe for satire. Though the town is undoubtedly based on Weimar,

Pumpnickel's evidently imaginative name distinguishes it from the ranks of the otherwise real cities that permeate the novel: London and Brighton, Brussels and Chatham, Waterloo and Paris. Pumpnickel is, of course, most commonly known as a hard, dense, sour bread, or, according to the more obscure French etymology, a bread that is *bon pour Nicol* or good only for Nicol (a familiar term for a horse). With these humorously pejorative implications, dubbing the town Pumpnickel clearly satirizes the fictional duchy.<sup>7</sup> Yet to focus solely on the satire in *Vanity Fair* is always to miss more than half the story, and, as is true of his attitude through much of the novel, the narrator's musings on Pumpnickel and its inhabitants are replete not only with satire, but also with sincere praise.<sup>8</sup> To this end, *Vanity Fair*'s Pumpnickel follows Thackeray's *The Fitz-Boodle Papers* (1842-43)—in which Thackeray first creates the town that he originally calls “Kalbsbraten-Pumpnickel” (286)—by deriving the town's name from a more pleasant etymological source: “the fertilizing stream” of “the Pump river” that “sparkles” through Pumpnickel, a fictionalization of the Ilm River that borders Weimar (800). The fictionalization of Pumpnickel therefore generates a productive artistic locale that holds two vantage points at once, where satirical humor and sincere aestheticizations produce both a degree of distance from the imaginatively authored duchy and a fruitfully credible reconstruction of a Napoleonic history that the narrator previously found impenetrable. Within a novel that traces the struggles of narrating an unnarratable military past, Pumpnickel's fictionality provides the crucial opportunity for the omniscient narrator, newly embedded within this storyworld, to experience history in an embodied present. It is in this duchy—where the past emerges through aesthetic forms in a fictional town centered on the arts—that Thackeray shows how history becomes narratable.

## II.

We encounter the upsurge of Napoleonic history most fully in the artistic center of this “court of the muses”: the “Hof—or Court—Theatre” in Pumpnickel.<sup>9</sup> In *Vanity Fair*, the Pumpnickel Hoftheater, alongside the duchy's warring singers and battling transparencies, plays a striking part in the town's larger creative venture of aestheticizing history. And inside this theater the incarnated

narrator and his fellow characters encounter the fictionalization of the Napoleonic wars most intimately with the performance and reception of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Battle of Vitoria* (1813). Also known by its full German title *Wellington's Sieg, oder die Schlacht bei Vittoria*, in English as *Wellington's Victory, or the Battle of Vitoria*, or simply as *Battle Symphony*, *Battle of Vitoria* celebrates, as its various titles suggest, the Duke of Wellington's victory over French armies at Vitoria, Spain, on 21 June 1813, almost exactly two years before the Battle of Waterloo. When *Vanity Fair's* narrator explains the movements of the orchestration, it becomes clear that *Battle of Vitoria* narrates the advancement and defeat of the French, recreating an account of the Napoleonic battlefield at large. The piece commences with an introduction of the warring nations, with England represented by a rendition of *Rule Britannia* and France emblemized by the folk song "Marlborough Has Left for the War," or what today we would recognize as the tune to "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."<sup>10</sup> This latter melody, as *Vanity Fair's* narrator explains, is "indicative of the brisk advance of the French Army" (794). The composition then proceeds to use a "battery of military and Turkish percussion instruments, including cannons and muskets" (Coldicott 220) to render, in the narrator's phrase, the "drums, trumpets, thunder of artillery, and groans of the dying" during the battle (794). And in its victorious finale, *Battle of Vitoria* concludes with what *Vanity Fair's* narrator terms a "grand triumphal swell" of the national anthem "God Save the King" (794).

This swell is met with an equally triumphant response from the British in the Pumpernickel Hoftheater's captive audience:

There may have been a score of Englishmen in the house, but at the burst of that beloved and well-known music, every one of them, we young fellows in the stalls, Sir John and Lady Bullminster (who had taken a house at Pumpernickel for the education of their nine children), the fat gentleman with the moustachios, the long major in white duck trousers, and the lady with the little boy upon whom he was so sweet: even Kirsch, the courier in the gallery, stood bolt upright in their places, and proclaimed themselves to be members of the dear old British nation. (794)

As this standing ovation suggests, *Battle of Vitoria* was a huge success in the early nineteenth century. After its introduction on 8 December 1813 (less than six months after the battle it celebrates), the piece was performed repeatedly by popular demand, with nine additional performances between Vienna and Munich by the end of 1814. Upon its

first performance at the Drury Theatre in London in February 1815, *Wellington's Victory* was, in Beethoven's words, "received with extraordinary applause" (3:1005). With what composer and musicologist Barry Cooper calls the "enormous success" of this piece, "Beethoven's popularity soared to unprecedented heights, especially amongst those who had found his music too learned and difficult but could readily grasp the direct appeal of *Wellington's Sieg*" (227). Perhaps because it was "designed," as Cooper notes, "to be entertaining rather than serious and sophisticated" (226), the few literary critics who mention the production of *Battle of Vitoria* in Pumpernickel read it negatively, presuming that the piece is "preposterous" (Mathison 242) or "queasy-making tourist whimsy" (Kurnick 35). Today the piece has become, as Anne-Louise Coldicott observes, "one of Beethoven's most notorious compositions" (220). And yet *Battle of Vitoria* was both well-liked and oft-performed in early nineteenth-century Europe, and some musical scholars still deem it worthy of attention in the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup>

Thackeray, for his part, both ironizes and relishes the affective power of what he calls Beethoven's "glorious" orchestration. While in Weimar, Thackeray attended a benefit performance of *Battle of Vitoria* in November 1830, an experience that he recalls first in a letter to his mother: "I never saw half a dozen men so excited as the English were, when Rule Britannia was played—I was amused with this celebrated piece of music" ("Letter to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth" 1:133). Thackeray's amusement finds its echo in *Vanity Fair's* narrator as he chuckles at the theatergoers' intense enthusiasm when they "stood bolt upright in their places" during *Battle of Vitoria's* finale, a moment that is more playful than scathing in its irony but nonetheless serves to distance the narrator, momentarily, from his own participation in the "burst" of patriotism. Rather than turning *Vanity Fair's* Pumpernickel scenes into a biting satire of the town or its visitors, the narrator's playfully ironic tone intersects with—and even enables—his sincere appreciation of *Battle of Vitoria*, since his ironic distance allows him both to snicker at the expense of his characters and indulge in a moment of patriotism without letting this affective experience slip entirely into sentimentality.

Given that the narrator's ironic detachment persists alongside his own emotional engagement at the theater, it is perhaps unsurprising that nine years after Thackeray first saw this piece performed,

he emphasizes its potential gravitas. In writing about *Battle of Vitoria* pseudonymously as Titmarsh in his “Second Lecture on the Fine Arts” (1839), he discusses the piece in a frank review of the paintings on exhibit in London’s galleries in order to offer an argument about the nature of affective experience and aesthetics:

But herein surely lies the power of the great artist. He makes you see and think of a great deal more than the objects before you; he knows how to soothe or to intoxicate, to fire or to depress, by a few notes, or forms, or colours, of which we cannot trace the effect to the source, but only acknowledge the power. I recollect, some years ago, at the theatre at Weimar, hearing Beethoven’s “Battle of Vittoria,” [sic] in which, amidst a storm of glorious music, the air of “God save the King” was introduced. The very instant it begun, every Englishman in the house was bolt upright, and so stood reverently until the air was played out. Why so? From some such thrill of excitement as makes us glow and rejoice over Mr. Turner and his “Fighting Téméraire,” which I am sure, when the art of translating colours into music or poetry shall be discovered, will be found to be a magnificent national ode or piece of music. (744)

By pairing *Battle of Vitoria* and *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839)—the famed painting that depicts a ship from the victorious Battle of Trafalgar and which figures prominently in John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (1843–60)—Titmarsh reminds us that the Napoleonic wars were an occasion for an extraordinary amount of affectively charged aesthetic work. Taking a cue from Titmarsh’s theory that the audience’s “thrill of excitement” occurs across aesthetic mediums from “forms, or colours” to “music or poetry,” *Vanity Fair*’s representation of *Battle of Vitoria* translates violent national history from music into prose, staging two acts of fictionalization: through his orchestration, Beethoven transforms the Napoleonic battlefield into a performed art object, a historical event characterized under the sign of the aesthetic; with his written rendition of this musical opus, the narrator performs this aestheticized historical narrative again through yet another fictional medium, the novel. According to Titmarsh, this “art of translating” from one medium to another does not dilute the “magnificent” aesthetic project; rather, it is this very act of removal through repeated aestheticizations that resuscitates the past as accessible through these same fictional mediums. Without the “art of translating,” the historical events remain impenetrable, a battlefield that cannot be narrated. Yet with his transmuted engagement with the Napoleonic wars through his narration of Beethoven’s *Battle of*

*Vitoria*, *Vanity Fair*'s narrator communes not only with the past military event, but also with its narrative—not only with the Battle of Vitoria but also, as Gleig's title might phrase it, with the story of the Battle of Vitoria.

Insofar as *Vanity Fair* turns the violence of history into fiction to make it narratable, one significant upshot generated by both Beethoven's and the narrator's fictionalizations of history is their construction of a seemingly comprehensive, but nonetheless comprehensible, tale with illusory narrative closure. Beethoven's *Battle of Vitoria* has an evident plot or, in conductor and musical historian Leon Botstein's phrase, "a clearly narrative intent" (340). Its teleology is unambiguous and digestible, simplifying the chaos of a war fought among multiple nations and under various leaders for over a decade into a conclusive conflict between two countries, England and France, with a single clear victor. *Vanity Fair*'s narrator emphasizes and even ironizes this unfussy teleology, turning the musical composition into a written narrative that reiterates the historical plot points at the novel's center (the rise and fall of the French empire) as if they were finite causes and effects: "Malbrook is introduced at the beginning of the performance, as indicative of the brisk advance of the French Army. Then come drums, trumpets, thunder of artillery, and groans of the dying, and at last in a grand triumphal swell, 'God save the King' is performed" (794). The flat affect of the narrator here—made even flatter by his insistent use of the passive voice—scores the Napoleonic war narrative with an unnerving degree of tripartite minimalism: the French arrive, "then" fighting ensues, "and at last" victory reigns. Not despite but because of the narrator's earlier avoidance of the complex war narrative that catalyzes this entire novel, in *Pumpnickel's Hoftheater* the narrator's account draws attention to its own unassuming effortlessness. In *Vanity Fair*, history's aestheticization means that the past may remain outside of representation, irreducible to cause and effect, while in the present, encounters with history combine, like realism itself, the effect of a phenomenological and narratable re-experiencing with the distancing knowledge that the effect is produced and controlled—or imaginatively authored.

Even more than transforming history into an episode that is narratable, then, *Vanity Fair*'s rendition of *Battle of Vitoria* animates history as, finally, experienceable. Through it, Thackeray's mid-Victorian readership engaged with the narrator's early 1830s experience in

Pumpnickel of a reconstituted battle fought in 1813—and the persistently present historical event consistently reasserted itself. Both Beethoven's orchestration and the novel's narration hoist the past into the present, generating an emotionally charged experience of contemporaneity with history. When *Vanity Fair's* narrator stands to salute the rendition of "God save the King," he trades in his flat affect from retelling the *Battle of Vitoria* narrative for a kinetic enthusiasm matched by the triumphant crowd, since he rises alongside "a score of Englishmen in the house," including "the fat gentleman with the moustachios" (Jos), "the long major in white duck trousers" (Dobbin), and "the lady with the little boy upon whom he was so sweet" (Amelia and Georgy), who all "proclaimed themselves to be members of the dear old British nation." For Thackeray's narrator and his fellow characters, this copresence of the past and the present is at once temporal (as if the characters are celebrating with the "old" and victorious British nation of 1813) and geopolitical (as the national allegiance exhibited during this anthem reaches across an international expanse). Even identifying *Battle of Vitoria's* finale anthem as "God Save the King" offers the possibility that the narrator and his characters salute both during the present moment of William IV's 1830s reign and the historical past of George III's reign when the Battles of Vitoria and later Waterloo were won. Instead of simply folding an ahistorical Pumpnickel into a vacuous mid-nineteenth-century present over which Victoria (and thus "God Save the Queen") had been reigning for over a decade, this overlay of wartime Europe and post-Napoleonic Pumpnickel plays out the unending "still"-ness of the past when resuscitated in the aesthetic and literary perpetual present.

### III.

Where in this terrain might we locate the characters' personal histories, their individual lives? Lukács suggests that in Scott's historical novels, widely read by Victorian readers, "great historical trends become tangible" in "typically human terms" (35), such that individual private lives are newly understood to be historically contingent—both the product and the representation of history. When *Vanity Fair's* narrator appears in Pumpnickel, he not only renders his characters' private lives as historically conditioned but also shows how these

personal pasts are only accessible through the same fictional forces as the more public and violent histories of war. In the same lineage as Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Scott's *Waverley* (1814), in which the narratives veer toward the characters' domestic lives over and against the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, *Vanity Fair's* narrator claims as his purview not the violent national history of the Napoleonic wars but the domestic histories of his characters. As he reminds his readers before the start of Waterloo: "We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants" (361). Scholarship on *Vanity Fair* repeatedly follows the narrator's lead in generating a binary opposition between military and domestic histories—between the combatants and the "non-combatants"—with the narrator shirking the former in his preference for the latter and thus rendering military history only through its resonances in characters' private lives.<sup>12</sup> But with the narrator's appearance in *Pumpernickel*, this gap between narrating military and domestic histories breaks down: the narrator's attempts to penetrate the characters' private, domestic histories suffer the same problems of false presentism as the initially impenetrable military history of the Napoleonic wars. More than the "tangible" traces of history's effects, the characters' personal pasts function as histories themselves, and once in *Pumpernickel* the narrator finds the ongoing personal histories of the Hoftheater's "non-combatants" to be, like Waterloo, impenetrable during their enactment. As a result, he only encounters his characters' personal pasts when, in narrating his novel, he presents the retrospectively reconstituted history of his own omniscient vantage point.

Part of what is at stake in the narrator's appearance in *Pumpernickel* is the authority he holds over and within the storyworld by inhabiting two simultaneous vantage points. On the one hand, he functions as an omniscient narrator who tells his story from the distance of a third-person perspective and claims to know nearly everything about his characters and their world. On the other hand, the narrator's incarnation in *Pumpernickel* also shows that he functions as a character with a first-person point of view, and thus observes the world with both the potential proximity and the inherent limitations of firsthand human perception.<sup>13</sup> Yet in *Pumpernickel* the narrator reduces any separation between these two ways of experiencing and narrating history, since he not only reorients his narratorial relationship with political historical events through his firsthand encounters

with the belated aestheticizations of the Napoleonic wars, but he also forces attention on how he grapples with narrating the personal pasts of his newly proximate fellow characters. This struggle is clear from the outset, since the narrator enters the storyworld only to distance himself, repeatedly, from its inhabitants. Though he is incarnated in the theatrical space where his first-person stance enables his engagement with military history, this same posture also distinguishes *Vanity Fair's* narrator from his fellow characters, since he at once situates himself on the figurative stage that is Pumpnickel and yet remains isolated both from the "table d'hôte" where Dobbin, Amelia, Jos, and little Georgy dine and from the honored "loge" reserved for these "best guests" of the Hoftheater (793). By observing, from the stalls, the Dobbin-Osborne-Sedley party while they attend to the opera, the narrator increasingly removes himself from the central performance—he is now a witness to the witnesses of theater. Even when the narrator participates in the standing ovation for *Battle of Vitoria's* finale, he at once joins with and distinguishes himself from the other theatergoers' national camaraderie, since he refers to the "score of Englishmen in the house" as not only "we young fellows in the stalls" but also "every one of them." This remoteness from his compatriots rewrites an important moment in Goethe's famous *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96) when, during a puppet show, the young eponymous protagonist reaches his hand inside his small theater to rescue a fallen puppet. Scholarship often revels in the opportunity to call Thackeray's narrators out as puppet masters who poke their hands in to rearrange the dolls and control the set, and *Vanity Fair*, the preface of which expressly dubs the characters "puppets" (2), appears to be no exception. Yet very late in this novel, the narrator's appearance does quite the opposite of *Wilhelm Meister's*: the presence of Thackeray's narrator negates his potential position as a controlling authorial narrator or even as an accidental actor upon the stage. Instead, his incarnation sets him down firmly as a distanced onlooker: a witness to characters and events that he initially neither impacts nor understands.

This degree of distance between the narrator and his characters becomes even more protracted when we consider how the narrator's late entrance into the storyworld precludes his ability to witness the majority of the narrative he tells. He arrives on the scene and meets his characters for the first time so late that nearly all of the events

in the personal histories he will record have already taken place. In entering so belatedly into the story, the narrator must piece the previous events together by gathering information from characters as wide-ranging as Dobbin (who informs him that Amelia's wedding dress was "a brown silk pelisse" [263]), Dr. Pestler (who reports on Amelia's "grief at weaning the child" after George's death [489]), the eavesdropping servant Tom Eaves (who informs the narrator of Lord and Lady Steyne's personal affairs [589]), and the diplomat Tapeworm (who dines with the narrator in Pumpernickel and relates "everything connected with Becky and her previous life" [849]). The narrator's posture as an *histor* or investigator serves as an intermittent reminder that prior to this point he could not have experienced his characters' personal histories synchronically, leaving their pasts as yet unknown.

Take, for instance, the narrator's vantage point from the Hoftheater stalls, which affords only what he can see or hear—these details are charged—of his fellow characters' facial expressions, what they ate, what they said. In watching his characters—for example Amelia, who is first the "lady in black" (793) and eventually "Mrs. Osborne, for so we had heard the stout gentleman in the moustachios call her" (793-94)—the narrator defamiliarizes his readers from characters we have been encountering for sixty-two chapters or, for Thackeray's original serial readers, for a lengthy eighteen months. This proves particularly true for Amelia, whose defamiliarizing descriptors include the "lady in black," "the boy's mamma" (793), "the English lady," "this particular lady," "the lady with the little boy" (794), and "that nice-looking woman" (797). The omniscient narrator may be physically present at the Hoftheater—something he refuses to be at Waterloo—yet his detachment generates a paradox of perspectives, as in pulling away in these moments from the intimacy he has already demonstrated with "little Georgy" (709) and "Dobbin of ours" (48), he incarnates himself only to see his fellow characters from the distance of a third person.<sup>14</sup> In the very moment when the narrator finally and belatedly experiences the Napoleonic wars at the Pumpernickel Hoftheater, then, the narrator also fails to process fully his characters' domestic histories.

*Vanity Fair* adds a final level of belated, distanced witnessing to this series of narrative postures within the Hoftheater: if there is one individual watching the incarnated narrator, then it is the omniscient narrator who looks back on his experiences within Pumpernickel,

seeing himself from the outside, as other. As the first-person narrator watches the “lady in black” and her entourage while they view an opera, and as the omniscient narrator retrospectively watches his incarnated self as he scrutinizes his characters, Thackeray’s narrator becomes a guest at multiple performances enveloped within one another. How fitting, then, that the evening when the narrator shows up among the stalls of the Pumpnickel theater is the night of “*Gast-rolle*”—or the guest role (793). Both a guest at the theater in Pumpnickel and a guest within the figurative theater that is *Vanity Fair*, the omniscient narrator, incarnated as a character, remains a spectator and an outsider, only belatedly and retrospectively intimate with the storyworld he inhabits and, ultimately, recreates.

We see this retroactive reprocessing when the narrator interleaves an omniscient vantage point within his posture as a character in the Hoftheater, and thus occasionally performs a level of knowledge that his originary first-person perspective cannot yet articulate. Amid reminders that Amelia is still “that nice-looking woman”—a character without a name, let alone a long transnational story—whom the incarnated narrator still does not know, he also, on one occasion, dubs Amelia with the intimate appellation “Emmy” (795). Though situated in the storyworld during the first days of his acquaintance with his fellow characters, the narrator’s first-person posture speaks of “Emmy” as only his retrospective omniscience could. This momentary shift between present character narration and backward-looking omniscient narration—between the “lady in black” and “Emmy”—produces the necessary distance between the narrator’s complete instantiation within his story and his initial experience of this history. While the omniscient narrator only grasps a historical experience of the Napoleonic wars through his retrospective engagement with a fictionalization of that historical narrative, the embodied narrator only participates fully in his characters’ personal histories through his retrospective construction of a projected omniscient point of view. The logic of Waterloo’s transition from an unnarratable world historical event to one belatedly and aesthetically reprocessed in Pumpnickel thus alerts us to how the narrator’s account of his characters’ domestic histories, which he observes remotely or not at all, will also require the distance and belatedness of fiction. For Waterloo, the narrator gains productive intimacy with the narratable past through the fictional duchy and

its theater; for the character's domestic histories, this intimacy only occurs with the narration of the novel itself.

This intimacy has everything to do with the distance garnered by history's aestheticization. In Thackeray's lecture series *The English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century* (1851), he suggests that engaging with "the fictitious book" allows for the ceaseless contemporaneity of aesthetically experiencing the past not only in but also as the present moment (94). Through reading, he submits, "the old times live again," and the reader can "travel in the old country of England" but with actions decidedly in the eternal present tense of literature: "the beaux are gathering . . .; the gentry are going . . .; the ladies are thronging" (94). With fiction, then, history becomes not just, in Lukács's phrase, a "concrete precondition of the present" (21); instead, history becomes an aesthetic condition of the present. This model of the historical novel is less about incremental progress—what Lukács terms "history as a process" (21) or "an uninterrupted process of changes" (23)—than it is about history standing "still": in *Vanity Fair*, the revival offered by fiction is at once static and generative, resuscitating history not as a prerequisite for progress but as a condition of originary experience.

Yet even as fiction revivifies history, the narrator's experiences also recognize that this contemporaneity can only occur after the fact—with a retrospective and imaginatively authored glance. According to this logic, neither violent national histories nor domestic histories can ever be experienced synchronically; on the contrary, by privileging an engagement with the past that is necessarily out of sync with the historical event, the belated and self-reflexively fictional form yields the firmest grasp on a phenomenology of history. Insofar as Pumpernickel's aesthetic resuscitations of the Napoleonic wars mark the unnarratability of these violent national events during their enactment and show that they can only be realized belatedly under the sign of fiction, the narrator also elevates the domestic lives of the characters to the force of history-making, exposing the characters' personal pasts as similarly impenetrable in the moments of their unfolding but, as the reader knows, ultimately recovered in their aesthetic resuscitation by the novel. *Vanity Fair* thus trumpets aesthetic revival as the best—and perhaps the only—way to confront history, or even to confront one's own historicity. Rather than figuring fiction as,

in Ian Duncan's phrase, "the discursive category that separates novels from history" (28-29), Thackeray envisions how the novel's fictionality allows one to be aesthetically and temporally distanced from, yet still immersed in, history made present. *Vanity Fair* thus poses a question for its readers, who encountered this novel propelled by a battle that occurred a generation earlier while they witnessed revolutions erupting across Europe: how might Victorians gain firsthand experience of their own history-making? According to Thackeray: wait thirty years, then read a novel.

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## NOTES

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1. Sutherland has made a similar observation about the erasure of history at the end of *Vanity Fair* (xix-xx).

2. While some of the best scholarship on omniscience has theorized this capacious point of view as constructed primarily as a "refusal of character" (Jaffe 13) or as an inter-subjective "collective mind" (Miller 67), *Vanity Fair's* narrator insists that his narration requires his firsthand experience as a discrete, historical character.

3. For a recent analysis of Waterloo as central to *Vanity Fair* despite "the battle's resistance to mimesis," see Heffernan 25. On the novel as an "unreliable witness" to Waterloo, see Hammond 36.

4. For instance, see *The Second Funeral of Napoleon* (1841) and "Little Travels and Road-side Sketches" (*Fraser's Magazine*, 1845), both published under Thackeray's oft-used pseudonym, Michael Angelo Titmarsh.

5. On how wartime "produces a history of the present always permeable to other presents, other wartimes," see Favret 30-43.

6. Thackeray's daughter, Anne Ritchie, extrapolates on the correlation between Thackeray's travels in Weimar from 1830-31 and the narrator's presentation of Pumpernickel during the same years. In Ritchie's words, one of her father's letters from Weimar "might almost be a page out of 'Vanity Fair' itself, so absolutely does it reproduce the atmosphere of Pumpernickel and the echoes of that time" (xviii).

7. Pumpernickel has also been read as a satirization of both English life and humanity more generally. See Mathison 242 and Worth 402-04.

8. The narrator's admiration of Pumpernickel in *Vanity Fair* echoes Thackeray's private letters on Weimar: "I think I have never seen a society more simple, charitable, courteous, gentlemanlike than that of the dear little Saxon city" ("Letter to George

Henry Lewes" 3:445) where the "Grand Duke and Duchess received us with the kindest hospitality," the "Court was splendid," and the "theatre was admirably conducted" (442) with "noble intelligence and order" (445).

9. Pumpnickel particularly echoes Weimar's status as a city built upon the musical and theatrical arts. As Randall argues, "The carefully cultivated image of Weimar as an intellectually elite court of creative, enlightened polymaths owes much to its reputation for music making" (98). The designation "court of the muses" derives from the German painter Theobald von Oer's 1860 oil painting *Der Weimarer Musenhof* [*The Weimar Court of the Muses*].

10. Thackeray's narrator and traditional English translations of the French folk song often render "Marlborough" as "Malbrook" (794).

11. See Botstein 340-41 and Cooper, *Beethoven* 226.

12. See Tillotson 94; Fleishman 147-48; and Ermarth 19.

13. Thackeray's interest in this complicated relationship between the generalizing panorama of omniscience and the limitations of firsthand perception is not isolated to *Vanity Fair*. For a recent account of the first-person narration of wartime in *Barry Lyndon*, see Greiner.

14. For a compelling analysis of how mirrors in *Vanity Fair* permit "an observer to be both within and beyond what he sees," see Brink-Roby 142.

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