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经典世界文学名著丛书



名利场

VANITY FAIR
WILLIAM THACKERAY

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VANITY FAIR

A NOVEL WITHOUT A HERO

William Makepeace Thackeray

With an Introduction by John Sutherland

With 193 Illustrations by the Author

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING & RESEARCH PRESS

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

外语教学与研究出版社·牛津大学出版社

(京)新登字 155 号

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

名利场 = VANITY FAIR / (英) 萨 克 雷
(Thackeray, W. N.) 著。—北京:外语教学与研究出版社, 1994. 10

ISBN 7-5600-0910-7

I. 名… II. 萨… III. ①长篇小说-英国-近代
②英语-长篇小说-课外读物 IV. H319.4:I

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (94)第 09167 号

本书由牛津大学出版社授权出版,限在中华人民共和国境内发行

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名利场

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外语教学与研究出版社出版发行
(北京西三环北路 19 号)

华利国际合营印刷有限公司印刷

新华书店总店北京发行所经销

开本 736×960 1/32 31.5 印张

1994 年 10 月第 1 版 1997 年 7 月第 3 次印刷

印数: 20001—26000 册

* * *
ISBN 7-5600-0910-7/H·487
定价: 28.80 元

威廉·梅克庇斯·萨克雷 1812 年生于印度的加尔各答，父亲是东印度公司的官员。萨克雷 6 岁回英国上学，从小喜欢写字作画，剑桥大学未毕业就到欧洲大陆游历，拜访了歌德，后到巴黎学画。1833 年因为银行倒闭，萨克雷父亲留下的大笔遗产化为乌有。从此他自谋生计，当年主办了《国旗》周刊。1836 年萨克雷任《立宪报》驻巴黎记者，同时对政治产生浓厚兴趣，持小资产阶级激进民主主义观点。他一方面发表文章，一方面到英美各地演讲。1857 年他在牛津区竞选议员失败。1859 年任新刊物《康希尔杂志》主编。1863 年圣诞节前夕他因心脏病突发逝世。

萨克雷从 1833 年开始发表文章，十几年里更换了 20 来个笔名，1847 年始用真名在《笨拙》杂志上连载自画插图的《名利场》，从此名声大振。早年的 45 个特写收在《势利者集》(1847)中。其他作品有《潘登尼斯的历史》(1850)、《纽克姆一家》(1855)和历史小说《亨利·艾斯蒙德的历史》(1852)及续集《弗吉尼亚人》。最后一部小说《丹尼斯·杜瓦尔》仅完成了 8 章。他的一系列文笔隽永的小品文收在《转弯抹角的随笔》(1863)中，讲演收在《英国幽默作家》(1853)和《四个乔治王》(1860)两个集子中。

萨克雷认为艺术的使命就是无情地揭发当权阶层，他特别善于揭去贵族和资产者所戴的假面具。代表作品《名利场》就塑造了 19 世纪初英国资本主义社会一个女冒险家的典型。小说以讲故事的方式叙述，夹叙夹议，冷嘲热讽，自成一独特风格。

内 容 简 介

小说题目“名利场”取自班扬的寓言小说《天路历程》。主要情节可分两条线索。一条线索描写已故穷画师的女儿蓓基在离开平克顿女子寄宿学校后，暂住在富家小姐爱米丽亚家中，企图勾引爱米丽亚的哥哥以进入上流社会。此事失败后，蓓基去毕脱·克劳雷爵士家当家庭教师，同时施展逢迎、拍马和勾搭等乖巧手段。而当毕脱丧偶后向蓓基求婚时，她却已秘密嫁给了爵士的儿子罗登。另一条线索写纯洁的姑娘爱米丽亚钟情于轻浮空虚的军官乔治·奥斯本，冲破重重障碍终于和他结婚。但丈夫很快就厌弃她，另寻新欢。爱米丽亚一味痴情，即使在丈夫死后仍不肯改嫁。最后，蓓基道出乔治生前曾约自己私奔的事实，爱米丽亚才另结了婚。蓓基后来又与年老丑陋的斯丹恩勋爵私通，因私情为丈夫窥破而遭抛弃。而斯丹恩则误以为罗登夫妇设局诈骗，也与蓓基一刀两段，蓓基就此潦倒。她晚年从另一情夫约瑟夫手中得到一笔遗产，开始热心于慈善事业。

作者萨克雷在小说中栩栩如生地勾勒出一幅现实中的名利场的画面，把生活中尔虞我诈、欺骗背叛、势利虚荣等丑恶行径表现得淋漓尽致。作者最后写道：“啊！虚荣中的虚荣！在这世界上我们又有谁是幸福的呢？我们又有谁如愿以偿了呢？而就算如此，又有谁满足了昵？”

INTRODUCTION

By the best reckoning we can make, Thackeray began serious work on *Vanity Fair* (as the novel was eventually to be called) in late 1844—early 1845. Up to this point his career, in and out of writing, had been chequered. He was born a gentleman, so brought up and educated; Charterhouse, Trinity College Cambridge, European travel, Inns of Court—his youth followed a high road to Victorian success. Had he not gambled away part of his patrimony and lost the rest in a bank crash, not idled at college, not been bored by law, and above all not compounded everything with a horribly unlucky marriage, Thackeray might have entered the leisured, lettered, professional life for which birth and upbringing destined him. One can imagine him, in later years, a mellowly Fieldingesque magistrate; an MP regularly prosing away in the heavier journals; a subtle diplomat or—most likely of all—a historian. For of all literary men, it was the historians (Macaulay notably) that Thackeray most revered. Had he lived longer, in his late prosperity he would certainly have written the history of Queen Anne's reign that he promised himself. Failing all else, the young Thackeray could have married money; he was charming and personable enough. Instead he chose Isabella Shawe. She brought him no dowry, no connections (except those of an Irish mother-in-law, whom he punished relentlessly in fiction to the end of his life), gave him two surviving daughters but went incurably mad in 1842.

Thackeray finally achieved membership of the Athenaeum, in 1851. But he did it with a difficult instrument of entry—the bestselling novelist's pen. Nor was his path to sales success in fiction easy. Few authors can have had a tougher or more wide-ranging apprenticeship. From 1835 to 1845 he 'wrote for his life'. His output was prodigious, and bewilderingly various. To short order he turned in reviews and essays of a social, political or historical kind as the nature of the journal required. He produced reportage,

travel books, comic squibs and journalism (for a while in the 1830s, he was even a newspaper proprietor), 'sketches', social physiologies and short fiction. All that he wrote was anonymous or pseudonymous. His pre-*Vanity Fair* pen-names and assumed personae are legion: *inter alia*, Yellow-plush the footman, 'Our Fat Contributor', Major Gahagan the fiery Irish warrior, Barry Lyndon the picaro soldier of fortune, Ikey Solomons Jr. the fence, Launcelot Wagstaff and George Fitz-Boodle—bon bourgeois club gents, Mr. Snob (for London), Mr. Squab (for Calcutta), and his favourite cockneyfied Michaelangelo Titmarsh. Obscure but versatile, Thackeray even put himself forward as an illustrator to Harrison Ainsworth and Charles Dickens, novelists of his generation who had made a faster and more brilliant start. It is a curious speculation how literary history would have been rewritten, had they commissioned him rather than Phiz and Cruikshank.

By early 1845, Thackeray had a substantial body of published work behind him. But he had published nothing in itself substantial. *Vanity Fair*, when it finally appeared in January 1847, took him with one jump to the top of the tree with Dickens. It made his name (literally, being published under the superscription 'W. M. Thackeray') and his fortune. Riding *Vanity Fair's* success he became, with Dickens, the best paid novelist of the age. Not *quite* as well paid, admittedly. (Bradbury and Evans came to reckon his maximum price per monthly part at £250 and Dickens's an astronomical £600.) But for many discriminating readers, Thackeray was the more highly regarded of the two. (See, for instance, Jane Carlyle's verdict on reading four of *Vanity Fair's* instalments: 'beats Dickens out of the world!')

The story of *Vanity Fair* is easily summarized and stripped down into shapes and patterns. It follows, through their turns of fortune, the careers of two women. One is good, stupid, bourgeois and (initially) rich; the other is clever, selfish, bohemian and (initially) poor. They leave their school at Chiswick in the same coach, in 1813. Both have vexed courtships and marry in 1815 to 'disoblige their families' (as Jane Austen would say). A great historical

event, Waterloo, lies athwart their newly-wed lives. Amelia's husband dies on the battlefield; Becky's husband survives. Both wives give birth to a son in 1816. There follows a decade of mounting triumph for Becky culminating in presentation to her monarch; a decade of intensifying misery for Amelia culminating in separation from her child. Then, in 1827, there is a spin of the wheel; Becky is plunged into (deserved) ruin, Amelia comes into (deserved) good fortune. But with an ironic twist, Thackeray brings both heroines into final equilibrium. As we first met them, Regency girls, together in a coach, so we leave them, now two early-Victorian ladies, either side of the charity stall which declares their mutual respectability in the eyes of the world.

Before Waterloo, the business of the novel is marriage, family disfavour and disinheritance. After Waterloo, as the heroines' lives separate, the great issue is marital fidelity. Two triangular relationships develop. Becky is faithless to her increasingly worthy husband Rawdon with the lecherous Marquis of Steyne. Amelia is faithful to her dead husband, the worthless George, denying the steadfast love of Dobbin. In so doing, both women sin.

Around their see-sawing careers and the congruent geometry of the post-marital affairs, Thackeray creates a narrative of panoramic historical sweep and of subtle ironic effects. It was work designed to be meditated on by fellow novelists, as well as consumed by the paying reading public. Gordon Ray is surely right in his insistence that Thackeray labours in *Vanity Fair* to raise the tone of mid-nineteenth-century fiction and with it the status of the novelist. (This, incidentally, was in line with Carlyle's stern judgement that the novelists of England had hitherto shirked their God-given mission.) Thackeray, one might paraphrase, found the English novel sloppy romance; he left it solid realism.

This Thackerayan correction entailed the lash as well as good example. Among his many parts, he is a supreme parodist. Like that of his master, Fielding, Thackeray's fiction is founded on a repudiation of the fashionable falsity of the day. And like Fielding again, Thackeray does not

merely disdain, but on occasion scornfully recreates in all its absurdity what he despises. Did he so choose, he could do it better is the implication of the exercise. Most of the currently popular novels shied at in *Vanity Fair* have since died a death so complete that they will be unknown to the modern reader. Thackeray, it might even be argued, did his work rather too well, helping burlesque into extinction such genres as the 'Newgate', 'silver fork', and Napoleonic soldier of fortune novel.

It is instructive to look carefully at the beginning of Chapter VI, 'Vauxhall', with its challenging opening: 'We might have treated this subject in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner.' Good as his word, Thackeray proceeds to offer hilarious samples of these alternative manners. The burlesque parade makes multiple parody of Mrs. Gore, Bulwer Lytton, G. P. R. James, Douglas Jerrold, Eugène Sue, Harrison Ainsworth, Victor Hugo, Mrs. Trollope, G. W. M. Reynolds and even (though Thackeray was chary of picking this particular fight) Dickens himself. The satiric overture to Chapter VI was shortened from the original manuscript version for the first printed issue of *Vanity Fair*, and further reduced for the next revised edition of the novel, in 1853, leaving the comparative stump which is printed in the text here (see note to p. 60). But elsewhere, the project was expanded. In April 1847 (Chapter VI was first published in February) Thackeray launched in *Punch* a series of parodic novelettes, 'Novels by Eminent Hands' (the title hits at Ainsworth, see the following note on the composition and publication of *Vanity Fair*). These vastly extend the *Vanity Fair* burlesques, and are agreed to be among the best things of their kind ever written.

As Gordon Ray puts it, *Vanity Fair* signals clearly and early the kind of novel Thackeray will not write; that is to say, the kind of novel the majority of his writing and reading contemporaries affect. Throughout *Vanity Fair*, and explicitly in Chapter VI, Thackeray makes the pharisaical assertion that he is not as other novelists are. But, as critics have come round to noticing, this *censor morum literariorum*

would often seem to have a dangerously soft spot for his victims. *Vanity Fair*, for all its show of repudiation, frequently conforms to the fiction it purports to chastise. With its 'arsenical' ending (Becky poisoning Jos) *Vanity Fair* is as much of the Newgate genre as Lytton's sensational *Lucretia* (1846). K. J. Hollingsworth, the authority on this early shoot of crime fiction, goes so far as to claim that *Vanity Fair* is the Newgate novel to end Newgate novels. So too, Matthew Rosa sees Thackeray's novel as the *summum genus* of silver forkery. It has certainly survived as the greatest of Waterloo novels (who now remembers the multitudinous works of W. H. Maxwell, or Lever's *Charles O'Malley*, the bestselling novel of 1841 which Thackeray put down hilariously with his spoof, 'Phil Fogarty. A Tale of the Fighting Onety-Oneth?'). Thackeray was loftily contemptuous in his two reviews of *Coningsby*, affecting to find Disraeli's romance of power politics in the 'saloons of the mighty' obnoxious and absurd. (See also 'Coddingsby', by the dubiously eminent hand of 'B. de Shrewsbury, Esq.'). But who is the arch villain of *Vanity Fair*? Why, Steyne, avowedly based on the Marquis of Hertford, the same aristocrat who modelled for the all-powerful Monmouth in *Coningsby*.

Thackeray, we may say, has a more complex and intimate relationship with the modes of fashionable fiction of the age than his apparently dismissive satirical manner would suggest. Neither is it easy to fix his feelings about the period in which *Vanity Fair* is principally set—the dissolute Regency and reign of George IV. Here, again, we detect in Thackeray mixed feelings of nostalgia and severe moral criticism. But at least we are on firm ground with the age's figurehead. Of all the historical figures whom Thackeray loathed, the bloated 'first gentleman of Europe' was the blackest of beasts. Even Marlborough in *Esmond* is treated with more tenderness than 'the great simulacrum'. Thackeray's ink boils whenever he describes Florizel. He often did describe him. More or less full-length portraits are found in *Punch* (see, particularly, *The Georges, Punch*, 11 October 1845), in *The Snobs of England* (see particularly Chapter II,

'The Snob Royal'), and—most vituperatively—in *The Four Georges* where the fourth lecture is devoted to an hour-long diatribe against the last Hanoverian: Thackeray's theme is simple. The Prince Regent represents the sink of corruption against which the present, Victorian, age is the wholesome reaction:

He is dead but thirty years, and one asks how a great society could have tolerated him? Would we bear him now? In this quarter of a century, what a silent revolution has been working! how it has separated us from old times and manners! How it has changed men themselves!

In *Vanity Fair*, the fourth George is referred to frequently. He actually appears on stage twice (and speaks once) at the apogee of Becky's career; in the charade scene at Gaunt House and in the Drawing-room presentation in 1827—Becky's moment of glory. On neither occasion can Thackeray, with a satiric attack of commoner's humility, bring himself to describe, nor even name, the 'great personage':

What were the circumstances of the interview between Rebecca Crawley, *née* Sharp, and her Imperial Master, it does not become such a feeble and inexperienced pen as mine to attempt to relate. The dazzled eyes close before that Magnificent Idea. Loyal respect and decency tell even the imagination not to look too keenly and audaciously about the sacred audience-chamber, but to back away rapidly, silently, and respectfully, making profound bows out of the August Presence. (p. 604)

But while miming loyal blindness at the incandescence of the Hanoverian sun god, Thackeray insinuates his derogatory view of the Prince Regent and his dandified parasites with the namesake Osborne, and George Osborne's very fat friend, Jos. ('William' Dobbin is significantly named for the decent, if maladroit, 'Silly Billy'. One of his first royal edicts on coming to power in 1830 was to restrict the extravagant military uniforms so beloved of the 'padded booby' George. Dobbin embodies that 'change' Thackeray eulogizes in *The Four Georges*.)

Vanity Fair, then, is an historical novel. In particular the middle-class social life of the Regency (i.e. 1811–20) is

reconstructed with apparently personal familiarity. Thackeray, however, was born in the year George was declared Regent. He could scarcely have been conscious of Waterloo, four years later. But the victory remained for him, as for many Victorians, the age's great event. Indeed, with the English 'saving revolution' of 1688, the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, Waterloo could easily be conceived as the most monumental occurrence in modern history. The close-run thing in Belgium was the foundation of Britain's century of triumph and the spread of imperial red over the world's map. And had the battle been lost, history would probably have delivered a bloody English Revolution, rather than the Reform Bill of 1832. Nor was it just the European balance of power which was rearranged by Waterloo. The victory had profound social consequences; it marked a moment of regeneration for the British aristocracy. Dandyism fell; Brummell was disgraced in 1815—a fall 'as great as Napoleon's' it was said. The Duke of Wellington was himself a 'dandy general' and led an army whose fashionable regiments fought brilliantly. (Hence, of course, the famous 'won on the playing fields of Eton' proverb.) Thackeray's 'silent revolution' can more plausibly be dated from 1815 than from 1830, when George died. Despite his monarchic radiance in mid-1820s *Vanity Fair*, George's last ten years were spent in almost total social eclipse and public unpopularity.

But despite his fascination with Waterloo, and its profound effect on the novel's five main characters and the world they inhabit, Thackeray's treatment of the battle is tantalizing in the highest degree. The suspense builds from Dobbin's 'the regiment's called away' to the Duchess of Richmond's eve of battle ball, from which officers slip out one by one, some to death, some to glory. We arrive to within earshot of the cannonade at Quatre Bras. But then, at the most teasing moment, we are denied satisfaction (which as thrill-seeking and *paying* readers we legitimately demand) by Thackeray's mock-humble and maidenish retraction:

We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants. When the decks are cleared for action we go below and wait meekly. We should only be in the way of the manoeuvres that the gallant fellows are performing overhead. We shall go no farther with the —th than to the city gate . . . (p. 361)

As a matter of literary record, the reader indignantly retorts that Thackeray is an excellent military novelist. Any number of examples could be given; but for the nearest turn to Chapters IV, V, VI of *Barry Lyndon*, which Thackeray was writing virtually up to the month when he began *Vanity Fair*. This rollicking autobiography of an eighteenth-century soldier of fortune demonstrates the skill which Thackeray disowns, with infuriating modesty, at the start of the ninth number of *Vanity Fair*.

The novelist teases at other similarly exciting moments in the novel's action. He will not, for instance, conduct us into the penetralium of Gaunt House, giving us, instead, serpentine, 'Tomeavesian' gossip. What we crave is reliable eye-witness report of what's going on at this climax of Becky's English campaign. 'Great personages' pop up momentarily on the edge of *Vanity Fair's* narrative, only to pop down. Thus the Duke of Wellington himself rides past the novel's heroes and heroines in a Brussels public park. It is his sole appearance and what does Thackeray give us? Peggy O'Dowd's chauvinist Hibernian irrelevance: 'the Wellesleys and Moloneys are related' but, of course, poor *I* would never dream of introjuicing myself unless his Grace thought proper to remember our family tie.' The Duchess of Richmond's Brussels ball on 15 June—that conjunction of brilliant social glitter and carnage—is famous from at least two other literary presentations. But Thackeray's thinned account keeps off-stage Byron's 'fated Brunswick'; the glamorous hostess; the martial guest of honour and indeed all personages above field rank. *Charles O'Malley*, by contrast, has the hero on the most hob-nobbing terms with the ducal hostess and Commander-in-Chief. The 'great captain' in Lever's narrative actually 'introjuices' himself to the hero ('know your face well; how d'ye do?') with the lack

of reserve which suggests that the brash Moloneys and the Wellesleys might indeed be related.

No more than with Thackeray's battlefield reticence can we put this omission down to authorial inadequacy. The depiction of Marlborough in *Esmond*, of Washington in *The Virginians* (and probably the imminent depiction of Paul Jones in the unfinished *Duval*) testify that Thackeray was as capable of rendering the portrait of a military chief as he was a military fight—when he chose to do so. *Vanity Fair*, then, is an historical novel in whose historical fabric there are gaping, but evidently carefully placed, holes. Thackeray gives us Regency London without Brummell, Byron or the Regent (how easy it would have been to send the Osborne-Sedley-Dobbin party to Vauxhall on the festive night of 13 July: see note to p. 63); the great Brussels ball without grandees; the frontline in 1815 without Waterloo, Wellington or Napoleon; and, later in the novel, Weimar without Goethe. An historical novel, we might call it, without everything conventionally historical.

The artful anticlimaxes in *Vanity Fair*, and particularly the frustrating vacancy around Waterloo, are partly explained by Thackeray's determination to avoid romantic stereotype. Other factors are his ambivalence about British imperial might, and his circumstances while actually composing *Vanity Fair*. To take this last (and probably least) consideration: the novelist was evidently very pressed for time and space during the writing of the middle sections of his narrative. He intended to get the action to the battle at least two numbers earlier than he actually managed. But what with the marriages and all the falling-out between relatives in the 'hundred days' between March and June, *Vanity Fair* was fairly bursting at the seams. Of course, with a narrator as deft as Thackeray, pressure could not have been the deciding factor. In fact, as the Tillotsons point out, Thackeray's gimmick of telling the story of Waterloo indirectly through its domestic repercussions had been aired as early as 1842, during a visit to Charles Lever's house near Dublin. As reported, Thackeray 'seemed much inclined to "laugh at martial might"', although he still held

to the idea that "something might be made out of Waterloo", even without the smoke and din of the action being introduced.' In Lever's *Charles O'Malley*, published in 1841, smoke and din is prominent and the hero observes the epic encounter at Napoleon's side.

Silence in the face of Waterloo was probably also encouraged by Thackeray's perplexity when he went to visit the battlefield, a few weeks before embarking on his novel. What he describes (in a 'Little Travels and Roadside Sketches' piece, published in *Fraser's Magazine*, January 1845) is strikingly like Orwell's painful sense of British greatness, lying underfoot in the mouldering carcasses of the expendable 'natives' whose sweat, suffering and hunger is empire's real foundation. Walking over the place where thousands of uncommemorated private soldiers were cut, blasted or bled to death, Thackeray felt pride—as what Englishman would not. But he also felt ashamed of a pride so paid for by others' sacrifice. Moreover, the strength of his mixed feelings induced a conviction that here was a place where one ought to be decently quiet, as in a church:

Let an Englishman go and see that field, and he *never forgets it*. The sight is an event in his life; and, though it has been seen by millions of peaceable *gents*—grocers from Bond Street, meek attorneys from Chancery Lane, and timid tailors from Piccadilly—I will wager that there is not one of them but feels a glow as he looks at the place, and remembers that he, too, is an Englishman.

It is a wrong, egotistical, savage, unchristian feeling, and that's the truth of it. A man of peace has no right to be dazzled by that red-coated glory, and to intoxicate his vanity with those remembrances of carnage and triumph. The same sentence which tells us that on earth there ought to be peace and good-will amongst men, tells us to whom GLORY belongs.

One cannot know for certain, but I suspect that until he actually came to writing it, Thackeray kept open the important question of how he should treat Waterloo. We know, for instance, that he ordered an early copy of G. R. Gleig's *Story of the Battle of Waterloo* in June 1847. He evidently devoured the book when it arrived (see notes to Chapters XXVII–XXXII). And he must have been struck

by one feature in particular. Gleig, at one point, complains at the feeble powers of the 'pen and pencil' (a phrase Thackeray had used in his novel's title) when it comes to describing this battle of battles. Moreover, the most vivacious by far of Gleig's chapters are those dealing with the furious carnival in Brussels before Waterloo, and the stiltedly entitled chapter 'State of Feeling Where the War was not', which records, with lively detail, the wild currents of pessimism and rumour that swept over Brussels during the three days of fighting. Thackeray plundered these sections for *Vanity Fair's* ninth number. With one notable exception (see note to p. 406), the stodgier battle chapters seem to have inspired him less. It is possible, too, that having read Gleig, the novelist felt disinclined to compete with the military historian on his own ground.

To summarize. There is no need to retract, nor even to modify the assertion that *Vanity Fair* is an historical novel. But the sense of historical period and the passage of world-shaking events around the characters is conveyed obliquely. Most obviously by the introduction of minor period detail such as seven shilling pieces and hessian boots. Thackeray inserts material of this kind very judiciously—but it is a simple device, equivalent to theatrical 'props'. More complex is the way in which he throws up a London subtly different from that familiar to his 1848 readers. Thus, in Chapter XXII, Dobbin meets George at the old Slaughter's Coffee House (it stood in St. Martin's Lane until 1843) before his furtive marriage cum elopement with Amelia:

It was about half an hour from twelve when this brief meeting and colloquy took place between the two captains. A coach, into which Captain Osborne's servant put his master's desk and dressing-case, had been in waiting for some time; and into this the two gentlemen hurried under an umbrella, and the valet mounted on the box, cursing the rain and the dampness of the coachman who was steaming beside him. 'We shall find a better trap than this at the chutch-door,' says he; 'that's a comfort.' And the carriage drove on, taking the road down Piccadilly; where Apsley House and St. George's Hospital wore red jackets still; where there

were oil-lamps; where Achilles was not yet born; nor the Pimlico arch raised; nor the hideous equestrian monster which pervades it and the neighbourhood;—and so they drove down by Brompton to a certain chapel near the Fulham road there. (p. 262)

Misfortune is predicted in the proverbially unlucky rain which falls on the bride and groom. Other predictions are contained in the urban landscape. This is early 1815. Apsley House, on Hyde Park Corner, was to become the residence of the Duke of Wellington, victor of Waterloo. Wyatt encased it in Bath stone in 1828 ('red coat' means literally 'brick' but also has a military significance here, as does St. George's Hospital, which is to care for Waterloo wounded). Wyatt was also responsible for the heroic statue of Wellington—weighing forty tons—erected at a cost of £30,000 by public subscription, in 1846. This monstrosity, as Thackeray and many of his contemporaries thought, also stood at the south-eastern entrance to the Park. (It figures, in caricature, on the serial cover—see notes.) The Achilles statue was subscribed for (£10,000), and inscribed by 'the women of England.' It was also dedicated as a tribute to Wellington, and was raised in 1822. It was cast partly from enemy cannon captured at Waterloo.

This elaboration of scenic detail serves a number of purposes. It emphasizes how London has changed (omnibuses in 1846 serve this part of London; oil-lighting gave way to gas in 1828). More thematically, we feel the marriage threatened by futurity, a futurity centred on Waterloo. These monuments to victory are also, we sense, George's gravestone: Amelia, although she does not know it, will join the 'women of England' in making a widow's sacrificial donation.

In the above example, Thackeray dwarfs a major novelistic event (the marriage of two principal characters) by throwing gigantic historical shadows across their bridal path. Examples can be found where—for artistic effect—he does just the opposite. In the following, the dizzying European crisis of 1813–14 is shrunk by reflection in Amelia's preoccupation about her engagement to George: