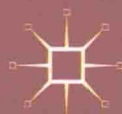


Words at Work in

VANITY FAIR

Language Shifts in Crucial Times, 1914–1930

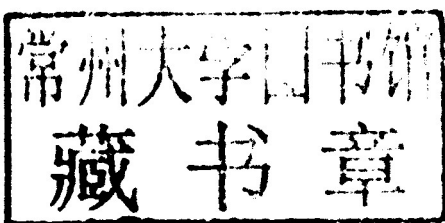
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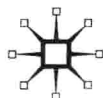
Words at Work in *Vanity Fair*

**Language Shifts in
Crucial Times, 1914–1930**

Martha Banta



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Introduction: *Words in Conversation with the Times*

What is an era? The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) (2nd edition) defines it as the “date, or ending, which forms the commencement of a new period in the history of a nation, an institution, individual, art or science.” Era serves as an “initial point”—a marker for chronological notations that claim to be “memorable.” *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (2nd edition) defines era more loosely, but usefully, as “an event or date that marks the beginning of a new or important period in the history of something.” Take note of the insistence by each of these sterling sources on placing era, the maker of new beginnings, in a seamless relationship to history.

What then is history? “A narrative of past events, account, tale, story” is one of the basic definitions meticulously tracked down by the *OED*. True to its long-held devotion to etymological studies, care is given to noting the origins of the terms era and history. Both evolved from ancient Greek roots: era is the noun for *brass*, evolving into the word for *counters that keep accounts*. History is the verb to *know*; spreading out to *acts of learning or knowing by inquiry*. Therefore, era keeps tabs on the brass-hard facts of the world’s business that merges its concerns with history’s commitment to the art of telling and the philosophy of knowing.

It would be well and good to trace the webs of defining terms that affect our notions of era and history. But what have they to do, straight on, with the business of this book? In lieu of stacks of brass counters once employed to compute material worth, words are markers by which to evaluate the stories (large and small) that attempt to know what it is that we have just experienced. In open societies words are free for the taking, and the persons who take them up are free agents

in what they want to say. In closed societies strict limitations restrict an individual's ability to profit from an unimpeded exchange of words—written, spoken, or listened to.¹ Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* of 1932, the imposition of the Hollywood Production Code of the Breen Office in 1934, and the prescience of George Orwell's novel *1984* are but three of the warnings that flip-overs in power structures can convert everyday words into forbidden obscenities or cause them to be totally erased.

Immersed as we are in a world of words, we often do not realize what is taking place in the moments that are shaping how we talk, write, and think. We may find ourselves calling upon words that appeared only today, words that have been turned upside down while our attention was turned elsewhere, and words (previously overlooked) that aggressively push their way to the fore to express immediate needs. To find out what has been going on, we turn toward aids that interpret an era as something that can be studied and, in part, understood, as the work of words.

Lexicographers dig words out of the compost heaps of language that accumulate over the years in order to arrange them conveniently into dictionaries. Linguists create theories as to why language came about. Etymologists absorb themselves with the origins of words, as did Christine Kenneally in *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language* (2007) as well as two recent publications: Philip Durkin's *The Oxford Guide to Etymology* (2009) and *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* in two volumes (2009). But the study of the lineage of timeworn vocabularies and the refurbishing of entrenched verbal traditions is hardly new. A glance into the *OED* is a reminder that we are forever "caught in the web of words" that prompted James Murray's lifelong toil. We add to the eternal wisdom of Henry Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and *The Elements of Style* compiled by Will Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, the current rage of publications: Sidney Landau's *Dictionaries—The Art and Craft of Lexicography* (1984), Henry Hitchings's *The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English* (2006), Robert E. Allen's *Allen's Dictionary of English Phrases* (2009), and the shrewdly cheeky studies of 2008 by John McWhorter, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English*, and Roy Blount Jr., *Alphabet Juice The Energies, Gists, and Spirits of Letters, Words, and Combinations Thereof*.

Any survivor of a course in "The History of the English Language" has been tutored in the influx of verbal expression that passed from Old English to Middle English, enriched the writings of Chaucer,

and led to the flood of words from the Continent that infiltrated the Elizabethan Age. The eighteenth century absorbed the language of the new sciences, and the nineteenth century appropriated vocabularies from imperial expansion. In the former colonies, newly self-defined Americans responded with the making of "an American dialect." Noah Webster's declaration of 1789 in *Dissertations on the English Language* ("A new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and sciences, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe, will introduce new words into the American tongue.") looks toward the challenge voiced by Thomas Jefferson in 1813 ("The new circumstances under which we are placed call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects").² But if history is to mean more than "something" that has happened, we should look at events through the language that brought them into being. Words will start wars (the Declaration of Independence of July 1776 and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's radio address on December 7, 1941) or speak to the consequences of a war in progress (the Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863). Words can also be woven around visual images of impossible acts (the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001) to foster reasons to begin yet other wars.

Words at Work differs from, but moves alongside, interests pursued by linguistic theorists, students of local dialects, compilers of dictionaries in the tradition of Samuel Johnson, Noah Webster, James Murray, and H. L. Mencken, and critics of speech in action such as I. A. Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning* and *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1923), William Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), and W. F. Bolton's *The Language of 1984: Orwell's English and Ours* (1984). It shares our avid interest in the politics of speech, whether used or misused. Analyses of the language that shaped the public's responses to the administrations of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover raised concerns of the kind later addressed by George Orwell's "New Words" and "Politics and the English Language" (1940 and 1946) and Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1976, 1983). It points toward the heightened politico-speak of the most recent presidential campaigns. William Safire's columns "On Language" and his *Political Dictionary* are supplemented by "The Word," anatomized on the Colbert Report, and the advice offered by Frank Luntz in *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (2007). Intensive attention is paid to the language skills, written or spoken, of Barack Obama, a man praised by many and derided by others as a modern example of the rare qualities of negative capability and multiple sensibility by which John Keats identified "A Man of

Achievement.”³ And we await those in the near future who attempt to discover the logic behind the use of angry neologisms such as “Liberal Fascism” and “Hitlerian Marxism.”

Where does *Words at Work* stand in light of previous studies? What sets it apart from previous revues, histories, and commentaries on the ever-shifting word patterns taking place within the English-cum-American language?

1. *The when and the what*: The years between 1914 and 1930—bracketed by the Great War and the Crash—offer concrete evidence of social, political, and cultural changes tracked through alterations in American and British language patterns.

In the immediate background are the spelling reforms urged by George Bernard Shaw, the advocacy in 1887 of an international language such as Esperanto, “The Question of Our Speech” raised by Henry James in 1905, and the radically driven language of Randolph Bourne’s essays in the 1910s. Yet it is the ongoing effects of World War I (references designated by the obsessively recurrent use of phrases prefaced by before, during, and after) that inform the book’s discussions of what has happened to the way we talk, write, and think. One can hardly overlook a time span marked by the historians’ use of labels like the Russian Revolution, the Big Four, the Versailles Treaty, the Fourteen Points, the League of Nations, and the Nineteenth Amendment. But it was a far more capacious time than that. The Jazz Age, the Speak-Easies, the Flapper, and the Prohibition—masthead tags borrowed from the tabloids—go only so far. What counts are the words (both compelling and everyday) given importance by their appearance in particular essays by particular critics, prompted by particular concerns driven by particular historical moments.

2. *The where*: The primary source for the words chosen for close examination in *Words at Work* is *Vanity Fair*, the New York based periodical under the guidance of its editor Frank Crowninshield between 1914 and 1936.

The merits of the analysis that drives the book depend in large part on the choice of material it places under scrutiny; so why choose *Vanity Fair*? What if it is deemed an unlikely vehicle to bear the weight placed upon it because of the manner in which its readers have been described: the smart set, the clever ones, and the slicks?⁴ The superficiality of these misleading phrases will be exposed in ways that make clear that the periodical was much

more than a trivial, albeit amusing, souvenir of a fleeting era. It is unfortunate that the current exhumation of *Vanity Fair* glories in the notion that it epitomized the Jazz Age throughout the 1920s, but little else. An accurate accounting discloses the complex role the earlier periodical played in its treatment of issues that led to the substantive changes in language usage that bridge the start of the Great War in 1914 and the body blows of the Crash of 1929.

There was nothing to prevent silly people from picking up *Vanity Fair* for whatever shallow purposes. This does not automatically prove that such a magazine is cynically complicit with anti-intellectual game playing and the processes of commoditization. It takes a stretch of the imagination to disregard the intelligence of a magazine that thrived upon observations by contributors to *Vanity Fair* as diverse and as articulate as Walter Lippmann, Edmund Wilson, Aldous Huxley, Dorothy Parker, Dorothy Richardson, T. S. Eliot, Gilbert Seldes, Sherwood Anderson, Jean Cocteau, Bertram Russell, Robert Benchley, Floyd Dell, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, E. E. Cummings, and "Krazy Kat." *Vanity Fair* contributors are to be numbered among the agents of change that helped to alter past linguistic conventions beyond recognition, even to the extent of disrupting them entirely.

The recent flare-up of studies circle around, or touch at the fringes of, the years between 1914 and 1930. If Barbara Tuchman's *The Proud Towers: a portrait of the world before the war, 1890–1914* (1966) was one of the first, Philipp Blom's *The Vertigo Years: Europe 1900–1914* (2008) continues the trend, but with attention given to Europe alone. Michael North's *Reading 1922* (1999), Martin Pugh's *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (2008), Peter Conn's *The American 1930s, A Literary History* (2009), Morris Dickstein's *Dancing in the Dark* (2009), and Alan Brinkley's *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (2010) do selective work within the localized venues indicated by their titles. In contrast, *Words at Work* devotes itself to a twenty-six-year span that covers an extensive spread of locales, cultural concerns, and events shaping political, economic, and intellectual systems.

Theoretical discussions per se do not take center stage, but the potential for extended exercises in applied theory leaves traces throughout. How could this not be when so many *Vanity Fair* articles feed directly into controversies, for example, over the nature of periodization?⁵ The concluding chapter briefly steps aside from its chosen methodological approach to touch upon theories on the entrapment of popular culture

by capitalistic forces of commodification, but for a bit of instant gratification, I offer one example of the contentions circling the meaning of the word “progress” spiked by Gregory Curtis’s *The Cave Painters* (2006).

Long, long ago before the invention of writing, as the Old Stone Age tapered into the Paleolithic era, vivid picture language was imprinted on the cave walls of southern France and northern Spain. Assertions were made that techniques of cave painting (essentially unchanged over twenty-five millennia) reflect a stable, conservative, and “deeply satisfying” culture. Progress was unknown because it was unneeded.⁶ These claims agitate theorists of every stripe: postcolonialists eager to discredit the notion that advanced nations are the masters of progress; anthropologists who resist argument that “savage cultures” remain fixed in stasis; and political analysts who refuse to define progress in terms of technological advances. A great deal will be said in the chapters ahead (often negative) about progress by the *Vanity Fair* contributors. Even with the hyperactive energies set loose after World War I, there were unseemly moments that seemed static (as when mediocrity defined the Harding and Coolidge administrations), but this era was never defined as “deeply satisfying” or filled with contentment.

Words at Work chooses alternative tactics to bring into focus the language shifts taking place within the highly specific contexts provided by *Vanity Fair*. Dictionaries are inventories of the being of words arranged in alphabetical order, corralled by etymological notes that trace the stages by which these words *became*. In this sense *Words at Work* merges the duties of a repository of dictionary terms with acts that anatomize the events producing the words.

Anatomies can draw upon several procedures: (a) Prufrockian dissection that cuts open the cadaver “fixed” by death, whether for the purpose of detecting specific causes of mortality or as a training technique; and (b) X-rays, chemically developed images used to determine the condition of sections of a living structure; once the picture plate develops, the trained eye is able to observe the subject’s current condition caused by incidents both external and internal. Future technologies may eventually match the enhanced power of the compound lenses of the fly’s eyes, whose compound lenses are six times more sensitive than the human eye, and are capable of registering an almost unlimited multitude of details.

Whether by employing the methods of dissection or X-ray, *Words at Work* looks into the years that span 1914 to 1930. It looks at newly coined phrases such as “the Great War” and “the Crash,” as well as

commonplace words in use before 1914 that received new prominence or underwent drastic redefinition as the result of the onrushing force of events. It also looks at yet other words that shot into existence to meet the need to understand formerly unknown circumstances. Finally, it looks at the consequences of these word changes.

Care is taken to note just what and who is being anatomized, and for whose pleasure and enlightenment. In 1920 H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan published *The American Credo*. Although their "little book" took a different approach than that pursued by *Vanity Fair*, its choice of topics and concerns was not dissimilar. Mencken and Nathan also had to deal with a similarly bifurcated audience. They expended their efforts on training their own X-ray vision upon the feelings and phrases of "the great masses of simple men" across America. At the same time, the primary goal was to appeal to the "higher and more delicately organized tribes and sects of men," readers less "susceptible" to "such ready anatomising."⁷ So how well did *Vanity Fair*, in going its own way, meet these demands?

Because of the attention given to the manner by which certain words reveal their skeletal image in a particular journal over a particular span of time, *Words at Work* acts in part as a capsule biography of *Vanity Fair*. In turn, both serve as a foretelling of the political and cultural fights currently on lurid display. This, in turn, necessitates a brief glance at its antecedents—the London lineage that stands behind the early efforts of Frank Crowninshield to guide the New York enterprise safely forward from its inception in 1914.⁸ The following samplings look at the first decade of London's *Vanity Fair*. They offer no more than a slice of time, cut from the midsection of that extended period labeled loosely as the Victorian era, but it nicely adumbrates the common goals pursued by the two ventures.

In November 1868, *Vanity Fair* introduced itself to London as "A Weekly Show of Political, Social, & Literary Wares." It is telling that Thomas Gibson Bowles, the publisher, chose as its proud motto, "We buy the Truth"—a phrase extracted from a central moment in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the primal document that lies behind all future versions of "Vanity Fair." Upon their arrival at the town of Vanity, Bunyan's sojourners to the Celestial City had been derisively asked, "What will ye buy?"⁹ Their answer, drawn from Proverbs 23: 23, stoutly claims that Truth is all they wish to purchase.

The fertile legacy of Bunyan's little book of 1678 was reanimated in William Makepeace Thackeray's novel of 1848, in Bowles's periodical in 1868, and finally by the arrival of *Vanity Fair* in New York

in 1914—all putting to the test whether Bunyanesque “Truth” can be an integral part of the “knowing” by which history defines itself. Bowles’s introduction to his new journal insists it will put aside the meretricious citizens of Bunyan’s ragtag town of Vanity. It will “display the vanities of the week, without ignoring or disguising that they are vanities, but keeping always in mind that in the buying and selling of them there is to be made a profit of Truth.” On November 29, 1873, Bowles repeats his pledge. His is not “a mere commercial speculation.” By refusing to aspire “to win the suffrages of the Many,” *Vanity Fair* will continue to be a “special paper of good Society,” addressed to “the Few,” “for those alone” to whom “the *current pass-words* of Society” are “comprehensible.”¹⁰

Much of the attention currently received by Bowles’s *Vanity Fair* rests on the striking caricatures for the features, “Men of the Day” and “Statesmen,” provided by “Ape” (Carlo Pelligrini). In the same manner, the worth of Crowinshield’s *Vanity Fair* is largely limited to its cache of handsome photographs. Demonstrably overlooked is the use by each periodical of compelling words to anatomize the power brokers of their generations.

Each image by Ape had a caption penned by Jehu Junior (the pseudonym employed by Bowles). Most point to the particular verbal and written styles that define these notables. *Thomas Carlyle* (October 22, 1870): “When he breaks out in an unknown tongue, his half sentences and strange apostrophes are like the overflowing of a torrent.” *Algernon Charles Swinburne* (November 21, 1874): “No punctuation can hold his luxuriance of speech.” *Hamilton Fish* (May 18, 1872): the American secretary of state for foreign affairs has “dabbled” in letters and journalism, “has never yet learnt to write English,” and comes across as “often absurdly familiar and always intolerably bumptious.” *Charles Sumner* (May 25, 1872): the senator from Massachusetts, is known for “brilliant conversation” and admired for “the extreme lucidity of all his statements and arguments.” *Horace Greeley* (July 20, 1872): a candidate for the president of the United States is “merely a strongly-pronounced journalist with all the worst journalistic faults highly displayed,” whose writing and politics show no “traces of culture” or “largeness of mind.” *Baron Paul Julius Reuter* with his far-flung wire service has “command of public opinion on foreign affairs” (December 14, 1872). Reuter, together with *Edward Levy* of the *Daily Telegraph* (March 22, 1873), exert “a new kind of force” through their hold over enhanced means of written communication. The writings of *Charles Darwin* (September 30, 1871) have “all the charm of romances” and the ability to “appeal

to ordinary men." *John Tyndall* (April 6, 1872), through his skills in the "scientific use of conversation," is a leader in science, which is "before long to rule the world," and *Thomas Henry Huxley* (January 28, 1871) picks through "the mud of Materialism," yet is able to be a "great Med'cine Man among the Inquir-ring Redskins."¹¹ *John Ruskin* (February 17, 1872) is one of those whose power of language engages "even the most indifferent." *Alfred Tennyson* (July 22, 1871) is the poet who instructs us "that there is after all no use in poetry." *John Stuart Mill* (March 29, 1873): "A Feminine Philosopher" is better as a writer rather than as a speaker since he embodies "at once the merit and the misfortune of the Thinker."

London's *Vanity Fair* also considered the way words were used in England's former colonies. "Americanisms" (January 16, 1869) reports that "nothing so much strikes the English visitor to the States... as the almost entire absence of 'slang' in common talk." (Slang: "The distorted, exaggerated application of words to uses for which they were never designed," for example, "awful.") True that Americans are given to "peculiar expressions, which are perfectly good English, but strange to us," such as "having a lovely time," but since they use words "found in old and forgotten English authors," many "speak better English than we do." Five years later, in the post-Civil War years, major changes have resulted from the displacement of the "pure Yankee or English American." September 26, 1874 takes a prophetic look to the time when Americans will speak "with a large admixture of foreign words and a more racy idiom," once the "obstinate nationalism" of incoming ethnic groups takes hold.

English pride in keeping the language pure leads to an active distrust of other languages that leads the islanders to be "about the worst linguists as a nation to be found anywhere," an obvious disadvantage to a nation whose wealth and dominance is based on world trade (September 18, 1869). "The Learning of Languages" criticizes the national "self-conceit" of the lower classes who use "foreigner" as a term of reproach. Yet most at fault are members of the upper classes who give primary importance to "'dead words' instead of 'living things.'" They consider it "more shameful to be ignorant of Latin than of French, and less creditable to be proficient in German or Spanish than in Greek or Hebrew." "Education" (May 8, 1875) has as its goal the means "to teach a man how to earn his bread honestly." One day children of the lower classes, having "learned to be workmen and workwomen," will "then have leisure to become gentlemen and gentlewomen." For now, what matters is not words but honest toil.

The main threats to the preservation of “the national characteristics of the English” are the tricksters in the journalistic trade (June 8, 1872). The stalwart image of John Bull, who once represented a nation of “honest, fair-dealing, outspoken folk,” has been corroded by the invention of “two new languages, the ‘Journalese’ and the ‘Talkee,’ which have no meaning.”¹² The growing power of popular journalism and other tools of Puffery (trade advertisements and the billboards defacing the streets of London) launch the sway of what we now call the Mass Media, a term that did not enter the *OED* until the 1920s.¹³ Long before that Victorian England took notice of the machinations that radically altered the ways by which the English read and thought. Throughout 1872 and 1873, *Vanity Fair* took umbrage over the usurpations of the popular press. The Pall Mall clubman was now subservient to “opinions” poured into his mind at 3 p.m. each day. No distinction was allowed between news and commentary. Newspaper “leaders” imposed meaning through bullying column headings. Long before the inception of today’s social media technologies, alarms were raised about the ways in which truth was overpowered by the “rapid chronicling of events” that defined the world in terms of speed and an overload of information. London’s mid-Victorian concerns over men of the day, Americanisms, foreigners, education, and popular journalism would reemerge in the years that further clouded efforts to discern the truth in the midst of the world’s vanity fairs. Thus, we take a brief backward glance at the ur-narrative (Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*) and its sequel (Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*) that ground New York’s *Vanity Fair*.

In 1678 John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* transcribes the history of Christian’s struggle to arrive at the Celestial City, in the hope of receiving the blessed grace of righteous truths promised by the holy scriptures. Among the many obstacles thrown across his path are the falsities mouthed by Mr. Worldly Wise from the Town of Carnal Policy and the blandishments dangled before him by the fairs held in Vanity, “a thing of ancient standing” (94). The action of William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* of 1847 begins with the departure of Becky Sharp from Miss Pinkerton’s academy for young women devoted to the teachings of “The Great Lexicographer” (8).¹⁴ Becky throws herself into a life of living with, and in command of, all the vanities society has to offer, by contemptuously tossing away the stale wisdom of Dr. Samuel Johnson’s “Dixonary.” Note that both Bunyan and Thackeray preface their narratives with all-important introductions. An introduction exacts grave tasks upon its author (as I well know). Words must be

marshaled with care to make clear the narrative's intent, while skirting Vanity's many tempting lies.

In "The Author's Apology for His BOOK," Bunyan defends the "Method" he chose when presenting his beliefs "In the similitude of a DREAM." He asks his critics, "May I not write in such a style as this?" (3) When he is accused of having "feigned" through his use of metaphors, fables, allegories, and parables, he responds, "What of that I tro? / Some men by feigning words as dark as mine / Make Truth to spangle and its Rays to shine" (4-5).

In "Before the Curtain," the introduction to *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*, Thackeray takes up the role as the manager of the performance with "a feeling of profound melancholy." Vanity Fair is "not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy." Its moments of "humour or kindness" should interest both those "with a reflective turn of mind" and those "of a lazy, or a benevolent, or a sarcastic mood" (5-6). The manager keeps intruding into the narrative, as in Chapter 8 where he makes certain that his readers realize "that Vanity Fair is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falsenesses and pretensions. . . . Yet, look you, one is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it, whether one mounts a cap and bells or a shove-hat, and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking" (89). Is it not, in order "to combat and expose" "quacks and fools," that "Laughter was made"? (91) But as Becky Sharp's own pilgrimage through *Vanity Fair* nears its close, he steps forward to point out the rules of the game he and his readers have chosen to obey: "If we play, let it be with clean cards, and not with this dirty pack" (759).

The *Vanity Fair* that came into being in New York City in 1914 was not limited to concerns characterizing 1678 or 1848, yet it is strongly marked by the legacies passed on by its distinguished predecessors.

In January 1914 Condé Nast made it clear what Frank Crowninshield's job as editor would entail. His business (and "business" it was) was to bring about "the transformation" of the fashion sheet *Dress* into "a new magazine unhampered by tradition"—a periodical with a new name, a new cover, and new contributors ready to offer a stage for "bold and sprightly" pieces about the theater, literature, and social doings in "the reflection of the customs, the humors, the foibles" of its readers. Still more charges were laid out in February 1914. *Vanity Fair* is "to avoid insincerity, puffery and vulgarity, and to tell the truth entertainingly. Reform is no part of our programme."

In March 1914 Crowninshield gamely took on his full-time assignment as “Manager of Performance.” Like Thackeray, he wrote a series of “introductions” stretching from March to October of that year. He declares his intention to free *Vanity Fair* from the static use of language and topics that mar America’s foremost periodicals. He promises that its special flavor will come from writing that was lean, supple, and to the point. In March 1915 he urges readers to “remember that Vanity Fair is not a *standard* magazine.” It is to be “an altogether new kind of magazine. A magazine for *MODERNS*,” addressed to readers with “a higher degree of literacy and intelligence than any in America (Atlantic Monthly and North American Review please copy).”

However self-assured the tone of these editorial declarations, *Vanity Fair* would have to find the nerve to survive the series of shocks that shook the world over the next few months. Once history took command in September 1914 with the outbreak of the European war, the pleasure culled from witty conversation had to be supplemented by a more comprehensive examination of what it means to *know*.

However much Frank Crowninshield deserves credit for his successes as editor, this is not a book about him. It is about the many writers whose contributions turned *Vanity Fair* (in time) into one of the sharper (not slick) X-ray images of its times. It is about the time frames that offer close-ups of how certain words were rejected, redefined, imported, or invented. It is about the welter of events that center the following six chapters: Chapter 1: “Two Editors, Two Projects, One War, 1914–1918”; Chapter 2: “The Corner Turned, 1919–1920”; Chapter 3: “Finding Their Focus, 1921”; Chapter 4: “The Word-Masters, 1922–1925”; Chapter 5: “The Huxley Years, 1926–1928”; and Chapter 6: “Between Wars, 1929–1930.”

Notable events came onto the world scene between the Great War and the Crash: the Russian Revolution, the Versailles Treaty, the League of Nations, the Ku Klux Klan, and Woman’s Suffrage. However, *Words at Work* is not “history” in the conventional sense defined by the *OED*: “A continuous methodical record, in order of time, of important or public events.” Rather, it is history defined as acts of knowing, grasped through words that flowed through these experiences.

In the earliest issues of *Vanity Fair* it was simply a matter of words lifted to prominence once certain topics came lazing into view. Through repetition, such words gained attention almost by default. At first slowly, and later with increased emphasis, the periodical began to hold up keywords for direct analysis. Scrutiny was given to what they meant and the ways in which they spoke to the moment. The editor’s