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# Collapsing the Secret Self: Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* as a Performative Parody

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Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* as a Performative Parody

by

Rachel Freire

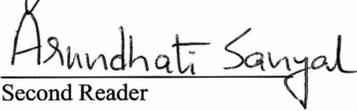
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In his 1851 article “*Pendennis and Copperfield: Thackeray and Dickens*,” David Masson praises William. M. Thackeray for assuming a “pocourantic” attitude toward “social arrangements and conventions amid which men and women move” and satirically focusing on the “foibles and vices of individual human beings”; on the other hand, Masson critiques Charles Dickens for “meddling” with “the external arrangements of society” and preaching his own reformative solutions (67). According to Masson, Thackeray’s focus on the individual allows him to mingle good and bad in his “life-like” characters in a way that Dickens’s idealized types fail to realize. Masson observes that the last words of *Pendennis* are “a petition for the charity of his readers on behalf of the principle personage of the story on the ground that not having meant to represent him as a hero, but ‘only as a man and a brother,’ he has exposed his foibles rather too freely” (Thackeray qtd. in Masson 75). Comparing the characters in *David Copperfield* and *The History of Pendennis*, Masson claims that we see a “gentle and dreamy David Copperfield” but a “vain and clever Mr. Arthur Pendennis” (77). Subsequently presenting a comparative list of the secondary characters in the two novels, Masson describes “Mr. Dickens as being decidedly the more poetical and ideal, and Mr. Thackeray as being decidedly the more world-like and real in the style and tendency of his conceptions” (77).

While Masson recognizes evident differences between the novelists’ characters, the division he identifies between idealism and realism simplifies the novels’ nuanced, competing constructions of what it means to be an individual functioning in a social world. We can typify Dickens’s David or Steerforth as decidedly “gentle and dreamy” or “brave” and “selfish” because Dickens provides insight into the interior selves of his characters, and with the revelation of their subjectivity comes a definition of their essence or authentic self. Typically, the genuineness of a nineteenth-century individual relies on the possession of a private identity, so

that the “real” characters are persons whose sincerity and value are dependent on the cultivation and revelation of their interiority. Lionel Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) defines “sincerity” as a “quality of the personal and private life, as bearing upon the individual’s relation to himself and to others as individuals” (26). In his opening chapter, Trilling examines the relationship between the rise of the autobiography and the rise of the “individual,” who “lives more and more in private rooms” and simultaneously becomes “an object of interest to his fellow man,” because the assumption of a private self invests the individual with a knowable essential self (24). For example, the unique individual presented in an autobiography is a self “bent on revealing himself in all his truth, bent...on demonstrating his sincerity” through writing (Trilling 25). According to Trilling, the writer’s “conception of his private and uniquely interesting individuality, together with his impulse to reveal himself, to demonstrate that in it is that which is to be admired and trusted, are, we may believe, his response to the newly available sense of an audience, of that public which society created” (25). Dickens’s autobiographical *David Copperfield*, then, with its first-person narrator and digressions into Copperfield’s interior life hinges on an understanding of the self as having an essential core which can be known and to which he must be “true.”

Conversely, however, in *Pendennis* the “private” version of the vain and clever Pen is as affected as Steerforth’s smooth-talk. Thackeray’s autobiographical novel turns Trilling’s notion of sincerity and private individuality on its head, as he exposes self-revelation as the affectation of an interiority, which has never been particularly secret. Pen blurs if not erases the lines between his private or “essential” self and his public performances: he invests his affectations with truth and believes in the authenticity of the identities, emotions, and voices he assumes. According to Pen, his true self lives on the surface of his body language and speech, and his

performances contribute to the development and expansion of that “Renaissance” self. For example, Pen, “full of high spirits and curiosity, easily adapting himself to all he met,” takes his place in London society and “pleased himself in this strange variety and jumble of men, and made himself welcome, or at ease at least, wherever he went” (Thackeray 383). Pen’s ease in these settings exists outside of his actual welcome; while he may not be as attuned to the desires of his surroundings as his behavior suggests, he still easily assumes the role of the welcome guest. Entering and adapting to different settings, Pen performs an ever-changing role among the “tap-rooms,” “inn-parlors,” “suburbs or on the river,” and with a distinct pleasure at “the deference which [the locals] paid him” (Thackeray 324). Similarly, as he explores the “queer London haunts,” Pen “liked to think that he was consorting with all sorts of men” (Thackeray 324). Pen views these excursions into both the brighter and darker realms of society as an authenticating stamp on his performative self. He becomes the roles he assumes. Given that his every movement is a public performance, Thackeray’s Pen re-envision the Victorian duality between public and private.

Through Pen, Thackeray not only re-imagines nineteenth-century constructions of the social individual, but simultaneously reaches back to his beloved eighteenth century and performs a parodic twist on the Bildungsroman genre as a whole. According to his biographer Gordon Ray, Thackeray revered Henry Fielding as his “older master,” whom he had read as boy and whose works he knew “well enough to sing their praises to his fellow undergraduates” at Cambridge” (225). In his series of lectures in *The English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century* (1853), Thackeray devotes a section to an analysis of Fielding’s work and expresses particular admiration for Fielding’s “admirable natural love of truth, the keenest instinctive antipathy to hypocrisy, [and] the happiest satirical gift of laughing it to scorn” (142). As a result, critics have

identified stylistic or thematic moments in Thackeray's writing that are reminiscent of Fielding's work or ideas. For example, in his brief essay "Amelia Sedley: Thackeray's Debt to Fielding?" Donald Hawes observes that "the way in which [Thackeray's] sentimental portrayal of Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair* is tinged with mockery" resonates with and is indebted to Fielding's protracted introductory description of Sophia Western in *Tom Jones* (1). Hawes proceeds to articulate the linguistic and thematic similarities between the two descriptions and claims that they share a "blend of affection and anti-heroism" and evidence Thackeray's "explicit awareness of literary convention" (2). Yet Thackeray's anti-heroism is more radical than Fielding's. In *The English Humorists*, Thackeray assesses the "truth" of Fielding's three main heroes, Joseph Andrews, Captain Booth, and Tom Jones. He particularly critiques the construction of Tom Jones, because "if it is right to have a hero whom we may admire, let us at least take care that he is admirable" – Tom Jones has too many faults to be a hero (145). Thackeray does not object to Tom Jones as a character but rather as a hero, who should not have a "flawed reputation" because it contradicts the hero's fundamental identity (146). This critique explains Thackeray's general resistance of heroes in *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* and his final identification of Pen as the un-heroic man and brother (*Pendennis* 785).

Though clearly influenced by Fielding, Thackeray's particular brand of fiction not only resists idealist labels but displaces and transforms the hero typically at the center of the Bildungsroman. In *Tom Jones*, Fielding engages the coming-of-age plot and consequently influences the development of the Bildungsroman in the nineteenth century. Examining the Bildungsroman as the "symbolic form" of modernity, Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World* (2000) asserts that the exploration of the modern youth in the Bildungsroman enables a "hitherto unknown *mobility*" and generates an "*interiority* not only fuller than before but also perennially

dissatisfied and restless,” as it calls for the “coexistence” of the modern Western world’s contradictory values, such as “identity and change” or “security and metamorphosis” (4, 9). This “predisposition to compromise” enables “modern socialization” and yet first requires the “interiorization of contradiction” (Moretti 10). The projection of Fielding’s novel of education, then, like Dickens’s, is intimately tied to the central character’s journey from naïve, domestic isolation to the assumption of a critical, useful performative role in society, and it requires the regulation of the interior, essential in order to reach that goal.

Despite his evident admiration for Fielding and contemporaneity with Dickens, in *The History of Pendennis*, Thackeray does not pay straight homage to Fielding or the Bildungsroman: rather his familiarity with the fictional modes that surround him in person or on his bookshelf opens the door for generic parody, and Thackeray’s work identifies the limiting assumptions about individuality and sociability that the genre perpetuates. Specifically, *Pendennis* parodies the binary relationship between essentialism and performativity that permeates the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century realist novel. In her discussion of genre and gender parody in *Gilbert and Sullivan* (2011), Carolyn Williams explains that because “the imitative and critical functions of parody are always closely intertwined,” a parody can simultaneously “make fun of its object, humorously indicating that it is old-fashioned or long past, while affectionately, ruefully – or with any other attitude – preserving its memory” (xiv). For Williams, parody is mimetic and critical, as it “always looks (or sounds) like what it criticizes”; serious and comic, as its “comedy ranges across a spectrum from entertaining silliness to serious reflection and critique”; inside and outside, as it “blurs the distinction...to make it clear that both aesthetic and historical formations can be treated as *forms*”; and conservative and progressive, as it “preserves the memory of past forms while turning away from them into its own, more highly valued

present” (6-7). Discussing the role of genre parody in Gilbert and Sullivan’s English comic opera, Williams argues that “depending on the particular blend of imitations and critique, past forms may be regarded as dangerous, stupid, and mistaken or as simply old hat, exhausted, and passé,” and yet “however much they are dismissed or put in their place, those former objects of critique and imitation also remain formative” (Williams 9). In *Pendennis*, Thackeray’s parodic appropriation of the Bildungsroman novel evidences his nostalgic reverence for the genre but mingles it with a resounding doubt in the realism conventionally located in the genre’s privileging of interior, secret experiences as authentic and distinct from external, public appearances. But *Pendennis* does more than unsettle the public and private spheres of existence; by parodying the novel of interiority, Thackeray reconstructs what it means to be a social and authentic individual as he exposes the problematic division between modes of being and collapses the distinction between performance and essentialism that the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century novels foster and rely so heavily on.

According to David Kurnick’s *Empty Houses* (2012), critics explain Thackeray’s presentation of affectation as a mingled hatred of artifice and a “powerful attraction” to it (30). Kurnick resists these absolute binaries and the ambiguity of such readings and instead examines Thackeray’s “melancholic relation to the lost possibility of performance” (32). Examining the role of the theater in the construction of the nineteenth-century novel of interiority, Kurnick argues that the novel “emerges as a record of the discontents historically sedimented in interiority – less propaganda for the inwardly focused, socially atomized individual than rigorous account book of interiority’s exclusions” (3). Instead of focusing on the novel as a celebration of privacy and domesticity, Kurnick demonstrates that “the novel’s interior spaces are lined with longing references to the public worlds they would seem to have left behind” (3). In Thackeray’s

work Kurnick observes that “the intensity with which Thackeray maps the domestic enclosure prompts his readers to imagine more various arrangements of social space than those provided by the idealized family of mid-Victorian England” (4). Furthermore, Thackeray’s theatrical themes and moments imagine “forms of domestic life open to penetrations by the street and less rigidly focused on the nuclear family,” and thus present the theater as an “emblem of social change” that opens and “envisions possible futures” (Kurnick 31). In *Pendennis*, however, Thackeray engages performance not as an art to be avidly discouraged or nostalgically mourned, but rather as one that is boldly, though at times uncomfortably, privileged as the primary source of authentic interaction, because it crosses and exists outside of the spheres. Instead of subtly penetrating the privacy of domestic space, performance in *Pendennis* takes center stage and subsumes interiority as another “genuine” performance.

In opposition to Jane Austen’s notion of adaptability and unlike performances of other characters within the novel and, Pen’s social performances are not masking or regulating the expression of an unseen feeling, a secret identity, or a sordid past. In her essay “Sociability” (2011), Gillian Russell examines sociability as a “performative event” in Austen’s fiction and discusses Austen’s interest in the “more quiet sociability of English provinces” in relation to the “deadening” effects of urban “agglomeration(s)” (176, 180-81). Examining the relationship between public and private behavior in *Sense and Sensibility*, Russell explains that Elinor and Marianne’s London excursion reveals that “the adventure of eighteenth-century sociability – the liminal act in crossing a threshold, both real and symbolic, with the prospect of losing or finding oneself in the company of others – is here rendered as a hollow ritual, which the Dashwood girls endure as defeated victims of the imperious code of politeness, to which they must pay necessary ‘tribute’” (181). Austen’s novel, like Fielding’s and Dickens’ autobiographical Bildungsroman,

embraces and explores the regulative relationship between the secret, private self and the public self and thereby reinforces the disciplinary action within the novel.

Appropriating Foucault's mode of disciplinary power, D.A. Miller in *The Novel and the Police* (1988) examines the "possibility of a radical *entanglement* between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police" and reads moments of surveillance, regulation, and normalization inside and outside the novel as evidence of the intrinsic tension between individual subjectivity and social and generic discipline (2, 17-21). In his final chapter, Miller argues that "gestures of secretiveness" (206) in *David Copperfield* demonstrate that

in a world where the explicit exposure of the subject would manifest how thoroughly he has been inscribed within a socially given totality, secrecy would be the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of himself as a resistance....[And] the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established. (199)

Miller asserts the experience of Dickens's novel "provides David's subjectivity with a secret refuge," in which he is distanced from "the world's carceral oppressions," and yet that secret space also forms David into "the liberal subject," so that the "story of David's liberation runs parallel to the story of his submission" (215-16). Adaptability and the control of their performances allow the characters of a typical eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century novel to function with relative social success up to a certain point, because their performances conform to social regulations and expectation.

Just as the Austen heroines struggle to limit the public's perception of Marianne's private yet overwhelming feelings, as they quit the "heat and inconvenience" of the ballroom in favor of the security and isolation of Berkeley Street (Austen 124), the social world to which Pen

belongs hinges on the utility of the masquerade and the ability to be or think one thing, but to express or perform its opposite before a swarm of critical observers. Consequently, Major Pendennis, the model social gentleman with his mysterious wigs privately curled, refuses “to show himself to any member of his family, or any acquaintance” without this head of hair; only after Morgan supplies his “deficiencies,” can Major Pendennis, “being belted, curled, and set straight,” descend “upon the drawing-room, with a grave majestic air, such as befitted one who was at once a man of business and a man of fashion” (Thackeray 101). Similarly, Henry Foker makes “a mystery of his passion” for Blanche Amory and “confines it to his own breast,” because society knows of his engagement to his cousin (475); George Warrington stifles his feelings for Laura because of the mysterious “something that can’t be mended, and that shattered my whole fortunes early” (571); Amory uses the identity of Colonel Altamont to threaten and extort money from Sir Francis without discovery (728); Helen Pendennis divines most of her son’s secrets “by the force of sheer love,” but “kept these things in her heart (if we may so speak), and did not speak of them” (64). Each of these characters along with Mr. Bows and Smirke, with their unrequited, secret passions, put on a particular performance for the watching world in order to hide their emotions, thoughts, or identities and thereby maintain their standing and acceptance in the public world. And yet, ultimately each character that seeks to maintain a private world, known only to the reader, gets disastrously exposed, exiled, or killed, which suggests that the novel ultimately rejects multiple identities if one of them is fixed and unchangeable. So in the end, Warrington cannot have Laura’s love but instead is condemned to the outskirts of the novel.

Pen, on the other hand, gets to marry Laura, because he does not suffer from a single, stabilizing characteristic or secret, and he thereby resists the characterization of a classic

Bildungsroman hero or modern individual. There is little if any hidden, interior Pen that remains mysterious or exclusively accessible to the reader at certain moments in time, and so his socialization does not depend on a regulated expression of his interiority. Instead of following the educational, socializing trajectory of a Bildungsroman, Thackeray's central character does not need to engage in a Tom-Jonesian journey of self-completion only realized once he is known by others, because Pen is always and only known through and by others. From the beginning of the novel, Pen cannot help but dance in the public spotlight, even if that public is only his mother and Laura; always keenly aware of an audience, he privileges that private, domestic sphere as a platform for the dramatic revelation of his thoughts and feelings. Pen's self-conscious blush, melodramatic tear, ornate speech, gushing pride, and social entrance become a spectacle for everyone around him to see. And instead of shrinking under the microscope, Pen invites his audience to observe his manners and words because he believes in the value of his perpetual performances. The narrator labels Pen's reveling awareness as "vanity" from the start, and yet on his "journey to maturity," Pen never appears to grow out of it and still self-consciously blushes when he mentions Laura to Warrington in the final chapters of the novel (Thackeray 725). Pen's progression through the novel, then, does not mark a search for his place within the public world but rather an amalgamation of performances: the questions are not "who is the real Pen, and how does he fit in this world?" but rather "how many roles can he add to his repertoire?" Pen's performances dissolve the difference between affectation and essence, as they fluidly form and become him in a way that disregards and eliminates any notion of privacy, so that Pen redefines what it means to be authentic.

By collapsing the distinctions between private and public as he presents individual interiority as yet another performance, Thackeray undercuts disciplinary individualism, so that

performances are not the product of social regulation but rather are as genuine as any presumed private thoughts or feelings. *Pendennis* actively performs the dissolution of interiority, as it thematically and stylistically enacts the awkwardness of genuine affectation as a routine and unavoidable reality of modern life. Reveling in the discomfort that accompanies the absence of secrecy, Thackeray parodies the privileging of secrecy and one's interior self that pervades the genre he has appropriated. Just as Pen's performances have an unrelenting presence in almost every scene, Thackeray similarly infuses the narrative with gestures and speeches to the reader, as if the novel itself is a performed event. While novels of interiority posit these gestures as symptoms of an otherwise unarticulated emotion or thought, *Pendennis* incorporates apostrophes to the reader as constitutive elements of an adaptive, social model of character. Instead of creating the sense of an "in-crowd" with private access to the workings of the novel, Thackeray's displays of inclusion function as a platform for moralistic and philosophical digressions, which reiterate the universality of human experience rather than privilege the individual reader. In the world of *Pendennis*, there is no room for a compromise between a public and private self, but the whole self – character, narrator, reader, and author – is subsumed by the performativity of the modern world, which disassembles secrets and replaces them with an insistent display of affectation as the only authenticity to which we have access.

### **Performative Emotions – “Private” Pen**

Pen is physically unable to maintain any secret or private self, and even when he is alone or revealing his feelings to a select, closed set of listeners, he can only communicate those emotions through elaborate performances which are more attuned to the formal or conventional melodrama of the moment than the actual content of his confessions. In *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1985), Peter Brooks explains melodrama as “not only a moralistic drama but the

drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to prove the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and categorical force among men” (20). More specifically, Carolyn Williams asserts that the melodrama tradition specializes in a “sudden, purportedly realistic ending, in which a document is produced or a secret is confessed, revealing social identities and relations that have been hidden or unknown” (5). This concern with the expression of secret or hidden truth, then, becomes the target of Thackeray’s parody at this critical moment for Pen; Pen’s melodramatic performance affects the expression of an interior self and yet is preoccupied and distracted by the externals of his display.

In chapter eight titled “In which Pen is kept Waiting at the Door,” the stage is set for Pen’s impassioned confrontation with his “awful uncle” Major Pendennis: Pen stands outside the room where the Major sits with Helen Pendennis, as the narrator pauses the story to tell us “who little Laura was” (Thackeray 112, 108). Once the narrator has completed Laura’s history, the scene unfreezes with the solitary statement, “And now let Mr. Pen come in, who has been waiting all the while” (Thackeray 112). *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) by Nancy Armstrong argues that typically, the domestic sphere is “a private framework,” in which conflict can be resolved securely, and “as it became the woman’s sphere, then, the household appeared to detach itself from the political world and to provide the complement and antidote to it” (55). And yet before entering a room which ought to embody the intimacy of the domestic space, Pen prepares for an elaborate performance and is more preoccupied with the public presentation of his thoughts than with confiding feelings to his concerned relatives. Pen has “settled in his mind” what the encounter will entail and has “strung up his nerves” accordingly (Thackeray 112). Pen’s preparations do not include a regulation of emotion, but rather the assumption of “courage” and

“dignity,” which he determines are best suited to the scene he has envisioned and to “the famous family which he represented” (Thackeray 112). As they are distinguishing features of his family, Pen invests these assumed emotions with a kind of essential truth, and acts as if he must perform the role of the courageous hero, because that is who he has decided he essentially must be. As a result, after flinging open the door, Pen enters “with the most severe and warlike expression, armed *cap-à-pie* as it were, with lance couched and plumes displayed, and glancing at his adversary, as if to say, ‘Come on, I’m ready’” (Thackeray 112).

When Major Pendennis responds to Pen’s “admirable pompous simplicity” with a grin and shrewdly dissolves the tragedy Pen intends to enact, Pen’s disappointment pours out of him in an outbreak of blushes and tears. He immediately feels that “his grand *entrée* was altogether balked and ludicrous,” and so he “blushed and winced with mortified vanity and bewilderment” and suddenly “felt inclined to begin to cry,” which he subsequently proceeds to do (112). When the scene turns out not to be what Pen has imagined with such certainty, he reverts to performing yet another set of emotions, which are equally elaborate and dramatic to the point where both Mrs. Pendennis and the Major “felt that the scene was at once ridiculous and sentimental” (112). The feelings that Jane Austen’s Marianne learns to regulate and cover with a performance of composure are here lavishly performed in their own right without being an insight into an up-to-this-point hidden self. All that Pen feels permeates the surface of his being, and he must shift suddenly from playing the role of dignified hero to that of mortified basket-case.

The attention the narrator draws to the physical performance of Pen’s embarrassment suggests that Pen remains hopelessly aware of how he appears to the eyes around him; his emotion has not blinded him to his audience. The narrator focuses on the outward expressions of Pen’s feelings and not his inward turmoil: Pen is pushed out of focus and left standing at the door

when this inner turmoil presumably would have taken place. Furthermore, instead of having the narrator align himself with Pen at this moment, Thackeray's use of free-indirect discourse privileges Major Pendennis's perspective. The narrator explains,

Major Pendennis too had examined his ground; and finding that the widow was already half won over to the enemy, and having a shrewd notion that threats and tragic exhortations would have no effect upon the boy, who was inclined to be perfectly stubborn and awfully serious, the Major laid aside the authoritative manner at once, and with the most good-humored natural smile in the world, held out his hands to Pen, shook the lad's passive fingers gaily, and said, "Well, Pen, my boy, tell us all about it." (112)

The observant "old man of the world" understands the nuances of the situation with an omniscience that informs the reader's view of Pen with his "tragic and heroic air" (112-13). The reader has no privileged information into the Pen's distress at this moment, but rather sees and only sees the performance that Major Pendennis observes and assesses. Even though the Major enacts a performance of his own here, unlike Pen's, Major Pendennis's behavior is calculated and evidences a careful regulation of his true reaction to Pen's impassioned state. Major Pendennis's character separates private thought from public expression, and as a result, the narrator can use his interior life to explain the subtleties of the scene. Yet Pen, with whom we would be aligned in a traditional Bildungsroman, literally becomes the outward expressions of the emotions he assumes. Pen's lack of an exclusive interiority cannot be dismissed purely as a mark of immaturity, which he must grow out of. Rather, the fact that we only see Pen through the eyes of others suggests that he has no hidden self, and so can never "mature" into a secretive, calculating individual with a private self that is distinct from his public behavior. Pen cannot

separate or distinguish between his internal thoughts and emotions and the tragic airs and heroic speeches he projects; instead he blurs the two until they become completely interchangeable.

Pen's display of the romantic hero oppressed by the "necessity of a first love" does not only surface when an inquisitive audience surrounds him, but his dramatic performances and imitations extend to the intimacy of his hopes and dreams (Thackeray 61). Before he meets Emily Fotheringay, Pen longs for a "an object on which he could concentrate all of the those vague floating fancies under which he sweetly suffered" – "a young lady to whom he could really make verses, and whom he could set up and adore in place of those insubstantial Ianthes and Zuleikas to whom he addressed the outpourings of his gushing muse" (61). Already performing the emotions of a "consuming passion" in his imagination, Pen seeks to concretize his performance with a material object upon which his words will enact a life of their own. Unfortunately, his object of choice fails to understand or appreciate Pen's poetic offerings, and yet Pen not only actively excuses Emily's simplicity and relative silence but pursues his performance as if she were Ophelia, Mrs. Haller, or any other role she has assumed. On his ride home after he has spent an afternoon with Emily and Costigan, Pen muses on the "charming" inconsistencies of Emily's behavior – the mingling of her performativity with domesticity – "a woman of her genius busying herself with the humble offices of domestic life" (87). Pen mimics this tension as he wraps his private thoughts with theatrical exclamations such as "How beautiful she is! How simple and how tender!" and "'Pendennis,' 'Pendennis' – how she spoke the word! Emily, Emily! how good, how noble, how beautiful, how perfect, she is!" (87). Pen thinks and speaks privately as if he truly is the poetic hero who has found the most unique and worthy object for his passion. As a result, the narrator explains that despite the discrepancies between Pen's imaginative performance and the Emily that the readers experience, Pen "saw a pair of

bright eyes, and he believed in them – a beautiful image, and he feel down and worshipped it. He supplied the meaning which her words wanted and created the divinity which he loved” (88). Pen creates a stage and audience for the performance of his emotions and thereby pushes them beyond the initial bounds of Byron, Waller, and Dryden; as he enacts his feelings, he transforms his private world into a materialized, public one (61).

This performative publicization of his emotions evidences not just a characteristic of the young, unsocialized Pen, but it re-appears in his relatively muted infatuation with Fanny Bolton. Again the narrator engages the opportunity to delve into the inner-workings of Pen’s mind, but chooses not to articulate Pen’s thoughts and feelings and instead provides an elaborate description of the scenery that frames the wandering, poetical Pen. As he muses on his frustrating relationship with Fanny, Pen’s thoughts mimic those of “the poetical figures” who “live in our memory just as much as the real personages,” and “as Mr. Arthur Pendennis was of a romantic and literary turn, by no means addicted to the legal pursuits common in the neighborhood of the place, we may presume that he was cherishing some such poetical reflections as these, when...the young gentleman chose the Temple Gardens as a place for exercise and meditation” (Thackeray 513). As he wanders the gardens, Pen intently plays a specific part: the distracted, irresolute poet-lover who looks for consolation and inspiration in the natural world. While the “pretty flower-beds,” “groups of pleased citizens,” “fresh evening air,” and the “sight of the shining Thames” embody Pen’s thoughts, they do not explicitly reveal what those thoughts are. Instead the narrative voice interrupts the description of Pen’s setting with the question “What were his cogitations?” (513).

*The Newcomes* makes a similar gesture and compares an author’s ability to create and articulate “a narrative of facts and conversation” to a paleontologist’s discoveries and

conclusions. Thackeray explains how he can “tell the feelings in young lady’s mind” and the “thoughts in a gentleman’s bosom” just “as Professor Owen or Professor Agassiz takes a fragment of a bone, and builds an enormous forgotten monster out of it, wallowing in primeval quagmires, tearing down leaves and branches of plants that flourished thousands of years ago, and perhaps may be coal by this time – so the novelist puts this and that together” (Thackeray, *The Newcomes* 875). In *Pendennis*, then, physical, “authentic” details of the scene become the revelatory evidence that enacts Pen’s thoughts and cogitations (*The Newcomes* 875). The narrator, like the paleontologist, “from the footprint finds the foot; from the foot, the brute who trod on it; from the brute, the plant he browsed on, the marsh in which he swam... [and] traces this slimy reptile through the mud, and describes his habits filthy and rapacious; prods down this butterfly with a pin, and depicts his beautiful coat and embroidered waistcoat” (*The Newcomes* 875).

Consequently, the narrator, instead of explaining the trajectory of Pen’s musings, transitions immediately into a more detailed painting of the surrounding scenery that both impacts and reveals Pen’s feelings and irresolution. As the focus turns from Pen’s mind to his stage, the two blend together:

The evening was delightfully bright and calm; the sky was cloudless; the chimneys on the opposite bank were not smoking; the wharfs and warehouses looked rosy in the sunshine, and as clear as if they, too, had washed for the holiday. The steamers rushed rapidly up and down the stream, laden with holiday passengers. The sun was lighting up the little Brawl, too, as well as the broad Thames, and sinking downwards majestically behind the Clavering elms, and the tower of the familiar village church. Was it thoughts of these, or the sunset merely, that caused the blush in the young man's face? He beat time on the

bench, to the chorus of the bells without; flicked the dust off his shining boots with his pocket-handkerchief, and starting up, stamped with his foot and said, 'No, by Jove, I'll go home.' And with this resolution, which indicated that some struggle as to the propriety of remaining where he was, or of quitting the garden, had been going on in his mind, he stepped out of the summer-house. (513-14)

By asking what caused the blush in Pen's face, thoughts of his past or the sunset, the narrator breaks down the distinction between Pen's internal musings and the outside world; Thackeray equates the potential mystery of a private Pen with the performative Pen who blushes at a sunset to show that he has been affected by the sunset like a proper sentimental, literary gentleman. Similarly, instead of dwelling on what Pen thinks or on why he is blushing, we see his physical movements affecting a kind of careless nonchalance which results in spoken words resolving to go home. These words indicate Pen's internal struggle, but that struggle is only presented to the reader as a lavishly staged performance as if the physicality of the experience is the "real" part of the experience and identifies any interior exploration as hypothetical at best and consequently dismissible.

### **Performative Criticism – "Public" Pen**

Through Pen's later experiences as a literary man of London, Thackeray re-creates the tensions of that "damnable style" of criticism which Coleridge despised so deeply, and thereby exposes the elements of the ridiculous that accompany the assumption of privatized, critical knowledge, while he simultaneously details its artful success and effectiveness. The "Pall Mall Gazette" functions as an initiating platform on which the zealous Pendennis exercises his nascent literary abilities and experiments with creative criticisms, as he endeavors to balance a proper amount of "jocularity" and "mock gravity" mixed with fixed politeness and gentlemanly

behavior (Thackeray 376). Pen belongs to the school of the adaptable, risk-taking gentleman, whose conduct in turn forms the heart of the new journal. The “Gazette” presents news and reviews with an affectation of specialization that plays on the naivety of “universal supposition” and a craving for social entertainment, whether by “folly, wit, or by his dullness, by his oddity, affectation, good spirits, or any other quality” (374, 377). The journal’s success relies on potentially “ill-founded” rumors whose veracity becomes irrelevant due to the ambitiously performative contributors, for whom “reality” equals “possibility”: whatever the audience will believe becomes the latest exciting “truth” (374). For example, “that series of papers on finance questions, which were universally supposed to be written by a great Statesman of the House of Commons, were in reality composed by Mr. George Warrington of the Upper Temple,” and compilers and editors like Jack Finucane and Captain Shandon cynically revel in their incongruous performances and profit-oriented mobility (374).

Pen also eagerly engages in the “bustle and pleasure” of his literary contributions but with a deviant absolutism that resists the presumption of these critical performances and instead privileges hypocrisy over cynicism as the more “honest” of the two performances (379). Pen does not have the calm cynicism of Warrington or Captain Shandon but rather believes in what he writes and is pleased “to think that his writings are creating some noise in the world” (375). Recounting Pen’s literary and social success, the narrator explains the “prodigious courage” that enables popularity and fuels critical production among “young critics” (377). The narrator remarks that critics like Pen,

Clamber up to the judgment seat, and, with scarce hesitation, give their opinion upon works the most intricate or profound. Had Macaulay’s History or Herschel’s Astronomy been put before Pen at this period, he would have looked through the volumes, meditated

his opinion over a cigar, and signified his august approval of either author, as if the critic had been their born superior and indulgent master and patron. (377)

Pen's social and intellectual mobility have encouraged him to assume an air of expertise in areas of knowledge which are technically beyond his specialization. Yet by passing "an opinion upon the greatest scholars" or giving "a judgment upon the *Encyclopedia*," Pen follows in the footsteps of all the other Pall Mall contributors; he affects proficiency and thereby proves his gentleman-like ability to adapt to circumstances and locate and exploit critical opportunities (377). However, Pen deviates from his fellow critics in that he not only plays the part but also believes in the part he plays. As a result, he becomes the parody of the "genuine" critic, earning the sarcasm of the narrator, and simultaneously exposes the cynicism of the openly disingenuous. Pen takes "a great deal of pain with the writing of his reviews," and when "his articles pleased his chief and the public," he is "proud to think that he deserved the money which he earned" (375-6). Just like he falls in love with and believes in the authenticity of the decorated and affected Emily Fotheringay he sees on the stage and refuses to see the vulgar girl he talks at in Costigan's flat, Pen falls in love with his own performance and views his popularity and social advancements as tokens of his innate literary talent and critical acuteness. Naturally, Pen celebrates the attention Lord Steyne pays him, and when he flings Lord Steyne's "letter across the table to Warrington," he is "disappointed that the other did not seem to be much affected by it" (377). Unlike Warrington, Pen values his social success as a direct indicator of his literary ability and does not account for or recognize the public's own naivety or its desire for mischievous entertainment.

Despite his "impertinence and a certain prematurity of judgment," Pen establishes himself as a "perfectly honest critic," whose "impartiality" disrupts the cynical routine of the

profit-seeking performers around him (377). When Captain Shandon rebukes Pen for praising a book published by their rival Mr. Bacon, Pen, eyes “wide with astonishment,” asserts that while a critic works to benefit himself and not his rival, he also has undertaken “to tell the truth” (378). Yet Pen’s staunch devotion to “truth” looks rather flimsy when Captain Shandon reminds Pen of the factual inaccuracies that often pervade the “Gazette” and Pen’s failure to oppose them in the past; Pen skirts around this accusation of willful deception and justifies his actions with the claim that such “trifling inaccuracies” are left to the conscience of the “showman,” Shandon, while Pen and Warrington are merely the “fiddlers” (378). According to Pen, truth, much like Pen, must conform to the dictates of whoever writes it. As Pen concludes his passionate declaration with the qualifying, but bold assertion that “one can’t tell all the truth, I suppose; but one can tell nothing but the truth: and I would rather starve, by Jove, and never earn another penny by my pen, than strike an opponent an unfair blow, or, if called upon to place him, rank him below his honest desert” (378), he simultaneously embraces the relativity of his work. “Unfair blows” and “honest deserts” are left to the judgment of the critic, whose standard resides in his own head and in his anticipation of how the ager public will receive his reviews. Thus, even the truth that Pen vows to tell exclusively becomes another platform for performance, as he does not have an essential standard of truth by which he chooses to judge his literary colleagues. And yet, Pen acts as if he is that very standard, that he, unlike the rest of the cynical critics, has access to perfect truth, and consequently, writes honest and therefore more valuable reviews. Pen invests value in the responsibility and ability of literary productions to represent an essential Reality, and yet he crowns his performative self as the source of that raw, essential talent. By merging the lines between essential truth and affectation in the literary world, Thackeray parodies the endeavor to

distinguish between the two and to regulate the production of criticism on the basis of honest truth-telling.

Thackeray further and more self-consciously complicates his rendition of this tension when Pen produces his own autobiographical novel *Leaves from the Life-Book of Walter Lorraine*. Thackeray explains Pen's creation as the fusion of an identifiable imitation of his precious classics with the expression of personal overwhelming feeling. Pen's book, "written under the influence of his youthful embarrassments, amatory and pecuniary, was of a very fierce, gloomy, and passionate sort,--the Byronic despair, the Wertherian despondency, the mocking bitterness of Mephistopheles of Faust, were all reproduced and developed in the character of the hero" (Thackeray 432). The novel's life and feeling relies on Pen's ability to imitate, "as almost all clever lads do, his favourite poets and writers" (Thackeray 432). However, Thackeray follows this admission of imitation with a discussion of Pen's emotional response to re-reading his novel: "as he looked over the pages of his manuscript, he remembered what had been overflowing feelings which had caused him to blot it, and the pain which had inspired the line" (432). Returning to his now written feelings, Pen has a Wordsworthian moment, as the writing triggers the recollection of the once powerful emotion. While Pen's novel mimics the style and themes of past writers, it can still claim to be a product of past but uniquely private emotion, so much so that Thackeray breaks from his description of Pen's attitude toward his work to deliberate on this reality. The narrator observes that "if the secret history of books could be written, and the author's private thoughts and meanings noted down alongside of his story, how many insipid volumes would become interesting, and dull tales excite the reader!" (432). Here, like the novelists on whom Trilling bases his argument, Thackeray seems to be infusing the autobiographical novel with value because it provides insight into a distinct individual. But

instead of stopping with this grand exclamation, Thackeray subsequently undercuts it as he returns to Pen who again notices that “this page was imitated from a then favourite author, as he could now clearly see and confess, though he had believed himself to be writing originally then” (432). Thackeray refuses to label the novel as purely imitative or purely genuine, in the Trilling sense, and instead merges the two so that we cannot judge *Walter Lorraine* according to either value system.

Instead assessment of *Walter Lorraine* is based on how well it balances and performs this dual identity. Used four times in this chapter to describe Pen’s novel, the word “performance” denotes the product of collapsing the distinctions between imitation and individuality. The act of recollecting and documenting past feelings and experiences puts them on display for an eager audience; this gesture does not diminish the value placed on personal experience but rather redefines it as necessarily and inherently performative. Warrington, in particular, draws attention to this reality as he reminds Pen of the financial and social implications of novel publication. At first, Warrington critiques Pen’s novel as the wares of yet another poetical “humbug,” because “that is the way of all poets”: “when they have experienced feelings enough they note them down in a book, and take the book to market...directly a man begins to sell his feelings for money he’s a humbug” (Thackeray 434). While Warrington bases his judgment on the assumption that the private and public selves ought to remain separate in order to be genuine and avoid becoming a “humbug,” Pen counters Warrington’s argument with the question “Why should not a man sell his sentimental thoughts as well as you your political ideas, or Paley his legal knowledge? Each alike is a matter of experience and practice” (434). Sentiment, originally private or otherwise, holds the same weight as any other expression, because it is the product of human experience and intellect and consequently ought to have a public platform. As Thackeray equates

experiencing and expressing interior, secret thoughts and feelings with positing social and political positions, he resists the binarism that would divide the two and legitimizes the performance and publicization of private emotion even for social and economic gain.

By privileging the notion of the autobiographical novel as a conscientious and materialistic performance, Thackeray simultaneously parodies the expression of privatized sentiment and his own imitative exploits. Just as the expression of Pen's feeling relies on samples from Romantic and Greco-Roman sentiment, the poignancy of Thackeray's novel depends on his unique parodic imitation of his literary heroes and contemporaries and the Bildungsroman form. He interrupts Pen's conversation with Warrington and his musings on the "genius" of the novel to summarize its content, and in doing so, Thackeray provides critical commentary on his attitude toward his own autobiographical work. Thackeray explains,

There was not the slightest doubt then that this document contained a great deal of Pen's personal experiences, and that *Leaves from the Life-Book of Walter Lorraine* would never have been written but for Arthur Pendennis's own private griefs, passions, and follies. As we have become acquainted with these in the earlier part of his biography, it will not be necessary to make large extracts from the novel of *Walter Lorraine*, in which the young gentleman had depicted such of them as he thought were likely to interest the reader, or were suitable for the purposes of his story. (435)

While Thackeray again draws attention to the private source that enables the creation of *Walter Lorraine*, he also reiterates the reality that Pen's "private griefs, passions, and follies" have never been secret or unknown because they are already detailed earlier in the "biography" which exists apart from Pen's own novel. What matters regarding Pen is what matters to, or interests, the reader, what matters to the public. Similarly, Thackeray notes the selectivity and artistry that

necessarily accompanies such a project regardless of the original source. Reminding the reader that his own literary composition encompasses Pendennis's, Thackeray aligns his work with the nuanced performativity of *Walter Lorraine* – one that blends affected individual experience with conventional forms and values as the necessary ingredients for a successful performance. In this moment, Thackeray divests private experience of its privileged place as the source of all things genuine, and instead suggests that what we consider to be hidden circulates in plain sight, and that publicization is equally valuable and real, despite protestations otherwise.

### **Performative Inclusion – Thackeray's Apostrophes to the Reader**

Thackeray again mimics Pen's consuming performativity even more directly through apostrophes to the reader, which enact a kind of intimate inclusion of the reader within the novel, but also draw attention to the public domain of the novel as a performance of familiar experience. Thackeray's repeated interruptions perform a philosophical address to the reader that muddies the line between actor and audience, so that the reader becomes another actor who must perform within the narrative in order to engage with it. As a result, the reader is "referred" to earlier pages or told to "fill up these details according to his liking and experience of village scandal," to "look or think over some old love-letters that he (or she) has had and forgotten," to "quite the woods and sea-shore of the west...and transport himself with Arthur Pendennis" (Thackeray 170, 148, 304). Because the reader is "respected," "friendly," "knowing," "ingenious," she is able to move about the plot and place of then novel with relative ease and perception. As Thackeray actively requires the reader to act within the novel, he confirms the genuineness of his narrative. In the opening line of the preface, Thackeray asserts that even if the novel "fail[s] in art, as it certainly does and must, it at least has the advantage of a certain truth and honesty, which a work more elaborate might lose" (34). Thackeray explicitly underscores his

commitment to truthfulness and “frankness” in his autobiographical novel to explain the ordinariness of his characters – no convicts, ruffians, or “real rascals” here (34). For Thackeray, then, filling his story with ordinary, recognizable emotions, characters, and events equals telling the truth, and “if there is not that, there is nothing” (33). The reader’s ability to perform within the novel and engage with the characters and events Thackeray presents distinguish the novel as “realistic”; the truth or reality of the fiction is presented as a function of its consumption as an event, a function of the act of reading, not as a putatively hidden property of the text or its characters.

Consequently, Thackeray’s apostrophes to the reader often seek to encompass and explain the full scope of the shared experience, and the intimacy of reading collapses under the weight of universality of the ideas he engages, and so the address becomes an affectation of private and individualized inclusion. In *Dear Reader* (1996), Garrett Stewart examines the direct address to the reader and attributes a historical, not aesthetic, privilege to “‘dear reader’ as synecdoche for a nineteenth-century literary public initially made available to us through the inferences of fictional reading” (6-7). Stewart argues that “the encoded presence of a reading consciousness to a narrative text – figured by apostrophe, for instance, or reduplicated by interpretative episode – can be isolated as *the* exemplary literary moment of the novel as narrative,” as it “recruits the very reading it requires” (12). According to Stewart, classic realist fiction demands “a double *realization*: our activated sense, first, of the rendered social and physical world of the narrative and then, second and simultaneously, of that world as focused upon and filtered through the credible interior of representation of characters’ mental lives” (17). With this duality in mind, Stewart demonstrates the various ways in which “the textual effects of both reader reference and enacted reading are systematically bound together” (23). Particularly,

Stewart argues that in “an extrapolative scene, which both figures and at the same time prompts a certain agenda for its own textual reception” and in “the literal scene of reading, you enter upon an enactment rather than a thematic: a narrative staging, a rehearsed event....whose reflexive nature remains every bit as simultaneous with the reading act it internally reconstitutes” (61-2). This staging distinguishes Thackeray’s interaction with the reader as each “dear reader” moment underscores the performance of the narrator and reader both apart from and in relation to the thematic events of the novel.

For example, when explaining Pen’s familiar but unsentimental relationship with Blanche, the narrator asserts that despite Pen’s belief that he has changed so dramatically from the fellow with “a grand passion” and “raging in a fever about Briseis,” it is still the “same Pendennis” (621). With this framework, the narrator detours away from Pendennis’s mistaken logic to develop the revised perspective that “We alter very little”:

When we talk of this man or that woman being no longer the same person whom we remember in youth, and remark (of course to deplore) changes in our friends, we don't, perhaps, calculate that circumstance only brings out the latent defect or quality, and does not create it....Our mental changes are like our grey hairs or our wrinkles – but the fulfillment of the plan of mortal growth and decay....Are you not awestricken, you, friendly reader, who, taking the page up for a moment's light reading, lay it down, perchance, for a graver reflection – to think how you, who have consummated your success or your disaster, may be holding marked station, or a hopeless and nameless place, in the crowd...to think how you are the same, You, whom in childhood you remember, before the voyage of life began? ....The sinking man and the successful one are thinking each about home, very likely, and remembering the time when they were

children; alone on the hopeless spar, drowning out of sight; alone in the midst of the crowd applauding you. (Thackeray 621-22)

In this passage, Thackeray recites the Romantic notion of an essential interiority that remains constant from childhood to old age, despite apparently common, contrary opinions, which identify the new expression of an already existing characteristic or flaw as a fundamental change in identity. Thackeray argues that while people may act as if individuals can change, circumstances are only responsible for bringing the “latent defect” to the surface of expression. And yet, Thackeray’s version of essentialism is more depressing than comforting and stabilizing, which implies that he is not simply peddling this popular view of the self. His inclusion of a gravely reflective reader within this enacted moralization suggests that performativity is as authentic as the essential self of Romantic individualism. Pen has not changed from being sentimental to becoming a skeptic, but rather has simply adapted his feelings to the requirements of the situation; similarly, in the reader’s world, “that which is sluggish obesity today was boisterous rosy health a few years back; that calm weariness, benevolent, resigned, and disappointed, was ambition, fierce and violent, but a few years since”: as time works on “this man or that woman,” new circumstances necessitate the appropriation of a revised behavioral form (621).

The narrative voice reinforces this notion of relative performances through the dramatic return to the awestruck reader, who has paused her reading to contemplate the gravity of realities which Thackeray has described in this moment. Imagining the various roles the reader could have or has assumed over time, the narrator further detaches the reader from the immediate event of the plot and instead engages the reader in what appears to be a more private event – the exploration of the reader’s own interiority. Yet apostrophizing the reader makes the interiority of

the reader more public than private. The narrator, who in other novels only probes the interiority of characters through free-indirect discourse and shares them intimately with the reader, here also probes the reader. And the probing of the reader becomes an act of typification and universalization, whereby the readers' individuality is interpellated as common enough to be already familiar with the narrator. By affecting to privilege the individual reader with a unique role within the text, Thackeray parodies the privacy of reading and the sense of private experience, as he reverts back to the centrality of performance in "the voyage of life" (622). Regardless of individual experiences and assumed roles, at the end of the story, "dear reader" as well as the "dear non-reader," will stand "alone in the midst of the crowd applauding you": each can only perform a role for an observing public, and in that way they are fundamentally the same (622).

### **Conclusion**

As he parodically appropriates the Bildungsroman form, Thackeray re-interprets what it means to be an individual in nineteenth-century England. Instead of imagining the young man destined for maturity as a body housing two divisible selves, Thackeray projects a story of an inherently performative individual, who recognizes and embraces the audience that sees and reads his "Life-Book." By dressing his autobiographical narrative in the clothes of the Bildungsroman, Thackeray pays tribute to both his past and present and simultaneously exposes and reconstructs the ideology that underpins the genre. Thackeray liberates performance from the trappings of regulative behavior and presents it as innate, perpetual, and un-hypocritical, as he defines it as an authentic, inescapable form of individual expression. Collapsing the differences between the public and private self, Thackeray interprets modern authenticity as permeating the surface of an individual, not hiding in the dark corners of the mind or affections, but living in the

realm of expression and social interaction. While Thackeray embraces performativity as way to critique yet perpetuate interiority, he also assumes a sarcastic tone towards those performative modes of behavior; the novel does not completely valorize performativity without simultaneously affecting to deride it. Thackeray's parody of interiority, then, extends beyond a critique of assumed privacy and exposes the presumption of secret authenticity when it condemns affectation as immoral.

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