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Thackeray's Ephemera: Fashion, Modernity and the Sketch

Richard Salmon

In Charles Baudelaire's famous essay on Constantin Guys, 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863), 'modernity' in art is defined as 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable' (13). The modern is expressed by transient forms of beauty which inhabit the time of the present in distinction from the established cultural forms of the past. This conception of modernity is intrinsically associated with the idea of fashion, as the etymology of the French words for each term suggests, and as later readers of Baudelaire's essay have emphasised. In 'The Painter of Modern Life', Baudelaire writes at length about the modern artist's attraction to ephemeral fashions and his attempts 'to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory' (12). Jürgen Habermas has noted that 'in Baudelaire's understanding, it is so disposed that the transitory moment will find confirmation as the authentic past of a future present … This understanding of time grounds the kinship of modernity with mode (or fashion)' (9). While the logic of fashion is centred on present (and future) time, then, what Habermas terms the 'aesthetic experience of modernity' also accounts for a blurring of past and present tenses, rather than marking a disengagement from the past altogether (8). Baudelaire contemplates history as an evolution of successive fashions in 'costume', each moment of which announces itself as a novel departure from previous incarnations, but by the same token consigns itself to becoming an obsolescent representative of its era in the future. Baudelaire expresses sympathy, rather than ridicule, for the outmoded fashion-plates which confront the historical observer, at the same time that he cautions artists

against becoming too absorbed by the costumes of the past and losing 'all memory of the present' (14). Walter Benjamin, in his study of Baudelaire for the unfinished Arcades Project, noted that while 'the modern is a main stress' of Baudelaire's poetry, 'it is precisely the modern which always conjures up prehistory' (171). The past fashion, in this account, stands as a reminder or relic of a future once promised; a novelty whose time has come and gone.

William Makepeace Thackeray is one of the few English-speaking writers and artists to be mentioned in 'The Painter of Modern Life'. Baudelaire acknowledges Thackeray's deep interest in 'matters of art' and refers to his remarks on Guys published in an unspecified 'London review' (5). Thackeray's contemporary profile as both an art critic and a novelist thus stands in the background of Baudelaire's celebrated essay. In this chapter, I argue that Thackeray's presence is more than merely marginal or coincidental to the discussion of 'modernity' in art. While Thackeray's conception of the modern was never revealed as explicitly as that of his French contemporary, Baudelaire's rubric of 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, [and] the contingent' offers a useful starting point for an enquiry into Thackeray's equivalent sense of the temporality of literary fashion. The focus of this discussion is primarily on the earlier part of Thackeray's career, the 1830s and early 1840s, when his engagement with the aspects of 'modernity' delineated by Baudelaire is most visible and, arguably, most vibrant. Although it is not my intention to reinforce a straightforward demarcation between Thackeray's early ephemeral authorship and his later attempts to secure a more lasting literary legacy, the 'feeling of rapid transience' identified by John Carey as characteristic of Thackeray's writing is more clearly associated with the earlier stages of his career at the level of print culture and textual form (130). Peter Shillingsburg has suggested that by 1844 Thackeray saw himself as 'primarily an author of books who also wrote for the magazines' rather than as a journalist or periodical contributor, a decisive shift in his professional development (53). By contrast, Thackeray's writings before this date were often

marked by their ephemeral status as print commodities which displayed the contingencies of their composition on the surface. The predominant temporal experience of authorship expressed by Thackeray during his early years as a writer for periodicals testifies to the pressures of producing sketches, stories, parodies, and reviews at stated monthly or weekly intervals for an expanding print market. When he returned to periodical work late in his career as the editor of the Cornhill Magazine, Thackeray seems to have found such time-pressure more difficult to cope with. His daughter Anne Ritchie recounts how he enclosed a drawing of a chapter initial in a letter to the magazine's publisher George Smith depicting the author's struggle to meet his editorial deadlines (xxxi), which was subsequently published in the second instalment of Lovel the Widower (1860). The image shows Thackeray attempting to restrain the allegorical figure of Time (represented as an old man, as in the work of Cruikshank discussed in the Introduction) by desperately clutching onto his pinions and forelock as he steps beyond the boundary of the letter O [Figure 1.1].[1] This self-dramatizing struggle to keep pace with Time lends credence to Geoffrey Tillotson's observation that Thackeray's habitual mode of composition was 'timed beyond dispute by the public clock' (15). With the exception perhaps of his contributions to the Cornhill, it is Thackeray's early work for *Fraser's Magazine* which contains his most sustained reflections on the temporal conditions of modern authorship.

[Insert Figure 1.1 here – portrait]

Figure 1.1 W.M. Thackeray. Chapter initial for Lovel the Widower. The Cornhill Magazine 1 (February 1860): 233.

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[1] The drawing is reproduced over the caption 'Taking "Time" By The Forelock' in Ritchie's Introduction to Volume XI of The Biographical Edition of the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray, The Adventures of Philip (xxxii). One of the vignettes in Plate 2 of Cruikshank's Illustrations of Time bears the same title (see Figure I.1).

Authorship and the Ephemeral

In a contribution to the occasional *Fraser's Magazine* series 'Epistles to the Literati' (January 1840), narrated in the comic persona of Charles J. Yellowplush, Thackeray criticised Edward Bulwer Lytton for his self-declared ambition of writing for posterity (the 'next age'), rather than being content to reside modestly within the present. A letter to Yellowplush written under the name of John Thomas Smith expresses Thackeray's satirical riposte to Bulwer's grandiose rhetoric: 'But let us not all be looking forward to a future, and fancying that our books are to be immortal … If all the immortalities were really to have their wish, what a work would our descendants have to study them all!' (Flore et Zéphyr 134) Whereas the pursuit of literary 'immortality' involves an authorial self-projection into an imagined futurity of audience acclaim, accepting the limitations of writing for the present is also, Thackeray suggests, a means of respecting the autonomous presence of the future. Four years later, Thackeray again targeted Bulwer Lytton in a review article for *Fraser's* which mounts a more sustained defence of ephemeral literature, focusing specifically on the contemporary conditions of writing for periodicals. 'A Brother of the Press on the History of a Literary Man' (1844), published under the signature of Michael Angelo Titmarsh, rebukes those '[p]eople in the big-book interest' who 'cry out against the fashion of fugitive literature', the example under review being Bulwer's posthumous memoir of the recently deceased Laman Blanchard, an acquaintance of both writers (466). While Bulwer had emphasised Blanchard's frustrated literary ambition as an everyday periodical contributor, portraying him as an exemplary victim of the modern print economy, Thackeray rejects the complaint that 'authors who might be occupied upon great works fritter away their lives in producing endless hasty sketches' (467). Titmarsh cites with amusement the horrified response of a visiting German physician, Dr Carus, to the Times newspaper:

> There was as much printed every day as would fill a thick volume. It required ten years of life to a philosopher to write a volume. The issuing of these daily tomes was unfair upon philosophers, who were put out of the market; and unfair on the public, who were made to receive (and, worse still, to get a relish for) crude daily speculations, and frivolous ephemeral news, when they ought to be fed and educated upon stronger and simpler diet. (466)

The contrasting temporalities of prolonged philosophical labour on a single book and the daily printed output of a newspaper provide another illustration of the patrician response to journalism and the periodical form which Thackeray detects in Bulwer's account of Blanchard's life. Resembling Croker's celebration of 'Maga', Titmarsh staunchly defends the undervalued duration of the periodical against the snobbish disdain of the 'bigwig body' (466): 'why should not the day have its literature? … Why should not the public be amused daily or frequently by kindly fictions?' he asks in response to the doctor's complaint (467).

As Richard Pearson has emphasised, it is also the case that Thackeray expressed ambivalence and unease about the 'commercial practices' of journalism and publishing, sometimes presenting them as a threat to the 'integrity of authorship' (15). His most subtle satirical commentary on professional literary debates of the period, most notably in Pendennis (1848–50), simultaneously questions both the high-minded aesthetic idealism which frowns on the prosaic exigencies of writing for a living and the commercial cynicism to which the development of the literary market gives rise. Nonetheless, it is clear that during the early part of his career Thackeray took pains to distinguish his position on the ephemerality of modern literary production from the more conventional critique articulated by Bulwer and other contemporary writers (including, during his lifetime, Laman Blanchard).[2] What Robert Colby terms Thackeray's 'fascination with the transitory and the

[2] In an article for the Monthly Chronicle (January 1840), for example, Blanchard wrote in diametrically opposed terms to Thackeray about the 'pernicious effects' of journalism on the art of fiction: 'The patiently and exquisitely wrought pictures of a really great novelist—as different from the flashy random sketches of the productions poured forth with the rapidity of a steam engine, as one of Titian's portraits from the daubing of the

mundane' (136) extends to a willingness to imbue the 'daily' labour of writing, and even the provision of 'ephemeral news', with a value of its own. The transient inscriptions contained within a daily newspaper do not necessarily carry any greater moral truth than a book which is the result of 10 year's philosophical labour, but they can be said to reflect more accurately the society in which they are produced. Thackeray later elaborated this point in a passage from Vanity Fair (1847–8), Chapter 19, which humorously disputes the virtues of 'indelible' ink:

> There ought to be a law in Vanity Fair ordering the destruction of every written document (except receipted tradesmen's bills) after a certain brief and proper interval. Those quacks and misanthropes who advertise indelible Japan ink, should be made to perish along with their wicked discoveries. The best ink for Vanity Fair use would be one that faded utterly in a couple of days, and left the paper clean and blank, so that you might write on it to somebody else. (192)

While, in the specific context of the novel, this statement refers to the capacity of written documents to reveal the lowly social origins of Becky Sharp, the conceit of a writing that fades 'in a couple of days' carries a broader resonance within Thackeray's work. In the first place, it echoes the temporal frequency and duration of periodical authorship which Thackeray had acknowledged in his earlier contributions to *Fraser's Magazine*. Secondly, though, the suggestion that an ephemeral form of writing creates the space for more writing – dispensing with the need for texts to function as palimpsests – reproduces the logic of fashion, whereby the pursuit of novelty creates a perpetual but unstable present time; or, as Roland Barthes puts it, 'an amnesiac substitution of the present for the past' (289).

Fashionable Fiction

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scene painter, —demand not only genius, but an expenditure of time and labour, to which the modern novel writer has little inducement, since every reward he can hope for is as likely to follow the lesser as the greater exertion' ('Novel Writing and Newspaper Criticism' 35).

Thackeray's attitude towards the idea of fashion is of particular significance when considering his early development as a professional writer during the 1830s, a decade marked by the continuing popularity of the 'fashionable novel' as a literary sub-genre, and by prominent debates on the close associations of this form of fiction with fashionable society and the figure of the 'dandy'. During this period, Thackeray's affiliation with *Fraser's* Magazine contributed to his status as a prominent critic of fashionable literature and society, a satirist of the 'dandiacal body' to be ranked alongside Thomas Carlyle, whose Sartor Resartus was first serialized in *Fraser's* in 1833–4.[3] As in Carlyle's case, the context of Thackeray's polemic against Bulwer Lytton in the sketches and reviews for *Fraser's* Magazine discussed earlier was Bulwer's reputation as a leading exponent of the fashionable (or 'silver-fork') novel and a flamboyant dandy with access to high society. In the ensuing decade, Thackeray continued to publish satirical squibs against Bulwer and the silver-fork genre in his work for the magazine Punch, most notably the series of stylistic parodies 'Punch's Prize Novelists' (1847). Yet underlying the critical censure found within these texts, and fostered by the periodicals in which they appeared, is a more ambivalent fascination with the process of fashion. Indeed, in some respects, it is Thackeray more than Bulwer who accedes to the logic of fashion, at least in his public pronouncements on the nature of literary work. Through his association with, and self-conscious defence of, the 'fugitive literature' of periodicals, Thackeray aligns himself with, rather than against, literary modernity – a position which can be differentiated from that adopted by Carlyle, as well as from the grandiose temporal ambitions espoused by Bulwer.[4]

[3] Book 3 Chapter 10 of Sartor Resartus, 'The Dandiacal Body', contains a satirical attack on Bulwer Lytton's popular fashionable novel, Pelham, or Adventures of a Gentleman (1828). For a discussion of Thackeray's association with *Fraser's Magazine*, see Thrall.

[4] Edward Copeland has recently characterised the silver-fork novel as a genre in which 'fashion' becomes 'the perfect trope' for the nation's modernity, 'driven by the consciousness of moving time' (6).

Fraser's Magazine was preoccupied with the subject of fashion during the period of Thackeray's greatest involvement with the magazine. In addition to publishing attacks on fashionable novels, it took an interest in fashion in clothing, as exemplified by an anonymous review of the History of British Costume which appeared in February 1837. While noting that '[d]andies and fops have always been ephemeral productions', the author of this review identifies a significant shift in what would now be called the semiotic character of nineteenth-century fashion ('Dress, Dandies, Fashion' 238). Whereas in the previous century, it is argued, gentlemen were obliged to dress in a manner largely determined by their social status, contemporary society is marked by an increasing 'instability of fashion' (241):

> At the present day, when every man dresses according to his fancy, it is difficult to say what is the fashion; and the silk collars we have lately seen substituted for velvet, the bits of silk that appear on the fronts of the coats, the cut of the cuffs, and the turn of the waistcoat collar, &c., all bespeak the shifts tailors are put to, to devise something to make people get new clothes before their old ones are worn out. (240)

In this account, the system of fashion which emerges in the nineteenth century leads to a radical destabilisation of the symbolic codes of dress inherited from earlier periods, to the extent that individual taste and 'fancy', rather than a collectively-defined 'station' in society (239), define what 'the fashion' is; assuming that it can be identified at all amidst the flux of constantly shifting signifiers. Here, fashion (or novelty) is clearly recognised as 'a quality which does not depend on the use-value of the commodity', to use Benjamin's definition (172).

Thackeray later contributed his own 'disquisition' on fashion to *Fraser's Magazine*, 'an essay upon new clothes and their influence' entitled 'Men and Coats' (1841), again published under his Michael Angelo Titmarsh moniker (600). Titmarsh is at pains to make clear that his essay was 'not written for drivelling dandies, but for honest men', and insofar as it contains a

serious argument aside from its whimsical, tongue-in-cheek style, 'Men and Coats' expounds an ideal of simple, 'manly' costume in opposition to the perceived artifice and effeminacy of the dandy (613). In Thackeray's alternative fashion statement, the comfort of 'old' or merely 'respectable' items of clothing is balanced against the pleasures of 'new' and 'fashionable' dress. The speaker adopts a characteristically fogeyish persona in advising the gentlemanly reader that '[t]here is no harm in putting on your old coat of a morning, or in wearing one always', and, more incongruously, by warning of the dangers of dressing gowns (605). At the same time, Thackeray's condemnation of the dandy does not deny the importance of clothing as a symbolic medium – '[t]he coat is the expression of the man', he acknowledges – nor its sensory allure (613). Rather, his interest centres on the temporality of fashion and its conflicting relationship with markers of class and gender status. The essay begins by exploring an analogy between the cycle of fashion and change within the natural world: an equivalence of feeling between putting on a new coat and the coming of spring. Both fashion and nature, of course, have their 'seasons'; or, rather, the discourse of fashion borrows from the representation of nature the notion of a regular, organic sequence of change – a quintessentially cultural process is thus made to seem natural. Titmarsh makes this link explicit in accounting for his desire to purchase a new set of clothes:

> In common with the birds, the trees, the meadows,—in common with the Sun, with Dyson , with all nature, in fact, I yielded to the irresistible spring impulse … I acknowledged the influence of the season, and ordered a new coat, waistcoat, and tr—in short, a new suit. (599)

The analogy with nature, it could be argued, offers a way of stabilising the 'instability of fashion' observed elsewhere in *Fraser's Magazine*, or at least of rationalising the condition of perpetual transience which fashion enshrines. 'Coats have been, and will be in the course of this disquisition', Titmarsh remarks, 'frequently compared to the flowers of the field; like them they bloom for a season, like them they grow seedy and they fade' (602). Yet the

cultural signification of fashion also functions through multiple temporal frequencies, rather than along a single axis of development. Titmarsh writes that 'wearing new clothes is always attended with exultation' but also confesses to a 'feeling of shyness' and an anxiety not to be 'mistaken for a snob' which accompany this pleasure; his proposed solution to this dilemma lies in what must be one of the earliest endorsements of the practice of 'distressing' clothes in order to make them look older than they really are (600). To display a fashionable figure in too explicit a manner risks being mistaken for a man of lower social status with aspirations for entry into higher society, one of the meanings of the word 'snob' current in Thackeray's usage. In this context, to be 'ultra-fashionable' (Thackeray's term) is to allow time to move too quickly, exposing the shallowness of the wearer's position within class hierarchy (603).

In Vanity Fair, a text which is often viewed as the apotheosis of the fashionable novel, Thackeray casts the conflation of fashion and organic nature in a more grotesque and disturbing light.[5] Becky Sharp's resemblance to an animated fashion-plate, when entering her son's nursery in Chapter 37, suggests that fashion appropriates the 'natural' as a signifier of perpetual youth:

> She came like a vivified figure out of the Magasin des Modes—blandly smiling in the most beautiful new clothes and little gloves and boots … She had always a new bonnet on: and flowers bloomed perpetually in it: or else magnificent curling ostrich feathers, soft and snowy as Camellias [my italics]. (380)

Here, the alignment of novelty or freshness with temporal duration makes Becky's appearance strangely oxymoronic: she looks permanently new. The young Rawdon's subsequent glimpse into his mother's 'fairy' boudoir confirms that her 'wardrobe' is a 'miracle of art', a calculated contrivance of visual effects, rather than conforming to nature as the rhetoric of fashion suggests (380). The retrospective historical mode of Vanity Fair

[5] In Dianne Sadoff's account of the silver-fork novel, Vanity Fair 'both represents the mode's epitome and declares the end of its era' (118), while Gordon N. Ray similarly characterised it as 'the silver-fork novel to end all silver-fork novels' (415).

allows for a more subtle examination of the temporal logic of fashion than was available in earlier examples of the silver-fork genre. Becky's presentation at the court of King George IV in Chapter 48 – the high water-mark of her initiation into fashionable society – is a key moment in this exposition. Commenting on Becky's elaborate dress, the narrator urges the Victorian female reader to step back from her initial response of ridicule or revulsion and to view her own costume from the detached perspective of a future observer: although 'if you were to see it now, any present lady of Vanity Fair would pronounce it to be the most foolish and preposterous attire ever worn', Becky's dress 'was as handsome in her eyes and those of the public, some five-and-twenty years since, as the most brilliant costume of the most famous beauty of the present season … A score of years hence, that, too, that milliner's wonder, will have passed into the domain of the absurd, along with all previous vanities' (476). Looking back at the fashions of the Regency from the perspective of the 1840s enables Thackeray to expose the transitory nature of fashion in a way that is potentially embarrassing to its 'victims', but any complacency on the part of the contemporary reader is immediately unsettled by the introduction of a further horizon of retrospection projected into the future. Thackeray's habitual narrative technique of proleptic reminiscence is particularly effective in showing how the consciousness of fashion develops as a sequence of disassociated present moments, each seeming oblivious to the past which it is compelled to repeat. In its furthest extension, this perspective resembles Walter Benjamin's allegorical vision of modernity in which, according to Susan Buck-Morss, 'history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation' (168). So, for example, the ephemerality of fashion in dress is analogous to *Vanity Fair's* sense of the shifting urban topography of the fashionable world (a subject discussed in greater detail by Matthew Ingleby in Chapter 6). With the imagined hindsight of a remote futurity, the narrator speculates that 'Hyde Park Gardens will be no better known than the celebrated horticultural

outskirts of Babylon; and Belgrave Square will be as desolate as Baker Street, or Tadmor in the wilderness' (500).

'Endless hasty sketches'

In her recent survey of the 'silver fork novel', Dianne Sadoff argues that the genre 'share[s] an origin in, and an aesthetic that emerges from, the sketch, a fictional mode characteristic of the early-century literary and political periodicals' (107). The original subtitle of the serial publication of Vanity Fair: Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society adds weight to this supposition, even if we prefer to view Thackeray's novel as a parodic reformulation of the genre rather than a straightforward exposition of it. The temporality of the sketch as a literary form bears obvious similarities with the ephemeral nature of fashion, as well as constituting the basic narrative unit from which many early-Victorian novels were expanded (not only those which would be classified as 'fashionable', of course). As Sadoff notes, the mode of sketch-writing was intrinsically connected to the print economy of literary periodicals which flourished during the same decades as the silver-fork novel: it was primarily magazines such as *Fraser's* and *Blackwood's* which demanded the 'endless hasty sketches' supplied by the likes of Laman Blanchard, which Thackeray defends in 'A Brother of the Press' (467). During the first two decades of his literary career, Thackeray himself wrote numerous 'sketches' of different kinds, encompassing varying degrees of 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' content, which were mainly, though not exclusively, published in periodicals. The centrality of sketches to Thackeray's early profile as both a writer and visual artist was no doubt one of the contexts behind Anthony Trollope's damaging assertion that Thackeray was 'a man of fits and starts', deficient in the time-discipline required for truly professional labour (Qtd. in Sutherland 124). The presumption that the form of the sketch, whether conceived separately or as part of an interlinked narrative sequence of serial parts, embodies a casual, sporadic, or

incomplete effort on the part of the writer, underlies such dismissive characterisations; a presumption which is also susceptible, of course, to more positive interpretation as a mode of spontaneous and authentic creativity. In a recent study of the significance of the literary sketch to the development of Victorian narrative fiction, Amanpal Garcha has argued that the form inscribes a contradictory response to 'modernity'. On the one hand, sketches were conducive to conveying the rapid pace and transient rhythms of modern life (they were often, though not exclusively, urban). On the other hand, sketches were often used as a vehicle for leisurely authorial digression, retarding the development of narrative plot and approaching the condition of stasis or atemporality; in this context, the form seems resistant to modernity in the sense of a progressive, linear unfolding of time. Garcha views Thackeray's early sketches, in particular, as 'suggestive of rushed composition, fragmentary incompleteness, and temporal stasis': an inchoate mixture of competing temporal frequencies (55). Martina Lauster has also considered Thackeray's early journalistic writing in relation to the wider literary and cultural traditions of the sketch, focussing on the popular print genre of the physiognomic (and physiological) sketch collection, which produced numerous volumes professing to document national and professional character types across Europe during the 1830s and 40s. One of the most influential of these collections was Heads of the People or Portraits of the English (1838–9), a series of uniform character sketches drawn by Kenny Meadows and reproduced alongside corresponding verbal sketches by well-known writers including Douglas Jerrold, Catherine Gore, Leigh Hunt and Thackeray. In his Preface to the two-volume reissue of Heads of the People (1840–1), Jerrold described its 'aim' as being 'to preserve the impress of the present age; to record its virtues, its follies, its moral contradictions, and its crying wrongs' for the benefit of posterity in the belief that the physiognomy of contemporary society would be of 'enduring interest' to the 'social antiquarian' of the future (iii). A good example of this ambition – and of the self-conscious

modernity of the collection – is F.G. Tomkins's sketch of 'The Capitalist', a generic figure who is 'essentially a new species, engendered by a new state of things', and who embodies the 'quadruple pace' of 'progress' in the nineteenth century (2: 208–9).

While Lauster suggestively characterises Thackeray's early sketches as constructing a 'grammar of modernity' (317–8), she does not examine in detail his contribution to Heads of the People, a total of three verbal sketches accompanying images by Meadows: 'Captain Rook and Mr. Pigeon', 'The Fashionable Authoress', and 'The Artists'. Of these, the latter two sketches engage directly with the stated aims of the series by reflecting on the temporality of fashion as a symptomatic experience of the 'present age'. In 'The Fashionable Authoress', Thackeray continues his satire on the silver-fork novel from his earlier *Fraser's* serial The Yellowplush Correspondence but with a shift of focus onto female exponents of the genre, of whom Catherine Gore was the most popular. The eponymous authoress, Lady Fanny Flummery, is a type of literary capitalist who finances her family's extravagant social life through her prolific output:

> The readiest of ready pens has Lady Fanny; her Pegasus gallops over hot-pressed satin so as to distance all gentleman riders; like Camilla, it scours the plain—of Bath, and never seems punished or fatigued; only it runs so fast that it often leaves all sense behind it; and there it goes on, on, scribble, scribble, scribble, never flagging until it arrives at that fair winning-post on which is written 'FINIS,' or, 'THE END;' and shews that the course, whether it be of novel, annual, poem, or what not, is complete. (2: 77–8)

Stereotypically assuming the superior 'literary fecundity' of female writers, Thackeray's heavy-handed satire makes it clear that quantity of production is at the expense of any claim to quality. The fashionable authoress, in this view, has nothing of lasting value to contribute to literature; the quantifiable result of her labour (45 novels in 15 years) vanishes at the moment of its completion: 'Lady Fanny writes everything: that is, nothing. Her poetry is

mere wind; her novels, stark nought; her philosophy, sheer vacancy' (2: 77–8). A male counterpart of this figure can be seen in Jerrold's sketch 'The "Lion" of a Party' for the same collection, another satirical squib on fashionable authorship and ephemeral celebrity which I have discussed elsewhere.[6]

In 'The Artists', a sketch appropriately credited to Michael Angelo Titmarsh, Thackeray adopts the ironic posture of a natural historian documenting organic changes within urban life. The analogy between fashion and nature is again pursued but with reference to the fashionable suburbs of London, anticipating the passage from Vanity Fair quoted earlier. Thackeray begins this sketch by evoking the air of faded grandeur lingering over the artists' quarter of Soho, a place which used to be 'thronged by the fashion of London', only to be supplanted by Bloomsbury which has in turn been abandoned:

> Both these quarters of the town have submitted to the awful rule of nature, and are now to be seen undergoing the dire process of decay. Fashion has deserted Soho, and left her in her gaunt, lonely old age. (2: 161)

With its restless and seemingly unfathomable motion, fashion is here extended to the topography of the city and its constantly shifting flows of people. Fashion is associated with periods of youth or rejuvenation in the organic development of a given environment, such that its migration to surrounding districts brings about the onset of 'old age' and 'decay'. This is not to suggest that the movement of the fashionable classes is the primary arbiter of cultural value within the metropolis, or the only type of modernity which it contains. Once 'the fashion' has abandoned Soho, a bohemian class of artists moves in, inaugurating the progressive development of a new professional identity. Thackeray moves on to discuss the prospects for the professionalisation of art (and literature) as a vocation after the demise of the eighteenth-century system of patronage:

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[6] See Richard Salmon, 'The physiognomy of the lion: encountering literary celebrity in the nineteenth century' in Mole, ed., Romanticism and Celebrity Culture (60-78).

> Time was—some hundred years back—when writers lived in Grub Street, and poor ragged Johnson shrunk behind a screen in Cave's parlour, that the author's trade was considered a very mean one; which a gentleman of family could not take up but as an amateur … The times are changing now, and as authors are no longer compelled to send their works abroad under the guardianship of a great man and a slavish dedication; painters, too, are beginning to deal directly with the public. (2: 175–6)

Two competing versions of modernity, then, are at work within this sketch: on the one hand, the transient shifts of fashion, which seem to guide movements of population across London without any clear 'account for this mystery of their residence' (2: 161); on the other hand, modernity as a trajectory of development through which the social classification of the artist emerges from the benighted past into the present day.

The Comic Almanack

The final part of this chapter considers a different manifestation of the temporal concerns of mid-nineteenth century print culture which impinged upon Thackeray's early career, if not quite with the same frequency as the journalistic sketch and fashionable novel, in an equally direct manner. In 1839 and again in 1840 Thackeray contributed a short fictional tale to George Cruikshank's Comic Almanack, stories which were first published in the form of a mock-calendar for the forthcoming year. The original publishing context of 'Stubbs' Calendar; or, The Fatal Boots' (1839) and 'Barber Cox, and the Cutting of his Comb' (1840) has not previously been considered in relation to Thackeray's broader preoccupation with temporal forms.[7] First published in 1835, Cruikshank's Comic Almanack was one of a number of new middle-class adaptations of the traditional almanack format which appeared in the wake of the abolition of stamp duty. Subtitled 'An Ephemeris both in Jest and Earnest',

[7] Useful accounts of Thackeray's collaboration with Cruikshank on these stories can be found in Burton (143-50) and Patten (Vol.2 80, 193-4).

it subjected popular belief in the significance of astrological configurations for the prognosis of weather and other future events to humorous satirical treatment, while also providing useful or interesting calendrical information on religious holidays, university terms, lunar and solar cycles, and the birth dates of famous individuals. According to Maureen Perkins, an increasing scepticism towards the centuries-old almanack tradition of voicing predictions for the year ahead was characteristic of the nineteenth-century development of the genre, and can be seen to reflect '[c]hanges in the way in which time was measured' within an emerging industrial society (55). A fatalistic conception of what the future holds, reproduced by earlier popular almanacks, was gradually replaced by a more progressive, rationalized outlook 'based on the regularity of the clock', by which time was rendered predictable without the need for esoteric forecasting (236).[8]

The idea of a malign 'fate' determining the course of events through a person's life is, indeed, subjected to burlesque treatment in Thackeray's first contribution to the Comic Almanack, 'The Fatal Boots'. The conception of the story thus appears to have emerged directly from its publishing context. Thackeray wrote to Cruikshank on 30 June 1838, outlining his plans for the narrative and its correspondence with the almanack format:

> I am going to write a kind of rambling biography of a Mr. Dobbs, dividing his life into 12 periods, and making them to correspond with the year. The first 3 will of course be Childhood, Boyhood, and Hobbadyhoyhood; then he will fall in love, and perhaps go into the army & so on. (Letters and Private Papers 37)

As he continued to work on the story through September 1838, Thackeray found that he was unable to adhere to his original plan of maintaining an interval of 5 years in the life of the protagonist (by now named Tims) between each monthly section of the calendar. Nevertheless, the basic conceit of 'Stubbs's Calendar' (as the character was finally known)

[8] Louis James also considers the temporal significance of this genre in his anthology Print and the People, Chapter 4, 'Time and the Popular Almanack' (49-61).

remained the same in its published form: 'Twelve of my adventures, suitable for meditation and perusal during the twelve months of the year, have been arranged by me for this Almanack', the comic hero and narrator of the story announces at the beginning (4). Within this design, the narrative form of autobiography is shaped by correspondence with the passing of a single year, condensing an individual life-story into a mock-allegorical pattern. Beginning with an account of his birth in January, proceeding through a period of youthful 'love-making' (20) and attempted marriage in the month of May, and ending as a pathetic figure in later life by December (the 'Winter of Our Discontent'), Stubbs presents his hapless 'adventures' as a sequence of uninterrupted 'misfortunes' over which he has no control (4). Almost every month sees the narrator bemoaning his 'ill luck': 'although I have laboured, perhaps, harder than any man to make a fortune, something always tumbled it down', for instance (24). His failed attempt as a school-boy to acquire a pair of fashionable top-boots from the German bootmaker Stiffelkind without paying for them is viewed retrospectively by Stubbs as emblematic of the course of his whole life; hence the sub-title of the story, 'The Fatal Boots'. In this way, Thackeray comically aligns the notion of a mysterious, inexplicable fate – the tradition concern of the almanack - with the irresistible compulsions of fashion. The transparent irony of the story, however, is that Stubbs is unable to recognise how his own mean-spirited personality and actions cause his misfortune by provoking the hostility of others towards him. Contrary to the narrator's self-perception, Thackeray indicates that Stubbs's experience is an entirely predictable result of his self-absorbed pursuit of social advancement - his misfortune is neither inexplicable nor 'unmerited', but comprehensible and fully deserved (32). Underlying the mock-astrological framework of the story, Thackeray thus seems to endorse a more rational version of modernity than that offered by the pursuit of fashion, although this also encompasses a pointed critique of Stubbs's utilitarian economic values.

Bob Stubbs is one of Thackeray's many early comic figures of the aspiring dandy whose pursuit of fashionable society betrays his true identity as a 'snob': '[h]e who meanly admires mean things', according to Thackeray's definition in The Snobs of England (1846-7) [original emphasis; 8]. In the almanack story which he wrote for the following year, 'Barber Cox, and the Cutting of his Comb' (later retitled 'Cox's Diary'), Thackeray explored the same theme but from an opposing class perspective. Whereas Stubbs begins life as a 'gentleman' in reduced circumstances, whose complacent attempts to restore his fortune lead only to further decline and humiliation, Cox is a 'tradesman' whose sudden inheritance of wealth leads to a series of embarrassing attempts to live up to his newfound social status, but his story ends happily in an equally abrupt loss of fortune and the barber's return to his 'native hair' (48). Cox is a more likeable figure than Stubbs, but his narrative equally warns of the dangers of misplaced social ambition. In particular, this story satirises the pursuit of 'fashion' and can be linked to Thackeray's broader campaign against the fashionable novel during the 1830s, as discussed earlier. Barber Cox's entry into high society leads him to embrace self-deluding cultural aspirations and to abandon the prosaic labour of his profession, one of the charges consistently levelled against Bulwer Lytton in Thackeray's various reviews and parodies. The elaborate pun suggested by the original title of the story, but lost in subsequent published versions, identifies the title character as a 'coxcomb', a term also used by Catherine Gore to characterise the questionable hero of her later novel, Cecil; or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb (1841), one of the most celebrated examples of the silver-fork genre. By abandoning his established place in society – or 'cutting' his comb – barber Cox assumes the role of a 'coxcomb', which the OED defines as a 'vain and conceited man, a dandy'; only by returning to his comb at the end of the narrative does Cox avoid the implications of this derogatory label, whilst, paradoxically, reclaiming the literal meaning of the signifier. Cruikshank's visual representation of Cox's barbershop, which appears in his

illustrations for the January and December sections of the tale, foregrounds the significance of this verbal joke [Figure 1.2]. Advertised as a 'Saloon of Fashion', the barber's shop is both the antithesis of the fashionable world to which Cox, and more particularly his wife Jemima, crave admission and a visible reminder of the fluctuating fortunes which the pursuit of fashion necessarily entails. By returning to this scene at the end of the narrative, Thackeray, in collaboration with Cruikshank, adumbrates the cycle of fashion by which Cox's fortunes have turned full circle in the course of a year. In contrast to 'Stubbs's Calendar', 'Barber Cox' maps a sequence of biographical 'adventures' onto the monthly calendar of the almanack in real time, rather than as an allegorical conceit, suggesting that the events of the narrative have occurred within the space of a single year. More than its predecessor, then, this tale emphasises the rapid transience of fashion within the confines of the regular monthly structure of the almanack, a form of publication that was, by definition, designed to mark the passing of time.

[Insert Figure 1.2. here - landscape]

Figure 1.2 George Cruikshank. 'January – The Announcement'. 'Barber Cox and the Cutting of his Comb'. The Comic Almanack for 1840.

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Thackeray's two contributions to the Comic Almanack demonstrate that the temporality of print culture in the mid-nineteenth century was not uniform in nature. Professional writers such as Thackeray worked within a literary market comprised of multiple print genres and publication formats, each bearing different temporal constraints and opportunities. The almanack, for instance, represents a mode of organising calendrical time according to a traditional, pre-modern understanding of temporal experience, which its comic treatment by nineteenth-century writers and publishers subjected to ironic scrutiny.

Notwithstanding this fact, the predominant experience of authorship recorded by Thackeray during his early years as a writer for periodicals testifies directly to the pressurised time of his role within the expanding print economy - his self-declared status as a producer of 'endless hasty sketches', stories, and reviews for newspapers and magazines. Thackeray's modernity, I have argued, was deeply imbricated with his ambivalent response to the value of 'fashion' within the literary marketplace and society at large. While Thackeray often examines the idea of fashionable fiction and clothing with corrosive satire, writing implicitly on behalf of a more rational understanding of progress, he also reveals a fascination with the ephemeral. Fashion and the ephemeral convey aspects of the 'aesthetic experience of modernity' to which Thackeray's writing gives powerful expression - if not with the polemical zeal of Baudelaire's 'Painter of Modern Life', with a witty and melancholy awareness of its recurrent allure.

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