

**'GILDED CARRIAGES AND LIVERIED SERVANTS':
Thackeray, Bourdieu, and Material Culture**

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ABSTRACT

The writings of William Thackeray (1811-1863) are dominated by his experience of the commodity form; his apprehension not only of objects and material reality, but also of his own literary productions emerges from economic experience. Working from Pierre Bourdieu's materialist analysis of spatial relationships, the following paper first examines the consequences of commodification on Thackeray's representation of space and material culture, and then briefly analyzes that representation as a product of Thackeray's habitus, understood as the dialectical product of his position within a series of social transformations in mid-Victorian England.

RÉSUMÉ

Les travaux de William Thackeray (1811-1863) sont dominés par son expérience avec la forme marchandise; son appréhension non seulement des objets et de la réalité matérielle, mais aussi de ses productions littéraires. En me basant sur l'analyse matérialiste de relations spatiales de Pierre Bourdieu, le papier examine premièrement les conséquences de la marchandisation sur les représentations de l'espace et de la culture matérielle de Thackeray, et ensuite analyse brièvement cette représentation en tant que produit de l'Habitus de Thackeray, compris comme un produit dialectique de sa position parmi une série de transformations sociales en Angleterre mi-Victorienne.

The paradox of exchange value hangs like a malediction over William Thackeray's novels. If objects are valued not as they can be used, but as they can be exchanged for other objects or for money, then the following holds: if an object has realized its full value, you have exchanged it and no longer possess it; if you possess it, it has not realized its full value. Moments when goods

are transferred and thus of great significance to Thackeray, because they reveal those goods at the moment of their greatest strength: auctions, gifts, losses, thefts, sales. However, the figure I think that best represents the situation I am describing is the plate glass window, a significant development in nineteenth century retailing and an invention that transformed the experience of walking London streets (Adburgham 1964:6-8; Smith 1857:319-330; Sennett 1987). Plate glass simultaneously displays goods for a desiring audience and ensures that those goods remain beyond reach; it arrests and idealizes in an impoverished utopia the liminal moment in the circulation of commodities, the moment of exchange, when goods have their full value and their greatest power:

A little further on ... is Mr. Filch's fine silversmith's shop, where a man may stand for a half-hour and gaze with ravishment at the beautiful gilt cups and tankards, the stunning waistcoat-chains, the little white cushions laid out with delightful diamond pins, gold horseshoes and splinterbars, pearl owls, turquoise lizards and dragons, enamelled monkeys, and all sorts of agreeable monsters for your neckcloth. If I live to be a hundred, or if the girl of my heart were waiting for me at the corner of the street, I could never pass Mr. Filch's shop without having a couple minutes' good stare at the window (Thackeray [1847] 1904a:549).

Writing is a form of consumption for Thackeray: he indulges himself for another paragraph here, bringing the goods before his eyes and detailing to us and to himself their beauties. And then he says, speaking about a particular gold pin,

The ball of it is almost as big as those which are painted over the side door of Mr. Filch's shop, which is down that passage which leads into Trotter's Court (Thackeray [1847] 1904a:550).

This is itself a surreptitious passage, literary alleyway and silent theft: three balls were the mark of a pawnshop, and, having allowed himself and the reader the indulgence of window shopping, Thackeray then, with characteristic harshness, undermines the sources of that pleasure. Goods cannot be possessed in Thackeray's world, they remain in hock:

When we read in the Court Journal of Lady Fitzball's head-dress of lappets and superb diamonds, it is because the jewels get a day rule from Filch's, and come back to his iron box as soon as the Drawing-room is over (Thackeray [1847-8] 1904a:549-50).

This experience of objects describes Thackeray's experience of the literary objects he produces: the commodity form -- defined here by the paradox of exchange value -- shapes the form of his novels. This is the way Thackerayan allegory -- allegory being one of the terms critics use to describe the form of Thackeray's novels -- must be seen to understand its progressive nature. Walter Benjamin, the most canny and persistent modern analyst of the object world, describes the production of allegorical significance in German Trauerspiel in terms that apply equally to the allegory of Thackeray's work:

Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything. With this possibility a destructive but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance. But it will be unmistakably apparent ... that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued (Benjamin 1977:175).

In Thackeray's world, there is no higher plane: objects and words gesture to a realm of ideal fulfillment that can be conceptualized but not achieved by character or narrator; as a result, these objects are experienced with a kind of frustrated intensity. If objects represent anything they represent money, the amount others will offer for them.

The connection I am suggesting here -- between what Benjamin is describing as an allegorical experience and my description of the commodity form -- could be dismissed as simple homology; except that elsewhere, and in a way finally not surprising, the implication of writing in the economic descends from formal practice to the terrain of explicit self-analysis and despair. The grossest example of this is in the late novel Philip:

Ah! how wonderful ways and means are! When I think how this very line, this very word which I am writing, represents money, I am lost in a respectful astonishment ... I am paid, we will say, for the sake of illustration, at the rate of sixpence per line. With the words 'Ah! How wonderful' to the words 'per line', I can actually buy a loaf, a piece of butter, a jug of milk, a modicum of tea (Thackeray [1861-2] 1904b:537).

Words "represent" money: it is, I think, an extraordinary formulation of the relationship between language and its referent, a relationship understood now as necessarily mediated through the economic. This recognition, assimilated on the level of content in Philip by Thackeray's self-reflexive wit, is present in his other novels as well, but it is not explicitly acknowledged. It exists in these other texts as a troubling pressure, external to the narratives but impinging upon them as an unexpected, unarticulated bitterness: not a bitterness arising out of events within the texts, but arising against the texts. It is most forcibly present at the conclusion to Vanity Fair:

Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied? Come children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out (Thackeray [1847-8] 1983:878).

The idea the novel closes with is the one I have called the paradox of exchange value: objects of desire are inaccessible in Thackeray's world, or, if acquired, unsatisfactory. But the anger behind these words cannot be so easily integrated thematically. It is, I think, a response to the ending of the novel, to its form, if we continue to understand form specifically as the commodity form: Thackeray is registering in disgust his own alienation from this object he has produced, its estrangement even from him, who wrote it. This is the power of his novels, I think, -- that they represent the experience of living in a commodified world; we read him as he looks at the objects at Filch's, through plate glass windows.

Thackeray's narratives enact, I am suggesting, what Bourdieu calls an "accountancy of symbolic exchanges", a register of the social manipulation of symbolic capital -- including, and most powerfully, the capital of Thackeray's own texts. "The only way", Bourdieu writes,

in which such an accountancy can apprehend the undifferentiatedness of economic and symbolic capital is in the form of their perfect interconvertability (Bourdieu 1977:178).

Thackeray achieved this apprehension because he understood implicitly the identity of what at this moment and in London was being analyzed as the commodity form and the submerged form not only of the novel but of all the material culture of his society. George Orwell said of Thackeray that he described a world in which "the desire for expensive clothes, gilded carriages, and hoards of liveried servants is assumed to be a natural instinct, like the desire for food and drink" (Orwell:300). But, to the contrary, Thackeray understood that such desires were not natural but the product of economic processes.

The question then arises, How did Thackeray achieve such an apprehension in his particular moment -- what were the conditions for the possibility of this apprehension? As Bourdieu would suggest, the answer to this question lies in the biographical and social forces that dialectically constituted Thackeray's habitus.

As Thackeray's letters show (Thackeray 1946, IV:155; Thackeray 1946, III:528), the loss of his inheritance in 1833, when he was 21, continued to influence his activity throughout his later life, spurring him to write so that he could provide as he thought he should for his children. The dispossession subsequent to this period of early maturity, the years during which he maintained an ambiguous position within the social configuration (as a poor artist in Paris and hack-writer in London), reinforced his affiliation with people alienated from society. More precisely, it encouraged a habit of social self-analysis that the essayist Walter Bagehot clearly recognized:

Hazlitt used to say to himself, and used to say truly, that he could not enjoy the society in a drawing-room for thinking of the opinion which the footman formed of his odd appearance as he went upstairs. Thackeray had too healthy and stable a nature to be so wholly thrown off his balance; but the footman's view of life was never out of his head (Bagehot [1864] 1965, II:304).

Thackeray's position on the stairs, as it were, near the servants in the hall and not yet fully ensconced within the drawing room

society into which he was born and to which he, during the late 40's and early 50's, was reascending, allowed him a purchase at least contiguous with that of the footman and butler. This contiguity is most fully marked by a kind of self-objectification, an estranged perception of his own odd appearance as he ascends, a sudden recognition of himself as something alien. The servant is more apt than the men in the drawing room to look upon his social being as something from which he is estranged. "It is true", Lukacs writes,

for the capitalist also there is the same doubling of personality, the same splitting up of man into an element of the movement of commodities and an (objective and impotent) observer of that movement. But for his consciousness it necessarily appears as an activity, ... in which effects emanate from himself. This illusion blinds him to the true state of affairs, whereas the worker, who is denied the scope for such illusory activity, perceives the split in his [own] being (Lukacs [1923] 1971:166).

To the extent that the servant can perceive himself, he perceives a commodity. Thackeray's understanding of "the true state of affairs" was critically limited by his inability to perceive workers as anything other than servants and butlers; even in the middle of the Chartist demonstrations he saw revolution as a revolt of footmen and maids, a rebellion entirely within a bourgeois world. But the self-objectification that he achieves in common with servants is the source of his insight into the impoverished attraction of the commodity form, and distinguishes his understanding of material culture from that of other writers. It is, following Lukacs' Hegelian contradiction, exactly Thackeray's total defeat that allows him, from a supine position, to see clearly the consequences of the economic.

What is finally most significant about this formative event -- if we are to take the loss of his fortune as a determining moment in Thackeray's attention to and involvement in moments of exchange-- is not its endurance in his psychology, but the extraordinary variety of experiences that the motif of explicitly economic disenchantment can explain at his moment in history. This objectively caused accident provides a medium for his exploration of certain kinds of content -- at the lowest level, the turquoise lizards and gilt cups, the riding whips and splinterbars -- and of certain kinds of form -- in particular the structure I have described as the commodity form. It offers a shorthand definition for the congeries

of dispositions that constitute Thackeray's habitus and allow the apparent improvisations of his texts.

At the most profound level, the structuring of Thackeray's habitus by the processes of economic exchange structures his apprehension of spatial form. When describing the constitution of the habitus, Bourdieu writes:

It is in the dialectical relationship between the body and a space structured according to mythico-ritual oppositions that one finds the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship which leads to the embodying of the structures of the world (Bourdieu 1977:89).

More radically, and in accord with Marx' formula that "the forming of the five senses is a [labour] of the entire history of the world down to the present" (Marx [1927] 1975, 3:302. Emphasis in original), Bourdieu suggests that the Kantian categories themselves are veritably reconstituted by material processes: "The mind is a metaphor of the world of objects which is itself but an endless circle of mutually reflecting metaphors" (Bourdieu 1977:91).

The space that Thackeray apprehended, and that structures his representations of space, is curiously planar; the arrangement of the glassed-in display window -- flat, circumscribed, two-dimensional -- describes it well. The sources of this kind of space are made clear I think, by Marx, when he writes: "while capital" -- and I am understanding capital now to include interconvertible symbolic and economic forms -- "while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time" (Marx [1939-41] 1973:539). This annihilation of space can be registered through the plate glass window, if one considers the origins of the diamonds, gold and enamel that so fascinate Thackeray; one common topos of the period was the description of collections that reduce to the space of a room or a display the products of the world. But, more importantly, the annihilation of space can be registered by the very structure of the space, its formal arrangement in addition to its contents: Thackeray's novels have the depthless abstraction of a world in which space has submitted to capital. Thus he stands in front of the flat space of the display window, conscious only of his desire and of time: "if I live to be a hundred, or if the girl of my heart were waiting for me at the corner of the street, I could

never pass Mr. Filch's shop without having a couple minutes' good stare at the window (Thackeray [1847-8] 1904a:549).

This reconstitution of Kantian categories was, I would argue, a more general process of the moment: one could analyze the metropolitan space of Victorian London and find this conquering of space by time, this planar, collage-like display. But the phenomenon is perhaps more strikingly demonstrated -- as Wolfgang Schivelbusch has noted (1986:33-37) -- by the development of the railways that were at this moment transforming the landscape: The Quarterly Review (1839): "distances were thus annihilated" by the train; Constantin Pecqueur (1839): "the railway's operation ... causes distances to diminish". Heine (1843): "Space is killed by the railways, and we are left with time alone;" Dionysius Lardner (1850): "Distances practically diminish".

Space is understood, in this mode, only in abstraction: the important points of reference for railway travel are not the contiguous spaces through which one travels, but the points of origin and termination, linked together by technological advance. As Thackeray understood his texts only through the abstraction of money, so the comprehension of space is ordered and rationalized according to an abstract scheme. This understanding of the space of the city, and of the area between cities traversed by railway has been called, by Erwin Straus, "geographical". "In a landscape", Straus writes,

... we always get to one place from another place; each location is determined only by its relation to the neighboring space ... But geographical space is closed, and is therefore in its entire structure transparent. Every place in such a space is determined by its position with respect to the whole and ultimately by its relation to the null point of the coordinate system by which this space obtains its order (Straus 1963:319).

Historically, as Straus argues, the nineteenth century in England and Western Europe marked a significant transformation from landscape to geography; the development of railway travel -- in which, again, the endpoints of a journey grow in importance relative to the contiguous points of traversed ground -- is one mark of this transformation: aesthetically, it is the journey from Turner to the Impressionism; economically it is the transparent arrangement of social goods around the null point defined by the universal abstraction, money. In Thackeray, it supports the understanding of

a space defined not by three-dimensional relationships, the contiguity or metonymic affiliation of objects, but by the abstract and economic value of the objects furnishing the space.

Any sufficient articulation of this comprehensive experience of subjected spatiality with the representation of spatial relations in Thackeray's writing would require not more space but more time than is available here¹; but I would like to conclude by circling back to Bourdieu and suggest an affiliation -- again one requiring further mediation -- between this description of geographical space and the totalizing practice of objectivist discourse, which can be seen as written from "the null point of the coordinate system". Thus Bourdieu writes:

The logical relationships constructed by the anthropologist are opposed to "practical" relationships -- practical because continually practiced, kept up and cultivated -- in the same way as the geometrical space of a map, an imaginary representation of all theoretically possible roads and routes, is opposed to the network of beaten tracks, of paths made ever more practicable by constant use (Bourdieu 1977:37-8).

Bourdieu's practical network of roads is the increasingly distant sense of landscape space, his geometrical space of the map is what Straus called "geographical space", apprehended with special force after the moment I have been describing. To close, I would say that Thackeray wrote from the null point of the coordinate system -- whether we understand that null point in spatial, economic, or aesthetic terms -- and that this writing paralysed him. What I have attempted to do here is to reconstruct some of the practical conditions that allowed the development of this non-practical thought, to use, maintain, and build anew the paths across Thackeray's overmapped space.

NOTES

1. Williams (1977:53-92) has charted such a mediation through Dickens' writing. And, more generally, some of Jameson's recent work on postmodern space (1984; 1988) has similarly articulated the relationships I describe.

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