These *Newcomes:* William Makepeace Thackeray and Novelistic Particularity

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> What I dislike is beginning a new novel. I should like to have a novel to read in a million volumes, to last me my life.
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> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Interviews and Recollections*[1]

THE unusualness of Tennyson's demand is not in its unreasonableness. Novel readers throughout the nineteenth century habitually asked for the impossible: "I wish Mr Trollope would go on writing *Framley Parsonage* for ever," wrote Elizabeth Gaskell; "I should like [*Daniel Deronda*] to continue indefinitely, to keep coming out always, to be one of the regular things of life," said a Henry James character; William Makepeace Thackeray would love "another dozen [volumes] of the continued history" of *The Three Musketeers*, and then to "get the lives of Athos, Porthos, and Aramis until they were 120 years old."[2] What is unusual about Tennyson is not what he specifies, but what he does not. If Gaskell, Theodora, and Thackeray nominate specific novels for praise, desiring the infinite extension of a particular experience, for the poet laureate this particularity does not imply the endorsement of any outstanding work. Strictly speaking, his comment establishes no criteria on the nature or quality of the reading material at all—*any novel will do, so long as it lasts.*

Why might it be painful to finish a novel, if not because it has been an especially good one? What is so difficult about beginning a novel, besides the risk it might be bad? If Tennyson's comment suggests that the pleasure of novel-reading lies partly beyond aesthetic judgment, his wish not for a million novels to read but "a novel to read in a million volumes" also points beyond reading in the abstract as an activity or state of consciousness (as targeted, for example, by nineteenth-century diagnoses of addictive or intoxicated reading). Instead, he articulates a desire for the novel that is both indiscriminate and prohibitively narrow: the experience of reading a *single* novel, but *any* single novel; something all novels

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have in common, but cannot substitute for one another; the general feeling of fictional specifics. Rita Felski has recently pointed out the multiplicity of ways that texts "solicit and capture our attention . . . by multiple devices designed to lure in readers and keep them hooked," including anything from suspense to prose style to characterization.[3] Yet one critically neglected dimension of reader-response upon which such devices operate is how readers might continue a novel because they want to compound their existing investment in it, or because switching to a new novel with a different plot or cast of characters (whatever their comparative merit) is more emotionally or mentally taxing than simply continuing something with which they have already become accustomed. The social scientific concept of *path dependency*, the resistance of consumers or institutions to changing course in their behaviors, has recently been used by Caroline Levine to describe the longevity of the critical categories that organize literary studies.[4] At a more microeconomic level, if we can call it that, the inherent allure of going on against the discomfort of switching tracks might also govern the attachment of individual readers to particular texts, or their desire to *stick* with a novel they've already begun.

Can the invisible momentum of continuity have its own literary form or value, an ethics or aesthetics of the familiar? This essay proposes there is more than inertia at stake in the natural hold that fictional objects accrete upon readerly attention: that the unique force of this experience in the nineteenth-century novel contributes to the form's foundational interest in "reforming the relation between general and particular" by allying the accretive power of familiar reading with a desire and imperative to particularize.[5] Such texts, through their formal capacity for accumulative knowledge and attachment, compel us to keep reading *this* novel with *these* irreplaceable (if not necessarily distinctive) specifics, and so make us experience *this*-ness as part of the novel's affective and ethical value. In addition, therefore, to readers like Tennyson, who registered the compulsive force of path dependency as an affective dimension to novel-reading, others like Thackeray and John Ruskin went further by attaching the moral weight of intimacy to our increasingly particular desire for *these* fictions, describing discontinued or superseded reading (even after the end of a narrative) as an act of cruelty or disloyalty to long-held relationships. If the realist novel is the genre of personal histories, so often concerned with how characters view or treat others within highly concretized private lives, novels and their fictions can themselves demand to be treated less anonymously as literary objects, on the basis on a personal history they construct with you.

I want to suggest the meaningfulness of the way certain texts come to "mean something to us" as individuals, to register the sociological or psychological force of familiar reading as a formal effect with historical and theoretical stakes. For instance, if not even the "large, loose, baggy monsters" of the nineteenth-century novel quite reached a thousand volumes,[6] as Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund have argued, the desire for extended fictional experiences was "inspired" by the rise of a serial format "with numerous pauses but less sense of an ending."[7] At the same time, to sustain a stubborn interest in single, particular novels in this period was also to swim against an unprecedented rising tide of new novels available; as Franco Moretti has argued, the nineteenth century marked the beginning of an age in which "the yearly input of titles" rapidly outgrew the consumption capacity of any individual reader, making the reading of any novel come at the cost of reading another.[8] In other words, the immersive attachment to particulars that is a constitutive part of the novel experience also jealously hoards readerly time and attention against the promiscuous possibilities for novelty or variety upon which the market is premised; a corollary of realizing the demand for a lifelong novel is the end of novels in general. For some readers, moreover, this compulsive favoritism or discomfort with change assumed the aspect of a perverse, even heroic refusal to partake in more impersonal or distanced ways of valuing their relations with literature.

This is an especially cogent disciplinary moment for exploring our seemingly unreasoning investments in novels we already know, amidst the ongoing need to rationalize the scope and aims of literary study. If nineteenth-century readers defended their excessive attachments to particular novels as an ethical stance reflective of the form's own narrative concerns, English studies now undertakes an institutional version of this defense on behalf of its increasingly beleaguered but still fundamental methodology: the close reading of canonical texts. While academic and popular novel-reading have different purposes, Felski has argued how they can nonetheless "share certain affective and cognitive parameters"; one of which may be the tension between absorptive investment and sunk cost (affective, cognitive, temporal, or economic) embodied by the contradictions of the novel form itself.[9] The return value of extended, concentrated attention on particular texts (*any* particular text) as a knowledge practice has been repeatedly brought into question throughout what Deidre Lynch has characterized as the discipline's ongoing "pursuits of rigor or campaigns for a new professionalism," most recently in the turn toward quantitative and digital methodologies.

But as there remains something perversely or heroically—in any case, irreducibly—particular about our professional practices, understanding novels as objects that signify to us through their familiarity is an opportunity to investigate "the entanglements of the institutional and the intimate" as sources of interpretive, formal, and ethical knowledge, and to defend what literary texts have to offer in the public sphere as objects of private experience.[10]

Through a sustained close reading of Thackeray's 1855 novel *The Newcomes*, this essay argues that a tension between the continuous or particular experience of an individual novel and the felt historical pressure of novels en masse registers in the text itself as a formal and narrative problem. Drawing on recent critical methods that have emphasized the sociological and network structures of narrative, I suggest how the sprawling intertextual references and relationships crosshatched throughout *The Newcomes*—a novel that G. K. Chesterton described as being for this reason "all one novel" with its predecessors (*Vanity Fair* [1848] and *The History of Pendennis* [1850]) and successor (*The Adventures of Philip* [1862])—feeds the compulsion for familiarity in returning readers.[11] At the same time, Thackeray's plot of family estrangement and romantic alienation critiques the influence of an open social market on relationships that derive their value from shared histories and old connections. An ongoing struggle (on the level of form and character) between nostalgic returns to former narratives and more emotionally detached attempts to start anew dramatizes the mutual pull (in the reading experience itself) between the strength of our familiarity, absorption, or attachment to particular fictions and the resistance of our more abstract literary judgments. Putting into question the desirability of reading novels in general (rather than in particular), *The Newcomes* leads us directly into recent methodological debates about expanding the study of the novel—a practice, on a disciplinary scale, of "beginning a new novel" several tens of thousands of times over.

This Particular Lover

The Newcomes, family and novel, begins with an originary Thomas Newcome whose two marriages form the root of the narrative's elaborate family tree, plot structure, and thematic pattern. Arriving in London "on a wagon, which landed him and some bales of cloth, all his fortune, in Bishopsgate Street," this ancestral Newcome makes his fortune in the business of cloth and banking, and marries twice.[12] First, his penniless

betrothed from his native village, who dies giving birth to (the later Colonel) Thomas Newcome Jr.; and "en secondes noces" (18), his employer's wealthy daughter, who bears him twin sons, Hobson and Brian Newcome ("called after their uncle and late grandfather, whose name and rank they were destined to perpetuate" [26]). The colonel comes to have two love affairs: with his French tutor's daughter, Mademoiselle du Blois, who is forced into a more convenient marriage, the heartbreak of which alienates him from his family and drives him to India; and then with the widow Emma Honeyman, who dies after marrying the colonel and giving birth to Clive Newcome, the novel's protagonist. The twins produce a number of step-cousins for Clive, most of whom only occasionally surface in the novel, but Brian in particular (married into the aristocracy) begets Ethel and Barnes Newcome, the heroine and villain, respectively.

Stripping the novel down to this schematic (and not too enthralling) genealogy reveals, even in the prenarrative, its preoccupation with patterns of moral behavior that replicate through generations of characters. Nicholas Dames has noted, after the contemporary reviewer James Hannay, that the original Thomas Newcome's marriages are "neatly allegorical, one a love match (which produces the Colonel) and one a money match (which produces the novel's least morally admirable characters)."[13] Characters throughout the novel, especially but not only the Newcome offspring, are recurrently presented with the same choice between a difficult marriage of love and a more indifferent marriage of convenience: Clive chooses between his beloved Ethel and the merely pleasant Rosie, Ethel between struggling painter Clive and a host of aristocratic suitors, Barnes between a local villager he has impregnated and the respectable Lady Clara Pulleyn, Clara between her impoverished sweetheart Belsize and the wealthy but abusive Barnes, among other examples. As Juliet McMaster has also argued, this "repetition of the mercenary marriage between various couples and its outcome is a unifying structural principle . . . *The Newcomes* is a set of variations on this theme."[14]

Yet this often-noted structuring principle extends its logic beyond the consistent moral dichotomy of marriage choice. Clive, his father, and his grandfather share not only a doubling of partners but also the early deaths of their wives (who often themselves have chosen between, or survived to have, two husbands), just as Hobson's and Brian's names, ranks, and even destinies explicitly echo forebears from their maternal line. As these relationship patterns replicate down the

generations, the central plot of the novel can also be seen as a series of horizontal rearrangements—as the potential match between Ethel and Clive rises and recedes in probability over their lives, as they meet and separate, fight and reconcile, engage or marry others, and break off or are widowed, the branches of the Newcome family they represent also oscillate between intimacy, estrangement, and outright hostility. *The Newcomes* can therefore be characterized as an intersection of three narrative directions: the generational reproduction of an ancestral marriage plot, which increasingly divides and splinters the family tree; the novel's particular and focal marriage plot between its protagonists, which seeks to reintegrate the branches; and the picaresque chronicling of what Dames calls the novel's "minutiae," the fine-grained experience of which hides the "thematic architecture" of an at-once expansive and detailed novel behind the characters' day-to-day lives.[15]

This interpretation of the novel draws, but with a distinctively Thackerayan twist, from a method recently demonstrated by Caroline Levine in a "new formalist" reading of *Bleak House* as "using narrative form to work through the dynamic unfolding of kinship networks over time" (128). This is as apt a description of *The Newcomes* as any, but for the significant difference of Thackeray's less optimistic view of time as a regulator (rather than facilitator) of connection. Taking the thrice-married Mrs. Badger as an example, Levine argues:

> As anyone who has ever tried to make a genealogical chart will know, the family is never graspable as a whole. It stretches indefinitely across time and space. Distant branches connect ever outwards, as marriages create links to other families, old generations stretch back into the past indefinitely, and generations yet to come will continue to add nodes. And as Mrs. Badger suggests, the nodes of the family network are best figured as positions that can be endlessly emptied and refilled: new people supplant previous husbands and wives . . . nodes repeatedly replace themselves, and in doing so replicate the network in ways that stretch the institution of the family itself across time. (108)

The Newcomes' textual version of the genealogical chart is amply demonstrative of this view of family plots as network, but Thackeray's novel differs from this picture in two major respects. For one, Levine emphasizes the way Dickens's detective mystery withholds knowledge of how its characters are unsuspectingly networked through social and material systems, only gradually connecting the dots through suspense to create a narrative experience of "indefinitely expanding processes of interconnectedness . . . .[which] can never be grasped all at once" (125). While *The*

Newcomes involves some (slipshod) detective work—Ethel's accidental discovery of a lost will, slipped between the pages of an old book, rejigs the legal lines of inheritance between the branches—almost every connection between the characters, however tangential, is laid out from their introductions and can be deciphered with a little readerly mental labor. In periods of particular estrangement, members of the Newcome family are even irritated by the social necessity of acknowledging their ties to one another, the exact opposite problem to the secret familial connection between Esther and Lady Dedlock. As Dames points out, in absolute antithesis to "plotted suspense," the novel's "lack of forward-directed plot" in fact led critics to complain of Thackeray's "loitering, be it ever so humorously, philosophically, picturesquely" in the webbing of his characters' intersecting lives.[16]

For another, if Levine identifies Dickens's key interest in the "replaceability" of abstract family positions, marital "nodes" in Thackeray's novels *cannot* be "endlessly emptied and refilled" but replaced precisely once, and only with significant emotional consequence (108). Unlike Mrs. Badger (many Thackerayan characters remarry, but none marry three times) and unlike "Esther's two husbands, one of whom replaces himself and his house with another husband and another house in one of [*Bleak House*'s] most unsettling moments" (Levine 128), *The Newcomes*' significant marriages are always explicitly unsettled, either by the failure of a first love, the death of a previous spouse, or already-present (if unnoticed) signs of illness; characters either marry in conditions of compromise or share love in conditions that compromise their ability to love again. Much as the original Thomas Newcome returns to his village to marry his first wife after her "pale face . . . had grown older and paler with long waiting" (18), as George Levine has argued, Thackeray's characters only ever marry after "it is too late for passion":

> The narratives carefully enfold passion in layers of irony and of time that diminish passion and transform it into self-consciousness. . . . In [Thackeray's] four best novels, Dobbin gets Amelia only when he has discovered the vanity of her selfishness; Esmond gets not the beautiful and sexually vital Beatrix, but her mature mother; Pen gets neither Fotheringay, nor Blanche, but a saccharine Laura . . . and we bestow Ethel on Clive only after she has outgrown her youthful energy, and he has gone through the embittering experience of a loveless marriage.[17]

Whereas for Dickens the effect of time on networks seems to be one of indefinite expansion, creating or revealing new connections to

increasingly far-flung people and places, for Thackeray time *degrades* connectivity, beginning with a more or less fully available picture of social ties before tapering or sealing off the ability of individuals to make new relations. Read this way, the choice between two partners that confronts each character in *The Newcomes* is difficult not only as a moral choice between love and convenience but also because of the inevitable wear and tear in replacing one relationship with another—all of the new generation have problems detaching from previous partners even after they have been married to others, which in Clara's case eventuates in actual infidelity with Belsize. In Thackeray's novel, it is not only *how* the world is networked (the variety, quantity, or reach of our social ties) that is being represented and scrutinized, but also how it *feels* to be connected to others, an experience far from the clean slotting together of compatible connections and nodes.

Although not exactly an evolutionary plot in Gillian Beer's sense (Thackeray's world of social climbers and pretenders always cynically decouples class from heredity), Thackeray poses a version of what Beer calls "the question of typology—can there be new movements, new stories? Is it possible to rupture the links of descent and to set out anew?"[18] Characters in *The Newcomes* suffer from an entanglement in both generational (if not necessarily genetic) patterns of behavior and the emotional stickiness of their personal histories: not individual enough to escape their social (or literary) types, they are also too painfully specific in their desires and attachments. Only in Dickens's fictional universe, perhaps, can the "replaceability" of loved ones exemplify a comic representation of family arrangements rather than a horrifying disregard for family members. That Mrs. Badger is, as Caroline Levine puts it, "absurdly proud of having had three distinguished husbands" (128) registers as absurd rather than sociopathic because both the widow and her husbands exemplify the kind of minor Dickensian character that Henry James complained of as being too abstract for sympathy—"a mere bundle of eccentricities," or "nothing but figure."[19] Indeed, this common critique of Dickens might consider Mrs. Badger, as a procedural combination of qualities and functions, to be replaceable in *Bleak House* itself with any number of other Dickensian eccentrics, or in turn to substitute for them in any other Dickens novel. The functional or personal distance at which characters regard each other, and we regard characters, can be measured by this affective and structural test we might call (inverting Beer) the question of particularity: would they be "missed" if they were replaced?

Another way of formulating the central ethical dilemma of *The Newcomes*—traditionally represented as a dichotomy between love and money—is as a challenge of where to set the level of abstraction for social relations. By putting this dilemma to characters across its multiple marriage plots, the novel's consistent preference for the love-match becomes a repudiation of what Gage McWeeny has identified as a competing ethical practice in the nineteenth-century novel, "the art of letting go . . . opening one's self up to attachments that might not be tied to any single person . . . [on] more neutral or detached social modes that characterise modern sociality."[20] In *The Newcomes*, such a practice is more usually ironized as destructive self-deception. Clive, attempting to justify his marriage to a woman he does not love, compares his wife, Rosie, with his beloved Ethel in "more neutral or detached," in fact anonymous terms: the former is "a pretty and fond young girl, who respected and admired him," the latter "a worldly ambitious girl—how foolishly worshipping and passionately beloved no matter" (818). Attempting (and failing) to anesthetize the process of detaching and reattaching deeply rooted affections, Clive's perversely impartial view of his own marriage reduces both women to type, mirroring his bitter portrayal of Ethel as also having rendered their shared history into "no matter," and "flung him away [for] a dissolute suitor with a great fortune and title" (818). If such treatment as simply *a* girl or *a* suitor is a betrayal of who they are to each other, Arthur Pendennis's supportive (if not necessarily helpful) narration strips the situation down even further, arguing:

> Suppose we had married our first loves, others of us, were we the happier? Ask Mr. Pendennis. . . . Ask poor George Warrington, who had his own way, Heaven help him! There was no need why Clive should turn monk because number one refused him; and, that charmer removed, why he should not take to his heart number two. (818)

As well as abstracting Ethel and Rosie into serial numbers, Pen appeals to a "structuring principle" of romantic choice carried over from *The Adventures of Pendennis*, where both he and his friend Warrington learn their lesson after disastrous first loves. Yet this almost formalist analysis of Thackeray's novels by one of his characters is received with disgust by another returnee from *Pendennis*, the infallibly moral Laura, who Pen "is bound to say, when I expressed these opinions . . . was more angry and provoked than ever" (818). Some transfer of insight between Thackeray's novels is clearly being suggested, but the disagreement between the Pendennises only restates the initial problem: should we

take Pen's view of the current crisis, based on an inductive conclusion of first loves in general, or Laura's intuition, founded on our existing experience of her moral character?

In its oscillation between a highly schematic exploration and an engrossment in experiential "minutiae," the novel reproduces its thematic question as an aesthetic experience: how it feels to read at different distances, to care or not care for fictional characters as particular individuals or as thematic variations of one another. In other words, the Newcomes' difficult feelings about the replaceability of their relationship partners is mirrored by the reader's interpretive response to characters either as people we know or interchangeable parts of a system, dramatizing through narrative the inherent "tension between reading character as a contingent particularity and . . . as the representative of a larger class of persons."[21] Because, as Alex Woloch has similarly argued, a claim to political or social recognition inheres to this negotiation between an "implied human figure" represented in a text and the text's "unified structure, the symbolic or thematic edifice, the interconnected plot," Thackeray's characters appear to resist simultaneous and analogous subordinations to the structures of the family tree, social class, and literary form.[22] In what is perhaps the most well-known scene of the novel, Ethel affixes a Royal Institute's "Sold" label to her dress and announces herself to be "a tableau-vivant . . . Number 46 in the Exhibition of the Gallery of Painters in Water-colours" (362). While Ethel explicitly represents this as a satire on her own commodification (her abstraction into potential wife number forty-six), the genre of the theatrical "tableau-vivant" also suggests her metafictional status as part of a posed and costumed composition, "nothing but figure" in the dual frames of the novel's fictional society and narrative structure.[23] By repeatedly drawing attention to our aesthetic response as a means and perspective by which we might (like Clive) do less than justice to Ethel, Thackeray transforms novel-reading into another instance of his narrative dilemma.

Moreover, by returning always to the affective reality of emotional compromise and fatigue, not just what it means as a moral binary but how it *feels* to recognize or deny what people mean to us, *The Newcomes* reveals the complicated play of desire and bad faith that makes its moral imperative to particularize more than just a general principle. Of course, precisely because Clive's dilemma is refracted through the different parts and levels of the narrative, the characters pose structural variations on the call to see them as more than variations. As Catherine Gallagher has argued, "even the impulse toward the specific can be

conceived in general terms" (69); for instance, Ethel's refusal to be treated as a token of type paradoxically invites *and* resists her generalization into a genre of female characters "capable of seeing their place in a system and articulating their helplessness within it . . . [Thackeray's] misfit women."[24] For Gallagher, George Eliot exhibits an exceptional mastery over such generic moralizations on type and instance because she "not only generalizes the process of becoming particular but also assimilates it to both ethical and erotic drives" (69), projecting the longing of characters for realization such that she "not only convinces us that . . . particularity is our ultimate ethical duty, but also, and supremely, makes us want it" (73). Thackeray's family narrative shows us that he, too, can operate not only conviction but also desire; and furthermore, not only desire but also the pain of detachment, abstraction, and replacement, which as disincentives hold the particularity of our bonds in place. As we will see, by drawing on the power of shared histories not only between characters in the narrative but also between readers and characters, and finally between readers and the novel experience itself, *The Newcomes* harnesses path dependency as a moral force that makes us, too, demand for the particular over the interchangeable.

This Particular Character

The moments in which readers most experience, for themselves, the irreplaceability of Thackeray's characters occur when those characters survive and reappear between his individual novels. As almost all of Thackeray's critics have noted, one of the consistent habits of his oeuvre is what James called the "attempt to create a permanent stock, a standing fund, of characters."[25] Familiar names and faces not only reappear from previous novels but are revealed as tangentially connected to the social world of the new work, as mutual friends or schoolmates or distant relatives; producing, as Lawrence Zygmunt has put it, "an extraordinary tangle of bickering, overlapping links among his fictional works. . . . Thackeray piles up interconnected characters and plots to produce a messy, confusing, picaresque narrative expanse."[26] For instance, Pen is both an active character and the narrator of *The Newcomes* (both a friend of the family and its chronicler), whose continued life from *The History of Pendennis* takes place in the margins of this novel and in the later *Adventures of Philip*. At a party thrown by the Colonel (where Pen is also present), an initially unnamed gentleman strikes up a conversation with Clive:

> "I knew your father in India," said the gentleman to [Clive]; "there is not a more gallant or respected officer in that service. I have a boy too, a stepson, who has just gone into the army; he is older than you, he was born at the end of the Waterloo year, and so was a great friend of his and mine, who was at your school, Sir Rawdon Crawley."
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> "He was in Gown Boys, I know," says the boy; "succeeded his uncle Pitt, fourth Baronet. I don't know how his mother—her who wrote the hymns, you know, and goes to Mr. Honeyman's chapel—comes to be Rebecca, Lady Crawley. His father, Colonel Rawdon Crawley, died at Coventry Island, in August, 182–, and his uncle, Sir Pitt, not till September here. I remember, we used to talk about it at Grey Friars." (172–73)

"How d'you do, Dobbin?" the Colonel later greets him (174), providing a redundant confirmation, given the extent and exactness to which Clive and Dobbin's conversation has mapped out every other major character of *Vanity Fair*. But redundancy is also very much the point of the passage, designed for both characters and readers to reminisce ("I remember, we used to talk about it"), specifically invoking both *Vanity Fair*'s critically lauded Waterloo chapter and the continued pretensions of Thackeray's "famous little Becky Puppet."[27]

But why again Dobbin? For critics like Woloch and McWeeny, *Middlemarch*'s famous check on its own favoritism—"but why always Dorothea?"—is "an Eliotic version of the question posed by any realist novel intent on broad social description" (McWeeny 65). The Thackerayan version of this question is in some ways the antithesis of this concern with more democratic distributions of sympathy and attention among the cast of characters, or among the population of potential characters outside the representational scope.[28] As opposed to diverting attention away from central figures—for instance, in Woloch's example from *Pride and Prejudice*—from "Elizabeth Bennet *in particular*. . . the center of the narrative in-and-of-herself" to "the five Bennet sisters *in general*, as a family unit faced with the same problem" (45, emphasis original), Thackeray pulls away from the protagonist and their story only to enter the gravity of an equally (if not more) recognizable character, the center of a former narrative. Thackeray's intertextual references people the backgrounds of his novels with familiar faces; if minor characters like Mrs. Badger are usually substitutable, too limited by type and function to sustain much singularity as an imagined person, for Thackeray's party scene to fulfil its nostalgic purpose (or even to be meaningful at all) requires the Dobbin depicted to be the same person as the Dobbin of *Vanity Fair*, possessing the full weight of a unique identity, history, and associations with other identifiable characters developed over

the course of a whole other novel. As one moves toward the social and narrative periphery of *The Newcomes* (or as the novel leads one there), figures do not necessarily become more indistinct as potentially jump into startling definition with a flash of recognition.

At the same time, if Dobbin's particularity as a character is indispensable to making sense or use of his presence—for the "gentleman" of the passage to be a stranger would make the scene incoherent—the specificities of his personality or past have no plot nor symbolic significance in *The Newcomes* besides confirming that particularity. Having nothing to say in this novel except about events and acquaintances from *Vanity Fair*, Dobbin is functionally less significant for who he is *in general* than who he is as *someone we know*; although no minor character can replace the amount and specificity of the associations connoted by his presence, that presence plays the role of a walk-on extra. As Woloch has argued of an equivalent practice for Balzac, "It is very rare that a narrative's actual plot will be determined by specific materials derived from other novels," importing not narrative knowledge or context but a "general sense of social multiplicity" alive in the novel world, a feeling of "referential thickness" (Woloch 294). Just as the party scene is not really about the details of Dobbin's shared history with Clive, so much as their mutual enjoyment of sharing history—"I knew your father in India"; "He was in the Gown Boys, I know" (172–73)—Thackeray's intertextuality makes few specific or significant demands on knowledge from his previous novels (especially as the information is explicitly reproduced anyway), but rather offers the feeling of *having* highly specific knowledge. In the "referential thickness" that Dobbin imports into *The Newcomes* only to be used as social trivia, Thackeray renders this feeling as a generalizable aesthetic or ethical experience, a genre of relations defined by their respective accumulated histories (even as those histories are each specific and noninterchangeable).

The connotative pleasure and personal significance of rediscovering Dobbin at the fringes of the novel's social network, in his very immunity to narrative plot, again reproduces a version of the particularizing imperative in the reading experience. As Zygmunt has suggested, the recurrence of characters in the background of Thackeray's novels "seem[s] largely an indulgence in characters of whom Thackeray was fond, allowable chiefly because loyal readers will recognize them. . . . Extraneous in practical terms, such allusions and cameo appearances convey a world thick with attenuated links and sudden curlicues."[29] But as I have argued, recognizing someone for what they *mean to us* rather than what they *mean*

as a textual component becomes analogous in *The Newcomes* to the way characters ought or fail to respect their particular significance to each other; the novel connects social intimacy and aesthetic response through an analogous resistance against more abstract approaches to fiction and relationships. Such an enrichment of "cameo" recognition into an ethical desire again exemplifies Thackeray's complement to Eliot's project of particularization, as Gallagher (rather than McWeeny) sees it. While Gallagher similarly perceives a narrativized conflict in *Middlemarch* between "the competing needs . . . to mean and to be, to have significance and to become real," she also maps this dichotomy onto one "between probability and surprise . . . to adhere to type and to deviate" (66). This sense of "errancy" as fundamental to the particular is reversed in Thackeray's techniques of familiarity, where we and the other characters recognize and value Dobbin for who he is (insignificant but real) because he acts just like himself. Both kinds of recognition, personal and intertextual, are also underscored by affective attachments (readerly loyalty, authorial fondness, and romantic love) that enforce the particularity of the object by invoking not curiosity but consolation; making it not only generally desirable but also painful to replace.

If abstraction often entails a kind of diagrammatic thinking (the *Bleak House* network or *The Newcomes* family tree) and specificity a focus on each irreducible unit (what Roland Barthes calls the "residues of functional analysis"), particularity can be understood as a field of tension between these two levels, as a stickiness or clinginess that holds things together even as it gums up the network.[30] The mediating force of this "referential thickness" in the social world of *The Newcomes* is best articulated by the unlikely character of Mrs. Mackenzie, a lively Scottish widow with a young, unmarried daughter. In "setting her cap" at Clive and the Colonel, Mrs. Mackenzie unashamedly pursues any and all potential combinations between her family and the Newcomes—"Should you like a stepmother, Mr. Clive," one friend teases, "or should you prefer a wife?" (285)—and ultimately secures a match by pushing Rosie to win over the Colonel's fatherly love, who in turn persuades Clive to marry his chosen daughter-in-law. This circuitous solution becomes necessary after her abortive attempts to persuade Clive through Rosie alone, and (the novel implies) trying for the Colonel herself. "If she tried she failed," writes Pendennis, recounting her private impressions to him:

> She said to me, "Colonel Newcome has had some great passion, once upon a time, I am sure of that, and has no more heart to give away. . . . You see tragedies in some people's faces. I recollect when we were in Coventry

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> Island—there was a chaplain there—a very good man—a Mr. Bell, and married to a pretty little woman who died. The first day I saw him I said, 'I know that man has had a great grief in life. I am sure he left his heart in England.'["] (286)

Modeled by Thackeray's own admission on his "she-devil of a mother-in-law," Mrs. Mackenzie is not often portrayed with much sympathy in the novel.[31] In this passage, however, Pendennis allows her a lengthy testimony that speaks to her canny sense for the general particularity of social relations (their tendency, as a class, to the particular). She achieves her insight into the Colonel, not because she has any knowledge of his past with Mademoiselle de Blois or Emma Honeyman, but because of her ability to understand a state of widowhood vastly different from her own mercenary view of remarriage. Mrs. Mackenzie can "see tragedies in some people's faces" (286)—not necessarily the specifics of each tragedy, but how Thackeray's narrative formula can generate highly particular attachments that resist reformulation.

The widow's acuity also has an uncanny, intertextual aspect. For example, she is again accurate in ascertaining that the chaplain "Mr. Bell . . . has had a great grief in life" lingering from his life in England, over and above his marriage to the "pretty little woman who died" in the colonial outpost of Coventry Island (286). These not at all straightforward conjectures about the history of Mr. Bell in fact retell the prenarrative to *The History of Pendennis*: Bell shared a doomed first love with Pendennis's mother, who agrees to raise his daughter after his own early death. (Mrs. Mackenzie seems unaware that Pendennis, to whom she tells this story, grew up with and is currently married to Laura Bell.) In another recollection from Coventry Island, she also recalls "poor dear Sir Rawdon Crawley," Becky's husband-in-exile, and continues to follow their family narrative as "I saw his dear boy [Becky's son] was gazetted to a lieutenant-colonelcy in the Guards last week" (283). Much as the challenge of "why always Dorothea?" evokes the counterfactual possibility of "a novel with a nearly unbounded factual field of characters" (McWeeny 66), George Levine has argued that Thackeray's "constant allusions to and introductions of characters from other novels . . . imply both the artificial closure of any single narrative, and the proximity of other equally important novels while any particular narrative is going on."[32] What Thackeray might share with Eliot here is a dissatisfaction with the limits of the novel form for the full representation of characters as persons; where they may differ is in the scope and aim of representation.

Because, rather than a realist and socially inclusive ambition to democratize the scope of representation, *The Newcomes* opens up its narrative to let in an alumni's club of fictional characters, whom we desire not so much for their inherent humanity as their accumulated familiarity. Mrs. Mackenzie's habitual wandering away from the central plot of *The Newcomes* and into the "proximity" of other lives is not so much about all the "equally important novels" (that is, all the unrepresented life stories) *out there* as those like Dobbin, Bell, Rawdon, and Pen who are awkwardly *still here*:

> You gentlemen who write books, Mr. Pendennis, and stop at the third volume, know very well that the real story often begins afterwards. My third volume ended when I was sixteen, and was married to my poor husband. Do you think all our adventures ended then, and that we lived happily ever after? (286)

Her speech, continuing from her analysis of men who have "no more heart to give away," moves from (unknowingly) intertextual examples of lost or disappointed love to an analogy of intertextuality *as* the experience of married life or widowhood, a commitment to maintaining the personal significance of a relationship beyond impersonal structures. "I like continuations," Thackeray writes in an essay proposing to reopen the ending of *Ivanhoe*, because "Do we take leave of our friends, or cease to have an interest in them, the moment they drive off in the chaise and the wedding-*déjeûné* is over?"[33] If the marriage plot is in this way insensitive and impersonalizing, flattening out fictional lives and relationships into a uniform "happily ever after," Thackeray's widows and widowers provide a moral contrast by continuing on as characters beyond the conventional limits of the text and, analogously, by being emotionally welded to their partners even after the relationship's end.

The messy, extraneous, seemingly redundant references that connect together Thackeray's long works reflect the formal and ethical resistance that the novel as a personal, immersive, particularizing experience puts up against its abstraction into just another object in the literary market. Much the same way, Thackeray's characters are both determined by social structures and determinedly clinging to persons and pasts in ways inconvenient to those structures. *The Newcomes*, a novel that draws this analogy explicitly through Mrs. Mackenzie and implicitly throughout, is morally pitched against the heartless flexibility of being *not* particular: Clive, trying to love number one than number two; Clara and Ethel's families, keeping their affections open for negotiation; Mrs. Mackenzie,

happy to be either widow or wife, stepmother or mother-in-law; and the novel market, demanding over and over that we exchange one set of characters for another.

By making this analogy between the ethical stakes of relationships and reading, and implying its demand to be treated as a familiar relation, *The Newcomes* reflects the view of Victorian readers who similarly attached the burdens of intimacy to (what would otherwise only be) the production and consumption of novels. In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in 1888, entitled "Novels and Their Endings," John Ruskin protested against "one of the increasing discomforts of my old age, never being allowed by novelists to stay long enough with people I like, after I once get acquainted with them."[34] Having sent the novelist Henrietta Eliza Stannard a "quite tearful supplication" that her protagonists "might not vanish in an instant into the regions of Praeterita and leave me desolate," he received an apologetic response explaining "that the public of to-day would never permit insistence on one conception beyond the conventionally established limits" (34:605). In his—admittedly melodramatic—view, the innocuous act of finishing a novel and beginning a new one is a deeply unnatural and Mrs. Badger–like act of exchanging one set of emotional investments for another; novelists therefore do readers an affective violence with their endings by "shifting the scenes of fate as if they were lantern slides . . . [and] tearing down the trellises of our affections that we may train the branches elsewhere" (34:605). If relationships do sometimes come to satisfying conclusions, Thackeray and Ruskin point out that this other sense of closure rarely synchronizes with where the pages of the novel run out ("the conventionally established limits"). The continuation of our "interest" or "affections" in fictional particulars possess their own forward motion that, like feelings of lost love in the marriage market, exceed and resist the abstractions of literary function or form.

Just as Ruskin's vine is neither purely defined by the plant itself nor by the trellis, social and literary experience in *The Newcomes* exists in between individual organisms and the structures where they live. The social relations that hold characters together, the intertextual references that entangle Thackeray's novels, and—as I will argue—the cognitive hold of novels on their readers all take place and direct us to this level of the particular. If as John Frow suggests, "Novelistic character is . . . a mechanism for scaling up and down between orders of generality," it is to this intermediary level that Thackeray's characters calibrate our aesthetic and ethical attention, and from which height, I want to suggest, our critical methodologies come into view with new perspective.[35] This

essay turns finally toward considering how *The Newcomes*' formal and narrative concerns about "the proximity of other equally important novels" speaks cogently to our disciplinary moment and to our changing engagements with the Victorian novel in particular.[36]

This Particular Novel

In writing *The Adventures of Philip* (1862), Thackeray privately admitted that "I can repeat old things in a pleasant way, but I have nothing fresh to say."[37] This view of his final completed novel is characteristic of Thackeray's frequent self-deprecations of his work, eagerly echoed by his critics, as repetitive, overly consistent, and self-derivative. The impression of *Philip* as a pleasant repetition seems even to have become a personal joke; while paraphrasing those critics, Thackeray reduces the novel into an et cetera: "What a poverty of friends the man has! He is always asking us to meet those Pendennises, Newcomes, and so forth. Why does he not introduce us to some new characters?"[38] The perceived problem Thackeray self-consciously identifies here and elsewhere about his oeuvre is its tendency, as Geoffrey Tillotson has noted, "to be as alike as possible, implor[ing] us to take them together . . . we cease to be much aware of differences, ceasing to attend to the chronology of the novels."[39] In their relentless narrative consistency and intertextual continuations of each other, Thackeray's novels "repeat old things in a pleasant way" with the effect that, as Chesterton similarly argues:

> *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, and *Philip* are in one sense all one novel. Certainly the reader sometimes forgets which one of them he is reading. Afterwards he cannot remember whether the best description of Lord Steyne's red whiskers or Mr. Wagg's rude jokes occurred in *Vanity Fair*, or *Pendennis*; he cannot remember whether his favourite dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Pendennis occurred in *The Newcomes*, or in *Philip*. (15:403)

For all that (as I have argued alongside Hannay and McMaster) *The Newcomes* is a novel of and about structures, Thackeray himself was a principal contributor to this perception of his novels as undifferentiated accumulations of the same stuff: "Pendennises, Newcomes, and so forth."

A literature of consistency and continuation, forever returning to and compounding the experience of a shared intertextual history, invites serious questions about the sunk costs and diminishing returns of novel-reading—as much for academic criticism as for authors and their readers. As F. R. Leavis summarily appraised them in *The Great Tradition*,

Thackeray's novels are "merely a matter of going on and on; nothing has been done by the close to justify the space taken—except, of course, that time has been killed (which seems to be all that even some academic critics demand of a novel)."[40] Leavis's influential characterization itself echoes James's feeling that "*The Newcomes* has life . . . [but] waste is only life sacrificed," and more audibly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous dismissal of novel-reading as "pass-time, or rather *kill-time*," an activity of the same genus as "gaming, swinging, or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking . . . &c. &c. &c."[41] We need not adopt such value-judgments ourselves to take note of how they militate against a common anxiety of the novel as time-killer or life-waster, a repetitive and empty release of restless attention, the end-goal of which may be allowing readers to "cease to be much aware of differences, ceasing to attend to the chronology."[42] Closer to our own disciplinary moment, we might identify a version of this anxiety in the recent shift away from "the very close reading of very few texts," as an overinvested method of literary analysis, toward quantitative and procedural ways of working with much vaster numbers of texts.[43] Moretti's "distant reading," in other ways vastly unlike Leavis's school of thought, nonetheless echoes his concern about the epistemological value that a too sustained, too attached, too particular mode of reading fails to generate. As he notes, "Knowing two hundred novels is already difficult. *Twenty thousand?* How can we do it, what does 'knowledge' mean, in this new scenario?"[44] His call to broaden what it means to know a novel, and thereby increase the numbers of novels within our capacity to know, shares with Leavis a desire to fundamentally retool what "academic critics demand of a novel" and to "justify" novels that (whether due to form or canonicity) capture a disproportionate amount of human energy and time.

What Thackeray has to offer to this picture of knowledge production is a closer look at the affective stuff that clings to each act of reading, whether popular or critical, and the stakes that lie behind what may only appear to be doing the same thing for its own sake. As McWeeny has suggested, novels themselves pose these questions of attention distribution on the levels of form and character: "Moretti is asking something like: Why always *Middlemarch*? . . . [A] reflexive critical tendency to ally close reading with the novel form itself, to think of close reading as a critical method bearing the imprint of the novel's own immersive particularity, fails to account for the ways in which the novel has a preoccupation with generality written into it" (74). As I have argued, however, *The Newcomes* is a thematic negative to this reading of

Middlemarch, assuming an equally deliberate and systematic refusal to practice the art of letting go, being full of characters who insist (sometimes despite themselves) on the particularity of their relations with those they already know and love. Such a novel, itself explicitly sustaining the "immersive particularity" of Thackeray's preceding narratives, is also formally predisposed to continuous, familiar, and intimate modes of reading, and argues for them as a principle for treating novels like people, as objects of attachment.

It does this, for one, by making visible how the motives and pressures of familiarity are no less informed or value-driven than those of detachment, and how deviation can have its own costs and risks. The irreplaceability of Thackeray's characters to one another, and their difficulty in rearranging their emotional bonds (even when they stand to benefit), reflect the investments of care and attention they solicit from readers as particular fictional persons. Contra Moretti's view of the nineteenth-century literary market as one in which "A new novel a week . . . is already the great capitalist oxymoron of the *regular novelty*: the unexpected that is produced with such efficiency and productivity that readers become unable to be without it," Thackeray's readers might therefore resist the jarring stop-and-start of such production, which demands that we get over our reading experiences like the changing of a "lantern-slide."[45] On an institutional scale, Caroline Levine has recently pointed out the profound hold of path dependency on how the procedures of literary studies operate: the division of scholarship into national literatures and historical periodizations may frequently come in for critique, but they are also held in place because of the collective cognitive (and economic) costs to restructuring "training organized around national literatures . . . bureaucratic structures that make it difficult to work across languages and university departments . . . [and] the convenience of being able to assume a shared set of texts that allow [academics] to talk to one another" (59). As a narrative about the pains of path deviation and a novel that formally mollifies the taxing necessity of "beginning a new novel," *The Newcomes* provides a sociology of the forces that operate equally on our novel-reading both in and beyond the academy; nuancing often more visible arguments against the alleged dull compulsion or laziness of remaining attached to particular literary works or ways of intimate knowing.

For another, to suggest how part of the formal and ethical knowledge novels offer may reside in their accumulative particularity to readers—in the very experience of wanting to continue them—is to acknowledge

the critical potential in our embodied, personal relations with literature. As Felski has argued, criticism's ongoing struggle "to clarify the value of literature must surely engage the diverse motives of readers," looking more carefully at both popular and academic reading to achieve "richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts."[46] For Tennyson, Ruskin, and Theodora, this interaction is crucially not one of expenditure or productivity but of mutual constitution; not an exchange of our increasingly rationed time or attention for amounts of pleasure or knowledge, but a practice of what Eve Sedgwick similarly called attention to as our "reparative motives . . . the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture": a novel should "last me my life," be "one of the regular things of life,"[47] and among the "discomforts of my old age . . . to stay long enough with people I like" (Ruskin 34:605). Another word for Coleridge's "kill-time," perhaps, is the ongoing act of living. Not so much close reading as stay-close reading, the hope to entwine one's life with one literary work is a hyperbolic challenge to Leavis's argument that Thackeray needs to "justify the space taken"—the space his novels take up becomes itself the justification, as they provide an expansive and immersive medium for our need to *feel* invested and *be* in relation (never mind what with) as ends in themselves. Part of the function and value of novels may belong neither to the specifics of their content nor to their production of new information, but to their capacity to become known or desired for what they mean to us.

Notes

1. Allingham, "Visits to Aldsworth," 134.
2. Gaskell, *Letters*, 602; James, "Henry James, 'Daniel Deronda,'" 420; Thackeray, "Proposals," 237.
3. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 133.
4. C. Levine, *Forms*, 59. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
5. Gallagher, "George Eliot," 61. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
6. James, *Tragic Muse*, xi.
7. Hughes and Lund, "Studying Victorian Serials," 236.
8. Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, 7.

9. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 14.
10. Lynch, *Loving Literature*, 2, 12.
11. Chesterton, *On Dickens*, 15:404. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
12. Thackeray, *The Newcomes*, 17. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
13. Dames, *Physiology*, 109.
14. McMaster, "Theme and Form in The Newcomes," 180.
15. Dames, *Physiology*, 109.
16. "The Newcomes," 1499; quoted in Dames, *Physiology*, 106.
17. G. Levine, *Realistic Imagination*, 139–40.
18. Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 182.
19. James, *Theory of Fiction*, 212.
20. McWeeny, *Comfort of Strangers*, 63–64. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
21. Frow, *Character and Person*, 114.
22. Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 33. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
23. James, *Theory of Fiction*, 212.
24. Dames, "William Makepeace Thackeray," 158.
25. James, *Art of Criticism*, 68.
26. Zygmunt, "Thackeray and the Picaresque World," 46.
27. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 2.
28. It perhaps gives further proof to Gallagher's placing of Eliot as "the greatest English realist" (73) that *Middlemarch* sustains both her reading of an intensive impulse to the particular as well as McWeeny's of a sprawling generality.
29. Zygmunt, "Thackeray and the Picaresque World," 56.
30. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 146.
31. Collins, *Thackeray*, 2:216.
32. G. Levine, *Realistic Imagination*, 153–54.
33. Thackeray, "Proposals," 238.
34. Ruskin, *Works*, 34:605. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
35. Frow, *Character and Person*, 114.
36. G. Levine, *Realistic Imagination*, 154.
37. Collins, *Thackeray*, 2:250.
38. Thackeray, *Roundabout Papers*, 272.
39. Tillotson, *Thackeray the Novelist*, 2–3.
40. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 21.

41. James, *Tragic Muse*, xi; Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1:34, emphasis added.
42. Tillotson, *Thackeray the Novelist*, 3.
43. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 62.
44. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 62, original emphasis.
45. Moretti, *Graphs*, 5.
46. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 11.
47. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150–51; Allingham, "Visits to Aldsworth," 134; James, "George Eliot," 420.

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