THACKERAY AND THE PROBLEM OF REALISM

by

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A thesis submitted to the English Department

University of Glasgow

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 1979

FOR

MY PARENTS

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due first and foremost to the University of Glasgow for a three-year research grant which enabled me to complete this study. My two supervisors, Mr David Skilton and Professor Philip Drew, were always generous with their assistance and I was helped in less academic, but no less significant, ways by Mrs Effie Neilson and Mr Trevor Burnley-Jones of Glasgow, and my wife Susan, all of whom had to cope at various times with the various moods of a man engaged in long-term research. My debt to my parents, which is even greater and more difficult to express, is, I hope, sufficiently indicated by the dedication.

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Summary

The key to Thackeray's novels is, in many ways, his interest in the novel form itself. As the first chapter of this study tries to explain, virtually all theoreticians of the novel see a certain kind of "realism" as the essence of fiction. The novel, it is claimed, should leave experience as it is, and not attempt to organize it in any way. In practice, however, most novels insist on letting a few themes and patterns govern experience, and it is appropriate that this should be so. The novel is after all a bourgeois genre, and it reflects that bourgeois view of life according to which the world is there merely to be organized and controlled by man.

In The Rise of the Novel Ian Watt claims that the novel is "realistic" precisely because it is an essentially bourgeois form. This is, of course, a common view, but it is also one that will not stand up under examination. In feudal society man's ability to impose his will on his environment is limited. Bourgeois society, on the other hand, offers a developed technology and great social liberties, and makes man the master of his world. As a result novels turn to life only in order to subject it to their schemes. Smollett's definition of the novel as "a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups, and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purposes of a uniform plan, and general occurrence, to which every individual figure is subservient" is more to the point than any theory of "realism".

What we find in Thackeray's fiction is a critique of such uniform plans. He sees the novel as a typical product of an aggressive society bent on dominating its environment. His early parodies like "The Professor" and "Novels by Eminent Hands" show that the domination of this environment begins with language, with the words into which man puts reality. Catherine and Barry Lyndon criticize the schemes that can be imposed on life through criminal intrigue, and The Book of Snobs opposes the reduction of every individual to a mere word, the title that he or she bears. Finally, in Vanity Fair all of Thackeray's major concerns are integrated into a dazzling whole. This novel is full of people who impose their own patterns on reality. Lovers force each other into simple roles; parents insist on directing the thoughts, and dominating the feelings of their children; and everywhere individuals are reduced to their titles, and objects to their prices. Man in his vanity strives to rule the world around him.

After Vanity Fair, however, Thackeray's fiction undergoes a change. Man's right to dominate his environment is now taken for granted and human schemes are no longer contrasted with reality itself. Along with this, Thackeray's view of those people and institutions whose aim is to fit individuals into rigid roles changes as well. Parents now become sympathetic figures like Helen Pendennis and Colonel Newcome; schools stop being places mainly to be associated with floggings and turn into venerable seats of learning; and most importantly, the novelist, who before had been seen as a "quack" and irreverently compared to the criminal and the Snob, now appears to Thackeray as a sage deserving comparison with "Professor Owen or Professor Agassiz". Because the

novelist's activity is no longer to be questioned Thackeray gives up insisting that we should see his characters as mere puppets. Arthur Pendennis and Clive Newcome are made to wear "a certain conventional simper" which is never really challenged, and it comes as no surprise when in Henry Esmond, the logical end of this phase of Thackeray's career, reality is brought completely under human control. Vanity Fair, digressive, diffuse and incomplete, is one pole of Thackeray's art; and Henry Esmond, dramatic, compact and exhaustive, is the other.

This study examines the philosophical, social and psychological implications of Thackeray's different attitudes towards art and artifice, and focuses on the novelist's personality in an attempt to explain why he first rejected form, only to accept it later with a vengeance.

Introduction

Introduction

I

Any would-be Thackeray critic is likely to be made uneasy by Thackeray's negative reputation. Half a dozen or so detailed and scholarly studies of Thackeray's work have, of course, appeared since the early sixties; and even now it would still be possible for New Criticism to damn him with misguided praise. That Old Criticism which is neither addressed exclusively to the specialist nor narrowly literary, however, seems to have classified and dismissed him. "No writer of genius," writes Walter Allen in The English Novel, "has given us an analysis of man in society based on so trivial a view of life";[1] J.Y.T. Greig sees Thackeray, in his Thackeray: A Reconsideration, as an essentially autobiographical novelist whose closeness to his subject matter frequently prevented him from writing with sufficient restraint and objectivity; and readers of F.R. Leavis's The Great Tradition are assured that Thackeray is an unimportant writer, and that "the conventional estimate that puts him among the great will not stand the touch of criticism".[2]

In the face of such negative judgements, defences of Thackeray tend to appear more eloquent than persuasive. When Geoffrey Tillotson says, for instance, in Thackeray the Novelist, that the older one gets the more one appreciates Thackeray, the reader fails to see how that really furthers Thackeray's cause. Nor, one feels, is it possible to answer

F.R. Leavis by saying, as Tillotson does in one of his appendices that, since Thackeray definitely influenced Henry James and may have influenced George Eliot, he has to be seen as being not entirely unrelated to the Great Tradition. Similarly, the various pleas for Thackeray made by his other principal defender, Gordon N. Ray, are no doubt moving, but in the end they do little more than indicate a personal preference which is more adequately expressed by Ray's two-volume definitive biography of Thackeray and his momentous four-volume edition of the novelist's letters and private papers. In short, in spite of the claims made by his defenders, a number of charges against Thackeray remain unanswered. For many he is still an artist not worth one's time, a novelist manqué, a writer without depth or sincerity.

II

As would be expected, the Thackeray that modern criticism has discovered or invented is a figure very similar to the Thackeray known to Victorian critics. Thackeray, we know, was lionized in England and America and for a while had paid to him the compliment of being considered a rival to Dickens. Dissenting voices, however, were no more uncommon in his day than they are in ours. On the whole the Victorians were disturbed by Thackeray's satirical turn of mind. Satire in general was considered superficial and mean-spirited, and this aspect of Thackeray's work alone attracted many harsh critical attacks. In 1841 The Times accused Thackeray of "flippancy" and "conceit",[3] and many Victorian critics echoed this verdict till it turned into one of the standard objections to Thackeray's art.[4]

It is of course not surprising that satire was not acceptable to the Victorians. The satirist sets out with a definite set of values and ends up painting a picture of life that tends to confirm his prejudices. The Victorians, on the other hand, demanded a more objective and realistic approach to things, and took Thackeray to task for what they saw as his manipulativeness. When, from time to time, they caught glimpses of a Thackeray who himself seemed to be against manipulation, the joy was often short-lived. Charlotte Brontë travelled to London to discover that Thackeray, the defier of convention, the scourge of the age, the supreme moralist, was quite at home in the fashionable world of the metropolis. She saw with disappointment that the author of Vanity Fair harboured as many designs on the world as any of his characters.

Nor was Charlotte Brontë merely a starry-eyed ingenue whose youthful earnestness made it impossible for her to tolerate any form of worldliness. Such earnestness was a quality which most Victorian intellectuals valued above everything else, and which Thackeray apparently did not possess. As a result, for quite a few of his contemporaries he was a dilettante and a writer of limited powers. When he published Henry Esmond, the novel he saw as his greatest achievement, Samuel Phillips simply wrote:

> We are neither surprised nor disappointed by this first complete novel from the skilful pen of the author of Vanity Fair. We knew the level below which Mr Thackeray's genius would not sink, and above which its wings are not solicitous to soar.[5]

And not even the fact that he was writing an obituary tribute could prevent Dickens from saying of Thackeray:

> . . . he too much feigned a want of earnestness . . . he made a pretense of undervaluing his art, which was not good for the art he held in trust.[6]

III

Perhaps the sheer persistence of such views is in itself proof of their veracity. In any case, it is not the chief aim of the following study to challenge them. It is better to understand from the start that Thackeray is not Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot. In some respects he is similar to Dickens, with whom he shared an interest in eighteenth-century fiction; but of course ultimately he is not Dickens either. Nor is he even Trollope, no matter how much the latter may have admired and emulated him. He is not a writer who strives for, or pretends to have achieved, realism. To read a novel by Thackeray is to enter a world in which the only hero is the author himself who manipulates his characters like so many puppets.

The term "Old Criticism" has been used above. George Steiner, whose first book Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky is sub-titled An Essay in the Old Criticism, writes:

> These I take to be the tenets of what might be called "the old criticism" in partial distinction from that brilliant and prevailing school known as "the new criticism". The old criticism is engendered by admiration. It sometimes steps back from the text to look upon moral purpose. It thinks of literature as existing not in isolation but as central to the play of historical and political energies. Above all, the old criticism is philosophic in range and temper. It proceeds, with most general application, on a belief particularized by Jean-Paul Sartre in an essay on Faulkner: "the technique of the novelist refers us back to the metaphysic of the novelist . . ."[7]

It is appropriate that this list should end with an item that implicitly equates literary creativity with the writing of novels. Valuing immersion in life, more interested in content than form, the Old Criticism that has condemned Thackeray has a particular interest in the novel which it sees as a genre in which an author anxiously sweeps aside all his prejudices and formal preoccupations in order to become, as it were, "a transparent eyeball" and confront life as it is. Earnestness, by which, what is understood, it seems, is a dedication to the truth combined with a refusal to tamper with reality in any way, is taken to be the hallmark of the novel. Thus, for instance, it is not at all surprising to find the same writers discussed by F.R. Leavis in The Great Tradition reappearing in a book by Laurence Lerner significantly entitled The Truth Tellers. Looked at from this point of view, Thackeray is of course suspect. His interest in life is apparently minimal; and his concessions to form and convention enormous. To put it simply, he is more interested in the telling than in the truth. Like Meredith, he turns his novels into plays, claiming that his characters have no free life of their own, and can only play the roles he has assigned to them. Moreover, he is a parodist and a satirist. He approaches life expecting it to conform to a scheme supplied by the particular author or genre he happens to be mocking, or his own values and prejudices; and sometimes he can even emphasize his manipulative activity by assigning it to a fictional narrator with some comic name like Major Goliah O'Grady Gahagan, Michael Angelo Titmarsh, or Ikey Solomons, Jr.

Yet what Thackeray's fiction does in a particularly obvious way is ultimately what all fiction does. The tradition that sees the novel as being magically exempt from formal concerns is more wishful than accurate.

Realism is of course an important issue. Understood properly, it is not a mere literary style or even an epistemological doctrine but a moral attitude. As the Old Criticism would claim, the realist rejects all designs upon the world, and pits himself against demagogues and schemers everywhere. In practice, however, it is difficult to find this kind of realism in novels. Individuals and events in fiction have to conform to definite patterns. They have no free, objective existence of their own, and in the end can only tell the story their author wishes them to tell. Novels give us not what Henry James called "the strange irregular rhythm of life"[8] but only a man-made world in which life has been replaced by design. Nor is this really surprising. The novel is after all a bourgeois genre, and what concerns bourgeois culture is not reality but human ways of organizing reality.

Moreover, if life tends to come under human control in novels, control over life may also be an emotional necessity. Some individuals are convinced that life is amorphous and unruly in itself, and, therefore, has to be ordered from without. Ivy Compton-Burnett, for instance, once remarked:

> Real life seems to have no plots. And as I think a plot desirable and almost necessary I have this extra grudge against life.[9]

Such individuals need art, as Nietzsche pointed out, "in order not to perish of the truth". There is every indication that Thackeray, too, was an individual of this sort, and this no doubt goes a long way towards explaining why his fiction sometimes seems to turn into a formal dance.

If this were the whole story, however, Thackeray would indeed be a

trivial writer, a novelist out to satisfy his private obsessions. What saves him is his consciousness of triviality, his firm conviction that all interpretations of life are mere interpretations, and not life as it exists in the absence of an interpreting consciousness. True enough, after Vanity Fair Thackeray's fiction does become rigidly manipulative and starts paying less attention to reality itself. Even this second phase of Thackeray's art, however, is in fact a response to his firm belief in the intrinsic disorderliness of life, and this belief is what lies behind all that is most valuable in Thackeray's art. At his best Thackeray perpetually strives to make us conscious of the essential artificiality of art. Because he is always aware that what makes novels necessary in the first place is that life itself is something other than a novel, he tries to bring into focus that otherness of life, accusing human consciousness of imposing its own patterns on reality, and eventually extending his critique of fiction into a critique of bourgeois culture itself.

Accordingly, the following study is devoted to the problem of realism in Thackeray. It is divided into two parts, the first of which opens with a chapter that examines the kind of realism that the novel form is both supposed to achieve and perpetually fails to achieve. This failure is shown to be ideological in nature and, in a second chapter, compared to a psychological failure which characterized Thackeray. Against this background Part Two examines Thackeray's concept of fiction and the ways in which the form-reality problem applies to both the form and content of his works. Because realism is a complex issue, demanding attention from a number of fields like philosophy, sociology and psychology, a lot of thinkers are initially mentioned and discussed in the following pages, who

do not normally appear in Thackeray criticism. Such an intellectual framework would have no doubt struck Thackeray himself as cumbersome and may be found no less obtrusive by some of his admirers. Thackeray's own understanding of realism, however, can be highly sophisticated, and it is hoped that during the detailed examination of his work that forms the second part of this study, the intellectual concepts dealt with in the introductory chapters will become alive in a way that will justify their having been introduced in the first place.

Notes

[1] Walter Allen, The English Novel (London, 1954), p. 168.

[2] F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (London, 1948), p. 21.

[3] The Times, 19 January 1841, p. 3.

[4] For a detailed examination of Thackeray's position as a satirist in a predominantly anti-satirical intellectual environment see C.C. Loomis, Jr, "Thackeray and the Plight of the Victorian Satirist", English Studies, 49 (1968), 1-19.

[5] Samuel Phillips, "Mr. Thackeray's New Novel", The Times, 22 December 1852, p. 8.

[6] Charles Dickens, "In Memoriam", Cornhill Magazine, 9 (1864), 129-132 (p. 130).

[7] George Steiner, Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky (London, 1960), p. 6. This book is sub-titled An Essay in Contrast in the British edition.

[8] Quoted by Arnold Kettle in An Introduction to the English Novel (London, 1951), i, 11.

[9] Quoted by Walter Allen in Tradition and Dream (London, 1964), p. 188.

Part One

REALISM REVISITED

Chapter One

REALISM AND THE NOVEL

Chapter One

REALISM AND THE NOVEL

I

Despite the fact that a good many books on the theory of the novel have appeared in recent years, it seems that the most lucid and comprehensive treatment of the subject in English is still to be found in Ian Watt's The Rise of the Novel. Watt's work is of course devoted mainly to specific eighteenth-century novels, but those parts of it that deal with the novel form in general express in a systematic fashion a conception of the genre, that is often held unconsciously or put forward only fragmentarily by other critics.

Watt's analysis proceeds in three steps. First he tries to establish the defining characteristics of the novel; secondly he relates these to similar traits to be observed in other cultural phenomena contemporary with the rise of the novel, like philosophical empiricism; and finally he refers both the novel and the other cultural products it resembles to the worldview and aspirations of a particular social class: the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie whose rise to power in the eighteenth century coincided with the birth of the novel form itself. Thus he sees realism, by which he understands openness to life and freedom from formal concerns, as the most obvious feature of the novel form. The attempts of the novel to be

realistic in this sense are then compared by Watt to Descartes' attempt to discover the truth about the world by approaching it without any presuppositions derived from previous experience or inherited from earlier schools of thought, and to the belief of the British Empiricists that experience is only likely to be distorted by the forms imposed on it by thought and that, therefore, the only indisputable truths are those arrived at through the senses. Finally, both fictional and philosophical realism are related by Watt to a typically bourgeois concern that individuals should not be dominated and shaped by forces outside them.

Watt's analysis seems to get weaker as it passes from literary criticism into the unfamiliar realms of philosophy and sociology. Philosophy, by its very nature, cannot be realistic since it is concerned not with reproducing but with interpreting life. The philosopher has to _say_ what life is, and that involves reducing it to words, which are products of the human mind. Thus, in _The Phenomenology of Mind_ Hegel writes of supposedly empiricist philosophies:

> Those who put forward such assertions really themselves say, if we bear in mind what we remarked before, the direct opposite of what they mean: a fact which is perhaps best able to bring them to reflect on the nature and certainty of sense-experience. . . . They "mean" this bit of paper I am writing on . . . but they do not say what they "mean". If they really wanted to _say_ this bit of paper which they mean, and they wanted to _say_ so, that is impossible because the This of sense, which is "meant", cannot be reached by language. . . In the very attempt to say it, it would therefore crumble in their hands; those who had begun to describe it would not be able to finish doing so; they would have to hand it over to others, who would themselves in the last resort have to confess to speaking about a thing that has no being . . . Consequently what is called unspeakable is nothing else than what is untrue, irrational, something barely and simply "meant".[1]

One does not, of course, have to agree with Hegel that only what is said is meaningful. Silence may be as expressive as speech and as worth striving after. One recalls in this context, for instance, Thackeray's insistence on passing in silence over intense personal experiences like Amelia's prayers and Dobbin's grief at the sight of her pain. Yet there is of course ultimately no such thing as a wordless novel, and the ability of language to shape reality is likely to bother the philosopher committed to empiricism. Thus, while Watt often quotes Locke to prove his point, he seldom refers to Hume, who came to the conclusion that since all that can be said about the world is formal, the human mind can never know reality as it is; and still less frequently to Berkeley who, following the same line of reasoning, arrived at philosophical idealism. Hume and Berkeley are not philosophers who are out to contradict Locke. They merely point out, like Hegel, that there is a difference between given experience and linguistic formulations of that experience.

Secondly, Hegel is, in many ways, the supreme philosopher of the bourgeois age, and his preference for the organized life is thoroughly bourgeois in character. The bourgeois approach to life is always technological and dominating, and has very little to do with "realism". All this is not to say that the novel is unrelated to philosophical empiricism or that it is not essentially a bourgeois genre. These relationships, though doubtless there, are more complex than Watt would seem to suggest; and furthermore, precisely because they are there, they manage, by the familiar process of guilt by association, to cast doubts on the innocence of the novel itself. This point will be returned to below. In the mean time, however, the central argument of

The Rise of the Novel is worth looking at in greater detail, if only because Watt manages to sum up all the demands that can be made from fiction as a result of its paradoxical involvement with "real" life.

According to Watt, the novel's realism can be seen in all of its various elements like character, setting, plot, and theme. The novel's characters are not personified abstractions like Despair or Charity. Nor are they the types of Restoration or sentimental comedy, or eighteenth-century satire. On the contrary, they are unique, individual human beings in an actual setting which the novel renders in minute detail, paying a closer attention to space and time than any other literary genre. Moreover, because they are thus immersed in the flow of time, these characters cannot be controlled by a rigid plot or a definite theme. Both plot and theme are things the novel has to find in life itself by passively witnessing its unfolding. Indeed, Watt concludes, the novel has to be concerned with time rather than with form, and an interest in form can only be detrimental to the novelist.

It is sufficient to turn to Victorian criticism to see that the view of the novel expressed by Watt is in fact a time-honoured and widespread one. Here one is occasionally confronted by adverse critics who see the novel as an ephemeral species of literature because it rejects "timeless" truths, and as formless because it refuses to give any tangible shape to the experiences it describes. For those on the side of the novel, however, any overt concern with timelessness or form is synonymous with a movement away from that realistic depiction of life, in which the novel's value lies. One finds Dickens, for instance, rejecting a novel sent to Household Words, saying:

> . . . it is all working machinery, and the people are not alive. I see the wheels going and hear them going, and the people are as like life as machinery can make them--but they do not get beyond the point of moving waxwork.[2]

A contributor to The North British Review of May, 1864, writes:

> . . . the realist in fiction is careless about plot. His sole object is to describe men's lives as they really are; and real life is fragmentary and unmethodical.[3]

Elsewhere the novels of Defoe are praised by another critic, Fitzjames Stephen, because in them characters "appear and disappear as they do in life."[4]

The pride of place among Victorian exponents of realism, however, no doubt belongs to G.H. Lewes and George Eliot. That novels should be like life, and not like other novels, already established visions of life, is a critical maxim that occurs again and again in Lewes' writings. "If," he writes,

> because Jane Eyre agitated novel readers, you, who never saw Mr Rochester, and never were in love with your master, write Jane Eyrish novels, you are wasting your time and the reader's temper. Paint what you see, write what you have experienced and the utmost success possible for you will be achieved.[5]

For George Eliot, on the other hand, realism is not just a fictional convention but also a moral attitude. The values to be found in her novels are the values the novel form itself is expected to preserve:

> . . . the man of maxims is the popular representative of minds that are guided in their moral judgement solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality--without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.[6]

This passage echoes George Eliot's habitual concern that others should be sympathized with rather than judged. Her novels constantly warn against the dangers of reducing people to simple images, instead of seeing them in their individuality. Dorothea and Lydgate learn through bitter experience that Casaubon and Rosamond will refuse to play the roles expected from them. Their initial views of their spouses of course tend to indicate their own selfishness that expresses itself in a desire to find in the world only what is convenient to them, and this innocent selfishness has a counterpart in the more conscious and exploitative selfishness displayed by Jamesian characters, who tend to see others in terms of a single function they wish to have performed. James is, in many ways, a guilt-ridden novelist, who tends to associate his own manipulation of his characters with their behaviour towards each other, and who, in the last resort, always feels the need to press home the distinction between disinterested aesthetic plans and egoistical plotting, between art and artfulness. This problem, as will be seen below, is raised also in Vanity Fair, where Thackeray's puppeteer narrator comes to resemble his own scheming characters. What differentiates Thackeray and James from George Eliot, though, is that the former are much less optimistic about attaining either the kind of art or the kind of morality advocated by the latter. Thus Thackeray either

lapses into silence or dismisses the novel as just another sham in a world full of shams, while James, with all the sadness of an atheistic priest, regards fiction as a sacred illusion which should not be challenged.

So much here, however, for Victorian criticism and Victorian novels. More than a century has passed since the remarks quoted above were made, and it would be reasonable to expect to find a different conception of the novel prevalent today, if only because novels themselves have changed so much. Surprisingly enough, this is not the case. Quite a few contemporary critics still seem content with ideas first expressed in the 1860s. One finds, for instance, Iris Murdoch arguing in her essay "Against Dryness" that novels should not reduce life to symbolic or mythical patterns, or present characters that can easily be identified as types. According to Murdoch, fiction ought to leave life as it is, and not attempt to organize it in any way. Novelists who try to tidy up human existence are simply guilty of "dryness". Murdoch writes:

> Real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for the imagination. Think of the Russians, those great masters of the contingent. Too much contingency of course may turn art into journalism. But since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness. Literature must always present a battle between real people and images; and what it requires now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former.[7]

Such a passage, one feels, would have met with George Eliot's full approval, and indeed could have been written by her. It would be impossible to mistake one of Murdoch's own novels for a work by George

Eliot, but her conception of fiction is essentially the same as that of her Victorian predecessor.

John Bayley is another critic who thinks like Murdoch. As a scholar of Russian literature, Bayley is thoroughly familiar with contingency and has recently argued for it as a formal device in a book entitled The Uses of Division. The Characters of Love and Tolstoy and the Novel, however, are books that spring more readily to mind when one thinks of Bayley. In the former work he argues that novelists, and indeed all writers, should be aware of the richness of life and not attempt to impose rigid forms on the ceaseless flux of experience. Since Bayley, too, believes that realism is fundamentally a moral attitude, he is especially concerned that people should not be made to conform to definite patterns, even though he can delight in any sort of detail that is simply there for its own sake and does not contribute to the ultimate meaning of a book. In Tolstoy and the Novel Bayley claims that this sort of realism has been achieved only by Tolstoy who lets his characters remain complex and many-sided, and does not force them to play any specific role. It is of course commonly agreed that the sort of thing Bayley demands has been done better in the Russian novel and drama than anywhere else. It is, for instance, not difficult to imagine Bayley being as fond of Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard as he is of Tolstoy's War and Peace. There are several possible interpretations of a play like The Cherry Orchard. One can, for example, see it as being about time, about ageing and approaching death. Or one can read it as a parable about the decline of the Russian landed gentry. How, though, in either case, does one explain Charlotte's conjuring tricks, Simeneov-Pischick's final stroke of luck, Anya's trip in a balloon or

Lepikhodov's revolver? Whenever two characters are having an important conversation others cross the stage, doing or saying something totally irrelevant. Chekhov does indeed make it seem as if any attempt to organize life could only diminish it.

Nonetheless, one cannot help feeling that Bayley's commitment to realism is slightly naive and that division and disharmony in literature may betoken artistic clumsiness as well as an openness to life. This, however, does not stop W.J. Harvey from mentioning both Bayley and Murdoch with great respect in a brilliant and sophisticated book entitled Character and the Novel. Harvey, echoing Watt, sees the novel as intimately connected with the ideology of liberalism. As a liberal himself, Harvey believes that people should not be dominated and controlled for any purpose whatsoever. To him realism means that a writer is making a real effort to question his own vision of life and not settle for simple interpretations. The great novels are those in which this effort is communicated to the reader:

> Thus by indirection we find direction out; what narrative control at its best can do is so to complicate the process of reading and response as to create in us an unfathomable sense of reality.
>
> On a huge hill
> Cragged and steep, stands Truth, and he that will
> Reach her, about must, and about must go.
>
> So writes Donne, and this is a truth that fiction can recognize and enforce. Reality lies as much in the journey as in the goal, and the art of fiction lies in making each one of us, alone, attempt that circuitous route.[8]

Finally, all these critics are mentioned and discussed at length in Bernard Bergonzi's book The Situation of the Novel, the first two

chapters of which are specifically devoted to the issue of realism. In his first chapter, "The Novel No Longer Novel", Bergonzi deplores the fact that contemporary novels are coming to resemble each other more than they resemble life. Like Lewes, Bergonzi distrusts novels that are like other novels, as such works are more concerned with following a particular script than remaining true to life itself:

> How often, for instance, does one find a novel about a sensitive young man leaving university and going into advertising, having qualms about it, more or less overcoming them, having an affair with one girl--a secretary, perhaps, or his boss's wife--but finally marrying another? Or about a scholarship boy from the provinces who has climbed up the class ladder, but whose origins continue to trip him up? Or about a very sensitive, rather neurotic girl, living in an Earls Court bedsitter and having sexual difficulties--conventional, or lesbian, or both? There are many more types, given the immense possibilities of contemporary experience--which, as I have suggested, are always being enlarged--but one is struck by the way in which they all fall precisely into types.[9]

What disturbs Bergonzi is clearly the fact that such novels present characters who are merely manipulated, and not really "loved" by their creators. This phenomenon is discussed in more detail in Bergonzi's second chapter, "Character and Liberalism", which is pervaded by strong fears that, since liberalism itself is on the decline, the novel may have a hard time creating meticulously individualized characters, and may disappear altogether as a genre.

Of course Murdoch, Bayley, Harvey and Bergonzi are all English critics committed to what Bergonzi himself calls "The Ideology of Being English", and consequently, realistic fiction means as much to them as the Great American Novel does to those who pursue the American

Dream. Similar concepts of realism, however, have been put forward by other cultures as well. Re-reading Alain Robbe-Grillet's essays and novels today, for instance, one fails to see why the so-called noveau roman was once considered so new. After all, Robbe-Grillet argues, like any realist, that objects should be rendered as they are, and not fitted into human patterns; and he takes as much time describing an ice cube as Flaubert did describing Charles Bovary's hat. He is also against the notion of character which he sees as a degenerate version of the notion of types. In his opinion, it is wrong to assign a definite "character" to an individual, as this reduces the many different people he or she actually is to a purely fictitous single human being. All this is, in fact, as old as Hume's concept of the dissolution of personal identity, and forms part of the intellectual equipage of an English novelist like Angus Wilson who would not wish to be seen as being, in any way, new or innovative. In his book on Dickens, Wilson writes:

> The joy in watching human behaviour is the key to his greatness; and perhaps also the measure of his limitation. For though no George Eliot or Thomas Hardy, what he enjoys is finally, though richly various, human predictability--his power to predict the goodness, the wickedness and the absurdity of his own characters. But then what novelists have not been so limited? Tolstoy perhaps; Stendhal in the first three quarters of The Charterhouse of Parma. For the rest, the quirks, the apparent unexpectedness of some fictional life are no more than a brilliant trick (often delightful as well as admirable as in, say, Sterne or Diderot, but still a trick). Within this almost universal limit Dickens had extraordinary powers of playing with human speech, human manners and above all human environment, and making works of art out of them.[10]

This Bayley-like argument is given a Robbe-Grillet-like twist in

Wilson's own novel No Laughing Matter. In this book an actor called Rupert, who is supposed to appear as Malvolio in a "reduced" production of Twelfth Night done entirely in black and white except for Malvolio's yellow stockings, discovers that Malvolio himself eludes reduction since he is merely a set of disparate traits with no unifying centre, and this gives his novelist sister an idea concerning a character called Aunt Alice that she is trying to create:

> She sat in her stall as the others rose, and she scribbled him a note: "Rupert, my dear darling, it was so good! Don't have any doubts. I thought from the crits that you had honeyed it all over, but you haven't—he is odious and worthy and when he is brought low it is unbearable and as soon as he is up again he is odious once more. Thank you ever so much—you have solved my problem. Mag. P.S. Oh that awful pointless black and white. It's that sort of silly vulgarity that keeps intelligent people out of the theatre." She thought for a moment of going to see him in his dressing room, but then instead she gave the note marked "immediate" to the stage door porter, for she had to hurry home to let Aunt Alice fall apart into all the various unrelated persons that she now knew bobbed up and sank down like corks in the ocean inside that old raddled body as inside all our bodies.[11]

There is much division and disharmony here as either Bayley or Robbe-Grillet could have wished for. What interests Wilson is clearly "the strange irregular rhythm of life" itself rather than any patterns the novelist might construct.

II

As can be gathered from these examples, the tendency to associate the novel form with a certain sort of realism is as widespread today as it was a century ago. In fact it is precisely when it is approached with this concept of realism that Thackeray's work is found most deficient. Thackeray does not leave life as it is but imposes a particular form on it through satire, parody and imitation. Indeed so many charges have been brought against Thackeray in this respect that it seems that one could almost say to the aspiring novelist, by way of advice, "Be as unlike Thackeray as you can and the utmost success possible for you will be achieved."

Alas, however, Thackeray cannot be the only one who has failed. Novelists must be particularly stubborn in their insistence on tampering with life. Else why would critics need to caution them so often against doing so? It is, after all, strange to read Wilson's words on Dickens. Wilson, too, is saying, "I see the wheels going and hear them going", even though he is willing to concede that Dickens spins them so fast and has oiled them so well that one is not unduly disturbed by their presence. There is also something strange in Lewes's demand that novels should be like life and not like other novels, since this is to say that novels are not like life. In fact if novels <u>can</u> be imitated, this can only mean that they are artificial in the first place. If people who were never governesses in love with their masters <u>can</u> write novels like <u>Jane Eyre</u>, then Charlotte Brontë is not talking about her own unique experience which presumably nobody else could

express. This is why all imitation ultimately turns into parody, as all mimicry ends up becoming satirical. Queen Victoria was wrong in not being amused. Any imitation of somebody else is bound to be amusing simply because it proves that they are not so much a real person as a mere "face" that has been deliberately prepared to meet other faces, and that can be assumed by absolutely anybody who chooses to do so.

Indeed, the whole issue of realism effectively dramatizes the dilemma of a civilization that, having initially abandoned nature for culture, is perpetually frustrated to discover that what it took to be nature is in fact culture, a mere technical trick: brilliant, yes, but still a trick. There is ultimately no such thing as a realistic novel. All novels impose their patterns on reality, if only because they use words. They always have formal concerns that have little to do with an objective scrutiny of life. As Watt demonstrates, even Defoe's Moll Flanders is arranged in a way that suggests that Defoe is not so much passively reporting life as actively fitting it into a certain pattern:

> The second, and for many readers the most interesting, part of the book is mainly devoted to Moll's career as a thief; its only connection with the rest of the plot is that it finally leads first to her arrest, then to the reunion with James in prison, to her later transportation and eventually to her return to Virginia and her family there. Ultimately, therefore, Moll's criminal adventures end in a renewal of our contact with the two main episodes of the earlier half of the plot, and thus make possible a fairly neat conclusion to the novel as a whole.[12]

Nor is there even any reason why art should be realistic. "There are

times when Bayley's reasonable preference for life becomes so emphatic," writes Bergonzi, "that one wonders why he wants to bother with objects called novels at all".[13] Why indeed? If what one wants is life, surely that is already available by itself, and one turns to art only in order to discover some satisfactory organization of that life.

If there is no such thing as a "realistic"; i.e., totally formless and transparent novel, however, there is the kind of novel which purports to be realistic, and, by doing so, ends up saying, as Hegel remarked, the very opposite of what it means. Realism is based on an equation of literature with life, and that equation, like all equations, can be reversed without losing anything from its truth. If literature can resemble life, then life must somehow resemble literature. If the words we use stand for actual objects, then objects must really be words. The so-called "realistic" novel, therefore, only argues for the objective validity of its patterns, and thus allows the self-consciously artificial work, which makes no such claim, to be, in fact, infinitely more realistic.

According to Watt, The Faerie Queene is a work of the latter sort. Watt contrasts the realistic characters and settings of eighteenth-century novels with Spenser's highly artificial poem with its allegorical characters and dreamlike settings. Probably no one would wish to say that this is not an accurate description of The Faerie Queene. Nonetheless it is worth stressing that Spenser's original readers cannot for an instance have thought that what they were getting was reality itself. That confidence in the authenticity of fiction belongs to a later age. A reader of Gulliver's Travels felt his

credulity strained and accused Gulliver, under whose name the book originally appeared, of having invented Lilliput and Brobdingnag. As far as we know, no reader of Spenser made a similar complaint about the House of Holiness or the Cave of Despair. Indeed the virtue of Spenser's poem lies in precisely the fact that it has no intention of sustaining any kind of deception. Obviously artificial, it insists that human artifact is not to be confused with the work of nature. Nothing in fact ever happens in The Faerie Queene. When, for instance, the Red Cross Knight marries Una nothing is achieved. Spenser manoeuvres his hero into a marriage that offers salvation, only to show ultimately that life resists manoeuvering:

> Her joyous presence and sweet company
> In full content he did there long enjoy,
> Ne wicked envie, ne vile gealosy
> His deare delights were able to annoy:
> Yet swimming in that sea of blissful joy,
> He nought forgot how he whilome had sworne,
> If he could that monstrous beast destroy,
> Unto his Faerie Queene back to returne:
> The which he shortly did and Una left to mourne.
>
> Now strike your sailes ye jolly Mariners
> For we be come unto a quiet rode,
> Where we must land some of our passangers,
> And light this wearie vessel of her lode.
> Here she a while may make her safe abode,
> Till she repaired have her tackles spent,
> And wants supplide. And then again abroad
> On the long voyage whereto she is bent:
> Well may she speede and fairely finish her intent.[14]

Here life and poetry go their separate ways. Red Cross goes on and the poem comes to a stop. Life clearly has a rhythm of its own that makes nonsense of artificial schemes of salvation. The world is fallen and mutable, and refuses to be ordered by human beings.

Spenser, then, both makes certain demands from life and shows that life is under no obligation to meet those demands. His hero is granted an existence in time that is quite separable from the roles he may be asked to play. What we find in a "realistic" work like Pride and Prejudice, on the other hand, is something entirely different. Jane Austen's characters are of course no less allegorical than Spenser's. The marriage between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy is that marriage of the English middle class with the English landed gentry that was as important to Jane Austen as the marriage of England with the True Church was to Spenser. Unlike Red Cross, however, Elizabeth has a temporal existence that is thoroughly dominated by her author's specific concerns. Jane Austen's scheme of salvation operates through a sequence of days, weeks and months, the self-same images used by Spenser for mutability. In other words, Jane Austen makes time itself answer to a particular pattern, and, by doing so, abolishes it altogether as free-flowing time, as time likely to go anywhere and reveal anything. She replaces history by logic in a way that would have pleased Hegel, while Spenser's is a message that is more similar to the one to be found at the end of Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus:

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)
>
> He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.
>
> Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.[15]

Wittgenstein is not merely playing a senseless practical joke on his

readers here. He, too, is asking us to pay more attention to life itself than to any particular organization of life, and pointing out that distinction between Logos and Chronos, Being and Time, which is also the theme of Heidegger's magnum opus Sein und Zeit.

What lies behind Spenser, as behind Wittgenstein, is of course the philosophy of Plato with its insistence on the distance between forms and things, words and objects, culture and nature. Plato naturally never claimed that this distance was absolute. He thought that the forms somehow applied to objects, but he did his best to make the precise relationship between forms and things an unclear and problematic one. Looking back today after more than two thousand years of Western philosophy, one discerns in that choice a skilful overcoming of the temptation to be the wise man who goes rushing in where angels fear to tread. Clearly, Plato was no real mystic. Nor was he incapable of the kind of philosophical sophistication that is commonly associated with Aristotle. Parmenides and The Sophist will bear that much out. The Aristotelian solution was available to him, but he rejected it, preferring, like his mentor Socrates, to assume the guise of the innocent fool, the man whose knowledge is imperfect. In fact he opposed art precisely because of its Aristotelian metaphysics which claims that everything has a form that inheres in it rather than applying to it externally. He had no wish to rationalize existence like that, for though a mathematician, he was more prepared to see life as a mystery than Aristotle, who was a biologist. That is, of course, only one aspect of Plato's philosophy, but it is an aspect worth stressing, if only because in our own age Heidegger has attacked Plato as one of the first enemies of time, and Marshall McLuhan has contrasted

the rigidity of his philosophy with the flexibility of the one propounded by the Sophists, those true formalists who manipulated the dialectic without taking it seriously. No doubt both Heidegger and McLuhan are right, and, in the last analysis, Plato's emphasis falls not on life but on the forms. Yet, much as that may be so, it should not be forgotten that the true Platonist believes with at least one side of his mind that the forms constitute a violation of nature which, far from actively cooperating with philosophy, actually screams and kicks as it is forcibly carried out of its cave into the light of day by the latter.

Spenser is of course just such a Platonist, and, in the end, he cannot help feeling that his art is merely something imposed on life. But that is not the whole story. The influence of Plato explains a lot, but not everything. Behind Spenser's archaic language there lies in fact an archaic tension, a medieval tension which Hegel in a celebrated chapter of the Phenomenology, much admired by existentialists of the Heideggerian sort, called "Unhappy Consciousness". Medieval man felt that his life was chaotic and unpredictable. The Church pulled him in one direction, insisting that he had been created in the image of God; and the State pulled him in another, offering a life over which he had no God-like control. The union of the Church and the State under Queen Elizabeth, which The Faerie Queene is supposed to be celebrating, is in fact precisely what it denies because Spenser, consciously or unconsciously, is essentially medieval in his outlook. No doubt such a worldview is largely conditioned by an agrarian economy which, with its imperfect domination of nature, and the complex kinds of traditional authority it implies, leaves man very little room for

determining his own destiny. Under such conditions human techniques come to seem trivial beside the ability of the universe to frustrate man's schemes. Jean Jacques Rousseau's famous words, "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains", spoken at a time when the last traces of medieval culture were disappearing from Europe, in fact express perfectly that awareness of the sharp clash between human reason and actuality that is "Unhappy Consciousness".

It is of course common knowledge that this tension was finally abolished with the dawning of the bourgeois age. When a new kind of freedom and a more powerful and developed technology gave man the ability to control his life, the various conflicts of medieval life disappeared. Order ceased to be something to be dreamt of, only to be ultimately dismissed as a mere dream; and came down to earth. And, in close keeping with this phenomenon, there came into being a new kind of fiction that was thoroughly this-worldly, and that sought to make a career out of what actually existed on earth, in space and time, here and now. Familiar as this development is, however, its implications are often missed. The novel's insistence on reality is frequently taken as an insistence on disorder, whereas the novel, like the culture that gave birth to it, is intent upon ordering and controlling life. Smollet defined the novel as "a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in groups and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purposes of a uniform plan, and general occurence, to which every individual figure is subservient."[16] This is indeed how, in the last analysis, novels function. They all insist on forcing life to unfold according to a uniform plan, and thus remain true to the tendency of bourgeois society to humanize reality. Making time itself

answer to its patterns, the novel is in fact the most formal of all genres. As a passage in Georg Lukács's The Theory of the Novel indicates, there is a deep contrast between the appearance and the reality of the novel form:

> Only in the novel . . . is time connected with the form . . . In the novel, meaning and life separate and, with them, essence and temporality; one could almost say that the whole inner action of the novel is a struggle against the might of time.[17]

Thus it appears that, depicting temporal reality, the novel is necessarily free from formal concerns. Yet, as Lukács admits, the essence of the novel actually consists of a struggle against time. Or in other words, rather than leaving time alone, the novel in fact makes it tell a definite story, and its inclusion of time is not so much a tribute to the latter as a proof of its own power.

This manipulative approach to life is characteristic of novelists from Fielding to Joyce, even though, needless to say, it is more marked in some cases than in others. Fielding, as Watt amply demonstrates, is no doubt a realistic writer, if what one understands by that is someone who will consult an almanac to get his dates right before writing a novel. But does not Tom Jones after all tell a rather simple story? It is not the novel's obviously contrived plot that is disturbing: Fielding takes a delight in admitting that he is manipulating events. One is rather made uneasy by the characters he depicts. Mr Allworthy, Blifil, Tom Jones, Sophia and Lady Bellaston are not timeless types existing in an eternal present. They are vividly present in space and time, and one cannot call them, say, Charity, Envy, Christian, Beauty

and Lust. Yet they are rather simple conceptions that are made to account for a great amount of realistic detail. Fielding's is obviously a carefully controlled universe in which individuals can only play definite roles. The same is also true of Jane Austen. She arrives at the same result as Fielding, albeit in a slightly different way. As is often noted, she takes the reader into her confidence. No matter what happens we know what is right and what is wrong, and in the end the characters themselves can only learn what we already know. Experience flatteringly bears out common sense.

A writer like Joyce, on the other hand, can communicate an even more overpowering "sense of reality" to his readers than either Fielding or Jane Austen. Isn't Ulysses the most realistic of novels? Does it not confine itself to a painstaking and extremely detailed analysis of the innermost thoughts and feelings of three very individual characters on a single day in the year 1904 in the city of Dublin? Yet what a literary novel Ulysses is, how well-organized, how tightly structured! It contains nothing that is not a part of Joyce's massive design. Anthony Burgess's book on Joyce, Re-Joyce, is well-named, for Joyce is indeed the happy child of the age of technology, who does not suffer in the least from "Unhappy Consciousness". For him only what is human is real; and consequently, life has to fit into patterns discovered by man more than two thousand years ago.

It will of course be retorted that these are extreme examples. The history of the novel cannot be summed up by referring to three writers, two of whom belonged to the Age of Reason and one of whom is in all probability a solitary eccentric who will always defy classification. Furthermore, Fielding, Jane Austen and Joyce are all comic writers, and

the comic vision of life after all demands an orderly universe. Between Fielding's "comic epic in prose" and Joyce's version of the same thing, however, there lie almost two hundred years of fiction, and the true representatives of realism may well belong to this period. This seems like a plausible thesis because nineteenth-century novelists themselves frequently insist that it is more important to look at things than to assign a definite shape to them. This emphasis on "the thing itself", however, is antithetical to the main trends of bourgeois culture and belongs to that still feudal past which George Eliot once personified as "a contemplative, rather stout gentleman of excellent digestion—of quiet perceptions, undiseased by hypothesis: happy in his inability to know the causes of things, preferring the things themselves".[18] In fact it can be said in general that a writer is capable of approaching the world cautiously to the extent that he remains aware of an older culture, either known in its original form, as in George Eliot's case, or sensed as being anachronistically present in the inability of bourgeois civilization to relieve the misery and suffering of a large number of its members, as in Dickens's.

It is indeed highly significant that a certain kind of novel came into being above all in England and France, where bourgeois revolutions had an entire medieval heritage to abolish; and in Russia, where such revolutions never occured.[19] It is certainly this fact that V.S. Pritchett has in mind when, after praising the realistic traits of the Russian novel already discussed in this chapter, he remarks that "In nineteenth-century Russia, under the simpler feudal division of society, [novelists had] more room to breathe".[20] Conversely, countries like Germany, where the medieval heritage was emphatically denied, and America,

where such a thing never existed, have never shown much interest in realism. As John Bayley notes, "nature" is absent from American literature.[21] What one has instead is a kind of fiction that forces nature to participate in its schemes. The same is also true of German letters. Both literatures are particularly rich in symbolic and allegorical works like Die Wahlverwandtschaften and Moby Dick, and correspondingly deficient in realistic works that simply strive to describe experience without forcing it into any particular mould.[22] Even Thomas Mann, the only German realist of any real significance, displays a characteristically Teutonic preoccupation with symbolism in works like Tonio Kröger, Doctor Faustus and Joseph and His Brothers, and has at least written a tightly structured and meticulously organized novel like Death in Venice, if only to show the alienation of his hero Gustav von Aschenbach from life. And that major American realist, James, could of course only become a realist by going into exile and embracing a culture still living in the past.

Today, needless to say, post-revolutionary Russians are more interested in organizing than in contemplating their lives. Consequently, Russian realism with its emphasis on contingency has been replaced by socialist realism with its all-too-familiar banalities. In France, too, despite Balzac's legitimist pamphleteering insisting on the need for incorporating the medieval heritage into the Revolution as was done in England during the Restoration, the yoke of feudalism has been overthrown. The French novel has regained time and gone beyond even that, passing into the hands of writers who are all philosophers of some sort or other with a thoroughly intellectual approach to life. Only in England a distrust of artifice survives, fed by an atavistic sense of the bare

earth that perpetually resists man, and that appears now as E.M. Forster's Caves of Marabar, now as Angus Wilson's Yugoslavian limestone cliffs that attract Margaret, the novelist, in No Laughing Matter:

> And yet how the limestone, the marsh and mud and the desert sand drew her to them! For every human assertion there are hundreds of inanimate negations. It was those, their stillness, their quiet, their non-existence which she so desperately needed. They were the other side of life, the nothing side, denying which everything was an empty boast, a silly whistling in the dark. She was not in love with easeful death, not at all, if that meant surrendering to the grave's embrace, but she did need the refreshment of negation, the refreshment of bare dead rock if she were to have the strength, the endurance to receive human noises. The great tenor arias she would hear in humanity's defence in Paris, how to bear their inevitable vulgarities? The small, private noises, sharp and astrigent that she perhaps or Mr E.M. Forster might contribute, how to bear their occasional cosiness? How to endure the millions that exulted in the boastful empty lies that came from Nuremburg and Bayreuth and Rome? Or the little dirty cheapening talk of everybody everyday? For these she must keep her imagination frighteningly yet deadly clean with the non-human--with the snow blowing through centuries in the icy blizzards of Antarctica, with the sand collecting endlessly in the Gobi desert.[23]

Whether the contemporary social realities of even England, admittedly the most "medieval" of modern countries, are in keeping with such "realism", though is of course debatable. There is, for instance, nothing surprising in the fact that contemporary English novels invariably tend to be about neurotic young women living in bedsitters or sensitive young men in advertising. That is after all the sort of prefabricated "experience" that contemporary society offers. Most novelists writing today are in fact neurotic young women or sensitive young men in advertising, and, as is amply demonstrated by Malcolm Bradbury's latest collection of short stories, Who Do You Think You Are?

literature, deprived of life, has once again taken refuge in satire and parody, those age-old ways of attacking artificial modes of behaviour and expression.

Even if one accepts the currently fashionable premise that life and novels were both richer in the past, however, the difficulties do not cease. No matter what Great Tradition one chooses, it is bound to be marred by traces of technologico-Benthamism. George Eliot's reference to the past, which was quoted above, is in fact wistful and nostalgic, though perhaps not so consciously nostalgic as James's passion for Europe. "That is the way things were," she seems to be saying, "But not the way they can be for us. We cannot sit and watch life unfold, and not bother to harness it to a design." This sad necessity is also what lies behind that typically Jamesian melancholy occasioned by being in love with what is doomed to die. James endows his characters with the maximum amount of life his plan permits, but when that is lived out the plan starts closing in, as, we feel, time itself will one day close in on Europe and put an end to its free, rich and complicated life. Indeed, though undoubtedly subtle and complex, nineteenth-century novels are as much concerned with uniform plans as fiction from any other era.

Bleak House offers a very good example of this phenomenon. W.J. Harvey, who tries to praise this novel for its realism, in fact ends up praising it for the intricacy of its design as a New Critic would. He writes:

> Indeed, I would say that one of the reasons for its greatness is the extreme tension set up between the centrifugal vigour of its parts and the centripetal

> demands of the whole. It is a tension between the impulse to intensify each local detail or particular episode and the impulse to subordinate, arrange and discipline. The final impression is one of immense and potentially anarchic energy being brought--but only just--under control. The fact that the equipoise between part and whole is so precariously maintained is itself a tribute to the energy here being harnessed.[24]

This is very well said, but on the whole Harvey seems to mistake Dickens's virtuosity for the flow of life itself. If the centripetal demands of the whole are real, then certainly the centrifugal vigour of the parts must ultimately be an illusion, and Harvey himself in fact admits this:

> Through the double narrative Dickens refracts, reflects, varies, distorts, reiterates his major themes, and the disturbing resonance thus set up is expressive of his deepest sense of what life is like. Bleak House is so dense with examples of this process that I will quote only one, very minor example. In Chapter 25 Mrs Snagsby is suspicious:
>
> > Mrs Snagsby screws a watchful glance on Jo, as he is brought into the little drawing-room by Guster. He looks at Mr Snagsby the moment he comes in. Aha! Why does he look at Mr Snagsby? Mr Snagsby looks at him. Why should he do that, but Mrs Snagsby sees it all? Why else should that look pass between them; why else should Mr Snagsby be confused, and cough a signal cough behind his hand. It is as clear as crystal that Mr Snagsby is that boy's father.
>
> Mrs Snagsby's magnificient illogicality is a comic analogue, a parody of the dominant atmosphere of the book, that of hints, guesses, suspicions, conspiracies. It is also a distorted echo of one of the novel's major themes, that of parents and children. Even here, in an insignificant corner of the book, its major concerns are repeated and echoed in a different key; this abundance of doubling, paralleling, contrasting, this constant modulation from sinister to pathetic or comic, serves to create a density of life providing a context for those vivid scenes of episodic intensification. We accept these, take them on trust as more than brilliant but isolated moments, because we know

> they mesh with that complicated web of human affair which entangles all the characters, even the most trivial.[25]

This is to say that reality in fact cannot go anywhere without echoing Dickens's themes. Even those details that seem totally irrelevant fit into a pattern. It is difficult to accept this as an expression of Dickens's "sense of what life is like". He can hardly have intended to create a set of events that, like so many Boodles and Coodles and Doodles, never fail to answer to the same pattern, for after all he is not of the Boodles' party but of Jo's, and the harshness and irrationality of the latter's life are precisely what he wishes to convey. Nonetheless, the novel works in the way Harvey claims it works, because when the flux of time is spoken out or written down the stillness of the word must necessarily impose order on it.

Again, George Eliot is a novelist who wishes us to understand how little order there is in life and how things do not fit into neat patterns. Yet definite patterns of course never fail to emerge in her novels. The Dorothea who refuses to believe that Lydgate has done anything wrong, for instance, is the same Dorothea who once declined to accept others' views of Casaubon. She is still proud and stubborn; indeed, selfish. Only, in this instance pride and selfishness have become admirable and noble. It is in this very scene that Mr Farebrother makes his famous comment that "character is not cut in marble", but the reader's sense is that that is how in fact it is, that people, at least in novels, never change. In her most generous impulses, as well as in her selfish daydreams, Dorothea is Dorothea, obstinate, rash, undisciplined. George Eliot's presentation of this scene is such that

Dorothea's pride is qualified for the reader without ceasing, for a single instant, to be pride. The entire episode is indeed, as Angus Wilson would agrue, a brilliant trick, perhaps unintentionally so, but still a trick. Dorothea is indeed a complex character, but the novelist is remarkably successful in keeping her complexity within bounds.

At this point defenders of realism might say that such complexity is in fact what realism is all about and argue that what is meant by that term is not the absence of a controlling design but rather a design that controls without crushing and rules without tyranny, bringing life "only just" under control. To this it can only be said that, whether simple or complex, whether reflected, refracted, varied, distorted and reiterated or just presented, a design is still a design, something essentially tangible, rigid and static, and not something mutable like life. Defending his own version of monism against that of Schelling, Hegel wrote:

> Hence [in Schelling's philosophy] everything appears brought within the compass of the Absolute Idea, which seems thus to be recognized in everything, and to have succeeded in becoming a system <u>in extenso</u> of scientific knowledge. But if we look more closely at this expanded system we find that it has not been reached by one and the same principle taking shape in diverse ways; it is the shapeless repetition of one and the same idea, which is applied in an external fashion to different material, the wearisome reiteration of it keeping up the semblance of diversity. The Idea, which is by itself no doubt the truth, really never gets any further than just where it began, as long as the development of it consists in nothing else than such a repetition of the same formula.[26]

Such a protest against bloodless formalism is of course impressive, but what Hegel's words convey is above all his own uneasiness at having to

smuggle in the Absolute Idea without mentioning that dreadful term. Whether things are immediately in the Absolute--whatever that might mean--or only ultimately so, the Absolute is firmly and embarrassingly there. Similarly, the difference between saying "Dorothea is proud" and saying "Well, in the end, (ultimately, when all is said and done), Dorothea, you know, is proud" is not so very great. Such ceaseless qualifying can only lead to the comic spectacle of Mr Brooke with his famous "certain point". True enough, a certain kind of novelist does not put tags on his characters or tell his readers immediately what this or that might mean. As Harvey suggests, he lets the reader arrive at such knowledge by himself. But the important thing is that that knowledge should be there to be arrived at, and when all the seemingly random details in a novel are seen to fit into a pattern the illusion of realism cannot but be destroyed.

III

For better or worse Thackeray's fiction makes no use of complex designs. Neither Dickens's intricate plots nor George Eliot's subtle characterizations are typical of Thackeray. He is always after a particular pattern which is more important to him than an objective depiction of reality, and he makes no attempt to disguise this fact. One of his first published works, a set of comic plates entitled Flore et Zéphyr, is a loving parody of a formal ballet. He is a self-confessed

follower of Fielding, and his vast output includes not only a great deal of "magazinery" written with the specific requirements of Fraser's or Punch in mind, but also imitations of Horace, Beranger and the German poets, a sequel to Scott's Ivanhoe, and even a fairy story entitled "Sultan Stork" that follows the manner of The Arabian Nights and has proved as popular among children as any of Scheherazade's original tales.

Yet Thackeray, of course, also refuses to take such patterns seriously. Calling his characters "puppets", insisting that he is only "making believe", and sneering at novelists' pretensions to absolute knowledge, he constantly denounces his own handiwork. For him life is ultimately meaningless and absurd, and it is only human vanity that strives to contain it within specific patterns. Hence that famous passage in Pendennis:

> Thus, oh friendly readers, we see every man in the world has his own private griefs and business, by which he is more cast down or occupied than by the affairs or sorrows of any other person . . . How lonely we are in the world! how selfish and secret everybody! You and your wife have pressed the same pillow for forty years and fancy yourselves united.--Psha, does she cry when you have the gout, or do you lie awake when she has the toothache? . . . Ah, sir--a distinct universe walks about under your hat and under mine--all things in nature are different to each--the woman we look at has not the same features, the dish we eat from has not the same taste to one and the other--you and I are but a pair of infinite isolations with some fellow-islands more or less near to us.[27]

That is how things really are. When the truth is really faced, there is only this tendency of everybody to go resolutely on their own way, and to attempt to tidy up this unfortunate, but also free, state of

affairs is to be guilty of illusion and manipulativeness. Thus Thackeray both tries to impose form on the world and to leave it formless and free, and his art is perpetually occupied with patterns, forms, roles and their relationship to reality. But that art is, of course, also the reflection of a personality that is, as Hegel once said of himself, "at once for and against the actual",[28] and that, basically convinced that life is ultimately chaotic and frustrating, tries to impose order on it by force. Before it can be seen, therefore, how the "artificiality" of Thackeray's fiction becomes a comment on the novel form as a whole, and indeed on the culture in which the novel was born, his personality, which made such artificiality necessary to him must itself be examined.

Notes

[1] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, revised second edition (London, 1931), pp. 159-160.

[2] Quoted by Richard Stang in *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870* (London, 1959), p. 159.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 172.

[6] *The Mill on the Floss*, Book VII, Chapter 2.

[7] Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness", *Encounter*, 16, no. 1 (January 1961), 16-20 (p. 20).

[8] W.J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London, 1965), pp. 117-118.

[9] Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London, 1970), p. 24.

[10] Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (London, 1970), p. 296.

[11] Angus Wilson, *No Laughing Matter* (London, 1967), p. 382.

[12] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1957), p. 105.

[13] *The Situation of the Novel*, p. 44.

[14] *The Faerie Queene*, I.12.361-378.

[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, 1922), propositions 6.54-7.

[16] Dedication to *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*.

[17] Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans* (Neuwied and Berlin, 1963), pp. 125-126 (J. Hillis Miller's translation. See *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame, Indiana and London, 1968), p. 50, n. 11).

[18] Adam Bede, Book VI, Chapter 52.

[19] If one sees the novel as in fact organizing and controlling reality, however, one will have to agree with Leslie A. Fiedler that it is an essentially American genre. On this point see Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel (New York, 1960), pp. xvii-xviii.

[20] V.S. Pritchett, The Living Novel (London, 1966), p. 219.

[21] John Bayley, The Characters of Love (London, 1960), p. 270.

[22] See, however, Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Die Wahlverwandtschaften as a novel that is essentially against allegory, a novel which rejects artifice in the name of reality (Gesammelte Schriften (Frankfurt, 1974), i, 125-201).

[23] No Laughing Matter, pp. 227-228.

[24] Character and the Novel, p. 90.

[25] Ibid., pp. 98-99.

[26] The Phenomenology, p. 78.

[27] The Oxford Thackeray, ed. George Saintsbury, 17 vols (Oxford, 1908), xii, 183-184. References throughout are to this collected edition which is hereafter abbreviated as Works.

[28] Quoted by Stephen Crites in In the Twilight of Christendom: Hegel vs. Kirkegaard on Faith and History, AAR Studies in Religion (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 1972), p. 6.

Chapter Two

REALISM AND THE REALITY PRINCIPLE: THACKERAY'S PERSONALITY

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I

The novel has to be seen as part of a technological revolution that gave man the ability to impose his will on nature. How this technological revolution itself came about, however, is still not entirely clear. In the Hegelian scheme of things "Unhappy Consciousness" turns into "Reason" simply by rebelling against its unhappiness and looking for more efficient ways of understanding and controlling its life. This may seem like a very simple explanation but it is one that is becoming increasingly widespread. The old view that medieval economy collapsed as a result of an injection of money into it by a set of traders of unknown social origin, who then set up their own money economy, is giving way to a new belief that, far from being static and self-perpetuating, as formerly thought, the feudal mode of production in fact had the capacity for generating the preconditions necessary for its own overthrow.[1] Defenders of this theory believe that a desire for greater efficiency was characteristic of medieval economy in that feudal landowners wished to increase their rents while their peasants strove to increase that part of the yield of their plots that they did not have to surrender to their masters. This desire for a more efficient exploitation of nature, it is claimed, became a basis

for technical innovation which, in turn, led to simple commodity production, international trade and urbanization. The problem with this theory is that the available evidence indicates that technical innovation, though never entirely absent from medieval life, tended to be influenced as much by purely contingent demographic factors as by supposedly permanent human desires. When the bubonic plague epidemic reduced the population of Europe, for instance, technological progress slowed down and did not speed up again until the population increased once more and a large number of people became dependent on limited natural resources. Even accepting the importance of demographic factors, however, the value of the theory is not diminished since what it emphasizes is the existence of a psychological mechanism whereby an unsatisfactory natural environment causes a retreat into an artificially ordered world. Precisely how that environment becomes unsatisfactory is immaterial. What is important is that life, less than perfect in itself, is replaced by controlled life, that experience, as it were, turns into fiction.

Itself always such a world, the novel frequently objects to artificially ordered worldson moral grounds. If things are controlled by us, it is argued, then they are not allowed to come into their own as they are "in themselves", and orderly visions of reality constitute an attempt to avoid the actual demands it makes on one. Thus in realistic fiction often the selfish hero or heroine begins with great expectations and ends up with the realization that the world has not been designed for his or her convenience, emerging from the action of the novel as a chastened and humble human being who is now more ready to be concerned with the needs and wishes of others. One of the greatest English novels, Middlemarch, for instance, is entirely based on this time-honoured pattern.

The principal characters, Dorothea, Casaubon, Lydgate and Rosamond, all try to make their spouses conform to images in their minds. Thus Casaubon becomes a possibility of intellectual development for Dorothea; Dorothea a promise of domestic bliss for Casaubon; Lydgate a means of changing her social status for Rosamond; and Rosamond a pretty and submissive wife, just another perfect possession, for Lydgate. These expectations, however, are frustrated when the needs and capacities of each individual come sharply into conflict with the role he or she is asked to play, and while the weaker and more peevish experience this as a gross injustice, to the more morally alert it becomes a basis for a less self-centred view of the world. "We are," comments the narrator,

> all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves; Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling --an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects--that he had an equivalent centre of self whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.[2]

This emphasis on the directness of sense and the solidity of objects, the sheer immediacy of reality and its resistance to appropriation, is a reminder that no one is alone in the world and that one's environment can be made to conform to certain standards only by ignoring the reality of that environment and of the other individuals in it.

Interestingly, though George Eliot is aware of the comic as well as tragic implications of the dreams of her characters, she misses their aesthetic implications. In fact when Casaubon is seen as an elderly sage; Dorothea as an adoring wife; Lydgate as an eligible suitor; and Rosamond

as a conquered beauty, they all turn into hackneyed characters out of popular fiction, and their refusal to conform to the images imposed on them becomes the destruction of art by reality, of myth by real people and of fantasy by contingency. In other words, George Eliot misses her chance to attack art as just another way of ordering the world at the expense of stifling the full reality of the individuals in it. Thackeray's imagination, however, with its natural propensity for parody of course thrives on characters who, like Don Quixote, perpetually try to make the world fit into patterns borrowed from fashionable fiction. He ceaselessly strives to lay bare the inflated daydreaming that lies behind popular literary conventions even as he himself adopts and exploits them.

The creation of an artificially ordered world through art is also one of the important themes of Angus Wilson's No Laughing Matter. By making his main characters artists Wilson tries to differentiate between their false art and his true one. The book constantly juxtaposes supposedly actual events and people with the ways in which they get represented in art, and Margaret's novels, Rupert's impersonations and the stylized paintings Marcus collects all come to be seen as distinct ways of organizing rather than merely representing reality. A particularly intriguing example of this process deserves quotation despite its length. Margaret is reminiscing about a holiday romance:

> In the early morning light and mist they had passed the fat-faced whiskery old women who, in grey printed dresses and black straw hats sat like ancient tom cats, except where here and there a lower eyelid had fallen to reveal red flecked eyeballs like those of a blood-hound, guarding their rougets and sea spiders, their langoustes and that squizzling, wriggling indeterminate grey mass which would appear on the hotel menu as poissons du golfe from the slinking, darting, voracious half-starved cats which would be seen like jackals' lean shadows here and there by the harbour's edge. On the deck of a tramp

> steamer stood a young negro in drill trousers and a sparkling white vest, cleaning his teeth with a piece of sugar cane. From the tenement buildings on the hill leading away from the harbour Armenian dock workers were crossing the cobbled streets so slippery with trodden-in debris from the vegetable carts, to wait at the broad wire gates of the naval dockyard for the siren to sound its summons to work.
>
> Looking back, Margaret remembered all these scenes as quite separate from one another, from herself. Their only unity lay in Clifford, his talk, his presence, his movements, the swing of his body, the turn of his head, the inverted triangle that his dark hair formed on the nape of his neck. Perhaps happiness, she thought, is entirely disjunctive, love so powerful an emotion, that the scrabbling of human reason busily making patterns and corrections is momentarily stilled. Indeed when a month later the memory of this happiness became too painful she set out consciously to piece together, to unify all these sharp edged pictures with a thread of irony. The mists and the early morning light, where had she got them but straight from a score of impressionist paintings? The fisherwomen were surely not real to her but little Boudin figures imported into the Midi from Normandy? As to the cats, she had reason to know that the fishsellers of La Ciotat were lavish in their disposal of fishwaste to these animals, the implied battle was the conventional nightmare of some English spinster in Rome? The negro, too--Conradian figure--sprang all too easily to life, for what sugar cane would have kept its savour from, at the nearest, India or the Sudan? As to the Armenians--creatures of a chance word of Madame that 'il y a beaucoup d'Armeniens dans le quartier ouvrier'--how clever to recognize such ethnic distinctions in that Boudinesque light! But all this tissue of mockery came later as she very well knew. At the time and for all those four weeks (a lie, it was only three) she had never seen the world around so clearly as when it needed no explanation since Clifford was the meaning of it all.[3]

Here memory is beginning to replace experience, and not only is the Muse the daughter of memory but memory is, as Hegel explained relying on a German pun, Er-innerung; or literally, internalization. In memory events and objects are no longer experienced but "re-membered". The mind re-creates them relying on its own resources replacing them by its own products and depriving them of their immediacy with the result that that

love which once responded to others in their full reality without feeling compelled to impose any particular image on them, and that happiness that was at home in disjunction, was felt and did not need to be expressed, are lost.

Unfortunately Wilson relies, as he very well knows, on some of the same strategies as his characters. He, too, is creating an artificially ordered world, imposing patterns on a life as amorphous as the barren Yugoslavian cliffs that confront Margaret, and turning into comprehensible characters people as unpredictable as Malvolio. If love and happiness demand mere passivity in the face of reality, then Wilson's art, though perhaps more subtle and less whimsical than Margaret's or Rupert's, is not essentially more loving or happy than theirs. Nonetheless, by emphasizing love and happiness Wilson manages to give realism a moral status and point out the essential unhealthiness of a radically humanized world, whose cruder aspects, "Miracle Germany . . . Time Magazine . . . seemly ambition, high profits and determined management"[4] are contemptuously dismissed in the last sentence of the novel.

II

The moral implications of anti-realistic attitudes are also one of the main concerns of Freudian psychology. Freud's interest in the "Reality Principle" and the formation of neurosis places him among the chief exponents of realism of this century. Broadly speaking, the transitions from dependence on nature to technology and from life to art, examined above, have the same structure as the transition from normalcy to neurosis. In all cases an unsatisfactory natural environment is replaced by an artificially ordered world. Freud of course does not

regard neurosis as a social phenomenon but looks for its causes in the personal history of the individual patient. In theory a neurotic could flourish in any kind of society. Nonetheless, a society that has already developed several ways of imposing its will on nature clearly offers a greater number of outlets to the neurotic, and most people would be more inclined to associate neurosis with members of modern industrial society than with Australian Aborigines.[5] This has an obvious application to Thackeray who strikes one as a novelist who found in the novel form the perfect way of indulging a Freudian-type neurosis.

Opponents of Freudian theory never get tired of saying that Freud related everything to sex. This is only a half-truth. Freud, the analyst, certainly sees sex as the "prime mover" behind individual case histories. In his general theory of personality, however, Freud is primarily concerned not with sex but with the "libido". The "libido" is a typically Germanic concept in some ways reminiscent of Kant's "transcendental ego", Fichte's "I" and Hegel's "Spirit". It stands, like these other notions, for the general tendency of the human ego to establish itself in the world. To be sure, for Freud, the libido, too, finds its ultimate expression in sex where one ego comes to find itself in another. But any act which allows the ego to establish itself in its surroundings is likewise an expression of the libido. Thus, for instance, language which replaces alien objects by human words is as much an outcome of the libido as sex.

Under normal conditions the gratification of the libido is dependent on reality, on what lies outside the ego. The world may, as it were, allow itself to be possessed by the ego, or it may not. On the whole,

depending on circumstances, it sometimes does and sometimes does not. The acceptance of this condition, of a world that, though it is not there for the convenience of the ego, is not without its moments of happiness either, is normalcy, and because normalcy makes it possible to respond to others in their full reality, it is not only a clinical concept but also a moral quality. Freud sees, however, that if the ego comes to see its environment as being erratic, unstable and frustrating and ends up detecting in it the operations of a "reality principle" at cross-purposes with its own "pleasure principle", reality will rapidly be replaced by an artificially ordered world. This is the formation of neurosis. The neurotic will not let reality unfold by itself but constantly has to insist on imposing his own patterns on it and living in a world governed by himself.

For Freud this loveless approach to the world is to be explained by a similar failure on the part of the world itself. The ego will settle for artificial schemes of order only if it comes to feel that reality is in itself disorderly and frustrating, and this evaluation of reality is always based on the nature of the ego's earliest encounters with the world. During the first four or five years of his existence a human being arrives at a certain view of the world which remains unalterable in later life unless he is helped by a psychoanalyst to recall and radically re-evaluate the events of those years. Thus the child who feels loved and accepted will grow up into the adult capable of accepting life as it is, while the child who feels unloved and abandoned will get increasingly frustrated, irritable and peevish, and ultimately develop into the neurotic trying to impose himself on the world by force.

Obviously bourgeois society is neurotic in this sense in its insistence on making nature submit to its will. Freud's theory also offers an insight into the kind of art that immediately betrays itself as art. What is at work in such cases is the desire of the artist to keep reality under control and make it obey his will. Indeed, like Wilson, Freud, too, tends to attribute all art to the wish to re-organize the world. True enough, in the Freudian scheme of things art is seen as involving not neurosis but sublimation. The three kinds of deviation identified by Freud, perversion, sublimation and neurosis, however, all boil down to the same attempt to control reality, and what lies behind Thackeray's art is no doubt an intensification of art's intrinsic tendencies by the demands of his own personality.

III

> It is only hope which is real, and
> reality is a bitterness and a deceit
>
> Thackeray, Rebecca and Rowena

When Thackeray's novels are criticized in various ways for their lack of realism, it is of course assumed that he wished to write realistic fiction but somehow failed to do so, settling for a formalistic art in spite of himself. In fact, however, it would be more correct to assume that the carefully structured vision of life was an emotional necessity to Thackeray, and consequently, a goal deliberately aimed at by his fiction. Any careful study of his personality could hardly fail to bear such an assumption out.

Thackeray, unfortunate in his critics, has been remarkably fortunate

in his biographers. He himself once remarked: "All that I can remember out of books generally is the impression I get of the Author",[6] and generations of scholars have followed his example, discovering in his work traces of his characters. Few critics are prepared to follow the example set by J.Y.T. Greig in Thackeray: A Reconsideration, and see Thackeray's art as being entirely a function of his personality, but biographical details keep intruding into Thackeray criticism simply because everyone seems to feel that the world of his novels is a subjective one that needs explaining. Apart from this, however, among others, Anthony Trollope, Lewis Melville, Malcolm Elwin, Lionel Stevenson, Lambert Ennis and Gordon N. Ray have written full-length biographies of Thackeray, and not only do these works provide, when taken together, the whole story of his life but also they all arrive at more or less the same view of the individual who is their subject.

This view is perhaps best summed up by the pair of titles chosen by Ray for his two-volume definitive biography of Thackeray, The Uses of Adversity and The Age of Wisdom. By dividing Thackeray's life into two different stages in this way Ray seems to indicate that Thackeray first became disappointed with the world and then discovered ways of coping with his environment, eventually moving from adversity to prosperity. Ray, though, is primarily concerned with the trials of Thackeray's adult life, the loss of his patrimony, his financial difficulties, the death of his second daughter, and the insanity of his wife. In fact Thackeray appears to have borne these calamities with a characteristically Victorian fortitude, and any darkening of his vision of life has to be attributed to an earlier period, indeed, as Freud would have wished, to the time when he was a boy.

Here what stands out is of course Thackeray's relationship with his mother. Once again, thanks to Thackeray's biographers, the details of this relationship are so familiar as to require only a few words. Thackeray's father died a few years after the birth of his son, and for a while Thackeray lived alone with his mother in Calcutta until he was sent to school in England. Mrs Thackeray, everyone agrees, treated her only child with the kind of possessiveness that mothers frequently mistake for love, instilling in him an early distrust of everyone besides herself in order to be sure of being the sole object of his affections. Her letters to Thackeray throughout the latter's life are full of warnings about the treacherousness of the world. Thackeray appears to have both seen through the relationship and taken it very seriously. His novels abound in doting mothers whose only children rebel against them without ever being able to shake off their influence completely. Arthur Pendennis desperately tries to become independent of Helen and yet has to retreat to the security of his home every time one of his sallies into the world ends in disaster; and in Vanity Fair there is the famous statement that "Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children".[7] There can thus be no doubt that by the time he left Calcutta Thackeray was already an extremely nervous individual, deeply distrustful of Freudian "reality" and happy only when together with his mother.

Clearly his insecurity was hardly helped by his English experience. Ready to regard the world as alien and hostile in any case, he was also actually in a foreign environment. Victorian children living in England did not have the comforts enjoyed by their colonial counterparts, and all of a sudden Thackeray, who was accustomed to being a little sahib back in Calcutta, had to face dull and authoritarian masters, bullies and canings

at a series of boarding schools. He had come to England with an Indian servant and now he had to become a fag himself. No doubt his initial conviction that the world was a dark and frustrating place was strengthened during these years. He also developed a defence mechanism that was to remain with him throughout the rest of his life. He started re-arranging reality by making it sweet, docile and comic in his imagination. His considerable artistic talent went into stylized drawings in which pompous teachers and cruel schoolfellows were transmuted into harmless, almost charming figures. No doubt any child craves sweetness in this way; he will give his toys names, talk with them, and live as much as possible in a fairy-tale world where even evil is surrounded by an aura of make-believe. But Thackeray had started taking his childhood too seriously and was developing into a precocious little boy who played at being a child without being entirely able to convince himself. Freud defines neurosis as a compromise between the childhood and adult personalities of the patient, and by this definition Thackeray was already turning into a neurotic who tried to impose on a hostile world the shape of an earlier time when he had been happy and secure in the company of his mother. In No Laughing Matter, Marcus, another child with a dominating mother, develops into both a homosexual and an aesthete who relies on high-quality kitsch for keeping himself in the sweet, secure and stylized world of the child. Thackeray, it appears, was spared sexual perversion, but he certainly remained plagued by an infantile sense of fun and a craving for childish jollity in later life. In his novels people get together, eat, drink and dance, and all of a sudden things become more saccharine than they get even in Dickens' wildest Christmas fantasies. Needless to say, in the midst of all such revels

there is always someone who remains unconvinced by it all and whose mind goes back to present troubles or a lost past. Barry Lyndon, for instance, says:

> [My son] was taken from me at the age of nine years, when he was full of beauty and promise; and so powerful is the hold that his memory has of me that . . . many a time in the wildest and maddest company, as the bottle is going round, and the song and laugh roaring about, I am thinking of him.[8]

Or, as William Roscoe pointed out with some dismay, Thackeray himself cannot help marring the illusion he has created by pointing out that reality will refuse to fit into the patterns human beings insist on imposing on it:

> In the first volume of The Newcomes we are told how Warrington and Pendennis gave a little entertainment at the Temple, including among their guests little Rosey and her mother. It is a very pleasant charming picture, and the narrator speaks of the 'merry songs and kind faces', the 'happy old dingy chambers illuminated by youthful sunshine'. [However an] unhappy prompting . . . makes him drop this blot on his description: 'I may say, without false modesty, that our little entertainment was most successful. The champagne was iced to a nicety. The ladies did not perceive that our laundress, Mrs Flanagan, was intoxicated early in the afternoon'. And before the end of the description we are not spared another allusion to 'Mrs Flanagan in a state of excitement'. It is vulgar, surely, to mar the pure and pleasant impression of the scene with this image of the drunken laundress not only introduced, but insisted on.[9]

But of course if reality had not been jarring in this way, there would have been no need to seek an escape from it in the first place, and, significantly, with Thackeray this escape always takes the form of a reversion to the moods, and sometimes even the vocabulary, of childhood. When, for instance, Clive Newcome refers to Rafael as a "brick", as if he were a favourite school-chum, one becomes conscious of a desperate attempt

not to grow up and face the world as an adult. And of course one feels that it was this regressive tendency that in the end led Thackeray to his attachment to novelists like Fielding and Smollet, in whose fun-loving ways he no doubt detected a resemblance to the joys of childhood.

With puberty, it seems, Thackeray's problems were intensified. He had grown up into a gigantic, ungainly young man. By contrast, his voice was high and had a tendency to disappear, and his broken nose had spoiled his good looks forever. Even his own body had betrayed him, and for the rest of his life he was to go around joking about his appearance in an attempt to assure others that he knew what they were all thinking and did not care. In addition to all this he suffered from shyness and sexual timidity to an even greater extent than most adolescents. No doubt a lot of himself was later to go into the fat, bashful Joseph Sedley, one of the most complex and, in a strange way, sympathetic characters in Vanity Fair. Of course Thackeray's woes do not strike one as unique. George Eliot, too, knew what it meant to be physically unattractive, and Dickens grew up in an environment even more hostile than the one encountered by Thackeray. But Thackeray was more sensitive than either of them, and experiences that even they were to have difficulty assimilating were beginning to weigh him down.

Thackeray's personal insecurity was also no doubt reinforced by the general insecurity of his class. When he went up to Cambridge in 1829 he became conscious of his place in society. Lambert Ennis describes the social atmosphere of Cambridge during those years rather well:

> The young men like Thackeray who belonged neither to the aristocratic gentlemen commoners nor the hard working sizars at the university, were confused by their ambiguous middle-group position, corresponding to the social level

> where they would find themselves on leaving college. They were all to some extent victims of the younger son philosophy of the hereditary aristocracy, whatever their own family histories. Furthermore, they were prone to feel that niches should be open to them in one of the gentlemanly professions: law, clergy, parliament or government service. But the forces of democracy were constantly stepping up the number of non-university competitors in these professions.[10]

In this environment Thackeray once again started feeling rejected by the world. He promptly responded by giving himself aristocratic airs and becoming a snob. The mature Thackeray was of course to take his younger self to task for this pretentious behaviour, but one cannot help seeing his attempts at self-criticism as mere intellectual exercises in humility that betoken no real change of heart. Deep down Thackeray was to remain a snob throughout his life. As Ray writes,

> Confronted by a portrait of Beau Nash, which according to a contemporary epigram showed 'Folly at full length', Thackeray confessed: 'I should like to have been the Folly. It was a splendid, embroidered, beruffed, snuff-boxed, red-heeled, impertinent Folly, and knew how to make itself respected'.[11]

In the face of such evidence it becomes difficult to believe that Thackeray was ever able to bring himself to accept his social position, and his various attacks on the aristocracy come to read as attempts to discredit a class whose ability "to make itself respected" he envied.

Thus surrounded on all sides by an unkind world, Thackeray could hardly avoid coming to the conclusion that reality was "a bitterness and a deceit". All through his life he was to remain an extremely sensitive man who refused to believe that the world would ever accept him and perpetually sought to be on his guard against real or imaginary attacks.

Carlyle spoke of him not unkindly as "a big, fierce, weeping, hungry man; not a strong one".[12] Herman Merrivale remarked:

> He had all the nervous susceptibilities, as he had all the loving-kindness of a woman . . . more than any other man I have known of Goethe's ewigweiblichkeit.[13]

And finally, Trollope wrote:

> He was not a man capable of feeling at any time quite assured in his position . . . He doubted the appreciation of the world; he doubted his fitness for turning his intellect to valuable account . . . Though he was aware of his own power, he always, to the last, was afraid that his own deficiencies should be too strong against him.[14]

Cynicism and sentimentality were the two dominant traits of Thackeray's character. This combination has always puzzled critics and biographers, but in reality it can be explained quite easily. Thackeray expected no love or understanding from the world and was therefore a cynic. On the other hand, for exactly the same reason, he was always ready to delude himself. Most of his private life was a series of sentimental attachments to rather shallow women like his wife Isabella, his friend Henry Brookfield's wife Jane, and the American debutante Sarah Baxter. Thackeray of course knew the truth about these women, but illusion was much sweeter, and he could not help demanding that reality should correspond to his dreams. His tendency to bring others in line with his desires in this fashion could also manifest itself in more active ways. Just as he was sentimental and cynical by turns, he could be alternately kind and vindictive. He was always ready to help friends and bestow gifts on everyone, and during his editorship of the Cornhill Magazine he would frequently send a personal cheque to

an author whose work he had rejected. No doubt a genuinely benevolent nature lay behind these acts, but one also suspects that Thackeray was trying to buy affection, and encouraging the world to respond to him in a certain way. He could not bear to think that others were indifferent towards him, and he had no tolerance at all for open hostility. At the height of his fame he was still insecure enough to precipitate the famous "Garrick Club Affair" by trying to ruin an unknown young writer who had been bold enough to attack him in an obscure periodical.[15]

But all this was still life. Thackeray could attend dinner parties, have love affairs, distribute sweets to children, and pick quarrels, but he still had to remain to a certain extent face to face with reality, and acknowledge that, however much he tampered with them, things insisted on preserving their own form. The kind of control over his environment that he needed could only be provided by a formalistic art like Fielding's, and, so, like Arthur Pendennis and Clive Newcome, he, too, had to become an artist as well as a gentleman. Thus, born of a special combination of individual and social tendencies, Thackeray's art is a particular kind of art, an art that does not bother to disguise its formal concerns. Thackeray sees the novel first and foremost as an instrument for controlling the world. Yet, because he is basically convinced that the world is in fact uncontrollable, both the novel and the culture to which it belongs also seem insanely aggressive and vain to him, and his fiction derives much of its significance from its critical approach to bourgeois humanism.

Notes

[1] For contemporary accounts of the transition from feudal to modern life without which the novel form in all probability would not have come into existence see The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, ed. Rodney Hilton (London, 1976).

[2] Middlemarch, Book II, Chapter 21.

[3] No Laughing Matter, pp. 191-192.

[4] Ibid., p. 464.

[5] This is in fact very much Freud's own message in Civilization and Its Discontents where he rebels against the perverse psychological adjustments that bourgeois society demands from its members. On this point see also Herbert Marcuse's "Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Society" (Negations (London, 1968), pp. 248-268) and Bernard J. Paris's "The Psychic Structure of Vanity Fair" (Victorian Studies, 10 (1967), 389-410). Paris's article, which is based on Karen Horney's concept of neurosis and comes to the conclusion that "if Horney is correct in arguing that each culture produces its own neurotic patterns and that she has described the neurotic personality of our time, there must be profound similarities between Thackeray's society and our time", is particularly relevant to the discussion in this chapter.

[6] The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray, ed. Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols (London, 1945-1946), iii, 19.

[7] Works, xi. 478.

[8] Works, vi. 280.

[9] William Roscoe, "W.M. Thackeray, Artist and Moralist", National Review, 2 (1856), 177-213 (p. 192).

[10] Lambert Ennis, Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic (Evanston, Illinois, 1950), pp. 38-39.

[11] Gordon N. Ray, The Age of Wisdom (London, 1958), p. 257.

[12] Quoted by D.A. Wilson in Carlyle to Threescore-And-Ten (London, 1929), p. 90.

[13] Herman Merrivale and Frank T. Marzials, The Life of W.M. Thackeray (London, 1891), p. 12.

[14] Anthony Trollope, Thackeray, English Men of Letters Series (London, 1879), p. 15.

[15] For a full account of the Garrick Club Affair see Ray, The Age of Wisdom, pp. 278-290 and Malcolm Elwin, Thackeray: A Personality (London, 1932), pp. 337-342.

Part Two

THACKERAY'S FICTION

Chapter Three

THACKERAY'S APPROACH TO THE NOVEL FORM

Chapter Three

THACKERAY'S APPROACH TO THE NOVEL FORM

I

The tension between life and design, between direct, immediate reality and the forms imposed on it by human beings, is, in many ways, the key to Thackeray's art. Speaking of Dickens's Hard Times in Culture and Society, Raymond Williams writes:

> The instinctive, unintellectual, unorganized life is the ground, here, of genuine feeling, and all good relationships. . . . [This] is a characteristic conclusion, in a vitally important tradition which based its values on such grounds. It is the major criticism of Industrialism as a whole way of life, and its grounds in experience have been firm.[1]

Clearly, what Williams understands by Industrialism is something very broad; not the proverbial "dark Satanic mills" but an entire frame of mind that values what is artificial and contrived more than what is natural and given. What is in question is obviously that mechanical approach to life denounced by Carlyle in "Signs of the Times":

> Were we required to characterize this age of ours by a single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inner sense of that word . . . Nothing is now done directly . . . all is by rule and calculated contrivance.[2]

It is as a critic of this sort of Industrialism that Thackeray, too, is always at his best.

Thackeray himself is of course a formalist, a writer who insists that life should conform to certain patterns. Yet, he is ultimately also against form. Years ago, reviewing J.Y.T. Greig's Thackeray: A Reconsideration, Lionel Stevenson noted that Greig accused Thackeray not only of choking the life out of his characters by sentimentalizing and sermonizing but also of not having a firm and didactic approach to the world.[3] This is of course one of the central paradoxes of Thackeray criticism. The same critics who accuse Thackeray of manipulation also charge him with not being manipulative enough and leaving his novels formless. Side by side with Thackeray, the puppet-master, there exists another Thackeray, a careless artist whose works are governed by no organizing principle, and frequently appear to be "a mere matter of going on and on".[4] But of course, as usual, the two different Thackerays are related. It is because life itself goes on and on that form is both striven after and ultimately dismissed as fake. This tension, evident in Thackeray's fiction itself, is also available in a different form. There is a remarkable discrepancy between the style of Thackeray's letters and that of his novels. Thackeray is easily the worst epistolarian in the English language. George Eliot's letters, for instance, are clearly the work of the author of Middlemarch. Thackeray's letters, on the other hand, generally speaking, convey the impression that they have been written not by the author of Vanity Fair but by a man more like Rawdon Crawley. They are full of misspellings, bad grammar and run-on sentences, and it is virtually impossible to believe that the man who penned them was thought by many to be the greatest stylist of his age. Yet what we

find in Thackeray's rambling, incoherent letters is of course "his deepest sense of what life is like", whereas what we find in his novels is his conscious organization of that life into definite patterns. The novels "communicate" in a way the letters do not, but what they communicate is no longer life itself.

Thackeray's deep awareness of the difference between life itself and human ways of organizing life is what makes him such a self-conscious writer. He is always ready to turn round and accuse himself of "making believe". In a letter to his mother, for instance, he writes:

> Snow! Snow! Snow! we have had lots of it here, my dearest Mother and I don't know whether it is to be succeeded by frost or not; of all the horrors in this blessed town, snow is the most horrible, in its consequences I mean; for when a thaw shall have moistened the snow flakes, and the genial influence of spring shall have put to flight Mr John Frost--I am getting quite into the Georgic Style, dont you think so? The fruits of half an hours lazy labour at those delectable compositions.[5]

It is this very distance between instinctive, unintellectual, unorganized personal experience and artificial literary styles that Thackeray always tries to bring into focus. As John Loofbourow demonstrates in Thackeray and the Form of Fiction, for Thackeray fiction is a manipulative enterprise that is more concerned with organizing than reflecting reality. The following passage from Vanity Fair makes Loofbourow's point clear:

> We might have treated this subject in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner. Suppose we had laid the scene in Grosvenor Square, with the very same adventures--would not some people have listened? Suppose we had shown how Lord Joseph Sedley fell in love, and the Marquis of Osborne became attached to Lady Amelia, with the full consent of the Duke, her noble father: or instead

> of the supremely genteel, suppose we had resorted to the entirely low, and described what was going on in Mr Sedley's kitchen;--how black Sambo was in love with the cook (as indeed he was), and how he fought a battle with the coachman in her behalf; how the knife boy was caught stealing a cold shoulder of mutton, and Miss Sedley's new femme de chambre refused to go to bed without a wax candle; such incidents might be made to provoke much delightful laughter and be supposed to represent scenes of 'life'. Or if, on the contrary, we had taken a fancy to the terrible, and made the lover of the new femme de chambre a professional burglar, who bursts into the house with his band, slaughters black Sambo at the feet of his master, and carries off Amelia in her night-dress, not to be let loose again till the third volume, we should easily have constructed a tale of thrilling interest, through the fiery chapters of which the reader should hurry, panting.[6]

That fiction has any kind of form is in itself an unacceptable idea to the realist. That, as Thackeray implies here, it in fact falls into a number of identifiable genres, each with its specific requirements, is an altogether alarming thought. Indeed the English mind in particular finds such a notion so inadmissible that there does not even exist a critical vocabulary in English for talking about fictional genres, and terms like Bildunsroman, roman à clef and roman fleuve have to be borrowed from other languages. Yet what Thackeray is saying is very similar to what Bernard Bergonzi says in The Situation of the Novel:

> . . . the English, including the most talented among them seem to have settled for the predictable pleasures of generic fiction. And so, for that matter, have many Americans: the categories of recent American fiction suggest a truly neo-classical strictness and diversity of genres: the Negro novel, the Jewish novel, the Depression novel, the Beat novel, the Campus novel.[7]

Furthermore, unlike Bergonzi, Thackeray does not even believe in a "novel proper"[8] that is free from such formal concerns. Vanity Fair itself is

obviously not a generic novel. As Thackeray takes some pains to emphasize, however, it is nonetheless a very formal work, with characters who are merely actors on a stage and an action that is itself controlled by frequent stage-directions like "Suppose some twelve months since the above conversation took place to have passed in the life of our poor Amelia"[9] and "We must suppose little George Osborne has ridden from Knightsbridge towards Fulham, and will stop to make inquiries at that village regarding some friends whom we have left there."[10] Clearly, for Thackeray, regardless of whether it is explicitly generic or not, fiction is always formal.

II

There is a lot to be learnt from a work like Thackeray and the Form of Fiction, and some of Loofbourow's insights are developed even further in James H. Wheatley's Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction. Important as both Loofbourow and Wheatley are as Thackeray critics, however, Thackeray's art is seriously diminished if it is seen as being merely about art itself. Thackeray's basic concerns are moral rather than aesthetic, and he is ultimately against fiction because he is against dominating approaches to life. This is already evident in Thackeray's first novel, Catherine: A Story. On the face of it, Catherine is a simple parody, an eighteenth-century cause célèbre selected from The Newgate Calendar and treated in the Newgate manner in order to lay bare the full absurdity of crime fiction. Yet what concerns Thackeray is not so much any fictional treatment of crime as crime itself. He attacks authors who take a glorified view of crime only because he sees them as obeying the same impulse as

the criminal himself, who also orders reality as he pleases. The same is also true of Thackeray's attacks on fiction elsewhere. He distrusts art because he distrusts and dislikes artifice as such.

In all this Thackeray is similar to no one so much as the writers of the 1930s. The poetry of W.H. Auden, by far the most important literary figure of this decade, always has a deliberately artificial quality, insists on being compared to popular verse and cabaret songs, and makes an attempt to renounce all claim to seriousness even when it is dealing with issues of utmost importance. Auden is a poet whose obvious technical skill is perpetually at odds with his essential lack of faith in what he is doing. Again, one of Auden's contemporaries, Graham Greene, is a master craftsman who deliberately imprisons himself within the conventions of melodrama and the detective story. It is as if both Auden and Greene wish to be considered skilled technicians who merely fulfil the requirements of certain literary forms rather than making any statement about the world as it is. Like Thackeray, they write with a strong awareness of form, and, again like Thackeray, they distrust form because they distrust human designs on the world as such. Writing from the heart of a radically humanized world, they are anxious to find in all that is human traces of that glibness that characterizes popular songs and the spy thriller. For Greene, life is a nightmare manufactured by some divine "ministry of fear": it cannot be controlled by human beings, and simply has to be accepted. His is a religious stance similar to T.S. Eliot's:

> Who then devised the torment? Love.
> Love is the unfamiliar Name
> Behind the hands that wove

> The intolerable shirt of flame
> Which human power cannot remove.
> We only live, only suspire
> Consumed by either fire or fire.[11]

Auden, too, takes more or less the same view, and, with his characteristic mixture of humour and bitterness, is, in some ways, even closer to Thackeray. He sees all attempts to organize the world as symptoms of human hubris, and congratulates E.M. Forster for showing that reality after all resists man:

> Yes, we are Lucy, Turton, Philip: we
> Wish international evil, are delighted
> To join the jolly ranks of the benighted
>
> Where reason is denied and love ignored,
> But, as we swear our lie, Miss Avery
> Comes out into the garden with the sword.[12]

And his famous plea to James--

> . . . because there is no end
> To the vanity of our calling, make intercession
> For the treason of all clerks.[13]

--is of course a Thackerayan plea for an end to all human vanity.[14]

James H. Wheatley calls Thackeray "the poet of the ego".[15] "That," he writes, "was his true subject, and his achievement consists in our ability to recognize, in so formal an art, the life of the ego in action."[16] The life of the ego is indeed central to Thackeray's fiction. He writes of a world in which everything is under the control of the ego, a world where art has become a way of life. His greatest novel Vanity Fair is the story of a group of middle-class people in whom that bourgeois passion for humanizing the world has bred a neurotic denial of reality. These people see in each other only what they wish to see, constantly preferring the patterns they impose on life to life itself. They are all artists at heart, and the world they constitute is one in which the writer can only

see himself as a quack among quacks.

Thus Thackeray is more aware of the relationship between fiction and the aggressiveness of bourgeois society than other Victorian novelists. Contrasting the formlessness of Thackeray's art with the technical triumphs of other nineteenth-century authors, J.Y.T. Greig writes:

> The early Victorians believed in character. They also believed in characters. They took it for granted that a man (and especially a 'great man') should be this or that, and remain this or that . . . What is more, they were many of them able to achieve this stability. Hence that self-assurance which we see in Charlotte Brontë no less than in Martin Tupper, in Dickens no less than in his Pecksniff and Gradgrind, Podsnap and Pumblechook . . .[17]

This is not an altogether correct assessment. In Our Mutual Friend, for instance, Dickens goes out of his way to show that fiction, too,is a version of Podsnappery, and thus something to be wary of. Similarly in The Way We Live Now Trollope accuses Victorian society of turning life into a game to be played according to manmade rules, only to suggest later in his Autobiography that this kind of game-playing and rule-making is central to fiction as well:

> I was always going about with some castles in the air firmly built within my mind. Nor were these efforts at architecture spasmodic or subject to constant change from day to day. For weeks, for months, if I remember rightly, from year to year, I would carry on the same tale, binding myself down to certain laws, to certain proportions. . . . There can, I imagine, hardly be a more dangerous mental practice; but I have often doubted whether, had it not been my practice, I should ever have written a novel. I learned in this way to maintain an interest in a fictitious story, to dwell on a work created by my imagination, and to live in a world altogether outside the world of my own material life.[18]

Nonetheless, these novelists essentially accept the novel form, and therefore willy-nilly accept that humanizing approach to reality that is characteristic of their society. For Thackeray, on the other hand, the novel is to be rejected because all that is human is to be rejected.

III

The central theme of Thackeray's art then is, in many ways, vanity; vanity both in the sense of pride and futility. The world is non-human, and those who strive to impose their own human patterns on it are both presumptuous and foolish. Because a non-human world can be said to be God-given, the theme of vanity has religious implications as well, and Thackeray's famous comment about his characters being "people living without God in the world"[19] is perfectly serious and sincere. Indeed some of the best passages in Thackeray are those which, like that well-known passage in Vanity Fair about Miss Osborne's domestic life, depict a world in which man has become alienated from his environment by losing his religious response to it and coming to see all things as being merely there to be possessed and controlled:

> At half-past nine [her father] rose and went to the City, and she was almost free till dinner-time, to make visitations in the kitchen and to scold the servants: to drive abroad and descend upon the tradesmen, who were prodigiously respectful: to leave her cards and her papa's at the great glum respectable houses of their City friends; or to sit alone in the large drawing-room expecting visitors; and working at a huge piece of worsted by the fire, on the sofa, hard by the great Iphigenia clock which ticked and tolled with a mournful loudness in the dreary room. The great glass over the mantelpiece, faced by the other great console-glass at the opposite end of the

> room, increased and multiplied between them the brown holland bag in which the chandelier hung; until you saw these brown holland bags fading away in endless perspectives, and this apartment of Miss Osborne's seemed the centre of a system of drawing-rooms. When she removed the cordovan leather from the grand piano and ventured to play a few notes on it, it sounded with a mournful sadness, startling the dismal echoes of the house.[20]

As Auden would have said,

> Plunge your hands into the water,
> Plunge them in up to the wrist,
> Stare, stare into the basin
> And wonder what you have missed.[21]

Humanized nature is only a void, a game which rapidly becomes more senseless because it is nothing more than a game. It is only by surrendering to actual experience that man can give depth and solidity to his life, and that involves renouncing art altogether.

Yet Thackeray somehow also feels that the world is bound to remain chaotic and frustrating unless it is deliberately organized and controlled. Somewhere he has a "sneaking kindness"[22] for those individuals who manage to bend everything to their will. Again, though presenting himself as an enemy of artifice, he can subtly encourage his readers to ignore the distinction between artifice and reality. After completing that amusing catalogue of fictional genres quoted above, for instance, he comments:

> But my readers must hope for no such romance, only a homely story, and must be content with a chapter about Vauxhall, which is so short that it scarce deserves to be called a chapter at all. And yet it is a chapter and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in everybody's life that seem to be nothing, and yet affect the rest of the history?[23]

All of a sudden we are asked to forget that chapters are artificial divisions in a book, and see them as existing in life itself, which, in its turn, becomes a "history". And of course in Pendennis and The Newcomes Thackeray suddenly becomes more complacent, and starts taking a more positive view of human designs on the world. Against all this, however, there exists Thackeray's obvious distaste for human schemes of all sorts that informs all of his early works and reaches its culmination in Vanity Fair.

Because Thackeray's critique of fiction is a critique of humanism as such, his art begins with a series of parodies that attack a society that relies on language to shape its environment as it chooses. Thackeray's first two novels, Catherine and Barry Lyndon, and his Book of Snobs continue this attack, focusing on other dominating approaches to the world like crime and snobbery, and all these concerns are united into dazzling whole in Vanity Fair where Thackeray's comic vision darkens and bourgeois society is revealed as a prisoner of its own vanity, constantly contemplating its own face in all the mirrors it is supposed to hold up to nature. Vanity Fair, however, also insists that an uncontrolled life can only lead to failure and frustration, and thus with Pendennis Thackeray's art takes a more humanistic turn and starts developing towards a new pole represented by Henry Esmond which, though not the last of Thackeray's novels, is clearly the logical end of the second phase of his career.

Notes

[1] Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950 (London, 1958), p. 95.

[2] Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times", Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, 4 vols (London, 1839), ii, 146-147.

[3] See Nineteenth Century Fiction, 4 (1949-50), 325-328.

[4] See F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (London, 1948), p. 21.

[5] Letters, i, 20.

[6] Works, xi, 60-61.

[7] The Situation of the Novel, p. 20.

[8] Ibid., 16.

[9] Works, xi, 447.

[10] Ibid., 482.

[11] "Little Gidding".

[12] "Sonnets from China XXI".

[13] "At the Grave of Henry James".

[14] Barbara Hardy, who uses two quotations from Auden as epigraphs to the last chapter of her The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray, appears to have noticed the essential similarity between the two writers.

[15] James H. Wheatley, Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1969), p. 5.

[16] Ibid., p. 146.

[17] J.Y.T. Greig, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (Oxford, 1950), p. 2.

[18] An Autobiography, Chapter 3.

[19] Letters, ii, 309.

[20] Works, xi, 538-539.

[21] "As I walked out one Evening".

[22] Letters, i, 433.

[23] Works, xi, 61.

Chapter Four

IN THE PRISON-HOUSE OF LANGUAGE: SOME EARLY PARODIES

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I

In recent years Thackeray's early work has started to attract more and more attention. Most critics now seem to feel that his output between roughly 1836 and 1847 contributed significantly to his development as a writer. One recent critic, John Carey, has even gone so far as to claim that these works constitute, along with Vanity Fair which began appearing in 1847, the quintessential Thackeray.[1] Similar claims are advanced by John Loofbourow and James H. Wheatley in, respectively, Thackeray and the Form of Fiction and Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction. Both these critics feel that Thackeray's early career, consisting as it does chiefly of parody and "developments from parody",[2] prepared the way for his subsequent interest in the nature of the relationship between human subjectivity and reality. Loofbourow thinks that Thackeray's lifelong fascination with literary conventions is to be explained by the fact that his art began with parody, and Wheatley sees a concern with the ways in which the human mind imposes itself on reality as already central to Thackeray's early fiction.

As Wheatley points out, Thackeray's early writings display a strong interest in language. Language is of course one of the most

basic ways of humanizing reality. It replaces alien, anonymous, immediately present objects by human words, and Thackeray is interested not only in language as such but also form in a very broad sense. People use words because they wish to impose form on reality, and the more frenzied their attempt to control reality gets, the more shrill, hollow and absurd the words they use become. Loofbourow explains how in Thackeray's fiction the emphasis is not on objective events but the ways in which these events are experienced by the participating characters, and claims that Thackeray relies on the sheer suggestive power of words to convey subjective experience. He writes:

> Thackeray's prose is an innovation in English fiction—a major element in the transition from the novels of Fielding or even the Brontës to the novels of Henry James and E.M. Forster. Thackeray was the first English novelist to create a narrative medium in which form and content are derived from the expressive patterns of the language itself. For example, he can produce an emotional climax by means of allusive verbal effects where there is literally no "plot" climax in the narrative action. Earlier English novelists set forth a preconceived incident in language designed primarily for communication. In Thackeray, intense, suggestive images give to literal event a further dimension, or even discredit appearance and create a divergent imaginative reality of their own. . . . the words are themselves the dramatic event.[3]

This is a very interesting observation, and, among other things, it enables Loofbourow to make a highly original and suggestive interpretation of Vanity Fair. He hits on one of the primary meanings of the title of Thackeray's novel when he suggests that in Vanity Fair the objective world is empty of any real content and becomes significant only to the extent that it gets permeated by the subjective hopes, fears

and obsessions of the principal characters. The drama that the reader experiences is perpetually only the internal drama of some nervous, acutely sensitive consciousness investing objective events with a significance that they in fact do not possess:

> The result is that Vanity Fair's objective plot-sequence does not correspond to the novel's effective dramatic form. Since the actors respond not to external facts but to inner images represented by allusive motifs and expressive textures, the literal incidents of the novel's "plot" are not correlated with its imaginative events. . . . Again, in the dramatic and central Waterloo episode, literal event is peripheral: malice, jealousy, panic are its subjective phenomena; its only objective incident is dismissed in the last sentence, and is never emotionally or dramatically represented in the narrative context--"Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead."[4]

Loofbourow might have added that not only is the only objective event of any real significance in this chapter dismissed in the last sentence but it is also relegated to a mere relative clause. Thackeray does not even say, "Amelia was praying and George was lying on his face, dead", bringing subjective experience and objective reality to the same level of significance; he says, "Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead." The emphasis, in short, is on Amelia's subjective experience, and not the objective fact of George's death. Yet one feels that Loofbourow exaggerates certain features of Thackeray's art in order to make his point. Thackeray is not after all Virginia Woolf, and he does not wish to dispense with plot and make the rendering of subjective experience the chief concern of fiction. Admittedly he joins in the game as much as any of his characters. When,

for instance, he describes Amelia's parting from George before Waterloo, he manages to convey a profound sense of doom that the actual event itself lacks:

> She was wrapped in a white morning dress, her hair falling on her shoulders, and her large eyes fixed and without light. By way of helping on the preparations for the departure, and showing that she too could be useful at a moment so critical, this poor soul had taken up a sash of George's from the drawers whereon it lay, and followed him to and fro with the sash in her hand, looking on mutely as his packing proceeded. She came out and stood, leaning at the wall, holding this sash against her bosom, from which the heavy net of crimson dropped like a large stain of blood.[5]

Although somewhat qualified by the narrator's ambiguous "this poor soul", this is of course pure melodrama. The woman in white with the dishevelled hair and the staring eyes is a figure from the stage, and Thackeray is obviously adding "a further dimension" to reality with great relish. But it should not be forgotten that Thackeray is also critical of such subjectivity. A passage like this may be meant to be taken at face value, but it is not at all unlike some passages in Thackeray's parodies, where melodrama is relentlessly attacked. As an American critic with an innate belief that it is more important for literature to be internally consistent than to represent accurately anything outside itself, Loofbourow is on the whole much too ready to praise Thackeray for traits towards which Thackeray himself has an ambiguous attitude, and which would strike most British critics as symptomatic of artistic and moral failure.

In fact what Loofbourow says of Thackeray by way of praise is strongly reminiscent of F.R. Leavis' famous criticism of Conrad. Speaking

of The Heart of Darkness, Leavis says:

> By means of this art of vivid, essential record, in terms of things seen and incidents experienced by a main agent in the narrative, and particular contacts and exchanges with other human agents, the overwhelming sinister and fantastic "atmosphere" is engendered. Ordinary greed, stupidity and moral squalor are made to look like behaviour in a lunatic asylum against the vast and oppressive mystery of the surroundings, rendered potently in terms of sensation.[6]

Here, behind Leavis' apparent approval of Conrad's techniques there is already an implied criticism. Conrad has dramatized events, making ordinary greed and stupidity appear more mysterious and powerful than they actually are. The voice we hear is in fact the voice of Thackeray in Catherine protesting against the glorification of violence and crime. Later, Leavis explains that Conrad achieves his effects by means of a special use of language. Marlowe's nervous consciousness, ceaselessly qualifying everything that it comes into contact with, creates a mystery ex nihilo. Coleridge once drew attention to the scarcity of adjectives in the Iliad and claimed that this indicated that at this point the Greeks had not yet attained subjectivity.[7] Marlowe, by contrast, suffers, as Leavis indicates, from "adjectival insistence".[8] Everything he witnesses is "inscrutable", "inconceivable", "unspeakable", "immense", "brooding" etc.

> Conrad must here stand convicted of borrowing the arts of the magazine-writer (who has borrowed his, shall we say, from Kipling and Poe) in order to impose on his readers and on himself, for thrilled response, a "significance" that is merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can't produce. The insistence betrays the absence, the willed "intensity"

> the nullity. . . . If he cannot through the concrete presentment of incident, setting and image invest the words with the terrific something that, by themselves, they fail to convey, then no amount of adjectival and ejaculatory emphasis will do it.[9]

Indeed the less the reader has to hold on to objectively the more bombastic Conrad's art becomes, finally degenerating into such sentences as:

> It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.[10]

That the words should themselves be the dramatic event, then, does not strike Leavis as an artistic triumph but as a radical weakness. There is a lot in this that Thackeray would have agreed with, and of course Leavis makes another Thackerayan point when he suggests that Conrad's style at its worst becomes reminiscent of pulp fiction.

Indeed, rather than celebrating the expressive power of language, Thackeray in fact strongly distrusts language and the subjectivity it conveys. Language is of course an important element of bourgeois ideology. A society wishing to impose its will on its environment will always begin by putting that environment into words. In The Rise of the Novel Ian Watt discredits his own claim that bourgeois society is committed to realism when he explains that the rise of the novel is connected with the rise of a reading public. Bourgeois society is in fact not realistic but literate; it is given to reading rather than experiencing, and it is interested not in reality as such but only in the words into which reality can be put. Attempts have of course been

made in our time by Wittgenstein and Heidegger and others to point out the essential subjectivity of language, and most recently print itself, where words are no longer experienced simultaneously with the objects that they are supposed to denote, as they might be in speech, and therefore become completely independent of reality, has been attacked by Marshall McLuhan. These critiques, however, merely indicate that language is so widely respected that it has become necessary to draw attention to some of its defects.

Significantly, such critiques also come from North America and the German-speaking world, places where there is a deep-seated belief in man's right to humanize his environment. If no English critique of language exists that would bear comparison with them, this is partly because none in fact is needed. British English, given to exaggeration and under-statement, which is of course a form of exaggeration, in and of itself emphasizes the fact that language frequently adds a further dimension to things.

Any native speaker of English who habitually uses expressions like "smashing", "lovely", "rather", "a touch" etc. in contexts where they are clearly quite out of place knows that language distorts reality. What strikes the foreigner as pomposity of affectation is frequently only a strange form of humility, a plea on the speaker's part not to be taken too seriously, which, when noticed, of course, this time leads to the familiar accusation of hypocrisy. By contrast, the German language, constantly aiming at precision, carefully differentiating between nuances and possessing an inexhaustible capacity for coining new words, creates an entire secondary linguistic world in which words actually seem to represent reality. As a result Germans are apt to believe that

faith can be separated from good works, that speech is as good as action, and that the best way to protect society is to extract loyalty oaths from its members, while the English constantly doubt the efficacy of the word and neither worship nor fear it as much as their cousins.

For obvious reasons this English tendency to look through, behind and beyond language finds a particularly intense expression in Thackeray. Thackeray distrusts cultural artifacts and has little faith in the possibility of "significant form". His entirely misspelt Yellowplush Papers anticipates McLuhan in drawing the reader's attention to the fact that what he is reading is after all print and should not be confused with reality as such. Furthermore, Thackeray sees language as an attempt to re-organize reality. In language begins that life of the mind that knows no boundaries, and he makes it his business to compare form with reality and to prick all bubbles of illusion.

II

Both Loofbourow and Wheatley see one of Thackeray's early pieces called "The Professor" as one of his first attempts to deal with some of the problems with which he is concerned, although they are not equally convinced of the attempt's success. For Loofbourow "The Professor" is "a crude burlesque in the eighteenth-century manner",[11] while Wheatley writes:

> In this early piece of short fiction, Thackeray already shows an extraordinary sophistication. Written for Fraser's and published in 1837, it is a complex little piece in two chapters, made up of several different kinds of jokes. It is surprising how well they all fit together: there is more than an apprentice ability in the style, which by its management of modulations and intermixtures makes the story still enjoyable.[12]

The truth, as usual, would seem to fall somewhere between these two extremes. In some ways "The Professor" is rather simple. The story of one Adeliza Grampus, a novel-reading daughter of a fishmonger, who constantly tries to live, act and think like a heroine from sentimental fiction, it is of course the old Don Quixote joke brought up to date. Only, as such, it reminds one of Jorge Luis Borges' story of the man who re-wrote Don Quixote. As in Borges' story, a new historical context renders this second Don Quixote "richer than the original",[13] making the reader realize that far from becoming irrelevant with the passage of time, Cervantes' insights have actually gained an additional force.

In Cervantes' Don Quixote there is a balance of forces. While Don Quixada, an impoverished nobleman withdrawn from the world, tries to live out a fantasy, his servant and companion Sancho Panza with a timeless peasant wisdom remains open to experience and sees reality in all its irredeemable mundaneness. Thackeray, on the other hand, writes from the heart of a culture in which surrender to experience is no longer necessary and man is capable of imposing his will on nature. His characters perpetually rebuild reality in their own image with the aid of one of the simplest and most effective human tools, language.

Indeed the world of "The Professor" is one that is entirely

shaped by human beings. Adeliza is a fishmonger's daughter. The fishmonger, however, is moving up in the world: he has become an alderman. This good fortune has enabled him to send his daughter to a genteel finishing-school for young ladies that rather resembles the school attended by Amelia and Becky in Vanity Fair, and one assumes that Adeliza's mother, who has named her after a romance heroine, has also derived a few benefits from the change in the family's fortunes, like spare time for light reading. It is significant that Thackeray already draws a connection between snobbery and fashionable fiction, finishing-schools and romance. The tendency in both cases is not to leave nature alone but to impose an artificial form on it. This does not of course mean that Thackeray believes that everyone should know their station and aspire no higher. Rather, he wishes to contrast genuine moral progress and education through experience with the kind of false veneer with which rank and title and fashionable schools for young ladies can provide one. There is little to be gained by turning a fishmonger into an alderman: one can become a better person only by becoming kinder, less selfish, and more sensitive and generous, and that involves being perpetually aware of the real needs of the individuals around one rather than escaping into absurd dreams of grandeur.

The escape, however, has already taken place and its effects can be witnessed everywhere. From the beginning Adeliza's genteel first name is uneasily wedded to the absurd surname Grampus that serves to attract attention to the family's real social origins. Reality, though, is of course unlikely to bother Adeliza very much. She indulges in transformations of it as absurd as the ones attempted by her parents.

At the school she attends she falls in love with a dancing master, a Cockney imposter who calls himself Dandolo and professes--the title of the story is a pun--to be a mysterious foreigner, and immediately starts imagining that he is Roderick Ferdinand, the 38th Count of Dandolo. The situation is already funny, but Thackeray compounds the joke by making Adeliza first realize the absurdity of her fantasies and then find a way of returning to them:

> "Oh Binx!" would Adeliza continue, fondly pressing the arm of that young lady, "is it not passing strange that one of that mighty ducal race should have lived to this day, and lived to love me? But I, too," Adeliza would add, archly, "am, as you know, a daughter of the sea".[14]

This sort of absurdity is sustained by a special use of language. The words the characters use constantly give reality a particular form. A glass of water is referred to as "the desired beverage",[15] Mr Grampus' shop becomes "the retail establishment",[16] and letters are "devoured"[17] rather than read. Furthermore, it is necessary to ignore facts and concrete detail in order to be able to play this game. Thus when Dandolo, indulging Adeliza's delusions, claims that he has been exiled from his Venetian home because of the Prussian occupation, it makes no difference that Prussia never went to war against Venice. Venice and Prussia sound historical enough and in the absence of anything objective to hold on to mere words themselves have to do the trick. Thackeray himself is of course notoriously incapable of maintaining an illusion of verisimilitude. More interested in imposing patterns on experience than in reflecting it, he will call his characters by different names in different places, change his opinion about their ages, and ignore

chronology. Here, however, like any true realist, he demands meticulous attention to detail.

Nor does Thackeray spare the narrator of this tale. The narrator, who is a romancer himself, is as much an enemy of reality as any of his characters. He is perpetually moralizing in an attempt to convince the reader of the edifying nature of his story:

> The reader will gather from this, that Dandolo's after-conduct at Miss Pidge's was not satisfactory,--nor was it; and may every mistress of such an establishment remember that confidence can be sometimes misplaced; that friendship is frequently but another name for villainy.[18]

Such a passage, however, is, as Wheatley writes, "sonic melodrama because it depends so heavily on the contrast between the orotund sound of the narrator's reflective digression and its banal content."[19] Moreover, the narrator shows himself as capable of wilfully ignoring reality as Adeliza herself. He will not see the truth about Dandolo:

> Although the Signor's name was decidedly foreign, so English was his appearance, and so entirely did he disguise his accent, that it was impossible to tell of what place he was a native, if not of London, and of the very heart of it; for he had caught completely the peculiarities which distinguish the so-called cockney part of the City, and obliterated his h's and doubled his v's, as if he had been for all his life in the neighbourhood of Bow bells.[20]

Reality, however, keeps intruding. Adeliza begins her career in romance by falling in love with "the young man who opened natives in the shop"[22] and attempting to "slay" herself quite prosaically with an oyster-knife,

and finally the truth about the narrator himself is exposed. He is still moralizing at the end of the story:

> Gentles, my tale is told. If it may have deterred one soul from vice, my end is fully answered: if it may have taught to schoolmistresses carefulness, to pupils circumspection, to youth the folly of sickly sentiment, the pain of bitter deception, to manhood the crime, the meanness of gluttony, the vice which it occasions, and the wicked passions it fosters; if these, or any of these, have been taught by the above tale, the writer seeks no other reward.[21]

The printer, however, has made a mistake, and a postscript to the manuscript apparently unintentionally included in the printed version reads:

> NOTE--Please send the proceeds as requested per letter: the bearer being directed not to give up the manuscript without.[22]

If there is a moral to this tale, it does not come directly from the narrator but rather lies in what Thackeray makes him reveal inadvertently. When Adeliza robs her father's till in order to send money to Dandolo, an innocent shop-assistant is blamed:

> The next day the till of the shop was empty, and a weeping apprentice dragged before the Lord Mayor. It is true that no signs of money were found on him; it is true that he protested his innocence; but he was dismissed the alderman's service, and passed a month at Bridewell because Adeliza Grampus had a needy lover.[23]

Adeliza casually and callously dismisses all this in a letter to Dandolo:

> A sudden thought! Our apprentice is dismissed. My father dines abroad; I shall be in the retail establishment all the night, alone.[24]

Such people, Thackeray is saying, are too absorbed in their own dreams to become conscious of the rights and needs of others, and will in fact not hesitate to sacrifice them selfishly.

"The Professor" of course has its limitations. Though not just a "crude burlesque", it is a rather simple piece involving characters who are little more than caricatures. As usual, however, the method that Thackeray employs has its advantages. Limitations, after all, not only keep certain things out but also keep certain things in, and by simplifying his characters Thackeray manages to deflect attention from them to the socio-economic forces they are driven by. The reader looks straight through Adeliza at her social origins and recognizes her as a typical member of a class that constantly has to impose itself on the world, and the nature of this imposition is once again made clear for him by another short experiment in parody entitled Novels by Eminent Hands that Thackeray published ten years later.

III

Surprisingly, Loofbourow does not even mention Novels by Eminent Hands. Wheatley, however, sees it as one of the most important of Thackeray's early works and discusses it at some length. Indeed, detached and didactic like "The Professor", this work is extremely helpful in identifying some of Thackeray's concerns. Originally serialized in Punch as "Punch's Prize Novelists", it consists of a

series of parodies of some of the most famous authors of Thackeray's day, the most important of which is a parody of Bulwer Lytton entitled "George de Barnwell".

Based on Lillo's popular tragedy The London ~~Apprentice~~ Merchant, "George de Barnwell" is, among other things, one of Thackeray's earliest works in which the social boundaries of his fiction are defined. Its world is essentially the middle-class world of the City whose younger members frequent the West End and try to imitate the "high life" they witness there. Thus, although the aristocracy, the intelligentsia and "the lower orders" are peripherally introduced, Thackeray's interest here, as in his major works like Vanity Fair and The Newcomes, is in the urban bourgeoisie. This is no doubt an old-fashioned commercial bourgeoisie, in some ways very different from the predominantly industrial bourgeoisie of the mid-nineteenth century that in any case came to power in the Midlands rather than in London. Notwithstanding these differences, however, it subscribes to an ideology that is characteristic of bourgeois society in any form, and it is above all as a spokesman for this ideology that Thackeray attacks Bulwer Lytton.

As can be gathered from "George de Barnwell", something called "the Ideal" is one of the cornerstones of Lytton's "philosophy". Lytton's novels, so popular in Thackeray's time, are hardly readable today. As a theoretician of fiction, though, he is still of some interest owing to his attempts to popularize the ideas of the German romantics in England in the early 1830s,[25] and it is probable that "the Ideal" was derived from the German philosophers that Lytton was in the habit of reading and quoting. In philosophy the term "ideal" refers to anything that is a product of the human mind. Thus, for

instance, words are ideal while the objects they denote are real. All idealist philosophies claim that reality is in its essence ideal. Objects are the words man uses for objects, experience is the patterns the human mind detects in experience and so on. What has not assumed a form "for us" cannot be experienced and therefore it is nonsensical to talk of its existence. This insistence on replacing reality by form is fully in keeping with the main trends of a culture capable of imposing its will on nature and, of course, only a step away from the neurotic's desperate adherence to the version of reality in his mind. What imposes form on reality in "George de Barnwell" is once again language and it is against language that Thackeray's attacks are directed.

Language, Thackeray keeps reminding his readers, does not need to represent anything at all even when it seems meticulously descriptive:

> In the midst of the shop and its gorgeous contents sat one who, to judge from his appearance (though 'twas a difficult task, as, in sooth, his back was turned), had just reached that happy period of life when the Boy is expanding into the Man.[26]

"To judge from his appearance" is a perfectly ordinary phrase but it is not always possible to say what it means. What is one to make of someone who judges from their appearance people seen from behind? Language, in short, is more interested on imposing patterns on reality than in representing it as it is, and the more fantastic those patterns become the more absurd becomes the language in which they are expressed. Thackeray's narrator who constantly speaks of "the True", "the Beautiful", "the Eternal" and "the Ideal" strongly resembles Conrad's

Marlowe obsessed with "the implacable", "the inscrutable" and "the unspeakable". Like Leavis, Thackeray protests against the meaninglessness of these expressions:

> Yes, my pretty one, what is the Unintelligible but the Ideal? what is the Ideal but the Beautiful? what the Beautiful but the Eternal? And the Spirit of Man that would commune with these is like Him who wanders by the thina poluphloisboio thalasses, and shrinks awestruck before that Azure Mystery.[27]

A mystery indeed, this is of course a completely unwarranted dramatization of reality and can only be sustained by wilfully ignoring concrete facts. Like Adeliza Grampus, Sir E.L.B.L. Bart., the narrator of "George de Barnwell" is happily ignorant of history. When the young hero George de Barnwell visits Button's Coffeehouse in the Mall he is seen talking to Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson. The fact that Dr Johnson was only ten years old when Addison died does not seem to bother the narrator. Thackeray comments:

> Some trifling inaccuracies may be remarked in the ensuing brilliant little chapter; but it must be remembered that the author wished to present an age at a glance; and the dialogue is quite as fine and correct as that in the "Last of the Barons" or in "Eugene Aram", or other works of our author, in which Sentiment and History, or the True and Beautiful, are united.[28]

More importantly, however, this sort of subjectivity that constantly violates reality can express itself in actual violence. Needing money to continue playing the role of a gentleman, George Barnwell robs and kills his uncle, a merchant in the City, and then refuses to acknowledge

the reality of his crime:

> Were it Crime, I should feel Remorse. Where there is no Remorse, Crime cannot exist. I am not sorry: therefore, I am innocent.[29]

Unlike one of Lytton's heroes, Hegel, then, Thackeray does not believe that the real is ideal, or as Hegel would call it, rational. It is merely rationalized and sometimes it can be rationalized in absurd and dangerous ways. Sir E.L.B.L. Bart. who sees himself as a wise man among fools and despises his fellow creatures for sticking to mundane reality and being unable to see "the True" and "the Beautiful" is a pretentious creature who reminds one of Hegel's demand that ordinary consciousness should learn "to stand on its head" in order to see the grand schemes in which ordinary things participate, and, like Aristophanes, Thackeray tries to bring this "philosopher" down from the clouds he inhabits, even though of course the baronet's description of himself—

> And the Philosopher, as he regarded the hot strife and struggle of these Candidates in the race for Gold, thought with a sigh of the Truthful and the Beautiful, and walked on, melancholy and serene.[30]

—bears a striking resemblance to one of Thackeray's own postures, that of a lonely, unwilling participant in Vanity Fair alienated from the meaningless world around him.

Finally, Thackeray's attacks are directed against art itself. Reality defies all human schemes and art is guilty of perpetually

detecting a false order in it:

> What a marvellous gift is this, and Royal privilege of Art! To make the Ideal more credible than the Actual: to enchain our hearts, to command our hopes, our regrets, our tears for a mere brain-born Emanation: to invest with life the Incorporeal, and to glamour the cloudy into substance . . . these I say, sir, are the privileges of the Poet--the Poietes--the Maker--he moves the world, and asks no lever; if he cannot charm death into life, as Orpheus feigned to do, he can create Beauty out of Nought, and defy death by rendering Thought Eternal.[31]

Thus George de Barnwell. But of course making the ideal more credible than the actual, creating beauty out of nought and rendering thought eternal are precisely the charges that Thackeray wishes to bring against art. Art, he insists, merely makes us prisoners of language and encourages us to organize the world in a particular way instead of seeing it in its full, immediate reality.

The other parodies in this series are not as important as "George de Barnwell". Aimed against writers like Disraeli, Charles Lever and James Fenimore Cooper, they are mostly extended ethnic jokes based on the idea that Jews, Irishmen and Americans will tend to see the world in ways most flattering to Jews, Irishmen and Americans. "George de Barnwell", too, is of course somewhat simple; but, along with "The Professor", it presents a disturbing vision of a world gone wild, in which the attempt to possess and control reality has replaced ordinary human virtues like sympathy for others, caution, delicacy and sensitivity.

Notes

[1] See John Carey, Thackeray: Prodigal Genius (London, 1977).

[2] Wheatley uses this phrase to describe works like Catherine, Barry Lyndon and The Book of Snobs.

[3] John Loofbourow, Thackeray and the Form of Fiction (Princeton, 1964), pp. 4-5.

[4] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

[5] Works, xi, 371-372.

[6] F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (London, 1948), p. 176.

[7] Table Talk, 9.7.1832.

[8] The Great Tradition, p. 177.

[9] Ibid., p. 180.

[10] Quoted by Leavis, p. 177.

[11] Thackeray and the Form of Fiction, p. 16.

[12] Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 11.

[13] J.L. Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote", trans. J.E. Irby, Labyrinths, ed. D.A. Yates and J.E. Irby (New York, 1962), p. 42.

[14] Works, i, 114.

[15] Ditto.

[16] Ibid., 122.

[17] Ibid., 120.

[18] Ibid., 112.

[19] Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 12.

[20] Works, i, 112.

[21] Ibid., 129.

[22] Ditto.

[23] Ibid., 122.

[24] Ditto.

[25] Excerpts from Bulwer Lytton's essays on fiction can be found throughout Richard Stang's The Theory of the Novel in England.

[26] Works, viii, 86.

[27] Ibid., 94-95.

[28] Ibid., 89-90.

[29] Ibid., 97.

[30] Ibid., 85.

[31] Ibid., 92-93.

Chapter Five

THACKERAY'S APPRENTICESHIP:

CATHERINE, BARRY LYNDON AND THE BOOK OF SNOBS

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I

In "The Professor" and "George de Barnwell" the main characters ignore reality and weave their own patterns, behaving like novelists and finding in everything and everyone they encounter echoes of a central theme that they are occupied with. This sort of "conceptual imprisonment", as Wheatley calls it,[1] is of course a perfect target for parody and Thackeray uses it to satirize some of the most fundamental obsessions behind the fiction of his day. Only, he sees at the same time that the kind of subjectivity he is interested in is the property of a particular social class that is convinced that reality can be shaped at will. His characters not only have certain views of the world but also make sure that the world lives up to these views, not hesitating to have recourse to crime to protect their dreams, and this turns them from harmless eccentrics and deluded fools into virtually possessed figures ready to do anything in order to ensure the ultimate triumph of their vision of things.

Thus Thackeray's concerns are, in a way, reminiscent of Shakespeare's who also associates the kind of control the artist exercises over life

with the way in which an Iago or a Prospero bends everything to his will, and the important thing to notice is that for Thackeray, as for Shakespeare, what stands behind this obsession with power is the rise of a new society valuing the ability of man to control his own life; Tudor England in Shakespeare's case, and Victorian England in Thackeray's. It is not, in short, the case that, as Wheatley claims, Thackeray does not examine the causes of "conceptual imprisonment" or ends up blaming human nature.[2] His interest in the form of fiction, detected by American critics like Loofbourow and Wheatley, is directly related to the social and moral concerns of his novels examined by a British critic like Barbara Hardy, and everything that he wrote in the ten years between the publication of "The Professor" and Novels by Eminent Hands demonstrates his deepening understanding of the social causes behind the attempts of his characters to control reality.

What Thackeray produced during this period makes up a substantial portion of his total output, and it is hardly possible to turn to even the most minor of these early pieces without coming across some of his fundamental concerns. Nonetheless, three major works, in which the ideas expressed schematically in the story of Adeliza Grampus and the parody of Bulwer Lytton are developed and refined, can be usefully selected for discussion. These are Thackeray's first two novels, Catherine: A Story and The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq., and his prototype for Vanity Fair, The Book of Snobs. All three display various traits that critics have always regarded as characteristic of Thackeray. Among these are reappearing characters and a devotion to certain cities and localities, two elements that Geoffrey Tillottson sees as contributing to the

"Thackerayan Oneness".[3] Thus, for instance, the Galgensteins, one of whose descendants seduces Catherine in the novel of that name, reappear in Barry Lyndon. Again, Barry Lyndon takes the reader on that obligatory tour of the Continent that includes the low countries, Paris, and various parts of Germany, while The Book of Snobs introduces a wide variety of characters, like Major Ponto, Sir Huddlestone Fuddlestone, and the Marquis of Farintosh, all of whom are to reappear in Thackeray's later works. On another level a different sort of unity is provided by Thackeray's continuing interest in parody. The emphasis that the realist tradition places on originality ultimately demands that ideally no novelist should know that things called novels exist before he writes one himself. Thackeray gets around this difficulty by showing how little established genres, whose existence he cannot possibly ignore, reflect reality. Catherine is a parody of crime fiction, and Barry Lyndon a parody of the "Irish" novel, and even The Book of Snobs makes several attempts to discredit fashionable literature. Yet these works owe their ultimate unity neither to the "Thackerayan Oneness" defined by Tillottson nor to their author's interest in parody but to the fact that they all deal with the same cold, aggressive, ruthless society.

Catherine, the first of Thackeray's novels, is perpetually underrated precisely because it is read simply as a parody. First serialized in Fraser's in 1838-39, this sordid tale of a young woman who, with the aid of her illegitimate son and another accomplice, murders her husband in order to marry her lover was generally regarded as unpleasant reading by Victorian critics. Thackeray himself chose to exclude it from his Miscellanies, published in 1856, and until George Saintsbury decided to

include it in The Oxford Thackeray of 1908 in its original form it was reprinted only in truncated versions that left out some of the more gruesome scenes it depicts. Modern criticism, however, has hardly improved matters by dismissing the moralistic concerns of the Victorians while continuing, like them, to view Catherine as nothing but a parody. Thackeray no doubt intended his novel to be an attack on the covert idealization of crime he detected in the so-called "Newgate fiction" of his day. He wished to expose the truth about criminals by showing how greedy, brutal, stupid and mean they really are, and hoped that he could write "the crime novel to end crime novels". Yet, however important this task may have seemed to him, it is of course hardly sufficient to turn Catherine into a great novel. Hundreds of TV viewers, after all, protest against the glorification of violence every day, and a distinguished author who appears to reiterate the banal moral they preach can only lead his critics to one of the two dead ends of literary studies, unnecessary scholarship or formalist criticism. As a result contemporary commentators on Catherine either dig up those long-forgotten novels by W.H. Ainsworth and Bulwer Lytton, that are the objects of Thackeray's attack, or focus on the function of his narrator "Ikey Solomons, Jr. Esq." in order to enliven their discussion of what they regard as a somewhat slight text.[4] This adherence to Thackeray's declared intentions and the critical tradition based on them is, to say the least, unfortunate because Catherine is perhaps the most interesting of his novels. It is tempting to speculate on what it might have become had Thackeray not used it to pursue too many ends at once. But even as it stands it contains the most devastating critique of bourgeois society that he ever undertook. If, as the title of Barbara Hardy's The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray

implies, there is a radical Thackeray, he is to be found above all in this first novel which he began writing as a young man of twenty-seven.

Parody is only one of the several aims of Catherine simply because Thackeray is interested in criticizing not so much "Newgate fiction" as the society in which it thrived. Occasionally Ikey Solomons Jr., who comes from a family of thieves and is named after a famous London criminal, is brought forward to cast doubts on the values of practitioners of crime fiction, and also, quite incongruously, to act as a spokesman for his author. In his own person he applauds crime, but then he melts into Thackeray and claims to be sickened by the grim tale he is relating. Apparently Thackeray, certain that his point will be understood, does not bother about the incompatible positions he is forcing his narrator to adopt in making it. At other times, however, Solomons all but disappears and the story takes its own course. Among modern critics John Loofbourow comes closest to understanding what happens in these sections when he remarks that "Bulwer Lytton's novels had accustomed the public to a satisfaction it would not own by name."[5] Unfortunately Loofbourow does not explain why Lytton's fiction should have been so satisfying. One feels that Thackeray's own answer to this question would have been similar to what Ian Watt says of Defoe's Moll Flanders in The Rise of the Novel:

> The pre-eminence of Moll Flanders among Defoe's novels is in no way the result of its being fundamentally different in subject and attitude from Robinson Crusoe. The heroine, it is true, is a criminal; but the high incidence of crime in our civilization is itself mainly due to a wide diffusion of an individualist ideology in a society where success is not easily or equally available to all its members. Moll Flanders, like Rastignac and Julien Sorel, is a characteristic product of modern individualism in assuming that she owes it to herself to achieve the highest economic and social rewards, and in using every available method to carry out her resolve.

> It is because her crimes, like the travels of Robinson Crusoe, are rooted in the dynamics of economic individualism that Moll Flanders is entirely different from the protagonists of the picaresque novel. The picaro happens to have a real historical basis--the breakdown of the feudal social order--but this is not the point of his adventures; he is not so much a complete individual personality whose actual life experiences are significant in themselves as a literary convention for the presentation of a variety of satiric observations and comic episodes. Defoe, on the other hand, presents his whores, pirates, highwaymen, shoplifters, and adventurers as ordinary people who are normal products of their environment, victims of circumstances which anyone might have experienced and which provoke exactly the same moral conflicts between means and ends as those faced by other members of society. Some of Moll Flanders's actions may be very similar to those of the picaro, but the feeling evoked by them is of a much more complete sympathy and identification: author and reader alike cannot but take her and her problems much more seriously.[6]

Thackeray mentions Moll Flanders in a footnote in Catherine and may have meant his novel to cast some light on Defoe's.[7] In any case he appears to have detected the essential similarity between Bulwer Lytton's celebration of language and art and his celebration of crime. What is admired in both instances is the ability of man to order reality as he chooses, and of course such a humanistic outlook is fully in keeping with the main tendencies of bourgeois society which the criminal merely follows by imposing his will on others. Crime is something that we have to live with simply because deep down we all admire the man who "pulled the big one", who refused to leave the conditions he lived under as he found them and triumphed over circumstances by means of his cleverness and courage. Not surprisingly, at the time of writing the Great Train Robbers are once again heroes in Britain. Again one of the most disturbing phenomena of our time is the changing nature of crime that George Orwell drew attention to in two brilliant and related essays entitled "Decline of the English Murder"

and "Raffles and Miss Blandish". Whereas in the past crimes tended to be crimes of passion, indicating an awareness of others, contemporary crimes are on the whole crimes of self-interest that indicate nothing but the determination of an individual or group of individuals to better themselves at the expense of their fellow human beings. The spirit of individualism reigns supreme.

The relationship between crime and this sort of individualism emerges most clearly in nineteenth-century fiction. Crime frequently enters Victorian novels in the form of murder, blackmail, embezzlement, swindling, or at least shady dealings with wills and property, and it is almost always seen as a special instance of the selfishness that pervades an entire society. Indeed when crime is defined as breaking the law a certain similarity is established between the criminal and the law-abiding citizen. As Hegel argued, the law paradoxically "legalizes" crime by pointing out that respect for the rights of others cannot be taken for granted and has to be made the subject of special decrees. The rise of the law in place of the multitudinous unformulated obligations of medieval life is itself, of course, a bourgeois phenomenon, and once again Britain follows older and more humane traditions by treating both the law and its enforcement unceremoniously and having neither an explicit constitution nor an armed police force. Even Britain, however, is in the end a bourgeois country and what concerns Thackeray in Catherine is the rise of a society whose spirit finds its ultimate expression in crime and the law.

Clearly Thackeray has no illusions about the nature of this society. He refers to Catherine's husband John Hayes, who is a usurer, as a "little capitalist"[8] and a "well-to-do bourgeois".[9] These words of course did not have in Thackeray's day the derogatory connotations they have subsequently

acquired, but they denoted the same section of society then as now, and Thackeray's description of Hayes in these terms is interesting, if only because he is seldom so explicit about the social and economic status of his characters. Also, of course, such epithets perfectly fit the world of Catherine which is populated by orphanage girls, rootless adventurers, small craftsmen, and petty crooks, all of whom are anxious to get away from the limited and limiting economy of the country and to avail themselves of the greater opportunities for advancement offered by the major cities, and especially, of course, by London. Crime is sometimes necessary to secure such advancement, but as Ikey Solomons' comments on Hayes's activities as a usurer indicate, legitimate business itself is scarcely better:

> What a pretty rascal history might be read in yonder greasy day-book, which never left the miser! --he never read in any other. Of what a treasure were yonder keys and purse the keepers! not a shilling they guarded but was picked from the pocket of necessity, plundered from needy wantonness, or pitilessly squeezed from starvation.[10]

The truth is that reality simply has to be coerced into obeying man's will. Echoing Carlyle, Thackeray suggests that man is dressing everything in the clothes he has chosen. At one point Catherine's illegitimate son is even apprenticed to a German tailor named Beinkleider who is "skilful in his trade after the manner of his nation, which in breeches and metaphysics--in inexpressibles and incomprehensibles--may instruct all of Europe."[11] Clearly clothes function as a metaphor for business or crime or philosophy or any of the other ways in which man forces reality to participate in his schemes. "Clothes" of this sort, it seems, are now more important than reality itself. A man's value is determined not

by what he intrinsically is but only by his rank or title, or the use to which he can be put; and apparently even objects have to take the shape assigned to them by man. One of Catherine's acquaintances, an Irish adventurer named Macshane, has already perfected that art of "living on nothing a year" to which Thackeray was to devote two chapters in Vanity Fair, and which appears here as "starvation":

> Starvation is very little when you are used to it. Some people I know even, who live on it quite comfortably, and make their daily bread by it. It had been our friend Macshane's sole profession for many years; and he did not fail to draw from it such a livelihood as was sufficient, and perhaps too good, for him.[12]

"Living on nothing" or "starvation", in many ways the economic equivalent of the kind of subjective evaluation of experience analyzed in the last chapter, is of course the natural outcome of a money economy that by placing a monetary value on objects that has nothing to do with their intrinsic worth creates a secondary financial world at a remove from actual production and consumption, and generates the kind of credit that enables even those who do not work or have small incomes to live well. Finally, of course, those who subscribe to a different worldview and believe that life cannot be controlled in this way, namely the hereditary aristocracy, are mere dazed spectators at this mad show who, cut off from the economy they were sustained by and faced with a new way of life they fail to comprehend, can only look forward to becoming increasingly more alienated, eccentric and world-weary. The single sentence that Thackeray uses to describe the ageing Count Galgenstein contains all the frustration experienced by the members of any class that suddenly has been overthrown and left to die:

> He was in that effete state to which many noblemen of his time had arrived; who were ready to believe in ghost-raising or in gold-making, or to retire into monasteries and wear hair-shirts, or to dabble in conspiracies, or to die in love with little cook-maids of fifteen, or to go mad at the refusal of a chamberlain's key.[13]

A world in which life is ceaselessly organized, controlled and made to conform to certain patterns, however, cannot sooner or later fail to create a need for its own antithesis, the sort of love that gives itself up to the full reality of its objects without wishing to dominate them in any way, and that, according to John Bayley, forms the basis of realistic literature.[14] Recently A.O.J. Cockshut has even claimed that the depiction of this kind of love is one of the chief concerns of the novel form.[15] Indeed, as Cockshut points out, it would be hard to imagine a great novel that does not involve a love affair of one sort or another, and one feels that novelists are so fascinated by love precisely because both they themselves and the world they come from are so far removed from the spontaneous acceptance of life that it implies. It has often been claimed that in bourgeois society love arises as an aberration, a revolt of sexuality against the ethic of work and profit, or of a feminine principle of affection against a masculine one of power, and novels frequently preserve this element of rebellion that love entails by depicting adulterous or quasi-adulterous relationships. Many a heroine trapped in a loveless, stifling marriage with a dull and dominating husband ends up getting attached to a man whose own healthy vitality is conditioned by love, and in this way an affirmation of what F.R. Leavis would call "Life" takes place. The

greatest novel in this tradition is obviously Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, but Anna's marriage with Karenin and her affair with Vronsky have their parallels in English literature in Dorothea's marriage with Casaubon and her subsequent attachment to Will Ladislaw. Again, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, who commits a form of adultery by rejecting the pedantic St John Rivers, who wishes to marry her, because of her love for the virile Mr Rochester, whom she cannot marry, merely defends her own femininity against a predominantly masculine world, and as Margaret Drabble's first novel, A Summer Birdcage, indicates, this pattern is still attractive to novelists.[16]

In Catherine, too, love ultimately strikes. The longer Catherine lives with her mean-spirited and jealous husband the dearer the memory of Count Galgenstein, her early seducer, becomes to her, and when the Count reappears in England she renews her old intimacy with him. This looks like the familiar adultery pattern but, alas, there is one important difference. Catherine's is not the sort of love that respects the reality and integrity of its object, not a triumph of spontaneous sexuality over neurosis but a genuine obsessive neurotic attachment. In her imagination she transforms the burnt-out and virtually senile old Count into a genuinely attractive figure, imposing on him an image in keeping with her desires. Here Thackeray demonstrates a new understanding of the position of love in the kind of world he depicts. While a novelist like Dickens may believe that the sort of selfless devotion to others a Florence Dombey is capable of can survive in an aggressive and manipulative society, Thackeray seems to regard this as a fond illusion. Even when they are in love, his characters merely regard each other as raw material to be shaped as they choose. His comment on Tom Jones--

> Why Tom Jones in my holding is as big a rogue as Blifil. Before God he is--I mean the man is selfish according to his nature as Blifil according to his.[17]

--obviously applies also to Catherine and her husband, the love experienced by one of whom is every bit as selfish as the greed displayed by the other. Furthermore, Thackeray rejects the cult of femininity as well. Whatever women may be in themselves, in the world of Catherine they are as wilful and perverse as men, and just as incapable of real love:

> The ladies--Heaven bless them!--are, as a general rule, coquettes from babyhood upwards. Little she's of three years old play little airs and graces upon small heroes of five; simpering misses of nine make attacks upon young gentlemen of twelve; and at sixteen, a well-grown girl, under encouraging circumstances, --say, she is pretty in a family of ugly elder sisters, or an only child and heiress, or a humble wench at a country inn, like our fair Catherine--is at the very pink and prime of her coquetry: they will jilt you at that age with an ease and arch infantine simplicity that never can be surpassed in maturer years.[18]

This refusal to believe in the ultimate triumph of love gives Thackeray something of a unique place in English literature. For novelists as disparate as Dickens, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence personal relationships provide an escape from a meaningless and destructive society. Of course in Dickens's Great Expectations doubts are cast on the possibility of such an escape when Mr Wemmick has to turn his house literally into a castle in order to protect his relationship to "the aged P." against the influence of a corrupting world, but Thackeray goes one step further and informs his readers that the outer walls have fallen and the enemy is now within the gates. Barbara Hardy points out that in Thackeray's major novels the kind of rigid duality that Dickens explores in Wemmick is

transferred to living characters like Amelia, Pen, and Ethel who, spoiled by society, yet carry within themselves a capacity for love.[19] In Catherine, however, the major characters prove themselves as ruthless and exploitative in love as in all their other activities, and only characters mentioned in Ikey Solomons's asides seem to possess an inner core unpenetrated by the values of society:

> . . . Love, like Death, plays havoc among the pauperûm tabernas, and sports with rich and poor, wicked and virtuous alike. I have often fancied, for instance, on seeing the haggard pale young old-clothesman, who wakes the echoes of our street with his nasal cry of 'Clo'!'--I have often, I said, fancied that, besides the load of exuvial coats and breeches under which he staggers, there is another weight on him--an atrior cura at his tail--and while his unshorn lips and nose together are performing that mocking, boisterous, Jack-indifferent cry of 'Clo', clo'!' who knows what woeful utterances are crying from the heart within?[20]

Thus, it appears, the ordinary man, though he is a dealer in clothes, still remains capable of a certain amount of tenderness; but this tenderness is of course peripheral to the normal functioning of society and does not get dramatically represented in the action of the novel.

Separated in this way from the English tradition by the strong emphasis he places on the corruptibility of love, Thackeray is closer in his beliefs to Flaubert than to any other novelist. The adulterous relationship at the centre of Catherine that turns out to be so radically different from the relationships in Anna Karenina and Middlemarch and Jane Eyre, which it superficially resembles, brings to mind Madame Bovary where Emma Bovary's sordid affairs are seen to be tainted by the same insensitivity, egoism, and lack of imagination that characterize her

husband Charles. Flaubert is the key figure in a tradition that runs counter to the one represented by Tolstoy. For this tradition personal relationships cannot remain intact in an unhealthy society, and if Tolstoy has an heir in Margaret Drabble, Flaubert's current heir is the dissident Czech writer Milan Kundera whose latest collection of short stories, Laughable Loves, deals with the selfishness, vanity and self-delusion that inevitably creep into the private lives of individuals living under a soulless regime for which everything is there simply to be controlled.

If incapable of love, however, Thackeray's characters are still provided with a spontaneous approach to life by memory. Now and then, thinking of the past, they become aware of the passage of time and realize that everything is perpetually in flux, that life is extraordinarily rich, and that any pattern imposed on it can only impoverish it:

> As she looked, lo! Oxford Street disappeared, and she saw a green common, and a village, and a little inn. There was a soldier leading a pair of horses about on the green common; and in the inn sat a cavalier, so young, so merry, so beautiful! Oh, what slim white hands he had; and winning words, and tender, gentle blue eyes! . . . As she walked towards the lane that morning, how well she remembered each spot as she passed it, and the look it wore for the last time! How the smoke was rising from the pastures, how the fish were jumping and plashing in the mill stream! There was a church with all its windows lighted up with gold, and yonder were the reapers sweeping down the brown corn.[21]

To such moments of gratuitous recollection, when a Humean dissolution of the manipulating ego into a genuine stream of passive consciousness takes place and the outside world suddenly becomes overwhelmingly vivid and colourful, Ikey Solomons occasionally adds an idea of fate similar to the one Conrad was later to introduce into Chance as a sort of memento

mori to a society worshipping the power of the will:

> It is an awful thing to get a glimpse as one sometimes does, when the time is past, of some little little wheel which works the whole mighty machinery of FATE, and see how our destinies turn on a minute's delay or advance, or on the turning of a street, or on somebody else's turning of a street, or on somebody else's doing of something else in Downing Street or in Timbuctoo, now or a thousand years ago.[22]

And again:

> Some call the doctrine of destiny a dark creed, but, for me, I would fain try and think it a consolatory one. It is better, with all one's sins upon one's head, to deem one's self in the hands of Fate, than to think--with our fierce passions and weak repentances; with our resolves so loud, so vain, so ludicrously, despicably weak and frail; with our dim, wavering, wretched conceits about virtue, and our irresistible propensity to wrong--that we are the workers of our own future sorrow and happiness.[23]

The world of Catherine, however, is ruled by neither time nor fate but only by man's desire for control over his life, and nothing can prevent the burst of violence with which the novel concludes.

Thus Catherine is, in many ways, the story of a society in which man is capable of imposing his will on reality. As a result every individual in this society is only what he can be turned into, the rank or title that can be bestowed on him, the image he can be reduced to, or the use to which he can be put, and this allows Thackeray not only to satirize, by implication, the artistic habits of naming, characterization, and plotting but also to endow his heroine with traits like snobbery, idolatry and manipulativeness, that he was to explore in greater detail in his later works. If, then, this first novel is still a failure, this

is not because it has no important message to communicate, or because its narrator displays an unfortunate tendency to contradict himself. What spoils it is Thackeray's reliance on parody to make his point. There is no mistaking the fact that the individuals he depicts share the values of popular fiction, and Thackeray only weakens his case by constantly pointing out what is obvious. As vehicles of social criticism Catherine and the other characters are at their most effective when they are seen as typical members of a perverse society. When the gruesomeness of their deeds, the absurdity of their pretensions, and the artificiality of their manner of speech are all heightened and emphasized in the interests of parody, however, this impression of typicality is lost, and it begins to look as if the attitudes and beliefs that Thackeray wishes to criticize are, in any case, likely to be taken seriously only by lunatics. Thackeray's second novel, Barry Lyndon, can therefore be seen as, in some ways, an attempt to remedy this defect by avoiding explicit parody and making Barry as ordinary a member of his society as possible.

III

The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon Esq., or The Luck of Barry Lyndon, as it was initially called when serialized in Fraser's in 1844, has proved, in many ways, a more enduring and popular work than Catherine. In his admirable "Barry Lyndon and the Irish Hero" Robert A. Colby states that this novel "repelled more readers than it attracted in its time, and has remained something of a special taste ever since."[24] This, however, is not quite true. "Artistically considered," wrote James Fitzjames Stephen, "we should almost be inclined to place Barry Lyndon at the head of the

list of Mr Thackeray's books",[25] and Trollope remarked: "In imagination, language, construction and general literary capacity, Thackeray never did anything more remarkable than Barry Lyndon."[26] Both critics, of course, had in mind the Barry Lyndon that Thackeray had revised for his Miscellanies in 1856. This revised version omits many of Barry's comments, asides and digressions to be found in The Luck of Barry Lyndon, and virtually eliminates the role of "Fitz-Boodle", who appears in Fraser's as the editor of Barry's memoirs.[27] Even in its original form, however, Barry Lyndon has an economy and tightness not to be encountered in any of Thackeray's major novels with the exception of The History of Henry Esmond, Esq., and it is no doubt partly these qualities that, in our own day, have led to its being filmed and thus becoming the best-known of Thackeray's works after Vanity Fair.[28]

Actually Thackeray experienced more trouble with the composition of Barry Lyndon than was common with him. He wrote most of it during his Eastern trip of 1844, finding the weather, the discomforts of travel, and constant sight-seeing distracting, and feeling that the story simply refused to flow. The notes he made on his progress in his diary--"Made a little attempt on Barry Lyndon & wrote a couple of pages in the cabin at night but was interrupted by the horrible bug-bites";[29] "Tried to write Barry Lyndon."[30] "Wrote Barry--but slowly & with great difficulty";[31] "Wrote Barry with no more success than yesterday."[32]--read like a saga of despair. Happily, however, the finished novel bears no sign of the labour pains it occasioned. As Robert A. Colby explains, the provenience of Barry Lyndon is complex. Thackeray draws on Fielding's Jonathan Wild and also, to a lesser extent, Smollett's Ferdinand Count Fathom and Peregrine Pickle. The account of Barry's marriage to Lady Lyndon is based on the career of Andrew Robertson Stoney-Bowes, an adventurer who wheedled the

wealthy Countess of Strathmore into marriage, and whose grandson John Bowes Bowes was a school friend of Thackeray's. Again, Barry's travels obviously owe a lot to Thackeray's own travels on the Continent during the 1830s and 40s, while his Irishness is an outcome of his creator's longstanding acquaintance with both Ireland and the "Irish" novels of Charles Lever, William Carleton and Gerald Griffin. Finally, another source for Barry Lyndon, which Colby does not mention, is of course Thackeray's own life. Barry's response to the death of his son does not, as Colby claims, convict him of "histrionic emotionalism".[33] Thackeray himself was grief-stricken by the death of his daughter Jane in 1838, and probably meant Barry's feelings to be taken at face value. Similarly, in Lady Lyndon's jealousies and suspicions it is possible to detect traces of Isabella Thackeray's insanity. All these different strands, however, are skilfully brought together in a narrative which, up to the penultimate chapter of the novel, never diverges from its main purpose of chronicling its rogue-hero Barry Lyndon's steady rise in the world.

The character of Barry himself is one of the novels's greatest triumphs. An unconsciously self-incriminating narrator, he is an exercise in point of view worthy of Browning or James. Unlike Ikey Solomons, he neither questions those very values of which he is such an ardent supporter nor makes any statement which could be regarded as being out of character. The reader is warned against him only by those remarks by others about his cruelty, unscrupulousness, ignorance and pretentiousness, which he quotes with complete candour, obviously not doubting for a second that his sword will be sufficient to silence anyone who dares to insult him. Moreover, Thackeray ingeniously manages to use Barry as

his mouthpiece and condemn him at the same time. The reader, for instance, agrees with Barry's denunciations of sentimentality, war, and the Irish, and simultaneously regards these sentiments as indications of Barry's own heartlessness, cowardice and lack of patriotism, getting, in George Eliot's words, "[a] double impression correspond[ing] to the double impulse of the speaker."[34]

Just as Barry is brilliantly drawn as a character, the narrative in which he figures too is a work of genius. Thackeray was often bothered by the formlessness of the "Irish" novel and apparently sought to remedy this defect in Barry Lyndon. Every single episode of the novel is there for the sake of advancing Barry's career one step further, and in the end the entire action satisfactorily culminates in his marriage to Lady Lyndon. At one point in the narrative Barry remarks:

> I find I have already filled up many scores of pages, and yet a vast deal of the most interesting portion of my history remains to be told, viz., that which describes my sojourn in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, and the great part I played there; moving among the most illustrious of the land, myself not the least distinguished of the brilliant circle. In order to give due justice to this portion of my memoirs, then--which is more important than my foreign adventures can be (though I could fill volumes with interesting descriptions of the latter),--I shall cut short my account of my travels in Europe and my success at Continental Courts, in order to speak of what befell me at home.[35]

This, the reader realizes, is no rambling, purposeless novel. It is moving towards a definite end, and everything in it has no other function than to point to that end.

Yet this virtually flawless work of art is ruled by a deep distrust of art. When Barry starts redecorating Lady Lyndon's ancestral home, Hackton Hall, the reader gets the impression that art is artificial and absurd:

> For many of these ornaments I was not so much answerable as Cornichon, whom Lauraguais lent me, and who was the intendant of my buildings during my absence abroad. I had given the man carte blanche, and when he fell down and broke his leg, as he was decorating a theatre in the room which had been the old chapel of the castle, the people of the county thought that it was a judgement of Heaven upon him. In his rage for improvement the fellow dared anything. Without my orders he cut down an old rookery which was sacred in the country and had a prophecy regarding it, stating, 'When the rook-wood shall fall, down goes Hackton Hall'. The rooks went over and colonised Tiptoff Woods, which lay near us (and be hanged to them!), and Cornichon built a temple to Venus and two lovely fountains on their site. Venuses and Cupids were the rascal's adoration: he wanted to take down the Gothic screen and place Cupids in our pew there; but old Doctor Huff the rector came out with a large oak stick, and addressed the unlucky architect in Latin, of which he did not comprehend a word, yet made him understand that he would break his bones if he laid a single finger on the sacred edifice.[36]

Art, it seems, is at war with nature and religion. It does not see reality as being natural or God-given but strives to replace it by the works of man. Indeed, as the care that Barry takes with the story which he is relating indicates, it is he and not Thackeray who has embraced the cause of art. Barry is the author not only of his memoirs but also, in a very real sense, of his own destiny. He is the one who uses every opportunity and every chance encounter to further his own career, and there is surely more to the world than he is capable of seeing. It exists in its own right and not just to figure in the scenario Barry has prepared, and if the narrative were to remain faithful to this greater truth, it might just as well linger over the beauties of Europe or the various characteristics of the people that Barry meets. That this does not happen, and instead everything is made subservient to Barry's schemes, is not Thackeray's fault but Barry's.

In denying the existence of reality outside his schemes, however, Barry merely follows the main trends of his society, in which only what man has imposed on reality is significant. For this society objects are the price of objects and a man is the title he bears. Price and rank are, of course, human estimations of reality, or in a sense "words" coined by man to designate certain objects. Thus, just as the world of Catherine is ruled by Hayes's "greasy day-book", the world of Barry Lyndon, too, is symbolically ruled by another book, the Gwin and Holwitzer that Barry and his uncle spend most of their time reading. Again, in the same way that "The Professor" is a story of names, Barry Lyndon, too, is in many ways a story of names. Just as the name Adeliza stands for the human estimation of the reality denoted by the name Grampus, the name Lyndon stands for the human estimation of the reality denoted by the name Barry. From the very beginning Barry believes that the Lyndon fortune is rightfully his, goes through the rest of the book trying to live up to his name, and in the end achieves his greatest triumph by earning the right to bear the name Lyndon:

> Before quitting London, I procured His Majesty's gracious permission to add the name of my lovely lady to my own; and henceforward assumed the style and title of BARRY LYNDON as I have written it in this autobiography.[37]

Thus, since its entire action is effectively controlled by the name Lyndon, the novel is, in fact, entirely circular and timeless. Nothing ever happens in it that the name Lyndon cannot justify, and Barry himself undergoes no significant change.

In all this there is a curious innocence. There are some men in

the world of Barry Lyndon, like Lady Lyndon's first husband Sir Charles, who are embittered, sinister, dangerous creatures weary of the world's game. For a man like Sir Charles life is no longer worth living because he has realized that in a world where all are objects to be manipulated he himself is a mere object. With his painful and sardonic laughter and his warnings to Barry concerning his wife he is reminiscent of Lord Steyne who says to Becky:

> All women are alike. . . . You will go to Gaunt House. You give an old fellow no rest until you get there. It's not half so nice as here. You'll be bored there. I am. My wife is as gay as Lady Macbeth, and my daughters as cheerful as Regan and Goneril. . . . Ho! ho! You'll be asked to dinner next week.[38]

It is not clear to what extent Thackeray identifies with these figures who watch the antics of young rakes with amused cynicism, convinced that all puppeteers will become, in their turn, puppets. What is clear, however, is that his young characters themselves are not aware of the true nature of the game they are playing. Thus, without realizing it, Barry turns into a victim of his own myth. In the end, like everyone else, he, too, is put to the service of the name Lyndon and ends up spending not only his wife's fortune but also his own winnings from gambling in the attempt to live in a style in keeping with his rank.

With this development the entire novel suddenly shifts and changes like a Gestalt. Barry, who had so far impressed the reader with his ability to look through, and play upon, the vanities and weaknesses of other people, is all at once seen to be a deluded fool himself. This revelation is a masterly stroke on Thackeray's part, and it allows both him and the reader to pay more attention to the other individuals who now surround Barry. These are mostly the genuine aristocracy who treat

Barry's pretensions with undisguised contempt, and whose derision forces him to become more and more defensive, abusive and sensitive to criticism, preparing him, no doubt, for those final days of his life when, bankrupt and in prison, he is to turn into "a baby almost, and . . . cry if deprived of his necessary glass of brandy."[39] Throughout all this Thackeray views his hero with a strange mixture of contempt and pity. Clearly, like Adeliza, Barry too, is, to a certain extent, a mentally deranged individual who obstinately holds on to a version of reality which no one else takes seriously, but then the people who are against him are members of the conservative Establishment, who look on their own position as their birthright and grudge any advancement to the rest of humanity. There is a plea here for Thackeray's own class, but of course he makes an even stronger plea for reality. As the last two chapters of the novel indicate, despite all that man can do reality will preserve its own shape. Barry's final downfall is quite inexplicable. Of course there are the machinations of those who are against him, and then he wastes his own money, but also his son dies and his legendary "luck" turns against him. Thackeray's point seems to be that life is complex and unruly like that and will not be governed by man's schemes. Thus, unable to control events any longer, Barry, like Iago, ultimately lapses into silence, and this uncontrollable, unplanned, "unutterable" part of the narrative is completed from without by the editor Fitz-Boodle.

All in all Barry Lyndon is a masterly work of art. No explicit parody interrupts the narrative, and Thackeray's point emerges clearly. The son of an attorney, Barry himself belongs to that class which he contemptuously designates as "your apothecaries, wine-merchants, attorneys and such scum as are allowed to attend our public assemblies",[40] and this

is what determines his attitudes and values. Because he is not a criminal in any ordinary sense of that term, and because his ideals are shared by many of those around him such as his uncle Chevalier de Balibari and his cousins, Thackeray can use him to comment on an entire society under the sway of a new belief in man's right to impose his will on his environment. In spite of this, however, as an Irishman and an eighteenth-century soldier of fortune Barry also remains, in some ways, an alien figure, and it is necessary to turn to The Book of Snobs to see that what Thackeray wished to communicate through his hero was in fact the frame of mind of the "respectable classes" of Victorian England.

IV

Both Catherine and Barry Lyndon are books written against other books. Catherine attacks Hayes's "greasy day-book"; and Barry Lyndon mocks Barry's Gwin and Holwitzer. The Book of Snobs, which was originally serialized in Punch as "The Snobs of England" in 1846-47, is a product of the same idea and deals with "that foolish and lying book",[41] the Peerage. Its aim is to oppose the reduction of every human being to a mere word: the title he bears. As Thackeray's "Preparatory Remarks" indicate, what lies behind this phenomenon is a general attempt to impose humanly recognizable patterns on reality. While opening his book with a plea for a study of snobbery, that echoes the plea that Carlyle had made more than a decade earlier for a study of clothes, Thackeray also mocks a certain conception of history. This Germanic conception of history, that was popularized in England by such writers as Bulwer Lytton and Carlyle,

culminates in Hegel's notion of "the cunning of Reason" (die List der Vernunft), according to which great men are not so much individuals in their own right as mere agents of history selected to carry out an important task. Against this idea Thackeray writes:

> Thus at the French Revolution (which the reader will be pleased to have introduced so early), when it was requisite to administer a corrective dose to the nation, Robespierre was found, a most foul and nauseous dose indeed, and swallowed eagerly by the patient, greatly to the latter's ultimate advantage: thus, when it became necessary to kick John Bull out of America, Mr Washington stepped forward, and performed that job to satisfaction: thus when the Earl of Aldborough was unwell, Professor Holloway appeared with his pills and cured his Lordship, as per advertisement, &c., &c. Numberless instances might be adduced to show, that when a nation is in great want the relief is at hand, just as in the Pantomime (that microcosm) where when Clown wants anything--a warming-pan, a pump-handle, a goose, or a lady's tippet--a fellow comes sauntering out from behind the side-scenes with the very article in question.[42]

In other words, the concept of "the cunning of Reason", and similar notions, reduce history to a mere pantomime in which every actor can only perform the role assigned to him.

Such deflating touches, that bring out the glibness at the heart of an idea, are of course characteristic of Thackeray. Only, in this instance he is worried about his own stance. If snobs are people who attempt to reduce themselves and others to mere words, then those who see them merely as snobs are themselves guilty of snobbery. What is at work in each case is an attempt to fit individuals into rigid categories without bothering to deal with them in their full particularity. This is why later on in the book the image of the play recurs and Thackeray appears in a role which he was soon to assume again as the narrator of

Vanity Fair. He is the manager of the performance making sure that nothing happens that does not tally with the script in his hand. After explaining why he has not included the landed gentry in his book, he writes:

> . . . those dignified personages do not enter into the scheme of the present work, and are but minor characters of our Snob drama; just as, in the play, kings and emperors are not half so important, as many humble persons. The Doge of Venice, for instance, gives way to Othello, who is but a nigger, and the King of France to Falconbridge, who is a gentleman of positively no birth at all. So with the exalted characters above mentioned.[43]

And the said exalted characters are left out simply because they are not snobs:

> But cui bono? In these perfectly stupid and honourable families there is not that Snobbishness which it is our purpose to expose. An ox is an ox . . . The Snob, my dear madam, is the frog that tries to swell itself to ox size. Let us pelt the silly brute out of his folly.[44]

This is very much like Thackeray's decision not to include Miss Jemima in Vanity Fair. there are clearly aspects of life that do not fit in with the themes of snobbery and vanity and thus have to be ignored. The artist, like the snob, is more interested in the forms that can be imposed on reality than reality itself in all its wealth of detail, and it is ultimately this similarity, rather than any actual preference for "the great world" on his own part, that leads Thackeray to insist that he, too, is a snob.

Throughout The Book of Snobs Thackeray intermittently pursues his comparison between the artist and the snob. The book's narrator, who

ultimately decides that "Mr Snob" is a better name for him than the "Smith, or Jones"[45] he initially considers, writes:

> You must not judge hastily or vulgarly of Snobs: to do so shows that you yourself are a Snob. I myself have been taken for one.[46]

Again, he describes the British Snob abroad in the following terms:

> Art, nature pass, and there is no dot of admiration in his stupid eyes; nothing moves him, except when a very great man comes his way, and then the rigid, proud, self-confident, inflexible British Snob can be as humble as a flunkey, and as supple as a harlequin.[47]

The next paragraph but one, however, begins with the statement "I (who, like other great men, have but one idea) thought to myself that as the stars are, so are the Snobs"[48] which indicates that, just as others are obsessed with greatness, Mr Snob is obsessed with snobbery, and can let his belief that an individual is a snob blind him to everything else about that individual. Despite these attempts to discredit Mr Snob, however, The Book of Snobs is likely to be remembered not for any painstaking attempt to create meticulously individualized characters but, paradoxically, for its contribution of a new word to the English language. The word "snob", that was originally Cambridge slang for a townsman,[49] comes to mean in Thackeray's hands a person interested not in actual individuals but only in their titles or the wealth they possess. Because this sort of attention to outward forms makes direct contact with others impossible, Thackeray can write: "With love and simplicity and natural kindness Snobbishness is perpetually at war",[50] and the modern definition of a snob in The Oxford English Dictionary as one who "meanly or vulgarly admires and seeks to imitate, or associate with, those of superior rank

or wealth" seems to be indebted to Thackeray's own definition: "He who meanly admires mean things is a Snob".[51]

Mr Snob clearly indicates that snobbery in this sense is a middle-class phenomenon. The Book of Snobs presents the usual Thackerayan view of the aristocracy as slightly stupid but perfectly honourable people. Its real quarrel is with "the respectable classes":[52]

> It is our fault, not that of the great, that they should fancy themselves so far above us. If you will fling yourself under the wheels, Juggernaut will go over you, depend upon it: and if you and I, my dear friend, had Kotoo performed before us every day,-- found people whenever we appeared grovelling in slavish adoration, we should drop into the airs of superiority quite naturally and accept the greatness with which the world insisted upon endowing us.[53]

As usual, Thackeray feigns surprise at the way in which supposedly "free" Britons worship rank and birth more than the inhabitants of less fortunate countries. In reality, however, there is an obvious relationship between this sort of "freedom" and snobbery. In a society, in which an individual is not free to leave the class he was born into, rank cannot be coveted. Only a bourgeois society that offers social mobility can create individuals whose chief goal in life is to achieve status or at least to consort with people of status. In a world where class barriers have dissolved and the value of money is widely accepted, the aristocracy can be easily recruited to consecrate a new order by their presence. Obviously what the snob cares about is not that other people are lords but that he is seen with lords. For him the nobility are there simply to lend dignity to his own existence. They have a definite function to perform, and he reduces their entire reality to this function. Similarly, the socially mobile snob can determine what his own identity is going to be:

> Old Pump sweeps a shop, runs of messages, becomes a confidential clerk and partner. Pump the Second becomes the chief of the house, spins more and more money, marries his son to an Earl's daughter. Pump Tertius goes on with the bank; but his chief business in life is to become the father of Pump Quartus, who comes out a full-blown aristocrat, and takes his seat as Baron Pumpington, and his race rules hereditarily over this nation of Snobs.[54]

In this way reality is replaced by one of man's forms, and Pump, the real man, turns into Pump, the baron. For Thackeray this worshipping of what man has imposed on reality is what snobbery ultimately consists of. Another name for this phenomenon is, of course, "vanity", and when, towards the end of The Book of Snobs, Thackeray mentions a certain Mr Goldmore who "thought that Shakespeare was a great dramatic poet, and ought to be patronized",[55] we experience a disturbing sense of recognition. That pompous Victorian businessman is, in his comic way, a precursor of our own hollow, artificial world in which, because man is the measure of all things, it is not even art any longer that counts but criticism.

Finally, precisely because it is against this sort of snobbery and vanity, The Book of Snobs is an essentially a-political work. Generations of critics have read it as a radical tract and then, depending on their own political position, congratulated or attacked Thackeray for subsequently becoming more conservative. The truth of the matter, however, is that Thackeray's "radicalism" is hardly political in nature. Much as he may criticise the existing social system he has no alternative "system" to offer, and indeed regards those who wish to impose this or that system on the world as "Political Snobs".[56] He is interested not in organizing reality in any particular way but only in experiencing it as it is. As a result, when he makes radical proposals he is careful to mock himself. At one point, for instance, after mentioning an excursion to Oxford for

five shillings, he writes:

> Why is the poor College servitor to wear that name and badge still? Because the Universities are the last places to which Reform penetrates. But now that she can go to College and back for five shillings, let her travel down thither.[57]

This is of course as glib and self-congratulatory as saying that Shakespeare was a great poet, and can hardly be taken at face value. Thackeray is not interested in the sort of reform that can be purchased for five shillings any more than he is interested in titles that can be bought for fifty thousand pounds. He is committed, in the best realist tradition, not to wholesale solutions but to personal ones:

> To laugh at [snobs] is Mr Punch's business. May he laugh honestly, hit no foul blow, and tell the truth when at his broadest grin--never forgetting that if Fun is good, Truth is still better, and Love the best of all.[58]

It is this emphasis on love and the truth, rather than any insistence on political reform, that stands at the heart of The Book of Snobs and gives it its significance.

Notes

[1] Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 20.

[2] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

[3] See Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray the Novelist (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 5-10.

[4] Thus Loofbourow and Wheatley both concentrate their attention on the works parodied by Thackeray, while F.C. Cabot's "The Two Voices in Thackeray's Catherine" (Nineteenth Century Fiction, 28 (1973-1974), 404-416) and J.C. Kleis's "Dramatic Irony in Thackeray's Catherine" (Victorian Newsletter, No. 33 (1968), 50-53) both deal with the role of Ikey Solomons. Robert A. Colby's "Catherine: Thackeray's Credo" (Review of English Studies, n.s., 15 (1964), 381-396) is a more serious attempt to understand Thackeray's novel, but even Colby devotes a lot of attention to Catherine's literary antecedents and cannot ultimately rescue it from seeming a simple parody.

[5] Thackeray and the Form of Fiction, p. 21.

[6] The Rise of the Novel, p. 94.

[7] See Works, iii, 68n.

[8] Ibid., 119.

[9] Ibid., 162.

[10] Ibid., 152-153.

[11] Ibid., 118. This seems like an obvious allusion to Sartor Resartus. Not surprisingly, Carlyle was one of the few Victorian admirers of Catherine.

[12] Ibid., 80.

[13] Ibid., 129.

[14] See John Bayley, The Characters of Love.

[15] See A.O.J. Cockshut, Man and Woman: A Study of Love and the Novel 1740-1940.

[16] Significantly, the deceived husband in this novel is also an eminent novelist. Apparently Drabble believes, like Angus Wilson, that love involves rejecting novels along with all other ways of controlling reality.

[17] Letters, ii. 424.

[18] Works, iii, 20.

[19] See Barbara Hardy, The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray (London, 1972), pp. 14-15.

[20] Works, iii, 21.

[21] Ibid., 126.

[22] Ibid., 97.

[23] Ibid., 102-103.

[24] Robert A. Colby, "Barry Lyndon and the Irish Hero", Nineteenth Century Fiction, 21 (1966-1967), 109-130 (p. 109).

[25] J.F. Stephen, "Barry Lyndon", Saturday Review, 2 (1856), 783-785 (p. 784).

[26] Thackeray, p. 70.

[27] All material that Thackeray later omitted is enclosed in brackets in The Oxford Thackeray. Most other editions are based on the revised version of the novel.

[28] There exists now even a sequel to Barry Lyndon by one Christopher Wood: The Further Adventures of Barry Lyndon by Himself (London, 1973).

[29] Letters, ii, 151.

[30] Ibid., 153.

[31] Ibid., 156.

[32] Ditto.

[33] "Barry Lyndon and the Irish Hero", p. 121.

[34] The Mill on the Floss, Book V, Chapter 3.

[35] Works, vi, 178.

[36] Ibid., 239.

[37] Ibid., 233.

[38] Works, xi. 607.

[39] Works, vi. 307.

[40] Ibid., 273.

[41] Works, ix, 286.

[42] Ibid., 259-260.

[43] Ibid., 421.

[44] Ibid., 421-422.

[45] Ibid., 261.

[46] Ditto.

[47] Ibid., 363.

[48] Ibid., 365.

[49] For a detailed account of the etymology of this word see The Book of Snobs, ed. J.A. Sutherland (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1978), pp. 235-237.

[50] Works, ix, 429.

[51] Ibid., 269.

[52] Ibid., 286.

[53] Ibid., 274.

[54] Ibid., 299.

[55] Works, ix, 436.

[56] When he published The Book of Snobs in book form Thackeray omitted the six chapters on "Political Snobs" that he had originally contributed to Punch. These are, however, as usual, included in The Oxford Thackeray.

[57] Works, ix, 318.

[58] Ibid., 493.

Chapter Six

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I

"The Snobs of England" was still running in Punch when the first number of Vanity Fair appeared in January 1847. A year later Thackeray was claiming that he was "all but at the top of the tree: indeed there if the truth were known and having a great fight up there with Dickens."[1] In retrospect it is clear that that self-confidence was well-founded. As the author of Vanity Fair, Thackeray's place in English literature is a secure one. The reviewers of 1847 who thought that Thackeray was destined for immortality have been proved right. Even those who dismiss Thackeray's other works are obliged to admit, however grudgingly, that Vanity Fair is a classic.

That Vanity Fair should have proved so enduring is hardly surprising. It is after all more subtle, elaborate and sophisticated than anything else in the Thackeray canon. As Charlotte Brontë noted, it is "quiet-as quiet as reflection, as quiet as memory".[2] Thackeray scrupulously avoids the heavy-handed and the obvious. Amelia is guilty of idolatry, but the object of her affections is neither a quack like Dandolo nor a cretin like Count Galgenstein. Becky is a Delilah who cuts off her husband's hair, and not, like Catherine, his head; and the brawls and duels of Barry Lyndon have been replaced by the intricate

rivalries of the 'Change and the drawing-room. Yet the society that Thackeray depicts in Vanity Fair is obviously the same one he had already shown imposing its will on reality through language, crime and snobbery in his earlier works. The fact that its members are now no longer insane or violent only makes it all the more credible, and hence, all the more frightening.

Avoiding sensationalism, Thackeray refuses to emphasize any particular aspect of this society at the expense of all the others. As a result Vanity Fair has the kind of "totality" that F.R. Leavis ascribes to Hard Times. Leavis writes:

> Ordinarily Dickens's criticisms of the world he lives in are casual and incidental--a matter of including among the ingredients of a book some indignant treatment of a particular abuse. But in Hard Times he is for once possessed by a comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of Victorian civilization are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy, the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit.[3]

Thackeray, too, is possessed by a comprehensive vision. By-passing the particular abuses treated in his other works, he goes straight to the source they all come from, and the inhumane spirit he thus uncovers is best described as "the spirit of vanity".

Again and again Thackeray shows human beings insisting that reality should obey them and become only what they decide it has to become. The world he is describing is obviously a bourgeois one. Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson write:

> His five main personages start in the great merchant rank--for by the time the action opens Becky, whose origins were dingy, has been adopted into it firmly enough for her to hold on.[4]

And what is true of Becky is true, at the other end of the social scale, of Lord Steyne. He, too, is, in many ways, a parvenu, a "newcome" who is from a dubious branch of the Gaunts and has allegedly won his marquisate at the gambling table. Though his claims to nobility may not be as fanciful as Mr Osborne's belief that he is related to the Leeds Osbornes, he, too, has clearly re-arranged reality a little and fitted himself into a particular role. He and Becky are ultimately of the same cut, and while they need each other, they also see through each other's pretensions with devastating clarity. When Lord Steyne sneers at Rawdon's gambling, Becky replies, "My lord . . . you are a knight of the order";[5] and when Becky claims that she was busy making a pie in the kitchen, Lord Steyne says, "I know you were: I saw you through the area-railings as I drove up."[6] Whoever else these two may deceive, they are at least undeceived by one another.

If Lord Steyne fits in with the world of the Sedleys, the Osbornes and the Dobbins, however, the genuine aristocracy are left out. Rawdon ultimately discovers that he cannot go along with the way of the world; Pitt Crawley's schemes fill him with guilt, an emotion which, with the exception of Dobbin, the other characters do not experience; and even the elder Sir Pitt lacks the determination and business sense necessary for the success of his various speculations. These are country people ultimately incapable of imposing their will on reality. As Becky discovers, theirs is an entirely different way of life:

> She was immensely happy to be free of the place, and yet loth to go. Queen's Crawley was abominably stupid; and yet the air there was somehow purer than that which she had been accustomed to breathe. Everybody had been dull, but had been kind in their way.[7]

Thackeray had earlier on cleared these country families of the charge of snobbery. Here he finds that they cannot be accused of attempting to tamper with reality in any way. It is only city-dwellers who in their vanity try to control everything around them.

We first become aware of Vanity Fair as a city. Thackeray seems to regard the city as both the locus and the ultimate expression of a way of life. Like E.M. Forster who speaks of the network of roads and streets which "Great Britain had thrown over India",[8] Thackeray speaks of "the streets, and the great squares of Vanity Fair".[9] Builders, he tells us at one point, have a habit of calling "Gardens" those "stucco houses with asphalte terraces in front"[10] which they have built over actual gardens. This forcing of everything into moulds designed by man, which the city brings out, is what life in Vanity Fair consists of. Vanity Fair is quite literally the City of Man, and it extends from its symbolic centre in Russell Square to all corners of the globe. Jos is the Collector of Bogley Wollah; Miss Swartz has an estate in the West Indies; Dobbin suggests that George could emigrate to Canada; Lady Elizabeth Sheepshanks leaves for Cape Town; missions are sent to Timbuctoo and the South Sea Islands; and Rawdon is appointed governor to Coventry Island. Everywhere human beings have to assert their own power, for direct, "immediate" nature is something the inhabitants of Vanity Fair cannot face. Becky thinks that she could become a country gentleman's wife, but the prospect of picking off dead leaves from geraniums and counting the apricots on the wall soon fills her with ennui. She is truly alive only when London surrounds her.

The City of Man is of course a religious image, and Vanity Fair is ultimately a religious book. Thackeray's title itself comes from

Bunyan, but Bunyan cannot be said to be a real influence on Thackeray. The kind of protest against worldliness and sensuality that one finds in The Pilgrim's Progress is a part of a Protestant ethic that criticizes those who merely enjoy the world instead of directing their attention to the serious business of working on it and forcing it to submit to their schemes for the greater glory of God. There is of course enough of the Puritan in Thackeray for him to take this worldview more or less seriously. He does after all frown on people guilty of such time-wasting and unprofitable pursuits like drinking, theatre-going and reading French novels. With one side of his mind, however, he is constantly inverting the Puritan tradition. In the end his satire is directed precisely against those who, instead of enjoying the world in its full reality, strive to impose their schemes on it. He is disturbed not by Major O'Dowd, who likes his wine, but by Mr Osborne, who cannot have his without reducing it to the price he is paying for each bottle. Similarly, Becky's sensuality obviously repulses him at times; but the Becky he is really against is not sensual but intellectual. She is interested not in taking pleasure in her environment but in bending it to her will. Indeed Becky is always most charming when she is most "abandoned", when her natural gaiety or her sexual impulses lead her to take delight in aspects of her victims that do not fit in with her plans, and she laughs at the joke against herself or is filled with admiration at the sight of Rawdon's triumph over Lord Steyne. As all this implies, Thackeray's famous roast-beef passage is in fact not a concession to Vanity Fair as he sees that "melancholy place". He writes:

> It is all vanity to be sure: but who will not own to liking a little of it? I should like to know what well-constituted mind, merely because it is transitory, dislikes roast-beef? That is a vanity; but may every man who reads this, have a wholesome portion of it through life; aye though my readers were five hundred thousand. Sit down, gentlemen, and fall to with a good hearty appetite; the fat, the lean, the gravy, the horse-radish as you like it--don't spare it. Another glass of wine, Jones, my boy--a bit of the Sunday side. . . .[11]

Of course one would not have to be a Puritan to find this slightly nauseating, but Thackeray's argument is a sound one. No well-constituted mind would indeed despise roast-beef. Mental derangement begins only when man starts turning roast-beef into the price of roast-beef.

Vanity Fair, then, cannot be read as a Puritan tract. Its religiosity is a religiosity of a more ancient and very different kind. Thackeray's conception of vanity is derived from Ecclesiastes with its picture of man trying to impose his will on a world that is essentially indifferent to him. His characters are people who have not learnt the Philosopher's lesson. They do not see the world as being too detailed and too unpredictable, ever to be controlled by them; and because they have no understanding of the essential darkness of life, they live without Faith, Hope and Charity. Not suspecting for a second that their schemes may be undercutting the complexity of reality, they are all like Mr Osborne on whom Thackeray passes a terrible judgement:

> He firmly believed that everything he did was right, that he ought on all occasions to have his own way--and like the sting of a wasp or serpent his hatred rushed out armed and poisonous against anything like opposition. He was proud of his hatred as of everything else. Always to be right, always to trample forward, and never to doubt, are not these the great qualities with which dullness takes the lead in the world?[12]

One feels that it must have been this smugness of the Victorian bourgeoisie that led Cardinal Newman to denounce people "living without God" and convert to Catholicism; and George Eliot to write Daniel Deronda with its Judaic vision of life as a mystery beyond human comprehension.

II

Clearly, Vanity Fair is a very Victorian novel indeed. The Victorians lived in a world of developed technology and great social liberties which enabled them to impose their will on reality. Of course on the whole they welcomed this development, but also, with an ingrained sense of Original Sin, they retreated from some of its implications. J. Hillis Miller, who deserves more credit for having illuminated this aspect of the Victorian mind than anyone else, has repeatedly pointed out how such great classics as Our Mutual Friend and Middlemarch continually insist that reality can only be impoverished when human beings start tampering with it. Vanity Fair is in the same tradition. Indeed so central is this theme to Thackeray's art on the whole, that, if criticizing those who treat the world as their own property and strive to bend it to their will is the most important qualification necessary for membership in the Great Tradition, it is difficult to see how Thackeray could be left out.

In Vanity Fair man's domination of reality begins, as usual, with

language, with the words and names chosen for objects, people and events. Thackeray's aggressive characters all have "a way with words", while his sympathetic ones are all beset by linguistic difficulties of one sort or another. Thus Miss Pinkerton, the friend of the great lexicographer, is a pompous bore, and her sister Miss Jemima cannot even pronounce the word "bouquet"; Becky is bi-lingual, and Amelia is sweet and dumb; George is a braggart and Dobbin is frequently at a loss for words and has a lisp; Pitt Crawley is an orator, and Rawdon is inarticulate and can hardly spell; Lady Elizabeth Sheepshanks is a poetess who also preaches the Word, and her sister Lady Jane is perpetually afraid to speak; and the Grand Duke of Pumpernickel erects a palace named "Monplaisir" which his honest peasants insist on calling "Monblaisir". In addition to this, Thackeray credits Becky with "a clear ringing voice",[13] and George with a "rich and deep"[14] one; and of course life in Vanity Fair begins with yet another book, Johnson's Dictionary.

In Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels Hillis Miller explains that in Our Mutual Friend Dickens, too, draws attention to the facility of his characters for putting reality into their own words, and indeed makes use of wild metaphors in order to express the violence with which this process takes place. After producing some engaging examples of such figures of speech--

> He is made of venomous insults and affronts, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. (iii, 11)
>
> In the meanwhile let it be fully understood that I shall not neglect bringing the grindstone to bear, nor yet bringing Dusty Boffin's nose to it. His nose once brought to it, shall be held by these hands, Mr Venus, till the sparks flies out in showers. (iii, 14)

> . . . he is here to submit to you that the time has arrived when, with our hearts in our glasses, with tears in our eyes, with blessings in our lips, and in general with a profusion of gammon and spinach in our emotional larders, we should one and all drink to our dear friends the Lammles. . . . (ii, 16)

--Miller comments:

> There is no ontological substratum in these metaphors. They have only human meaning. There is no real grindstone, and no hearts in the glasses. Nothing exists except as the meaning which the human beings give it.[15]

Again, in a brilliant essay entitled "Optic and Semiotic in Middlemarch" Miller points out that George Eliot's characters are more sensitive to the metaphors into which they translate reality than to reality itself.[16] Thackeray, who once remarked: "I have no head above my eyes",[17] could of course hardly fail to be aware of the dialectics of optic and semiotic, and though there are no metaphors in Vanity Fair that can be compared with the ones in Our Mutual Friend and Middlemarch, the same point is made in another way:

> George had an air at once swaggering and melancholy, languid and fierce. He looked like a man who had passions, secrets, and private harrowing griefs and adventures. . . . He would say it was a warm evening, or ask his partner to take an ice, with a tone as sad and confidential as if he were breaking her mother's death to her or preluding a declaration of love.[18]

This is of course an obvious way of using language to force reality into a particular mould, and the connections between language and the forms that can be imposed on reality is further indicated by a note-book kept

by Miss Horrocks, the daughter of Sir Pitt's butler, who has hopes of becoming the third Lady Crawley:

> And it is a fact, that some time after she left Queen's Crawley a copybook belonging to this lady was discovered, which showed that she had taken great pains in private to learn the art of writing in general, and especially that of writing her own name as Lady Crawley, Lady Betsy Horrocks, Lady Elizabeth Crawley, & c.[19]

Clearly, like Adeliza and Barry, Horrocks, too, is fascinated by names, and by writing her name in a new way tries to prepare herself for a new role. Furthermore, Thackeray has his own metaphor for metaphor: mimicry. The same individuals who are endowed with linguistic gifts in Vanity Fair also often have a talent for reducing themselves and others to images which they actually act out. Becky is a relentless caricaturist who gives imitations of Miss Pinkerton and her sister, Pitt Crawley, Lady Southdown and many others, and herself acts the part of a lady of fashion with great success; and George gives imitations of Dobbin to amuse Amelia, acts in school plays and regimental productions, and finally produces a son who is an accomplished mimic himself.

All this of course functions as a comment on Thackeray's own activity as a novelist. Novels, too, after all reduce life to words, and in so far as a novel claims to be like life, it is a metaphor for life. According to Hillis Miller one of Dickens's aims in Our Mutual Friend is to point out the essential artificiality of such metaphors. When he calls the Veneerings' butler "the Analytical Chemist", or refers to Mrs Podsnap as a "rocking horse", he is trying to underline

the fact that, like his characters, he, too, is forcing reality to assume a particular form. Thackeray himself thought that Vanity Fair had taught Dickens to write in a simpler style. While David Copperfield was appearing he wrote to Mrs Brookfield:

> Have you read Dickens?--O it is charming. Bravo Dickens. It has some of his prettiest touches--those inimitable Dickens touches wh. make such a great man of him. And the reading of the book has done another author a great deal of good. In the first place it pleases the other Author to see that Dickens who has long left off alluding to his the O A's works has been copying the O A, and greatly simplifying his style and foregoing the use of fine words. By this the public will be the gainer and David Copperfield will be improved by taking a lesson from Vanity Fair.[20]

From what Miller says, however, it would appear that Dickens had in fact learnt a very different lesson from Thackeray, for, like Our Mutual Friend, Vanity Fair, too, is a self-consciously artificial novel. Most of Thackeray's comic effects derive from the special use he makes of language. In Vanity Fair language forces individuals to assume particular roles. Thackeray's characters are sometimes referred to by their proper names, but more often they are described merely generically. Thus Rawdon becomes "the dragoon", "the officer", or "the aide-de-camp", Jos turns into "the Collector of Bogley Wollah", "the civilian", "the Indian", or "the Bengali", and Dobbin becomes "the Captain", "the Major", or "the Colonel". It is the tension between these glib terms and the real individuals they are supposed to designate that the narrator exploits and turns into comedy. Similarly, comedy results when the novel's language starts reflecting the roles that the characters it is depicting try to play. When poor Miss Briggs describes herself as a

"[g]entlewoman of agreeable manners"[21] in an advertisement she puts in the Times for a new post, Thackeray begins referring to her as "she of the agreeable manners"; and when Horrocks tries to beautify herself with ribbons she becomes "Ribbons". These verbal games parallel the novel's celebrated mock-epic quality which is the direct result of glibly fitting ordinary incidents into epic patterns.

III

Language itself is, of course, only a metaphor in Vanity Fair. It stands for the patterns man imposes on reality, and whether linguistically gifted or not, all of Thackeray's characters are capable of constructing such patterns. Indeed as the novel progresses Thackeray's simple contrasts dissolve, and it becomes clear that his "silent" characters, too, are, in their way, capable of speech. Dobbin, who fails to learn Latin at school, later displays a good command of military German, and Amelia can obviously defend herself when it comes to an argument:

> "Authority, none!" broke out Amelia. "Rebecca, you stay with me. I won't desert you because you have been persecuted, or insult you, because--because Major Dobbin chooses to do so. Come away, dear." And the two women made towards the door.[22]

Despite Thackeray's obvious idealization of them, Amelia and Dobbin,

too, are inhabitants of Vanity Fair. They live in a world which can bestow titles on individuals, and prices on objects; and they follow this tendency of their society to dominate and control everything. Amelia imposes a particular image on George, and Dobbin does the same thing to Amelia. Their behaviour is very much like that of Jos who first imagines that every woman he meets is interested in him, and then lets his own view of things lead him into shyness. Also, needless to say, their tampering with reality echoes one of the novel's major themes: plotting. Thackeray obviously had some sort of plan for Vanity Fair that covered the action up to Waterloo; and when he had exhausted that, he started, as usual, to improvise. The plotted half of the novel, however, in fact dissolves into a series of plots by the characters themselves: Becky's plot to marry Jos, followed by Mrs Bute Crawley's plot to marry Becky to Rawdon, followed by Dobbin's plot to marry George and Amelia, with all three plots intersecting with the meta-plots concocted by the great masters of the world like the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon who move around not a few individuals but entire armies, and determine the destiny of millions. Everyone has his puppets, everyone is the manager of some performance or another, everyone strives to impose a particular shape on reality. The connections between this and the novelist's art need no explaining.

Nowhere, however, is reality forced to obey man's will as much as in family relationships. Thackeray was obsessed with marital and parental oppression throughout his life. He saw that individuals could insist that their spouses and their offspring should conform to patterns set by them. Othello, whose story-telling gifts somehow go together with his domination of Desdemona, was a figure he never got

tired of alluding to. It is a little strange, therefore, that we should find no obvious reference in his works to The Tempest, the play in which Shakespeare adds to art, cities and imprisoned enemies yet another example of man's domination of reality: captive daughters. With or without Shakespearean allusions, though, Vanity Fair is, like Bleak House, a novel largely about parents and children. Indeed it is something of a companion volume to Thackeray's earlier Men's Wives, with the domination of children now replacing the domination of spouses. The images of sacrifice that dominate the book--Iphigenia at Tauris, Isaac on his knees before Abraham--illustrate Thackeray's theme. Mr Osborne determines what each of his three children is going to be. George is to become Miss Swartz's husband, Maria is to turn into Frederick Bullock's wife, and Jane is to make herself useful as Mr Osborne's house-keeper. That these roles may be too simple or restrictive for real individuals never seems to occur to the old merchant. Mr Sedley is, of course, the same. He first orders Amelia to marry George, and then just as firmly forbids her to do so. Amelia herself cannot let her son out of her sight, and is, in her turn, harassed by her mother who thinks that her obsessive devotion to her child has started interfering with her filial duties.

When it comes to describing all the emotional wear and tear of these relationships, and the ways in which they force people to become sour and peevish, and resort to threats and blackmail, Thackeray has few equals. No reader of Vanity Fair is likely to forget the scene where George and his father are left alone in the dining-room after the former has been so bold as to mention the now penniless Amelia in the latter's presence:

> . . . George, flapping his napkin, and with a swaggering bow, opened the door for the ladies to leave the room; and filling himself a glass of wine, smacked it, and looked his father full in the face, as if to say, "Gentlemen of the Guard, fire first." The old man also took a supply of ammunition, but his decanter clinked against the glass as he tried to fill it.
>
> After giving a great heave, and with a purple choking face, he then began. "How dare you, sir, mention that person's name before Miss Swartz to-day, in my drawing-room? I ask you, sir, how dare you do it?"
>
> "Stop, sir," says George, "don't say dare, sir. Dare isn't a word to be used to a Captain in the British Army."
>
> "I shall say what I like to my son, sir. I can cut him off with a shilling if I like. I can make him a beggar if I like. I will say what I like," the elder said.
>
> "I am a gentleman though I am your son, sir," George answered haughtily. "Any communications which you have to make to me, or any orders which you may please to give, I beg may be couched in that kind of language which I am accustomed to hear."[23]

—or Mrs Sedley's behaviour after the Daffy's Elixir episode:

> She warned the domestics not to touch the child, as Mrs Osborne might be offended. She asked her daughter to see and satisfy herself that there was no poison prepared in the little daily messes concocted for Georgy. When neighbours asked after the boy's health, she referred them pointedly to Mrs Osborne. She never ventured to ask whether the baby was well or not. She would not touch the child although he was her grandson, and own precious darling, for she was not used to children, and might kill it. And whenever Mr Pestler came upon his healing inquisition, she received the doctor with such a sarcastic and scornful demeanour, as made the surgeon declare that not Lady Thistlewood herself, whom he had the honour of attending professionally, could give herself greater airs than old Mrs Sedley from whom he never took a fee.[24]

These are of course, to a certain extent, comic scenes, but there is

also a real tension in them. When George responds to his father as he would to someone who had challenged him to a duel, or Thackeray refers to the claret that Mr Osborne swallows before addressing his son as "ammunition", the mock-epic conventions for once touch on something serious. The child who is to preserve his autonomy has a real battle to fight against his parents. Yet, Thackeray does not wish us to judge his characters lightly. They are not simple tyrants. Indeed they merely love their children, and are as ready to spoil as to bully them. The rewards they give, however, are, like the punishments they hand out, designed to ensure that those around them do not stray from the paths they are supposed to follow. Their love takes the form of a stubborn, unquestioned belief that they know what is best for their offspring, and bears as much resemblance to true, disinterested love as Mr Osborne's Victorian habit of using his family Bible as a convenient place for noting down his decisions concerning his children, does to the proper function of that book. So quickly does parental love turn into domination in Vanity Fair, that when at the end of the novel we see Dobbin with his daughter Janey, "of whom he is fonder than anything in the world--fonder than his History of the Punjaub",[25] we feel slightly apprehensive. The association of the child with the book is ominous. "Is little Janey, then," we find ourselves asking, "to be moulded and shaped like her father's History itself?"

This spectacle of the bourgeois family neurotically clinging to its members has to be contrasted with the way in which Rawdon gives up his son:

> Rawdon Crawley, though the only book which he studied was the Racing Calendar, and though his chief recollections of polite learning were connected with the floggings which he received at Eton in his early youth, had that decent and honest reverence for classical learning which all English gentlemen feel, and was glad to think that his son was to have a provision for life, perhaps, and a certain opportunity of becoming a scholar. And although the boy was his chief solace and companion, and endeared to him by a thousand small ties, about which he did not care to speak to his wife, who all along had shown the utmost indifference to their son, yet Rawdon agreed at once to part with him, and to give up his own greatest comfort and benefit for the sake of the welfare of the little lad.[26]

Rawdon lets his child develop freely, while to the rest the narrator can only say:

> If people would but leave children to themselves; if teachers would cease to bully them; if parents would not insist upon directing their thoughts, and dominating their feelings--those feelings and thoughts which are a mystery to all (for how much do you or I know of each other, of our children, of our fathers, of our neighbour, and how far more beautiful and sacred are the thoughts of the poor lad or girl whom you govern are likely to be, than those of the dull and world-corrupted person who rules him?)--if, I say, parents and masters would leave their children alone a little more,--small harm would accrue, although a less quantity of _as in praesenti_ might be acquired.[27]

Such a statement makes Thackeray similar to D.H. Lawrence who exclaimed: "The . . . tragedy of England . . . is the tragedy of ugliness. [Natural England] is so lovely: the man-made England is so vile."[28] Children are beautiful in themselves, but parents and teachers force them to play ugly roles.

Thackeray's theme of parents and children enables him to establish

firmly how reality is treated in Vanity Fair. If the children he portrays are oppressed, this is only because they live in a world in which everything and everybody must assume whatever form is chosen to be imposed on them. They merely remind us once again that Vanity Fair is "a novel without a hero". Thackeray's sub-title is commonly taken to imply that none of his characters possesses heroic attributes. While this is true, however, the word "hero", when used in connection with a novel, also of course simply denotes a protagonist, any individual who participates in a story. Such "heroes" may be brave or cowardly, admirable or weak, tragic or comic, but the important thing is that they should remain real individuals. Vanity Fair is, on the other hand, a novel without a hero because the real individuals in it have been replaced by images and roles, and turned into mere puppets. When Dobbin leaves Amelia after their quarrel in Pumpernickel, the narrator writes: "As for Emmy, had she not done her duty? She had her picture of George for consolation".[29] That is indeed all that is left: a picture of George and pictures of everybody else, pictures of what they are thought to be or wanted to be, visions both experienced and striven after. This is reminiscent of a passage in Hegel's Phenomenology:

> This type of spiritual life is the absolute and universal inversion of reality and thought, their entire estrangement the one from the other; it is pure culture.[30]

If what one understands by culture is human activity in the broadest possible sense of that term--and this is certainly what Hegel means--then Vanity Fair is the ultimate cultured society. Everything in it

has a definite shape assigned to it by human beings. Because nothing is in and of itself what it is claimed to be, however, culture is in fact a vain pretence, or as Hegel puts it, "a universal deception".[31] Everybody in Vanity Fair is in the same condition as Becky, of whom Thackeray writes:

> . . . there were times when she believed herself to be a fine lady, and forgot that there was no money in the chest at home--duns round the gate, tradesmen to coax and wheedle--no ground to walk upon in a word.[32]

Nobody has any real ground to walk upon; everybody lives on nothing. Mr Sedley, for instance, does not own anything, not even money. He merely speculates in shares, in expectations concerning a property, and when events prove his speculations to be just that; idle speculations, he is ruined overnight. Thus living in a make-believe world, this society is in fact a huge joke which its more self-conscious members like Becky can at times see as a joke. Itself offering crude caricatures of everything, it needs, as Hegel implies, no satirist:

> Its existence consists in universal talk. . . . This judging and talking is, therefore, the real truth, which cannot be got over, while it overpowers everything--it is that which in this . . . world is alone truly of importance. Each part of this world comes to find there its spirit expressed, or gets to be spoken of with esprit and finds said of it what it is.[33]

One consequence of all this is that everyone is condemned to an incredible and terrifying loneliness in Vanity Fair. In 1895 W.S. Lilly

claimed, in a lecture delivered to the Royal Institution, that Thackeray's worldview was essentially a Kantian one, even though he admitted that such terms would not have meant much to Thackeray.[34] What we find in Vanity Fair is indeed a Kantian duality which separates knowledge from existence. Because all that is known of anyone are the schemes in which he or she is desired to participate, everyone is unknown and alone as they are in themselves. This loneliness is a part of that thoroughly modern feeling of being trapped in history which Thackeray conjures up so well:

> When the eagles of Napoleon Bonaparte, the Corsican upstart, were flying from Provence, where they had perched after a brief sojourn in Elba, and from steeple to steeple until they reached the towers of Notre Dame, I wonder whether the Imperial birds had an eye for a little corner of the parish of Bloomsbury, London, which you might have thought so quiet, that even the whirring and flapping of those mighty wings would pass unobserved there?
>
> . . . Bon Dieu, I say, is it not hard that the fateful rush of the great Imperial struggle can't take place without affecting a poor harmless girl of eighteen, who is occupied in billing and cooing, or working muslin collars in Russell Square? You, too, kindly, homely flower!--is the great roaring war tempest coming to sweep you down here, although cowering under the shelter of Holborn? Yes; Napoleon is flinging his last stake, and poor little Emmy Sedley's happiness forms, somehow, part of it.[35]

Napoleon does not know Amelia; he merely determines her fate. Such knowledge would indeed prove a hindrance to any modern statesman whose task is not to see the world in its full reality but to organize it in a particular way. Prince Hal always has to reject Falstaff.

Amelia, however, is not the only lonely person in Vanity Fair. Merely used, and not really known, everyone is alone. Jos is as lonely

in London "as in his jungle at Bogley Wollah",[36] and after being lonely at Brussels, Southampton and Pumpernickel, is sent to a lonely death at Aix-la-Chapelle, wringing his hands and begging Dobbin not to leave him alone. Dobbin, himself destined for loneliness, is left alone at Vauxhall with a couple of shawls for companions, and feels unbearably lonely once more after Amelia's wedding. Rawdon sits by himself in a corner at his wife's soirées, and Jane Osborne spends her days in an empty drawing-room. As usual with Thackeray, Auden comes to mind:

> Strangers were hailed as brothers by his clocks,
> With roof and spire he built a human sky,
> Stored random facts in a museum box,
> To watch his treasure set a paper spy.
>
> All grew so fast his life was overgrown,
> Till he forgot what all had once been made for:
> He gathered into crowds but was alone.[37]

That, it seems, is the destiny of urban man: to be left in eternal solitude like the pasteboard hermit in the midst of the literal fair at Vauxhall.

IV

The sort of loneliness that Vanity Fair examines is the direct result of the inadequacy of culture in the sense of that term defined above. In a world in which everyone has their own conception of reality Thackeray makes it his business to show how reality refuses to

be conceptualized and pinned down. The world, he constantly reminds us, resists man in the form of space and time. That space and time do not exist except as the locus of conceptions is an idea fundamental to virtually all aspects of modern thought. Kant, for instance, tells us that while everything can only be conceived as existing in space and time, the latter can never be conceived in themselves. Another way of saying this would be that both space and time are "relative", that both always, as it were, "hold" something, and therefore, have a definite form; and this is of course exactly the view taken by Einstein who argues that both space and time are somehow "curved". Thackeray, though, is an Englishman and a Newtonian. Had he been born some eighty years later, he no doubt would have regarded the Theory of Relativity as something of a pantomime, and in his own day he would have been more impressed by Kant's notion of "the thing in itself" than by his abolition of space and time, for Vanity Fair insists that space and time have a being of their own and will not come under the control of man's forms.

Space is present in Vanity Fair as sheer physical bulk, as Jos's huge body and Dobbin's large hands and feet that can never be made to perform any neat little dance. On the subject of time Thackeray is even more eloquent. In his The English Novel: Defoe to the Victorians, David Skilton concludes his otherwise sensitive and illuminating treatment of Thackeray by taking him to task for not having developed a philosophy of time like Proust's:

> In Proust, such ideas as Thackeray touches on from time to time are united into a large scheme in which memory is the guarantee of identity through time, and literature a

> kind of magical custodian of memory. . . . Thackeray, who wrote too often without a sufficient plan and improvised his story from month to month, could not have developed an adequate form to exploit his vision to the full, and consequently his elucidation of his protagonists' consciousness is a trifle commonplace beside Proust's.[38]

This is well said, but all it proves is that Thackeray is not Proust. The point is that for Thackeray there cannot be any philosophy of time. The passage from the end of A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, which Skilton quotes to support his thesis, gives an indication of what Proust's "large scheme" amounts to:

> When [the bell] rang I already existed, and since then, in order that I should continue to hear this ringing, there could necessarily have been no discontinuity, and I could not for a moment have ceased to exist, to think, to be conscious of myself, because that former moment clung to me, and I could still return to it, merely by plunging more deeply into myself . . . I felt dizzy at seeing so many years beneath me, or rather within me, as if I were leagues high . . . At least if [the strength of my memory] were left to me for long enough to accomplish my work, I should not fail to describe men (though it should make them resemble monstrous beings) as occupying a most considerable place in time, beside the so restricted one which is reserved for them in space, a place on the contrary, immeasureably prolonged--since like giants immersed in the years, they touch simultaneously on widely separated periods, between which so many days have come and ranged themselves--in Time.[39]

This of course sums Proust up. One has to remember that Proust can be compared with Thackeray in more than one respect. He was interested not only in time but also in snobbery, and was in fact a snob himself. He spent half of his life drilling himself for a particular role and seeking admission into the Vanity Fair that was the Third Republic, and when he had finally realized that those circles that welcomed his wealth

would forever frown on his Jewishness and homosexuality, he brought the same ardour to his conquest of time. With him form is everything. Men tower above time because he has arrived at a distinct conception of each of them which does not change from period to period. Indeed, as he admits, they exist not in their own right but only "within me", only as the novelist's idea of them. Thackeray's characters, too, assign such simple roles to real individuals, not allowing them to develop and change in time; but this is clearly something that Thackeray himself does not endorse.

The tendency of Thackeray's characters to control the unfolding of time by imposing definite patterns on it is indicated by their fondness for clocks and watches. There are probably more timepieces in Vanity Fair than in any other English novel. Every house is alive with their ticking. A massive ornamented clock with chimes presides over Mr Osborne's drawing-room, and when Dobbin comes back from India he finds a similar instrument in Mr Sedley's humble quarters at Fulham:

> The landlord and landlady of the house led the worthy Major into the Sedleys' room (whereof he remembered every single article of furniture, from the old brass ornamented piano . . . to the screens and alabaster miniature-tombstone, in the midst of which ticked Mr Sedley's gold watch) . . .[40]

Timepieces, or "tickers", as Rawdon characteristically calls them, however, are invariably pompous or dainty appliances like Mr Osborne's Sacrifice of Iphigenia clock or the pretty little watches which General Tufto and George send to Becky:

> . . . the very next morning there came to her a little bijou marked Leroy, with a chain and cover charmingly set with turquoises, and another signed Brequet, which was covered with pearls, and yet scarcely bigger than a half-crown.[41]

Bejewelled, made of precious metals, and obviously artificial, time-pieces are indeed so much a part of Vanity Fair that little Georgy's induction into the genteel world begins when his aunt meets him and puts an expensive French watch around his neck.

Clocks and watches, it then seems, clearly will not do. Individuals display a wide variety of traits in time, and will not fit into simple patterns. Thus, although Thackeray constantly tries to see his characters as they see each other, he always remains conscious of the inadequacy of such schemes. Like Becky, he insists that Rawdon is a harmless fool; like Lord Steyne, he regards Becky as a ruthless adventurer; and like Dobbin, he idealizes Amelia; but he also sees that real individuals are much more complicated than these simple notions would suggest. After quoting a passage on the difficulty of judging Becky at all, James H. Wheatley remarks:

> Yet in a passage like the one we have examined, the style is not simply antirational, anti-intellectual; it might be called antimonistic: some link, some belief in the mind's ability to make sense of the world, has been cut, or at least greatly attenuated. Superficially, Thackeray seems to resemble the Fielding whom he admired so much; but Fielding would have been incapable of writing the passage we have examined, for somewhere in such a passage, however complex, the sly and genial position of Good Sense would have triumphantly emerged.[42]

Barbara Hardy, too, alights on such a passage describing Pitt Crawley:

> There is a dignified and sympathetic account of Pitt, his respect for his mother-in-law, his kindness, and then . . . a devastating account of his mediocrity, industry and lack of self-knowledge.[43]

What we find in these ambiguous descriptions is in fact a sense of individuals changing in time, and hence, resisting appropriation. Here is Thackeray's farewell to Miss Crawley:

> Peace to thee, kind and selfish, vain and generous old heathen!--We shall see thee no more. Let us hope that Lady Jane supported her kindly, and led her with a gentle hand out of the busy struggle of Vanity Fair.[44]

Being now kind, now selfish, now vain, now generous, Miss Crawley is obviously not to be easily categorized.

Two important matters have to be mentioned in connection with Thackeray's view of his characters. The first of these is the function of the narrator of Vanity Fair. This narrator, like other Thackerayan narrators, has attracted attacks from critics who believe that the artist's duty is to make us see. Thackeray, it is said, has opted for telling rather than showing, for the panoramic narrative rather than dramatization. This is of course manifestly untrue since all that Thackeray actually tells us is that nothing can be told. As Juliet McMaster explains in her Thackeray: The Major Novels, Thackeray's narrator has two different roles, being not only a puppeteer but also someone who passively witnesses the development of his characters and offers to shake hands with them if they are good, and to abuse them if they are wicked:

> The characters are no longer puppets, to be galvanized by the twitch of a string or eliminated at the whim of the puppeteer; they are human beings, of the same size and species as the Manager and the audience, and qualified to shake hands with the one or the other.[45]

This duality identified by McMaster is in fact characteristic of Thackerayan narrators on the whole, and corresponds to that Kantian duality mentioned above that separates "things for us" from "things in themselves". As early as "The Professor" Thackeray employs a narrator who not only shares the views of his characters but also once in a while turns round and criticizes them:

> The next day the till of the shop was empty, and a weeping apprentice dragged before the Lord Mayor. It is true that no signs of money were found on him; it is true that he protested his innocence; but he was dismissed the alderman's service, and passed a month at Bridewell because Adeliza Grampus had a needy lover.[46]

Similarly, as adverse critics were quick to point out, the narrator of Catherine has two different voices; and though Barry Lyndon has a single autobiographical narrator, his pronouncements are qualified by the editor Fitz-Boodle. By using such, as it were, "bi-lingual" narrators, Thackeray both tries to impose form on things and shows how they insist on remaining formless, and the conflict thus set up is very different from that interplay of centripetal and centrifugal forces which W.J. Harvey sees as the key to Bleak House. With Dickens time is ultimately regained; with Thackeray the parts prove too complicated for the whole, for any whole.

Secondly, there is the matter of serial publication. Again,

McMaster is very illuminating on this point:

> It seems as though Thackeray had a concept of the serially published novel as almost a genre in itself: certainly Esmond, written for publication as a whole, is a work different in kind from his other novels; with its limited point of view and sustained emotional intensity, it is more like the kind of novel Ortega describes. . . . The publication over many months has some effect on the mood and action of the novel, as well as its structure. As the time of writing and of reading is extended, so the time of the action is protracted. These novels are not concerned with any single conflict of wills, any decisive break-through of experience, as, say Jane Austen's or George Eliot's are. His characters get older, they act themselves out; they gain in wisdom in one direction, perhaps, while their receptivity in another fades. Meanwhile, the narrator gets older, and reminds us that we are getting older too. That continuous fabric of existence goes on, over months or years, with its dramas and disappointments but without resolution, for the novel's characters as for its readers.[47]

As McMaster implies, Thackeray uses the serial form to create the illusion that he is merely reporting life as it occurs. His characters develop and change in time, and this fragmentation once more becomes a counterpoint to Thackeray's so-called "redoublings"[48] which attempt to anticipate an as yet undisclosed future.

What is true of individuals is also of course true of life in general in Vanity Fair. Reality refuses to be governed by human schemes. A little bowl of punch suffices to upset Becky's carefully prepared plans, and this tragi-comic complexity of things is exactly what Thackeray celebrates. Thackeray's methods of composition, the looseness of his plots and his reliance on improvisation, have been examined at length by J.A. Sutherland in Thackeray at Work. Indeed in Vanity Fair life is not forced to unfold according to a definite plot or made to

answer to a particular theme. We see Mr Sedley embarrassing his son with his jokes at the dinner table, and then we see him sitting on a park bench, old and broken; Dobbin bursts out laughing among the flower stalls at Brussels, and he returns years later, grizzled and disillusioned, to confront Amelia; Jos meets a number of misfortunes in the first half of the novel, and then he quite happily performs a Polonaise at the court of Victor Aurelius XVII. This sense of the richness of life, of its capacity for offering both happiness and sadness and for changing from low comedy into high tragedy and vice versa, is the very quality for which we still read and value Victorian fiction, and Vanity Fair is in fact the very first place where it has been captured. Significantly, it was precisely when he decided to follow "the tragic muse" and reflect a particular vision of life, that Henry James came to see Tolstoy and Thackeray as creators of "large, loose, baggy monsters". Dickens, too, lost his sense of life by self-consciously trying to create "atmosphere" in his later works like Little Dorrit and Bleak House which we now admire so much; and needless to say, our present prisoners of tone and style are more interested in their own schemes than in life itself. Not even a contemporary novel as brilliant, inventive and deliberately "Victorian" as Angus Wilson's No Laughing Matter has quite the kind of life that Vanity Fair has. How a novelist as self-conscious about his art as Thackeray can at the same time provide his readers with such an unfathomable sense of reality is nothing short of amazing.

Finally, to space and time Thackeray adds another variable: death. With some twenty deaths mentioned or described in the course of sixty-eight chapters, Vanity Fair has a mortality rate that is nearly as high

as that of Wuthering Heights, surely the most death-ridden novel in the English language. Death, Thackeray insists, can always break man's grip on things. This is not quite that "death of man" which the Structuralists are now popularizing, or that death-wish at the end of Lawrence's Women in Love which takes the form of a hope that man may die, leaving the world to unfold freely once again:

> "God cannot do without man." It was the saying of some great French religious teacher. But surely this is false. God can do without man. God could do without the ichthyosauri and the mastodon. These monsters failed creatively to develop, so God, the creative mystery, dispensed with them. In the same way the mystery could dispense with man, should he too fail creatively to change and develop. The eternal creative mystery could dispose of man, and replace him with a finer created being. Just as the horse has taken the place of the mastodon.
>
> It was very consoling to Birkin to think this. If humanity ran into a cul-de-sac, and expended itself, the timeless creative mystery would bring forth some other being, finer, more wonderful, some new, more lovely race, to carry on the embodiment of creation. The game was never up. The mystery of creation was fathomless, infallible, inexhaustible, for ever. Races came and went, species passed away, but ever new species arose, more lovely, or equally lovely, always surpassing wonder. . . . To have one's pulse beating direct from the mystery, this was perfection, unutterable satisfaction.[49]

Thackeray does not go to such extremes. But he does remind us in his way that man is mortal and would do better to take himself less seriously. All man's enterprises are tainted by death. The houses he builds have an arch in them for resting coffins upon, and entire civilizations seem to have a built-in factor of mortality:

> 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.[50]

and:

> Ah, ladies!--ask the Reverend Mr Thurifer if Belgravia is not a sounding brass, and Tyburnia a tinkling cymbal. These are vanities. Even these will pass away. And some day or other . . . 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.[51]

These anti-humanist pronouncements are reminiscent not only of Shakespeare's belief that all cloud-capp'd towers and gorgeous palaces are doomed to pass away but also of Thackeray's own refusal to be impressed by such decaying monuments like the Acropolis and the Pyramids in his travel book based on his Eastern trip of 1844, A Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo. Thackeray's obsession with death is, in many ways, his final affirmation of life, his last attempt to remind a society insisting on imposing its own patterns on reality that all such patterns are weak and ephemeral. When he tells us that the soldiers of Waterloo, "just rescued out of death, fell to gambling, and gaiety, and love-making",[52] it becomes clear that Vanity Fair is a place where man tries to establish his own kingdom in the face of time, change and death.

V

In a world where reality remains ultimately intractable, where space and time defy man and death is only the end of a life-long process of decay, some fail; and these are the sympathetic ones. In his autobiography, A Sort of Life, Graham Greene writes: "I have preferred to finish this essay with the years of failure which followed the acceptance of my first novel. Failure too is a kind of death",[53] and like him, Thackeray, too, seems to regard failure as a death of sorts, a death in life, a Christian dying to the world. The best, it appears, are those who lack all conviction. Those who fail lack the ability to impose their will on the world, and therefore, like those who cannot speak, they deserve our admiration and respect. With all his flowered waistcoats, Jos cannot hide his stout body, so he is sympathetic. Mr Sedley is obnoxious when he is a successful businessman, but when he goes bankrupt he begins to become likeable. Rawdon starts becoming sympathetic not when we see him with his son but really as soon as it becomes clear that he is not going to inherit Miss Crawley's money, and even Thackeray's sympathy for Pitt, which takes the form of a constant emphasis on his kindness, is connected with his having "failed somehow, in spite of a mediocrity that should have insured any man a success."[54] Pitt, we feel, cannot have been really mediocre after all, for otherwise he surely would have taken the lead in the world along with other dull people. Similarly, because they are failures, all minorities and foreigners are sympathetic. Mrs O'Dowd, whose pretensions are those of the poverty-stricken Irish, is a friendly soul who can hide neither her fat body nor her rich brogue;

Lady Grizzel Macbeth, who is Scottish, is out of her depth in fashionable society; and the inhabitants of Pumpernickel, who are often related to half the royal houses in Germany without having ten pounds in the world, are naive and charming. Indeed, as in George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, everyone is attractive except for the English with their wealth and power. Finally, all this makes us realize that this "mild tune", this poor-spirited novel whose sentimental hesitations will prove unbearable to Jones at the club, is also better than a brilliant and polished work like Barry Lyndon whose narrator confidently fits life into his schemes.

Yet, for Thackeray, failure is also ultimately frightening, something to be associated not only with virtues like generosity, kindness, friendliness and hospitality but also with sleazy coffee-houses and Continental pensions of dubious reputation. Greene, of course, would have been at home in such places, but Thackeray is ultimately too timid, too middle-class, too Victorian for that. Mr Osborne's belief in "merit and industry, and judicious speculations, and that"[55] is clearly repulsive to him, but the alternative is not altogether acceptable either. Without any doubt Vanity Fair is one of the greatest novels of the nineteenth century. Criticizing cities, art, language, titles, money, scheming, the oppression of children, clocks and the ethic of success, or in short, all of man's ways of imposing his will on reality, it belongs to a genuine "Great Tradition" that extends unbroken from Shakespeare to Lawrence. In the end, however, it is also frightened by its own profound and moving vision of life. An uncontrolled life, it seems, is not only rich but also frustrating. When Thackeray calls his characters "puppets", he is

merely echoing Shakespeare who tells us that his actors were all "spirits", but, unlike Shakespeare, he finds in the abjuring of "this rough magic" not an ultimate reconciliation with life but a movement towards doubt and unhappiness. The narrator shares that dissatisfaction which Thackeray saw as the lot of his characters,[56] and it is no doubt to a large extent this disappointment with life itself that lies behind Thackeray's more favourable treatment of "culture" in his later works.

Notes

[1] Letters, ii, 333.

[2] The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships, and Correspondence, ed. T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, 4 vols (Oxford, 1932), ii, 201.

[3] The Great Tradition, p. 228.

[4] William Makepeace Thackeray, Vanity Fair, ed. Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson (Boston and London, 1963), p. x.

[5] Works, xi, 475.

[6] Ibid., 606.

[7] Ibid., 534.

[8] A Passage to India, Chapter 2.

[9] Works, xi, 674.

[10] Ibid., 761.

[11] Ibid., 634.

[12] Ibid., 444.

[13] Ibid., 166.

[14] Ibid., 252.

[15] J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1958), p. 305. The Roman numerals that follow Miller's quotations refer to book numbers in Our Mutual Friend, while his Arabic numerals refer to chapter numbers.

[16] See J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in Middlemarch", in The Worlds of Victorian Fiction, ed. J.H. Buckley, Harvard English Studies, 6 (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1975), pp. 125-145.

[17] Quoted by Ray in The Age of Wisdom, p. 119. Ray suggests that Thackeray may have been paraphrasing Henry James, Senior who told Emerson in 1853 that "Thackeray could not see beyond his eyes, and had no ideas, and merely is a sounding-board against which his experiences thump and resound".

[18] Works, xi, 252.

[19] Ibid., 504.

[20] Letters, ii, 531.

[21] Works, xi, 520.

[22] Ibid., 851-852.

[23] Ibid., 257-258.

[24] Ibid., 488.

[25] Ibid., 877.

[26] Ibid., 658.

[27] Ibid., 51.

[28] "Nottingham and the Mining Country", Selected Essays, Penguin (1950), p. 119.

[29] Works, xi, 855.

[30] The Phenomenology, p. 541.

[31] Ibid., p. 543.

[32] Works, xi, 600-601.

[33] The Phenomenology, pp. 542-543.

[34] See Geoffrey Tillotson, A View of Victorian Literature (Oxford, 1978), p. 174.

[35] Works, xi, 211-212.

[36] Works, xi, 27.

[37] "Sonnets from China VIII".

[38] David Skilton, The English Novel: Defoe to the Victorians (Newton Abbot, 1977), pp. 144-145.

[39] Quoted by Skilton, pp. 144-145.

[40] Works, xi, 740.

[41] Ibid., 369.

[42] Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 67.

[43] The Exposure of Luxury, p. 66.

[44] Works, xi, 437.

[45] Juliet McMaster, Thackeray: The Major Novels (Manchester, 1971), pp. 16-18.

[46] Works, i, 122.

[47] Thackeray: The Major Novels, p. 24.

[48] See John A. Lester, Jr., "Thackeray's Narrative Technique", PMLA, 69 (1954), 392-409.

[49] Women in Love, Chapter 31.

[50] Works, xi, 602.

[51] Ibid., 633-634.

[52] Ibid., 442.

[53] Graham Greene, A Sort of Life (London, 1971), p. 9.

[54] Works, xi, 99-100.

[55] Ibid., 773.

[56] See Letters, ii, 423. Thackeray writes: " . . . I want to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story."

Chapter Seven

A CHANGE OF HEART

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I

Chapter IX of Margaret Forster's recent "autobiography" of Thackeray concludes with the words

> There--I have told you all you need to know about my great success. Wasn't it quickly over, even though you thought I would never get to it? There I am, on the pinnacle, and not knowing it. Not knowing it? Well, of course I did not know it--I thought Vanity Fair was the beginning, I thought I should get better and better, I thought a golden age had opened up before me. It would have been insupportable if I had known the truth.[1]

This is of course the standard view of Thackeray's achievement, whether or not Thackeray himself held it. Most critics agree that the outstanding success of Vanity Fair is followed by a series of relative failures, and there exist numerous explanations as to "what went wrong" after the great "Novel Without a Hero". Winslow Rogers for one writes:

> Behind Thackeray's decline is an impatience with self-conscious storytelling, combined with an inability to avoid it and work out for himself some other conception of his art. The late novels are spoiled not by self-consciousness but by his refusal to be as thoroughly self-conscious as he had been earlier. In his late years he lost patience with human diversity

> and complexity and grew unable to continue doing justice to its endless ramifications. He more and more tended to fall back on a particular sentimental voice as the last word. At his best he created fictional works of great power because of the self-conscious awareness that no person, not even the omniscient author, deserves that final word.[2]

An interesting implication of this view is that that well-known sentimental and didactic Thackeray who insists that his characters should behave in a certain way is in fact a relatively late development. Rogers sees this development as both voluntary and involuntary. He speaks simultaneously of Thackeray's refusal to remain self-conscious and his inability to do so. Gordon N. Ray's view of this matter is on the whole more straightforward. In his famous essay "Vanity Fair: One Version of the Novelist's Responsibility" Ray explains how at some point during the composition of that novel Thackeray arrived at a new conception of his art, deciding that henceforth he would not merely reflect life but also point out how it ought to be lived.[3] Somewhere Ray seems to believe that this decision made Thackeray a better novelist, although he ultimately subscribes to the conventional view that the still self-conscious and evasive Vanity Fair is the greatest of Thackeray's works. That Ray should be attracted at all to Thackeray's later novels, however, is significant. A novelist who, so to speak, puts himself forth and explains what he thinks is of course easier to deal with than one who refuses to make up his mind. But one is left with the impression that what is at work in Ray's case is a specifically American preference for art over life. In this respect Ray is similar to critics like Loofbourow and Wheatley who are more outspoken in their admiration for Thackeray's later works, although,

paradoxically, they also assert that it is Thackeray, the parodist, rather than Thackeray, the straight-foward novelist, who is in the end the truly significant artist.

Whatever American critics may think, though, it is clear that to any critic of an essentially English cast of mind the illusion that one knows what good and evil consist of and how life ought to be lived is likely to smack of Original Sin. This is why John Carey has no difficulty claiming that Thackeray never wrote anything of any real importance after 1848. What went wrong after Vanity Fair, says Carey, was that Thackeray decided to adopt that Victorian ethic which he had previously so despised and argue for control over life:

> This fatal resolve, which destroyed him as a writer, was partly a bid for popularity. He wanted the great public to take him to its heart, as it had taken Dickens. But it was also a result of a change in his circumstances. Suddenly he found himself a celebrity, fêted by the great: "I reel from dinner party to dinner party—I wallow in turtle and swim in claret and Shampang", he chaffed jubilantly. Gratification softened his heart and his head, and he began to grow "ashamed" of his "former misanthropical turn".[4]

This is very strongly put, but in a way strong words are necessary. Critics who treat Thackeray, as it were, thematically, concentrating on some perennial concerns of his art rather than on his chronological development, tend to ignore the fact that he changed his outlook halfway through his career. Geoffrey Tillotson's notion of the "Thackerayan Oneness" is, in many ways, a direct result of his thematic approach, and even Barbara Hardy, who is aware that Thackeray changed as a man, wishes to say that this did not affect his art. "The evidence

of the biography and the evidence of the fiction," she writes, "are two startlingly different things."[5] In other words, the fiction, once separated from the chronology that belongs to the biography, is unified and can be treated collectively under the title The Exposure of Luxury. This is an essentially misleading position. No doubt it is possible to isolate bits and pieces of Pendennis or The Newcomes and claim that in these works Thackeray is still sneering at human vanity, but the general thrust of these novels is very different from that of Vanity Fair, and Carey is right to emphasize this.

What led Thackeray to change his mind, however, is a different matter. He may have decided to cater to the prejudices of his readers in order to achieve greater popularity. Again, the change in his circumstances may have made him more sympathetic towards the society of which he had finally become a recognized member. But one feels that the explanation ultimately lies, as usual, in Thackeray's personality. That he made a conscious decision to change is clear. Vanity Fair itself, however, bears few signs of that didacticism which Ray claims Thackeray had decided to strive for. In fact it is a novel very much against dominating approaches to life. As Wheatley argues, Thackeray is "antirational, anti-intellectual . . . antimonistic".[6] Everything is distrusted except the flow of life itself. Yet that flow of life is also ultimately seen to be the source of tragedy, frustration and despair:

> Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?[7]

Thackeray rejects control over life, but he also finally discovers that he cannot accept an uncontrolled life. This is why the novel ends with a top-hatted, frock-coated Dobbin striving to ensure the respectability of his wife and children. Mr Osborne comes back under a different guise because, it seems, only his Victorianism can cope with the world. As a result, Vanity Fair is not only the culmination of the early phase of Thackeray's art but also a transition. Carrying Thackeray's rejection of human ways of organizing the world to an extreme, it yet ends up opting for organization and thus ushers in a new phase in Thackeray's development.

Winslow Rogers is thus right in relating Thackeray's change of heart to a "dissatisfaction" with his previous attitudes. This dissatisfaction is expressed most strongly in Thackeray lectures on The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century which were first delivered in London between May and July 1851 shortly after the completion of Pendennis. Here it is possible to see Thackeray changing from an Augustan anti-humanist into a Victorian moralist. The various likes and dislikes he expresses are all significant, but perhaps most telling is his comment on Swift:

> And dreadful it is to think that Swift knew the tendency of his creed--the fatal rocks towards which his logic desperately drifted. That last part of "Gulliver" is only a consequence of what has gone before; and the worthlessness of all mankind, the pettiness, cruelty, pride, imbecility, the general vanity, the foolish pretension, the mock greatness, the pompous dullness, the mean aims, the base successes--all these were present to him; it was with the din of these curses of the world, blasphemies against Heaven, shrieking in his ears that he began to write this dreadful allegory--of which the meaning is that man is utterly wicked, desperate and imbecile, and his

> passions are so monstrous, and his boasted powers so mean, that he is and deserves to be the slave of brutes, and ignorance is better than his vaunted reason.[8]

All that is said here of Gulliver is of course applicable to Vanity Fair as well. But Thackeray has realized that to reject humanism is to be left face to face with the ambiguity and complexity of life itself, and in the end he wants to "play it safe" and return to the attitudes and values his earlier works had satirized.

II

Thackeray's post-1848 novels constitute an unabashed defence of the organized life. True enough, Thackeray occasionally tries to deny this. In his most carefully controlled novel, Henry Esmond, for instance, there occurs the astonishing remark "I can't but accept the world as I find it, including a rope's end".[9] Similarly, in a letter written shortly after the publication of The Newcomes in book form he comments:

> I think please God my books are written by a God-loving man, and the morality--the vanity of success & c. of all but Love and Goodness--is not that the teaching of Domini Nostri?[10]

And as late as The Virginians Thackeray is still presenting himself as someone who is, as it were, constitutionally unable to refrain from satirizing worldly success:

> I for one, and for the future, am determined never to speak or write my mind out regarding anything or anybody. I intend to say of every woman that she is chaste and handsome; of every man that he is handsome, clever, and rich; of every book that it is delightfully interesting; of Snobmore's manners that they are gentlemanlike; of Screwby's dinners that they are luxurious; of Jawkins's conversation that it is lively and amusing; of Xantippe, that she had a sweet temper; of Jezebel, that her colour is natural; of Bluebeard, that he really was most indulgent to his wives, and that very likely they died of bronchitis. What? a word against the spotless Messalina? What an unfavourable view of human nature? What? King Cheops was not a perfect monarch? Oh, you railer at royalty and slanderer of all that is noble and good! When this book is concluded I shall change the jaundiced livery which my books have worn since I began to lisp in numbers, have rose-coloured coats for them with cherubs on the cover, and all the characters within shall be perfect angels.
> Meanwhile . . .[11]

There is, however, reason to suspect that Thackeray had in fact abandoned satire long before this point.

Thackeray himself actually admits this. In The Adventures of Philip he makes Arthur Pendennis say:

> Now I am ready to say that Nero was a monarch with many elegant accomplishments, and considerable natural amiability of disposition. I praise and admire success wherever I meet it. I make allowance for faults and shortcomings, especially in my superiors; and feel that, did we know all, we should judge them very differently. People don't believe me, perhaps, quite as much as formerly. But I don't offend: I trust I don't offend.[12]

This is of course ironic, but it is also defensive. Thackeray knows that he has changed, and he is hoping that his more intelligent readers will not be offended. One symptom of this change is that he now takes

a favourable view of parents. The parents in his new novels are sympathetic figures like Helen Pendennis and Colonel Newcome. Needless to say, a few doubts remain. Helen suffers from "sexual jealousy"[13] and the Colonel is absolutely incapable of understanding his son's artistic leanings. But neither is held up as a self-satisfied tyrant, the way Mr Osborne had been. Likewise, Thackeray's attitude towards schools and education has changed. As Saintsbury remarks in his Introduction to Pendennis, "The old half-revengeful and more than half-grudging estimate of school-life has mellowed and sweetened itself."[14] Even the Classics Master who torments Pen is really a kindly man--

> "There is nothing serious, I hope," said the doctor. "It is a pity to take the boy otherwise. He is a good boy, rather idle and unenergetic, but an honest, gentlemanlike little fellow, though I can't get him to construe as I wish. . . ."[15]

--and the respectful treatment Grey Friars receives in The Newcomes and Philip makes it a very different place from the schools in Thackeray's earlier fiction which had been associated mainly with brutal floggings. Thackeray now supports people and institutions capable of controlling others.

Not surprisingly, he has begun to approve of art as well. In The Newcomes, a work much concerned with art and artists, he writes, "Art is truth: and truth is religion; and its study and practice is a daily work of pious duty":[16] and the same novel urges us to respect artists in general and novelists in particular:

> As Professor Owen or Professor Agassiz takes a fragment of a bone, and builds an enormous forgotten monster out of it, wallowing in primaeval quagmires, tearing down leaves and branches of plants that flourished thousands of years ago, and perhaps may be coal by this time—so the novelist puts this and that together: from the footprint finds the foot; from the foot, the brute who trod on it; from the brute, the plant he browsed on, the marsh in which he swam—and thus in his humble way a physiologist too, depicts the habits, size, appearance of the beings whereof he has to treat;—traces this slimy reptile through the mud, describes his habits filthy and rapacious; prods down his butterfly with a pin, and depicts his beautiful coat and embroidered waistcoat; points out the singular structure of yonder more important animal, the megatherium of his history.[17]

It appears that the artist can no longer be seen as a "quack" and compared to the criminal and the snob. Instead, he is now a physiologist of sorts who is capable of pointing out the structure of everything he examines. This passage may have influenced Dickens, for the very same analogy occurs in Our Mutual Friend where the enigmatic Mr Venus, who, according to Silas Wegg, "has the patience to put together on wires the whole framework of society",[18] is clearly intended to remind the reader of the nature of the novelist's task. Only, of course, Dickens views this kind of skeleton-building with a considerable amount of suspicion. Not only is Mr Venus himself a half-sinister figure but it is also possible to compare art to Jenny Wren's sartorial activities. As a "dolls' dressmaker" Jenny brings Carlyle's metaphor of clothes together with Thackeray's metaphor of puppetry, and makes it clear that, for Dickens, art is perverse and violent:

> When I see a great lady very suitable for my business, I say, "You'll do my dear!" and take particular notice of her, and run home and cut her and baste her. Then another day, I come scudding back again to try on, and then I take particular notice of her again. Sometimes she plainly seems to say, "How that little creature is staring!" and sometimes likes it and sometimes don't, but much more often yes than no. All the time I am only saying to myself, "I must hollow out a bit here; I must slope away there"; and I am making a perfect slave of her, with making her try on my doll's dress.[19]

Thackeray, though, no longer sees the artist as a neurotic and virtually sadistic child trying to enslave an unruly world. To be sure, in The Newcomes fiction is still depicted as an artificial "Fable-land", but Thackeray does not really wish to criticize an activity which he somewhat self-defensively claims to be worthy of Professor Owen or Professor Agassiz. Indeed the whole "Fable-land" passage is separated from the main body of The Newcomes by a line drawn at the end of the last chapter, just as the contrast between art and nature that Thackeray makes in Pendennis occurs in the Preface to that novel. There is not much actually within either work that could suggest fiction is mere game-playing, and Thackeray's fictional editors and narrators are now allowed to go to work either anonymously or under the cover of a respectable name like Arthur Pendennis, instead of having their glibness advertised by comic names like Ikey Solomons, Jr. and Major Goliah O'Grady Gahagan. The emphasis is, as much as possible, on the truthfulness and reliability of the artist.

Along with this new respect for art there goes a tightening of Thackeray's own art. Although J.A. Sutherland claims that the novels Thackeray wrote after Vanity Fair are not "patterned",[20] it is possible to argue that they in fact constitute a move towards plot. Thus such

elements as the bigamous marriage between Colonel Altamont and Lady Clavering in Pendennis and the will in Orme's India in The Newcomes eventually combine to produce the main story-line of Philip, while there is little in the unfinished Denis Duval apart from plot. The real tightening, though, occurs in Thackeray's handling of his characters. One of the special features of Vanity Fair is that it is in fact a novel without puppets. Does Thackeray idealize Amelia, or is he in fact sneering at her? Does he admire or condemn Becky? Critics have endlessly debated these issues, and even today there are those who try to settle such questions.[21] The point, however, is that Thackeray's characters are not supposed to mean but be. Thackeray does not try to fit them into any particular mould, and as a result, they have all the untidiness and ambiguity of real people. After Vanity Fair, though, this is no longer true. Laura is good and Blanche is bad: it is as simple and straightforward as that. Major Pendennis, whom Orwell admired, and whom Carey sees as practically the only living character in Thackeray's later fiction, is indeed a remarkable exception, a multi-dimensional figure who would not have been out of place in Vanity Fair. For the rest, Thackeray's new heroes and heroines are either unified after the fashion of Blanche and Laura, or in another, less obvious, but ultimately equally rigid, fashion. As Wheatley notes,

> After Ethel's conversion, for instance, she throws herself into the High Church line with almost as much imperiousness and rigidity as she had shown in her days of empty triumph. . . . This rather fierce Diana, as Clive had once called her, now has new game to hunt.[22]

In other words, Ethel seems to change, but in fact she does not. Like George Eliot's Dorothea, whose development was examined in Chapter One above, she leads an existence that is governed by a definite pattern. This is not an accident but a deliberate strategy backed up by a conception of character which Thackeray outlines in Pendennis:

> We alter very little. When we speak of this man or that woman no longer being the same person whom we remember in youth, and remark . . . changes in our friends, we don't, perhaps, calculate that circumstance only brings out the latent defect or quality, and does not create it.[23]

Thackeray's own characters are no longer allowed to display a wide variety of traits in time, and that, Thackeray is saying, is exactly as it should be.

For the later Thackeray, then, form is more important than life. This preference is sometimes indicated in a humorous or apologetic way, but it is there. Thackeray's new allegiance to middle-class attitudes and values is occasionally uneasy. "The Newcomes", that wonderful name which James tried to imitate in The Ambassadors, for instance, is a satirical touch infinitely more effective than Dickens's constant insistence that the Veneerings are "bran-new people". Yet, in the end, Thackeray is obviously more sympathetic towards the Newcomes than Dickens is towards the Veneerings, and, in any case, his certainties are more significant than his doubts. He makes the narrator of Pendennis explain that it is better to die than to submit to the kind of "easy sensuality" that lets the world take its own course without any outside interference,[24] and this insistence on power over the world is what stands behind the novels he wrote after Vanity Fair.

III

In discussing the second phase of Thackeray's art it is best to concentrate on the three major novels he produced between 1848 and 1855, Pendennis, Henry Esmond and The Newcomes. After the last of these repetition sets in. What Thackeray tries to do in The Adventures of Philip and, in some ways, the unfinished Denis Duval is done better in Pendennis and The Newcomes, and the same is true of The Virginians which returns to the themes of Esmond without any of the subtlety and assurance of the earlier novel. Furthermore, in these works Thackeray's artistic integrity is frequently threatened by mercenary concerns. The Virginians is clearly written with American sales in mind: Philip provides something for the reader interested in action in the form of a melodramatic scene in which the Little Sister chloroforms the blackmailing Tufton Hunt; and Denis Duval is a swashbuckling adventure yarn designed for light reading.

The novels between Vanity Fair and The Virginians, however, also pose problems. In some ways Thackeray's new position is stated so clearly in Henry Esmond that no further development is possible, and even The Newcomes is, as Thackeray admitted, "a repetition of past performances".[25] But with its rebellion against the unruliness of life and its pointed allusions to Don Quixote, this novel is very helpful in identifying many of Thackeray's main concerns in this period and can serve as an illuminating companion volume to Pendennis. In both of these works a young man is dominated and shaped by those around him, and Thackeray's essential approval of this process is indicated by the fact that both Arthur and Clive are "heroes". Because Thackeray no

longer questions the patterns that can be imposed on reality, he has given up insisting that his characters are mere puppets, and this acceptance of man's right to humanize his environment prepares the way for Henry Esmond, which is easily the most humanistic of Thackeray's novels.

Notes

[1] Margaret Forster, William Makepeace Thackeray: Memoirs of a Victorian Gentleman (London, 1978), p. 148.

[2] Winslow Rogers, "Thackeray's Self-Consciousness", in The Worlds of Victorian Fiction, ed. J.H. Buckley, Harvard English Studies, 6 (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1975), pp. 149-163 (pp. 162-163).

[3] See Gordon N. Ray, "Vanity Fair: One Version of the Novelist's Responsibility", Essays by Divers Hands, 25 (1950), 87-101.

[4] John Carey, Thackeray: Prodigal Genius (London, 1977), p. 18.

[5] The Exposure of Luxury, p. 19.

[6] Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 67.

[7] Works, xi, 878.

[8] Works, xiii, 496.

[9] Ibid., 16.

[10] Letters, iii, 467.

[11] Works, xv, 364.

[12] Works, xvi, 58.

[13] Works, xii, 298.

[14] Ibid., xix.

[15] Ibid., 23.

[16] Works, xiv, 851.

[17] Ibid., 616.

[18] Our Mutual Friend, Book III, Chapter 6.

[19] Ibid., Chapter 2.

[20] J.A. Sutherland, Thackeray at Work (London, 1974), p. 45.

[21] See, for instance, John Hagan's "Vanity Fair: Becky Brought to Book Again" (Studies in the Novel, 7 (1975), 479-506). Hagan claims that Becky is obviously a "bad" character and none of the arguments in her favour will stand up under examination.

[22] Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, pp. 124-125.

[23] Works, xii, 766-767.

[24] Ibid., 801.

[25] Letters, iii, 287.

Chapter Eight

THE NOVELS WITH HEROES: PENDENNIS AND THE NEWCOMES

Chapter Eight

THE NOVELS WITH HEROES: PENDENNIS AND THE NEWCOMES

I

The similarities between Pendennis and The Newcomes are more important than the differences. "In his second full length novel," writes J.A. Sutherland,

> Thackeray hit what Trollope would call his 'groove'. Pendennis establishes not just the shape of one work but the mould for all the subsequent long fiction that Thackeray was to write--the career of a young hero (correspondent with his younger self) regarded by a friendly 'biographer' (correspondent with his older self) as he tries and errs his way through the world, gaining a moral education and a wife on the way.[1]

While all of Thackeray's later novels more or less answer to this pattern, however, Henry Esmond and The Virginians are historical novels, and Denis Duval is an adventure story. It is thus in Pendennis and The Newcomes that Thackeray is most directly concerned with the fortunes of a young hero, and the pattern he establishes in these works is later repeated in Philip.

Another similarity between the two novels is that many readers find them equally "formless". Yet, although these works are not organized in any conventional way, they are both concerned with the achievement of form in life. Thackeray found both of them difficult to write. He began

Pendennis with the intention of concentrating on the Altamont-Amory affair, but soon he decided to turn this "very precise plan" into a sub-plot and open his novel with an account of Helen's relationship with Laura's father. Eventually, however, he became dissatisfied with this scheme as well and was able to continue working only after a story out of real life, which he had heard from Horace Smith's daughters in Brighton in October 1848, had given him the idea for the Fotheringay episode. Even then, though, his difficulties did not cease. He fell seriously ill after completing the first eleven numbers, and upon recovering he found it difficult to stick to the original tone and mood of the book.

The Newcomes was hardly more fortunate. Having signed a contract with Bradbury and Evans for a new novel, Thackeray started working without any clear idea of what he wanted to do. Then, according to his own testimony, the story was revealed to him in a little wood near Berne; but, as usual, wanderlust and continued illness interrupted his plans, and most of the book was a co-production, with Thackeray supplying the text, Dicky Doyle providing the illustrations, and Percival Leigh and the printer somehow cutting down or blowing up the available copy to the required length for each number.[2]

All this, of course, tells, and at times both Pendennis and The Newcomes seem to fall apart. Yet Thackeray clearly has something to say, and, in a way, it would be possible to claim that his remarks concerning his initial plan for Pendennis hold the key to his message:

> Perhaps the lovers of 'excitement' may care to know that this book began with a very precise plan, which was entirely put aside. Ladies and gentlemen, you were to have been treated, and the writer's and the publishers' pocket benefited, by the recital of the most active horrors. What more exciting than a ruffian . . . in St Giles's, visited constantly by a young lady from Belgravia? What more stirring than the contrasts of society? the mixture of slang and fashionable language?[3]

A careful analysis of Pendennis and The Newcomes would show that Thackeray in fact did not deviate from this plan. "The contrasts of society" are very much what he is concerned with. Indeed the three different openings he considered for Pendennis are all variations on this theme. In each case a contrast is made between "high" and "low" life, between people who have the right morals and manners and people who drop their h's, eat peas with a knife, have no definite occupation, tend to be sexually loose, or otherwise offend against bourgeois notions of proper behaviour. Thackeray's attitude towards this second group could be summed up in the words "But for the grace of my mother and Charterhouse there go I". He needs to deal with such people of course, because ultimately one class, one way of life, can only be defined with respect to another. But the dissolute lower orders primarily exemplify to Thackeray what his own characters would become if they were not strictly controlled by their anxious parents and friends.

Thackeray, then, no longer holds spontaneity and naturalness to be great virtues. Instead he is concerned that his characters should be prim and respectable. He is not, however, after respectability in any superficial way. It is no doubt highly desirable for a gentleman to be prosperous and refined. Yet those who have these gifts without having the morality that ought to go along with them are clearly not respectable.

Their sole difference from the poor is that they have more money, whereas what Thackeray is interested in is not having more money but, as it were, a different attitude towards money. His gentlemen are supposed to achieve a comfortable existence by being indifferent to comfort, by not valuing the goods of this world in their own right and living with prudence and economy. This is why in the twenty-ninth chapter of Pendennis he writes:

> Colleges, schools, and inns of court, still have some respect for antiquity, and maintain a great number of the customs and institutions of our ancestors with which those persons who do not particularly regard their forefathers, or perhaps are not very well acquainted with them, have long since done away. A well-ordained workhouse or prison is much better provided with the appliances of health, comfort, and cleanliness, than a respectable Foundation School, a venerable College, or a learned Inn. In the latter place of residence men are contented to sleep in dingy closets, and to pay for the sitting-room and cupboard, which is their dormitory, the price of a good villa and garden in the suburbs, or of a roomy house in the neglected squares of the town. The poorest mechanic in Spitalfields has a cistern and an unbounded supply of water at his command; but the gentlemen of the inns of court, and of the universities, have their supply of this cosmetic fetched in jugs by launderesses and bedmakers, and live in abodes which were erected long before the custom of cleanliness and decency obtained among us.4

There can hardly be a better example than this of what Max Weber called "this-worldly asceticism". John Carey finds this passage both false and repulsive, and he goes into a long and angry digression on the history of London's water supply in the first half of the nineteenth century:

> The Royal Commission Report of 1850 records that in the area supplied by the East London Company, which included Spitalfields, over 500 households had to fetch their water from common tanks, while a further 3,297 were dependent on common outdoor standcocks which were kept running for two hours or less each day. The company drew its supplies from the River Lea, into which the effluents of dye-works,

> distilleries, chemical works and sewers ran. As a result, by the time the water reached the consumer, it was, the Commission learned, 'very much discoloured, thick, muddy', contained 'organic matters', and had a 'peculiar smell'. . . . So much for Thackeray's happy mechanic with a cistern.[5]

This is informative but highly irrelevant. The actual conditions the poor lived under are immaterial to Thackeray's argument. He is essentially making one of the points that Mayhew was to make some years later in London Labour and the London Poor. The poor are, alas, sensualists who enjoy and waste things, while the middle class, being careful and thrifty, lives in relative prosperity.

Having defined respectability as the antithesis of sensuality, Thackeray can then go on to pour scorn on the pseudo-respectable who merely have more money without really being any better than the poor, and this has of course helped to confuse a good many critics. In fact the avowed themes of Pendennis and The Newcomes--the conflict between the sentimental and the practical life, and the marriage market--have to be handled carefully. In the former case it is all too easy to assume that Helen's "sentimental life" consists of a loving approach to the world, while the "practical life" Major Pendennis stands for is a synonym for the kind of "vanity" that was explored in Vanity Fair. In reality, however, Thackeray uses these terms in a curious way, and in the end, strictly speaking, it is the Major who is the truly sentimental, or at least sensual one, while Helen upholds the middle-class virtues which had been pilloried in the earlier novel.

What makes Major Pendennis such an intriguing character is that unconsciously he subscribes to two different, and in the end irreconcilable, ethical codes. On the one hand he is a respectable professional soldier

who has once served his country gallantly and now lives frugally on his small pension; on the other hand he is a Regency buck with a devil-may-care attitude towards the world. In so far as he is the second of these things he is not fundamentally different from a character like Captain Costigan. Indeed Thackeray subtly encourages us to compare the Major with the Captain. Both men display a sensuality that is meant to be seen as being out of keeping with their age. Costigan sings bawdy songs, and Major Pendennis is capable of giving an occasional "superannuated leer" at a passing bonnet. Moreover, both of these elderly satyrs live largely by sponging on other people, and they are both treated somewhat contemptuously by their acquaintances. True enough, Major Pendennis is an aristocratic hanger-on who merely receives dinners from Lords, while Costigan actually receives shillings and half-crowns from tavern keepers and young bohemians, but the difference between the two is a difference of degree rather than of kind. Neither is capable of understanding the middle-class virtues of hard work, discipline, self-control, chastity and prudence, and neither can see that the "high" life necessitates a distinct moral outlook, and not simply greater material resources. Interestingly, for instance, the Major does not think that there is anything intrinsically wrong with the idea of marrying the Fotheringay. He merely does not want his nephew to marry her, as he has a small income and needs a rich wife. Otherwise, apparently a man may marry an actress, or even have an actress for a mistress, provided that he does not thereby reduce himself to poverty. It is perfectly permissible to go to the deuce if one can do so in a fashionable carriage. Accordingly, when the wealthy Sir Charles Mirabel eventually marries the Fotheringay, the

Major merely states that a man of Sir Charles's rank "could afford to marry whom he chooses".[6] Helen, on the other hand, opposes her son's matrimonial plans for radically different reasons. Clearly, she would rather have Arthur marry Emily than have her for a mistress. But, better still, she wants the connection to cease altogether because Emily is not only poor but also has the manners of the poor and is likely to lead young Pen into dissolute courses.

Again, the Major's ignorance of middle-class values leads him to think that Blanche is a suitable candidate for Pen's hand. Of course with the puritanical side of his mind he initially disapproves of Blanche and even warns Pen against her:

> Don't get yourself entangled with that Miss Amory. She is forward, affected, and underbred; and her character is somewhat--never mind what. But don't think of her; ten thousand pound won't do for you. What, my good fellow, is ten thousand pound? I would scarcely pay that girl's milliner's bill with the interest of the money.[7]

In short, Blanche is a poor investment. She wastes everything, squandering her money on millinery; and her sexual charms, which ought to be put to the service of a production line that turns out a baby every year, on coquettish games. Alas, however, the Major's allegiance to prudence and economy is only superficial, and soon, dazzled by Blanche's wealth, he forgets the fact that she is the kind of woman who bares her shoulders, makes passes at men, and secretly gorges herself on cream puffs in her bedroom. Whether such characteristics necessarily go along with being a convict's daughter is not altogether clear. What is clear, though, is that Major Pendennis's "vulgar" attachment to the goods of this world and his inability to exercise any control over his appetites brand him

as, in certain respects, a lower-class person. Needless to say, he himself would be horrified at such an idea, but the readers of Pendennis are meant to see him for what he is. His ultimate punishment comes when his servant Morgan rebels against him. The valet has lost all respect for his master whom he regards as being no better than himself. He says: "I am an Englishman, I am, and as good as you";[8] and in Thackeray's eyes this claim is fully justified because he is indeed an Englishman of exactly the same kind as the Major. Fortunately, though, there exist "higher" criteria for Englishness, according to which Helen is "a high-bred English lady"[9] and Blanche is not;[10] and in the end England is saved from being left in the hands of coarse, drunken servants and their equally abandoned aristocratic masters and is turned over to the respectable middle classes.

The theme of pseudo-respectability also spills over into The Newcomes. Here the Major's role is played, in part, by Colonel Newcome. The Colonel is of course much more middle-class in his outlook than the Major. He is a staunch defender of morality who always takes Sir Charles Grandison and the Spectator with him on his travels, cannot tolerate Tom Jones and has little patience with reprobates like Captain Costigan. He also works hard and spends little. Despite this admirable asceticism, however, somewhere he has quaint notions of class and believes that a gentleman must possess and spend money. Thus he spoils his son with large cheques and ultimately insists on his marrying a woman who, though rich, has a vulgar mother and a past history of attending parties at bachelors' establishments. The Colonel, though, is by and large on the side of proper behaviour, whereas Ethel's family really adhere to

a false concept of respectability. Their coveting of money is truly sensual and ends up bringing them into contact with other sensualists. Both of the suitors Lady Kew finds for Ethel are dissolute rakes, and Barnes stays on friendly terms with his wife's lover in order not to lose his account.

Clearly, real gentlemen are different from such people. They maintain a genuine distance from the lower orders by refusing to adopt their ways at all. Moreover, being gentlemen, they also marry people who resemble themselves. Marriage is obviously an important issue for Thackeray. His young heroes always have to choose between two different women, and this is meant to be seen as a moral choice. Thus Arthur is faced with Blanche and Laura; Clive with Rosy and Ethel; Esmond with Beatrix and Rachel; Warrington's ancestor George Warrington with Lydia Van den Bosch and Theo; and Philip with Agnes Twysden and Charlotte. As far as Thackeray is concerned, a man is only as good as the woman he ultimately chooses to marry; and as a result, his obsession with the marriage market in The Newcomes is far from accidental. Only, once again, what he has in mind has to be understood clearly. He thinks that people ought not to be sold for money. While this is highly laudable, however, the alternative he offers is that they should be made slaves to morality, or what the average mid-Victorian novel reader would have considered morality. Whatever the opposite of a marriage of convenience may be, it is clearly not a love-match pure and simple. Thackeray is against the idea of marrying for money because he regards any attachment to luxury as inherently sinful and self-indulgent. On the other hand, he sees mere passion as being equally undisciplined and wasteful:

> Many a young couple of spendthrifts get through their capital of passion in the first twelve months and have no love left for the daily demands of after-life. O me! for the day when the bank account is closed, and the cupboard is empty, and the firm of Damon and Phyliss is insolvent.[11]

In other words, lovers are rash and imprudent: they succumb to their momentary desires and live carelessly.

Indeed in this phase of his career Thackeray distrusts spontaneous affection of any kind. Pen and Warrington, for instance, are congratulated for greeting each other with only a brief handshake after a parting of several months. This, says Thackeray, is how true Englishmen behave, while Continentals smother each other with kisses.[12] The same Thackeray had of course once criticized George Osborne for displaying a characteristically English pride and refusing to write anything more than a cold note to his father on the eve of Waterloo.[13] Since then, however, his values have undergone a great change, and now he regards coldness as a virtue. Accordingly, a man is not supposed to marry for love any more than he is supposed to marry for money. He can only marry for stability. The great virtue of marriage lies in the fact that it is a bulwark against the temptations of the world. This is why when Colonel Newcome first meets Ethel he immediately thinks: "I would like to have Clive married to her; to see him out of the scrapes and dangers that young fellows encounter, and safe with such a sweet girl as that."[14]

Apparently the worst that can be said against marriages of convenience is that they end in adultery. Thackeray keeps reiterating this point, and one could easily be misled into thinking that what he means is that the natural instincts that are suppressed as a result of such unions ultimately return, causing people to abandon their legal spouses in favour

of those whom they really love. The real relationship between the marriage market and adultery, however, is more complex. In fact, far from being incompatible with natural instincts, marriages of convenience are actually based on them. A person who values money and marries for it is a weak-willed individual who cannot resist temptation, and sooner or later he or she can be expected to give in to desires of a different kind. This is certainly true of Lady Clara Pulleyn, a real weakling who is equally attracted to Barnes's wealth and Jack Belsize's masculinity. Significantly, she is one of the few characters in Thackeray's later fiction who are allowed to display sexual leanings. Her attachment to the tall, bearded, virile Jack Belsize is highly "improper" to begin with, and it is meant to come as no surprise when such a sensual woman ultimately finds the prospect of wealth and luxury irresistible as well. She has no self-control, and to emphasize this point Thackeray makes her marriage to Barnes a matter of personal choice as well as obedience to her parents. Ethel, on the other hand, would certainly not yield to her physical desires, and, for the same reason, in the end she will not marry for money either. Seeking money and seeking passionate, sexual love are, in short, not so much opposed impulses as two sides of the same coin. All this, of course, means that Thackeray's alleged preference for love at all costs is something that has been invented by his critics. For him the greatest good is not love but marriage itself. It is clearly better to be unhappily married than to find love and happiness through an adulterous liaison. Laura, who functions as Thackeray's mouthpiece and everybody's "conscience-keeper",[15] has no doubts on this point. Her account of her visit to the unfortunate Lady Clara is in fact an Evangelical sermon:

> "At first she was very indifferent; cold and haughty in her manner . . . then all of a sudden--I don't know how--I said, 'Lady Clara, I have had a dream about you and your children, and I was so frightened that I came over to you to speak about it.' And I had the dream, Pen; it came to me absolutely as I was speaking to her.
>
> "She looked a little scared, and I went on telling her the dream. 'My dear,' I said, 'I dreamed that I saw you happy with those children.'
>
> "'Happy!' says she--the three were playing in the conservatory, into which the sitting-room opens.
>
> "'And that a bad spirit came and tore them from you; and drove you into the darkness; and I saw you wandering about quite lonely and wretched, and looking back into the garden where the children were playing. And you asked and implored to see them; and the Keeper at the gate said "No, never." And then--then I thought they passed by you, and they did not know you.'
>
> "'Ah,' said Lady Clara.
>
> "'And then I thought, as we do in dreams, you know, that it was my child who was separated from me, and would not know me: and oh what a pang that was! Fancy that. Let us pray God that it was only a dream. And worse than that, when you, when I, implored to come to the child, and the man said "No, never," I thought there came a spirit--an angel that fetched the child to heaven, and you said, "Let me come too; oh, let me come too, I am so miserable." And the angel said, "No, never, never."'"[16]

The message seems to be that those who live by their desires and end up committing adultery are scorned in this world and punished in the next. This fictitious dream could, of course, be printed separately under a title like The Adulteress of Newcome Park and given to Lady Emily Sheepshanks for distribution. The good sense which had once enabled Thackeray to sneer at such edifying pamphlets as The Sailor's True Binnacle and The Applewoman of Finchley Common is evidently no longer in operation.

II

It should be clear by now that to read Pendennis and The Newcomes is to discover a new Thackeray. In a superficial sense he can still be said to be writing about "vanity". Only, he is now much closer to Bunyan than to Ecclesiastes and thinks that "vanity" consists not of trying to control the world but of trying to enjoy it. One could of course argue that this is only a development from a strain which had always been present in Thackeray's fiction. Thackeray, the Puritan, who detects the presence of Sin in Blanche's eating habits, Morgan's coveting of the Major's lawn-fronted shirts and gold-headed cane and Mrs Mackenzie's fascination with the silver coco-nut tree, is, after all already discernible in Vanity Fair where Becky's sexual escapades, Sir Pitt's habit of drinking rum and water with his peasants and fox-hunting parsons like the Reverend Crawley are surrounded by an aura of authorial disapproval. But in the end in Vanity Fair Thackeray's quarrel is not with those who enjoy life but those who try to impose their designs on it, while in his later fiction he upholds an ethic which would have been neither unfamiliar nor unacceptable to Mr Osborne.

Again, although some critics see Thackeray as returning to some themes of The Book of Snobs in Pendennis and The Newcomes, this is not really the case. Mr Snob is concerned with people whose very senses have been blunted. Snobs, he tells us cannot enjoy drinking wine unless they are drinking with lords and will rather drink water with lords than wine with anybody else. The senses of the people whom Thackeray attacks in his later novels, however, have not by any means been blunted. To Major Pendennis, for example, it is as important that he should dine well as

that he should dine with a lord, and, to do him justice, in the end he will sit at anybody's table as long as the fare is good. Thackeray's new enemy is the flesh, and he pitches at it with might and main. He may sneer at Mrs Newcome's Calvinist gardener who tends the melons and pines only "provisionally, and until the end of the world",[17] but his own position owes a lot to Calvin and other Protestant divines.

Thackeray's good characters like Helen Pendennis, Laura and Colonel Newcome accept this position as well. They are anxious that their loved ones should not succumb to temptation but live in a disciplined and orderly manner. To them and to Thackeray, it could be argued, time must have a pattern. This is why Emily Costigan, who would be incapable of understanding concepts like order and discipline, is compared to Arthur's first watch which "never went well from the beginning, and was always getting out of order",[18] and Colonel Newcome's standard present to young people is a watch. Clearly, however, even if Thackeray's heroes had no parents or friends to guide and control them, they would still behave in the right way; for an Arthur Pendennis, a Clive Newcome or a Philip Firmin is in the end "one of us". Each is the product of an environment and an education which are not only assumed to be right and proper but also to be shared by Thackeray and the reader as well. Of course a young man is bound to ask why people ought to be controlled at all, and why they can't live as they choose. Society, he might argue, suppresses all our natural instincts, and turns us into mere puppets. But deep down he is a member of the society he is criticizing, and a part of him is always ready to accept the wisdom of its ways. It is, as Anthony Powell might have said, a question of upbringing. Even when he seems to care for nothing but love,

for instance, Arthur is different from a character like Emily Costigan. The latter has no understanding of role-playing and sees only Bingley, the manager, where Arthur sees Hamlet. A young man who is thus more interested in the roles that people can be made to play than anything else is clearly on the right track and knows that it is only right that he should play a role as well. As a result Thackeray can afford to wink and say, "Dear reader, do not be too worried about these prodigals. They might appear a bit unruly, but in the end they are just like you and me, and they will never do anything really improper".

At least that is what Thackeray says most of the time. At other times he is more disturbed. Somehow he has come to believe that people ought to be controlled, but he still has some doubts. The Newcomes is, by and large, a complacent book, and Philip is even worse. In these two novels Thackeray merely assumes that his heroes are in themselves what "we" want them to be, and he does not even pay too much attention to them. Clive has to share The Newcomes with two other central characters, and The Adventures of Philip is, as many critics have observed, a masterpiece of indirect narrative. Arthur Pendennis, however, is not a dummy seen from a distance but a real and troubled individual, and his restlessness to a certain extent affects his creator as well. It appears, for instance, that it is foolish and imprudent to be attached to the Fotheringay. The narrator says so, the reader is expected to think so, and even Pen is not altogether unaware that it is so. Yet to a society which thinks that people should not be allowed to step out of line in this fashion Thackeray feels obliged to say: "It is best to love wisely, no doubt: but to love foolishly is better than not to love at all."[19]

Isn't there something to be said for spontaneous affection after all? And, in any case, who are we to decide what other people should or should not do? These are the questions that bother Thackeray, and he returns to them in the Preface to Pendennis where he writes: "We must drape [a man], and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art."[20] This is of course not merely a reference to the kind of censorship exercised over fiction by the sensitive "cheek of the young person". Society, or rather the society that Thackeray has in mind, does not tolerate the Natural in life either. Young men of Pen's class cannot relax and follow their instincts in the real world any more than they can do so in novels. Needless to say, in real life the rules can be stretched a little, but even then they cannot be completely abandoned. One of Thackeray's favourite themes is present here. Victorian life itself is a kind of novel. What appear to be actual living individuals are in fact mere puppets behaving in highly stylized and formal ways, and Thackeray is once again out to criticize both novels and the world in which they exist.

There are many more criticisms of this kind in Pendennis. Arthur clearly resents Helen's attempts to control him, and at times he is at odds with Laura as well. Even when he accepts their point of view he is pursued by doubts. The conversation he has with Laura after deciding to give up Blanche would not have been out of place in Vanity Fair:

> 'You can't help having sweet thoughts and doing good actions. Dear creature! they are the flowers which you bear.'
>
> 'And what else, sir?' asked Laura. 'I see a sneer coming over your face. What is it? Why does it come to drive all the good thoughts away?'

> 'A sneer, is there? I was thinking, my dear, that nature in making you so good and loving did very well: but--'
>
> 'But what? What is that wicked but? and why are you always calling it up?'
>
> 'But will come in spite of us. But is reflection. But is the sceptic's familiar, with whom he has made a compact; and if he forgets it, and indulges in happy day-dreams, or building of air-castles, or listens to sweet music, let us say, or to bells ringing to church, But taps at the door, and says, "Master, I am here. You are my master; but I am yours. Go where you will you can't travel without me. I will whisper to you when you are on your knees at church. I will be at your marriage pillow. I will sit down at your table with your children. I will be behind your death-bed curtain." That is what But is,' Pen said.[21]

The implication is that people like Helen Pendennis and her ward would do well to think of But while deciding how other people ought to behave. What Thackeray is saying here is not very different from what he had once said of Mr Osborne:

> Always to be right, always to trample forward, and never to doubt, are not these the great qualities with which dullness takes the lead in the world?[22]

Indeed this passage is virtually reproduced in Pendennis. When Pen sees a priest in a railway carriage he reflects:

> How I wish I could be that priest opposite, who never has lifted his eyes from his breviary, except when we were in Reigate tunnel, when he could not see; or that old gentleman next him, who scowls at him with eyes of hatred over his newspaper. The priest shuts his eyes to the world, but has his thoughts on the book, which is his directory to the world to come. His neighbour hates him as a monster, tyrant, persecutor, and fancies burning martyrs, and that pale countenance looking on, and lighted up by the flame. These have no doubts; these march on trustfully, bearing their load of logic.[23]

Yet, even in this soul-searching novel, Thackeray ultimately thinks that human beings simply cannot be allowed to behave as they please, and he clearly approves of the way in which, despite temptations of all kinds, Pen remains his mother's pure and upright son.

As already indicated, however, if Pen cannot be free and uninhibited, others can. These others are occasionally aristocrats or upper-middle-class individuals who have adopted the life style of the lower orders. But, as well as being <u>like</u> the poor, pleasure-seeking young rakes can also actually come into contact with them in their own world. This is a familiar "underworld" of a kind that never fails to fascinate novelists. The novelist, too, after all controls his characters, and in the end he guiltily dreams of an environment where there is no control over people, and all is instinct and passion. Richardson's <u>Clarissa</u> is set in a brothel, Defoe's Moll Flanders is a whore, and Thackeray teases his readers and himself with glimpses of what he calls "Bohemia". His mood while doing so is described very well by Walter Bagehot:

> No one can read Mr Thackeray's writings without feeling that he is perpetually treading as close as he dare to the border line that separates the world which may be described in books from the world which it is prohibited so to describe. No one knows better than this accomplished artist where that line is, and how curious are its windings and turns. The charge against him is that he knows it but too well; that with an anxious care and a wistful eye he is ever approximating to its edge, and hinting with subtle art how thoroughly he is familiar with and how interesting he could make the interdicted region on the other side. He never violates a single conventional rule; but at the same time the shadow of the immorality that is not seen is scarcely ever wanting to his delineation of the society that is seen--everyone may perceive what is passing in his fancy.[24]

This is a very fine piece of criticism because words like "hinting", "subtle" and "shadow" indicate that, sub-consciously, Bagehot is aware of the real nature of the problem he is talking about. Certain things cannot be described in fiction not simply because society will not hear them mentioned but because to describe them would be to change their nature. If the "free" life is put into words a certain form is imposed on it, and it is no longer "free". In order to be kept as it is, therefore, it has to be referred to in a most oblique manner and indicated to be something that exists beyond language and consciousness altogether. Indeed what Bagehot rightly credits Thackeray with having achieved is very similar to what James tells us he sought to achieve in Princess Casamassima:

> My scheme called for the suggested nearness (to all our apparently ordered life) of some sinister anarchic underworld, heaving in its pain, its power and its hate; a presentation not of sharp particulars, but of loose appearances, vague motions and sounds and symptoms, just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities.[25]

The anarchic underworld, being formless, can only remain a place of "just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities". Otherwise it would merely become stylized, and all its anarchy would vanish. As another highly perceptive Victorian critic observed, this is indeed what happens with a writer like Dickens:

> [T]hough Mr Dickens introduced in his last novel [David Copperfield] a seduction of the worst character, aggravated by every accessory, and episodical and needless as regards the main current of his tale, we should very much question if with him 'ladies remonstrated and subscribers left,' and we doubt it simply because he enveloped the whole in a cloud of sentiment, fancy, and fine writing.[26]

In other words, Dickens cannot be accused of having any secret liking for what he describes, and giving it an occasional wistful glance. He has mastered it so thoroughly through language that it no longer holds any mystery or attraction either for him or for us.

Thackeray, too, exercises this kind of control in The Newcomes. Despite all Colonel Newcome's fears for his son there really isn't much that could happen to Clive. His supposedly "dissolute" acquaintances are individuals like Fred Bayham and Florac, who are enveloped in such a cloud of sentiment and fancy that they seem, and indeed are, totally harmless; and while these figures might be said to be what they are because, deep down, they are after all gentlemen, characters like the Captains Hoby and Goby are not particularly threatening either. Indeed how could anybody called "Goby" be taken seriously? In Pendennis, however, "Bohemia" resists this sort of stylization and remains vivid, colourful and uncontrollable. John Carey writes:

> Thackeray's [effort] to fabricate something wild yet innocuous . . . makes Pen's high-jinks with Warrington . . . a farce. Swigging their 'pot of ale' in 'queer London haunts', roaring jovial ditties, or going for 'a pull on the river', the pair appear to have embarked on an extremely inexpert imitation of masculine pleasures.[27]

But Pen and Warrington of course stand for the visible surface of society, and they cannot be allowed to get away with too much. The real underworld of Pendennis is quite different. Here we have Costigan with his inebriation, his bawdy songs, and his spontaneous kindness; Captain Shandon with his debts and his bottles; Colonel Altamont with his gambling systems and his adventurous career; and the various acquaintances of Chevalier Strong with their impossible desperate schemes--

> Jack Holt had been in Queen Christina's army, when Ned Strong had fought on the other side; and was now organizing a little scheme for smuggling tobacco into London, which must bring thirty thousand to any man who would advance fifteen hundred, just to bribe the last officer of the Excise who held out, and had wind of the scheme. Tom Diver, who had been in the Mexican navy, knew a specie-ship which had been sunk in the first year of the war, with three hundred and eighty thousand dollars on board, and a hundred and eighty thousand pounds in bars and doubloons. 'Give me eighteen hundred pounds,' Tom said, 'and I'm off tomorrow. I take out four men and a diving-bell with me; and I return in ten months to take my seat in Parliament by Jove! and to buy back my family estate.' Keightly, the manager of the Tredyddlum and Polwheedle Copper Mines (which were as yet under water), besides singing as good a second as any professional man, and besides the Tredyddlum Office, had a Smyrna Sponge Company, and a little quicksilver operation in view, which would set him straight in the world yet. Filby had been everything: a corporal of dragoons, a field-preacher, and missionary-agent for converting the Irish: an actor at a Greenwich fair-booth, in front of which his father's attorney found him when the old gentleman died and left him that famous property, from which he got no rents now, and of which nobody exactly knew the situation.[28]

This is a far cry from Hoby and Goby. These figures are alive and real, and they will not be cut down to size by the novelist or anybody else. Were they a bit more articulate, they might turn and say to us, like Shaw's Doolittle, "None of your middle-class morality for me". They are not interested in order or discipline but only freedom; and by relying on intensely suggestive details Thackeray manages to make their lives appear richer and more dramatic than that of the kind of reader he has in mind. The Newcomes is full of allusions to Henry IV, and Clive is sometimes compared to Prince Hal while his acquaintances are referred to as "Poins and Nym and Pistol";[29] but it is in Pendennis that the Nyms and Pistols really succeed in remaining interesting enough to remind us of what a famous old reprobate once said to a cold-hearted prince:

> If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked! If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned: if to be fat be to be hated, then Pharaoh's lean kine are to be loved. No, my good lord; banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins: but, for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant, being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company, banish not him thy Harry's company:--banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.[30]

"Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world." The threat goes on ringing in one's ears long after one has first heard it. Those who agree that they should not be impulsive and spontaneous say good-bye to life in a very real way. But then that is what the Devil, or at any rate the Protestant Devil, always tells us. Of course, in Pendennis he says "Banish me if you dare" a bit more defiantly than usual, and poor Pen's "I do, I will" is dragged out of him somewhat unwillingly, but in the end, no matter how tempting the dissolute life may prove, Thackeray wants his hero to bear his load of respectability. Even when Fanny Bolton comes on the scene nothing changes. Her attachment to Pen is perfectly genuine, and he likes her as well; but she is turned into a coquette to show that those who are capable of real passion are morally suspect, and Pen is conveniently "saved" from yet another partner who might have led him astray.

III

If the kind of underworld Thackeray deals with is the world of Falstaff, it is also the world of Bottom, the Weaver, and Caliban. Refusing to be controlled, it is instinctively against art, and Thackeray cannot dismiss it without ~~dismissing~~ defending art. This, however, gives rise to

a curious problem. According to a widespread myth, the artist, too, belongs to the underworld, and Thackeray is fully aware that, as far as his readers are concerned, an artist is no better than an adulteress or a drunkard. Are not artists, after all, bohemians par excellence? Don't we all know that they all wear their hair long, keep irregular hours, are addicted to the bottle, and do not really work? Bourgeois society, in short, distrusts artists for exactly the same reasons that it values art, and one of Thackeray's concerns is to change the popular image of the artist. In this he is, in some ways, the forerunner of Thomas Mann, and both Pendennis and The Newcomes are not only Bildungsromane but also, to a certain extent, examples of that minor genre which German critics call Der Künstlerroman. They both try to tell the average reader what it really means to be an artist, insisting that the Muse is not so much a siren as a stern task-mistress. Like Mann's Tonio Kröger, who may be the last bourgeois in Schwabing, Thackeray's young artists, too, are exposed to "Bohemia" but are anything but bohemians themselves. Instead they have a truly Protestant sense of having a "vocation", and will work just as hard and as steadily as any member of society.

We know this because when Pen starts writing a poem he even forgets to go out with Warrington, and Thackeray has actually drawn him sitting at his desk, his head between his hands, concentrating. Clive, it is true, proves an artist of a somewhat different kind, but even he is capable of working for weeks at a time on enormous pictures like "The Battle of Assaye"; and, in any case, if any reader of The Newcomes needs to be assured that artists, too, are respectable citizens, there is always J.J. "J.J. Ridley," writes J.Y.T. Greig, "is a character who falls outside the scheme of the book,"[31] and Thackeray himself asks:

"[W]hy did Pendennis introduce J.J. with such a flourish, giving us, as it were, an overture, and no piece to follow it?"[32] Yet, although this character has very little to do with the plot of The Newcomes, he is clearly the ultimate product of Thackeray's desire to rehabilitate the artist. He is such an ascetic and works so hard that Colonel Newcome himself could hardly hope to compete with him. If that is what artists are like, we are meant to say, surely there cannot be anything wrong with being a painter or a novelist.

All this is, however, for the benefit of Thackeray's readers. He himself is not so much interested in how artists might live as in the kind of control over life that art itself implies. He has opted for order and discipline, and this is why he champions art, and has Pen disagree with Warrington's opinions concerning Leaves from the Lifebook of Walter Lorraine. "Warrington, with his high soul, pipe, and 'rough yet tender' laugh," says John Carey, "is probably Thackeray's most fatuous creation, the most catastrophic result of his resolution to be cordial, upright and good-hearted as the Victorians wished."[33] But this is not completely true. No doubt half of the time Warrington is a firm advocate of the beaten track, and on the whole he is to Pen what Pen later becomes to Clive and Philip: a sort of protective older brother whose warnings against the temptations of the world carry a great deal of authority as he knows them only too well himself. Only, of course, Warrington has not only experienced temptation but also actually succumbed to it, and, as a result, part of him is cynical and disillusioned and prone to raise questions about the wisdom of trying to exercise control over life. It is in this capacity that he confronts Pen, the budding novelist, saying:

"All poets are humbugs, all literary men are humbugs".[34] Clearly, for him, it is foolish and pretentious to attempt to replace reality by form, and everything is best left as it is. Thackeray, though, no longer regards this stance as a wise one, and Pen is allowed to say that style and form are but the way of the world, and that other people are constantly making use of them. This is, of course, not much of an answer, but then the author of Pendennis still has some doubts about the validity of the values he has adopted, and though he does not agree with Warrington, he lets him dominate the scene.

Later, with increasing self-confidence, Thackeray can let Pen outgrow Warrington's influence in The Newcomes. Here "Bluebeard" is simply turned into a socially awkward eccentric whose occasional subversive utterances do not need to be taken too seriously. Here, too, Thackeray can come up with a much stronger and more effective plea for form. The Newcomes itself is a very formal novel. Though its design is not altogether perfect, it has a pervasive "unity of mood", which is a truly remarkable achievement for a work of that size. Furthermore, it is obviously a highly stylized creation with a prince, a princess, a "wicked fairy", a benevolent old man and other similar figures, and this is so because stylization itself is one of the main themes of the novel. Thackeray is not the only artist at work. Colonel Newcome, too, tries to control his son in the same way a novelist would try to control a fictional character, and several figures decide to turn themselves into "moral" individuals, with Ethel actually overdoing her "reformation" even in Thackeray's eyes and becoming somewhat stilted and funny. "In The Newcomes," writes Rowland McMaster,

> we see two related patterns of action: on the one hand, attempts to impose the imagination's daydreams and formulas on the lives of others, as with the Colonel; on the other, stylization of behaviour according to conventional fancies as with Ethel. . . . Everywhere the narrative is saturated with traditional and familiar fictions from art, literature, mythology and social convention that not only adorn reality and displace reality but become reality. A depiction of a world so highly fictive may lead us to reconsider Thackeray's long-standing reputation as a realist, but not because he eschews the accidents of experience for the patterns of the imagination--rather the two are in perennial tension. . . . Put another way, he is portraying an affliction of the imagination. Man imagines style, order or perfection, but he lives in a world of limitation. As Camus says: 'There is not one human being who, above a certain elementary level of consciousness, does not exhaust himself in trying to find formulas or attitudes that will give his existence the unity it lacks. . . . The same impulse . . . also leads to creative literature which derives its serious content from this source.' In short, the impulse that shapes both life and art is a reflex from the consciousness that, though imagination and reason would order it otherwise, 'the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding; but time and chance happeneth to them all" (Eccl. 9.11).[35]

Mr McMaster's comments on Victorian fiction are always illuminative, and this passage is no exception. Yet, in a way, it does not really apply to The Newcomes. The hint of disapproval that a phrase like "the imagination's daydreams" carries is appropriate to Thackeray's early fiction but not to any of his later works. The early Thackeray is indeed against any interference with life, but this is not true of the later Thackeray. Of course young people will tend to follow their inclinations, and it is quixotic to try to stop them; but Colonel Newcome's quixotism is meant to be one of his more endearing qualities. In the early short story "The Professor", Adeliza, the female Quixote, who tries to turn life into romance is a figure of fun who deserves nothing but contempt. By contrast, in The Newcomes Don Quixote is a sympathetic figure.

Similarly, the basic mood of The Newcomes could hardly be more different from that of a novel like Vanity Fair. In the earlier work nobody has his desire, nobody is satisfied, and nobody deserves to be. The "pursuit of happiness" is by no means seen as an inalienable right, and Thackeray takes a grim pleasure in forcing his characters to give up their expectations and face life as it is. His stance is that of an Augustan sage tired of the foolishness of mankind and not entirely displeased at its misfortunes. In The Newcomes, on the other hand, we are meant to see that human desires are so reasonable and valid that there is no reason to give them up just because reality will refuse to be ruled by them. A lot has been written about the way the "Fable-land" passage at the end of the novel "mocks" the expectations held by Thackeray's readers. Juliet McMaster, for instance, comments: "In his 'happy ending' Thackeray is exposing rather than capitulating to the kind of sentimentality by which readers like to delude themselves that everything comes out right in the end";[36] and even a critic as sensitive as Winslow Rogers cannot refrain from speaking of Thackeray's attempt to do "justice both to the hunger for conventional happiness and to the intractability of human affairs."[37] All this, though, is entirely beside the point. It does not matter in the least whether or not Clive eventually ends up getting married to Ethel. What counts is that we have known all along that these two young people should get married to each other and settle down instead of wandering aimlessly in the dark and frightening maze of the world, and if they fail to do so, that cannot constitute a rude awakening from a foolish dream but only a confrontation with tragedy. Reality's "is" neither can nor is meant to destroy the heart's cherished "ought". This

is why, despite all their suffering, Thackeray's characters never learn anything. The dream simply goes on forever. Dobbin may discover that he is not going to have the Amelia in his mind and has to live with the Amelia he has got; but nobody in The Newcomes makes a comparable adjustment to the facts, and this perverse insistence that reality is not happening, ought not to happen, and in any case is not as important as human desires, gives the novel that peculiar aura of defiance which so many readers unconsciously enjoy so much.

It can be said, then, that if Vanity Fair is about the vanity of human wishes, The Newcomes is about their transcendence, their refusal to be affected by minor disasters like time and chance. Wishes do not die in The Newcomes, or anywhere else in Thackeray's later fiction, and neither of course do human beings. Colonel Newcome's death is indeed described with an admirable amount of restraint, and the whole scene is infinitely refreshing to the reader who has stood beside other death-beds in Victorian fiction. But perhaps in this instance restraint is not particularly difficult, because the one thing that is never really confronted is the fact of death itself. Thackeray, as we know, went around London, looking very solemn and telling his acquaintances that he had killed his hero; but the Victorians wisely declined to put on their mourning bands on this occasion, for in what sense, after all, can a man whose final word is "Adsum" or "present" be said to be dead? Helen, too, it will be recollected, is frequently felt to be still "present" long after she dies, and in the end this is not because Thackeray has started believing in some kind of after-life but because the desires of Helen and the Colonel are so right and proper that an irrational universe that insists on putting an end to the existence of such people is best ignored.

Human mortality, the very factor which in the end makes human wishes so vain, and which Thackeray was so anxious to keep constantly before his readers' eyes in Vanity Fair, can no longer be mentioned. Accordingly, there is no "cormorant devouring time" in either Pendennis or The Newcomes, no sinister messenger who interrupts the revels to tell everyone that the King of France is dead and all love's labours have been lost. Finally, of course, this attempt to cheat death reaches its culmination in Henry Esmond where Esmond, though he is not allowed to describe his own funeral like Moses, can at least speak of remembering certain things "to the very last hour of his life".[38] If men die, as the physician Alkmeon said, because they cannot join their beginning with their end, then it is difficult to see how such a fate could befall Esmond.

To sum up, if there is one central theme around which both Pendennis and The Newcomes have been built, it is that life should not be allowed to take its own course. Others have to be controlled; controlled by their parents, their spouses, their friends, their environment and upbringing, and ultimately by the novelists who put them into their books. In Pendennis this idea triumphs with some difficulty, but in The Newcomes its victory is complete, and, taken together, the two novels show how much Thackeray has changed his opinions since the completion of Vanity Fair.

Notes

[1] Thackeray at Work, p. 45.

[2] For a detailed account of the composition of some early numbers of the novel see Edgar F. Harden, "The Challenges of Serialization: Parts 4, 5 and 6 of The Newcomes", Nineteenth Century Fiction, 29 (1974-1975), 3-21.

[3] Works, xii, xxxvi.

[4] Ibid., 365-366.

[5] Thackeray: Prodigal Genius, pp. 153-154.

[6] Works, xii, 559.

[7] Ibid., 475.

[8] Ibid., 886.

[9] Ibid., 17.

[10] Ibid., 755.

[11] Works, xiv, 491.

[12] See Works, xii, 895.

[13] See Works, xi, 441.

[14] Works, xiv, 204.

[15] Ibid., 956.

[16] Ibid., 756-757.

[17] Ibid., 22.

[18] Works, xii, 50.

[19] Ibid., 78.

[20] Works, xxxvi.

[21] Ibid., 915-916.

[22] Works, xi, 444.

[23] Works, xii, 933.

[24] Collected Works, ed. N. St John-Stevas (London, 1965-), ii, 98.

[25] Preface to Princess Casamassima.

[26] J.R. Findlay, "The History of Pendennis: Nos. 23 to 24", Scotsman, 18 December 1850, p. 3.

[27] Thackeray: Prodigal Genius, p. 152.

[28] Works, xii, 542-543.

[29] See Works, xiv, 136, 365, 626.

[30] 1 Henry IV, II.4.414-422.

[31] Thackeray: A Reconsideration, p. 179.

[32] Works, xiv, 1008.

[33] Thackeray: Prodigal Genius, p. 152.

[34] Works, xii, 520.

[35] Rowland McMaster, "The Pygmalion Motif in The Newcomes", Nineteenth Century Fiction, 29 (1974-1975), 22-39 (p. 38).

[36] Thackeray: The Major Novels, p. 172.

[37] Winslow Rogers, "Thackeray's Self-Consciousness", in The Worlds of Victorian Fiction, ed. J.H. Buckley, Harvard English Studies, 6 (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1975), pp. 149-164 (p. 161).

[38] Works, xiii, 17.

Chapter Nine

TIME REGAINED: HENRY ESMOND

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I

The History of Henry Esmond, Esq. is, in many ways, Thackeray's last serious novel. The Newcomes, which was actually written and published later, is not so much a work in its own right as a gloss on Pendennis. Critics who quote Thackeray's remark to the effect that he did not think he could "jump further" than he had done in The Newcomes[1] tend to ignore the fact that the novelist was always much too ready to accept the verdict of his readers and deliberately confuse popular and commercial success with genuine artistic achievement. A more valid critical judgement is to be found in the apologetic Preface to The Newcomes where the reader is warned that he is about to be given an "old" story by a tired author who has already said all that he had to say. The story is, of course, an "old" one in more than one sense. Have not anxious parents worried about their offspring from time immemorial? And since Clive is "one of us" are we not already familiar with him? Behind all this, however, there is Thackeray's uneasy recognition of the fact that he himself has already told this very story once and is now doing so again for the lack of anything else to say. No doubt re-telling has its virtues, and The Newcomes is, in some ways, a tour de force which works better and is more effective than Pendennis; but though it might

appeal to those who prefer smooth and well-oiled works of art to "spots of greenness", it is, like its author's more obvious and less successful repetitions, essentially of secondary importance, while Henry Esmond is a different matter altogether. This work is used to extend a theme which is first stated in Pendennis and then re-worked in The Newcomes. In those two novels Thackeray deals mainly with parents and children, and insists that the former have the right to control the latter. In Esmond this idea is driven to its logical conclusion, with the hero becoming a kind of universal father and ruling over all those around him.

Thackeray carefully places Esmond in an environment where in reality it should be impossible to control others. All the figures who surround young Harry are gods of one kind or another. He has a benefactor, a mistress, a spiritual director, and a king who is supposed to govern him by Divine Right. But, as many critics have observed, Esmond simply challenges the divinity of all these people, and in the end has them all kneeling before him. He is obviously something of a tyrant. His daughter Rachel tells us that he always liked to be "the first in his company";[2] Father Holt accuses him of being a secret republican who wants his rulers to be answerable to him;[3] and, most tellingly, Beatrix remarks: "I won't worship you, and you'll never be happy except with a woman who will."[4] All this of course identifies Esmond as a type. In fact he behaves in the way bastards and younger sons traditionally behave in fiction, triumphantly bringing to its knees an order which has rejected him. Yet, although Esmond has all the characteristics of a bastard, because Thackeray wants to sanction his conduct, he is made a legitimate heir, and his base mentality is covered up by a noble name.

Legitimacy, however, is not what Esmond is after. The world he lives in is one where kings have absolute authority, priests demand respect and obedience from the laity, and everyone follows their impulses and refuses to be governed by anybody else. Esmond is too insecure to belong to such a world and accept its ways. As a result, he willingly gives up his title, becoming a bastard by choice and deliberately alienating himself from his society. His supposed magnanimity is in fact nothing but pride. He thinks that he is too good for the world he has to live in, and it costs him nothing to refuse a place in it. He simply cannot accept being unable to control those around him, and he wants to be liberated from all traditional duties and obligations. His final burning of his birth certificate is thus merely the fulfilment of all his wishes.

Thackeray's desire to say no to an uncontrolled life once and forever also accounts for the various shortcomings of Esmond as a historical novel. Ray notes, for instance, that the Old Pretender, whom Thackeray depicts as a dissolute man, was actually "a person of the most stodgy and uninteresting respectability".[5] This is, of course, undeniably true, but it is not difficult to see why the discrepancy comes about. An absolute monarch cannot be controlled, and a man who cannot be controlled can behave as he pleases, becoming more and more self-indulgent. It would have been, as it were, "in character" for the Pretender to be dissolute, and that is how Thackeray presents him. A more serious objection is raised by György Lukács in The Historical Novel. Thackeray, we are told here, makes history "private", refusing to provide Esmond with any real economic or political motives for supporting the Stuarts. Lukács is of course too sophisticated and intelligent a Marxist not to know that some individuals might embrace

causes which do not really concern them. What he is bothered by is the way in which Esmond's situation is made to seem typical and Jacobitism is lightly dismissed as a sentimental gesture without any real historical foundations.[6] Yet this is precisely what Thackeray wants to do. The pretension is that no intelligent man could possibly be a Jacobite, and Esmond's own leanings in this direction must necessarily remain superficial. Put another way, Esmond is, like Pen and Clive, an essentially static character. He has only one role to play, and he remains true to it throughout his life. He is from the Roundhead side of the Esmonds, and he has been brought up by Protestant French immigrants. These are the factors that condition his attitudes, and he cannot really go against his nature. Just as Pen and Clive may visit "Bohemia" but are not really at home there, Esmond may pretend to be a Royalist or a Catholic but cannot really take such things seriously.

Similarly, there is nothing surprising about the so-called "double ending" of the novel. Esmond is not really in love with Beatrix any more than he is a real follower of the Pretender. The abrupt second ending where he marries Rachel, therefore, needs no introduction. Like the Chevalier de St George and Father Holt, Beatrix is there merely to be discredited, for she too refuses to be controlled. Named after James II's queen and at one point compared to a Pope whose toe must be kissed,[7] she stands for all that is anathema to a man of Esmond's temperament. Needless to say, she is also the most attractive of Thackeray's "fallen" women. She takes a genuine, passionate delight in life, saying:

> I cannot toil, neither can I spin, but I can play twenty-three games on cards. I can dance the last dance, I can hunt the stag, and I think I could shoot

> flying. I can talk as wicked as any woman of my years, and know enough stories to amuse a sulky husband for at least one thousand and one nights. I have a pretty taste for dress, diamonds, gambling, and old China. I love sugar-plums, Malines Lace . . . the opera, and everything that is useless and costly.[8]

All this, though, merely frightens Cousin Harry. Although Beatrix says that she is frightened of Esmond, it is really he who is afraid of her. Throughout the time he is pursuing her his mind is actually only occupied by Rachel. In his Spectator paper, for instance, he refers to "Jocasta", but if he is Oedipus, Jocasta can only be Rachel. Again, he compares himself to Ulysses and says that Beatrix "was in so far like Penelope that she had a crowd of suitors, and undid day after day and night after night the handiwork of fascination and the web of coquetry with which she was wont to allure and entertain them",[9] but it is of course Rachel who appears in the traditional posture of Penelope, busy by the fireside with her "tambour-frame and needles".[10] He has no difficulty understanding Rachel, as she is willing to be dominated by him. Beatrix, on the other hand, proves wild and unruly, and he cannot really respond to her.

Thus the circle is completed. Royalism, Catholicism and love are all shown to be mistaken and unreal. Only power and domination count. Esmond cannot bow to kings, priests, scholars, wits or women. Being more like a king than the Pretender, a better theologian than Father Holt, a more learned man than Steele, and a greater wit than Swift, he does not have to do that. Not surprisingly, such a man who cannot respect anybody ultimately proves too good for the Old World and realizes that he belongs to America. Long before he actually emigrates to Virginia he says to Beatrix: "I am not clever enough, or not rogue enough--I know not which--for the Old World. I may make a place for myself in the New, which is

not so full."[11] This is a direct statement of one of the novel's main themes. Esmond is full of attacks on European attitudes and values. As we take a rather special Continental tour in the wake of Marlborough we cannot help remembering Walter Bagehot's brilliant comparison of Sterne and Thackeray:

> Sterne had all [Thackeray's] sensibility also, but--and this is the cardinal discrepancy--it did not make him irritable. . . . He had no tendency to rub the bloom off life. He accepted pretty-looking things, even the French aristocracy, and he owes his immortality to his making them prettier than they are. Thackeray was pained by things, and exaggerated their imperfections . . . This is why the old lady said, 'Mr Thackeray was an uncomfortable writer,'--and an uncomfortable writer he is.[12]

Yes, for Thackeray, the sentimental journey has turned sour. We see a war-torn Europe destroyed by petty quarrels. Curiously enough, Esmond brings the same charges against European history that Lukács brings against The History of Henry Esmond. It is all too private and personal. The Prince of Savoy, for instance, has a "personal rage"[13] against the King of France. These are absolute monarchs who fight their childish battles, unchecked by anybody. The modern reader is likely to be bored by Thackeray's detailed accounts of Blenheim, Oudenarde, Wynendael and Malplaquet, and think, like Charlotte Brontë, that the book contains too much history.[14] But, in a way, this is deliberate, and Thackeray wants us to be bored. We are meant to think that the way of life we are witnessing is absurd, silly and wasteful. "That," Thackeray is saying, "is what happens when there is no control over people. They simply run wild, dragging us along with them; and life turns into a series of pointless campaigns, an endless chronicle of wasted time."

Looking at all this it is not difficult to see why in The Virginians Thackeray is so anxious to champion the American cause. As J.A. Sutherland observes:

> The reader cannot but notice that [The Virginians] opens with a florid compliment to a distinguished American friend. Neither will he miss the fact that the best Englishman in the novel, Sir George Warrington, is an expatriate American or that all the villains come from the 'wicked selfish old world' or that for the first two hundred pages there is not an Englishman who does not swear, wench, booze, gamble immoderately or cheat at play.[15]

This is so, of course, because Thackeray wants to flatter his American readers. But Esmond, which was written before Thackeray's American tour, ought to convince us that he also sincerely believes that the American way of life is better. He is tired of a life over which he has no control, and he wants to be able to impose his will on the world like an American.

II

In Esmond, then, Thackeray's desire not to let life take its own course reaches a peak. He is no longer concerned simply with the control of young people; he wants his hero to have power over everything and everybody. In this sense Esmond is a summa just as Vanity Fair is a summa, but of course it belongs to a different phase of its author's career. Vanity Fair is a deeply religious novel which tries to expose the hollowness of a society that tries to live "without God". Esmond, by contrast, is an atheistic work which rebels against the idea of God and tries to affirm its hero's right to dominate all those around him.

Again, it is possible to recognize in Esmond traces of Barry Lyndon. He is, after all, another eighteenth-century officer who participates in certain campaigns and then manages to win the hand of an insanely jealous married woman older than himself. But, unlike Barry, Esmond can only be admired. Even his famous encounter with Swift recalls Barry's encounter with Dr Johnson, but there is an important difference. Barry writes:

> 'Sir,' said I to Mr Johnson, on the occasion I allude to--he was accompanied by a Mr Buswell of Scotland, and I was presented to the club by a Mr Goldsmith, a countryman of my own--'Sir,' I said in reply to the schoolmaster's thundering quotation in Greek, 'you fancy you know a great deal more than me, because you quote your Aristotle and your Pluto, but can you tell me which horse will win at Epsom Downs next week?--Can you run six miles without breathing?--Can you shoot the ace of spades ten times without missing? If so, talk about Aristotle and Pluto to me.'
>
> 'D'ye know who ye're speaking to?' roared out the Scotch gentleman, Mr Buswell, at this.
>
> 'Hold your tongue, Mr Boswell,' said the old schoolmaster. 'I had no right to brag of my Greek to the gentleman, and he has answered me very well.'[16]

A farcical scene like this, of course, merely allows us to see that Barry is not only a bully but also an ignorant boor. Esmond, however, is actually congratulated for behaving in a similar way. Having met Swift accidentally, he begins by mocking the Dean's Irish accent, fat figure and shabby clothes, and then takes advantage of a subsequent meeting to reveal that he is a well-connected colonel in the English Army who will stand no nonsense from any man:

> Mr Esmond went up to the Doctor with a bow and a smile: 'I gave Doctor Swift's message,' says he, 'to the printer: I hope he brought your pamphlet to your lodgings in time.'

> Indeed poor Leach had come to his house very soon after the Doctor left it, being brought away rather tipsy from the tavern by his thrifty wife; and he talked of Cousin Swift in a maudlin way, though of course Mr Esmond did not allude to this relationship. The Doctor scowled, blushed, and was much confused, and said scarce a word during the whole dinner. A very little stone will sometimes knock down these Goliaths of wit; and this one was often discomfited when met by a man of any spirit; he took his place sulkily, put water in his wine that the others drank plentifully, and scarce said a word.[17]

This is vulgar and insensitive, but evidently we are expected to side with Esmond against the poor Doctor.

Esmond wants everyone to worship and obey him. Thus, in a way, he wants to control the unfolding of time, never letting anything happen that he has not wished for. Hillis Miller, who examines this aspect of the novel in great detail, concludes that Thackeray is in fact critical of this attempt, and that, for him, "as for other major Victorian novelists, man remains within time and cannot escape from it by spatializing it."[18] Yet it would seem that Esmond is permitted to escape. He is more obviously immortal than even Helen Pendennis and Colonel Newcome. His consciousness extends beyond his own death, and Thackeray has even allowed him an additional triumph. The original Esmond of 1852, which is still available in a few libraries in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, is faithful to eighteenth-century typography and book-binding practices. It imposes itself on a different age, denying change and loss, and creating the illusion that Esmond has managed to make time stand still. Here at the logical end of his career Thackeray finally affirms something which he had always challenged in his early works. The philosopher's "vanitas vanitatum" has given way to a celebration of human immortality. Parody has at last turned into forgery, and the desire to mock and expose has

been replaced by the desire to accept and revere.

In Esmond's struggle with time there also lie the roots of his incestuous leanings. Although Esmond's relationship with Rachel has attracted a lot of critical attention, incest is of course a rather common occurrence in the novels Thackeray wrote after Vanity Fair. Laura, for instance, is related to Pen, and Ethel is Clive's cousin. Indeed the Victorians objected to these relationships as strongly as they objected to the conclusion of Esmond, with J.R. Findlay, for instance, asking in the Scotsman:

> [D]oes not Mr Thackeray make a little too much of the sisterly and fraternal element in the relations between [Laura] and Pen, if he all along meant to arrange matters as they are finally?[19]

This is, of course, a valid question, and the answer is that Thackeray does harp a bit too much on "the sisterly and fraternal element". In fact he goes out of his way to convey the impression that Laura is Pen's "sister", just as later he keeps insisting that Rachel is Esmond's "mother", when she is actually no blood relative of his. This is so because he has understood the real nature of what he is dealing with. Clearly incest has no psychological fascination for him. He is not, that is, unconsciously chasing his own mother but consciously developing a theme. The desires of the Id usually have a disruptive influence on art as they are not known and cannot be controlled. As modern criticism has demonstrated, however, especially in Esmond the incest theme is built up so carefully and supported by so many deliberate allusions and parallels that one could not possibly conclude that it has somehow managed to get into the book completely spontaneously.

Broadly speaking, the significance of incest is clear. Relatives stand for nature, for unadulterated reality. They are simply given to us, and we can only accept and love them. Any attempt to interfere with nature, therefore, necessarily resembles an attempt to possess our relatives sexually and use them as we like. What should have been untouchable is seized and desecrated. This is why King Oedipus is given such a startling lesson in civilization and discontents, and made to realize that all human kingdoms rest on rape and guilt, and that, as Hegel says, "only the stones are innocent".[20] Thackeray, too, of course knows this lesson; and, accordingly, he compares the attempts to control Pen and Clive to incest, but, of course, an incest which has his blessing. In Esmond he merely broadens his theme by making the relative in question a mother. Mothers, needless to say, stand for all that is physical and immediate. They are the direct cause of our being in the world, whereas fathers give us a name and a social identity, and demonstrate how the world can be organized and controlled. As long as a child regards his mother as sacred and inviolable he will view the world in the same light as well. Esmond, however, refuses to respect his mother in this way, and this refusal in the end dooms all the other mother symbols around him, including the Mother Church and his motherland England.

It is possible to compare all this to a similar development in another great Victorian novel. When George Eliot read Esmond she wrote to Caroline Bray:

> 'Esmond' is the most uncomfortable book you can imagine. . . . The hero is in love with the daughter all through the book, and marries the mother at the end.[21]

What is so interesting about this comment is that it applies not only to Esmond but also to Adam Bede, the novel which George Eliot published while The Virginians was in progress. Adam, too after, all, is in love with one woman and ends up marrying another. But the similarities do not end there. Adam Bede is in fact a complete re-writing of Esmond in which the Pretender is replaced by the dissolute young squire Arthur Donnithorne; Father Holt by the Reverend Irwine; and Beatrix by Hetty Sorrel. Like Esmond, Adam, too, finds that the world these figures belong to has a radical flaw. It is "natural" in the sense that it is not controlled. Nature, however, he has realized, has no real claim on us, and he promptly makes use of this discovery by stealing his brother's woman. Here George Eliot is dealing with sibling-rivalry, a phenomenon closely related to incest. And Thackeray, who had a mother but no brothers or sisters, of course knew all about sibling-rivalry as well. Indeed he intended to devote The Virginians to this very subject and said to J.E. Cooke:

> I shall lay the scene in Virginia, during the Revolution. There will be two brothers, who will be prominent characters; one will take the English side in the war and one the American and they will both be in love with the same girl.[22]

So the sons of Oedipus, as it were, were to fall out. The finished novel, alas, does not quite conform to this pattern, but clearly Thackeray was aware of all the implications of his ideas.

In any case, Esmond needs no sequel. It is complete in itself, and Thackeray's message is made eminently clear. No compromises are to be made, and reality is to come fully under human control. This, of course,

has very little to do with Esmond's declared intention of accepting the world as it is, but then he is a man whose deeds seldom tally with his words. He also asks: "[W]ho is one man to punish another?"[23] but clearly he wants to have absolute authority over all those around him. Like the narrator of Pendennis, he believes that death is better than an uncontrolled life, and he can only act according to this belief.

III

A lot of course ultimately depends on what Thackeray really thinks of his hero. There is actually no reason to doubt that he supports this other "Knight of the Woeful Countenance" as he supports Colonel Newcome. But some critics have found Esmond so unattractive that they have been tempted to think that Thackeray shares their feelings as well. Even Lukács, who is not in any way concerned with moral issues, cannot refrain from stating that Thackeray's positive characters are "tedious, insufferable paragons of virtue";[24] and William H. Marshall and Juliet McMaster settle for ironical readings of the novel which totally discredit Esmond.[25] In many ways, though, the chief representative of the anti-Esmond school is Hillis Miller. As already indicated, he believes that Thackeray's intention is to show that time in fact cannot be conquered. This, he says, is also a comment on fiction. Form is simply not possible, and

> the novel . . . questions the convention of fiction which supposes that an individual narrator can see things like a transcendent god or like an epic bard who sings under the guidance of some heavenly muse.[26]

Such a reading would of course make Esmond a replica of Vanity Fair. Even if we ignore the fact that the novel belongs to a phase of Thackeray's career in which the tenets of Vanity Fair are repudiated, however, it is difficult to accept Miller's interpretation. If Thackeray is being ironical at Esmond's expense, where is the ultimate irony, the conclusion where all expectations come to nought and nobody has his desire? Adeliza wakes up from her foolish dream; George de Barnwell and Catherine end up in the condemned cell; Barry is defeated; and Dobbin and Amelia are left frustrated and unhappy. Esmond, on the other hand, like all of Thackeray's later novels, ends happily. Pen, after all, does get married to Laura; Clive should have his Ethel; and Esmond's wishes are fulfilled as well. Nor can the artist be defeated in any of these works. In each case he simply pretends that his story has such an inevitable conclusion that it can be set in the past and treated as something that has already happened. And Esmond itself is of course the most meticulously organized of Thackeray's works. Everything is foreshadowed from the very beginning, and in the end only what is predicted happens.

Thackeray said of Esmond: "Here is the very best I can do. . . . I stand by this book, and am willing to leave it when I go as my card."[27] This alone should be sufficient to indicate that he took his hero seriously. Surely every Thackerayan knows that when we go we leave no card. They carry the coffin downstairs, remove the useless cover from the table, open the windows to let fresh air into the house, and it is all as if we had never existed. The world does not care for us now, and it will not care for us when we die. If something else is possible, however, Esmond is justified in wanting to leave his card and make some sort of imprint upon

time. Of course Thackeray lets Esmond meet with some resentment and opposition. Captain Westbury, for instance, calls him "Killjoy", and Beatrix sarcastically addresses him as "Graveairs". But it would be dangerous to assume that we are meant to take such comments seriously. The Captain is a rake; and Beatrix is a loose woman. Such people recognize in Esmond a natural enemy, and if we agree with them there must be something wrong with us as well.

Indeed the reader condemns Esmond at his own peril. When Frank informs his family that he has converted to Catholicism, for example, Esmond writes:

> And his Lordship added a postscript . . . in which he reminded Colonel Esmond that he too was, by birth, of that Church; and that his mother and his sister should have his Lordship's prayers to the saints (an inestimable benefit, truly) for their conversion.[28]

Do we think that it is uncharitable and un-Christian to sneer at anybody's prayers? Well, of course, being decent souls, we do. So, too, Clive writes to Pen, saying: "There must be moments, in Rome especially, when every man of friendly heart, who writes himself English and Protestant, must feel a pang at thinking that he and his countrymen are insulated from European Christendom."[29] His is youthful enthusiasm, of course, and it is to be hoped that ours is as well. Otherwise, whatever the weak-minded may say, Catholicism deserves the Thackerayan's contempt. Colonel Esmond, who knows all about this religion, could tell us that it is superstitious and silly. Anybody who is still not convinced is free to join the ranks of the benighted.

Only those who have not seen the truth oppose Esmond. In conversation with Trollope, Thackeray remarked that Esmond's unpopularity was not

surprising as the hero was a "prig". Even this, though, does not really matter. Quite apart from the fact that it is virtually a compliment to describe a man who all but claims that he is God merely as a "prig", this is of course exactly the kind of word that those ignorant readers who are incapable of appreciating Thackeray's novel would use. What appears to be frankness is in reality another thrust at the opposition. This is in fact a technique that the later Thackeray is rather fond of. In The Virginians, for instance, he writes:

> Harry had slept on many a straw mattress, and engaged in endless jolly night-bouts over claret and punch in cracked bowls till morning came, and it was time to follow the hounds. His poor brother was of a much more sober sort, as the lad owned with contrition. So it is that Nature makes folks; and some love books and tea, and some like burgundy and a gallop across country. Our young fellow's tastes were speedily made visible to his friends in England. None of them were partial to the Puritan discipline; nor did they like Harry the worse for not being the least of a milksop.[30]

It is actually the Castlewoods who are speaking in the last sentence here. Thackeray is insinuating that such people always regard their decent neighbours as Puritans and milksops, and the serious need not be bothered by this.

Accordingly, Esmond is not disturbed by the opposition he meets. He knows that the decadent will always resent his interference and despise his values, and he goes about with the air of a long-suffering man much misunderstood by the world. Nor does Thackeray fail to sympathize with him. It is we who see through Esmond. Thackeray tells us that he is mature, but we see that he is in fact pre-mature--a little old man who has lost touch with life. We also see that he is sexless. Beatrix demands something from him which he cannot give. He wants to

enslave her when she only wants to be enjoyed as a woman. The scene in which she tries to get him to kiss her is typical:

> 'Mon ami,' she says quite kindly, and taking Esmond's hand with an air of great compassion, 'you can't think that in our present condition anything more than our present friendship is possible. . . . I feel as a sister to you, and can no more. Isn't that enough, sir?' And she put her face quite close to his--who knows with what intention?
> 'It's too much,' says Esmond, turning away.[31]

And, in short, he is afraid. If Thackeray intended to portray himself in his hero and Jane Brookfield in Beatrix, such a scene is thought-provoking.

Finally, we see the darkness that has descended over Esmond's life, and we pity him. Faithless, Hopeless, Charityless, he has to live without God in the vacuum he has created. That is no unusual thing of course. In a world where the human will is dominant God is always dead and life is empty. Defoe discovered that long before Nietzsche. Moll Flanders, he knew, had passed all barriers, had even literally committed incest, and could no longer really go back, repent and achieve humility once more. The prospect disturbed and frightened him, and Esmond's condition disturbs and frightens us. Thackeray, though, seems to regard it as some sort of triumph. We feel that America is a dead end; Thackeray thinks that it is the land he should support.

This is a sad conclusion for any writer to arrive at, but especially for a writer of Thackeray's intelligence, sensitivity and humour, and the fact that it had been hanging in the air ever since the last few pages of Vanity Fair does not make it any easier to bear. Esmond is a great novel no doubt, but it is based on false premises and built around false values. In the end it just makes us uneasy.

Notes

[1] See Letters, iii, 619, n. 126.

[2] Works, xiii, 10.

[3] Ibid., 322.

[4] Ibid., 363.

[5] The Age of Wisdom, p. 179.

[6] See György Lukács, The Historical Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London, 1962), pp. 201-206.

[7] Works, xiii, 336.

[8] Ibid., 342.

[9] Ibid., 350.

[10] Ibid., 86.

[11] Ibid., 357-358.

[12] Collected Works, ii, 310.

[13] Works, xiii, 319.

[14] See The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships, and Correspondence, ed. T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, 4 vols (Oxford, 1932), iii, 315.

[15] Thackeray at Work, p. 99.

[16] Works, vi, 15.

[17] Works, xiii, 379-380.

[18] J. Hillis Miller, The Form of Victorian Fiction (Notre Dame, Indiana and London, 1968), p. 24.

[19] J.R. Findlay, "The History of Pendennis: Nos. 23 to 24", Scotsman, 18 December 1850, p. 3.

[20] The Phenomenology, p. 488.

[21] The George Eliot Letters, ed. G.S. Haight (New Haven, Conn., 1955), ii, 67.

[22] Quoted by Ray in The Age of Wisdom, p. 382.

[23] Works, xiii, 296.

[24] The Historical Novel, p. 206.

[25] See respectively "Dramatic Irony in Henry Esmond", Revue des langues vivantes, 27 (1961), 35-42 and Thackeray: The Major Novels, pp. 109-125.

[26] The Form of Victorian Fiction, p. 24.

[27] Quoted by Ray in The Age of Wisdom, p. 193.

[28] Works, xiii, 334.

[29] Works, xiv, 466.

[30] Works, xv, 158.

[31] Works, xiii, 358.

Conclusion

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Whatever else realism may be it is also an ideological issue. "As reviewer for the Sunday Times," writes the ~~English~~ anglicized novelist Anne Redmon,

> I have seen the slickest nonsense flourish--books that falsify life, lies veiled in smooth phrases prevail. There are classy little efforts which cheat the mind of real nourishment. . . . There are hard-nosed intellectual amusements that glitter like executive toys, where words themselves take the place of reality when it is reality itself that words ought to define.[1]

One could contrast this with the sort of praise heaped on John Gardner's Grendel by an American reviewer:

> This book is another fierce blow struck against the realistic novel, the dead novel. Good, I say: let's hold no more mirrors up to nature. Make nature approach the artist, make nature grovel. Gardner is good.[2]

Admittedly, these statements have been culled from popular publications, and somewhere they do not so much define national attitudes as caricature them. But, though perhaps not as subtle and sophisticated as, say, Tolstoy and the Novel and The Rhetoric of Fiction, in the end they take us to the heart of the same controversy. The British clearly suspect art of being a somewhat silly and childish game while Americans respect and value it. And the debate is not merely about literature. Behind this disagreement over the relative importance of reality and words there lie all those different assumptions about what human life ought to be which

make contemporary Britain and America what they are.

In a sense this study has tried to trace Thackeray's development from an Englishman into an American. The early Thackeray has a profound distaste for artifice which turns into a critique of bourgeois society and its values. The later Thackeray, on the other hand, seems reconciled to the attitudes he had once ridiculed so savagely. What provides continuity between these different choices is of course his personality. We do not need to doubt that the same awareness of the frustrating complexity of life is responsible for both Thackeray's early and his later works, and that the best and the worst in his art go back to the same source. Understanding Thackeray, the man, is the surest way of understanding Thackeray, the novelist.

Finally, however, it needs to be pointed out that neither this nor any other study of Thackeray deserves as much attention as his own works. He himself ultimately chose to become "serious", of course, but we can take our cue from what he wrote in his Preface to Comic Tales and Sketches in 1841:

> Mr Yellowplush's Memoirs appeared in Fraser's Magazine, and have been reprinted accurately from that publication. The elegance of their style have made them excessively popular in America, where they were reprinted more than once. Major Gahagan's Reminiscences, from the New Monthly Magazine, were received by our American brethren with similar piratical honours; and the Editor has had the pleasure of perusing them likewise in the French tongue. To translate Yellowplush was more difficult; but Doctor Strumpff, the celebrated Sanskrit Professor in the University of Bonn, has already deciphered the first ten pages, has separated the mythic from the historical part of the volume, and discovered that it is, like Homer, the work of many ages and persons. He declares the work to be written in the Cockniac dialect; but, for this and other conjectures, the reader is referred to his Essay.[3]

Those tired of the noise and bustle of the academic Vanity Fair could go home and chuckle over that. It was no doubt to combat, among other things, the insufferable knowingness of critics that laughter was made.

Notes

[1] Anne Redmon *et al.*, "The Urge to Write", *Company* (July 1979), 75-82 (p. 75).

[2] D. Keith Mano in *New York Times Book Review*. Quoted on the dustjacket of the first British edition of *Grendel* (London, 1972).

[3] *Works*, i, xlix.

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