

He is convinced that George Sand is not the proper person to pose the problem of marriage ties, as she herself broke the bondage, set herself free and found consolation elsewhere. She is therefore prejudiced and so personally committed that "her arguments may be considered to be somewhat partial, and received with some little caution"⁴⁹ Thackeray is not so unjust to the authoress, however, as not to recognize and appreciate the beauty of the style in which these novels are written and admit that in her genius and eloquence she can take rank side by side with Rousseau and Byron.

While Thackeray did not dare to particularize Sand's notions on morals in her three early novels, he feels himself to be on safer ground in writing about "her religious manifesto", the novel *Spiridion*. He again pays generous tribute to Sand's splendid style, to her wonderful power of language, which he finds to be even greater in this novel than in the preceding ones and about which he writes

'Her style is a noble, and, as far as a foreigner can judge, a strange tongue, beautifully rich and pure. She has a very exuberant imagination and with it a very chaste style of expression. She never scarcely indulges in declamation as other modern prophets do, and yet her sentences are exquisitely melodious and full. She seldom runs a thought to death, but she leaves you at the end of one of her brief, rich, melancholy sentences, with plenty of food for future cogitation. I can't express to you the charm of them, they seem to me like the sound of country bells—provoking I don't know what vein of musing and meditation and falling sweetly and sadly on the ear' (*Works* II 232)

This is, however, almost the only positive value he finds in the novel. He has serious reservations regarding the ideas propagated by the authoress, the "new Apocalypse" Sand propagates in this work, which he characterizes as a pantheistic doctrine, dissociating himself from her open attacks upon the received Christian creed.

She declares it to be useless now and unfitted to the exigencies and the degree of culture of the actual world and though it would be hardly worth while to combat her opinions in due form it is at least worth while to notice them not merely from the extraordinary eloquence and genius of the woman herself, but because they express the opinions of a great number of people besides, for she not only produces her own thoughts but imitates those of others very eagerly and one finds in her writings so much similarity with others or in others so much resemblance to her that the book before us may pass for the expressions of the sentiments of a certain French party" (*Works* II, 230–231)

This passage and his attack upon Lamennais referred to above (see page 56) testify that Thackeray was not only well informed about Sand's philosophical ideas and religious beliefs, but was also familiar with their sources (besides Lamennais, he mentions Saint-Simon, Fourier and Leroux). As V. Brett has pointed out, some parts of this mystical novel were written by Leroux himself and Thackeray must have been well versed in his works to recognize the resemblance.⁵⁰

Thackeray's critical weapons are levelled not only at Sand's philosophy as such, but also at her having chosen such a theme at all. In his opinion

Works II 230

⁵⁰ See J. O. Fischer and collective, *op cit*, p 289

the authoress overstepped the boundary of the novel as a *genre*, neglected her old trade of novelist, of which she was the very ablest practitioner in France and—like the English authoresses of religious novels and tracts (whom she, however, surpasses by her style)—attempted to proclaim her truth concerning the unfathomable mystery of God “by means of pretty sentimental tales, and cheap apologues”, by drawing upon her imagination, and making a story instead of argument. Another critical shaft of his is aimed at the way in which Sand elaborated the main idea of her novel—“the downfall of the Catholic church; and, indeed, of the whole Christian scheme”⁵¹—in the characters and plot of the novel, especially in the fortunes of the titular hero. He positively evaluates only one episode, in which the authoress successfully evokes the dreary and mysterious atmosphere of the cloister and sacristy, praises her fine fancy and her capability of keeping up “the natural *supernaturalness*” of the scene by means of suitably chosen details:

“How skilfully is each of these little strokes dashed in, and how well do all together combine to make a picture!” (*Works* II, 235).

His evaluation of some of the characters, however, and especially that of Peter Hebronius, “Spiridion”, is much more critical, though he finds some positive traits even in this curious personage, who does not appear in the novel in flesh, but as a ghost and at the same time as a mouthpiece of Sand’s ideas:

“This beautiful, mysterious, dandy ghost, whose costume, with a true woman’s coquetry, Madame Dudevant has so rejoiced to describe—is her religious type, a mystical representation of Faith struggling up towards Truth, through superstition, doubt, fear, reason,—in tight inexpressibles, with ‘a belt such as is worn by the old German students’. You will pardon me for treating such an awful person as this somewhat lightly; but there is always, I think, such a dash of the ridiculous in the French sublime, that the critic should try and do justice to both, or he may fail in giving a fair account of either. This character of Hebronius, the type of Mrs Sand’s convictions—if convictions they may be called—or, at least, the allegory under which her doubts are represented, is, in parts, very finely drawn; contains many passages of truth, very deep and touching, by the side of others so entirely absurd and unreasonable, that the reader’s feelings are continually swaying between admiration and something very like contempt—always in a kind of wonder at the strange mixture before him” (*Works* II, 237).

This character and his fortunes are for Thackeray a proof that Sand had hopelessly lost her way on the paths of her religious speculations. Spiridion gradually abjures the Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic religion, finally renounces Christianity itself and goes through a deep inner conflict in his search for a new religion. Thackeray very strongly protests against this everlasting abjuring of creeds and setting up of new faiths, but at the same time expresses his conviction that in this respect, as a warning to dabblers in religious speculations, the novel “may do a vast deal of good, and bears a good moral with it; though not such a one, perhaps, as our fair philosopher intended”. The moral which he draws from Sand’s book is that it is after all better and safer not to listen to the doctrines of the philosophers who constantly change their creeds, not to allow oneself to be dazzled by fine sentences and fiery declamations of various charla-

⁵¹ For the quotations see *Works* II, 232, 233.

tans, but to remain quiet and sober, "in that quiet and sober way of faith" of one's ancestors. As this quotation suggests, the doctrine of the authoress, not acceptable to Thackeray in itself, and, moreover, propagated by her in an incompetent and amateur way (he emphasizes that not "all the big words in the world can make Mrs. Sand talk like a philosopher"), leads him to a conservative adherence to old established beliefs and to mistrust in any progress of religious thought (a standpoint not wholly characteristic of him in this period of his life). It is therefore not surprising that the truth which Spiridion eventually succeeds in finding, which is a prophecy of the kingdom of everlasting Gospel, does not arouse in him any enthusiasm. He quotes in full Spiridion's manuscript which the prior took with himself to his grave and which contains his heretic doctrine, refuses to see in it, like Sand did, the "absolute truth" and "supreme secret", and evaluates it as the dullest "of all the dull, vague, windy documents that mortal ever set eyes on". His indignation is especially aroused by its final part, which contains an account of the development and decay of Christianity as well as some statements belittling the doctrine and role of Christ, which Thackeray denounces as impious and blasphemous. He expresses his conviction that some words in which Spiridion's philosophy is expressed could be written only after the authoress had passed through "the state of mental debauch and disease", but then relents a little and admits that they might be due to the peculiar influence of French air and sun which makes the French philosophers, politicians, and literary men permanently intoxicated. Thackeray obviously does not want to conclude his review in an entirely inimical spirit and therefore quotes one extract from "the dramatic and descriptive parts of the novel" which in his opinion "cannot, in point of style and beauty, be praised too highly", expressing his regret that he cannot quote more of them for want of space. His concluding remark is, however, not very positive. He explains that he dealt with Sand's religious or irreligious notions in such detail only because she is "the representative of a vast class of her countrymen, whom the wits and philosophers of the eighteenth century have brought to this condition", and pronounces his prophecy, which we quoted in the first chapter (see page 55), as to the inevitable downfall of their doctrine, that "goodly fruit" of "the Diderot and Rousseau tree".⁵² In this, however, he was mistaken, for the imported idealism was not the fruit of the philosophy of the Encyclopaedists, but, on the contrary, as Lafargue has pointed out, was driving their materialism to death.⁵³

After 1839 Thackeray ceased to consider Sand's novels as literary critic and mentioned her only in a few marginal comments. These show that the progressive development of the authoress towards Utopian socialism in the 1840s, bearing fruit in her best novels, either escaped his notice or failed to make him change his former views.⁵⁴ If he refers to her at all.

⁵² For the quotations and references in this paragraph see *Works* II, 240, 242, 248, 243, 246, 247, 248, 250.

⁵³ Quoted in J. O. Fischer and collective, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

⁵⁴ Of her novels of this period he mentions only *Consuelo*, without any critical comment (see *Works* V, 482).

he does so only to include her in his general condemnation of contemporary French literature, or to make her a favourite novelist of the morally questionable, selfish and cold-hearted Blanche Amory, who is moreover characterized as being, like Lélia, a *femme incomprise*. His continued negative attitude to Sand's personality is in my opinion reflected in his character of Madame d'Ivry in the *Newcomes*, who may be regarded as a composite picture of George Sand and Madame de Staël, of course transposed and modified in Thackeray's workshop (as far as I know nobody has as yet dealt with this character from this point of view). Like George Sand Madame d'Ivry married at a very early age, when she left the convent, taking a husband who was many years older (like the husband of de Staël) and who did not understand her (like the husbands of both French authoresses). In the third year of this unhappy *mariage de convenance*, after having given birth to a daughter, she took to literature and (like de Staël and also Sand) opened her *salons* to art, entertaining there (like these women of letters) the representatives of the Romantic School and the Young France. Like George Sand, she gradually renounced several political, religious, and philosophical creeds and finally took to Pantheism, all of which found due reflection in her works, which are—unlike those of de Staël and Sand—written in verse. Like Sand and Staël she takes a fancy to any man who comes near her, but soon quarrels with him and grows tired of him, as Sand especially did. The creeds she adopts in turn include, too, natural sciences, chemistry and botany, i.e. those branches of science which Sand learned from her private tutor, the former priest Deschartes. Like Sand, who dressed herself in masculine attire to be able to share fully the life of the Parisian students and literary Bohemians, Madame d'Ivry adapts her dresses to the robes worn by the members of the particular sects or by individuals she admires at the moment. Like Sand she had been used to smoke cigars, but abandoned the habit. Like Sand, she has a jealous husband and constantly changes her lovers. Like Staël she has a much younger lover, who is a poet, as was Sand's lover Musset, and whom she calls "Stenio"—using the name of Lélia's lover. The outpourings of the Duchess's heart, her *cris de l'âme*, as Thackeray calls them, in which she deplures her unhappy marriage with an old man and expresses her protests against the ruthless egotism of the male sex, remind us very strongly of Sand's views upon these questions and even of her style. Even the Duchess's portrait in the novel (by Richard Doyle, but most probably inspired by Thackeray) reminds us to a certain extent of the likeness of Sand in her younger years, as it was drawn by Musset. The character of Madame d'Ivry is a very convincing proof, too, of Thackeray's negative attitude to Sand's philosophical ideas and religious beliefs. He created in it a very lifelike illustration of the thesis formulated by Lady Kew, that when "a woman forgets religious principles . . . , she is sure to go wrong". He makes the Duchess into another Becky Sharp, but this time without the grudging sympathy he could not help feeling for his courageous little governess—he depicts her in an entirely adverse light, so that she never excites any sympathy in the reader, but only loathing and contempt. She is presented as a selfish, completely worldly, mischievous, scandal-mongering, utterly depraved, cold-hearted and

dangerous woman, who is capable only of nursing her own alleged wrongs and has not a trace of genuinely human feelings for anybody. Like Becky she does not care about her child, neglects her, leaves her to her loneliness and exposes her "maternal" feelings only "before the world, before ladies, that understands itself". As in Becky's case her child is separated from her by her husband and she bears this loss, like Becky, with complete indifference and equanimity. This malevolent viper, this monstre, as Florac calls her, is the cause of the rupture between Kew and Ethel and of the duel between Kew and Stenio, in which the former is seriously wounded. That part of her life, with which we become acquainted from the novel, strongly reminds us of Becky's fortunes after Rawdon's discovery of her unfaithfulness—like Becky, the Duchess leaves her husband (though, in contradistinction to Becky, of her own choice) and, together with depraved females of her own type and with some very questionable males, starts patronizing the roulette-tables and trails "through the country with her vagabond court of billiard-markers at her heels".⁵⁵ The key to both the character of Becky and that of the Duchess is the image of a siren, beautiful and alluring above the surface of the water, which, however, hides the cave full of the bones of her victims. The composite character of this personage shows that Thackeray did not create it with the purpose of attacking and ridiculing either of the two French authoresses and that he only took his inspiration from what he thought he knew about their lives and personalities. Even though he was not motivated by any evil intent, his depiction is very unjust both to de Staël and Sand, and especially to the latter, who was a very pure and noble, warm-hearted and kind person and the tenderest, most affectionate of mothers.

While Thackeray's criticism of Sand is, as we have seen, not positive, nor is it wholly negative—he did not deny her genius and warmly praised her style. His treatment of her novel *Spiridion*, which, like her other novels *à la thèse*, is filled with confused metaphysics and misty symbolism and is unequal in its composition and in its truthfulness to life, is by no means unjust. If we disregard his negative attitude to Sand's personal character, especially as it is expressed in the character of Madame d'Ivry analysed above, his criticism of George Sand the novelist is upon the whole not so adverse as that of her English denigrators, whom George Henry Lewes attacked in his two articles of 1842 and 1844, while it avoids the enthusiasm of the English feminists and most female writers.⁵⁶ He is near to Carlyle, who characterized the authoress as the "sublime Highpriestess of Anarchy", and who confessed that he was so much

⁵⁵ For the quotations see *Works* XIV. 499, 473, 429.

⁵⁶ Lewes's articles were published in the *Monthly Magazine*, June 1842, and the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, July 1844. See Patricia Thomson, "The Three Georges", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 18, Sept. 1963, No. 2, p. 141 and note. Among Sand's admirers we find E. Browning, Mrs. Jameson, H. Martineau, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. The last bowed before the genius of the French authoress in great respect and eternal gratefulness, regarded her as her model and was even inspired by her (see *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, OUP, Geoffrey Cumberlege; New Haven: Yale UP, 1954, vol. I, pp. 277–278).

irritated by the "sick Sentimentalism" in her work that he was often unjust to what was truthful in it. He liked, however, "the melody that runs thro' that strange 'beautiful incontinent' soul,—a *Modern Magdalen*, with the 'seven devils' mostly still in her!".⁵⁷ Thackeray's attitude to Sand reminds me, too, in some respects, of the critical opinions of the Russian democratic critics, especially of those of Belinsky, who criticized her Utopian, unreal and vague social programme and some other limitations of her creative approach almost in the same spirit as Thackeray, and sometimes even in much stronger words.⁵⁸ In contradistinction to this critic, however (and to Gercen and Chernyshevsky), Thackeray criticizes Sand's programme from the point of view of a believer and of an Englishman of the Victorian age, and does not do justice to the democratic and progressive tendency of her works, which was so warmly appreciated by her Russian critics, nor to her genuine and sincere love for ordinary working people, to which Brandes paid such an eloquent and enthusiastic tribute.⁵⁹ This weak point of his criticism is of course mainly rooted in his whole philosophy of life and in his conception of literature, which was the very opposite of Sand's romantic aesthetics, but at the same time also partly results from the limited range of his treatment of the authoress. All his critical judgments, even the later ones, are obviously based only upon his knowledge of Sand's early novels, which are mainly directed against the suppression of woman (this part of her doctrine is not neglected by Thackeray, as we have seen, even if he does not accept it with much sympathy) and represent only the outset of the authoress's fight against the injustices she found in her society.

In his evaluation of the Romantic prose written by Hugo and Sand, the two indisputably great practitioners of this literary kind, Thackeray applies the same standards that he uses in his reviews of the prose-works by second-rate writers discussed in the preceding chapter. He found Hugo's works wanting in their truthfulness to life and reprehended their author for his prophetic visions, his predilection for sharp contrasts and too ornate a style. George Sand offended him more from the moral point of view than because she deviated from the faithful depiction of reality. Furthermore, as in the case of Soulié, he had severe objections to her having inserted her own opinions and prejudices into her novel, thus overstepping the boundary of the *genre* and producing a religious pamphlet instead. In her case Thackeray applies, too, his usual standard that an author should set a good example in his life as well as in his work and should not deal with problems in which he is too closely personally involved. Since Hugo and Sand have retained their high places in literature down to the present day, Thackeray's critical judgments have not been confirmed by posterity. His evaluation is not, however, entirely unjust and, as I have tried to demonstrate, contains some grains of truth which may be accepted even by the greatest admirers of these two writers.

⁵⁷ *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning*, ed. Alexander Carlyle, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1923, pp. 287–288.

⁵⁸ See op. cit., I, pp. 633–634; II, p. 352, etc.

⁵⁹ See op. cit., V, pp. 360, 362–363.

3. Thackeray and the Romantic Drama

If Thackeray was not badly qualified for his criticism of French Romantic prose, he was almost equally well equipped for evaluating the drama produced by this literary movement. Ever since youth a great theatre-lover, he was lucky enough to spend much of his time in Paris at the very period in which Romantic drama was being born and even witnessed some of the stormy reactions and commotions which were the labour pains that accompanied its arrival in the world. In the 1830s, during the Paris stays of varying length which marked that decade, he went almost daily to the theatre, saw a great number of significant productions of the Romantic movement, some of which he evaluated as critic and some of which he only commented upon in his diary or letters. In fact none of those he saw and recorded were left uncommented. Another qualification of his was of course his very good knowledge of English drama (especially of Shakespeare and the Restoration dramatists) and of classical French drama, which allowed him to confront the productions of the past with those he saw on the French stage in the period of Romanticism. As all the evidence we have at our disposal shows, he deeply admired the art of the French actors and the stage production, but the dramas themselves, even though marvellously acted and perfectly produced, did not evoke in him any particular enthusiasm. Nor was he here very unjust, for the drama was the only literary kind in which the *École romantique* failed to realize its original bold expectations. His earliest acquaintance with the French Romantic drama was, however, not a wholly negative experience. During his first stay in Paris, in his university vacations of 1829, he saw one of the first romantic dramas in France, Dumas's *Henri III. et sa cour*, the most powerful of all the plays written by this dramatist, which was characterized by Henley as "the rallying trumpet of 1830".¹ His knowledge of French was not yet very good, but in spite of this he was able to see at least some of the merits and demerits of this play, which he characterizes as "a drama which as it is cannot be called a tragedy". Quite justly, too, he appreciates the plot of the play as "a good one", praises the costumes as "most scrupulously correct" and enthusiastically writes about the "most excellent acting", especially that of Made-moiselle Mars.² In 1830 he saw at Weimar the German translation of Hugo's epoch-making tragedy *Hernani* and at that time it obviously had not yet aroused his indignation (as it did later), as he recommends his mother to read this play which had made such a commotion in Paris.³ So too the next drama he saw in Paris two years later, Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse* (he saw the première, which was also the last performance, the play being banned by the government), met with his qualified approval and probably made strong impression upon him, in the opinion of Ray, who finds a striking reminiscence of the play in George Warrington's drama *Carpezan*

¹ Quoted by Saintsbury, *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 319 note.

² *Letters* I, 88. The drama had a fascinating and lively plot. In externals Dumas reproduced exactly the historical milieu and the scenery and costumes were adapted according to Scott's *Quentin Durward*.

³ See *Letters* I, 127, 133.

in the *Virginians*.⁴ In the same year he saw the tragedy by Casimir Delavigne, *Louis XI.*, which he found "capital" and in the following year *Les Enfants d'Édouard* by the same writer, which he evaluated as "one of the best acted tragedies I had ever the good fortune to see".⁵ In 1835 he read (but probably did not see) De Vigny's play *Chatterton*, by common consent the high-watermark of the Romantic theatre, and summed up its plot in a letter to his friend FitzGerald which aptly comments on De Vigny's embellishments of fact in the plot as being "very rich", but does not otherwise critically enlarge.⁶ It was obviously not until 1838 that the French romantic drama properly aroused Thackeray's anger, though he commented upon it adversely at least on two earlier occasions.⁷ In that year he saw in Paris Hugo's tragedy *Marion Delorme* and was disgusted in the highest degree, as follows from this communication to his mother:

"I have just come from seeing *Marion Delorme*, a tragedy of Victor Hugo, and am so disgusted and sick with the horrid piece that I have hardly heart to write. The last act ends with an execution, and you are kept waiting a long hour listening to the agonies of parting lovers, and grim speculations about head-chopping, dead-bodies, coffins and what not—Bah! I am as sick as if I had taken an emetic" (*Letters* I, 362).

His evaluation is of course not quite just, for the play, in spite of the demerits which he saw so clearly, possessed considerable brilliance and was full of charm, as Faguet emphasizes,⁸ and was also politically daring—as an anti-government drama it was prohibited by Charles X. Two years after this characteristic statement of his, which preshadows all his later judgments upon French romantic drama, Thackeray examined the dramatic production of the Romantic school as critic in his article "French Dramas and Melodramas" (1840). He condemns it, sharply and utterly, as drama dealing exclusively in crimes and vices, and therefore highly objectionable from the moral point of view, as drama ridiculing religion. His objections are best expressed in the introductory part of the article:

"Finally, there is the Drama, that great monster which has sprung into life of late years; and which is said, but I don't believe a word of it, to have Shakespeare for a father. If Mr. Scribe's plays (about which he wrote in the preceding paragraph—LP) may be said to be so many ingenious examples how to break one commandment, the *drame* is a grand and general chaos of them all; nay, several crimes are added, not prohibited in the Decalogue, which was written before dramas were. Of the drama, Victor Hugo and Dumas are the well-known and respectable guardians. Every piece Victor Hugo has written, since *Hernani*, has contained a monster—a delightful monster, saved by one virtue. There is Triboulet, a foolish monster; Lucrece Borgia, a maternal monster; Mary Tudor, a religious monster; Monsieur Quasimodo, a hump-backed monster; and others, that might be named, whose monstrosities we are induced to pardon—nay, admiringly to witness—because they are agreeably mingled with some exquisite display of affection. And, as the great Hugo has one monster to each play, the great Dumas has, ordinarily, half

⁴ See *Letters* I, 238 and note. The hero of Hugo's drama is Francis I, the most brutal of the royal debauchees of France; one of the characters of Carpezan is another royal Don Juan, King Louis of Hungary and Bohemia.

⁵ *Letters* I, 252 and *Works* I, 39.

⁶ See *Letters* I, 278.

⁷ See *Letters* I, 226 (on Dumas's *drame brutal*, *Le fils de l'émigré*) and *Letters* I, 254.

⁸ See *op. cit.*, p. 565.

a dozen, to whom murder is nothing; common intrigue, and simple breakage of the before-mentioned commandment, nothing; but who live and move in a vast, delightful complication of crime, that cannot be easily conceived in England, much less described" (*Works II*, 291-292).

As we can see, Thackeray's evaluation of the French romantic drama has a very strong moralistic colouring: in his opinion this sort of drama exercises a very harmful influence upon the spectator, equal almost to that exercised by public executions—it makes him indulge in a "hideous kind of mental intoxication"⁹ and in morbid interest in, and perhaps even sympathy for, crime and vice. His second objection is directed against the predilection of French romantic writers for "mixed" criminal characters, for depicting, as Brandes expressed it, "a human soul debased by bad passions, by all kinds of misery and humiliations, by vice, by slavery, by infirmity, yet so constituted that, under given circumstances, it is irresistibly attracted by the good and beautiful, in alliance with which it fights against the horrible past which it has forsworn".¹⁰

All the above-mentioned criteria of Thackeray's are applied in the body of his article, which is devoted to the evaluation of three plays by Alexandre Dumas-père—*Caligula* (1837), *Don Juan de Marana* (1836) and *Kean* (1836). The reason why he had chosen Dumas and not Hugo to represent the Romantic drama in his article is difficult to descry. He might have perhaps recognized in the former a more "dangerous" representative of the school, who had, as his contemporaries thought, and as Faguet believes, "perhaps a greater share than Victor Hugo in bringing about the revolution in the drama in the nineteenth century by substituting historic drama for tragedy".¹¹ The plays Thackeray chooses for his criticism belong, however, to the later period of Dumas's return to melodrama and, being more or less trashy, do not reach the level of his first two dramas, *Henri III. et sa cour* and *Antony*. In the introduction to his critical notice of *Caligula*, Thackeray mentions the cold reception of the play by the Parisian critics and quotes Dumas's defence, in which the dramatist, with considerable lack of modesty, draws his critics' attention to the deep piety of his play and to the new, bold, but chaste and grave thoughts expressed in it and claims for himself the merit of presenting to the spectator "the solution of a problem which he has long and vainly sought in his waking hours". Such words could not but rouse the anger of the sober and modest critic, who reprehends the dramatist for trying to present himself as an apostle and a writer with a divine mission. He pronounces, however, very few critical judgments upon the play itself, and his critical notice consists for the most part of long quotations from the drama in French and in his own translation. But even his scanty critical comments suggest that he very much resents the way in which Dumas treats religion in this play: he stops translating the piece at the point when Mary Magdalen is mentioned for the first time, refusing to enter the sacred ground "with such spotless high-priest as Monsieur Dumas".¹²

⁹ *Works II*, 293; see also 292.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, V, p. 350 (on Hugo).

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 570.

¹² For the quotations see *Works II*, 294 and 297.

Nor does Dumas's choice of his "hero" and "heroine" (Caligula and Messalina), and his sympathetic approach to them, meet with his approval, but he is aware that these personages might have led Dumas into much greater excesses of indecency than they had done:

"All things considered, the tragedy of *Caligula* is a decent tragedy; as decent as the decent characters of the hero and heroine can allow it to be; it may be almost said, provokingly decent: but this, it must be remembered, is the characteristic of the modern French school (nay, of the English school too); and if the writer take the character of a remarkable scoundrel, it is ten to one but he turns out an amiable fellow, in whom we have all the warmest sympathy. Caligula is killed at the end of the performance; Messalina is comparatively well-behaved;..." (*Works* II, 294).

Much more strongly does Thackeray disapprove of Dumas's treatment of religion in *Don Juan de Marana*, the dramatic version of the well-known story of the debauches of Don Juan and his pious repentance. The scene of the play is laid in heaven, on earth and in hell and the plot concerns the contest of a good and a bad angel for the possession of the soul of the hero. Thackeray is especially indignant regarding the character of Don Juan, whom Dumas endowed with some additional qualities, non-existent both in the historical prototype and in his namesake created by Mozart and Molière, but rendering him "eminently fitting for stage representation". In Dumas's depiction this personage is an odd combination of Lovelace and Lacenaire (a notorious criminal of that time—LP): he not only seduces ladies, as his original did, but also blasphemes upon all occasions and "murders, at the slightest provocation, and without the most trifling remorse". Such a conception of this character, considerably deviating from historical truth, enabled the dramatist to fill his scene with numerous intrigues, surprise effects and other romantic accessories, as well as with a number of depictions of various crimes and vices, which Thackeray laconically enumerates in his brief summary of the plot of the play. In his final words he sharply indicts the play as immoral, indecent and vulgar, characterizes its favourable reception as "a very bitter satire upon the country, which calls itself the politest nation in the world" and appeals to the French government, which censors dramas because of political allusions, to exert "the same guardianship over public morals".¹³ His sharpest shaft is reserved, however, for the author's cavalier treatment of religion:

"The honest English reader, who has a faith in his clergyman, and is a regular attendant at Sunday worship, will not be a little surprised at the march of intellect among our neighbours across the Channel, and at the kind of consideration in which they hold their religion. Here is a man who seizes upon saints and angels, merely to put sentiments in their mouths, which might suit a nymph of Drury Lane. He shows heaven, in order that he may carry debauch into it; and avails himself of the most sacred and sublime parts of our creed, as a vehicle for a scene-painter's skill, or an occasion for a handsome actress to wear a new dress" (*Works* II, 300-301).

As usual, Thackeray quotes from the reviewed play an extract in his own rendering, including his successful translation of Martha's prayer in verse, "Le Bon Ange".

¹³ For the quotations see *Works* II, 297 and 300.

Even the third play, *Kean*, did not find mercy in the critic's eyes, but on this occasion he is not motivated predominantly by his religious feelings, but by the indignation of a realist seeking in literature truthful depiction of life, as well as by his offended patriotic feelings and moral sense. He criticizes this play in the first place for its entirely false depiction of English life, enumerating all the biggest blunders committed by the author, and sums up briefly the absurd plot, based upon a conventional romantic scheme and abounding in the usual surprise effects and unexpected *dénouements*. The sharpest of his critical weapons is aimed at Dumas's cavalier treatment of virtue and vice in sexual life. This in Thackeray's opinion faithfully reflects the perverted French code of morals, for which infidelity, adultery and seduction are "a matter of course" and success among women "the proof and the reward of virtue".¹⁴ As Garnett points out, Thackeray's evaluation of *Kean* has been regarded as unjust and prejudiced especially by French critics, who have always treated this drama with the greatest respect as an excellent play from the standpoint of the theatre, even though it contained many mistakes in English history and manners. According to this scholar Thackeray failed to appreciate the excellent stage qualities of this play and concentrated his attention exclusively upon the "Frenchness" of the piece, and to the singular mistakes in it". Garnett evaluates Thackeray as a not very good or just critic of French plays, but admits that his "ironic humour" makes his criticisms of the plays depicting English life "exceedingly entertaining".¹⁵ I agree with Garnett that Thackeray ignored the stage qualities of *Kean*, but I am not quite willing to accept his conclusion that his only concern was the "Frenchness" of the play. In my opinion he was mainly concerned with the relation of Dumas's depicted scene to reality, as in the case of any other writer, whether English, German or French. That the reality in the play was supposed to be English only increased his anger, but was not, in my opinion, its main cause. I find myself in agreement rather with Saintsbury who argues against the French critics of the play, and adds:

"To which, of course, it can only be replied that if all Europe thought *Kean* a fine play, and only one person perceived the absurdities that Thackeray points out, all Europe would be wrong and the one person right. For these are absurdities, sometimes in themselves, sometimes as exhibiting ignorance of his subject, which the author had not business to commit if he took that subject at all."¹⁶

After all, not all Europe accepted *Kean* with enthusiasm. Belinsky, for instance, characterized it as a "feeble" play, and all Dumas's popular melodramas, including *Kean*, as sanguinary pieces of bad taste, even though he did not condemn them utterly, seeing in them a protest of the human individual and his appeal to society.¹⁷

The rest of Thackeray's article is devoted to the evaluation of several popular melodramas, both of religious and non-religious character. He

¹⁴ *Works* II, 301, 302.

¹⁵ For the quotations see *NSB*, pp. 300, 301.

¹⁶ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 42.

¹⁷ See *op. cit.*, I, p. 525; II, p. 352.

sums up either briefly or in detail the plots of some of them¹⁸ and criticizes the former for the liberties they take with the text of the Bible, the latter for their occasional indecency, lack of refinement, "absurdities and claptraps". Upon the whole, however, he prefers these popular plays, which are mostly anonymous productions, to the whole production of the *École romantique*. They do not pretend to any divine mission, "do not deal in descriptions of the agreeably wicked, or ask pity and admiration for tender-hearted criminals and philanthropic murderers, as their betters do", depict virtue as virtue and vice as vice and lead all the vicious characters to due punishment. In contradistinction to the dramas of the great representatives of the Romantic school they therefore contain, as Thackeray points out, "fine hearty virtue" and "pleasant child-like simplicity", and "a kind of rude moral":¹⁹

"So that while the drama of Victor Hugo, Dumas, and the enlightened classes, is profoundly immoral and absurd, the *drama* of the common people is absurd, if you will, but good and right-hearted" (*Works* II, 305)

These plays appeal to Thackeray, too, by always expressing the standpoint of the people regarding the classes in power: the seducer and villain is always an aristocrat, and is punished at the end of the play, thus expiating, and quite justly, as Thackeray emphasizes, the wrongs which his class did a hundred years ago. Thackeray warmly sympathizes with this "republican" tendency of the popular melodramas and expresses his wish that it should live on the French stage for a long time yet. His evaluation is essentially correct, for these plays, in spite of their stereotype characters, lack of depth in thought and exaggerated sentimentality, expressed the democratic ideals of their time and contained, as E. Uhlířová points out, a strong note of social criticism.²⁰

The concluding part of Thackeray's article is devoted to a general assessment of the depiction of English life and manners on the French stage. He notices the most striking blunders occurring in four plays dealing with the subject (including again Dumas's *Kean*) and in a poem by Roger de Beauvoir,²¹ concluding his "catalogue" of errors (and his article) with the following question:

¹⁸ The "Catholic" plays include *The Wandering Jew*, *Belshazzar's Feast* (criticized by Thackeray also elsewhere as early as 1833 — see *Works* I, 37 — as a scandalous parody of scripture and parodied by him at a dinner party given by Lever — see W. J. Fitzpatrick, *Life of Charles Lever*, 2 vols. London, 1879, II, pp. 405–410, quoted in *Letters* II, 67 note), *Nebuchadnezzar*, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, *Joseph and his Brethren*, *The Passage of the Red Sea*, and *The Deluge*. The non-religious melodramas include *La Duchesse de Vauballière* (he does not mention the author, but this is not an anonymous production — it was written in 1839 by Nicolas Balisson de Rougemont), *Hermann L'Yvrogne* (according to Thackeray this play is of Polish origin; I have found out that a play of this title was written by Joseph Bouchardy in 1836), and *Le Maudit des Mers* (I was unable to identify the author, but it is obviously one of the numerous versions of the famous story about the Flying Dutchman).

¹⁹ For the quotations see *Works* II, 308, 305.

²⁰ See J. O. Fischer and collective, op. cit., p. 316.

²¹ The first play he notices is one of the satirical plays upon the follies of the year, played at Christmas in France: the second is Dumas's *Kean*; the third is *Bergami et la reine d'Angleterre* (1833) by Charles-Désiré Dupcuty (with Alhoy and

"Would a playwright or painter of the Chinese empire have stranger notions about the barbarians than our neighbours, who are separated from us but by two hours of salt-water?" (*Works* II, 312).

After 1840 Thackeray's critical interest in the French romantic drama noticeably declined. He ceases to pay any attention whatever to Hugo's dramas, which might be partly explained by the fact that Hugo's drama was already outside the centre of interest of the whole of English criticism. As Hooker points out, the critical storm against Hugo's dramas had calmed down and English critics had become indifferent, probably because the dramas written after *Ruy Blas*, no longer so strongly politically committed, did not offer so much provocation as the earlier ones.²² Dumas's dramatic work, on the other hand, remained within the range of Thackeray's interest for a longer time. If he is really the author of the summary review "English History and Character on the French Stage" (as some scholars believe and Ray does not wholly deny), he returned to it again in 1843. The main reason for this renewal of his critical interest was obviously his surprise at the versatility of the dramatic resources of Dumas, who had written a comedy in the previous year (*Halifax*) and thus entered the domain of the lighter dramatic Muse. As a great lover of the Parisian vaudeville, Thackeray very much resents the intrusion of the heavy-handed Dumas, the author of the monstrous tale of *Don Juan de Marana*, with all its melodramatic effects and blasphemies, into the smiling garden of "that genuine, sparkling, essentially French thing, the Vaudeville".²³ He then briefly sums up the plot of the comedy, which takes place in England at the time of Charles II, sharply criticizes the character of the titular hero who is, contrary to historical truth, depicted as a low, brawling ruffian, and protests against the improbabilities of the resolution of the plot (Lord Halifax, in spite of all his cheating, drinking and killing, is rewarded by the marriage with Jenny). In concluding his notice of the play, Thackeray sighs over Dumas's queer notions of mirth and the perverse morality of his play:

"And this is a vaudeville, or, by the book, a comedy, mixed with couplets; and this is the lugubrious mirth, not to speak of the morality, of the romantic school. Oh! Alexandre Dumas" (*NSB*, 161).

In 1848 Thackeray once again, and for the last time, attacked the drama of the Dumasian type in the form of a little parody, "La Duchesse de Montefiasco", included in his Christmas story *Our Street*. He ridicules in it Dumas's predilection for rhetorical declamations, unlawful passion, tragic deaths of his heroes and surprise turns of the plot (the hero of the parody, Don Alonzo, falls in love with a duchess, who eventually turns out to be his own grandmother).²⁴

Of the other representatives of the drama of the Romantic school (Fontan); the fourth is *Nauffrage de la Meduse* (I was unable to identify the author). Edouard Roger de Bully, called Roger de Beauvoir (1809-1866) lived for many months, as Thackeray points out, in England as the attaché to the Embassy of M. de Polignac. He was the author of many romantic novels, plays and poems, and was an old friend of Thackeray (see *Letters* II, 588 note).

²² See op. cit., p. 64.

²³ *NSB*, p. 157.

²⁴ See *Works* X, 140-143.

Thackeray paid formal critical attention only to Soulie. In the same review, in which he reviewed Dumas's *Halifax*, he takes notice of Soulie's play *Gaetan, Il Mammone* (1842), by which he is even more horrified. In the very first words of his review he hints that he regards the play as unworthy of critical notice and that he deals with it only because Soulie is a prominent writer, who is on the staff of the *Journal des Debats* and whose play is likely to get an audience. Soulie, the author of the corrupt and licentious book *Les Memoires du diable*, is according to Thackeray "assuredly not the best of historical guides", but his views upon English history and people are worth having, as in the eyes of some of his countrymen "he who could so well paint the devil, ought to draw an Englishman or Englishwoman to perfection"²⁵. Thackeray then sums up briefly the plot of the play which is based upon the idea that the world is governed by mean causes, evaluates it as "bewildering" and the play as a whole as "egregious rubbish" beyond all criticism. One of its numerous weak points is in Thackeray's opinion "a total absence" of character and the proper motivation of the action and behaviour of the personages.

Nor indeed is there the least necessary connexion between the conduct of the personages and the incidents of the piece. Any body might have filled the place of Lord Merton. He is an English admiral without one marked feature or characteristic, a singular evidence of the author's dulness in the appreciation of force of soul or determination or humour or whim of manner. (NSB 155)

Garnett does not agree with Thackeray in his total condemnation of the play and rates Soulie much higher, as a dramatist of great power, though not much *finesse*. He emphasizes that *Gaetan* was very successful in Paris, points out that it "abounds with happy strokes of national character" and blames Thackeray that his "national prepossessions prevented him from enjoying what was after all not a bad play"²⁶. I think, however, that time has proved Thackeray right—as far as I know, Soulie's play is now entirely forgotten.

Thackeray's evaluation of the French romantic drama cannot be regarded as genuine dramatic criticism, for he does not deal in it at all with the specific problems of the drama as literary form and ignores the theatrical qualities of the individual plays he assesses. His approach to the reviewed dramas is essentially the same as that he used in evaluating novels and other prose-works: it almost seems as if his judgments were based upon his reading them in book form and not seeing them on the stage. He had obviously only very general notions about the drama as literary form and about dramatic production. In the dramas he evaluated he sought only for the depiction of characters and manners, lively dialogue, interesting situations and episodes, while the technical aspects of this literary kind, the process by which a written drama is transformed into a powerful play performed on the stage, failed to draw his attention or at least did not stand in the forefront of his interest. As the preceding account implies, Thackeray took some share in the campaign of the other critics of his country against the "immoral" and "depraved" dramas of Hugo and Dumas, which is characterized by Hooker as a wholesale attack

²⁵ NSB, p. 152, see also *ibid.*, p. 155

²⁶ NSB, p. 303, see also *ibid.*, p. 317

launched by the awful edict in the article on "The State of the French Drama", published in the *Quarterly Review* in March 1834, after the appearance of which no English critic, except Lewes, ventured to defend the French drama, and especially that of Hugo, again. In my opinion, however, Thackeray's criticism differs from that of most English adverse critics—if not in its conclusions, at least in its informed character. As Hooker points out, these critics passed their negative judgments very easily and extended their disapproval to productions about which they knew nothing except that they were French.²⁷ Thackeray's judgments, on the other hand, are based upon his good knowledge of all Hugo's dramas, probably of the whole dramatic production of Dumas, of plays by lesser Romantic dramatists, of French classical drama, and, of course, on his familiarity with Shakespeare's dramatic work. It is true, and I have pointed it out above, that his judgments are coloured by his national prejudices and, moreover, strongly influenced by his own strictly moralistic and narrow-minded point of view and that of his society, but I am convinced that a very important, if not a decisive, role in his criticism is played by his fundamental opposition to the romantic creative approach of the above-discussed French dramatists, which was entirely foreign to his own conception of literature. The essentially schematic dramatic methods of Hugo and Dumas, their predilection for grandiose exaggeration, strong dramatic contrasts and hyperbolized characters, their love of the unusual and the monstrous, their delight in melodrama and pathos and their lack of humour and irony prevented Thackeray from appreciating what was really positive in the French romantic drama and what made it so epoch-making in its time—its lyricism, feeling for nature and verse, its romantic protest against the injustices of the régime, its social criticism and the choice of heroes (especially in Hugo) from among the declassed elements of society. And thus though Thackeray set out from different presumptions than did the other English critics of his time, he arrived at the same explicit condemnation of the Romantic drama. His evaluation is not, however, entirely unjust—the plays of Dumas and Hugo, which he criticized, had something frenzied and ridiculous about them, as even Praz admits,²⁸ while scarcely any of all the dramas mentioned in this chapter ever found real favour with the public or ever became part of the permanent repertory of any theatre. His evaluation of Dumas's dramas is near to that of the Russian democratic critics, as we have seen, but his criticism of Hugo's dramatic work is more negative. It is true that even the Russian critics sharply criticize the romantic excesses in Hugo's creative approach, evaluate his characters as defying the laws of nature (Chernyshevsky) and his dramas as a genuine slander on human nature and as artificial plays full of violence and theatrical effects (Belinsky).²⁹

²⁷ See op. cit., pp. 39, 57, 59, 62, 65, 85. Lewes defended Hugo's drama in his article "The French Drama: Racine and Victor Hugo", *Westminster Review*, Sept. 1840.

²⁸ See op. cit., p. 207.

²⁹ For Chernyshevsky's view see V. V. Ivashcheva, *Istoriya zapadno-evropeyskoy literatury XIX. veka*, 3 vols, Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1951 (*The History of the West-European Literature of the 19th Century*), III, pp. 272–273; for Belinsky's opinion see op. cit., I, pp. 384, 587; II, p. 455.

But, in contradistinction to Thackeray, Belinsky was able to appreciate the "poetic element" in Hugo and even that aspect of the dramatist's creative method which aroused Thackeray's deepest indignation—his endeavour to prove that even the most corrupt human being possesses some beautiful traits of character.³⁰ The Russian critic evaluated correctly, too, the significance of Hugo's dramas for their time. He regarded all the French romanticists as ephemeral writers, including among them, as did Thackeray, also Balzac, but he was able to appreciate that their works responded to the needs of their age and reflected its interests and problems and that they therefore deserved their enormous popularity.

III.

THACKERAY AND FRENCH REALISTIC FICTION

As I have suggested in the preceding chapter, Thackeray condemned contemporary French literature as a whole and included in his condemnation, with only negligible exceptions, even the realistic fiction of the period. He had found almost no works which he could regard as representing serious fiction, found almost no difference between such novelists as Dumas, Soulié, Hugo, Sand, Sue, and Balzac, and characterized their whole production as profane, light literature, in its substance and effect immoral, utterly lacking in gentility, elegance and all other gentlemanlike qualities and as literature presenting an entirely false picture of the French society of its time. He expressed this opinion of his perhaps most clearly in his review of Reybaud's *Jérôme Paturot*. After having sharply criticized Sue, Balzac, and Soulié for not writing like gentlemen, he adds:

"These are hard words. But a hundred years hence (when, of course, the frequenters of the circulating library will be as eager to read the works of Soulié, Dumas, and the rest, as now), a hundred years hence, what a strange opinion the world will have of the French society of to-day! Did all married people, we may imagine they will ask, break a certain commandment?—They all do in the novels. Was French society composed of murderers, of forgers, of children without parents, of men consequently running the daily risk of marrying their grandmothers by mistake; of disguised princes, who lived in the friendship of amiable cut-throats and spotless prostitutes; who gave up the sceptre for the *savate*, and the stars and pig-tails of the court for the chains and wooden shoes of the galleys? All these characters are quite common in French novels, and France in the nineteenth century was the politest country in the world. What must the rest of the world have been?" (*Works* VI, 320).

Perhaps this quotation also suggests the reason why Thackeray paid such slight attention to the French realistic fiction of his time as critic—as we shall see, he reviewed only the works of two second-rate writers, Bernard and Reybaud, and devoted some space, too, to the

³⁰ See op. cit., II, p. 352.

evaluation of the realistic sketch and caricature, paying more attention, however, to the latter. As a reader however, he had extensive knowledge of the realistic novel and story produced in France in his lifetime, certainly more extensive than we can learn from the records of his reading and the references in his works.¹ He read Balzac, as I shall demonstrate in more detail below, he was familiar at least with some works of Prosper Mérimée and admired them very much, even though he had an antipathy to the personal character of this writer.² He read some novels by Alexandre Dumas-fils and found them "very impudent and amusing."³ In the second half of the 1850s he became acquainted with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but disliked the novel very much, evaluating it as a "bad" book, "a heartless, cold-blooded study of the downfall and degradation of a woman."⁴ This view of his, though very surprising in view of some indisputable points of resemblance between the two novelists, for which they have often been compared, contains some grains of truth—he seems to have perceived some of the limitations of Flaubert's almost naturalistically objective approach to his characters. His short comment suggests that he might have found Flaubert's standpoint too disinterested, his view of life too pessimistic, his negation too absolute, his loss of faith too entire and his scepticism too supreme. It is worth noticing that Thackeray probably did not read any novels of Stendhal, at least he does not refer to them anywhere. This complete absence of evidence is a regrettable gap in our knowledge of his critical opinions of French literature of his time and it is all the more provoking as there are so many parallels between the creative methods, literary and critical theories of these two great realists, which are closer and exceed in number even those between Thackeray and Balzac. They are indeed so striking that they have led Jerome Donnelly, who is determined to overlook this gap in factual evidence and relies solely on internal evidence, to the conclusion that Thackeray was almost certainly directly influenced by his great French contemporary.⁵ I find myself in agreement with this scholar in many of his findings (though some of the parallels he finds seem to me too far-fetched and there are again some which he does not notice), but his strong insistence upon Stendhal's direct influence implies, at least in my eyes, a certain underestimation of Thackeray's own creative power. All arguments of this sort, however, are beyond the scope of this article.

As I have suggested, in his critical judgments upon contemporary

¹ Besides the prose writers mentioned in this chapter he read many second-rate authors both realists and romanticists such as for instance Le Comte Horace de Viel-Castel whose two novels he noticed in his review *On Some French Favourite Novels* (see *Works* II, 110 ff.) Emile Souvestre (see *Letters* II, 33, 142) Joseph Xavier Boniface known as Saintine (see *Letters* II, 829, III, 668) Emile-Marco de Saint Hilaire (see *Letters* I, 234, II, 830) Olivier Gloux Aimard, called Gustave (see *Works* XVII, 601–602), etc.

² See *Letters* III, 460.

³ See *Letters* II, 679–680 and note.

⁴ *Letters* IV, 82 note, quoted from Henry Sutherland Edwards, *Personal Recollections*, London 1900, p. 36.

⁵ See Jerome Donnelly, "Stendhal and Thackeray: The Source of Henry Esmond", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1965 No. 3, pp. 372–381.

French literature Thackeray committed the blunder, not uncommon in his time, of not making any distinction between the leaders of the Romantic school and the great realist Honoré de Balzac. It is true that the latter at first ranged himself among the Romanticists with his early Satanic novels and in fact never used the term "realism" when characterizing his own creative approach. But he very soon abandoned the road he started upon with his early romances, had no illusions about their literary value and, before the twenties were over, presented himself as a realist. If Thackeray's early judgments on Balzac had been founded only on his knowledge of Balzac's first works, they would have been of course correct. But he persisted in assigning Balzac to the Romanticists even on the basis of the novels published in the 1830s, in which the fundamental creative approach of the author was already that of a realist. In 1832 Thackeray read the novel *La Peau de Chagrin* (1831), which he at first liked very much, but soon afterwards classified as a typical product of the Romantic school, possessing many of its "faults" and "beauties"—"plenty of light and shade, good colouring and costume, but no character".⁶ As this judgment suggests, the blend of romantic and realistic motifs and images, characteristic of this novel, prevented Thackeray from seeing and appreciating its merits, especially Balzac's marvellous art of characterization (for which he uses here the unusual and to Thackeray unacceptable method of profound allegory), not to mention the splendid depictions of French society and the underlying forces which govern it, which have so many traits in common with Thackeray's own later images. It is worth noticing that *La Peau de Chagrin* and *Les Chouans*, upon which he commented later, are the only two novels of Balzac that Thackeray mentions in all his public and private writings. Although he worked as a professional literary critic of French literature, he did not review any of the works of his remarkable French contemporary,⁷ nor did he anywhere say a word about Balzac's great novels of his *Comédie Humaine*, which were all published during Thackeray's lifetime. It is, however, most probable that he was familiar with at least some of these novels, and that for several reasons: he was an omnivorous reader of French contemporary literature, read everything he could take hold of, read mostly in French and for the most part immediately in Paris; he followed regularly the two satirical magazines, *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari*, with which Balzac was connected; he visited France and worked there as literary critic at the time when Balzac was in his full creative power and beginning to be famous, and he referred to Balzac in several occasional remarks which might concern his great novels. Thus for instance in his comments of the years 1839–1840 he reprehends the

⁶ *Letters* I, 225, see also *ibid.*, 222.

⁷ Garnett ascribes to him the authorship of the review of Balzac's work *Monographie de la presse parisienne* (1843), published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in April 1843 under the title "Balzac on the Newspapers of Paris". His authorship of this review has not been, however, definitely ascertained and both Ray and Maître regard it as very doubtful. Even the internal evidence seems to suggest that this review was not written by Thackeray, for it differs considerably, with its positive evaluation, from all the other statements pronounced by Thackeray upon Balzac at this time. I shall therefore not take this review into account.

French novelist for depicting merely states of "convulsive crimes" and horrors, criticizes his melodramatic stories for betraying bad taste and his style for not being sufficiently polished, light, graceful, and elegant.⁸ In July 1840 he refers to Balzac in his evaluation of Dickens's portrait

If Monsieur de Balzac that voluminous physiognomist could examine this head he would no doubt interpret every tone and wrinkle in it the nose firm and well placed the nostrils wide and full as are the nostrils of all men of genius (this is Monsieur Balzac's maxim) (*Works* II 518)

From 1842 we have the already mentioned (see page 71) record of the conversation at the dinner in Lever's house, during which "full justice was done" to the contemporary French celebrities, including Balzac. According to Carey Taylor we could deduce from this laconic sentence that Thackeray reserved his severest judgments of Balzac for his articles and it might perhaps even be regarded as a signal of the change of his attitude to Balzac.⁹ Thackeray's statements from the following years, which remain negative, speak against the latter alternative, but the fact that all of them appeared in his articles, speaks for the first. Some of these later comments might refer to Balzac's great novels as well. It is, first of all, his remark in the review of Sue's novel (April 1843), in which Thackeray confronts Sue's enormous popularity with the lesser success of Soulie. Balzac and Dumas and emphasizes that "even Balzac has grown wearisome with his monotonous thrummings on the cracked old string"¹⁰ In the same month and year Thackeray refers to Balzac's play *Vautrin* (that is, if the review "The English History and Character on the French Stage" is his) and correctly assesses the hero as an imitation of Robert Macaire.¹¹ In October of the same year he expresses his pleasure at Balzac's "subsiding" for the moment and being at St Petersburg. Still in the same year he again reprehends Balzac for not writing like a gentleman and therefore not being fit for the *salon*, and three years later, in his review of English illustrated books for children, he comments upon the "voluptuous pictures" with which the French designers provided Balzac's (and some other writers') novels making them thus insuitable for children to look at.¹² In July 1844 he read Balzac's novel *Les Chouans*, but even this work did not arouse in him any particular enthusiasm. As one of his diary items bears witness, he was convinced that the work contained the germs of a good novel but that these remained undeveloped.¹³ In this case,

⁸ See *Works* II 98-99 109

⁹ See op cit p 364

¹⁰ *Works* V 461

¹¹ See *NSB*, p 172. Thackeray mentions here too the prohibition of the play by the police for satirizing a highly placed personage obviously referring to the performance of 1840 when Lemaitre in the titular role wore his hair arranged so as to recall Louis Philippe (see J. O. Fischer and collective op cit p 477 note). He also mentions that even Macaire himself has since not been permitted to appear. It is worth noticing that Thackeray visited the prototype of Balzac's *Vautrin* the chief of police François Eugène Vidocq, in Paris, when his money was stolen. It is also very probable that he read Vidocq's *Memoires*, published in 1828 (see *Letters* I, 223 and note).

¹² For the references see *Works* V, 482 VI 320 570

¹³ See *Letters* II, 146

however, he is not far from the truth, as *Les Chouans* does not belong to Balzac's greatest works and has many weak points, as Saintsbury has demonstrated.¹⁴ In his later novels *Pendennis* and *The Newcomes*, Thackeray characterizes Balzac as one of the representatives of the profane literature of the lighter sort, places him on the same level not only with Lamartine and George Sand, but even with Sue, Dumas-père and Paul de Kock and makes him the favourite author of such characters as Blanche Amory and Honeyman. His last remark upon Balzac may be found in his *Roundabout Papers*. It concerns *La Peau de Chagrin* and even though it is not explicitly positive, it is not so negative as are all his preceding comments. It shows that this novel, in spite of the reservations we have noted, retained its vitality in his memory ever since the 1830s, when he had read it.¹⁵ We should also mention that Thackeray took some interest, in 1839, in Balzac's well-known intervention on behalf of the murderer Peytel. In his article "The Case of Peytel" (November 1839) he describes the whole case in detail, but his purpose is not to declare his belief in Peytel's innocence, as Balzac had done, or to proclaim his guilt, but to demonstrate, by analysing the act of accusation and the trial, that this man was condemned upon circumstantial and very feeble evidence. He expresses his indignation at the "wicked, illegal, and inhuman" proceedings of the French court, emphasizes that the law should be more wise and more merciful and that justice should never be executed in the way it was in this case. He prefers the way such things are managed in England and makes a passionate plea against capital punishment, which should be either abolished altogether, or, if this is not possible, executed in moderation, and only in such cases when we are "sure of a man's guilt before we murder him".¹⁶ He is convinced that Balzac's intervention was most unfortunate and rather harmed the condemned man than helped him:

"Perhaps Monsieur de Balzac helped to smother what little sparks of interest might still have remained for the murderous notary. Balzac put forward a letter in his favour, so very long, so very dull, so very pompous, promising so much, and performing so little, that the Parisian public gave up Peytel and his case altogether; nor was it until to-day that some small feeling was raised concerning him, when the newspapers brought the account how Peytel's head had been cut off, at Bourg" (*Works* II, 251).

I am convinced that Thackeray was essentially right and that if his analysis of the case could have been brought to the notice of the court in time, it would have proved more efficient than Balzac's intervention. Saintsbury is of a similar opinion:

"It is, however, pretty certain, to some who have read what both these great novelists and critics of life have to say, that Thackeray was right and Balzac wrong."¹⁷

Although we have such a small number of references of Thackeray to Balzac at our disposal, they clearly show that he never comprehended the

¹⁴ See *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 160.

¹⁵ See *Works* XVII, 368-369.

¹⁶ For the quotations see *Works* II, 266, 279.

¹⁷ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 38.

real greatness of the French novelist and that Balzac's work remained practically a closed book to him. As the remarks quoted in this chapter testify, he was especially repelled by the moral contents of Balzac's novels, by his self-confidence and naïve boastfulness, his pretences and grandiose plans, by the qualities in which Balzac's style differed from the generally accepted norms and by the romantic elements in his creative approach. As Las Vergnas and Carey Taylor point out, Thackeray's critical remarks very rarely concern the literary values of Balzac's novels—his judgment is almost always distorted "par le point de vue moral et la hantise du snobisme".¹⁸ This is true, but it is also necessary to point out that each of Thackeray's judgments is naturally based upon his own literary theory and that even if he does not always explicitly mention literary values, he has them always in mind and they are implied in his judgment. All his critical rebukes addressed to Balzac are founded upon his conception of literature as a faithful depiction of reality devoid of any romantic excesses and it is therefore quite natural that whenever he comes across anything in Balzac's works which deviates from the sober, matter-of-fact representation of real facts (and Balzac's novels offer plenty of such instances), he revolts and expresses his disapproval. I am far from seeking unjustified excuses for Thackeray's attitude to Balzac, which is certainly unjust and from the present-day point of view indefensible. But if we look at it from the point of view of Thackeray's time, it does not appear so heretical. He certainly should not be too severely rebuked for not having appreciated Balzac's greatness. Even the best critics of his time, such as for instance Sainte-Beuve and Belinsky, failed to do the great novelist justice, being—like Thackeray—too unlike him and too near to him in time. According to Garnett, the entire Balzac was something too big and grand, and too fantastic and strange for any single contemporary—except his sister—to comprehend entirely.¹⁹ Many critics of Thackeray's time, too, shared with him the error of wrongly classifying Balzac according to existing literary movements, as for instance Belinsky, and even those who were much nearer to Balzac than the Russian critic and Thackeray—the French critics. Some of them connected him with the realistic school, according to others he initiated the second phase of romanticism and some believed that he deviated from realism by the exceptionality of his characters.²⁰ One of the causes of this current confusion in classification was undoubtedly the fact that in Balzac's lifetime no realistic literary school yet existed in France, which could be recognized as such by its representatives and by critics and that the term "realism" did not become current in that country until after 1850, as Weinberg has pointed out.²¹ Even for the strong moralistic colouring of

¹⁸ See Raymond Las Vergnas, *W. M. Thackeray, L'homme, le penseur, le romancier*, Champion, Paris, 1932, p. 324, quoted by Carey Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

¹⁹ See *NSB*, p. 296.

²⁰ See Bernard Weinberg, *French Realism: The Critical Reaction, 1830—1870*, New York, Modern Language Association of America, London, OUP, 1937, pp. 33—79.

²¹ See *ibid.*, p. 117. For Belinsky's views see especially *op. cit.*, I, pp. 390, 391. In contradistinction to Thackeray, however, Belinsky eventually began to evaluate Balzac more positively and praised his rich art of characterization (see for instance *op. cit.*, I, p. 133; II, p. 352).

Thackeray's criticism some explanation may be found: it is another instance of his having succumbed to the precepts of the moral code of his time and society. We must bear in mind, however, that he was well aware of the restricting influence of this code upon literature and protested against it. In the case of Sue, for instance, he even admitted that the French novelist had one advantage over his English literary brethren in not being so restricted by moral prejudices and being able to express himself more freely, and he wrote in this spirit, at least in the 1830s and 1840s, about the eighteenth-century English novelists. It should also be pointed out that Thackeray's critical opinion of his great French contemporary ceases to seem so very hostile and prejudiced, if we confront it with the current Balzacian criticism in France, which was for many years more adverse than positive. as Weinberg, Maitre and Jules Romains have demonstrated, and especially with that in England, evaluated by Clarence R. Decker.²² Thackeray shared the moralistic point of view of the English critics of his time and though he did not identify himself with the very few sympathetic critics of Balzac in his country,²³ he never indulged in such sharp personal attacks upon the French novelist, as for instance the reviewer of the *Quarterly Review*, who abused Balzac as a base, mean, and filthy scoundrel who pollutes society,²⁴ nor did he ever pronounce such adverse judgments as Ruskin in *Time and Tide* or George Eliot who characterized *Père Goriot* as "a hateful book".²⁵

Thackeray's critical opinions of his great French contemporary certainly cannot be regarded as proper literary criticism and I have devoted to them relatively so much space only because they are worth noticing for other reasons. The principal of these is that it is always worth knowing the views of one great novelist upon another, as this knowledge throws additional light upon the criticizing author's own conception of literature and creative method, especially in such a case as this, when he has so many things in common with the criticized novelist. Even a mere reader of Balzac and Thackeray can see that there are numerous points of similarity between the creative methods of the two great novelists. Some of these were noticed and commented upon even during Thackeray's life-

²² See Weinberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-79, Maitre, "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1950, p. 281 (quoting, too, Jules Romains), Clarence R. Decker, "Balzac's Literary Reputation in Victorian Society", *PMLA*, vol. XLVII, Dec. 1932, No. 4, pp. 1150-1157. See also Hooker, *op. cit.*, p. 87 and Miriam M. H. Thrall, *Rebellious Fraser's*, Morningside Heights, Columbia UP, New York, 1934, p. 113 upon the fate of Balzac's novels in England in the 1830s.

²³ For the positive criticism of Balzac see Decker, *op. cit.* (he mentions the review "The Philosophy of Fiction", published in the *Westminster Review* in April 1838 and the article "Balzac and His Writings", published in the same magazine in July 1853) and A. Carey Taylor, *op. cit.* (he mentions the same review and two positive comments by Ainsworth and Browning). Hooker includes Thackeray among Balzac's admirers, whom he otherwise enumerates correctly (see *op. cit.*, p. 37).

²⁴ See *Quarterly Review*, April 1836, LVI, p. 69, quoted by Decker, *op. cit.*, pp. 1150, 1157.

²⁵ See *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, George Allen, London; Longmans, Green, and Co., New York, 1905, XVII, pp. 344-345; George Eliot's statement is quoted by Dr F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition*, New ed., Chatto and Windus, London, 1962, p. 29.

time by French and English critics and readers, who started to compare the two novelists when Thackeray began to publish his great novels. It is very interesting that the English novelist was not unaware of the existence of such comparisons. He was for instance familiar with Philarète Chasles's article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1849) which I have mentioned above (see page 60) and in which the critic compares the methods of observation used by Balzac and Thackeray.²⁶ Thackeray's reaction to one of such comparisons, made in his presence by one of the two Misses Berry, his friends, was recorded by another friend of his, Miss Perry:

"Thackeray and Balzac," she added (Thackeray being present), "write with great minuteness, but do so with a brilliant pen." Thackeray made two bows of gratitude (one, pointing to the ground, for Balzac)."²⁷

Ever since that time the parallels between Balzac's and Thackeray's novels, the theories and conjectures as to their being the outcome of a direct or indirect influence of Balzac upon the English novelist, and in this connection Thackeray's knowledge of Balzac's writings and his critical opinions upon them, have been in the foreground of Thackerayan criticism. The scholars who investigated this interesting problem²⁸ have presented many remarkable and valuable conclusions which would deserve notice if they were within the scope of this study. Certain conjectures, however, concerning a supposed direct influence of Balzac upon Thackeray, appear to me to be rather far-fetched.

Thackeray was also familiar with the representatives of the French realistic sketch of his time. He briefly refers to Henri Monnier, the creator of the legendary figure of Joseph Prudhomme, with whose work he obviously became acquainted as a regular reader of *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari*.²⁹ He paid much more attention, however, and also very correctly evaluated the work of the famous satirist Charles Philipon and his collaborator, the designer Honoré Daumier. In his critical article "Caricatures and Lithography in Paris" (1840) he describes in detail the courageous struggle of these artists against the régime of the July Monarchy, highly praises especially their attack upon the King, "the *facile princeps*"

²⁶ Maitre quotes, besides Chasles's article, some other instances of such comparisons in Thackeray's lifetime: the article in the *Edinburgh Review*, 1848 and the well-known passage in H. A. Taine's *History of English Literature*, in which the author compares Becky Sharp to Valérie Marneffe.

²⁷ *A Collection of Letters of W. M. Thackeray (1847-1855)*, ed. Jane Octavia Brookfield, 2nd ed., Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1887, p. 179; see also *Biogr. ed.*, XIII, p. xx.

²⁸ See the works of the anonymous contributor to the *Dublin University Magazine* (Dec. 1864), Erwin Walter, Paul T. Lathour, W. C. D. Pacey and J. A. Falconer quoted in Maitre, *op. cit.* See also Moraud, *op. cit.*, pp. 388, 392-394, Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 169, and *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 164 and note and some later comments - Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1952, p. 33; Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1954, p. 9; G. N. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 228; V. V. Ivashcheva, *Tekkeray-satirik (Thackeray, the Satirist)*, Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1958, p. 260, and A. Carey Taylor, *op. cit.*

²⁹ See *Works* II, 171.

in a country of humbugs and swindlers", which he evaluates as "a blow that shook the whole dynasty", writes with warm sympathy about the prosecutions they were exposed to and about the final "murder" committed upon their political caricature by the September laws, enacted in 1835 by the King. He warmly appreciates the courage with which they continued in their struggle even after this mortal blow, by transferring their activities to the field of "the ridicules and rascalities of common life"³⁰ and concentrating their attention upon the general corruption in public life, which is only the reflection, as Thackeray emphasizes, of the corruption of the Government itself. He then deals with the famous character of the sharper and impostor Robert Macaire, both in its stage form, represented by Frederick Lemaître, and in the form in which it appears in the splendid caricatures of Philipon, who invented the figure, and Daumier, who gave it its pictorial form.³¹ He pays only small attention to the comedy *L'Auberge des Adrets* (1823, by Benjamin Antier, Saint-Amand and Polyranthe) in which this clever rogue appeared for the first time, characterizes it as melodrama and rates it much lower than for instance Balzac did and contemporary progressive criticism does.

It is needless to describe the play—a witless performance enough of which the joke was Macaire's exaggerated style of conversation—a farrago of all sorts of high-flown sentiments such as the French love to indulge in—contrasted with his actions which were philosophically unscrupulous and his appearance which was most picturesquely sordid (*Works* II, 179).

He correctly appreciates, however, the decisive authorial share of the actor Lemaître in the character of Macaire and, as his whole criticism suggests, he obviously realizes that by changing the conception of his role Lemaître transposed the text of the sentimental comedy into a satirical farce, in fact into a grandiose parody of the whole regime of the July Monarchy, thus transforming the original, not very significant figure, into a splendid typical character, a convincing embodiment of a modern villain of great size. He evaluates this character, both as it was represented on the stage and depicted by the caricaturists,³² as "the type of roguery in general", a great villain representing "greatness" in the sense which Fielding gave it in his *Jonathan Wild*, the embodiment of the whole villainy of the time. Macaire is a satirical commentator upon "all the prevailing abuses of the day" who, after his banishment from the field of politics, "found no lack of opportunities for exercising his wit"³³—the whole world lay open before him.

³⁰ For the quotations see *Works* II, 181, 178.

³¹ Daumier's Macaire caricatures *Les cent et un Robert Macaire*, were based on Philipon's themes and published in 1837–1838 in *Le Charivari*.

³² He evaluates this character much better in his article "Caricatures and Lithography in Paris" than in his later review (if it is really his) "English History and Character on the French Stage", where he only comments — and very briefly — upon its stage representation by Lemaître evaluating Macaire as the embodiment of modern villainy, as a devil incarnate, being a peculiar combination of Mephistopheles and Grimaldi, and as a character at the same time parodistical and real the parody being aimed at the villains of Dumas (see *NSB*, p. 172).

³³ For the quotations see *Works* II, 179, 180, 181.

"There was the Bar, with its roguish practitioners, lascally attorneys, stupid juries and forsworn judges, there was the Bourse with all its gambling, swindling, and hoaxing, its cheats and its dupes, the Medical Profession, and the quacks who ruled it alternately, the Stage, and the cant that was prevalent there, the Fashion, and its thousand follies and extravagances. Robert Macaire had all these to *exploiter*. Of all the empire, through all the ranks, professions, the lies, crimes, and absurdities of men, he may make sport at will, of all except of a certain class' (*Works* II 181 to 182)

Thackeray approves of Macaire's keeping aloof from the prohibited zone, for there would not be any use of his martyrdom—his prosecutor, whom Thackeray compares with Bluebeard, cannot live for ever and "perhaps, even now, those are on their way (one sees a suspicious cloud of dust or two) that are to destroy him" This prophecy is very clear-sighted—not more than eight years elapsed before it was fulfilled, Louis Philippe lost his throne and Macaire could again appear on the stage and in the satirical magazines in his original likeness. In the rest of his article Thackeray evaluates the various roles in which Macaire and his companion Bertrand appear in the caricatures, confronts these fictitious figures with some real speculators and impostors in France and finds many analogies, too, between the abuses satirized in these characters and those in the society of his own country. Upon the whole he highly appreciates the Macaire caricatures as providing the readers with very interesting and instructive information about the life of Parisian society and enabling the future generations to gain intimate knowledge of "the manners of life and being of their grandsires", as well as to laugh at the immensity of their follies and superstitions. As far as the two main characters are concerned, Thackeray places them side by side with the immortal creations of Fielding and emphasizes that they are as real and convincing, or even more so, as historical personages who had once really existed. He managed so entirely to convince himself of the reality of these figures that he has quite forgotten, as he writes, to speak of their creators and therefore devotes the last paragraphs of his article to warm praise of Philipon and Daumier. The whole series of their caricatures is in his opinion a remarkable work of *esprit* and art, possessing extraordinary cleverness and variety, a work all the merits of which "cannot be described on paper, or too highly lauded"¹⁴ His evaluation is essentially correct and in some places even penetrating. It bears witness to his progressive political views, and provides us, too, with much interesting information about the French art, humour, manners and morals, as confronted with those existing in England.

Thackeray as a literary critic is often reprehended for having underestimated the work of the great French romanticists and realists and appreciated chiefly second-rate talent, especially Charles de Bernard. The authors of *CHEL* for instance write

'As a critic of literature, his appreciation was always limited by considerations which have little bearing upon purely literary merit, and it is not surprising to find that the French novelists of manners whom he selected for his approval were by no means of the first class. We are invited to the perusal of long extracts from

¹⁴ For the quotations see *Works* II, 182, 194, 193.

Charles de Bernard, 'without risk of lighting upon any such horrors as Balzac or Dumas have provided for us'. It is strange to think that anyone could have preferred these easily written, but somewhat insipid, passages to the 'horrors' of *Le Père Goriot*, *Béatrix*, *Eugénie Grandet*, or *Le Curé de Tours*, from all of which it would have been possible for Thackeray to select."³⁵

This rebuke is certainly justified. Charles de Bernard,³⁶ Balzac's disciple, friend and imitator, was in his time recognized—and even by such critics as Sainte-Beuve and Zola³⁷—as an author of keen observation, capable of analysing social manners and especially the life of the aristocracy, as a writer of graceful and elegant style free from coarseness, of light wit and considerable powers in composition and characterization, but he inclined to observe rather external details than the passions of the human heart, was unable to make generalizations from what he observed and therefore never reached the depth and strength of his master's social analysis. If he had done so, his works would have certainly survived alongside those of Balzac and not fallen into their present oblivion. Some scholars, however, are of the opinion that Bernard has been rather belittled by official French criticism and that he is not so slight a novelist, as he has been thought (Saintsbury, Maître³⁸). Whatever his literary merits might have been, he was certainly not as great as Balzac, and yet Thackeray not only deeply admired his works, but also used them as the source of his inspiration. That he took the theme and plot of his early story *The Bedford-Row Conspiracy* from Bernard's nouvelle *Le Pied d'argile* and openly confessed to this "theft",³⁹ is well-known. Less familiar is perhaps the indebtedness of one of the motifs in his *Ravenswing* (the rivalry between the barber and the tailor) to Bernard's nouvelle *La Chasse aux amants*, which was suggested by Dr. Erwin Walter and demonstrated by Professor Maître.⁴⁰ There is undoubtedly, too, a great similarity between the creative methods of the two novelists, as Saintsbury has demonstrated, characterizing Bernard as "a not so very minor edition of his great English contemporary".⁴¹ This similarity is indeed so conspicuous that it led Maître to the conclusion that certain parallels between the works of Balzac and Thackeray, which cannot be explained by the direct influence of the French novelist (for against it speaks Thackeray's hostility to Balzac), could be explained by indirect influence through the medium of the works of Balzac's disciple.⁴²

³⁵ CHEL XIII, p. 283; see also the opinion of Henri Peyre, quoted by Praz, op. cit., p. 396, note 84, of Enzinger, op. cit., Winter Number 1831, pp. 151–152 and of Clapp, op. cit., pp. 288–289.

³⁶ The pen-name of Pierre Marie Charles Bernard du Grail de la Villette (1805 to 1850).

³⁷ See the views of Sainte-Beuve and Zola quoted by Maître, op. cit., pp. 290–291 and the opinion of Sainte-Beuve quoted by Praz, op. cit., p. 396, note 84.

³⁸ See Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 33, and *A History of the French Novel*, II, pp. 237, 289, 293, 294–296; Maître, op. cit., pp. 290–291.

³⁹ For Thackeray's confession see *Preface to Comic Tales*, Works I, xlix–l, Works VI, 319–320 (quoted below) and *Letters* I, 433 and note. For the extent of his indebtedness see Saintsbury, *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 294 and note.

⁴⁰ See Maître, "Nouvelles Sources françaises de Thackeray", pp. 56–57.

⁴¹ *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 293.

⁴² See Maître, "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", pp. 290 ff.

As literary critic Thackeray dealt with Bernard in the summary review "On Some French Fashionable Novels", in which he reviewed one of his novels and summed up the plots of several others. In the introduction he argues with those critics who persist in underestimating the novel and in reprehending it for alleged "frivolity", underlines the instructive value of this *genre*, which is in his opinion the same as (if not higher than) that of regular historical works and emphasizes that from the contemporary French novel the English reader can gain much more knowledge of French society than he could get from his own personal observation as a foreigner. Not all the French novelists, however, are according to Thackeray such safe guides. He recommends only Bernard, whom he places above all his contemporaries as a writer whose works wound the English sense of propriety only occasionally, who paints actual manners "without those monstrous and terrible exaggerations in which late French writers (i.e. Balzac, Soulié, and Dumas, whom he mentions earlier—LP) have indulged". Bernard's characters are "men and women of genteel society—rascals enough, but living in no state of convulsive crimes", and the English reader can therefore follow Bernard "in his lively, malicious account of their manners, without risk of lighting upon any such horrors as Balzac or Dumas have provided for us".⁴³ Thackeray then briefly reviews Bernard's novel *Les Ailes d'Icare* (1840) which drew his attention especially by a delightful depiction of a French dandy, sketched by the author in a sparkling and gentlemanlike way. Bernard endears himself to him, too, by knowing something about life in England and giving his English characters more decent names than Paul de Kock does. From the second novel, *Un Acte de Vertu*, Thackeray highly appreciates Bernard's lifelike picture of the Paris student, both in his ferocious revolutionary youth and in his middle age when he settles down as a *Sous-Préfet*. He praises Bernard even for something which the novelist did not intend—for his unconscious, but very truthful representation of the immorality and lack of religious faith prevailing in contemporary French society. According to Maître these words of praise addressed to Bernard are quite exceptional among Thackeray's other statements upon French literature pronounced at that time.⁴⁴ Thackeray is not entirely uncritical, however, and has some reservations regarding the moral notions of this favourite of his, as follows especially from his brief summaries of the plots of three novels (*Gerfaut*, *La Femme de Quarante Ans*, and *Un Acte de Vertu*), all of which deal almost exclusively with adultery. But he is inclined to forgive Bernard even this weak point, which is a very grave offence in his eyes (as we know from all his critical works and also from his reflections upon the French and English morals which may be found in this very article), because he writes "like a gentleman: there is ease, grace, and *ton*, in his style, which, if we judge aright, cannot be discovered in Balzac, or Soulié, or Dumas".⁴⁵ As Maître briefly and rather maliciously

⁴³ For the quotations see *Works* II, 98–99.

⁴⁴ See *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁴⁵ *Works* II, 109.

sums it up, Thackeray almost forgives Bernard for being a Frenchman, because he is a "gentleman".⁴⁶

Thackeray evaluates Bernard in the same spirit also in his review of Reybaud's *Jérôme Paturot*, committing a surprising mistake in the title of Bernard's best-known novel *Gerfaut*, which he elsewhere quotes correctly:

"Besides Paul de Kock, there is another humorous writer of a very different sort, and whose works have of late found a considerable popularity among us—Monsieur de Bernard. He was first discovered by one Michael Angelo Titmarsh, who wrote a critique on one of his works, and pilfered one of his stories. Mrs. Gore followed him by 'editing' Bernard's novel of *Gerfeuil*, which was badly translated, and pronounced by the press to be immoral. It may be so in certain details, but it is not immoral in tendency. It is full of fine observation and gentle feeling; it has a gallant sense of the absurd, and is written—rare quality for a French romance—in a gentlemanlike style" (*Works* VI, 319–320).

As follows from the above, Thackeray really overrates Bernard and is very unjust to Balzac when he places him below his imitator. On the other hand it is necessary to point out that though he fails to see Bernard's demerits, he praises him only for those qualities which he really possessed and which had been appreciated by such great critics as Sainte-Beuve, whose estimation we have mentioned above.

The review *Jérôme Paturot*, to which we have several times referred, is the review of the novel *Jérôme Paturot à la recherche d'une position sociale* (1843) by another second-rate realistic writer, M.R.L. Reybaud, one of the most influential propagators of Utopian socialism, a serious historian and a student of social philosophy. In the introductory part Thackeray discusses in detail the fortunes of the *gaieté française* under the censorship of the July Monarchy and accuses its main representative, Louis Philippe, of being the cause of the total disappearance of humour, laughter and even politeness from public life and literature. This long exposé, from which I have several times quoted on various occasions in the preceding chapters, contains his already familiar attacks upon the immorality of contemporary French literature, its predilection for depicting horrors and its ensuing untruthfulness to life, which will prevent the future generations from gaining reliable knowledge of the depicted society and time. The reviewed novel is in Thackeray's opinion one of the very rare honorary exceptions to this general taste for horrors and deaths in France, being "a good, cheerful, clear, kind-hearted, merry, smart, bitter, sparkling romance". He characterizes it as "a little manual of French quackery" and positively appreciates that the author gives in it "a curious insight into some of the social and political humbugs of the great nation".⁴⁷ His evaluation bears at the same time witness to his changing conception of satire, which is by this time (as I have demonstrated in detail in my previous study⁴⁸) gradually being replaced by humour. The most positive aspect of Bernard's approach to the depicted society seems

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 291. The same opinion is held by Praz, see *op. cit.*, pp. 206–207, 396, note 84.

⁴⁷ For the quotations see *Works* VI, 323, 330.

⁴⁸ See "The Aesthetic Views of Thackeray", pp. 32 ff.

to him to be that it is not motivated by indignation, but by kind-heartedness and good humour:

"The latter is no bad quality in a satirist, and I think one may mistrust the genius whose *indignatio facit versum*, and as a general rule, set him down as no better than his neighbours. Swift was no better than the demoniacal libeller, nor Byron that one knows of, and, be pretty sure on't, that foul-mouthed Juvenal could not have described what he did, had he been the delicate moralist he pretends to be" (*Works* VI, 329-330).

Thackeray finds words of praise, too, for Reybaud's lively and convincing sketches from Parisian life which contain, moreover, a wholesome moral—that it is better to live in poverty than to participate in the life of fashionable society. As the only improbable part of the novel Thackeray regards the temporary salvation of the hero by his rich uncle. In the conclusion of his review he argues with those critics who denoted Reybaud's work as a "political novel" and pronounced it to be a failure. According to Thackeray perhaps it is a political novel and contains a great deal of sound thinking, but first and foremost it is a funny and entertaining story, in which there is not a trace of bad blood and malice. He recommends it to all readers who want to add to their knowledge of the world, as well as to enjoy a hearty laugh, and expresses his hope that the author, whose main business is political economy, Fourierism, "and other severe sciences", will follow the example of his great predecessor, the police-magistrate Fielding, and find some spare time to write other novels of this kind "for the benefit of the lazy, novel-reading, unscientific world."⁴⁹ As Reybaud's novel is not accessible to me, I cannot verify the validity of Thackeray's critical judgments and have only to rely upon the evaluation of Saintsbury, who finds in it the same positive qualities as Thackeray (and even some further positive features) and very few demerits. He also warmly praises Thackeray's review as a very readable, delightful, and unequalled abstract, which must have fulfilled the reviewer's aim of drawing the reader's attention to the novel.⁵⁰

Thackeray's evaluation of the French realistic fiction of his time is perhaps the least satisfactory part of his whole criticism of French literature, though it is certainly not wholly to be condemned, for some of his judgments (especially those he pronounced in evaluating the satirical sketch and caricature) are sound and have remained valid up to the present day. In the first place, and in contradistinction to his criticism of the French romantic prose, its range is too narrow, for it deals only with two second-rate novelists and leaves out all the great ones. This is inexcusable from the present-day point of view, but after all not very surprising, as French realistic fiction was in the initial stages of its growth

⁴⁹ *Works* VI, 341. In 1844 Thackeray briefly commented upon Reybaud's next novel *Jean Mouton*, pointing out that its author is endeavouring "to equal the popularity which he obtained with *Jérôme Paturot*" (*Works* V, 481). Thackeray's wish had not been granted, as Saintsbury points out, until after the February Revolution, when Reybaud published the continuation of *Jérôme* (see *A History of the French Novel*, II, pp. 308-309).

⁵⁰ See *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 199; see also *A History of the French Novel*, II, pp. 306-307.

at the time when it drew Thackeray's critical attention, while Romantic fiction was well established and generally acknowledged as a literary school. In the second place it contains his greatest errors, for neither in his criticism of the French Romantic prose, nor in that of the English Romantic or realistic novelists, did he commit the blunder of not recognizing great talent, as he did in the case of Balzac. This error of his is not defensible from our point of view, but excusable from the point of view of Thackeray's time, as I have shown. In the third place, we should expect deeper and more clear-sighted judgments upon the realistic novel and its theory from a critic who himself wrote in this *genre* and eventually became a great master of it. Such judgments, however, are not to be found even in his criticism of the English realistic novel, where he was not hindered by the barrier of a foreign language from seeing and duly appreciating the talent and all the merits of the writers he evaluated. The root of this weakness is his comparative lack of interest in purely aesthetic values. Although he was constantly and keenly interested in all the more significant basic problems of literature and art and applied them, too, in his evaluation of French realistic fiction (paying due attention to its relationship to reality and overemphasizing, as usual, its moral function), he took almost no notice of the subtler problems of literary form. In my opinion, however, he should not be too severely reprimanded for this limitation of critical approach, for it was quite general in his time, when the realistic novel and its theory were in process of formation both in England and France, these problems not beginning to draw the attention of novelists and critics until later (in England, not till the last decades of the century).

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I have not reserved any special chapter for Thackeray's criticism of non-fictional French literary works, as I have dealt with most of them in the sections devoted to their authors (as in the case of Thackeray's reviews of Hugo and Dumas's travel-books) or elsewhere. One work of this type, however, defying all such classification, has been left upon my hands and should be therefore dealt with separately. The present chapter may well be the most suitable place for it, with its faithful and authentic account of contemporary French society, i.e. the same subject-matter as that of the realistic novelists discussed earlier. It is the collection of feuilletons *Lettres Parisiennes*, written for *La Presse* by the poetess and journalist Delphine Corinne de Girardin under the name of Vicomte de Launay. Thackeray's evaluation of this work forms a part of his longer review "New Accounts of Paris" (*Foreign Quarterly Review*, January 1844), in which he takes notice of two books of a similar kind by non-French authors.⁵¹ To review this work was a very congenial task for Thackeray, because the authoress depicts the milieu which fascinated the English satirist for many years—the world of high fashionable society—and does it unconsciously in a way which confirmed the generalizations he drew

⁵¹ *Paris im Frühjahr*, 1843 by Von L. Rellstab, Leipzig, 1844 and *Paris and its People* by James Grant, London, 1843.

from his own observation of the same fair of vanities in his own country. He welcomes this work as a really true and authentic picture of French fashionable society, presented by a woman of fashion who possesses, besides first-hand knowledge of this sphere of life, "the unconscious wickedness, the delightful want of principle" of the great fashionable men and women, and is therefore perfectly qualified for her task. She depicts her society with genuine French *esprit*, in a very lively and amusing manner, and paints it as a society in which all genuine values have been replaced by futile trifles. Although her purpose is not satirical (she shares in the life of this society and has a perfectly good opinion of it and herself), her depiction contains "an admirable unconscious satire", which is in Thackeray's opinion the satire "of the best and wholesomest sort", i.e. polite, not too ill-natured, and not motivated by indignation. As such her depiction also contains a very wholesome moral for the lower classes who long to take a share in the delights of fashionable life: they will find, after having read her book, that this life is a "heartless, false, and above all, intolerably wearisome existence" and that rather than sigh after it, it is better to be contented with one's own condition. Thackeray also highly appreciates that the authoress, who is sometimes not very sincere, is never snobbish and looks even "at kings and queens without feeling the least oppression or awe".⁵² He reprehends her, however, for the graceful levity with which she approaches vice and passion, this being in his opinion unacceptable to English mothers of families, and finds it hard to believe that the character of the Parisian women is really so odious as she paints it. At the same time, however, he admits that she depicts morals as she finds them and only reproduces the attitude of the whole French *beau monde* to such matters.⁵³ Thackeray's review is extremely readable, contains several extracts from the work in his own translation and a very interesting long digression upon the difference between the social position of the Parisian journalist and that of his colleague in London and upon the snobbishness of the English middle classes.

IV.

THACKERAY'S CRITICISM OF FRENCH COMEDY AND REALISTIC DRAMA

Thackeray did not concentrate his critical attention merely upon the dramatic works of the French romanticists, but followed with great interest the works of almost all the other practitioners of this literary kind, who were patrons of the French stage during his lifetime and whose products differed from the drama of the Romantic school both in creative method and inspiration (they were either comedies of intrigue written in the manner of the 18th century or realistic problem dramas). Even among

⁵² For the quotations see *Works* V, 507, 506, 518.

⁵³ See *Works* V, 508; see also *ibid.*, 523.

these dramatists, however, he did not find any author who would meet with his unqualified approval, although he saw a great number of plays during his visits to Paris and became a very well-informed expert especially in French comedy and vaudeville. This is, however, not very surprising, for at that time the French stage was under the patronage of skilful but definitely second-rate manufacturers of comedies, such as Eugène Scribe, and later began to be supplied with productions by realistic dramatists of the second order, such as Dumas-fils and Émile Augier. As I have shown above, Thackeray was a great lover of the Parisian vaudeville, but he had many critical reservations as to the regular comedy of the day, resenting its lack of art, its superficiality, schematic depiction of human nature and its immorality. He expressed his standpoint very clearly in his article "French Dramas and Melodramas":

"Then there is the comedy of the day, of which Monsieur Scribe is the father. Good heavens! with what a number of gay colonels, smart widows, and silly husbands has that gentleman peopled the playbooks. How that unfortunate seventh commandment has been maltreated by him and his disciples. You will see four pieces, at the Gymnase, of a night; and so sure as you see them, four husbands shall be wickedly used. When is this joke to cease? Mon Dieu! Play writers have handled it for about two thousand years, and the public, like a great baby, must have the tale repeated to it over and over again" (*Works* II, 291).

It is therefore not surprising that he selected the main representative of this *genre* for a more detailed critical analysis in his review "English History and Character on the French Stage" (we present the following with the usual stipulation concerning the uncertain authorship of this contribution). He selects for his evaluation three comedies by Scribe, *Le Verre d'eau, ou les effets et les causes* (1840), *Le Fils de Cromwell, ou une restauration* (1842) and *Une Chaîne* (1843)—all of them new ventures of the author, originally a vaudevilliste, in the field of regular comedy, the first two on a historical theme. Thackeray begins his review by expressing his deep regret at this unexpected transformation of Scribe into "a Professor of English History" and, moreover, a discoverer of a new historical doctrine—"that the historical trophies of England are in general but the result of some mean accident, which entirely strips them of their ideal glory".¹ Thackeray sharply criticizes this basic doctrine of Scribe's pseudo-historical plays, as well as its elaboration in the two comedies *Le Verre d'eau* and *Le Fils de Cromwell*, in which the author depicts great historical events in England as consequences of quite trivial accidents and circumstances. In his opinion, which is quite correct, the actual role of insignificant incidents in history and their relationship to the destinies of the whole nations essentially differs from that ascribed to them by the dramatist:

"But M. Scribe is as wrong in his general principle, as he is mistaken in the bearing of the present particular fact, assuming it to be true.² Trivial circumstances

¹ NSB, p. 139.

² The comedy *Le Verre d'eau* is founded upon an anecdote, recorded by Voltaire, about the Duchess of Marlborough, who accidentally poured a glass of water upon the dress of Queen Anne, thus bringing about, according to Scribe, a change in the course of English history — the fall of the Premier, the overthrow of the Whigs and the peace with France.

are in this life pretexts, not causes, for breaches of long-established connexions. They are the ready available facts which discover the depth of an existing difference, they are seized to decide an already established rupture. Such an occurrence as the falling of a glass of water could, if an accident, have been apologized for and explained, unless indeed, as a pretext it had been wanted and watched for' (NSB, 140)

An even more serious offence committed by Scribe is in Thackeray's eyes the choice of momentous historical events for the theme of a comedy. In the first place, such a theme oversteps the boundary of the given *genre* and encroaches upon the sphere of history and philosophy. The result of such a choice is then naturally such a mongrel as Scribe's *Le Verre d'eau*, which Thackeray characterizes as a "politico-philosophical comedy", at the same time lamenting over the dramatist's desertion from the realm of vaudeville:

"Oh! Scribe, why didst thou abandon so happy a realm, where thou wert supreme, to take to history and politics, and the legitimate five-act comedy torsooth, where thou art last among the great?" (NSB, 157)

In the second place, the events of similar kind overstep the boundary of the sphere of the comic and cannot be treated lightly:

"Accidents arising even from the infirmities of human temper, when they affect human destinies, are no longer subjects for laughter, and the levity with which historical circumstances of great political import are treated in these comedies, is assuredly no very gratifying evidence of the spirit of the time. It is the antagonist of reverence—not only of reverence for things sacred, but of reverence for historical and traditional associations—for great names and great characters. We quarrel with it as an unwise and unmannerly invasion of the comic drama' (NSB, 141)

As his critical standards Thackeray uses mainly Shakespeare, and his conception of the trivial causes in history, and Molière, whom he selects because Scribe obviously aspires to take over the ground occupied up to that time by his predecessor's pleasant spirit, thus subjecting himself to higher obligations than merely to amuse the spectator, as he did in his vaudevilles. Thackeray compares Scribe to Molière in a longer passage which we have quoted above (see pages 49–50) and in which he ascribes the weaknesses of Scribe's creative approach to a great extent to his time. In contradistinction to his great predecessor:

"Scribe lives in a time of commonplace actions and commonplace men. It has been justly said that it takes a good people to nourish a good and great man, and Scribe is the poet laureate of the Financiers of the Chausse d'Antin' (NSB, 151)

That is also one of the reasons for the great success of his comedy, the philosophy of which "was up to the low current mark" and the morality of which "was appreciable by those whose best maxim is 'take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves' ". Another reason for the dramatist's success is according to Thackeray his depreciation of virtue and character in the "man of money", satirical attacks upon Englishmen and "claptraps about the glory of France".³ As the main demerits of the comedy Thackeray points out the author's ready method of inventing

For the quotations see NSB, p. 151

expedients, enabling him to place his characters into artificial relationships which have never existed (as for instance the relationship between Queen Anne and the Viscount Bolingbroke). The reviewer's anger is especially aroused by the entirely false representation of the real facts of history in the play, which he generally assesses as "a lie against history, as it is a lie against morals",⁴ a play vulgar in conception and containing some ridiculously travestied characters and unnatural incidents.

Similar weak points—especially falsification of history—are discovered by Thackeray even in the second comedy, *Le Fils de Cromwell*, which he characterizes as history turned "into a sad farce":

"His licences bring art itself into contempt. If any subject might thus be trifled with, fictitious writing would cease to be regarded as a medium of truth of any kind. Fiction should assume the cap and bells, and Imagination go out as a pantomime clown" (*NSB*, 152).

Another critical weapon of the reviewer is turned against the titular hero, who is a sort of Timon and with whom—considering the free speech allowed on the French stage—much could have been done. But Scribe in his opinion is not a writer who could provide "an analysis of inward action".⁵ Thackeray admits, however, that such an analysis would look out of place in comedy, certainly in comedy as understood by this dramatist.

Thackeray's evaluation of Scribe's "historical" comedies is certainly just—they were in fact pseudo-historical plays, or anecdotal comedies, in which historical facts were treated quite arbitrarily and were violated to suit Scribe's *apriori* theses.

The last comedy of Scribe, which Thackeray evaluates in this article, *Une Chaîne*, serves him as a guide in his introductory exposé concerning the inroad of the French drama upon the domain of general morals, which he regards as much more serious than that upon the narrowed region of English history and character. Evaluating this comedy exclusively from the moralistic point of view, he sees in it evidence that the immorality of modern French novels has begun to affect even the classic atmosphere of the *Théâtre Français*. Thackeray devotes much space to the discussion of the problem of whether and to what extent modern French drama reflects the morals of its age. He is willing to accept the opinions of M. Saint Marc Girardin and Scribe that the manners of French society are more decorous than its literature, but emphasizes that even if the fiction of the day does not depict these manners faithfully, at least the stage should adhere to Shakespeare's adage and give more truly "the body of the time".⁶ In Thackeray's eyes it unfortunately does not do so and he tries to find the explanation. As he sees it, the stage does not reflect the manners of its time so immediately as Villemain thinks—it obeys its routine habits and traditions and only slowly adapts itself to sudden changes in society, which must assume something of a permanent form before they begin to affect the drama. This is the reason why the improved manners of French society have not yet found reflection in

⁴ For the quotations see *NSB*, p. 150; see also *ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵ *NSB*, p. 152.

⁶ *NSB*, p. 170.

modern French plays. These are immoral, but it is in Thackeray's opinion immorality of the kind naturally engendered by a revolution and the following years of military success. As he sees it, a generation whose mind was nurtured upon tales of horror at home and of battles abroad would naturally seek for highly impassioned entertainments, could have little taste for gentle depictions of domestic virtue, and could hardly have a refined taste. This generation could have been pleased for a time by such writers as Dumas or Soulié, who would further debauch their taste, but then they would seek for "stronger and coarser food", such as for instance great villains of the type of Robert Macaire and Balzac's Vautrin, who were convincing embodiments of the depths of modern villainy and thus more acceptable to the modern audience than old Tartuffe was. In his evaluation of this current public taste in France (which is remarkable for its length and subtlety and does not in all places sound like Thackeray) the reviewer takes into consideration, too, the phase in which the French public finds itself at the moment—that "of weariness succeeding excitement in all its moods" and of indifference to all moral values. The comedy *Une Chaîne* is for him a startling proof that in this state of indifference the distinctions between moral right and wrong have already so far disappeared, "as to confound the sharp observation of even such a man as M. Scribe".⁷ The comedy depicts a liaison between the hero and a married woman, which is not marked by any slightest guilt or shame, but, on the contrary, invested with considerable charm. And thus, even though the play is not indecent in the broad sense of the word, it contains "much of that thorough indelicacy which is the sure attendant upon a dull moral sense".⁸ Thackeray then poses the question of whether the presence of these traits in a play by one of the most popular living dramatists, performed upon the boards of the most classic theatre, demonstrates the existence of vice in contemporary society or whether it is only the evidence of a careless people seeking amusement without reflecting upon the means, provided only they are novel. He arrives at the conclusion, consistent with his reflections quoted above, that perhaps the second alternative suggests the true solution. In either case, however, Scribe is in his opinion as bad a teacher of morals, as he is a bad illustrator of history. The reviewer then argues with the possible objection that the dramatist does not aspire to either. If that is the case, Thackeray exhorts him to remove his enervating pictures "of an ill-drawn and worse imagined state of society" from beside the comedy of Molière, whose mirth is not over-nice, but does not offend the delicacy of the spectator, and asks Scribe to return to his vaudevilles and present some new combinations of his stereotype personages:

"In his hands these are 'marionettes' to be shifted about at his pleasure: without character, colour, or physiognomy, it is true, but exciting curiosity by varying changes of position, and still appearing to talk from themselves, though it be but the author's voice which is heard in the one unchanged tone, cutting his jokes upon the passing occurrences of the day. In this light walk of the drama, M. Scribe could not do much harm" (*NSB*, 178).

⁷ *NSB*, p. 173.

⁸ *NSB*, p. 177.

Thackeray's evaluation of Scribe is certainly not unjust. He clearly saw the main demerits of this undoubtedly second-rate dramatist, but he was also able to appreciate some of his strong points, especially his talent for observation, his skilful management of plot and his witty colloquial language. His fair attitude to the dramatist is most clearly apparent in his praise of Scribe's play *Bertrand and Raton*, which he juxtaposes to *Le Verre d'eau* as a good comedy with excellent purpose, well-sustained action, and very happy language.⁹

In the summary review we are dealing with, Thackeray also briefly notices two comedies by Scribe's imitators Léon Gozlan and Madame Ancelot. The first of them is Gozlan's comedy *La Main Droite et la Main Gauche* (1843), which is the altered version of the original play *Il était une fois un Roi et une Reine*, prohibited for containing an allusion to the English Queen and Prince Consort. Thackeray condemns this play very sharply as the most tiresome production he has ever seen, which is, moreover, not original, as one of the scenic effects was stolen from *Whittington and his Cat*. The author is in the reviewer's opinion an ass in a lion's skin, utterly devoid of inventive power and extremely feeble in language.¹⁰ Garnett regards Thackeray's judgment as too severe and is convinced that it was pronounced under the influence of the idea that the play contained allusions to Victoria and Albert.¹¹ This reason does not seem to me to be very convincing, as Thackeray wrote the review (if indeed it is his work) at the time when he had a very critical attitude to the English royal family which he had revealed in his correspondence a few years before he wrote this article and proved many times in the very decade in which it was published, especially in his contributions to *Punch*.

The last play Thackeray notices in his review is Madame Virginie Ancelot's comedy *The Two Empresses; or, A Little War*, which was inspired by Scribe's doctrine of little causes and great effects. In his opinion, which tends to be more positive than the occasion warrants, the authoress succeeded better in elaborating this doctrine than her literary teacher, so much so indeed that she seems to give her master a lesson in his own art, by filling up the hard outlines of his depictions with warm feeling. Thackeray especially praises her kindly spirit, genuine mirth and lively portraiture, and adds in conclusion:

"If we are to have nonsense about history, let us have it at least in an agreeable shape. Let it come from a clever woman like Madame Ancelot, and we shall be spared its nauseous dogmas and abominable attempts at philosophy" (*NSB*, 168-169).

Garnett finds it strange that Thackeray, after having condemned Scribe, Dumas, Soulié, and Gozlan, is subjugated by the charm of an authoress who is hardly known to the present generation, and finds a possible explanation in Thackeray's unduly developed patriotism:

"But if there was little to admire in 'The Two Empresses', there was nothing to which an Englishman could object" (*NSB*, 304).

⁹ See *NSB*, p. 149.

¹⁰ See *NSB*, pp. 164-165.

¹¹ See *NSB*, p. 304.

We should add, perhaps, that Thackeray saw and positively evaluated at least one of the other plays of this authoress and that he became personally acquainted with her in 1851¹²

Thackeray paid critical attention to contemporary French comedy for the last time in 1849, in his article "Two or Three Theatres at Paris" (*Punch*, February 24), in which he assumes an even more strictly moralistic point of view than in the review discussed above. He praises *Punch* for its modest and harmless humour, appreciates the high sense of the public morality in England, sharply condemns the "general smash and bankruptcy" of morality and religious faith in France and pillories the French comedy for the cynicism with which it ridicules all beliefs and moral values

"Sir these funny pieces at the plays frightened me more than the most blood-thirsty melodrama ever did and inspired your humble servant with a melancholy which is not to be elicited from the most profound tragedies. There is something awful, infernal almost I was going to say, in the gaiety with which the personages of these satiric dramas were dancing and shrieking about among the tumbled ruins of ever so many ages and traditions. I hope we shall never have the air of 'God Save the King' set to ribald words amongst us—the mysteries of our religion, or any man's religion, made the subject of laughter, or of a worse sort of excitement" (*Works* VIII 473)

As a proof of this he mentions the play *La Foire aux idées* and especially *La Propriété, c'est le vol*,¹³ in which the main protagonists, Adam and Eve, dance a polka and sing a song quite appropriate to their costumes—and the audience laugh and enjoy themselves, never thinking "about being ashamed of themselves"¹⁴ He emphasizes that if he hears one day about Paris meeting the same fate as "certain other cities", he will not be surprised. This conspicuous strengthening of his moralistic indignation and his religious feelings is in perfect harmony with the whole development of his philosophy of life after 1848. In this article Thackeray also briefly notices the stage adaptation of Paul Feval's popular novel *Les Mystères de Londres* (1844) and criticizes it for its entirely false depiction of English life, as well as for its absurd plot based upon improbable and too exciting incidents¹⁴

When Thackeray stopped working as a professional literary critic (in 1847), he did not lose interest in the further development of the French drama in the period when Romantic drama had outlived itself, but commented upon it only as a spectator. Once again he found little that he could genuinely admire. He saw the play which inaugurated the new "theatre of common sense" in France and which was written in conscious reaction against the drama of the Romantic school, the tragedy *Lucrece* (1843) by François Ponsard, but only recorded his visit to the performance,

¹² He saw in 1838 her *Isabelle ou deux jours d'expérience* which he found "chock full of sentiment, but tolerably entertaining" (*Letters* I, 358). For his acquaintance with Madame Ancelot see *Letters* II, 747 and note.

¹³ *La Foire aux idées* (1849) is by Adolphe de Leuven, Le comte de Ribbing (with Lherie) *La Propriété, c'est le vol* (1848) by Louis François Nicolaïe, called Clairville.

¹⁴ See *Works* VIII, 474–476, see also *Letters* II, 496–498.

without evaluating the play in any way, except calling it "famous".¹⁵ The plays of the leader of this dramatic school, Alexandre Dumas-fils, did not evoke in him any particular enthusiasm, though his first reaction was positive. He liked Dumas's comedy *Le Demi-monde*, which he saw in the year in which it was written (1855), and which even reminded him of his own characters of depraved women and adventuresses:

"It put me in mind of myself rather—it's a comedy of Beckys and Madame Cruchecassés and the like" (*Letters* III, 460–461).

In 1856, however, he went to see the dramatic version of Dumas's successful novel *La Dame aux camélias*, and did not stay longer than the third act, because the play seemed to him to be "too wicked".¹⁶ His indignation was obviously not aroused so much by the heroine being a *femme galante* (as his later remark suggests he much more strongly resented the marriage market in his society than the existence of Traviatas¹⁷), as by the typically romantic theme of the play, always unacceptable to him—that of the regeneration of a depraved human being through love.

Of all the realistic dramatists of the second half of the century Thackeray found most acceptable Émile Augier, who delighted him with his comedy in verse, *Gabrielle* (1849). He found it charming and highly appreciated its moral as finer and more proper than that of the majority of French plays he saw at that period.¹⁸ In his short comment he evaluates this comedy exclusively from the point of view of its morals, but it might have appealed to him, too, in being a realistic play close to the everyday reality of Parisian middle-class life, and attacking with much power and wit those vices of these classes which were the target of Thackeray's own critical assaults—avarice, vanity and snobbery.

Thackeray's evaluation of the French drama of the second half of the century is not unfair, although it is, like all his literary judgments, too strongly influenced by his notions of morality and religion and bears traces of his national prejudices. The Common-sense School could not boast of any great dramatists, though its representatives possessed many skills and merits, and did not produce any really great dramas which would grapple with great ideas and endeavour to struggle for higher values of the human soul.

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The detailed investigation of Thackeray's criticism of French literature has enabled me to come to the final conclusion that it is not wholly condemnable and contains many merits, even though it possesses several weak points. In the first place, it betrays Thackeray's lack of understanding for the national characteristic traits of French literature, for the

¹⁵ See *Letters* II, 124.

¹⁶ *Letters* III, 618.

¹⁷ See *Works* XVI, 110–111. This reference shows that he saw Verdi's opera version of the play, as the name of the heroine of both Dumas's novel and its dramatic version was Marguerite Gautier.

¹⁸ See *Letters* II, 656.

French character and morality. I find myself in agreement with Dodds, Garnett, Enzinger, Clapp and Carey Taylor who see in his national prejudice the main weakness of his criticism, but I think some of these scholars go too far when they call him a chauvinist, for this term is surely inappropriate for the author of *The Book of Snobs*. Saintsbury is in my opinion too much inclined to reject the indictment of Thackeray for "John Bullishness" as absurd, but he rightly emphasizes that Thackeray's judgments upon French literature are passed "under codes and before courts where no nation can plead lack of jurisdiction" and that his Anglicism was not too rigid, for "he sees English faults as clearly as French".¹⁹ It should be added, however, that Thackeray proved to be—and quite naturally so—a keener and more sensitive critic in the evaluation of the literature of his own country than of that of France, and that he might have been a better critic of German literature than of French, had he paid more attention to it, as Saintsbury suggests.²⁰

In the second place, Thackeray's criticism is characterized by a strong moralistic colouring. He overemphasizes the moral aspect and effect of literature and in consequence of this the organic unity of the moral judgment and the aesthetic is in many cases impaired and in some seriously injured. In my opinion, however, which I have tried to prove in the course of my investigation and which considerably differs especially from that of Clapp and Saintsbury, the aesthetic judgment, though often relegated to the background by other considerations, is in fact never wanting. Thackeray did not attempt to force the evaluated works into any ready-made aesthetic canon, for he had not elaborated any; he applied only a small number of criteria, for he was little interested in subtle literary problems and did not formulate all the principles of realistic aesthetics; but all the judgments he pronounced upon French literature are founded upon clear and firm aesthetic principles to which he consistently adhered until the middle of the 1850s and from which he did not entirely recede even in the later period, although he modified some of them, as I have demonstrated in my previous study.²¹

In the third place, he failed to do full justice to two great writers of the period (Hugo and Sand), wrongly evaluated and classified Balzac and overestimated the second-rate writer Bernard. For these errors, however, there are some excuses, as I have pointed out, and they should not lead us to the precipitate conclusion that he appreciated only second-rate talent and was not able to do justice to any great one. As we have seen, he evaluated many French writers of the second order very correctly and justly and was able to appreciate the talent and genius of all the great ones except Balzac.

In spite of all these main limitations and some slighter faults demonstrated in the course of my investigation, however, Thackeray's criticism of French literature has many merits. In the first place, its range is comparatively wide, and if we add to his formal critical contributions

¹⁹ See *A Consideration of Thackeray*, pp. 21–22, 42–43.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 91.

²¹ See "The Aesthetic Views of Thackeray", *passim*.

the informal opinions he expressed on books read and plays seen it becomes surprisingly extensive, covering almost all the literary streams and schools that appeared in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the second place, it has very solid foundations in the critic's knowledge of older French literature, and in his familiarity with the language, the country, and the general social and cultural background. In the third place, most of his critical judgments are sound and have been confirmed by posterity. I find myself in agreement again with Saintsbury that the absurdities Thackeray detected in French literature "*were* absurdities, *are* so, and will be so whenever they recur 'a hundred years hence', or a thousand".²² His criticism betrays his common sense, his honesty and sincerity, his devotion to the cause of truth in literature and life and his hatred of hypocrisy, affectation and cant, which he attacks with all the vigour of his satire whenever he comes across them in any literary work he evaluates. Although he was not able to distinguish all the positive and fruitful tendencies and phenomena in contemporary French literature, he was able to discern most of the negative and unfruitful ones and was in this aspect of his criticism very near to some of the great critics of his time, especially the Russian revolutionary democrats, with whom he shared, of course unconsciously, even some critical errors. His criticism of French literature is never personal or malicious and in this it markedly differs from the hysterical attacks of some of the English critics of his time. And last but not least, Thackeray's reviews of French literary works are written in his characteristic fine style which develops to maturity with the progress of time and which makes his critical contributions permanently readable, even if they deal with many writers who have fallen into deserved oblivion.

²² *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 22.

VÝTAH

THACKERAY JAKO ČTENÁŘ A KRITIK FRANCOUZSKÉ LITERATURY

V úvodu studie autorka shrnuje výsledky dosavadního bádání o daném problému a vyslovuje výhrady k závěrům těch vědců, kteří Thackerayovu kritiku francouzské literatury hodnotí příliš negativně. Jejím záměrem je ukázat, že paušální odmítání Thackerayových kritických soudů v této oblasti není zcela spravedlivé, upozornit na ty kladné aspekty jeho kritiky, které nebyly dosud patřičně zhodnoceny a podtrhnout jeho rozsáhlou znalost starší francouzské literatury, již se doposud žádný badatel podrobněji nezabýval.

V první kapitole autorka rozebírá kvalifikaci Thackerayho ke kritice francouzské literatury, zejména jeho dobrou znalost společenského a politického života Francie a francouzského jazyka, která byla výtečnou výzbrojí pro kritika literatury této země, i když mu nenapomohla, aby se zbavil některých předsudků vůči Francouzům, jež nepříznivě ovlivnily i jeho literární kritiku. Autorka dále rozebírá Thackerayovu četbu starší francouzské literatury a podrobněji se zabývá jeho kritickými názory na její významnější jevy. Dospívá k závěru, že Thackerayova znalost v této oblasti je překvapivě rozsáhlá a ne zcela obvyklá u anglického kritika jeho doby.

V druhé kapitole se autorka zabývá vztahem Thackerayho k francouzskému romantismu. V první části kapitoly rozebírá jeho obeznámenost s celkovou atmosférou období zrodu tohoto literárního proudu ve Francii a ukazuje, že v podstatě pokrokový charakter jeho kritických názorů na rané fáze francouzského romantismu se projevuje především v jeho schopnosti rozpoznat některé pozitivní hodnoty a většinu negativních jevů v tomto literárním proudu. Jako současný pozorovatel, jemuž chyběla patřičná časová perspektiva a také některé kvalifikace nezbytné nutné ve výzbroji velkého kritika cizí literatury (hlubší porozumění pro francouzský národní charakter, velkodušnost v morálních otázkách a tolerantnost vůči jiné tvůrčí metodě, než byla jeho vlastní), Thackeray však nebyl schopen rozpoznat všechny tyto hodnoty a jevy. Jeho nechuť k romantickým výstředkům ho zavedla příliš daleko – až k celkovému odsouzení celého romantického hnutí ve Francii, včetně představitelů jeho liberálního křídla (Hugo a Sandová). V druhé části kapitoly autorka rozebírá Thackerayovy kritické názory na romantickou prózu a hlavní kritická měřítká, která Thackeray ve svém hodnocení uplatňuje. Dochází k závěru, že ve svém hodnocení výstřední prózy a lidového románu se Thackeray projevil jako bystrý kritik a že téměř všechny jeho kritické soudy byly potvrzeny budoucností. Jeho hodnocení tvorby Victora Huga a George Sandové není podle autorčina názoru vědomě nespravedlivé a není tak nepřátelské jako postoj většiny anglických kritiků Thackerayovy doby. Autorka rozebírá kritická měřítká, která Thackeray aplikuje na tvorbu Huga a Sandové, a dospívá k závěru, že jeho hodnocení sice nebylo v tomto případě potvrzeno budoucností, že však obsahuje některé kritické soudy, které mohou být přijaty i největšími obdivovateli těchto dvou velkých autorů. Další část kapitoly je věnována Thackerayově hodnocení francouzského romantického dramatu. Autorka ukazuje, že jeho první kritické soudy nebyly zcela negativní; počínajíc r. 1838 však Thackeray toto drama ostře a jednoznačně odsuzuje jako zavrženíhodné především z morálního hlediska. Autorka dospívá k závěru, že jeho hodnocení francouzského romantického dramatu není skutečnou dramatickou kritikou, protože se vůbec nezabývá specifickými problémy dramatu jako literárního druhu. Thackerayův přístup k hodnoceným

dramatům je v podstatě identicky s přístupem jehož noudíva v hodnocení prózy. Jeho kritika francouzského romantického dramatu se však přes všechny své nedostatky puznivé odlišuje od hodnocení většiny anglických kritiků. I když jsou jeho soudy zabařeny jeho nacionalními předsudky a silně ovlivněny uzkopřse moralistickým hlediskem jeho společnosti, jsou postaveny na principech realistické estetiky a nejsou zcela nespravedlivé — téměř žádná z her, které kriticky posuzoval, nenašla puzeň u obecnstva a nestala se tivalou součástí repertoaru žádného divadla.

Třetí kapitola je věnována Thackerayově kritice francouzské realistické prózy. Autorka dochází k závěru, že kritikovo hodnocení v této oblasti je nejmeně uspokojivou částí z celé jeho kritiky francouzské literatury. Obsahuje sice některé dodnes platné kritické soudy (zejména o realistické črte) avšak také Thackerayovy největší omyly (nespravedlivé hodnocení Balzaca a přecenení druhohradého romanopisce Bernarda). Tyto a jiné slabé stránky jeho kritiky (zejména nedostatek zájmu o jemnější problémy románu jako literárního žánru) jsou neomluvitelné z dnešního hlediska, jsou však pochopitelné z hlediska jeho doby, kdy francouzská realistická próza byla v začátcích svých a kdy realistický román vůbec a jeho teorie byly v procesu utváření ve Francii i v Anglii.

Ve čtvrté kapitole se autorka věnuje rozboru Thackerayovy kritiky francouzské komedie a realistického dramatu. Dospívá k závěru, že jeho hodnocení dramatické tvorby Scribeovy, Gozlanovy, Madame Ancelotové, Alexandria Dumase mladšího a Augiera není nespravedlivé, i když je příliš silně ovlivněno jeho moralistickými a nacionalními předsudky.

V závěrečném hodnocení autorka shrnuje hlavní slabiny Thackerayovy kritiky francouzské literatury, zdůrazňuje však, že jeho kritika má i mnohé kladné aspekty. Její rozsah je poměrně široký a jestliže k jeho formální kritice přidáme neformální názory na přečtené knihy a zhlédnutá představení, stává se tento rozsah překvapivě extenzivní — pokrývá téměř všechny literární proudy a školy, které se objevily ve Francii v první polovině 19. století. Jeho kritika současné francouzské literatury má velmi solidní základy v jeho znalosti starší francouzské literatury a v jeho obeznamenosti s jazykem, zemi a celkovým společenským a kulturním prostředím, v němž posuzována díla vznikla. Většina jeho kritických soudů je zdravá a byla potvrzena budoucností. Celkově jeho kritika svědčí o jeho čestnosti a upřímnosti, oddanosti pravdě v literatuře a životě a nenávisti k pokrytectví, afektovanosti a falši, které napada vši silou své satiry, kdykoli se s nimi setká v posuzovaném literárním díle. Ačkoli Thackeray nebyl schopen rozpoznat všechny kladné a plodné tendence a jevy v současné francouzské literatuře, byl schopen správně hodnotit většinu záporných a neplodných a byl v tomto aspektu své kritiky velmi blízky některým velkým kritikům dane doby, zvláště Bělnskému, s nímž sdílel, ovšem nevědomky, i některé kritické omyly. Poslední, ale nikoli nejmenší předností jeho recenzi francouzských literárních děl je jeho charakteristický styl, který se vyvíjí k zralosti s průběhem doby a který je příčinou toho, že jeho kritické příspěvky jsou dodnes čtivé, i když se zabývají mnohými autory, kteří upadli do zaslouženého zapomnutí.

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