

Franklin) than as foreigners. In spite of this, however, his assaults upon American chauvinism were not acceptable to the Americans, as is obvious from the fact that his parody of Cooper was omitted by the editor in the Appleton reprint of *Novels by Eminent Hands*.³⁶

Like his parody of Cooper, his whole critical campaign against the producers of the novel of adventure is essentially just. It is not motivated by malice or personal rancour against the criticized authors, but is founded upon Thackeray's wholesome distaste for any falsified depiction of reality in art, for the irresponsible attitude of any novelist to his craft and for carelessness in style and composition.

V. THE DIDACTIC NOVEL

Under the heading of this sub-chapter I include all those works of fiction which Thackeray critically assessed predominantly as didactic novels or novels *à la thèse* (though he does not use either of these terms), whether the purpose they followed was philosophical (Bulwer's "metaphysical" novels *Ernest Maltravers* and *Alice* and their predecessor *Godolphin*, and Madame Sand's *Spiridion*, which may be classed, however, also in the following category), religious (Mrs. Trollope's *The Vicar of Wrexhill*) or political (Soulié's novel *Le Bananier*, Lever's *St. Patrick's Eve*, Disraeli's *Coningsby* and *Sybil* and Cooper's *Ravensnest*). Thackeray's critical campaign against novels of this type begins as early as June 1833 in his review of Bulwer's novel *Godolphin* (published in the *National Standard* and not yet reprinted) and falls into two distinct periods which differ from each other not so much in Thackeray's critical approach, which remains essentially the same in both, as in the range of his criticism. While in his review of *Godolphin* and in all the reviews written up to 1843¹ he inveighs against the foibles in the creative approach of individual novelists cultivating this type of fiction and as his only critical weapon uses the book review, in the middle of the 1840s (with some previous signals to be discerned in his reviews of the novels of Madame Sand and Soulié) he launches a wholesale attack upon the novel *à la thèse* as such, enriching his critical armory by new weapons — burlesque and parody.

One of the main criteria he applies to the novels he evaluated in the period I suggest as the first, is based upon extra-aesthetic considerations — he never fails to vent his protest whenever the doctrine propagated by the reviewed author was in itself unacceptable to him, though this criterion, as I should

³⁶ See Wilson, op. cit., I, 80.

¹ They are the reviews of *Ernest Maltravers* in the *Times*, September 30, 1837 and in *Fraser's Magazine*, January 1838; of *Alice* in the *Times*, April 24, 1838; of *The Vicar of Wrexhill* in the *Times*, October 25, 1837 and in *Fraser's Magazine*, January 1838; of *Spiridion* in the *Corsair*, September 14 and 21, 1839, and of *Le Bananier* in a summary review "French Romancers on England", the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, October 1843. His *Times* reviews of *Ernest Maltravers*, *Alice* and *The Vicar of Wrexhill* are reprinted by Gulliver, those of *Ernest Maltravers* and *The Vicar of Wrexhill* from *Fraser's Magazine* ("Our Batch of Novels for Christmas") in *Stray Papers and Critical Papers*, those of *Spiridion* and *Le Bananier* in the *Works*. The review of *Godolphin* has been attributed to Thackeray by Melville; Donald Hawes, however, in his newly published study "Thackeray and the *National Standard*" (*The Review of English Studies*, vol. XXIII, No. 89, February 1972, pp. 35-51), throws some doubt on his authorship.

add here and shall seek to prove later, was never so decisive as to make him condemn the whole work, if it came up to his other standards. Especially worth noticing in this respect is his early review of *Godolphin*, in which he also proved his critical discernment by not assessing this novel as another example of fashionable fiction, but as a novel with a purpose. As Rosa has pointed out, this novel in its first version (which Thackeray reviewed) "is recognizably a fashionable novel despite the inclusion of much more theory drawn from Radcliffe, Godwin, and Goethe than was customary" and must have seemed such to the contemporary reader, for it was not until its later second version (1850) that Bulwer "made changes which emphasize the differences between it and the conventional fashionable novel", coming thus "closer to what he called a 'metaphysical' . . . novel"² (fully represented in his fiction for the first time by *Ernest Maltravers* and *Alice*), and making a definite break with the fashionable mode. In his review Thackeray does not connect this novel with the Silver-Fork School (nor with Bulwer, for that matter, treating it as a work of an anonymous author, as it was published, though occasionally throwing out a hint which suggests that he guessed the author's identity), but pays detailed attention to its purpose. As he points out, the aim of the author, as declared in the preface to the novel, was "to show the influence exercised by the great world over the more intellectual, the more daring, and the more imaginative of its inmates of either sex".³ Such a purpose in itself seems to him absurd and too generalizing:

"High life, for such we presume to be meant by 'the great world', is answerable for giving birth to, and parentally fostering, many follies and vices; but to embody as many as can well be conceived, in a given number of characters, and, because those characters are made to move in this sphere, declare that they are necessarily produced by such a station, is about as absurd as it would be to say because the author of *Godolphin* has scribbled, and still scribbles, to the imminent danger of his publisher's shelves, which have to bear the weight of the unsaleable 'raw material', that, *constat*, he is to be answerable for all the trumpety that shall be coined by greater blockheads than himself — when such are found."⁴

As I have shown at greater length in "Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of French Literature", the doctrines propagated by Madame Sand in her *Spiridion* and by Frédéric Soulié in *Le Bananier* are also unsatisfactory or highly objectionable to Thackeray. He has serious reservations regarding the ideas propagated by the French authoress, whom he characterizes as the high priestess of the "new" religion imported to France from Germany (i.e. pantheism and transcendentalism), condemning her "new Apocalypse" as a distorted caricature of a doctrine and dissociating himself especially from her open attacks on the received Christian creed, which he castigates as blasphemous. The doctrine propagated by Soulié is resented by Thackeray even more strongly than that to be found in *Spiridion*. As I have shown in the quoted study, he sharply criticizes the French novelist for intending to demonstrate that England abolished slavery in her colonies neither out of love of the black race nor out of mere humanity, but with the aim of ruining the French and Spanish colonies; that the English are therefore natural enemies of the French and that slavery is a praiseworthy institution which should be maintained in the French colonies. Thackeray regards such a purpose as in itself unworthy of an artist, his anger

² For the quotations see *op. cit.*, p. 95.

³ *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833, p. 370.

⁴ *Ibid.*

being especially aroused by Soulié's having placed himself on the side of the French slave-owners, painting "negro slavery as a happy condition of being" and inventing "fictions for the purpose of inculcating hatred and ill will".⁵

Thackeray very strongly resents, too, Soulié's attempts to ascribe base motives to the English abolition movement, about which he speaks with warm sympathy, characterizing it as "the noblest and greatest" that ever a people made, "the purest and the least selfish".⁶ In this judgment, however, he is more motivated by his offended national feelings and his prejudices against the French than by a genuine sympathy to the slaves themselves. Even if he never regarded slavery as "a happy condition of being" and never gave his whole-hearted consent to the slave-owning system as such, he never fully shared, as Ray has also pointed out, "the moral loathing of slavery which inspired the abolitionists".⁷ Increasingly since the 1850s, when Thackeray visited the United States and saw the slave-system functioning, his standpoint was diverging from that of the leaders of the abolition movement and approaching that of the Southern plantation owners. He found much that he could accept in the latter's arguments for slavery⁸ and from what he was shown assumed that the Negroes were happy in their situation, well taken care of by their masters and fairly treated (and so depicted them in *The Virginians*), his attitude to them being at the same time strongly coloured by racial prejudices⁹ (which found their expression especially in the character of Captain Woolcomb in *Philip*). Up to the period of the Civil War in America, when he placed himself definitely on the side of the South, as several of his contemporaries confirm¹⁰ (though even then he was willing to hear the other side), his attitude to slavery was not entirely identical with that of the plantation-owners, for the problem obviously disturbed him a great deal and he felt that he did not understand it well enough to be able to pronounce any finite judgment upon it. This attitude strongly influenced, too, the literary judgments which he pronounced as a reader — he refused to read Mrs. Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,¹¹ maintaining, in the first place, that such painful themes as slavery were not suitable for fiction and, in the second place, that slavery was a much more complicated problem than is presented by Mrs. Stowe:

"I dont believe Blacky is my man & my brother, though God forbid I should own him or flog him, or part him from his wife & children. But the question is a much longer [one than] is set forth in Mrs Stowe's philosophy: and I shant speak about it, till I know it, or till its my business, or I think I can do good" (*Letters III*, 187).

⁵ For the quotations see *Works V*, 483.

⁶ *Works V*, 489.

⁷ *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 316.

⁸ See his arguments for slavery in *Letters III*, 199—200, 224; through the mouth of Harry Warrington, however, he protests against the system.

⁹ See e.g. *Letters III*, 199, 273—274.

¹⁰ As for instance John R. Thompson, Leslie Stephen, Bayard Taylor and James Alston Cabell (see Wilson, *op. cit.*, II, 42—44 and 73—74). For a more recent analysis of his attitude see *The Age of Wisdom*, pp. 316, 484; see also *Letters III*, 566—567, IV, 213, 237.

¹¹ For his reaction to this novel see *Letters III*, 157, 273. He also drew a burlesque "Womanifesto" (see *Letters III*, 181, 187, Wilson, *op. cit.*, I, 183) to ridicule the address issued against slavery in London by some English ladies, in which he underlined, as Ray has pointed out, "the ignorance of these genteel agitators" (*The Age of Wisdom*, p. 216). He also makes Lady Ann Newcome sign "the address to Mrs. Stowe" (*Works XIV*, 363).

In two cases Thackeray finds the original purpose of the novelists whose works he reviewed acceptable — that of Bulwer in *Ernest Maltravers* and Alice and of Mrs. Trollope in *The Vicar of Wrexhill*. Bulwer's aim of letting the reader "into the inward heart of a man — nay, more, to show us step by step his progress towards truth"¹² seems to him very ambitious and praiseworthy as it is declared by the novelist, but unacceptable in the form in which it appears in the novel. Also Mrs. Trollope's aim of defending high church Protestantism against the attacks of the Evangelical sects seems to Thackeray laudable:

"It is hard to say what moral end has been proposed or can be answered by the publication of this book. That Mrs. Trollope, in her zeal for the tenets of high church Protestantism, should be anxious to show that her form of religion is superior to that of any other sect, is only a laudable enthusiasm upon the lady's part, who has both a good cause to advocate and no ordinary talent to back her cause."¹³

But whether he finds the purpose of the novelists whom he critically considers acceptable or not, in each case he always applies some further criteria before pronouncing his final judgment. One of these is his concern about the moral value of the instruction provided in the works assessed. In the first place, he applies to their authors his postulate that a writer who takes upon himself the role of moralist, philosopher or social reformer has the right to do so only if his private life is blameless and his morals unquestionable. As I have shown in my study on his criticism of French literature, he applies this postulate of his in particular to George Sand, who is in his opinion not the proper person to proclaim the demand for the emancipation of woman and to pose the problem of marriage ties (as she does in her three earlier novels *Indiana*, *Valentine* and *Lélia*, which he briefly considers in his review of *Spiridion*), for she herself broke the bondage and found consolation elsewhere, is therefore prejudiced and so personally committed that "her arguments may be considered to be somewhat partial, and received with some little caution".¹⁴

In the second place, he insists that the characters who are the protagonists of the novelist's doctrine should also be of unexceptionable morals, for if there is any serious discrepancy between what they are doing and what they are proclaiming, even the philosophy which they propagate becomes very questionable from the moral point of view. He applies this view, which is based on his postulate of "unmixed" criminal or vicious characters discussed earlier, especially to two characters created by Bulwer, Godolphin and Maltravers, though he measures these characters at the same time by purely aesthetic criteria, as I shall partly show in the following and enlarge upon later. As Thackeray rightly points out, Godolphin in Bulwer's depiction is an impertinent, cool, nonchalant and extremely weak man, the development of whose character is treated by the author in lamentably bad taste. When a boy, he participated in all sort of vice and dissipation and, "if he had any redeeming qualities, we were certainly left in entire ignorance of them". When we meet him again in Italy after some years, he is still notorious for his excesses, but at the same time stands out as an idealist, "whose dreamy wanderings are after human per-

¹² Gulliver, op. cit., p. 215.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁴ *Works* II, 230.

fectibility".¹⁵ Thackeray is extremely irritated by this absurd figure of a philosophizing debauchee and condemns it in the following comment, laying stress especially upon its inconsistency:

"Page after page we are bored to death with the musings of this solitary dreamer. Now, we deny that such a character is at all natural; we are quite sure that it is only in such a trashy book as the one before us, that, with this excess in refinement, could be coupled all that is gross and sensual. A man having a diseased imagination might yearn after an object free from the stains of mortality, but he could not at the same time be one in whom was centred its most degrading attributes; he could not be one who would seek to turn virtue, when he found it, into vice, and to spread, by the force of example, a contagion that would stand for ever between him and the realization of his dream; finally, he could not be one without soul, without feeling; and this we shall show Godolphin to be. He is an indolent sensualist, and no more. The attempt to make him pass muster by decking him in the masquerade of philosophy, is contemptible. His actions have their birth and being in self, and the sickly sentiments he utters fail to conceal it."¹⁶

Similarly, too, in *Ernest Maltravers*, Bulwer intended to depict an ideal hero, but created only a scoundrel, whose actions are in constant contradiction to his pompous declamations about virtue, his endless ranting about the stars and Greek plays and prating "about his own perfections and his divine nature". As Thackeray points out, Maltravers teaches Alice that there is a God and then seduces her, this catastrophe coming "after this picture of virtue and love, this talk of God and judgment, this prating about the 'science of life, the desire for the good, the yearning after the true, the passion for the honest'".¹⁷ Bulwer's hero discourses like Socrates, but acts like Charerès:

"Seduction, to be sure, is a trivial incident in novels, and flippancy remarks about chastity are stale and common; but such subjects fall ungraciously from the mouths of sages."¹⁸

The outcome of such a creative approach is in Thackeray's opinion an absurdly caricatured figure of a "ranting fool", which invalidates Bulwer's original purpose:

"He cannot see that the hero into whose mouth he places his favourite metaphysical gabble — his dissertations upon the stars, the passions, the Greek plays, and what not — his eternal whine about what he calls the good and the beautiful, is a fellow as mean and paltry as can be imagined; a man of rant and not of action, foolishly infirm in purposes and strong only in desire; whose beautiful is a tawdry strumpet, and whose good would be crime in the eyes of an honest man. So much for the portrait of Ernest Maltravers; as for the artist, we cannot conceive a man to have failed more completely. He wishes to paint an amiable man, and he succeeds in drawing a scoundrel; he says he will give us the likeness of a genius, and it is only the picture of a *lumbag*."¹⁹

At the same time Thackeray is convinced that the philosophy which Bulwer places into the mouth of his hero is his own philosophy:

"But let us have done with Maltravers the philosopher. We are not going to press the point that this character is neither more nor less than Mr. Edward Earle Lytton Bulwer. That gentleman expressly declares that all men are 'fools' who see in this windy declaimer of bad morals, this vain spouter of pompous twaddle, only the morals and egotism of

¹⁵ For the quotations see *The National Standard*, June 22, 1833, p. 390.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For the quotations see *Stray Papers*, p. 297, *Gulliver*, op. cit., p. 202.

¹⁸ *Gulliver*, op. cit., p. 203.

¹⁹ *Stray Papers*, pp. 293—294; see also his similar remarks in *Catherine*, *Works* III, 31, 32, 46.

the author himself; in spite of this imputation of folly, we are convinced that the writer is mistaken, and not the public. We defy even his most ardent admirers to fancy that in the principal personage of every one of his novels it is the character which speaks, and not the ego of the author."²⁰

And not only is it Bulwer's own philosophy, it is a sham philosophy into the bargain, not genuine and wholesome teaching:

"A ploughboy is a better philosopher and moralist than this mouthing Maltravers, with his boasted love of mankind."²¹

The critic compares Bulwer's philosophy to the wife of Goldsmith's Beau Tibbs whom her husband "presented to the world as a paragon of virtue and *ton*, and who was but the cast-off mistress of a lord", and proceeds:

"Mr. Bulwer's philosophy is his Mrs. Tibbs; he thrusts her forward into the company of her betters, as if her rank and reputation never admitted of a question. To all his literary undertakings this goddess of his accompanies him; and what a cracked, battered, trull she is! with a person and morals which would suit Vinegar Yard, and a chastity that would be hooted in Drury Lane. The morality which Mr. Bulwer has acquired in his researches, political and metaphysical, is of the most extraordinary nature. For one who is always preaching of Truth, of Beauty, the dulness of his moral sense is perfectly ludicrous."²²

Thackeray is also very much concerned about the harmful influence of such a philosophy, which, for all its showy splendour, reminds him "of the sewer".²³ As I have suggested above, he regards Maltravers in this respect as much more offensive than Pelham:

"But Maltravers and his philosophy are more important matters. A man who preaches morals, who, with an air of authority, sets himself down to teach virtue and truth, has a far more serious influence for good or for evil, and because at once amenable to a far higher tribunal, than a young star who plays a few of the pranks and follies incident to his age. What a heavy charge is this man taking on himself! What a multitude of others will listen and believe, him on his word! What a position is he in towards those whom he professes to teach, and above all towards the truth which he pretends to deliver! If he fail in his trust to one or the other, if he err ignorantly or knowingly, if his vaunted system of morality be but a lie put forward by a foolish vanity or by a corrupt heart, in what an awful situation stands our philosopher! In amusing the world, an author writing with decency and good temper can run no great risk of doing harm; but he should think before he begins to instruct, for he tampers then with God's coin."²⁴

We shall see later that Thackeray has serious moral reservations, too, regarding Mrs. Trollope's novel, condemning it as a "most odiously and disgustingly indecent" book, containing scenes and descriptions which "could scarcely be less unscrupulously filthy", "if they had been written by Fielding or Louvet",²⁵ as he maintains with less than justice to the first-named writer. His moral sense is offended, too, by Madame Sand's early novels, especially *Lélia*, which he characterizes as "a regular topsyturvyfication of morality, a thieves' and prostitutes' apotheosis",²⁶ not daring to particularize the authoress's "peculiar" notions of morals which in his opinion might offend the squeamish English reader.

²⁰ *Gulliver*, op. cit., pp. 215-216.

²¹ *Stray Papers*, p. 297.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 293.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

²⁴ *Gulliver*, op. cit., p. 215.

²⁵ For the quotations see *Stray Papers*, pp. 292 and 291.

²⁶ *Works II*, 230.

All the other criteria he applies to the authors he is evaluating in the period we are dealing with are based upon aesthetic standards. In the first place, he rebukes all of them for having failed — for several reasons — in attaining their ambitious aims. In his review of *Godolphin* he shows in detail how its author failed in elaborating his purpose through the medium of his characters. He points out that in none of these personages does the writer succeed in demonstrating the evil influence of the “great world”, for their vices (and here he is in the right) are not in any way peculiar to this sphere of life. *Godolphin*’s profligacy, for instance, “was the result of being thrown on the town at fifteen years of age”, and his “heartlessness, if not innate, was learned out of ‘the great world’, wandering in Italy”.²⁷ Owing to the author’s signal failure in accomplishing his purpose, Thackeray points out that the second volume deserves less reprobation than the other two, for the author “does not even try to delude us into the belief” that he shows the influence of the “great world” upon his personages:

“Indeed, it would appear that, despairing, as he evidently did at the end of the first volume, of succeeding in the attempt, he entirely gave up the notion in the second, but without having the candour to say so. Had he here thrown overboard the dead-weight that was sinking him, — the dead-weight of an object to which his abilities were unequal, and simply declared his intention of shewing the consequences of unbounded vanity and unbridled passions, he might perhaps have attained a moderate portion of success: but this he has not done; for although, as we have said, he gets rid of ‘the great world’ for a length of time, he returns to it before he brings his story to a conclusion, and would then have his readers to infer that the characters, as they stand out in his latter scenes, are characters that have been moulded by the society in which we see them moving; and this, without any reference whatever to, or reflection upon, the other important circumstances which have in reality made them what they are.”²⁸

It was Thackeray’s opinion that in *Ernest Maltravers* and *Alice Bulwer* failed in attaining his high aim mainly because he did not confine his attention to subjects suitable to his own powers, i.e. to “the humorous and the sarcastic”, in which he could give rein to his keen perception of the ridiculous, but “is always striving after the style of Plato”, persisting that “his real vein is the sublime” and thinking fit “to turn moralist, metaphysician, politician, poet”.²⁹ In none of which roles he was, moreover, in earnest. Bulwer’s hero is nothing else but a mouthpiece of the novelist’s own philosophical and moral views, and the latter’s purpose thus becomes too obtrusive, exercising a baneful influence upon the naturalness of his depictions:

“A little more politics and Plato, and the natural disappears altogether from Mr. Bulwer’s writings; the individual man becomes as indistinguishable amidst the farrago of philosophy in which he has chosen to envelop himself, as a cutlet in the sauces of a French cook.”³⁰

And not only Bulwer’s purpose, but also his own personality is too obtrusive: *Maltravers* is only “an old actor in a new part”, for all the characters so far created by Bulwer “are only so many appearances of the same character placed in different coats and circumstances” — namely the author himself:

²⁷ *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833, p. 370.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, June 22, 1833, p. 389.

²⁹ For the quotations see *Stray Papers*, pp. 297, 292.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

"He has not dramatic power sufficient to create a great character; he can give a very lively sketch of a small one; he can seize peculiarities with much humour and neatness; he can weave the incidents of a story with tolerable skill; he can describe those incidents and peculiarities in a very pleasing and impressive language and style; but here, as we think, his power ends, and his merit too. The hero appears upon the stage, and straightaway the style becomes intolerably bloated and pompous; the genius of Mr. Bulwer, the ill-usage which has been shown to Mr. Bulwer, the self-love of Mr. Bulwer, the piques of Mr. Bulwer, appear in every line; it is only Mr. Bulwer placed in imaginary circumstances, and acting, or rather talking, accordingly."³¹

Thackeray is very much irritated by this "most concentrated, consummate, ludicrous egotism" on the part of Bulwer, which makes itself felt everywhere in his works, but especially in "the guidance of his puppets and the action of his drama",³² and condemns it altogether, using as his critical standard the creative approach of three great writers who possess, in contradistinction to Bulwer, real genius:

"How little in the works of Fielding, of Scott, of Cervantes, does the author intrude upon the reader, and yet each had his woes, and wounded vanities, and his literary wrongs."³³

Like Bulwer, Madame Sand too is reprimanded by Thackeray for transforming herself into a philosopher and thus overstepping the boundary of the novel as a literary form, and neglecting her old trade of novelist, of which she was the very ablest practitioner in France. As I have shown in my study on his criticism of French literature, Thackeray rebukes her, in the first place, for attempting to proclaim her doctrine by drawing upon her imagination instead of her learning, and presenting a sentimental tale instead of argument. In the second place, he criticizes the way in which she elaborated her purpose — that of showing "the downfall of the Catholic church; and, indeed, of the whole Christian scheme" — in the characters and plot of her novel, voicing his objections especially to the titular character, whom the authoress made the mouthpiece of her own convictions and whom he characterizes as a strange mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. Such a curious personage cannot in Thackeray's opinion convince the reader of the truth of Madame Sand's religious speculations, but is rather proof that she had gone hopelessly astray in her quest. In spite of this, however, the novel does contain in Thackeray's opinion a good moral, "though not such an one, perhaps, as our fair philosopher intended", namely a warning to dabblers in religious speculations that it is after all better and safer not to listen to the doctrines of the philosophers who constantly change their creeds, but to remain quiet and sober, "in that quiet and sober way of faith"³⁴ of one's ancestors. As these quotations suggest, George Sand's doctrine, not acceptable to Thackeray in itself, and, moreover, propagated by her in an incompetent way, leads him to a conservative adherence to old-established beliefs and to distrust of any progress in religious thought, a standpoint not wholly characteristic of him in this period of his life.

Mrs. Trollope and Soulié are blamed by Thackeray for trespasses of a slightly different character. They both enforce their purpose in too obtrusive a manner, but are guilty besides of monstrously exaggerating the foibles of the opposing

³¹ Gulliver, op. cit., p. 216; see also *ibid.*, p. 215.

³² For the quotations see *ibid.*, p. 203.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 203—204.

³⁴ For the quotations in this paragraph see *Works* II, 233, 240, 242.

party and exemplifying them in their negative characters. Mrs. Trollope set forth — in Thackeray's opinion — on a very foolish mission in undertaking "to be the champion of oppressed Orthodoxy", for although she has "a keen eye, a very sharp tongue, a firm belief, doubtless, in the high-church doctrines, and a decent reputation from the authorship of half-a-dozen novels, or other light works", these "are feeble arms for one who would engage in such a contest". She "has not exactly the genius which is best calculated to support the Church of England, or to argue upon so grave a subject as that on which she has thought proper to write", meddles with matters which she does not understand and, "having very little, except prejudice, on which to found an opinion, she makes up for want of argument by a wonderful fluency of abuse" and by being "outrageously cruel in her treatment of her adversary".³⁵ Thackeray accuses her especially of the cardinal sin of erroneous generalization — of representing all her negative characters, who are all recruited from the opposing party, the Evangelical sect, as incarnations of evil and thus transferring the bad traits of individual sinners to be found in any religious sect to a whole group of persons. The outcome of such a proceeding is in Thackeray's opinion "a gross and monstrous libel on the part of the authoress" and greater bigotry than that which she pillories. He demonstrates this especially by the following analysis of the titular character of the novel:

"If the Devil himself had been the great patron of what is called the New-Light Sect, Mrs. Trollope could not, or perhaps would not, have hated it worse. She takes for her hero a shining leader of the party, and endows him with a character which certainly must be copied from the personage whom we have just named. She does not give him the shadow of a good quality, except a very handsome person (if this may be deemed one). She makes him a liar, a lecher, a coward, a hypocrite, a tyrant and a swindler, whose only charm consists in his black whiskers and white teeth, and his happy knack of mingling indecency with blasphemy, and, under cover of an address to the almighty, pampering the grossest passions of his audience — women for the most part, who fancy they worship God, but adore the vicar."³⁶

In Thackeray's opinion, Mrs. Trollope "had much better have remained at home pudding-making or stocking-mending", for "she has only harmed herself and her cause (as a bad advocate always will)" — her novel, as a party attack, being "an entire failure".³⁷ As I have suggested, he has, moreover, serious moral reservations as to the novel, which he regards as dangerous to public morals. He points out that by describing so accurately the vicar's vices, of which it would be better "not to speak at all", Mrs. Trollope has only shown that she is "but too well acquainted with scenes which [her] pure eyes should never have beheld", and thus has degraded her good wit and good intention shamefully, exposing herself at the same time to possible and quite justifiable rebukes from the opposing party that she "learned all this wickedness" at church:

"No moralist (and above all, no woman moralist) can use such weapons as these without injuring herself far more than her adversary."³⁸

³⁵ For the quotations see *Stray Papers*, pp. 281, 282, *Gulliver*, op. cit., p. 205.

³⁶ *Gulliver*, op. cit., p. 206; for the preceding quotation see *Stray Papers*, p. 288.

³⁷ For the quotations see *Stray Papers*, pp. 281, 292.

³⁸ *Gulliver*, op. cit., p. 206; for the preceding quotations see *Stray Papers*, pp. 284, 285, *Gulliver*, op. cit., p. 207.

As I have shown in the already-quoted study, Soulié is sharply criticized by Thackeray for elaborating his purpose in his characters (especially in the figure of the perfidious Englishman, Mr. Welmoth, drawn in extremely black colours) in such a way as to foment the chauvinism of the French and their hatred of the English. This part of Thackeray's argument is strongly coloured by his prejudices against the French, kindled to unusual heat by Soulié's grotesque representation of English character and all the other offences he commits against the English nation in his "trumpety novel". In the conclusion of the review Thackeray vents his main grievance — that Soulié as novelist should so far overstep the boundaries of the novel as a literary form as to choose a theme suitable for a political pamphlet, and to use that sort of argumentation which should "be left to the writers of the leading articles". In Thackeray's opinion the novelist has a perfect right to exercise "the utmost severities of his imagination" upon the villains he had himself created, but he should not "deal in specific calumnies, and inculcate, by means of lies, hatred of actual breathing flesh and blood. This task should be left to what are called *hommes graves* in France, the sages of the war newspapers".³⁹

In the reviews we are dealing with Thackeray has also much to say upon what we might call legitimate novel-interest, i.e. characters, plot, situations and style. Thus in his review of *Godolphin* he pays detailed attention to Bulwer's method of creating characters, criticizing his personages as inconsistent (especially Godolphin and Constance), pointing to a serious discrepancy between the admiration with which the author comments upon Constance and the way in which he makes her act and rebuking him for many other absurdities and illogicalities in his characterization, which he ridicules in brief ironical remarks ("a showy nose! good Lord!" etc.). He also objects to the excessively long descriptions of the characters, as well as to the tediously lengthy monologues and dialogues, one of which occupies "the moderate space of forty-four pages!" His indignation is especially aroused by the mysterious Radcliffean figure of the "romantic visionary" Volkman, with whom Godolphin spends the greater part of his time in Rome in "so mysterious and unearthly" conversations, as Bulwer characterizes them, that Thackeray is "actually afraid to republish them". He has not so many reservations as to the character of Volkman's daughter Lucilla; as it is presented in the early stages of the story, and approves of Bulwer's rendering her devotion to her lover "in an inverse ratio to the worth of its object", a point in which he discerns "a good deal of nature", though he doubts whether this was the novelist's intention.⁴⁰

Thackeray's opinion of the character of Ernest Maltravers is sufficiently clear from the earlier analysis: he regarded this personage as an unconvincing lay figure, considering it to be "more talkative, more adroit, but less real" than Pelham, reality being in his opinion destroyed chiefly by Maltravers's "fatal, prosing, tedious habit of talking about himself".⁴¹ On the other hand, however, he points out that some of the minor personages in *Ernest Maltravers* are "hit off" very neatly, for instance the funny old husband of Madame de Ventadour

³⁹ For the quotations see *Works* V, 502.

⁴⁰ For the quotations see *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833, pp. 371, 373; June 22, pp. 389, 390.

⁴¹ For the quotations see *Gulliver*, op. cit., pp. 215, 217.

and the participants at a ball at Naples. He finds warm words of praise, too, for the character of Alice, which is in his opinion "neither more nor less than charming" and drawn with talent:

"There is a reality in it, a certain grace of innocence and affections, which show him to be no mean artist."⁴²

As far as Mrs. Trollope's characters are concerned, Thackeray finds very little to praise, assessing positively only "a capital burlesque of a serious fancy-fair, and a Jew-Missionary to Wabbeboo; which exhibits a most unwomanlike genius for slang and drollery", but condemning the titular figure of the novel as not true to life. In his opinion, the indecencies and blasphemies of the vicar "go far beyond the genuine limits of satire, as they exceed the bounds of truth".⁴³

Thackeray has not a little to say, too, on the plots of the novels he evaluates. Thus he sums up at some length and with much humour the plot of *Godolphin* ("the plot! shades of departed genius, forgive us!"), rejecting its foundation as absurd and condemning the whole conventional pattern upon which it is built. His sharpest rebukes are aimed at the "most violent" way "in which Lucilla is dragged into the third volume" and the "absurd and improbable" part she is made to enact,⁴⁴ and at the execution of Vernon's revenge which arouses in him moral indignation as well. In his review of *Alice* Thackeray criticizes the whole argument of both this novel and *Maltravers* — the search of the hero for truth — as lacking in originality, and considers the truth eventually found so self-evident as not to be worth the quest. On the other hand, however, he estimates quite favourably the two first chapters of *Ernest Maltravers* as being "in Mr. Bulwer's very best manner", told as they are "with admirable liveliness and effect".⁴⁵ The "conduct of the story" in Mrs. Trollope's novel is praised by him as "capitally arranged" and the events characterized as "extraordinarily striking and real".⁴⁶ From Madame Sand's novel he positively appreciates only one episode, in which the authoress successfully evokes the 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.⁴⁷

And finally Thackeray pays due attention, too, to the style of these authors. The writer who irritates him most by this aspect of his creative approach is, not surprisingly, Bulwer, and that in all the three novels reviewed. The speeches put by Bulwer into the mouth of some of the characters in *Godolphin* are characterized by Thackeray as the crazy drivellings of maniacs and the language of Ernest Maltravers assessed as "endless *blague*", a string of windy sentences possessing no meaning, yet "gravely delivered with all the emphasis of truth and the air of profound conviction".⁴⁸ As the reviewer emphasizes, every arrival of Bulwer's hero on the scene signifies a turn from good to bad and the appearance of a "wicked and disgusting cant", while his departure is immediately to be noticed in the general improvement of "the style, the interest, and the

⁴² Gulliver, op. cit., p. 202; for the preceding quotation see *ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴³ For the quotations see *Stray Papers*, p. 291; Gulliver, op. cit., p. 206.

⁴⁴ For the quotations see *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833, p. 371; June 22, p. 390.

⁴⁵ For the quotations see *Stray Papers*, p. 294.

⁴⁶ Gulliver, op. cit., p. 206.

⁴⁷ See *Works* II, 235.

⁴⁸ For the quotations see Gulliver, op. cit., p. 203; *Stray Papers*, p. 296.

morals".⁴⁹ From Mrs. Trollope's novel Thackeray quotes one very clever piece of writing, adding that for all his grave reservations he is not going "to question at all the undeniable talent of the authoress of the *Vicar of Wrexhill*".⁵⁰ The only writer, however, whose style he genuinely admires, is Madame Sand, as I have pointed out in my last study. He pays generous tribute to her wonderful power of language and "exquisitely melodious and full" sentences which remind him of "the sound of country bells — provoking I don't know what vein of musing and meditation, and falling sweetly and sadly on the ear".⁵¹

As far as the value of Thackeray's reviews as criticism is concerned, we may say that in the case of the English writers his critical assaults are entirely just. In his reviews of Bulwer's novels he vents his protest against those critics who prostitute their talents by misplaced praise of such second-rate works and thus lead the public astray. In his first review of *Ernest Maltravers*, however, he is milder in his tone than in that of *Godolphin*, where he includes even the author himself among professional "puffers", as a man who knows the system of puffery and calculates its effects, for, being aware "that there is no legitimate interest whatever in his story, he endeavours, in his preface, to engender a spurious one". Thackeray intends to "do strict justice upon this 'extraordinary production'" and for this reason lets the author occasionally speak for himself, quoting from his preface and novel plentifully. His endeavour to be objective and just in his criticism is also confirmed by his re-reading the second volume of the novel, when a friend suggested to him that it "contained some good ideas, well expressed". He found out, however, that he might have spared himself the labour and that his friend had been "wofully led astray by a wretched metaphysician, and very middling writer". His final judgment is then totally negative: he condemns *Godolphin* as a trashy book written in "wretched taste";⁵² and finishes his review with the following contemptuous words:

"And with this we throw from us 'Godolphin'; trusting that, in the execution of our duty, we may never have to dissect a subject so valueless again."⁵³

And he does deliver justice in this case, for *Godolphin* really is a very curious novel, compounded, as Rosa has it, "of even more diverse elements than *Pelham*";⁵⁴ some of which, especially the basic strain of Gothic romance, as well as Bulwer's inept borrowings from Goethe, were in direct contradiction to Thackeray's budding aesthetic ideas and therefore unacceptable to him.

In his first review of *Ernest Maltravers* Thackeray turns not only against Bulwer's enraptured admirers who laud him "as a heaven-born genius", but also against his detractors who spurn him "as a ninny" and plunge him "in the blackest mud of the *bathos*". Both critical attitudes are regarded by Thackeray as very harmful, for "the abuse lavished upon him (however well-founded)" naturally makes him place his faith in the opinion of his admirers and, moreover, strengthens him "in his darling fault of egotism", making him "imagine

⁴⁹ For the quotations see Gulliver, op. cit., p. 216.

⁵⁰ *Stray Papers*, p. 288.

⁵¹ *Works II*, 232.

⁵² For the quotations see *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833, p. 370; June 22, pp. 389, 390.

⁵³ *The National Standard*, June 22, 1833, p. 393.

⁵⁴ Op. cit., p. 93.

that he must be a man of wondrous merit, on whom critics sometimes so angrily fasten", and thus perverting "the natural bent or bias of his mind": "he is a novelist no more, he is a God uttering oracles".⁵⁵ In his reviews Thackeray proved in my opinion a better judge than either the friends or the enemies of Bulwer of whom he writes. This is not, however, the opinion of all Thackerayan scholars. Saintsbury, for instance, omitted the summary review "Our Batch of Novels for Christmas", which contains Thackeray's second review of *Ernest Maltravers*, because of its being "clumsy and amateurish" and a "slating" written "in the Mr. Bludyer style"; Greig characterizes Thackeray's approach as brutal "bludgeoning" and Melville thinks that he applied the lash with the utmost vigour, went too far in his zeal for pure and healthy literature and showed what might easily have been constructed as personal animus against the author, "though, as a matter of fact, the objections he entertained against this author were purely abstract".⁵⁶ As we have seen, however, in spite of all his very sharp attacks, most of which are in my opinion entirely justifiable (except perhaps one passage not quoted above in which he addresses a few ironical remarks to Bulwer's personal appearance, rarefied tastes and "artificial courses" which in his opinion exercise a baneful influence upon his literary work⁵⁷), Thackeray does also bestow praise upon several descriptions, episodes and characters. It is even probable that his reviews published in the *Times* might have originally contained still more positive comments. At least Macready, in his diary of 14th April 1838, records a statement of Thackeray that from what he wrote on Bulwer for this paper every word of praise was left out.⁵⁸ I can therefore find myself in agreement with G.N. Ray who points out that although these reviews are "sufficiently harsh", they "are not entirely hostile. Thackeray admits his admiration for *Pelham*, and he shows that he is not blind to Bulwer's imaginative power, his wide knowledge of life, and his intermittent command of witty dialogue".⁵⁹ Nor, as he was himself convinced, is Thackeray's review of Mrs. Trollope's novel unfair, though he at the same time realized that the critical weapons he had used were very sharp.⁶⁰

As far as the novels of Sand and Soulié are concerned, Thackeray's evaluation is in places coloured by his national prejudices, as I have pointed out in my previous study, but it is not unjust. His treatment of *Spiridion* is quite justifiable, for this work, like the other novels *à la thèse* produced by the French authoress, is filled with confused metaphysics and misty symbolism and is unequal both in its composition and its truthfulness to life. And he was not so unfair as to fail to recognize and appreciate the beauty of her style and admit that in her genius and eloquence she could take rank with Rousseau and Byron. His review of Soulié's novel is quite fair, for the weak points he has found and castigated are real demerits of this second-rate work which was "manu-

⁵⁵ For the quotations see Gulliver, op. cit., p. 201.

⁵⁶ For the view of Saintsbury, see *Works* X, xx; of Greig, see op. cit., p. 37; of Melville, see op. cit., I, 171.

⁵⁷ See *Stray Papers*, pp. 292-293.

⁵⁸ Quoted by Stevenson, op. cit., p. 80.

⁵⁹ *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 242.

⁶⁰ When, after publishing his review, he was invited to a dinner-party at which Mrs. Trollope was to be present, we are told: "Oh, By Jove! I can't come", he exclaimed. 'I've just cut up her 'Vicar of Wrexhill' in a review. I think she tells lies'" (quoted by Melville, op. cit., I, 155n. from Richard Bedingfield's *Recollections of Thackeray*).

factured" by the author for a definite political purpose provided by certain politicians, as Thackeray has it, and has fallen into deserved oblivion.

In the middle 1840s, when the social novel in particular, alongside the "political" and "religious", was in its heyday and reaching the zenith of its popularity, Thackeray begins to be much more disturbed than he had previously been by a conspicuous tendency to be observed among the novelists, namely an inclination to go too far in their endeavour to make their works instructive, to use them first and foremost for didactic purposes and thus produce, instead of novels, political, religious or economic pamphlets and manifestos. Having carefully read several works of some contemporary writers of fiction (Disraeli's *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, Lever's *St. Patrick's Eve*, Cooper's *Ravensnest*, Mrs. Trollope's *Jessie Phillips*, Eugène Sue's *Juif errant*, as well as Jerrold's and Dickens's works published in this period), he feels bound as critic to sound the alarm against their treatment of the novel. Above all in his review of Lever's novel (*The Morning Chronicle*, April 3, 1845), but also in the other reviews published in this magazine and concerned with fiction (notably in those of Disraeli's *Coningsby*, May 13, 1844, and *Sybil*, May 13, 1845, and of some Christmas stories to be dealt with in the following sub-chapter; in less measure in his review of Cooper's novel, August 27, 1846), Thackeray develops his interesting argument concerning the social and political commitment of fiction with which I dealt in detail in two of my previous studies and have here summed up in my second chapter along with my own conclusions. This argument contains his mature formulation of some of his older criteria, as well as of some not entirely new, but not yet explicitly applied by him in his criticism of novels *à la thèse* or of any other type of fiction.

One of the older criteria he continued to apply in the period I am dealing with is that of his familiar extra-aesthetic considerations which make him reject the propagated doctrine itself. He applies this criterion especially in the case of Disraeli's novels *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, the acknowledged literary manifestos of the "Young England" party, even although his rejection of the doctrine is not absolute. He appreciates the positive aspects of Disraeli's thesis as it is embodied in these novels: the truthful exposure of the dirty political game of the Whigs and Tories, and the severe hits at both parties. It is good, he is convinced, "to find gentlemen sitting with the present government acknowledging the cant of its professions, the entire uncertainty of its aims, the hollowness of its views, and for the imminent convulsions of the country its utter inadequacy to provide". But even if Thackeray appreciates Disraeli's revelation of the evils of political and social life in England, the remedy the novelist prescribes for their removal seems to him entirely ineffective — he points out that when Disraeli "comes to legislate for them . . . his reasoning becomes altogether unsatisfactory". Thackeray professes himself unable to decipher the parable of "Young England" and to understand what are the aims of this new political programme, which he denotes as a mystery wanting "a key as much as any problem hitherto unexplained in this world".⁶¹ In spite of this, however, in his summary of the

⁶¹ For the quotations see *Contributions*, 42, 79.

doctrine, which he presents in his review of Smythe's *Historic Fancies* (published in the *Morning Chronicle* in the interval between those of *Coningsby* and *Sybil*), he succeeds in grasping its main drawbacks, explaining the progress it has made since its first appearance and even demonstrating that such a political programme is very unsatisfactory, for it is in its substance vague prophecy and dangerous demagoguery, which disturbs men's minds by offering them "something as yet undefined" as a remedy for their present troubles.⁶² From Thackeray's whole argument it is obvious that he particularly resented the fundamental principle of the Young Englanders' doctrine — the proposal for the revival of some undefined "good old times", in fact "those wicked middle ages", as he characterized them elsewhere, "of which romancers like to make chivalrous pageants, and we madmen in Young England and Young Ireland prate about" but which are "now considered damnable by all proper men".⁶³ He finishes his review of *Coningsby* by highly appreciating Disraeli's definition of the English government, but pointing to the inconsistency between this definition and Disraeli's political ideals:

"We wish Sir Robert Peel joy of his Young England friends; and, admiring fully the vivid correctness of Mr. Disraeli's description of this great Conservative party, which conserves nothing, which proposes nothing, which resists nothing, which believes nothing; admire still more his conclusion, that out of this nothing a something is to be created, round which England is contentedly to rally, and that we are one day to re-organize faith and reverence round this wretched, tottering, mouldy, clumsy, old idol."⁶⁴

No less vigorously does Thackeray criticize the doctrine propagated by Cooper in *Ravensnest*, the main tenet of which is that "a landed gentry is precisely what is most needed for the higher order of civilization".⁶⁵ As Thackeray points out, this tenet is enforced by the novelist especially in his record of the honours of the Littlepage family in its three generations, in which the landed aristocracy is celebrated as an exclusive and indispensable social class. "a record full of the same sentiment of exclusiveness, a sentiment which, having been denounced time out of mind by the movement party in the old world, is just beginning to be taken up by the aristocratic party in the new". Thackeray, himself a hater of aristocratic privileges, finds such an attitude to this social class anachronistic and untenable:

"What strange vicissitudes occur in the history of our race! A premium upon landowners in democratic America, just at the very time the country-gentleman party have been turned to the right about in aristocratic England!"⁶⁶

The purpose followed by Lever in *St. Patrick's Eve* seems to Thackeray not so objectionable in itself as that of Disraeli or Cooper. Lever's aim is to show that the only remedy for the Irish national evils is the return of the absentee landlords to their Irish manors. In Thackeray's opinion, as "a general proposition none can be more amiable and undeniable than this": the remedy "is of the mildest sort and such as could not possibly do harm to that or any other

⁶² See *ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

⁶³ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 165 and 60; see also Jeames's remark on Young England in *Works* VII, 399.

⁶⁴ *Contributions*, 50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170; quoted from Cooper.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170; for the preceding quotation see *ibid.*, p. 169.

afflicted country". He doubts, however, whether this "medicine would be sufficiently powerful".⁶⁷

Another objection Thackeray lodges against "political" novelists is their inconsistent and infirm political creed: they change their political views either several times during their literary career (like Disraeli) or even within one work, like Mrs. Trollope in her novel *Jessie Phillips: a Tale of the New Poor Law* (1842—1843). This objection is vented by Thackeray especially in the argument mentioned above, in the following words:

"Let us remember, too, how loosely some of our sentimental writers have held to political creeds: — thus, we all know that the great philosopher, Mrs. Trollope, who, by means of a novel in shilling numbers, determined to write down the poor-laws, somewhere towards the end of her story came to a hitch in her argument, and fairly broke down with a confession that facts had come to light, subsequent to the commencement of her story, which had greatly altered her opinions regarding the law; and so the law was saved for that time. Thus, too, we know that the famous author of 'Coningsby', before he propounded the famous New England philosophy, had preached many other respectable doctrines, viz., the Peel doctrines, the Hume doctrines, &c.: all this Sir Robert Peel himself took the pains to explain to the House of Commons the other night, when the great philosopher alluded to called the right honourable baronet an organised hypocrite."⁶⁸

It is worth noticing, however, that Thackeray does not apply this criterion in his reviews of Disraeli's novels, but only in a marginal comment in his *Book of Snobs*, where he pillories this writer especially for his propensity towards changing his political convictions according to his needs. Even here, however, he does not deny Disraeli's talent, knowledge of political problems and courage in the political struggle, and confesses that he likes "to see him in his public position — a quill-driver, like one of us", because "he makes our profession respected".⁶⁹ To a certain extent Thackeray applies this criterion in his review of Cooper's novel, where he shows the discrepancies between the views this novelist expressed in his travel-book *Gleanings in Europe: England* (1837) and in his novel *Ravensnest*. Whereas in his travel-book Cooper revealed himself as a hater of aristocratic privileges and "a thorough-going equality-man", the hero of his novel, the American squire Littlepage, and his uncle Ro are fine specimens of aristocrats with a patriarchal enthusiasm for their inherited landed property and a great pride in their origin and family traditions, which Cooper characterizes as "that very justifiable pride which belongs to *enduring respectability and social station*". Whereas in his travel-book Cooper clearly expressed his conviction of the superiority of the Americans over all the other nations, in his novel he makes his two main characters mouthpieces for his own critical assaults upon nearly all political and executive institutions of the land of which he and they "are so proud".⁷⁰

As in his criticism of the novels discussed in the first half of this sub-chapter, however, the criteria so far discussed do not play a decisive role here, for he again evaluates the works of the "political" novelists by several other principles, which he also formulated in his theoretical argument. In this he categorically

⁶⁷ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 75, 74.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 71—72.

⁶⁹ *Works* IX, 334 (Disraeli is referred to under the fictitious name "Bon de Minorities").

⁷⁰ For the quotations see *Contributions*, 168, 169, 172; for another similar comment on Cooper's travel-book see *Works* V, 403.

declared that writers of fiction should not officiate as social regenerators, deep philosophers and politicians, but should keep to their own ground —

“amusing by means of amiable fiction, and instructing by kindly satire, being careful to avoid the discussion of abstract principles, beyond those of the common ethical science which forms a branch of all poets and novelists’ business — but, above all, eschewing questions of politics and political economy, as too deep, I will not say for your comprehension, but for your readers’; and never, from their nature, properly to be discussed in any, the most gilded, story-book.”⁷¹

The proper theme of the novelist is in his opinion human life and society:

“Morals and manners we believe to be the novelist’s best themes; and hence prefer romances which do not treat of algebra, religion, political economy, or other abstract science.”⁷²

As I have pointed out in the second chapter, Thackeray’s statements in which he excludes political problems, including the “Condition-of-England question”, from the sphere of the novelist’s interest, seem at first sight very heretical, yet they are based upon well-substantiated reasons which are more clearly displayed in his concrete appreciation of individual authors and their works than in his theoretical pronouncement. What he really had in mind was that the novelists should not overload their novels with obtrusive “moral ballast”, i.e. explicit instruction. This is not an entirely new criterion, but nowhere so consistently applied as in his *Morning Chronicle* reviews of novels *à la thèse*. From this point of view he found Disraeli’s novels particularly objectionable. One of their grave demerits he considers to be the great number of digressions and commentaries in which the author inflicts his political beliefs upon his readers. *Sybil*, as he points out, is even more overloaded with such a ballast than is *Coningsby* and he ironically suggests a list of reference books to be sent by book-sellers to their country correspondents as “a key” to this novel, mentioning books on history, economy, agriculture, manufacture, banking and credit. After having read this necessary literature on the problems discussed in the novel, “the reader would be competent to judge this wonderful author”, and “to form theories for himself, after mastering such a political encyclopaedia”. Thackeray returns to this rebuke in the conclusion of the review where he points out that he would have been glad “to see a number of disquisitions, religious, retrospective, and prophetic, omitted. If a man professes to write a book ‘in a light and unpretending form’, as our author does, why introduce into it subjects both heavy and pretentious?”⁷³

The other culprit in this respect is Cooper, of whose novel Thackeray writes:

“With regard to the book generally, we must observe that, although printed in the usual fashionable novel form, it is the least lively affair of the kind we have ever met with. Indeed, we do not see how it could be otherwise, the incidents being few and common-place, and the dialogue all turning upon political and social questions.”⁷⁴

Another criterion which Thackeray applies in the reviews we are dealing with, and which is familiar to us from all his criticism so far discussed in this work,

⁷¹ *Contributions*, 71.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 77—78.

⁷³ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 79, 86.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

is his postulate that the novelists should be familiar with their subject, preferably from their own personal experience. According to his view, contemporary "political" novelists "meddle with subjects of which their small studies have given them but a faint notion" and thence "treat complicated and delicate questions with apologues instead of argument". This is, as he concludes, "not only dishonest, but it is a bore". He applies this postulate especially to the authors who occupy themselves with one of the themes he excluded from the thematic range of fiction, the "Condition-of-England" (or Ireland) question (Disraeli and Lever). He praises Disraeli's aim of including within the framework of his depiction of contemporary society in *Sybil* not only the life of the highest social classes, but "the whole cycle of labour", the working class both in town and country, and gives ungrudging tribute to his depiction of the terrible colony of agricultural labourers, drawn "with honesty, truth, and hearty sympathy", in which he sees the best part of the novel. Particularly praiseworthy in his eyes is the novelist's endeavour to introduce the reader into the "mysterious" world of factory workers and miners. But in this case, as Thackeray clearly understands, Disraeli's depictions are not satisfactory, not because he has no sympathy with his subject, but because he lacks the necessary experience and familiarity with it. This is most strikingly revealed in his delineation of the characters of factory workers and miners, "with whose features the writer is not sufficiently familiar to be able to sketch them off with the ease that is requisite in the novelist".⁷⁵ Thackeray also suggests what should be the equipment of the writer who would venture upon this hitherto almost entirely neglected ground:

"A man who was really familiar with the mill and the mine might now, we should think, awaken great public attention as a novelist. It is a magnificent and untrodden field (for Mrs. Trollope's Factory story was wretched caricaturing, and Mr. Disraeli appears on the ground rather as an amateur): to describe it well, a man should be born to it. We want a Boz from among the miners or the manufactories to detail their ways of work and pleasure — to describe their feelings, interests, and lives, public and private."⁷⁶

For all his critical words addressed to Disraeli's depiction of the English working class, the reviewer is able to see its social significance: he is convinced that even if these descriptions are not entirely faithful to life, "they are written with genuine feeling", and they can do good by turning the readers' attention to this novel subject and by sending travellers from the higher classes to manufacturing and mining districts. He highly appreciates (and quotes) Disraeli's well-known revelation of the "two nations" existing side by side within English society and praises his attempt to rend asunder the veil dividing them:

"If this book can have made any members of the one nation think of the other, it is something to have done; to our idea Mr. Disraeli never said truer words than that the one nation does not know what the other does, and that it is time they should be acquainted."⁷⁷

We may see, then, that although Thackeray was convinced that the novelist "ought to be a non-combatant", he is able to appreciate the help a writer of fiction can give to the cause of the oppressed by drawing the attention of the

⁷⁵ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 101, 80, 82—83.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80; the reference to Mrs. Trollope's novel here concerns, as Ray points out, *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839).

⁷⁷ *Contributions*, 81; for the preceding quotation see *ibid.*, p. 80.

public to their miserable condition, even if he is not able to depict it entirely truthfully or offer any effectual remedy for its improvement.

The utter inadequacy of the "political" novelists to present any such remedy for the social evils they depict is indeed the object of Thackeray's most serious complaint. He formulates his views at some length in his review of Lever's novel, but applies them in all the reviews I am dealing with at present, as well as in that of one of Dickens's Christmas stories, with which I shall deal in the next sub-chapter. As we have seen, he explicitly rejected the remedies offered by Disraeli and Cooper and doubted the efficiency of that proposed by Lever. But he goes further, criticizing as well the way in which these writers embody their beliefs artistically. What he mainly objects to is the fact that instead of suggesting a practicable solution they offer moral fables, at the conclusion of which the good poor are rewarded and reconciled to the wicked rich, by then greatly reformed:

"Has any sentimental writer organised any feasible scheme for bettering the poor? Has any one of them, after weeping over poor Jack, and turning my lord to ridicule, devised anything for the substantial benefit of the former. At the conclusion of these tales, when the poor hero or heroine has been bullied enough — when poor Jack has been put off the murder he was meditating, or poor Polly has been rescued from the town on which she was about to go — there somehow arrives a misty reconciliation between the poor and the rich: a prophecy is uttered of better times for the one, and better manners in the other; presages are made of happy life, happy marriage and children, happy beef and pudding for all time to come; and the characters make their bow, grinning, in a group, as they do at the end of a drama when the curtain falls, and the blue fire blazes behind the scenes."⁷⁸

This is not, in Thackeray's opinion, "the way in which men seriously engaged and interested in the awful question between rich and poor meet and grapple with it". Men like Cobden and Sir Robert Peel go into battle armed with facts and figures, and their conduct is based upon "cogent prudential reasons". for the contest in which they participate is a serious one on both sides:

"The novelist as it appears to us, ought to be a non-combatant. But if he persists in taking a side, don't let him go into the contest unarmed; let him do something more effectual than call the enemy names. The cause of either party in this great quarrel requires a stronger championship than this, and merits a more earnest warfare."⁷⁹

From this point of view Thackeray criticizes Disraeli for attaching to his *Sybil* a conventional happy end, which, as he sarcastically remarks, is not a successful realization of Disraeli's purpose of connecting the two nations by means of the marriage of the heroine and Egremont, a marriage which was meant to "typify the union of the people and the nobles"; in fact Egremont is "a dandy aristocrat of not over good blood", whose "family is living upon the spoils of holy monasteries", while Sybil, though at first presented as "the daughter of a pattern Chartist", turns out "to be one of the old, old nobility of all, a baroness of forty thousand pounds a year".⁸⁰

Nor is Lever in Thackeray's opinion a competent person to propose a practicable solution of the situation in Ireland, even if he is familiar with it, for this can be done only by experts:

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁸⁰ For the quotations see *ibid.*, p. 82.

"The landlords may be wickedly to blame; the monsters get two per cent. for their land; they roll about in carriages, do nothing, and drink champagne; while the poor labourer remains at home and works and starves; — but we had better have some other opinion than that of the novelist to decide upon the dispute between them. He can exaggerate the indolence and luxury of the one, or the miseries and privations of the other, as his fancy leads him."⁸¹

Thackeray makes, however, some distinctions between this novelist and the other "sentimental" politicians to be found among the contemporary writers of fiction. In contradistinction to these (and to Mrs. Trollope and Soulié, whom Thackeray rebuked for a similar fault earlier), Lever does not content himself with making an outcry against the opposing party, but proposes a remedy, and a remedy, as we have seen, not wholly rejected by his reviewer — the return of the absentee landlords. Even the main idea of the novel is acceptable to Thackeray, namely that the rich have their duties towards the poor and should share their wealth with them, as they "are but the stewards of heaven's bounty to the poor". Yet the way in which this idea and Lever's general purpose are elaborated in the characters and the plot of the novel does not come up to Thackeray's standard. His criticism, however, is in my opinion only partly justifiable. Where he is in the right is in pointing to the main weakness of Lever's approach — his depiction of the hero of the story as a man incapable of retaining his original nobility of character in the absence of his landlord, either in prosperity, when he becomes idle and fond of drinking, or in adversity, when he shows himself capable of even committing a crime. As Thackeray rightly realizes, such a character seems to have been specially invented to suit the novelist's purpose, but it is not true to life, leading Lever, moreover, to erroneous generalization: he lays the whole guilt for the idleness and criminal propensities of the tenant upon the absent landlord, who should be present to teach him better, and makes the mere return of the latter the instrument of saving the former from murder, as well as of bringing about the ultimate reconciliation of all parties and a happy end for everybody. Where Thackeray is wrong, however, is in his suddenly transferring his criticism from the sphere of Lever's art to that of the actual reality depicted in the novel, condemning not only the novelist's but any verdict upon landlords as preposterous and attempting to prove that Lever's social facts were wrong. He reserves it as his right "to put in a word for the landlord, just for novelty's sake"⁸², and when he does so, he disregards objective historical facts by making his defence of Lever's Irish landlord general for all landlords and capitalists, committing a further error by being unfair to Dickens whom he names in this connection:

"Here we have an Irish judge convicting the landlords of 'guilt, in deriving all the appliances of his ease and enjoyment from those whose struggles to supply them were made under the pressure of disease and hunger'. Why not hunger? Without hunger there would be no work. We have just seen Mr. Lever's peasant, idling and drinking when he got his farm for nothing, and when he is to pay his landlord, the latter is straightway brought in *guilty*. What a verdict is this! All property may similarly be declared iniquitous, and all capital criminal. Let fundholders and manufacturers look out — Judge Jerrold will show them no favour, Chief Baron Boz has charged dead against them, and so we see it has been ruled in Ireland by the chief authority of the literary bench."⁸³

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁸² For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 74, 76.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

As in his reviews of other types of fiction, so too in those of novels *à la thèse* Thackeray devotes some attention to the novelists' craft, though much less than he does to their intention. Thus he gives unstinted praise to Disraeli's faithful depiction of the political tricks and practices of the English political parties and lays stress on the author's gift of humour and satire, which is often directed against things, persons, and practices deserving to be ridiculed. As Disraeli's best achievement in *Coningsby* Thackeray regards his satirical portraits of contemporary politicians, his "amusing bitter sketches of Tadpole, Rigby, Monmouth, and the rest, of which the likenesses were irresistible, and the malice tickled everybody", but he makes his praise rather too extravagant by seeing in Disraeli a direct successor of Swift in this style of delineation, surpassing all the other disciples of the latter in dexterity. So too is he over-lavish in his praise of the character of Rigby in his second review of the novel, pointing out that a "better portrait of a parasite has never been written since Juvenal's days" and expressing his belief "that even ages hence people will read this book as a singular picture of manners and society in our times". *Sybil*, on the other hand, as he points out, lacks the evidence of Disraeli's gift of malicious political caricature, which is the strong point of *Coningsby*, even if the rogueries of the "cabals of parliamentary parties" are satirized in it successfully and "the Chartists and their conspiracies, and their impracticable selfishness" are equally bitterly castigated. He approved, however, of Disraeli's satirical pictures from the life of aristocratic society and of some convincing subsidiary characters from this milieu, which contain "admirable observation and satire" and seem to him, and quite rightly, "to be most brilliantly hit off, more so than the plebeian likenesses, the men and women of the mines and the factories".⁸⁴ In his *Morning Chronicle* review of *Coningsby* Thackeray pays some attention, too, to Disraeli's style:

"He writes for a page or two in passages of the most admirable and pure English, thoughts finely poetical, fresh, startling, or ingenious; but one may be pretty sure of not being able to turn half-a-dozen leaves without coming upon something outrageous."⁸⁵

In the conclusion of his review of Lever's novel Thackeray deals with the objection lodged against his criticism by a friend of his, who declared "that the story [had] nothing to do with politics; that no critic [had] a right to judge it in a political sense; and that it [was] to be tested by its descriptive, its humorous, its pathetic, or romantic merits". Thackeray preserves his doubts as to the validity of this statement, but, to forestall possible objections of this sort on the part of the readers or the author himself, he adds a very brief evaluation of the merits and demerits of the novel, starting with the statement that "a great deal may be said in praise, and a little in blame of Mr. Lever's new story".⁸⁶ He finds some serious blemishes in Lever's style, which he characterizes as "exceedingly careless", and blames the author for his outrageous treatment of grammar:

"A regard for that mother whom the critic and the novelist ought to revere equally, the venerable English grammar, binds us to protest against this careless treatment of her."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ For the quotations see *ibid.*, p. 79, *Works* VI, 508, *Contributions*, 82, 83, 82.

⁸⁵ *Contributions*, 41.

⁸⁶ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

His praise is summed up in the last paragraph of the review:

"In regard of the merits, the narrative has the animated, rapid, easy style which is the charm of the author's writing, the kindly and affectionate humour (which appears in this volume to greater advantage, because it is not *over laughed* by the boisterous jocularity which we find in some of his other works), and the gay and brilliant manner of depicting figure and landscape, which distinguishes Mr. Lever's dexterous and facile hand. Parts of the tale are told with exceeding pathos and sweetness; and he who begins must needs go through it, with interest and with unabated pleasure."⁸⁷

As I have pointed out above, in this second period of his critical campaign against the novel *à la thèse*, Thackeray also makes use of those critical weapons which had lain unexploited in his critical armory in the first — parody and burlesque. He did so for the first time in his parodistic portrait of the Jewish banker Sidonia from *Coningsby* in the already discussed parody of Disraeli's novel in *Novels by Eminent Hands*. This portrait is Thackeray's most damaging attack both upon the novelist's personality and political doctrine, but especially upon the latter. Sidonia is to a great extent Disraeli's autobiographical portrait, as Thackeray rightly pointed out in both his reviews of the novel, especially in that published in the *Pictorial Times*:

"He paints his own portrait in this book in the most splendid fashion: it is the queerest in the whole queer gallery of likenesses; he appears as the greatest philosopher, the greatest poet, the greatest horseman, the greatest statesman, the greatest *roué* in the world; with all the qualities of Pitt and Byron, and Burke, and the great Mr. Widdicombe of Batty's Amphitheatre. Perhaps one is reminded of the last-named famous individual more than of any other" (*Works* VI, 507).

At the same time, however, Sidonia is the main protagonist of Disraeli's ideology, a very seriously meant embodiment of the novelist's political, social and aesthetic ideals, or, as Merritt has it, "Disraeli's idealized symbol of the alienated artistic sensibility and of the unjustly judged Jew". Thackeray parodies this character in the figure of the Jewish old-clothes merchant Raphael Mendoza, whom he endows with all the positive traits characteristic of Sidonia, exaggerated and caricatured into the grotesque, with the purpose of tearing down the romantic trappings enveloping this figure as Disraeli depicted him. The similarity and contrast between the two personages are undeniable. Both men are tremendously rich and belong to the rank of the great capitalist magnates who dictate the policy of whole states, but Thackeray's Mendoza is forced, as Merritt points out, "to masquerade as a Jewish merchant to avoid the inevitable censure of Christians jealous of his wealth". Mendoza walks through the streets of London in shabby clothes and does his business in a dirty small shop, but behind it he has a splendid apartment (one of many others) from which he conducts the policy of the whole world. Both Sidonia and Mendoza are altruistic and save tottering governments with loans from their enormous wealth, both are prominent philosophers and are endowed, moreover, with some other positive traits characteristic of the heroes of romances (both possess personal courage, Sidonia is a splendid rider and Mendoza an oarsman). Thackeray in his parody of Sidonia goes into the smallest details — for instance the Arabian horse which Sidonia received from the Egyptian Pasha figures in the parody as a *caïque*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

presented to Mendoza by the Turkish Sultan. Sidonia talks to Coningsby about his intimate intercourse with the royal courts in Russia and Spain and about his encounters with the people of his faith and race in all significant places — Mendoza is visited by the Czar's messenger, the ambassador from Spain, Louis Philippe himself and other prominent personalities who fawn upon the merchant and are all of Jewish confession. As follows from this brief outline, in the character of Mendoza Thackeray successfully derides the philosophical and political ideas embodied in the original created by Disraeli. It is first and foremost this novelist's militant Judaism, manifested in the exaggerated eulogies he bestows upon the genius of the Jewish nation and his tendencies to ascribe Jewish origin to all the great historical personalities. Thackeray caricatures this part of Disraeli's doctrine by ascribing a Jewish origin not only to Louis Philippe, mentioned above, but even to the Pope. Thackeray's parody hits its target with deadly precision and is one of the best to be found in the whole *Punch* series. As Merritt has shown, he "made Disraeli's style and his noble ethnic hero utterly ridiculous, and . . . Disraeli may have well nursed a grudge against him for having done so".⁸⁹ The range of Thackeray's satirical weapons is not, however, limited exclusively to purely literary parody, but is extended to the social life behind it. As Ivasheva has pointed out, Thackeray divests even Mendoza's wealth itself of its romantic glamour by revealing that he had acquired it by extorting shillings and pennies from the poor.⁹⁰

Thackeray's last sustained attack upon the novel *à la thèse* is represented by his burlesque *A Plan for a Prize Novel*, written in the form of an open letter "from the eminent Dramatist BROWN to the eminent Novelist SNOOKS", published in *Punch* on 22 February, 1851 and attached to his *Novels by Eminent Hands*. Through the mouth of his spokesman Brown, Thackeray proposes to the popular novelist Snooks how to conform in his next work to the current literary fashion of the novel with a purpose and at the same time "be rewarded at a still higher figure", and suggests to him, as I have mentioned before, to write an advertisement novel, showing him at the same time how to do it. In his prefatory words we find the following categorical protest against fiction written with a purpose:

"Unless he writes with a purpose, you know, a novelist in our days is good for nothing. This one writes with a Socialist purpose; that with a Conservative purpose; this author or authoress with the most delicate skill insinuates Catholicism into you, and you find yourself all but a Papist in the third volume; another doctors you with Low Church remedies to work inwardly upon you, and which you swallow down unsuspectingly, as children do calomel in jelly. Fiction advocates all sorts of truths and causes — doesn't the delightful bard of the Minorities find Moses in everything?" (*Works* VIII, 175).

As his burlesque plan of an advertisement novel clearly shows, however, even in this case Thackeray's protest is not in fact addressed to the social or political commitment of literature as such, but to those second-rate novelists who were unable to clothe their purpose in adequate artistic form.

Before coming to the final conclusion I should at least briefly point out that after publishing his burlesque with the above-quoted satirical remark addressed to Disraeli, Thackeray changed his opinion of this author's political novels, as

⁸⁹ For the quotations see *op. cit.*, pp. 86—87.

⁹⁰ See *op. cit.*, p. 126.

he did that of Disraeli's Silver-Fork productions. In his speech at the Royal Literary Fund Dinner of May 1852, in which he praised Disraeli's early fashionable novels, he also found warm words of praise for the trilogy *Coningsby*, *Sybil* and *Tancred*, in which Disraeli "explained to a breathless and listening world the great Caucasian mystery".⁹¹

Since this is the last time I am to be concerned with Thackeray's criticism of Bulwer as novelist, I should also duly emphasize that even his attitude to this writer, whom he persecuted so relentlessly, began to change at the end of the 1840s. Although even in the following decade we find in his letters a few critical remarks addressed to Bulwer's creative method,⁹² we also find comments in which he characterizes his former criticism of this writer as too "savage", expresses his regret at having pelted "at that poor old Bulwer & others" and apologizes for his attacks on account of "the days of hot youth" in which they were written.⁹³ In his speech of May 16, 1849, at the Royal Literary Fund Dinner, he pointed out how some literary men greatly advanced themselves by their labour, mentioning also Bulwer, though not referring to him by name, as the author of *Letters to John Bull, Esq.*, which had gone through eight editions up to that date.⁹⁴ On 21 June 1853 he wrote a letter directly to Bulwer, drawing attention to his Thackeray's, now public apology for the former critical assaults which had been published in the preface to the 1852 American edition of *Mr. Brown's Letters* and some earlier works of his. In this preface he apologizes for the American editor's having reprinted some of his early "careless papers" which he would never have reprinted himself and which he would like to forget. He is not so much concerned about his *Novels by Eminent Hands*, which he even in these years characterizes as "not malicious, . . . nor unamusing",⁹⁵ but first and foremost about the pamphlet "Mr. Yellowplush's Ajew" and his review of Bulwer's drama *The Sea-Captain* (to be yet discussed) which he is very sorry to see reproduced. He asks pardon of Bulwer "for a lampoon, which I know he himself has forgiven, and which I wish I could recall", and proceeds:

"I had never seen that eminent writer but once in public when this satire was penned, and wonder at the recklessness of the young man who could fancy such personality was harmless jocularity, and never calculate that it might give pain. The best experiences of my life have been gained since that time of youth and gaiety and careless laughter. I allude to them, perhaps, because I would not have any kind and friendly American reader judge of me by the wild performances of early years" (*Works* X, 605).

On his first reading *My Novel*, Thackeray was not very enthusiastic, characterizing it as "very dexterously brewed & bottled small beer", but soon afterwards he evaluated it positively as "fresher & richer" than any of Bulwer's preceding works (in which he was of course not mistaken), placing this novelist, as far as the fecundity of his imagination is concerned, even above Dickens (in which he was certainly quite wrong).⁹⁶ In the same year he even used one of Bulwer's artistic procedures as his model: *The Cartons*, which he much admired,

⁹¹ Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 79.

⁹² See *Letters* III, 12, 13.

⁹³ For the quotations see *Letters* II, 553-554.

⁹⁴ See Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 74.

⁹⁵ For the quotations see *Works* X, 603, 604.

⁹⁶ For the quotations see *Letters* III, 248, 288; see also *ibid.*, pp. 253, 407, 409.

inspired him to use a fictitious narrator in *The Newcomes*.⁹⁷ In his last years he was much attracted by Bulwer's *Strange Story* which was, along with Collins's *Woman in White*, his avowed source of inspiration when he wrote his late burlesque *The Notch on the Axe — a Story à la Mode* (*The Cornhill Magazine*, April—June 1862),⁹⁸ meant as a parody of the sensational novels which had become so popular in the 1850s, but essentially differing from his earlier works of this kind in being written without a polemical purpose and in a mild and kind-hearted tone.

In attempting to assess Thackeray's criticism of novels *à la thèse* as a whole, I should in the first place point out that from his concrete analysis of individual works of this type his own position is more obvious than it is from his theoretical argument. There can be no doubt that he acutely felt the necessity that contemporary social and political life should find its reflection in literature: at that time he was attaining the heights of the novelist's art himself and in *Vanity Fair* presented a remarkable embodiment of his own outlook upon the place of political and social manners in fiction. He could not help protesting, however, whenever he met this broad theme handled as the writers discussed in this sub-chapter treated it, he could not help rebelling whenever he saw the novel as a literary form maltreated at the hands of the novelists who were unable to find such media for expressing their purpose as would be aesthetically acceptable.

His criticism is not motivated by personal prejudice or spite, for he metes out the same justice to his personal friends as he does to writers whom he either did not know in person at all or at least not intimately. I do think therefore that Forsythe is almost entirely in the wrong when he maintains that Thackeray's criticism of Disraeli was "founded upon Thackeray's anti-Semitic prejudice, personal dislike, intellectual dissimilarity, political differences, and divergent aims in letters, heightened by a degree of jealousy on Thackeray's part of the literary, social and threatening political success of the vivid son of the amiable old Jewish antiquary." In the opinion of this scholar, Thackeray's "allusions to Disraeli were frequently brutal, often unjust, and nearly always offensive", they "ridiculed his race, parodied his style, and disposed of him in the easiest of all ways — by sweepingly pronouncing him a 'humbug' — and were not concerned with Disraeli's ideas. It is only in pointing to Thackeray's anti-Semitic prejudice that Forsythe is in the right, while he may be excused for his final rebuke, since he of course could not have read Thackeray's *Morning Chronicle* reviews of *Coningsby* and *Sybil* which were not identified until recently. Otherwise his conclusions are in contradiction to the available material (even he admits, however, that Thackeray's *Punch* parody is "brilliantly done", though it is in his opinion in some parts "sadly and cruelly personal").⁹⁹ Nor is Thackeray's criticism of Bulwer personally prejudiced, but with this I shall deal in more detail later.

⁹⁷ See *Letters* II, 298; for his admiration of *The Caxtons* see Melville, op. cit., I, 173.

⁹⁸ See *Works* XVII, 569; for his admiration of Collins's novel see also *ibid.*, p. 594.

⁹⁹ For the quotations see op. cit., pp. 194, 195.

Thackeray of course does in my opinion sometimes err, especially in his theoretical argument: he is unjust to Dickens, for example, when he places him on the same level as Disraeli, Lever and Jerrold and when he protests against his attacks on the rich, the artistic value of which is surely essentially different from that of similar critical depictions by Lever and Jerrold and surpasses even Disraeli. A fundamental mistake, from my point of view, is Thackeray's assertion that the novelist should be a non-combatant, an uncommitted and neutral observer of social struggles. In this respect he commits an injustice towards his own works in which, especially in his great novels, he does very clearly express, through the medium of his depictions and images, his own very definite moral, social and even political standpoint. His arguments as a whole, however, and especially his concrete evaluations of "political" novelists, contain much truth which remains valid up to the present day. Their main merit is that they so remarkably display his firm and unchanging insistence upon realism in literature, which in this case, and notably in the second period, penetrates far more deeply below the superficial aspects of the novelist's craft than it ever did before. His criticism itself is partly based on criteria founded upon extra-aesthetic considerations, but these do not play a decisive role in his final judgments, for they always appear in close combination with the aesthetic, which are in this case undoubtedly the determining factor. Thackeray does not reject the novel *à la thèse* predominantly on moral grounds (in the second period he does not even apply the moral criterion at all) or on social and political, but on aesthetic grounds, as a fashionable mode exploiting the topical social and political problems mostly for the sake of their popularity and depicting them in a way which the great novelist rightly felt to be unacceptable for the novel.

VI. "CHRISTMAS" LITERATURE

Another fashionable mode to which Thackeray paid much attention especially as literary, but also as art critic, was the literature produced in great quantities in England at Christmas time, the explicit purpose of which was to amuse the reader and keep him in a good temper during this festive period, and which became enormously popular especially after Dickens's success in the genre, being cultivated by a great number of second-rate imitators. Thackeray began his criticism of this type of literature with his review of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (in the summary review "A Box of Novels", *Fraser's Magazine*, February 1844), continued in the review of *The Cricket on the Hearth* (*The Morning Chronicle*, December 24, 1845) and in the following two years reviewed a fairly large number of other publications of this sort, fairy-tale books and collections of poems.¹ Even his earlier reviews of illustrated annuals, which were the most

¹ Besides his three reviews of Dickens's stories (the third of which is mentioned in the text after this note) Thackeray published the following reviews: "Christmas Books — No. 2", *The Morning Chronicle*, December 26, 1845 (a review of Douglas Jerrold's *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures* and of the English translation of the fairy tales by the brothers Grimm, *The Fairy Ring*, by John Edward Taylor); "Christmas Books — No. 3", *The Morning Chronicle*, December 31, 1845 (a review of *The Comic Blackstone* by Gilbert Abbott à Beckett and *The Snow Storm, a Tale of Christmas* by Mrs. Gore); "About a Christmas Book", *Fraser's Magazine*, December 1845 (a review of *Poems and Pictures; a Collection of Ballads, Songs, and other Poems, Ancient and Modern, including both Originals and Selections*); "On Some Illustrated Children's Books", *Fraser's Magazine*, April 1846 (a review of *Felix Summerly's*

popular Christmas publications before Dickens occupied the field, might be included in his criticism of this sort of literature, if he were not concerned more with their pictorial than literary aspect. His last summary review devoted to Christmas literature, "A Grumble about the Christmas Books" (*Fraser's Magazine*, January 1847), contains his last review of Dickens's Christmas stories, that of *The Battle of Life*.

Thackeray's first reaction to the new literary fashion was very positive, for his review of *A Christmas Carol* is an almost pure eulogy. In his prefatory words he bestows warm praise upon Dickens's preceding works (I shall return to this in the next chapter) and then gives ungrudging tribute to his new story. The critic obviously realizes that it is not an absolutely perfect work of art, but refuses to state his objections, for the story has already been reviewed by the public (with whose verdict he agrees) and no critic can circumvent its triumphant success:

"I do not mean that the *Christmas Carol* is quite as brilliant or self-evident as the sun at noonday: but it is so spread over England by this time that no sceptic, no *Fraser's Magazine*. — no, not even the godlike and ancient *Quarterly* itself (venerable, Saturnian, big-wigged dynasty!), could review it down" (*Works* VI, 414).

He even goes so far as to defend Dickens against the criticism of bad taste, lack of education, sudden transitions from "low humours" to "the sublime" and his "deplorable propensity to write blank verse", which may be expected from such magazines as the *Quarterly Review*. Of all these possible rebukes he finds only the last substantiated and protests, "with the classics, against the use of blank verse in prose", adding another reservation of his own, or at least a doubt, as to whether the allegory of Scrooge's Christmas conversion "is a very complete one" (not specifying, however, what exactly he had in mind). But here, as he says, all objections stop, for who "can listen to objections regarding such a book as this?"² He then warmly appreciates the beneficial influence the story cannot fail to exercise upon the stony hearts of misanthropes and upon the whole reading public, among whom it cannot but sow good will and love. Of the characters in the story it is especially Tiny Tim who is singled out for affectionate comment:

"There is not a reader in England but that little creature will be a bond of union between the author and him; and he will say of Charles Dickens, as the woman just now, 'GOD BLESS HIM!' What a feeling is this for a writer to be able to inspire, and what a reward to reap!" (*Works* VI, 416.)

Home Treasury: Gammer Gurton's Story-books and Stories for the Season: The Good-natured Bear; "A Grumble about the Christmas Books", *Fraser's Magazine*, January 1847 (a review of *A Christmas in the Seventeenth Century*, by Mrs. Percy Sinnett, *New Year's Day; a Winter's Tale*, by Mrs. Gore, *January Eve; a Tale of the Times*, by G. Soane, *The Good Genius that Turned Everything into Gold*; or, *the Queen Bee and the Magic Dress. A Christmas Fairy Tale*, by the Brothers Mayhew, *The Yule Log, for Everybody's Christmas Hearth*, by the Author of *The Chronicles of the Bastille* [i.e. A. Chamerozow], *Fisher's Drawing-room Scrap-book*, by the Hon. Mrs. Norton, *Wonderful Stories for Children*, by Hans Christian Andersen, trans. by Mary Howitt, *The Battle of Life; a Love Story*, by Charles Dickens, *Mrs. Perkins's Ball*, by M. A. Titmarsh).

² For the quotations see *Works* VI, 415.

His general evaluation of the story is summed up in the following statement, which has become classic:

"It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness" (*Works* VI, 415).

As we may see, in his review Thackeray applies almost exclusively extra-aesthetic criteria, evaluating in particular Dickens's "Christmas message", the contradictory political programme of social criticism and class compromise with which Dickens was so conspicuous in the period of Chartism, and finding it — unlike other progressive critics of his time, notably Belinski³ — highly commendable. It is worth noticing, however, that his attitude is surprisingly near to that of the Chartists themselves, at least to their literary critics. The reviewer who assessed the story in the *Northern Star* on 21 December 1844 warmly praised it as a work "which, could it be read by all — would that it were in the hands of all — would do more to promote 'peace on earth, and good will to men', than all the sermons and homilies ever uttered or penned", and appreciated its moral in the following words:

"The moral of the book, that any Christian Spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness, is a gem of priceless worth. Were these words written on the hearts of all men; was their spirit felt and acted up to; what an Elysium might this earth be, instead of the 'vale of tears' which so many find it."⁴

Whereas in his review of *A Christmas Carol* Thackeray almost entirely avoids applying purely aesthetic criteria to Dickens's story (not, however, because of lack of objections to the author's art, as we have seen), he begins to do so in his very next review, that of *The Cricket on the Hearth*. In this piece of his criticism he for the first time begins to sound an alarm against some aspects of Dickens's creative approach (though finding excuses for them and writing in a very conciliatory tone), and also to express his views upon "Christmas" literature in general. The main target of his criticism is, as Ivashova also points out,⁵ the false idyllism of Dickens's story, its deliberate Christmas idealization. In contradistinction to the case of *A Christmas Carol*, the great popularity of *The Cricket on the Hearth* aroused in Thackeray a feeling of urgent responsibility to the public, and he considers it to be his duty as a critic to ask whether it is really "a good book which so excites you and all the public with emotion" (in the case of *A Christmas Carol* he had no such doubts, as we have seen, and was certainly in the right. for Dickens's first story is undoubtedly a better work of art than the second). His answer is not positive: though he does not say it in so many words, the story is in his opinion not a good work of art, but a "good Christmas book, illuminated with extra gas, crammed with extra bonbons, French plums and sweetnesses". In the first place, and to his great regret, the characters of this story cannot be classed among Dickens's best creations — they do not seem actual persons, "we don't believe in them".⁶

³ For Belinski's views see *Otechestvenniye zapiski*, 1845, vol. XXXVIII, p. 37.

⁴ *An Anthology of Chartist Literature*, p. 306.

⁵ See *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁶ For the quotations see *Contributions*, 88, 87, 95.

"To our fancy, the dialogue and characters of the 'Cricket on the Hearth' are no more like nature than the talk of Tityrus and Meliboeus is like the real talk of Bumpkin and Hodge over a stile, or than Florian's pastoral *petits maitres*, in red heels and powder, are like French peasants, with wooden shoes and a pitchfork, or than Pierrot and Carlotta in a ballet, smiling charmingly, jumping and dancing astonishingly, amidst wreaths of calico roses and fragrant pasteboard bouquets, are like a real spotless nymph, fresh from Ida, and a young demigod lately descended from Olympus. This story is no more a real story than Peerybingle is a real name. It is like one — made, as the calico-roses before-mentioned, much redder and bigger than the common plant. The 'Cricket on the Hearth' has the effect of a beautiful theatrical piece: It interests you as such — charms you with its grace, picturesqueness, and variety — tickles you with its admirable grotesque; but you cannot help seeing that Carlotta is not a goddess (dancing as she does divinely), and that that is rouge, not blushes, on her cheeks."⁷

In his opinion the author's aim was to startle the reader and "ply him with brisk sentences, rapid conceits, dazzling pictures, adroit interchanges of pathos and extravaganza", and he proves this by quoting the introduction of the story ("Kettle began it!") and pointing out that the whole scene is more like a "brilliant ballet-pantomime" than "like nature", is distorted into caricature, the main causes for this deviation from nature being Dickens's propensity to animate inanimate objects and the "determined jocularity" with which he is writing. Even if Thackeray is not inclined to retreat from the principles of realistic aesthetics in matters of essential importance (as we have already seen from the analysis of Dickens's characters), he is willing to make some concessions in Dickens's case. He ranks him among those providers who produce "extra jovialities in compliment to the season" (among whom he counts meat and sweet providers, theatres and booksellers) and calls him the "chief literary master of the ceremonies for Christmas", who best understands the "kindness and joviality and withal the pathos of the season" and who wrote his story with the sole aim in mind of cheering and amusing his readers. Thus he created a work with a special purpose, pervaded by the festive and hilarious atmosphere of the season. "a Christmas frolic", and the critic reconciles himself to looking at it from this Christmas point of view. If the book is viewed from this angle, writes Thackeray, we may accept, as we do in fairy tales and Christmas pantomimes, all the impossibilities, absurdities and surprise effects of the plot, and find them "pleasant, almost credible", and may regard the pretty and pleasant, but unnatural characters as "a sort of half-recognised realities", closely akin to the charming inhabitants of fairy land, to Mother Bunch's princesses, "dwarfs and ogres, singing trees, and conversational animals":⁸

"As a Christmas pageant which you witness in the armchair — your private box by the fireside — the piece is excellent, incomparably brilliant and dexterous. It opens with broad pantomime, but the interest deepens as it proceeds. The little rural scenery is delightfully painted. Each pretty, pleasant, impossible character has his *entrée* and his *pas*. The music is gay or plaintive, always fresh and agreeable. The piece ends with a *grand pas d'ensemble*, where the whole *dramatis personae* figure high and low, toe and heel, to a full orchestral crash, and a brilliant illumination of blue and pink fire."⁹

As we may see, in this review Thackeray for the first time begins to treat "Christmas" literature as a special literary genre based upon specific aesthetic

⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

⁸ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 88—89, 90, 87, 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

principles, identical with those valid in a fairy tale or pantomime, but essentially different from those which lie at the basis of the novel, as he himself conceived it. He does realize, however, that a story which is not pure fairy tale, in which there appear not fairies and witches but characters taken from actual life, should in fact follow the same "rules" as those valid for the novel — realistic depiction of life should not be combined with fairy-tale fantasy. He therefore cannot help regretting that such a subtle painter of "nature" as Dickens, who on occasions not so festive as Christmas depicts reality with such an acute perception and so thoughtfully and delicately, nevertheless, in his *Cricket on the Hearth*, paints with such a coarse brush. As Thackeray saw it, Dickens's fantastic creations turn literature away from its true role of faithfully depicting reality:

"If we think that nature and quiet are still better, it is because Mr. Dickens, with other great English humorists have used us to them, O, for the artist's early and simple manner!"¹⁰

On the other hand he gladly gives ungrudging tribute to such brilliant examples of Dickens's genius as the story does contain, to "those touches of nature for which Mr. Dickens's hand is unrivalled". These he finds especially in the characters of Mrs. Fielding and Miss Slowboy, "who having been once introduced to the reader can never be forgotten by him, and remain to be admired and laughed at for ever".¹¹

The characters of Dickens's *Cricket on the Hearth* seemed to have disturbed Thackeray a great deal, for he returned to them in his review of Jerrold's *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures*, as we shall see, as well as in two other later reviews. In his review "On Some Illustrated Children's Books" he takes to task the character of the toy-maker Tackleton as "a great and painful blot upon that otherwise charming performance" and as an impossible figure, untruthful to life. No toy-maker could ever be, as he explains in a perfectly logical, though perhaps a somewhat idealistic argument, "a child-hater by nature", for, if nothing else, he could not have succeeded in his trade — the "practice of it would be enough to break that black heart of his outright".¹² He returns to the characters of this story for the last time in his review of *The Battle of Life*, written at the close of his critical campaign against "Christmas" literature, when, as we shall see, he had read and reviewed several of its specimens produced by Dickens's imitators, and when he was more willing than in his earlier *Morning Chronicle* review to forgive the initiator of this literary fashion for his deviations from nature. By that time he had realized that Dickens stood incomparably higher than his followers, for his works bore the "sacred press mark" of Lowe for mankind, by which the novelist had earned his highest place among his English contemporaries, as well as among the greatest literary geniuses of world literature. His followers have taken his method from him, but cannot produce his wonderful "music":

"That is why we lose patience or affect to have no respect for minor performers. Numbers of unknown fiddlers, hearing of the success of Mr. Dickens's opera, rush forward, fiddle in hand, of the very same shape by the very same maker. 'Come and hear *our* partition', they say; 'see how we have set the Barber to music, and what tunes we make Papageno sing!'

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; see also p. 90.

¹¹ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 91—92.

¹² For the quotations see *Works* VI, 567.

Away with your miserable fiddlesticks, misguided people! You play after such a master! You take a bad moment. We may have heard some indifferent music from this composer, and some very weak and bad music from him too; but we have had, likewise, strains so delightful and noble, specimens of skill so unapproachable by others, that we protest against all followers" (*Works VI*, 608-609).

On the characters of *The Cricket on the Hearth* he wrote, referring to his own earlier criticism:

"Last year the critics were specially outraged by the famous clock-and-kettle overture of the Christmas piece. 'Is this truth, is this nature?' cries the Cynic, growling from his tub. You might say, Is it the multiplication table, or is it the *pons asinorum*? It is not intended to be true or natural, as I hold; it is intended to be a brisk, dashing, startling caricature. The poet does not want you to believe him, he wants to provoke your mirth and wonder. He is appealing, not to your reason and feelings as in a prose narrative, but to your fancy and feelings. He peoples the familiar hearth with sprites, and the church-tower with goblins: all the commonest objects swarm with preternatural life. The haymaker has convulsions, the warming-pan is vivified, the chairs are ambulatory, and the poker writhes with life. In the midst of these wonders goes on a little, common, kind-hearted, tender, everyday story of poverty averted, true hearts rewarded, the poor loving one another, a tyrant grotesquely punished. It is not much. But in these performances the music is everything. The *Zauberflöte* or the *Barbiere* are not like life; *mais* ——" (*Works VI*, 608).

In Thackeray's opinion such a writer, whose humanity "has mastered the sympathy of almost all", "in whom all the world is putting faith — who has the ear of all England" and who has done so much for the poor, is surely not "to be railed at by his literary brethren", and he himself does not intend to do so and in fact does not. He expresses his conviction that Dickens's aim in his Christmas stories was not "to produce a prose tale of mingled fun and sadness, and a close imitation of life, but a prose poem, designed to awaken emotions tender, mirthful, pastoral, wonderful". His characters are therefore "modified — prettified, so to speak":¹³

"The action of the piece you see clearly enough, but the actors speak and move to measure and music. The drolls are more violently funny; the serious heroes and heroines more gracefully and faultlessly beautiful. Such figures are never seen among real country people. No more are Tityrus and Meliboeus like, or Hermann and Dorothea like, or Taglioni, bounding through air in gauze, like a Scotch peasant girl. *Tityre tu patule*, is a ballet in hexameters; the *Sylphide*, a poem performed on the toes; these charming little books of Mr. Dickens's are chorals for Christmas executed in prose" (*Works VI*, 608).

Whereas Thackeray's assessment of the basic qualities of Dickens's art is just, his evaluation of the social function of Dickens's Christmas stories is, from my point of view, not so clear-sighted. It is true that in the prefatory words to his review he quite correctly assesses the subjective meaning Dickens himself embodied in his "Christmas message", but, as in his review of *A Christmas Carol*, he positively evaluates, too, what was in Dickens's stories objectively not at all progressive: he ranks Dickens (with Andersen) among the "sweet Christian messengers of peace and goodwill" and praises him for having done very much "to make the poor known to the rich, and reconcile each to the other".¹⁴ In contradistinction to the progressive critics of his time and later, who perfectly

¹³ For the quotations see *Works VI*, 607-608. That Thackeray did not intend to be too severe in his review of *The Battle of Life* is also proved by his stating, in a letter of his, that he loved "Pickwick and Crummles too well to abuse this great man" (*Letters II*, 262).

¹⁴ For the quotations see *Works VI*, 607.

realized this weak point of Dickens's stories, he also failed to see what they took special notice of, namely that the lower artistic value of *The Cricket on the Hearth* and of all the following Christmas stories is rooted in Dickens's gradual retreat from social problematics.¹⁵

In his reviews of the Christmas stories produced by Dickens's imitators, Thackeray assumes a very interesting attitude: he is determined to treat these productions as a special literary *genre* which obeys and should obey different laws than the novel, but his patience is tried so much that he does not always find it easy to remember his determination. As he sees it, the Christmas story should in the first place obey different "rules" than does the novel in the matter of incident — it must have a happy end, the good characters must be rewarded and the evil punished. In the second place, it should not imitate nature — it should comfort the reader, and not make him miserable "by being called upon to sympathize with the sickness, the premature demise, or otherwise undeserved misfortune, of certain honest personages with whose adventures we are made acquainted"¹⁶ — the authors of Christmas stories should not present too gloomy pictures of human misery and poverty. In the third place (but this is a "rule" he also applies to the novel), the authors of this type of literature should not attempt to present any explicit moral instruction. He sums up all these basic "rules" (though he does not use this word) in his review of Mrs. Gore's story *New Year's Day*, in which he rebukes the authoress for not providing the necessary happy end and for the consequent lachrymose sentimentality of her story:

"And as in pantomimes, so I say in Christmas stories, those fireside Christmas pantomimes, which are no more natural than *Mother Goose* or *Harlequin Gulliver*. Kill your people off as much as you like, but always bring 'em to life again. Belabour your villains as you please. As they are more hideous than mortals, punish them more severely than mortals can bear. But they must always amend, and you must always be reconciled to them in the last scene, when the spangled fairy comes out of the revolving star, and uttering the music octosyllabic incantations of reconciliation, vanishes into an elysium of blue fire. Sweet, kindly eight-syllabled incantations, pleasant fantastic fairy follies, charming mystery, wherein the soul is plunged, as the gentle curtain descends, and covers those scenes of beloved and absurd glory! Do you suppose the people who invented such were fools, and wanted to imitate great blundering realities to inculcate great, stupid, moral apophthegms? Anybody can do that — anybody can say that 'Evil communications corrupt good manners', or that 'Procrastination is the thief of time', or what not; but a poet does not take his inspirations from the copybook or his pictures from the police-office. Is there any moralizing in *Titania*, *Ariosto*, or *Undine*?" (*Works* VI, 590).

This reflection is a sort of prelude to his review of perhaps the only Christmas book that fulfils all his expectations and does not violate any of the "rules" — George Soane's *January Eve; a Tale of the Times*. This book has in his opinion great merits, which he sums up with much humour as follows:

"First, it is improbable; secondly, it is pretty and graceful; thirdly, it has many pleasant pastoral descriptions and kindly ballet groups and dances; fourthly, the criminals are reformed, the dead come to life again, and the devil is not the devil — to which, by the way, I take objection" (*Works* VI, 590).

¹⁵ For the views of the Chartist reviewers, of Belinski, Nekrasov, Lenin and Stanislavski see *Istoriya angliyskoy literaturi*, Tom II, Vipusk vtoroy, Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk SSSR, Moskva, 1955, pp. 217—218.

¹⁶ *Works* VI, 588—589.

He then sums up the conventional plot of this idyllic story, quotes a likewise idyllic and sentimental episode, the celebration of the blind old schoolmaster's birthday, and adds:

"This is as it should be: your proper, pleasant, rouged, grinning, junketing, pantomimic business. It is not intended to be natural — only pretty and kind-hearted — pleasing to the eye — cheerfully ticklesome to the senses — mildly festive, benevolent, and brisk" (*Works VI*, 593).

Also the end of the story comes up to his expectations:

"The only person who dies is old Elias Rodwell, the schoolmaster; but then he is so old, so very old, and his hair so very cottony, that his death is rather a pleasure than otherwise; and you fancy his life was only a sort of make-believe. And so everybody is happy, and the light-blue entertainment of Mr. Soane [the book had a sky-blue cover — LP] closes. It is a good, cheap, easy, and profitable Christmas pastime" (*Works VI*, 594).

In some cases, however, the reviewer's patience is tried too much. Thus in his review of another Christmas story by Mrs. Gore, *The Snow Storm*, he starts making sarcastic comments upon the authoress's depiction of life in the country as a happy idyll of the rustics fondly attached to their aristocratic masters, and only then recollects that it is a Christmas story, and adds:

"They are happy on the stage, where they grin in *tableaux* before the footlights, and scatter calico garlands before their lord, who pledges them in a bumper of sparkling pasteboard, and, happy in the *Christmas-books* that are constructed upon the theatrical model: let this pass as one of the jokes of Christmas — to live at the very least until Twelfth-day."¹⁷

In summing up the conventional plot of Chamervozov's tale *The Yule Log* Thackeray's tolerance has obviously been tried to its utmost limits and he gives free vent to the indignation of a realist forced to read this sort of literature:

"Isn't this a novelty? Isn't this a piece of ingenuity? Take your rustic, your fairies, your nightmare, finish off with a plum-pudding and a dance under the holly-bush, and a benign invocation to Christmas, kind hearts, and what not. Are we to have this sort of business for ever? *Mon Dieu!* will people never get tired of reading what they know, and authors weary of inventing what everybody has been going on inventing for ages past?" (*Works VI*, 600).

Thackeray's indignation was especially aroused, however, when he read the story *The Good Genius that Turned Everything into Gold* by the brothers Mayhew, which he found unsatisfactory in every respect. As he sees it, these authors violate one "rule" valid in his opinion for all imaginative literature, for they replace genuine fancy and humour by "stupendous moralization", make their fairy discuss "a prodigious deal of political ethics" with the hero, who is thus made acquainted with the macro-universe of the stars as well as the micro-universe in every atom, with the Wondrous Tale of Creation, chemistry, herbs and minerals, and the mechanism of his body, in a very finely written discourse, but "out of place, and little to be understood by children".¹⁸ Thackeray points out that the story was rightly treated in a review entitled "Fairy Politics", and adds:

¹⁷ *Contributions*, 106.

¹⁸ For the quotations see *Works VI*, 594, 597, 599.

"If any fairy presumes to talk any such nonsense to me, I will do my best from my place in the pit to hiss him off the stage. Had it been any the best known and dearest author — had it been Dickens himself, we would assume the privilege of replying to him with the cat-call, or other Protestant instrument, until the policeman ordered us off the premises" (*Works VI*, 597).

His anger is most thoroughly aroused, however, not by the fact that the authors moralize, but above all because they preach a very unsatisfactory doctrine which Thackeray denotes, by reversing the title of their story so as to correspond better to its contents, as "gold is a good genius". This makes him so angry (and not unexpectedly, for we know his view of the baneful influence of money in society and his conception of success in this fair of vanities) that he cannot in this case tolerate the conventional disentanglement of the plot by the rewarding of the good characters and the punishment of the evil. According to his opinion, if a writer wants to write a mere fantastic tale, he need not be too correct in his logic, but if "he wants to moralize, his proposition should be neat and clear, as his argument is correct". He then addresses to the brothers Mayhew the following interesting comment:

"If there were really your sort of good geniuses in the world, Socrates ought to have driven off from his trial in a coach-and-six to Xantippe, the loveliest and best-natured of women; yet we know to the contrary. She was a shrew, and her husband was hanged. A banker's account is a fine thing when properly organized, and the balance agreeably preponderating upon your side; but there are other accounts we have to settle, and if they look at this sublunary sphere, *mes frères*, and the misfortunes of the good and the prosperity of their opposites, — at Genius and Virtue in neglect and penury, and Dullness blundering into success, and Knavery filching Reputation, how can sublime moralists talk of goodness and gold together? Whatever we may do privately as individuals, let us sublime moralists never publicly worship twopence-halfpenny. I, for my part, as 'one of the aforesaid, will always make an uproar when I meet with any apologue conveying such a foolish signification; and I wish that some Christmas storytellers would make us a few tales in which all the rogues should prosper, and all the honest men go to jail, just to correct the present odious tendency of the guides of public taste" (*Works VI*, 596—597).

Although Thackeray admits that the story has much merit and is often written with brilliancy and wisdom, in view of its faulty moral he regards it as his duty as a critic

"to abuse and deny it altogether. — the which I cordially do: and I warn the public, firstly, that under pretence of giving him a fairy story, the authors of the *Good Genius that turned Everything into*, &c., inveigle the reader into a sermon, — that the sermon is quite unsatisfactory, but that the preachers have a plenty of brains to supply their abundance of doctrine" (*Works VI*, 597).

Thackeray has another objection to the brothers Mayhew, however, and that is their "personification mania", their propensity to animate inanimate objects, in which they badly imitate their master Dickens:

"To see the faults of a great master, look at his imitators', Reynolds says in his *Discourses*; and the sins of Mr. Dickens's followers must frighten that gentleman not a little. Almost every one of the Christmas carollers are exaggerating the master's own exaggerations, and caricaturing the face of nature most shamelessly. Every object in the world is brought to life, and invested with a vulgar knowingness and outrageous jocularity. Winds used to whistle in former days, and oaks to toss their arms in the storm. Winds are now made to laugh, to howl, to scream, to triumph, to sing choruses; trees to squint, to shiver, to leer, to grin, to smoke pipes, dance hornpipes, and smoke those of tobacco" (*Works VI*, 597).

These imitators of Dickens, however, lack his genius and by copying this aspect of his creative approach produce only "clumsy joking" and "dreary buffooning".¹⁹ Even a greater culprit than the brothers Mayhew in this respect is, in Thackeray's opinion, A. Chamerovzow in his story *The Yule Log*, as the reviewer demonstrates by a specimen of his style and an enumeration of all the metaphors this author uses in describing an old hollow beech, which he personifies as an old being suffering from all sorts of human diseases. Thackeray declares that this "animated landscape nuisance [is] becoming most intolerable, and no longer to be endured", characterizes it as neither ingenious, nor poetical, but "merely foolish", pointing out that in his opinion it is "the easiest and silliest kind of composition in which any poetaster can indulge" and adding this remarkable reflection, in which he sums up his own conception of humour:

"I will engage to vivify my tailor's bill; to make a romance of the heart out of my boot-jack; to get up a tender interest for mashed turnips and boiled mutton; to invest my breeches with pathos; to communicate an air of mystery to my coat (dash its buttons!); to make my waistcoat split its sides with jocularity; or so to treat and degrade, with clumsy joking, anything natural or supernatural; to make a farce of a thunderstorm, or a tragedy of a teapot; but shall we do so? No! in the name of honest humour, no! . . . A comic artist, as I take it, has almost the entire range of thought to play upon; the maddest foolery at times becomes him perfectly as the deepest pathos; but this systematic fooling, this dreary cut-and-dry fancy, this grinning without fun, makes my gorge rise, my dear Mr. YORKE; and I protest, for the honour of the trade. Mr. Merryman in the ring is not a humourist, but a poor half-witted impostor: I have my own opinion of a fellow who deliberately cuts sham jokes. They should come from a humourist's heart, or they are but acts of dishonesty on his part and forgeries on the public" (*Works* VI, 601-602).

Indeed, almost the whole of Thackeray's summary review "A Grumble about the Christmas Books", from which the above quotation is taken, is, as the title suggests, the expression of his exasperation at this new "branch" of English literature, the productions of which were flooding the book market. In the introduction he writes to Mr. Yorke that he undertook the task, sharing the editor's idea that

"the occupation would be exceedingly easy, jovial, and pleasant; that we should be able to make an agreeable lecture upon an amusing subject; that critics, authors, and readers would be brought together in the most enticing and amiable manner possible; and that we should finish off an article with kind hearts, friendly greetings, merry Christmas, and that sort of thing, — a perfect prize-paper, streaky with benevolence, and larded with the most unctuous human kindness, with an appropriate bit of holly placed in its hinder quarter" (*Works* VI, 584).

But he informs his editor that they both "made a most dismal mistake", for he finds himself in a wretched state of mind instead, surfeited with Christmas stories:

"I have read Christmas books until I have reached a state of mind the most deplorable. 'Curses on all fairies!' I gasp out; 'I will never swallow another one as long as I live. Perdition seize all Benevolence! Be hanged to the Good and the Truc! Fling me every drop of the milk of human kindness out of the window! — horrible, curdling slops, away with them! Kick old Father Christmas out of doors, the abominable old impostor! Next year I'll go to the Turks, the Scotch, or other heathens who don't keep Christmas. Is all the street to come for a Christmas-box? Are the waits to be invading us by millions, and yelling all night? By my soul, if anybody offers me plum-pudding again this season, I'll fling it in his face!" (*Works* VI, 581-582).

¹⁹ *Works* VI, 598.

A little further on he openly declares that "the Christmas-book system" in England is bidding fair to become a nuisance, and adds:

"Sir, it was wisely regulated that Christmas should come only once a year, but that does not mean that it is to stay all the year round. Do you suppose that any man could read through all these books and retain his senses? I have swallowed eight or nine out of the twenty-five or thirty volumes. I am in a pitiable condition. I speak with difficulty out of my fullness" (*Works* VI, 582).

That Thackeray in spite of all his determination to be tolerant to Christmas books and treat them as a special literary *genre* clearly saw their basic limitations from the point of view of art, is also confirmed by his positively evaluating only pure fairy tales, which do not draw upon nature, but upon "Mother Bunch's delightful super-nature", or realistic, satirical or humorous stories. From the fairy-tale books he warmly praises *The Fairy Ring*, "a set of new stories delightfully translated from Grimm's various collections by J. E. Taylor, and charmingly illustrated by Mr. R. Doyle", reserving much space in his review to a very positive assessment of Doyle as illustrator of fairy tales, with an almost uncanny knowledge of fairyland and its inhabitants, and as contributor to *Punch*. The tales themselves are highly appreciated by him because they are written in the old form of the fairy tale, possessing "the child-like simplicity and wonder of narration which constitute its main charm" and being unspoilt by "that knowing modern slang and *goguenard* air with which later authors have polluted that sacred fairy ground". He also has nothing but praise for the fairy-tale books he considers in his review "On Some Illustrated Children's Books". He is mainly concerned with the pictorial side of the works he assesses, but pays some attention, too, to the text, finding much to praise especially in the *History of Tom Hickathrift the Conqueror*, the vigorous style of which reminds him of "Fielding's cudgel-style by the force and simplicity of the blow", in *The Babes in the Wood* and *The Good-natured Bear*. His warmest eulogy is bestowed, however, upon Hans Christian Andersen, whose *Wonderful Stories for Children* fully recompensed him for the suffering he had undergone when reading the other Christmas books he "grumbled about" in his summary review, for "what man can go on grumbling in the presence of such an angelical spirit as Hans Christian Andersen"?²⁰ After having been "perfectly bored with the beef-fed English fairies, their hob-nailed gambols, and elephantine friskiness", he finds Andersen's stories a real blessing and pays to him the following generous tribute:

"Heaven bless Hans Christian! Here *are* fairies! Here *is* fancy, and graceful wit, and delicate humour, and sweet, naïve kindness, flowing from the heart! Here is frolic without any labour! Here is admirable feeling without any consciousness or degradation! Though we have no sort of respect for a great, hulking, whiskered, red-faced, middle-aged man, who dresses himself in a pinafore and affects to frolic like a baby, may we not be charmed by the play and prattle of a child? And Hans Christian Andersen so affects me" (*Works* VI, 606).

Of the Christmas books which were not fairy tales, Thackeray took a positive view of the collection *Poems and Pictures*, because it contained, besides bad poems and pictures, also several good ones, of Mrs. Sinnett's "pretty" though

²⁰ For the quotations in this paragraph see *Works* II, 626, *Contributions*, 98 and *Works* VI, 576.

not original book *A Christmas in the Seventeenth Century*, and of two humorous works — Jerrold's *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures* and *The Comic Blackstone* by Gilbert Abbott à Beckett. His criticism of Jerrold's little book is convincing proof of his unprejudiced approach to literary criticism. Although he had many controversies with Jerrold, who irritated him by his extreme radicalism and his sharp attacks upon the Church, the clergy and the rich,²¹ his review does not bear any traces of this. With great respect and warm praise he evaluates Jerrold's book as a work of permanent value, which differs from the other Christmas books by its truthfulness to life. He discusses at some length the impression Jerrold's characters made upon contemporary readers,²² but points out that the social significance of the book is even wider than its contemporary appeal, for Jerrold depicted the life of an English middle-class family so faithfully that future generations may get out of it "as accurate pictures of London life as we can out of the pictures of Hogarth".²³ The power of Jerrold's satire, as he believes, reaches even the level of the satirical mastery of Swift:

"It is quite as keen as the satirical book of the Dean before alluded to [i.e. *Directions to Servants* — LP], contains wit and sarcasm quite as brilliant, and gives (in caricature) the most queer, minute, and amusing picture of English middle-class life."²⁴

Special words of praise are reserved by him for Jerrold's power of creating lifelike characters whom the reader is disposed to accept as actual people, which in his opinion places this book above Dickens's *Cricket on the Hearth* in respect of truth and reality. The greatest charm of the book is the "credibility of Mr. and Mrs. Caudle", writes Thackeray, and proceeds:

"The couple have become real living personages in history, like Queen Elizabeth, or Sancho Panza, or Parson Adams, or any other past character, who, false or real once, is only imaginary now, and for whose existence we have only the word of a book. And surely to create these realities is the greatest triumph of a fictitious writer — a serious or humorous poet. Mr. Dickens has created a whole gallery of these: our quarrel with his last book, and with Dot and Peerybingle, is because we don't believe in them."²⁵

There is one character of Dickens, however, though not from the *Cricket on the Hearth*, which Thackeray does use as his standard for measuring the credibility of Mrs. Caudle — his favourite Mrs. Nickleby:

"They are both types of English matrons so excellent, that it is hard to say which of the two should have the *pas*."²⁶

The vitality of Jerrold's characters is in Thackeray's opinion a greater merit of the book than its wit and humour, though he praises even these, quoting some witty puns and aphorisms, and comparing Jerrold's humour with that

²¹ For an analysis of his attitude to Jerrold see *The Uses of Adversity*, pp. 363ff. and 491, note 41, Melville, op. cit., I, 296, Wilson, op. cit., I, 350, II, 100; for the attitude itself see *Works* II, 712–713, *Letters* II, 281–282, 681, 823–824, III, 432.

²² For another interesting remark on the contemporary appeal of Jerrold's characters see "Letters from a Club Arm-Chair" (*The Calcutta Star*, August 21, 1845, reprinted in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 18, December 1963, No. 3, p. 233). For Thackeray's other references to this book see *Works* VI, 451, 460, VIII, 49 (all 1845).

²³ *Contributions*, 94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

of Fielding and Smollett. The general truth of Thackeray's evaluation of Jerrold's book may pass unchallenged, for the work does possess certain undoubtable qualities — the characters are indeed lively and convincing (though they cannot be placed on the same level as the immortal creations of Cervantes, Fielding and Dickens) and the humour irresistible. In auguring for it an everlasting popularity, however, Thackeray was not a reliable prophet, for the book, once so widely popular in its country, is scarcely read nowadays, especially outside England, where it is practically unknown.

As far as A Beckett's work is concerned, Thackeray praises it in the first place for not breaking the "rule" that writers of Christmas books, writers of fiction in general and "comic" writers in particular should not pretend to instruct the reader in moral and political sermons or have other pretensions exceeding their field and possibilities. A Beckett wins his commendation for occupying himself "steadily and modestly with his joking, and with nothing else", for not making "one single attempt to be sublime", pretending "to regenerate the world" or preaching sermons on ethics, hydrostatics or geology.²⁷ In his opinion, which is in full harmony with his conception of beauty in art, there is nothing to be ashamed of in cultivating merely the ridiculous, even if it is generally regarded as a lower sphere of art than the sublime and even if writers cultivating it "must live in the world and go out of it with this woeful conviction, that there is a kind of art incomparably higher than theirs, and which is not to be reached by any straining or endeavour":

"But theirs is no bad position after all. It is something to be *Mercutio* if you can't be *Romeo* — to be a gentleman, if not a hero — to have a shrewd, kindly, wit without the least claim to be a sublime genius or a profound philosopher — to have kind affections and warm feelings, but to be very cautious and diffident in parading them; — in fine, though a man can't produce *Paradise Lost* or *Newton's Principia*, it is by no means disagreeable to be able to write the 'Comic Blackstone'."²⁸

The book as a whole is evaluated by Thackeray as a splendid humorous commentary on English laws, which is, "from beginning to end, of the most happy and ingenious absurdity", full of "queerness and folly", of hilarious and absurd humour:

"If laughter, without the least malice — laughter springing out of the sheer absurd — laughter the most unrestrainable be worth cultivating for Christmas-holidays, this should be the Christmas book of the season."²⁹

As we are already used to in his criticism, Thackeray not only sharply criticizes what he regards as deviations from reality in the works of the producers of "Christmas" literature, including those of the initiator of this literary fashion, but also juxtaposes against their works his own productions of this type, in which he shows what sort of literature should be produced in this season as well as in all the others. His own Christmas books are predominantly realistic or satirical stories or sketches (*Mrs. Perkins's Ball*, 1847, *Our Street*, 1848, *Dr. Birch and his Young Friends*, 1849 and *The Kickleburys on the Rhine*, 1850) with a single exception — *The Rose and the Ring* (1855) is a fairy tale, but a burlesque one, one shaft of its satire being aimed, as we have already

²⁷ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 102, 101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

seen, against chivalric romances, another, but a very blunt one, against pantomimes (as Ray has pointed out, the story, called by Thackeray a fireside pantomime, has a pantomime plot and contains many pantomime characters).³⁰ A secondary purpose of *Mrs. Perkins's Ball* was, as the same scholar has shown, "to underline the blatant snobbery of the annuals":

"It was satirically advertised in the magazines as 'containing twenty-three gorgeous plates of beauty, rank, and fashion, seventy or eighty select portraits of the friends of Mrs. Perkins. To illustrate the truly festive volume, for the express use of the aristocracy there will be an illuminated edition, in which the plates will be coloured.'"³¹

This is also the Christmas book which Thackeray himself "reviews" as the last of those productions about which he "grumbles", and he treats it very ruthlessly (though only its pictorial part), being so exasperated by Dickens's imitators that he longs "for some one to devour":

"Ha! What have we here? — *M. A. Titmarsh's Christmas Book* — MRS. PERKINS'S BALL. Dedicated to the Mulligan of Ballymulligan. Ballymulligan! Ballyfiddlestick! What, you, too, Mr. Titmarsh? You, you sneering wretch, setting up a Christmas-book of your own? This then, is the meaning of your savage feeling towards 'the minor fiddlers'! Is your kit, sirrah, any bigger than theirs? You, who in the columns of this very Magazine have sneered at the works of so many painters, look at your own performances! Some of your folks have scarcely more legs than Miss Biffin; they have fins instead of hands — they squint almost every one of them!" (*Works* VI, 609.)

As follows from our investigation in this sub-chapter, Thackeray's criticism of "Christmas" literature represents a very remarkable part of his critical legacy, so remarkable indeed that it is a matter of surprise that it has so far not been assessed as a whole by any Thackerayan scholar. What should be particularly emphasized is that the critic has more to say in it than in most of his other critical contributions on the art of fiction in general, though most of what he says is rather implied in his evaluation of "Christmas" literature as a specific literary *genre* than explicitly formulated. What also deserves mentioning is the fact that Thackeray's judgments are in this case predominantly based upon purely aesthetic criteria, derived from his own conception of the creation of literary character, of the conduct and arrangement of the plot, of the aesthetic relationship of the literary artist to his materials, his choice of metaphors, his usage of language, etc. And what deserves praise, too, is the essential justness of Thackeray's criticism and his capacity for dispensing praise and blame in correct proportion and in due place. He is not an entirely infallible judge, however, but the mistakes he makes are not in this case unpardonable blunders. As we have seen, he does not prove to be a very penetrating critic, at least in my opinion, in evaluating the social function of Dickens's Christmas stories, and he bestows more praise than was due to Jerrold's Christmas book. These mistakes do not, however, substantially detract from the considerable value of this part of his criticism which has so far been so surprisingly and in my opinion undeservedly neglected.

³⁰ See *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 230.

³¹ Lady Ritchie's *Biographical Introductions to The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, London, 1898-1899, IX, xlvi; quoted by Ray in *The Age of Wisdom*, pp. 448-449, note 6.