

3. Thackeray as a Critic of Realistic Fiction

As I have pointed out in the prefatory words to this whole lengthy chapter, Thackeray's criticism of fiction of a realistic type represents a relatively very small part in his critical legacy. During his professional critical career, when his critical interest was predominantly concentrated on literature produced in his own time, he paid considerable attention to the work of Charles Dickens. In a longer *exposé* in his review "Horae Catnachianae", in his polemically pointed commentary to *Catherine* and in marginal remarks he critically commented upon the "Newgate" part of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and, in the review quoted above, also on *Nicholas Nickleby*, devoted a whole critical contribution ("Dickens in France", *Fraser's Magazine*, March 1842) to severe condemnation of the French dramatization of the last-named novel, reviewed three of Dickens's Christmas stories, assessed his contemporary's art in his later lecture *Charity and Humour*, and fairly copiously commented upon all Dickens's novels published during his lifetime. Some scholars (as far as I have been able to ascertain, van Duzer and Malcolm Elwin) attribute to him, too, an early review of Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, *Pickwick Papers*, *Bentley's Miscellany* and *Oliver Twist*, published in the *London and Westminster Review* in July 1837, but his authorship has not been, as far as I know, definitely ascertained (neither Melville nor Gulliver include this review among Thackeray's works and Charles Mauskopf, who recently published a study on "Thackeray's Attitude Towards Dickens's Writings",¹ does not mention it) and I do not therefore take this review into account. An additional reason which made me exclude it was that when I studied it, I found several things which do not in my opinion sound like Thackeray, not in style (of which as a foreigner I cannot be a good judge) but in critical assessment, though the general critical approach does in many of its aspects resemble that of Thackeray. The reviewer for instance rebukes Dickens, though with admiration and good will, for employing his powers on a very limited sphere of the "lower orders" in London, while Thackeray praised him for it; the reviewer maintains that Dickens depicts the same class of persons and circumstances as Hook does, while Thackeray pointed out that they concentrated upon two opposite extremes of society; the reviewer places Dickens below Irving, while Thackeray's attitude to the American writer was in this period not yet so positive as it was in his later years;² the reviewer has a very critical attitude to Dickens's art in drawing characters, while Thackeray always highly appreciated it except for the representatives of the criminal underworld in *Oliver Twist*.

Of the contemporary French realistic novelists Thackeray paid formal critical attention to Charles de Bernard in his summary review "On Some French Fashionable Novels" (*The Paris Sketch Book*, 1840), in which he briefly reviewed Bernard's novel *Les Ailes d'Icare*, assessed one character from *Un Acte de Vertu* and provided brief summaries of the plots of the latter novel, as well as of two others, *Gerfaut* and *La Femme de Quarante Ans*. In his review "Jérôme Paturot" (*Fraser's Magazine*, September 1843) he paid detailed attention to the novel of the same title by M.R.L. Reybaud.

¹ *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 21, No. 1, June 1966, pp. 21-33.

² For Thackeray's earlier not entirely positive comment on Irving see *Letters* I, 288; for his later praises see *Works* X, 613, XVII, 620. *Letters* III, 511-512, and especially "Nil Nisi Bonum", *The Cornhill Magazine*, February 1860.

The only exception to the general direction of his critical interest, in the 1830s and 1840s, to contemporary literature, is his review "Fielding's Works" (*The Times*, September 2, 1840). In the 1850s the focus of his interest shifted to the English literature of the 18th century and he paid relatively much attention especially to the lives but also to the works of the novelists and other prose writers of that period, in his *Lectures on the English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (read for the first time in 1851 and published in 1853) and in his later lecture *Charity and Humour* (read and published in 1853). I shall not keep, however, to a chronological arrangement and shall consider, in the first sub-chapter, his criticism of the French and English realistic novel of his own time (paying attention, too, to some of his later judgments which he pronounced as reader) and, in the second, his criticism of the 18th-century English realistic fiction, both in the earlier and later period.

I. THE FRENCH AND ENGLISH REALISTIC NOVEL OF HIS OWN TIME

In his evaluation of the French and English realistic novel of his time Thackeray applies, as usual, criteria based both on extra-aesthetic and aesthetic considerations. As far as the French novelists are concerned, one of the criteria he uses with particular emphasis is his usual concern about the possible harmful influence of the assessed novel on the morals of its readers. In the case of the two novelists we are discussing, however, Thackeray does not use this criterion as one of his instruments for condemning the objects of his criticism. On the contrary, he places Bernard, a definitely second-rate novelist from the point of view of his art, above all his contemporaries as a writer whose works wound the English sense of propriety only occasionally, and whose characters are "men and women of genteel society — rascals enough, but living in no state of convulsive crimes", so that the English reader can follow the novelist "in his lively, malicious account of their manners, without risk of lighting upon any such horrors as Balzac and Dumas have provided for us". Thackeray is not entirely uncritical, however, and has some reservations regarding the moral notions of his favourite, as follows especially from his brief summaries of the plots of several of Bernard's novels, all of which deal almost exclusively with adultery. As I have pointed out in my study on his criticism of French literature, Thackeray is inclined to forgive Bernard even this weak point, which is a very grave offence in his eyes, because this author writes "like a gentleman".¹ Thackeray evaluates Bernard in the same spirit in his review of Reybaud's novel, confessing in a marginal comment to his indebtedness to the former novelist, pointing out that he was the first English critic who paid any attention to his works, dissociating himself from the opinion of English critics who found Bernard's novel *Gerfaut* to be immoral, and adding:

"It may be so in certain details, but it is not immoral in tendency" (*Works* VI, 320).

Also Reybaud is separated by Thackeray from the rest of the French novelists and his novel is treated as one of the very rare honorary exceptions to the

¹ For the quotations see *Works* II, 98—99, 109.

general taste for immoralities and horrors in France, as "a good, cheerful, clear, kind-hearted, merry, smart, bitter, sparkling romance".²

Another criterion which he applies to the works of these two novelists is the degree and quality of their instructive value. In the introduction to his article "On Some French Fashionable Novels" he argues with those critics who persist in underestimating the novel and in reprehending it for alleged "frivolity", underlines the instructive value of this literary art which is in his opinion the same as (if not higher than) that of regular historical works and emphasizes that from the contemporary French novel the English reader can gain a great deal more knowledge of French society than he could get from his own personal observation as a foreigner. Not all the French novelists, however, are according to Thackeray such safe guides, for few of them in his opinion paint actual manners truthfully, "without those monstrous and terrible exaggerations in which late French writers [i.e. Balzac, Soulié, and Dumas, whom he mentions earlier-LP] have indulged".³ Bernard and Reybaud, however, provide in Thackeray's opinion "safe" instruction, that is safe especially from the moral point of view and, moreover, truthful in relation to the depicted reality, devoid of any exaggerations. He singles out for appreciation Bernard's delightful depiction of a French dandy in *Les Ailes d'Icare*, sketched in a sparkling and gentlemanlike way, and his lifelike picture of a Paris student in *Un Acte de Vertu*. This novelist is praised by Thackeray even for something he did not intend — for his unconscious, but very truthful representation of the immorality and lack of religious faith prevailing in contemporary French society. Reybaud's novel is evaluated by Thackeray as "a little manual of French quackery" and its author praised for giving in it "a curious insight into some of the social and political humbugs of the great nation"⁴ and for creating lively and convincing sketches from Parisian life. These contain, in Thackeray's opinion, also a wholesome moral — that it is better to live in poverty than to participate in the life of fashionable society. The only improbable part of the novel Thackeray considers to be the temporary salvation of the hero by his rich uncle. The review bears also traces of Thackeray's gradual dissociation from the satire of the highest degree in which humorous elements completely disappear and laughter is ousted by savage anger, a dissociation on which I commented in my study of his aesthetics. The most positive aspect of Reybaud's approach to the depicted society seems to him to be that it is not motivated by indignation, but by kind-heartedness and good humour.

As I have suggested in the introduction to this whole chapter, in his reviews of Bernard and Reybaud, Thackeray takes notice, too, of those specific traits of their works which lead him to discuss Bernard in his article on French fashionable novels and to argue in the conclusion of his review of Reybaud's novel with those critics who denoted this work as a "political" novel. But these traits do not stand in the foreground of his interest, as I pointed out; he does not see any connection between Bernard's works and the productions of the Silver-Fork School and answers the critics aforesaid by saying that Reybaud's novel is perhaps a political novel and contains a great deal of sound thinking, but

² *Works* VI, 323.

³ *Works* II, 98.

⁴ For the quotations see *Works* VI, 330, 323.

that it is first and foremost an entertaining story, in which there is not a trace of bad blood and malice. He recommends it to all readers who want to add to their knowledge of the world, as well as to enjoy a hearty laugh, and expresses his hope that the author, whose main business is political economy, Fourierism, "and other severe sciences", will follow the example of his great predecessor, the police-magistrate Fielding, and find some spare time to write other novels of this kind "for the benefit of the lazy, novel-reading, unscientific world".⁵

Thackeray's critical judgment in the two reviews is to a certain extent coloured by his national prejudice against the French, though not to such a degree as to make him condemn the two writers, as he did for instance Balzac. The validity of his critical judgments is, however, not very great, for he greatly overestimated Bernard, as all scholars agree, and also placed Reybaud as a novelist on a higher level than this serious student of social philosophy, who excelled rather in the latter field of his activities than in his fiction, really deserved. In both cases, however, even if Thackeray failed to see the demerits of the two novelists, he praised them for the positive qualities which their art really possessed and which were appreciated in Bernard by such critics as Sainte-Beuve and Zola, and in Reybaud by Saintsbury.⁶

As far as Dickens is concerned, Thackeray began to refer to his works at first in marginal comments and appreciated his art in the earliest of them (1836 to 1838) very positively, praising "the admirable Boz" for concentrating his creative interest upon the depiction of the lower social classes so far entirely neglected by fiction, and his depictions for not being so fanciful as those of Bulwer (in a comment in his "Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge", quoted in one of the preceding sub-chapters). In the same review he also characterized *Oliver Twist* as "Boz's admirable tale"⁷ and sharply criticized a silly plagiarism of this novel published under the title *Oliver Twiss*, by "Bos". Beginning with his review "Horae Catnachianae", however, his attitude to Dickens changes and he begins to address quite sharp critical rebukes to some aspects of Dickens's creative method, as they revealed themselves in his depiction of the London underworld in the above-quoted novel. As we have seen, he applied to Dickens's criminal characters the same criteria as he did to the absurd figures created by the Newgate novelists and used against them the same critical weapons (except the parody — although he originally intended to include also Dickens among his *Punch's Prize Novelists*, he wisely decided to exclude him, though obviously not quickly enough to avoid rousing the anger of Dickens's

⁵ For the quotations see *Works*, VI, 340, 341.

⁶ See the views of Sainte-Beuve and Zola quoted by Maitre in "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", pp. 290—291 and the opinion of Sainte-Beuve quoted by Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 396, note 84. For Saintsbury's view on Reybaud see *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 100; see also *A History of the French Novel*, II, 306—307. The last-named scholar also believes (and Maitre with him) that Bernard has been rather belittled by official French criticism and that he is not so slight a novelist as he has been thought. See also my analysis of Thackeray's criticism of Bernard and Reybaud in "Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of French Literature", pp. 111—115. In the same study I have also paid detailed attention to Thackeray's criticism, in "Caricatures and Lithography in Paris" (1840), of the work of the satirist Charles Philippon and his collaborator, the designer Honoré Daumier, authors of the Macaire caricatures, *Les cent et un Robert Macaire*, published in 1837—1838 in *Le Charivari* (see *ibid.*, pp. 109—111).

⁷ *Works* I, 143.

friend Forster⁸). I have already quoted comments in which he confronted Dickens's characters with Fielding's Jonathan Wild and with the characters from Gay's *Beggar's Opera*; to this I shall add two further remarks, in the first of which he confronts them with the authentic information about "low" life to be found in cheap periodicals, characterizes Dickens as one of the "poetical travellers, who talk wildly and cleverly, exaggerate much, and know very little of the scenes which they pretend to describe", and addresses the following appeal to the reader who is curious about such matters:

"Let him try, for instance, three numbers of the — twopenny newspaper: there is more information about thieves, ruffians, swindlers of both sexes, more real vulgarity, more tremendous slang, more unconscious, honest, blackguard NATURE, in fact, than Mr. Dickens will ever give to the public. There sits Blackguardism, calm, simple, at ease, uttering her own thoughts in her own language; not having a gentleman for a mouthpiece, not decked out with any artificial flowers of wit, nor trammelled by any notions of politeness or decorum. She has her own jokes, words, ways, as different from those that our popular writers choose to give to her, as their habits are from hers: and when we say that neither Mr. Dickens, nor Mr. Ainsworth, nor Sir Lytton Bulwer, can write about what they know not, we presume that not one of those three gentlemen will be insulted at an imputation of ignorance on a subject where knowledge is not, after all, very desirable."⁹

In the second comment Thackeray confronts Dickens's Nancy with actual reality. In 1840, when he found himself in the midst of the crowd assembled to see the execution of Courvoisier, he observed two girls belonging to the "low" orders of society, one of whom, "a young thief's mistress", might have been, as he insists, a prototype for Boz's Nancy:

"I was curious to look at them, having, in late fashionable novels, read many accounts of such personages. Bah! What figments these novelists tell us! Boz, who knows life well, knows that his Miss Nancy is the most unreal fantastical personage possible; no more like a thief's mistress than one of Gessner's shepherdesses resembles a real country wench. He dare not tell the truth concerning such young ladies. They have, no doubt, virtues like other human creatures; nay, their position engenders virtues that are not called into exercise among other women. But on these an honest painter of human nature has no right to dwell; not being able to paint the whole portrait, he has no right to present one or two favourable points as characterizing the whole; and therefore, in fact, had better leave the picture alone altogether" (*Works* III, 198).

As we may see, Thackeray is again in the first place concerned with the faithfulness of these characters to life and with their creator's failure to depict them as whole human beings (in "Horae" he characterizes them as "startling, pleasing, unnatural caricatures"¹⁰), but in the case of Nancy he is not entirely just to Dickens, for he knew perfectly well from his own experience (when

⁸ Dickens maintained that he should not have been excluded from the series, but he believed that Thackeray wasted his talent in the publications of this kind and very much disliked the latter's *Punch* parodies, insisting that they "did no honour to literature or literary men, and should be left to very inferior and miserable hands" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter, Bloomsbury, 1938, II, 29). Forster, however, accused Thackeray of being as "false as hell". For Thackeray's reaction to this controversy see *Letters* II, 294-304, 308-309, 336-337; for a detailed account of the whole affair see *The Age of Wisdom*, pp. 135-136. According to Gulliver, however, Thackeray most probably did write a parody of Dickens, *The Pseudo-Graphic, or Weak Boz-and-Water*, included in the *Hints to Novelists, for 1846, The Comic Almanack*, November 18, 1846 (see op. cit., pp. 128-129).

⁹ "Horae Catnachianae", p. 408.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

creating Catherine, for instance) that Dickens could not have told the whole truth about his prostitute, even if he had wanted to do so. As Kathleen Tillotson has pointed out,

"Dickens does not and could not answer Thackeray's objection [i.e. in his preface to the 1841 edition of the novel, from which I shall quote below and which was a defence of Dickens's approach as well as a reaction against Thackeray's attacks — *II*] that it makes an unbalanced picture, since so much of the rest of the truth about a prostitute's feelings was necessarily suppressed."¹¹

In the second place, Thackeray is again much disturbed about the possible harmful influence of Dickens's "mixed" criminal characters upon the morals of the reader, for Dickens's propensity to endow them with virtues (Nancy) or humour (Fagin and the Artful Dodger) or to present harrowing accounts of their last moments (Fagin and Sikes) produces in his opinion a similar reaction in the reader as do the glorified ruffians of Ainsworth and Bulwer — breathless interest, tender feelings and sympathy.

As is obvious from the preceding, Thackeray failed to see that in creating his *Oliver Twist* Dickens followed (as the author himself pointed out in the 1841 preface to the novel) the same models which the critic used as his standards when assessing this work and those of the Newgate novelists, namely Fielding in particular (but also Defoe, Smollett, Hogarth and Cervantes), and that the "aim and object" he had in view was the same as that followed by Thackeray in *Catherine* — to protest against the glorified criminals created by the Newgate novelists, "to dim the false glitter surrounding something which really did exist, by showing it in its unattractive and repulsive truth". As Dickens explained in the 1841 preface, his sole original intention was "to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last". When he sought in contemporary reality for the "vilest evil", the darkest vice which could serve as a contrast to the Good and Virtue embodied in his hero, he naturally found it in the most morally degraded members of society — the criminals and prostitutes. Only on more mature consideration did he realize what a splendid opportunity such characters and milieu offered for a protest against the idealized depictions of the same reality in the Newgate novels:

"When I came to discuss the subject more maturely with myself, I saw many strong reasons for pursuing the course to which I was inclined. I had read of thieves by scores — seductive fellows (amiable for the most part), faultless in dress, plump in pocket, choice in horseflesh, bold in bearing, fortunate in gallantry, great at a song, a bottle, pack of cards or dice-box, and fit companions for the bravest. But I had never met (except in HOGARTH) with the miserable reality. It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really do exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to show them as they really are, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great, black, ghastly gallows closing up their prospect, turn them where they may; it appeared to me that to do this, would be to attempt a something which was greatly needed, and which would be a service to society. And therefore I did it as I best could."¹²

As I have shown at greater detail in my study on the Newgate novel, however, Dickens's picture of the London underworld failed to convince all at

¹¹ "Oliver Twist", *Essays and Studies*, 1959, p. 98.

¹² Preface to *Oliver Twist*, pp. xvii—xviii; for the preceding quotations see *ibid.*, pp. xvii, xx, xvii.

his readers of his intention to show up the faults of the Newgate novels. The contrast between his work and *Jack Sheppard* was not perceived, either, by the majority of his critics (as Dickens himself complained¹³), and he was accused of being himself tainted, as Kathleen Tillotson has it, "with the sham romance that he claimed to be reacting against". As the same scholar has shown, these rebukes were to a certain extent justified:

"Dickens must have had Ainsworth in mind as one of the glamorisers of thieves; but he was discreet in not naming him, for he used more than one hint from *Bookwood*, such as the comic use of 'flash' language (Jerry Juniper) and the description of Conkey Jem's hut in Thorne Waste where Turpin takes refuge. These borrowings, though superficial, complicate Dickens's picture of himself as a reformer, and gave an edge to some of the attacks on him."¹⁴

Those censures of Thackeray that are aimed at Dickens's use of "flash" language and slang are therefore justifiable; yet he failed to see that the general contrast of Dickens's criminal characters with "the 'heroes' of both Ainsworth and Bulwer" was "emphatic", as Mrs. Tillotson points out, for "Dickens's thieves are contemporary not historical, 'low' not aristocratic, their surroundings are squalid and their end miserable".¹⁵ Nor is Thackeray in the right in his evaluation of Dickens's depiction of the last moments of Fagin and especially of Sikes, which made a very strong impression upon him,¹⁶ but which he wrongly interpreted as a shift of moral sympathy on the part of the author: in his opinion Bill Sikes in his last moments arouses in the reader such a feeling as this sort of character should never do — "a kind of pity and admiration".¹⁷ As Mrs. Tillotson points out, Dickens "perceived and penetrated, both in Sikes and Fagin, the 'strong truth' of the horrible, deserved yet pitiable, isolation of the criminal; and indeed this was the natural fulfilment of his intention to show criminals 'as they really are'". In the last scenes of Sikes and Fagin

"there is added to the reality of their evil natures, brutish and violent, mean and cringing, the reality of the lonely and terrified human being. The imaginative force with which Dickens conveys that loneliness and terror, in compelling detail, is ill interpreted if it is seen as a shift of moral sympathy or in any way divergent from his stated purpose.¹⁸ His imagination was more strongly stimulated by the 'dregs of life' and by 'adverse circumstance' than by the triumphing 'principle of Good'; in this he resembles other great writers. Dickens concluded his retrospect of how his aim 'appeared' to him with the simple words 'And therefore I did it as I best could'; the ring of satisfaction is surely justified."¹⁹

And, moreover, Thackeray underestimated the power of Dickens's art, for this novelist's depictions not only roused the readers' interest in the fortunes of Fagin's gang and sympathy with their hard lot, as the critic complained, but told at least some of them more than the author himself intended to say. Dickens's view of criminality as a social phenomenon was considerably limited owing to

¹³ See *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter, I, 240.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 97. For the preceding quotation see *ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See e.g. *Works* VI, 322, II, 488-489.

¹⁷ *Works* III, 185.

¹⁸ As Mrs. Tillotson points out in a footnote to this, it was so interpreted in Thackeray's day for instance by R. H. Horne and has been in ours by Humphry House.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 195; see also *ibid.*, p. 104.

the contradictions inherent in his outlook upon contemporary reality: he saw in criminality an inevitable social evil, which he placed, in his novel, in contrast with the Good which was to triumph at last. But his criminal characters set in the wide canvas of his novel, including the paupers in the work-houses and the poor in the slums, assumed a wider meaning: they showed, at least to some of the contemporary readers, the very social roots of criminality. This objective meaning of Dickens's pictures of Fagin's gang of thieves was obviously not understood by Thackeray, for he does not comment upon it at all, but it was highly appreciated as early as 1844 by Belinski:

"As a true artist Dickens truthfully represents criminal and evil characters as the victims of a bad social order; but as a true-born Englishman he never admits it even to himself."²⁰

Thackeray's failure to appreciate this aspect of Dickens's depiction is really curious, for his views upon criminality were obviously more mature than those of Dickens, even if not entirely devoid of similar contradictions. As Colby has pointed out, Thackeray regarded "crime and sin as rooted in human instincts", rather than in social conditions, as we should add, and, like Dickens, saw in criminality a necessary and irremovable social phenomenon; yet in *Catherine* he conceived crime, as Colby has also shown, "as a gross image of the evil that corrupts all society", set "rascality as the norm of society",²¹ and in several of his comments sought for the roots of criminality in what are in my opinion the right places — in poverty and hunger at any time, as well as in "the brutality and the inefficiency of the criminal jurisprudence of England"²² in the time of Sheppard and Jonathan Wild.

Thus from my point of view Thackeray's critical attacks upon Dickens's criminal characters are justifiable only in some of their points; in general, however, as I have pointed out before, he is unjust to Dickens when he places his convincing characters (whose immortality has been sufficiently proved by the readers' unabated interest in their adventures) on the same level as the absurd figures created by Ainsworth and Bulwer, now safely dead in spite of their previous enormous popularity. As I have suggested in the chapter dealing with Thackeray's criticism of the Newgate novelists, however, these attacks are quite justifiable from the critic's own point of view. He was convinced that the only possible creative approach to criminal characters was a strictly objective, harshly realistic or satirical depiction (such as he himself used in depicting Catherine and Barry Lyndon, or his later and much subtler rogues), devoid of any romantic trappings (such as he found especially in Bulwer's and in Ainsworth's romances) and of any other attempts to make the unpleasant reality acceptable to the reader (as for example Dickens's propensity to endow his criminal characters with virtues or use in their depiction humorous circumlocution).

It is necessary to point out, however, that in his attacks Thackeray limits himself to Dickens's creative approach to the criminal characters in *Oliver Twist* and only very exceptionally extends his censure to include the novelist's

²⁰ V. G. Belinski, *Sobr. soch. v trekh tomakh*, vol. II, 645 (1848).

²¹ For the quotations see *op. cit.*, pp. 391, 390, 389. Colby bases his conclusions, however, also upon the views expressed in the review "Hints for a History of Highwaymen", *Fraser's Magazine*, March 1834, included by White among disallowed attributions.

²² "William Ainsworth and Jack Sheppard", p. 242. For the other comments see *ibid.*, pp. 237-238, 242, 243; *Works* XI, 532-533, XIII, 16.

depiction of the lower social classes in general (we may instance his criticism of *Nicholas Nickleby* in the conclusion of "Horae", where he points out that Dickens's depiction of the quarrel and reconciliation between Mr. Lilyvick and Mr. Kenwigs in this novel does not depict the life of the lower social classes as faithfully as the street ballads do). He does not evaluate *Oliver Twist* as a whole, and finds some positive values in it, notably Dickens's pictures of the work-house, which he appreciates as "genuine and pure", in the comment I have already quoted in the chapter dealing with his criticism of the Newgate novelists. Moreover, he also confesses to having read, in private, not only *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, but also *Jack Sheppard*, *Paul Clifford* and *Rookwood* with great enjoyment:

"All these opinions are, to be sure, delivered *ex cathedra*, from the solemn critical chair; but when out of it, and in private, we humbly acknowledge that we have read every one of Mr. Dickens's tales with the most eager delight, that we watch for *Nicholas Nickleby* as the month comes round, and have the strongest curiosity and admiration for Mr. Ainsworth's new work, *Jack Sheppard*. Mr. Long Ned, Mr. Paul Clifford, Mr. William Sykes, Mr. Fagin, Mr. John Sheppard (just mentioned), and Mr. Richard Turpin, whose portraits are the most striking in the modern and fashionable Thief's Gallery, are gentlemen whom we must all admire. We could 'hug the rogues and love them', and do — *in private*. In public it is, however, quite wrong to avow such likings, and to be seen in such company."²³

As Ivashева has rightly pointed out, Thackeray's attacks on Dickens's depiction of the London underworld in this novel cannot be therefore interpreted as any programmatic campaign against his great contemporary.²⁴ This is also confirmed by his later comments on the novel. In his article on Cruikshank, for instance, published only four months after *Catherine*, he refers to the characters from this novel as to figures which remain impressed on the memory of the reader (though, to be sure, he weakens this tribute by laying too much stress on "the wonderful assistance" Dickens "has derived from the artist"²⁵). In *The Newcomes* he recalls with sympathy the enormous popularity of *Oliver Twist* in its heyday, making Lady Walham so intensely interested "in the parish boy's progress" as to read the novel in her bedroom by stealth, and Kew laugh at Mr. Bumble the Beadle so immensely "as to endanger the reopening of his wound".²⁶

The same might be said about Thackeray's attack on *Nicholas Nickleby*. Although in "Horae Catnachianae" he criticized Dickens's depictions of the life of the lower classes as "artificial" when compared to the "nature" to be found in street ballads²⁷ and showed, as Mauskopf formulated it, "how in *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens uses slang and bad grammar, not the characters or the situations themselves, to bind the story to a particular social class",²⁸ he obviously thought much of Dickens's depiction of Dotheboys Hall, as his later references suggest,²⁹ and had two great favourites among Dickens's characters

²³ "Horae Catnachianae", p. 408.

²⁴ See *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.

²⁵ *Works* II, 482.

²⁶ *Works* XIV, 496; see also *ibid.*, p. 502.

²⁷ "Horae Catnachianae", p. 424; for his whole criticism see *ibid.*, pp. 420-424.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

²⁹ See *Works* X, 551, V, 290, Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 107; for a reference to *Squeers* see *Works* IX, 270.

(Mrs. Nickleby and Crummles³⁰). His positive attitude to this novel is best expressed, however, in his article "Dickens in France", in which he highly praises several episodes and characters from the novel, especially again "the famous Mrs. Nickleby, who has lain undescribed until Boz seized upon her and brought that great truth to light, and whom yet every man possesses in the bosom of his own family",³¹ positively appreciates the English dramatic version of the novel, but sharply condemns the French dramatization, along with the critic of this dramatization, Jules Janin, who made it the basis for "a most stern and ferocious criticism upon the piece in question, and upon poor Monsieur Dickens, its supposed author".³² As Mauskopf aptly summed it up, Thackeray describes the French production "as being heavily plotted and excessively melodramatic and having little in common with Dickens's novel".³³ The article was written at a time when Thackeray and Dickens had become good friends, but the criticism, even if it may be characterized as a spirited defence of Dickens by the critic, is in no way influenced by this change of their former friendly relationships into personal friendship. For even in those of the preceding years, when Thackeray was most critical of Dickens and the Newgate controversy was at its whitest heat (1839—1840), his attitude to his great contemporary was not prejudiced, as is further confirmed by his ranking Dickens (in 1840) among the greatest humorists of world literature (beside Shakespeare and Fielding) whose humour "has been eagerly received by the public as by the most delicate connoisseur":

"There is hardly a man in England who can read but will laugh at Falstaff and the humour of Joseph Andrews; and honest Mr. Pickwick's story can be felt and loved by any person above the age of six" (*Works* II, 420).

In the same year he also highly appreciated the great instructive value of *Pickwick Papers* in the following comment:

"I am sure that a man who, a hundred years hence, should sit down to write the history of our time, would do wrong to put that great contemporary history of Pickwick aside, as a frivolous work. It contains true character under false names; and, like Roderick Random, an inferior work, and Tom Jones (one that is immeasurably superior), gives us a better idea of the state and ways of the people, than one could gather from any more pompous or authentic histories" (*Works* II, 98).

The following warm tribute to Dickens was also written in 1840:

"There seems no flagging as yet in it [i.e. in Dickens's countenance in Maclise's portrait — LP], no sense of fatigue, or consciousness of decaying power. Long mayest thou, O Boz! reign over thy comic kingdom; long may we pay tribute, whether of threepence weekly or of a shilling monthly, it matters not. Mighty prince! at thy imperial feet, Titmarsh, humblest of thy servants, offers his vows of loyalty and his humble tribute of praise" (*Works* II, 518).³⁴

³⁰ For his reference to Crummles see *Works* III, 175; for his declaration of love for this character see note 13 in the preceding sub-chapter, and *Works* X, 627, XVII, 598. For his later praises of the novel see *Works* X, 627 (where he reproduces the opinions of his daughter Anne, a passionate reader of *Nicholas Nickleby*).

³¹ *Works* IV, 162. For a later praise of this character see *Works* X, 628.

³² *Works* IV, 161.

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

³⁴ See also the following comment in one of Thackeray's letters of 1840: "The new Boz [i.e. the first number of *Master Humphrey's Clock* — LP] is dull but somehow gives one a very pleasing impression of the man: a noble tender-hearted creature, who sympathizes with all the human race" (*Letters* I, 438).

That Thackeray's attacks upon Dickens in the years 1839 and 1840 were an exceptional phase in his attitude to his great contemporary and not the beginning of a deliberate campaign is, after all, most convincingly proved by the fact that when he had had his say in the Newgate controversy, he stored the sharp critical weapons he had used against Dickens in his armory and never took them out again. Although in his own words he "quarrelled" with Dickens's art, protested in his reviews of Dickens's Christmas stories against the novelist's propensity to exaggeration, to "animate inanimate objects, and make nature bear witness to the ludicrous or the tragical moral in the author's mind",³⁵ as he expressed it in his review of Horne's *A New Spirit of the Age*, rebuked him for not faithfully depicting nature (in the same reviews and in his letter to David Masson) and for assuming the office of a social reformer (in his review of Lever's *St. Patrick's Eve*), he recognized Dickens's genius and paid to it many grateful tributes, as for instance the following from *Charity and Humour*:

"I may quarrel with Mr. Dickens's art a thousand and a thousand times; I delight and wonder at his genius; I recognize in it — I speak with awe and reverence — a commission from that Divine Beneficence, whose blessed task we know it will one day be to wipe every tear from every eye. Thankfully I take my share of the feast of love and kindness, which this gentle, and generous, and charitable soul has contributed to the happiness of the world. I take and enjoy my share and say a Benediction for the meal" (*Works* X, 628).³⁶

He also several times wrote of the affectionate hold Dickens's novels have taken of the English public, of the continual and confidential communion between the novelist and his readers, which is, as he points out, "something like personal affection", gratefully acknowledged that Dickens's books "have made millions of rich and poor happy" and thanked the novelist, for himself and for all his readers, for "the store of happy hours that he has made us pass, the kindly and pleasant companions whom he has introduced to us; the harmless laughter, the generous wit, the frank, manly, human love which he has taught us to feel". Increasingly with the advance of time he accepts with appreciation what was objectively not progressive in Dickens's art — the author's programme of class compromise — paying at the same time, however, warm tribute to the novelist's humanism. This is most clearly obvious in his lecture *Charity and Humour*, where he assesses Dickens exclusively as a tender humorist (ignoring, except for a short comment on the good influence of the critical depiction of Dotheboys Hall, Dickens's social criticism as well as his masterly satire which was at that time reaching its maturity), ranking him among those great writers (characteristically selecting Addison, Steele, Goldsmith, Hood, but also Fielding) who had done much in support of the holy cause "of love and charity, the cause of the poor, the weak, and the unhappy; the sweet mission of love and tenderness, and peace and good will towards men", again praising *A Christmas Carol* as the best "charity-sermon" ever preached in the world, thanking his great contemporary for the "multiplied kindnesses which he has conferred upon us all" and calling him a "kind friend, who soothed and charmed so many hours, brought pleasure and sweet laughter to so many homes; made such

³⁵ *Works* VI, 423.

³⁶ For similar tributes to Dickens's genius see *Letters* III, 407, 409, *Works* VI, 412, X, 464 (in the last reference he does not mention Dickens by name, but it is clear whom he has in mind).

multitudes of children happy; endowed us with such a sweet store of gracious thoughts, fair fancies, soft sympathies, hearty enjoyments".³⁷ He also emphasized that a novelist of so enormous a popularity should feel a great responsibility to his public, expressing this perhaps most convincingly in the following passage from *Mr. Brown's Letters to his Nephew*:

"Have you read *David Copperfield*, by the way? How beautiful it is — how charmingly fresh and simple! In those admirable touches of tender humour — and I should call humour, Bob, a mixture of love and wit — who can equal this great genius? There are little words and phrases in his books which are like personal benefits to the reader. What a place it is to hold in the affections of men! What an awful responsibility hanging over a writer! What man holding such a place, and knowing that his words go forth to vast congregations of mankind, — to grown folks — to their children, and perhaps to their children's children, — but must think of his calling with a solemn and humble heart! May love and truth guide such a man always! It is an awful prayer; may Heaven further its fulfilment!" (*Works* VIII, 290).

Thackeray wrote in warm words, too, of the specific quality of Dickens's art which in his opinion overweighed all the defects — "that wonderful sweetness & freshness" which none of the other novelists of his time possessed³⁸ — and of the fecundity of his imagination in which, as Thackeray sincerely confessed, his great contemporary greatly surpassed him.³⁹ One of the aspects of Dickens's art which Thackeray also greatly admired was the novelist's pathos. Thus for instance in 1847, after having read the chapter depicting the death of little Paul in *Dombey and Son*, he declared:

"There's no writing against such power as this — one has no chance! Read that chapter describing young Paul's death; it is unsurpassed — it is stupendous!"⁴⁰

In one instance Thackeray applied even in his later years the ethical criterion to Dickens's art, but only to find the novelist's depictions irreproachable from the moral point of view; and to place them, in direct contradiction to his previous practice, high above those of the great realists of the 18th century, especially of Sterne:

"I think of these past writers and of one who lives amongst us now, and am grateful for the innocent laughter and the sweet and unsullied page which the author of *David Copperfield* gives to my children" (*Works* XIII, 671).

Throughout his whole life Thackeray also appreciated Dickens's capacity for creating lifelike characters, on which he wrote in 1844:

"What a noble, divine power this of genius is, which, passing from the poet into his reader's soul, mingles with it, and there engenders, as it were, real creatures, which is as strong as history, which creates beings that take their place by nature's own!" (*Works* VI, 413).

³⁷ For the quotations in this paragraph see *Works* VI, 412–413 and X, 614, 626.

³⁸ *Letters* II, 773 (in the above-quoted letter to David Masson).

³⁹ See especially *Letters* III, 288.

⁴⁰ George Hodder, *Memoirs of my Time*, London, 1870, p. 277; quoted in *Letters* II, 267n. See also Dickens's reminiscence in his obituary article "In Memoriam", *The Cornhill Magazine*, IX, February 1864, p. 129, of how Thackeray once presented himself unexpectedly in his room "announcing how that some passage in a certain book [probably *Dombey and Son*] had made him cry yesterday, and how that he had come to dinner, 'because he couldn't help it', and must talk such passage over" (quoted by Ray in *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 138).

In his *Charity and Humour* he paid Dickens's characters in general the following tribute, strongly coloured by his moral point of view:

"There are creations of Mr. Dickens's which seem to me to rank as personal benefits; figures so delightful, that one feels happier and better for knowing them, as one does for being brought into the society of very good men and women. The atmosphere in which these people live is wholesome to breathe in; you feel that to be allowed to speak to them is a personal kindness; you come away better for your contact with them; your hands seem cleaner from having the privilege of shaking theirs" (*Works* X, 626).

As we have seen, Thackeray had among Dickens's characters several great favourites, to whom he remained faithful throughout his whole life. Besides Mrs. Nickleby and Crummles, among them were especially Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller, of whom he wrote in 1844 in a reflection concerned with the question of Dickens's claims to immortal fame (denied to him by some critics), which he settles "by the ordinary historic method":

"Did not your great-great-grandfather love and delight in Don Quixote and Sancho Panza? Have they lost their vitality by their age? Don't they move laughter and awaken affection now as three hundred years ago? And so with Don Pickwick and Sancho Weller, if their gentle humours, and kindly wit, and hearty benevolent natures, touch us and convince us, as it were, now, why should they not exist for our children as well as for us, and make the twenty-fifth century happy as they have the nineteenth?" (*Works* VI, 414).⁴¹

Besides these characters he highly appreciated those of Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Harris from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Mr. Peggotty, Mrs. Steerforth (hinting to Dickens that her relationship to her son was not unlike Thackeray's own mother's to him), Stiggins, Pecksniff and Chadband (whom he considered equally convincing types of hypocrites as Tartuffe and Joseph Surface),⁴² and in *Charity and Humour*, besides his early favourites the Marchioness and Richard Swiveller, including also Oliver Twist and two characters he had formerly criticized, the Artful Dodger and "the chief of that illustrious family", "the accomplished, the Epicurean, the dirty, the delightful Micawber".⁴³ Even after 1858, when in consequence of the so-called Garrick Club Affair the friendly relationships between Thackeray and Dickens were for a few years replaced by enmity and when Thackeray transferred his attention from Dickens's work to his person and family life, he was still able to defend Dickens against the assaults of the *Saturday Review*⁴⁴ and to appreciate the novelist's marvellous art of creating characters to the detriment of his own:

"I am played out. All I can do now is to bring out my old puppets ... But, if he live to be ninety, Dickens will still be creating new characters. In his art that man is marvellous."⁴⁵

⁴¹ For his other references to the two figures (or to one of them) see *Works* II, 423, 516, IV, 320-321, III, 257, VI, 322, 550, XI, 86, 885, XIII, 635; for a reference to Bob Sawyer see *Works* VI, 593.

⁴² For his references to Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Harris see *Works* IX, 356, 345-346, X, 628; to Mr. Peggotty see *Letters* IV, 380n.; to Mrs. Steerforth see John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, London, 1928, p. 556, quoted in *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 111; to Stiggins see especially "Stiggins in New Zealand" (*Punch*, 1845) and *Works* X, 587, 615; to Pecksniff see *Punch*, vol. VII, 1844, No. 157, p. 32; to Chadband see *Works* X, 615 and *Punch*, vol. XXVII, 1854, p. 111.

⁴³ *Works* X, 628.

⁴⁴ See especially *Works* XVII, 423; see also note 28, Chapter III, part 1.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Hugh Kingsmill, *The Sentimental Journey*, Bristol, 1934, p. 169.

Only in one instance did he compare one of Dickens's characters with similar types created by himself and hinted that his own style was better:

"There's a bit from 'Hard Times' quoted in the Examiner to day: representing such a character [he has obviously in mind Mr. Bounderby, as Ray suggests⁴⁶ — LP] as I have drawn in several varieties [in Ray's opinion he is thinking of old Osborne — LP]: but I think I know whose the best English is of the 2 writers — I wonder there is not some young fellow come up to knock us both off the stage" (*Letters* III, 363).

Thackeray had also several favourites among Dickens's novels, as partly follows from the preceding. He especially liked *Pickwick Papers* (and always highly appreciated the Fleet Prison scenes as truthful to life and expressing the author's deep sympathy for the poor and unhappy⁴⁷), loved *David Copperfield*, greatly estimated *Bleak House*, especially for its author's sharp attacks upon the Court of Chancery,⁴⁸ praised the story *The Holly-Tree* in the Christmas number of *Household Words* in 1855, characterized the third and fourth chapters of *Little Dorrit* as "a famous preface" and the whole novel as "capital", though the first two chapters seemed to him to be "dead stupid", praised *Pictures from Italy* and the poem "Ivy Green" from the sixth chapter of the *Pickwick Papers*.⁴⁹ The only work of Dickens which he assessed entirely negatively after 1840 were the *American Notes* which, both in his earlier opinion (before his visit to the United States) and in his later, from my viewpoint not entirely justifiable opinion, presented an entirely false and one-sided depiction of the country and revealed Dickens's insufficient familiarity with it.⁵⁰ He was so generous to Dickens, however, that when he was asked to review the book for the *Edinburgh Review* (during that period of his life when his relationships with Dickens were very friendly), he refused the offer in the following words:

"I cannot praise it and I will not cut it up ... It is like the worst part of *Humphrey's Clock*, what is meant to be easy and sprightly is vulgar and flippant ... the book is at once frivolous and dull."⁵¹

As the analysis in this chapter and those parts of the preceding sub-chapters concerned with Thackeray's criticism of Dickens's Christmas stories and of Dickens as social reformer show, Thackeray's critical attitude to the work of his great contemporary went through a remarkable development. He was most sharply critical of his literary rival at the time of his critical campaign against the Newgate novelists and the producers of other fashionable works, when basic literary problems were at stake and when he was much concerned about the way in which his contemporaries handled the novel as a literary form. His

⁴⁶ See *Letters* III, 363n.

⁴⁷ See *Works* I, 281, III, 187, IV, 132.

⁴⁸ See Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 78; see also his positive evaluation of the character of Mr. Turveydrop in *Letters* III, 238, 251n. Mauskopf is then not in the right when he maintains that Thackeray's "only comment upon *Bleak House* concerns the popularity of that novel", i. e. the comment (quoted by Wilson, *op. cit.*, I, 277) on the sale of the novel in the United States as compared with that of *The Newcomes* (see Mauskopf, *op. cit.*, p. 32).

⁴⁹ For his comments on the works mentioned see *Letters* III, 537, 572; Una Pope-Hennessy, *Charles Dickens*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1946, p. 357; *Letters* III, 518-519. "Letters from a Club Arm-Chair", August 21, 1845, p. 233, *Letters* III, 10. For his reference to the Merdles see *Letters* III, 623.

⁵⁰ For his references to the *American Notes* see *Contributions*, 172, *Letters* III, 226.

⁵¹ Quoted by Una Pope-Hennessy, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

critical approach remained firm and principled throughout the following period to 1848, during which he disagreed with Dickens, in his reviews of the latter's Christmas stories, on some basic problems of the creation of literary character, but his critical weapons were not so sharp as they had been before. After this year, however, except for a short period of silence in consequence of the Garrick Club Affair, admiration and praise predominate over censure in his assessments of Dickens's art, these being of course this time predominantly informal. Our analysis also enables us to come to the conclusion that in all its stages it was a just criticism, though not always so clear-sighted (notably in his criticism of the "Newgate" part of *Oliver Twist*, of Dickens's "Christmas message" and of this novelist as social reformer) as to be fully acceptable at the present day. And it was also generous criticism, not motivated by Thackeray's jealousy of Dickens's popularity, as some Dickensian scholars in particular maintain⁵² (though he was naturally not indifferent to the fact that his works never achieved such an enormous success as Dickens's did, as we know from his correspondence⁵³). His sharp critical assaults were always more or less counterbalanced by words of sincere praise addressed to the great genius and talent of his contemporary, which were many a time pronounced to the detriment of his own art. Even the regrettable Garrick Club Affair and the ensuing feud between the two novelists, on which so much has been written by Dickensian and Thackerayan scholars detrimental to both sides in the conflict,⁵⁴ did not make him substantially change his views upon Dickens's art, as we have seen, even if it did make him look differently upon this novelist's personal character. I find myself therefore in agreement with Dr. Thrall who has pointed out that

"The generosity of Thackeray toward his great rival has been almost a phenomenon in literary criticism, persisting as it did in spite of the bitter personal quarrel of the two men and the hot rivalry of their followers which divided England into hostile camps."⁵⁵

As we have seen, Thackeray's judgments of Dickens's art are not based on any personal emotions, but on the basic principles of his aesthetics familiar to us from the preceding analysis of his criticism. He differed with Dickens especially, as Mauskopf expressed it, "in his fundamental conception of the nature of fiction", "believing that the function of the novelist was to attempt to record with the accuracy of an historian and from a moral view-point a balanced picture of society",⁵⁶ and therefore being unable to accept those depictions of Dickens in which this writer's presentation of moral values deviated from his own notions or those in which Dickens's exuberant imagination overstepped the boundaries within which, in the opinion of Thackeray, a novelist should keep. And we should also duly emphasize that even if he accused Dickens of exaggeration, he never went so far as some other critics of his time and of our own, who

⁵² See for instance the view of Edgar Johnson in the article quoted in note 54 below.

⁵³ For Thackeray's references to Dickens's greater popularity see especially *Letters* II, 258, 262, III, 119, 341; see also Wilson, *op. cit.*, I, 277.

⁵⁴ See especially the articles in *PMLA*: Gordon N. Ray, "Dickens versus Thackeray, The Garrick Club Affair", vol. 69, 1954; Edgar Johnson, "The Garrick Club Affair", vol. 71, 1956; Gordon N. Ray, "Dickens versus Thackeray, The Garrick Club Affair", vol. 71, 1956. See also *Letters* I, cxx-cxxiii, *The Uses of Adversity*, pp. 285ff., *The Age of Wisdom*, pp. 276ff. (the last modified after Johnson's criticism).

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

have regarded Dickens's marvellous vividness of imagination "as almost akin to the hallucinations of madness" (Lewes, echoing Taine's essay on Dickens and, expressing this in similar but even stronger words, Praz) and consequently have condemned Dickens's personages as being rather puppets than characters (Lewes) or mere "mechanical playthings" (Praz) which in the opinion of the last-named scholar "lose all contact with reality and assume the sinister fixed, exasperated expressions of wax dolls", thus giving us "a foretaste of the Grand Guignol".⁵⁷

II. THE ENGLISH REALISTIC FICTION OF THE 18TH CENTURY

Thackeray's critical opinions of the English realistic fiction of the 18th century in general and the novel in particular are worth special interest for several reasons. In the first place, it was a literature which he had been reading since his childhood and with which he was therefore intimately familiar, from the most famous classic novels and essays to the works of the second-rate imitators of the great classics, as well as the journalism and history of the period. He knew it so thoroughly, indeed, that he was able to imitate with remarkable success the literary style of the Queen Anne period in his *Esmond*, including a contribution to *The Spectator* in the same novel written in the style of Steele and, in *The Virginians*, a letter of Horace Walpole. And he was not only familiar with it, he also loved it (disagreeing here for instance with Jeffrey and in particular with Carlyle, but agreeing with Scott, Hazlitt, Hunt, and Dickens, among others). As a novelist, he was largely indebted to it, even if his mature art went beyond its influence, as we have seen before; an influence which nevertheless remained an integral part of his narrative mode. His first model undoubtedly was, as Loofbourow points out,¹ Fielding's heroic burlesque, and this Thackeray himself later confessed in a letter to James Hain Friswell, in which he pointed out some parallels between this writer's *Houses with the Fronts Off* and his own *Dr. Birch and his Young Friends* or other depictions of his school experiences in his works, and added:

"I daresay you are no more aware of the resemblance, than I was, years ago, that I imitated Fielding: but on looking back lately at some of those early papers I saw whose the original manner was" (*Letters* III, 402).

As we have also seen, Fielding was his chief model when he wrote *Catherine and Barry Lyndon*, while Miss Touster and Professor Ernest A. Baker have shown² that many traces of Fieldingesque realism may be found in his *Yellowplush Papers*, and Miss Touster again and Loofbourow have found its traces in his great novels as well.³ Fielding was not, of course, his only teacher in realism, satirical craftsmanship and ironic humour: though he obviously did not fully realize it himself, his creative approach had much in common with that of

⁵⁷ For Lewes's views see "Dickens in Relation to Criticism", *The Fortnightly Review*, XI, n. s. (1872), pp. 144-149; see also Stang, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85; for the opinions of Mario Praz see *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173, 155-156.

¹ See *op. cit.*, p. 94.

² See Eva Beach Touster, *op. cit.*, p. 389 (quoting, too, Ernest A. Baker).

³ For the opinions of E. B. Touster see *op. cit.*, pp. 389-394; for the analysis of Loofbourow see Chapter VI of *op. cit.*

Swift, however much he disliked the latter. This was pointed out by Taine, James Hannay, Bagehot, Percival Leigh and John W. Dodds.⁴ Also the influence of Sterne played a very significant role in "the complex processes that prefigured the prose of *Vanity Fair*", as Loofbourow has shown, for Thackeray learned from Sterne, among other things, how to conduct his authorial commentary, a fact to which Mrs. Tillotson has drawn particular attention,⁵ while the "conversational flexibility" and "rhythmic resources" of Sterne's narrative style enabled him, as Loofbourow has it, "to integrate diverse expressive textures in *Vanity Fair*".⁶ A far from negligible factor in this process was, too, the elegant and refined diction of Addison and Steele, on which Thackeray modelled his style, learning from the essayists at the same time how to address the readers unobtrusively in the form of "informal chatting" and "roundabout" talking. Furthermore, not only did Thackeray love and find inspiration in the works of the 18th-century realists, he also used their art, as we have seen, as his critical standard for measuring the value of the productions of his own contemporaries.

Thackeray's criticism of the realistic fiction of the 18th century is worth separate treatment for yet another reason. It is the only literary *genre* to which he paid considerable critical attention even in the 1850s, when he had stopped working as a professional literary critic, and we may therefore demonstrate much better by his criticism in this particular sphere than by the criticism concerned with the fiction produced in his own time how his critical principles and opinions developed in this later period of his life and especially what changes they underwent.

When we survey his criticism as a whole, what strikes us in the first place is a decided change in the criteria which he applies in his assessments of the individual authors and works. Worth noticing are especially the changes in his conception of humour and satire which were gradually leading to his eventual dissociation from the satire of the highest degree. The first tentative signal of this development may be discerned even in some of the comments he made, as a reader, in the 1830s and 1840s, but only in the isolated case of one author — in his informal pronouncements on Jonathan Swift. The earliest evidence is his severe condemnation, in 1838, of Swift's "scandalously mean" strictures upon the Duke of Marlborough, in which in Thackeray's opinion the power of Swift's satire is displayed in the most disgusting form of lies and diabolical sneers, all the more condemnable in the critic's opinion on account of Swift's entertaining "the highest admiration"⁷ for this military hero. The attitude Thackeray assumes in this early contribution of his is very remarkable, for his own view of Marl-

⁴ For the views of Taine see *History of English Literature*, trans. by H. Van Laun, 2 vols., A New Edition, Chatto & Windus, London, n. d., II, 374–375; for those of Hannay see "Thackeray on Swift", *Temple Bar*, 1867 (quoted by Dodds, *op. cit.*, p. 185); for Bagehot's see *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot*, 10 vols., Longmans, Green, and Co., London, IV, 265 ("Sterne and Thackeray", 1864); Leigh's views are quoted by Greig, *op. cit.*, p. 46; for Dodds's views see *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁵ For Mrs. Tillotson's analysis see *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, pp. 150, 252, 254; for the parallels pointed out by Bagehot (to whom Mrs. Tillotson also refers) see *op. cit.*, IV, 257 and for those noticed by Ennis, see Lambert Ennis, *Thackeray: the Sentimental Cynic*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 1950, pp. 15, 139.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 78–79.

⁷ *Works* I, 83.

borough was far from enthusiastic, a fact to which I drew attention in my second chapter and which is clear from *Esmond*. It is not wholly inexplicable, however, for Thackeray especially resents Swift's attempts to attribute to this "hero of fifty battles" such negative traits of which he really could not be accused (cowardice and incompetency) and which are not to be found, either, among those attributed to him by Thackeray in his later novel. In Thackeray's other earlier contributions and works we find fairly copious marginal comments concerning the art of the great satirist, which prove that with the progress of time he came to look at Swift's satire with mixed feelings of distaste and admiration, with the former increasingly predominating over the latter. His comments show that he was able to feel and appreciate the great power of Swift's satire (for he used it more than once as his critical standard when measuring the satirical depictions created by his contemporaries, and characterized its creator, in his lecture of 1851, as "a vast genius, a magnificent genius, a genius wonderfully bright, and dazzling, and strong. — to seize, to know, to see, to flash upon falsehood and scorch it into perdition, to penetrate into the hidden motives, and expose the black thoughts of men"⁸), but that he found it too intense and venomous and therefore in his opinion not explicable otherwise than by being motivated by personal spite and reflecting the negative traits of the satirist's own personal character. In several of these comments Thackeray explicitly condemns Swift's satire as foul and morbid and denounces the satirist as a wicked old cynic, whose jokes are "like the fun of a demon".⁹ His attitude is perhaps best expressed in the following remark, in which he commits a real injustice against the great writer, all the more glaring as he speaks in one breath of Swift's great satire and the ephemeral productions of Churchill, in which genuine satire is replaced by personal invectives:

"One is apt to suspect the moralist whose indignation makes his verse or points his wit; one cannot tell how much of personal pique mars the truth of his descriptions, or how many vices or passions are painted after the happy ever-present model himself; and while we read Swift's satires of a sordid, brutal, and wicked age, or Churchill's truculent descriptions of the daring profligates of his time, we know the first to be black-hearted, wicked, and envious as any monster he represents, and have good reason to suspect the latter to be the dissolute ruffian whom he describes as a characteristic of his times.

But the world *could* never be what the Dean painted as he looked at it with his furious, mad, glaring eyes; nor was it the wild drunken place which Churchill, reeling from a tavern, fancied he saw reeling round about him. We might as well take the word of a sot who sees four candles on the table where the sober man can only perceive two; or of a madman who peoples a room with devils that are quite invisible to the doctor" (*Works* V, 505-506).

In his informal critical judgments on other prose writers, however, as well as in his formal and informal criticism of Fielding of the 1830s and 1840s, these modifications of his conception of humour and satire cannot yet be discerned. As we have seen before, during his campaign against the Newgate novelists, Thackeray several times expressed his great admiration for Fielding's satirical mastery, especially as it is manifested in *Jonathan Wild*, used this novel as his critical standard, and imitated Fielding's approach in *Catherine* and *Barry Lyndon*. Also in several marginal comments in his other contributions published

⁸ *Works* XIII, 489; see also *Stray Papers*, pp. 125, 137n.

⁹ *Works* VI, 570; see also *ibid.*, pp. 329-330, *Works* V, 19, 505-506, IX, 162, *Letters* II, 553n.

in these two decades he highly assessed the power and sharpness of Fielding's satire. Thus for instance in his article on the Queen's *bal poudré* (*Punch*, 1845) he expresses his regret that Fielding and Hogarth cannot rise from their graves, for only they, he is convinced, could write an effective satire on the frivolity of the royal court of his time.¹⁰ On the other hand, however, he also paid generous tribute to Fielding's sterling humour, pervaded with a warm sympathy for mankind, and ranked him among the few great "humourists" in world literature (alongside Shakespeare, Cervantes, Addison and Steele, Jean Paul, Sterne, Scott, and Dickens).¹¹ Thackeray's conception of humour is in this period still sufficiently wide to include, besides the humour of the writers mentioned in brackets, also the racy humour of Smollett, whose *Peregrine Pickle* was appreciated by him as "excellent for its liveliness and spirit and wonderful for its atrocious vulgarity",¹² and the simple, charming humour of Goldsmith.

The second of the above-mentioned changes concerns the mutual relationship between the ethical criterion and the other standards on which Thackeray bases his judgments. In the 1830s and 1840s he is more concerned with the relationship of the depictions of the 18th-century writers to reality itself than in the moral content and effect of their works. The moral evaluation is not wanting, but it is not in the foreground of his interest: he uses it only in his formal criticism of Fielding's works and, moreover, in a way markedly different from that characteristic of his later assessment of this novelist. The writers other than Swift and Fielding to whom he pays informal critical attention in this period (notably Smollett, Goldsmith, Addison and Steele, and Sterne¹³) are appreciated by him either as writers presenting in their works a truer and more instructive picture of human life than official historians (Smollett), or as great humorists (as we have seen above), or as great masters in creating lifelike characters (Smollett, Addison,¹⁴ Steele and Goldsmith). Of the characters created by these writers he in this period mentions as his favourites, or as lifelike creations, Smollett's Humphrey Clinker and Roderick Random, Goldsmith's Beau Tibbs, Dr. Primrose and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs,¹⁵ and Addison's and Steele's Sir Roger de Coverley. Sterne in this period, apart from the references quoted, is scarcely mentioned at all and never significantly.¹⁶

Worthy of at least brief comment is Thackeray's attitude to Richardson at this time, for it essentially differs from his relationship to all the other writers so far mentioned. Except for using the name "Lovelace" as a common generic name for a rake and that of Charles Grandison for a correct gentleman, Thack-

¹⁰ See Spielmann, *op. cit.*, p. 121; see also *Stray Papers*, p. 125.

¹¹ See especially *Works* VI, 606–607; see also *Works* III, 383, *Letters* II, 249.

¹² *Letters* II, 144.

¹³ Most of Thackeray's references to Defoe are insignificant and concern for the most part only the titular hero of *Robinson Crusoe*, often used by Thackeray as a symbol of solitariness. His references to Richardson will be considered below.

¹⁴ Two of his comments (positive) concern Addison's quiet and refined sentiment and his style (see *Works* II, 648, I, 67).

¹⁵ He even borrowed the name of the last-named personage for one of his pseudonyms in *Punch*; the surname is used to characterize a snobbish lady in the *Book of Snobs*. For his references to Goldsmith's characters in this period see *Works* II, 180, 340, III, 397, 542–543, V, 249, 511, VIII, 154, 298, IX, 373, XII, 105, *Stray Papers*, p. 293, Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 69.

¹⁶ For his references see *Works* II, 402, IV, 174, 179, V, 266, VI, 607, *Letters* II, 53, 584, Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 177. *The Cornhill Magazine*, July 1911, p. 11 ("Cockney Travels", written at the beginning of the 1840s).

may refers to Richardson in the 1830s and 1840s very rarely and mostly negatively. He expresses, for instance, his resentment at the "painful accuracy" with which the novelist depicts "all the struggles and woes" of *Clarissa* and "all the wicked arts and triumphs of such scoundrels as Lovelace"¹⁷ and refers scornfully to the novelist's art also in the following comment in his assessment of Lauder's picture:

"It is entirely unnatural, theatrical, of the Davidgian, nay, Richardsonian drama, and all such attempts at effect must be reprehended by the stern critic" (*Works* II, 624).

In his review of Fielding's works he dissociates himself from Richardson's disdainful attitude to *Amelia*, his own great favourite, and places himself on the side of Fielding in the notorious feud between the two novelists:

"It is a wonder how old Richardson, girded at as he had been by the reckless satirist — how Richardson, the author of *Pamela*, could have been so blinded by anger and pique as not to have seen the merits of his rival's exquisite performance" (*Works* III, 387).

On the other hand, however, he admitted, according to Melville, that *Clarissa* "had one of the best-managed surprises he had read".¹⁸ His early critical judgments on Richardson are so scanty and general that Professor Greig might indeed be in the right in maintaining that they "were mainly, and perhaps completely, based on hearsay" and that Thackeray had not read Richardson's novels before he pronounced them.¹⁹ This is partly confirmed by his own later confession that he did not read *Clarissa* until Macaulay expressed surprise at his ignorance,²⁰ which must have been sometime after 1849, for it was from that year that he was on excellent terms with the historian.

I have already pointed out that in his review of Fielding's works Thackeray does apply the ethical criterion, and I shall return to this point, but he pays considerable attention, too, to several other qualities of Fielding's art, though his evaluation is by no means exhaustive (he devotes too much space to *Amelia*, too little to *Tom Jones* and almost none to *Joseph Andrews*). He highly appreciates the novels of his predecessor for presenting to the reader "a strong, real picture of human life" and "the whole truth about human nature",²¹ that is, the very things which he most sorely missed in the productions of the Newgate novelists. Referring to the evaluation of Dr. Beattie, he devotes much attention, too, to Fielding's masterly composition, characterizing the author of *Tom Jones* as "one of the most minute and careful artists that ever lived" and this novel "as the most astonishing production of human ingenuity".²² I can find myself in agreement with Clapp, in whose opinion this early paper on Fielding is not inspired, but "is soundly appreciative and for Thackeray an unusually pure piece of criticism, in this respect at least superior to the later lecture in the *English Humourists*".²³ Also Thackeray's informal judgments on Fielding, pronounced in the indicated period, are predominantly concerned with other

¹⁷ *Works* III, 359.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, I, 179.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 134.

²⁰ See *Works* XVII, 364.

²¹ For the quotations see *Works* III, 385, 386.

²² For the quotations see *Works* III, 389.

²³ "Critic on Horseback", p. 289.

aspects of the novelist's works than their moral content and effect. In several of his remarks Thackeray highly appreciates the faithfulness of Fielding's picture of life and society and includes him among those great literary masters whose works possess a very great instructive value, greater than regular history.²⁴ Some of his comments are also devoted to the appreciation of Fielding's remarkable art of characterization — Thackeray compares Fielding's characters to historical personages and expresses his conviction that the former are more real than the latter, very often using Fielding's personages (other than Jonathan Wild) as his critical standard for measuring characters created by other novelists, as we have seen *passim* in the preceding chapters.

An inseparable part of Thackeray's evaluation of Fielding in his review of this novelist's works is moral assessment, as we have seen, but the ethical criterion is not used by him as an instrument for condemning the author or his novels. On the contrary, he highly appreciates the "philosophy" of *Amelia*, quoting the words of Dr. Harrison to the effect that the nature of man is essentially good, abounding with "benevolence and charity, and pity, coveting praise and honour, and shunning shame and disgrace", and that it is only bad education and bad habits that "drive it headlong into vice". In his opinion those readers who "have a mind to forgive a little coarseness, for the sake of one of the honestest, manliest, kindest companions in the world, cannot, as we fancy, find a better than Fielding, or get so much true wit and shrewdness from any other writer of our language". He finds in Fielding's novels many "wise and practical" virtues, which "shine out by their contrasts with the vices which he paints so faithfully, as they never could have done if the latter had not been depicted as well as the former", so that the reader "cannot read it and imitate it too much".²⁵

In his review Thackeray clearly still adhered to Fielding's own conception of the literary character as a "mixed" human being, for he finds nothing amiss in Fielding's heroes from the moral point of view, realizing that they are full-blooded people with both human foibles and good qualities, who occasionally err, but seek their way to amendment. Of Captain Booth he for instance writes:

"His vices, even, if we may say so, are those of a man; there is nothing morbid or mawkish in any of Fielding's heroes; no passionate pleas in extenuation, such as one finds in the pseudo-moral romances of the sentimental character; no flashy excuses like those which Sheridan puts forward (unconsciously, most likely) for those brilliant blackguards who are the chief characters of his comedies. Vice is never to be mistaken for virtue in Fielding's honest downright books; it goes by its name, and invariably gets its punishment" (*Works* III, 390).

At this time of life he had no serious reservations, either, as to the character type of Tom Jones, in whom, as in Booth, the negative traits of character (mostly concerning sexual behaviour) stand out more conspicuously than in the other "mixed" characters created by Fielding:

"He tries to give you, as far as he knows it, the whole truth about human nature: the good and the evil of his characters are both practical. Tom Jones sins, and his faults are described with a curious accuracy, but then follows the repentance which comes out of his very sins, and that surely is moral and touching. Booth goes astray (we do verily believe that many persons even in these days are not altogether pure), but how good his remorse is! Are persons who profess to take the likeness of human nature to make an accurate

²⁴ See *Works* II, 98, 182, VI, 340–341.

²⁵ For the quotations see *Works* III, 390, 384, 385–386.

portrait? This is such a hard question, that, think as we will, we will not venture to say what we think. Perhaps it is better to do as Hannibal's painter did, and draw only that side of the face which has not the blind eye. Fielding attacked it in full. Let the reader, according to his taste, select the artist who shall give a likeness of him, or only half a likeness" (*Works* III, 386).

As this quotation confirms, in this earlier piece of criticism Thackeray does not apply to Tom Jones the principle that virtue and vice should not be mingled in one character, the principle on which he based his criticism of the "heroes" of the Newgate romances and of the criminal characters in *Oliver Twist*, nor does he insist, as he did in his attacks upon Bulwer and the rest, that such creations exercise a harmful influence upon the morals of the readers. Worth noticing in this connection is also his evaluation of the subsidiary characters in *Amelia*, not so "beautiful" as the heroine, as he says, "but not less admirably true to nature" — Mrs. James, Mrs. Matthews, Mr. James and Mr. Bath. According to Thackeray all these characters display their creator's "admirable knowledge of the world" and those who take the trouble to think may draw from them a very wholesome moral. Of especial interest is the following comment on Fielding's approach to these "mixed" characters:

"But what is especially worthy of remark is the masterly manner in which the author paints the good part of those equivocal characters that he brings upon his stage: James has his generosity, and his silly wife her good nature; Matthews her starts of kindness; and old Bath, in his sister's dressing-gown, cooking possets for her, is really an amiable object, whom we like while we laugh at him. A great deal of tenderness and love goes along with this kind of laughter, and it was this mixed feeling that our author liked so to indulge himself, and knew so well how to excite in others. Whenever he has to relate an action of benevolence, honest Fielding kindles as he writes it: some writers of fiction have been accused of falling in a passion with their bad characters; these our author treats with a philosophic calmness; it is when he comes to the good that he grows enthusiastic; you fancy that you see the tears in his manly eyes, nor does he care to disguise any of the affectionate sympathies of his great simple heart. This is a defect in art, perhaps, but a very charming one" (*Works* III, 391-392).

As follows from the above, in this period of his life Thackeray had much sympathy for all the "mixed" beings created by Fielding, whether their role in the novel was decisive or less significant. Worth noticing, too, is the way in which he grapples with the accusations of immorality levelled at Fielding's novels by Victorian society, shifting the blame to the society of the novelist's time. In the often quoted long passage "The world does not tolerate now such satire as that of Hogarth and Fielding..." he accuses the Victorian reading public of hypocrisy, and though he partly identifies himself with this society by praising the wisdom of its prudery, his identification is at this time of his life by no means complete, as the conclusion of the passage suggests:

"It is wise that the public modesty should be as prudish as it is; that writers should be forced to chasten their humour, and when it would play with points of life and character which are essentially immoral, that they should be compelled, by the general outcry of incensed public propriety, to be silent altogether. But an impartial observer, who gets some little of his knowledge of men from books, and some more from personal examination of them, knows pretty well that Fielding's men and Hogarth's are Dickens's and Cruikshank's, drawn with ten times more skill and force, only the latter humourists dare not talk of what the elder discussed honestly" (*Works* III, 385).

We may see then that Thackeray's attitude to Fielding in the 1830s and 1840s substantially differs in all points from that of Johnson, the originator of the

doctrine of the "unmixed" literary character and the critic who looked upon the novel first and foremost in terms of its effect on young people. Johnson's doctrine was in the first place directed against the "mixed" character of Tom Jones, as I have mentioned before, and he used it as his main argument in his attempt, as Mayo formulates it, "to establish Richardson's higher claim to truth" in the realm of character and to defend *Clarissa* against its detractors.²⁶ Mayo has also demonstrated that it was the post-Johnsonian school of purely didactic critics who saw in the novel of their time (with the single exception of the productions of Richardson) a public disaster and an "instrument of debauchery", and who sharply criticized Fielding and Sterne in the name of youth. Their critical practice thus entirely diverged from the literary theory and practice of Fielding, Smollett and Sterne, and it was they who were guilty of the gradual dimming of Fielding's reputation by accusations of "lowness", immorality and indecency. In one respect so far not mentioned, however, Thackeray's standpoint does approach that of the post-Johnsonian critics even in the period we are dealing with. Much space in his review of Fielding's works is devoted to the assessment of the personal character of the novelist and in this respect — though not deliberately — Thackeray is not entirely just to his great predecessor. As Cross points out,²⁷ he allowed himself to be influenced by the biographical introduction to the edition he reviewed, written by the editor Thomas Roscoe, accepting it as genuine authority, and painted a fictitious portrait of Fielding as a young man with "very loose morals indeed", who "led a sad, riotous life, and mixed with many a bad woman in his time". On the other hand, however, he dissociates himself from Walpole's criticism of Fielding for indulging in low company, pointing out that Walpole's letters are "not a whit more moral" than Fielding's novels and that "Lord Chesterfield's model of a man" might have been perhaps more polite, but was not so honest as Tom Jones and Will Booth.²⁸ Thackeray was also generous enough to find many positive traits in Fielding's character which amply redeem these alleged weaknesses in his eyes: especially Fielding's personal honesty, his sincere and manful philosophy, his devotion to his family and the courage with which he fought against adverse circumstances. Upon the whole, Thackeray's early attitude to Fielding seems to me to be very near to that of Hazlitt and not far either from the views of Scott and Coleridge, especially with regard to his admiration of the masterly composition of *Tom Jones*.

In the 1850s the modifications in Thackeray's conception of humour and satire reach their final stage of development (though only in his theory and criticism, not yet in his imaginative works) and a decided shift takes place in the relationship of his ethical criterion to the other critical standards. Thackeray's modified conception of humour and satire is for the first time consistently applied in his *Lectures on the English Humourists*, where the author also presents his new conception of the role of the humorous writer, a conception which indicates, as Loomis has pointed out, "how moral 'humor' had become".²⁹ For the second time he applies it consistently in his lecture *Charity and Humour*,

²⁶ See *op. cit.*, p. 99.

²⁷ See Wilbur Cross, *The History of Henry Fielding*, 3 vols., New Haven 1918, III, 213.

²⁸ For the quotations see *Works* III, 386, 387, 384.

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

where he presents his new definition of humour as "love and wit" (used by him once before, as we have seen, in *Mr. Brown's Letters to his Nephew*), characterizing the best humour as "that which contains most humanity, that which is flavoured throughout with tenderness and kindness".³⁰ Both this conception and definition, as well as his selection of the authors he assesses in these lectures and his critical evaluation of them clearly show that at this period of his life Thackeray came to a complete identification of satire with humour. I have touched upon this problem in my study of his aesthetics (referring in particular to the conclusions of G. N. Ray and V. V. Ivashcheva) and since that time it has in my opinion been very penetratingly treated by Loomis, especially in the following passage:

"Gordon Ray believes that Thackeray redefined the word 'humorous' in his lectures on the so-called humorists of the eighteenth century, but Tave's *The Amiable Humorist* shows that Thackeray was not original in these lectures; rather he crystallized the contemporary sentimental, anti-satiric attitude towards the comic modes. The word 'humor' is the key to Thackeray's lectures. By the middle of the century it was almost generic and denoted virtually all forms of comedy, but it connoted only tender-hearted 'amiable' humor, and around it were clustered a complex of positive moral values . . . Thus the very title of Thackeray's lectures, although apparently a neutral statement of subject, actually contains latent judgments in the word 'humourists'. It is obvious that some will pay when such various writers as Congreve, Swift, Steele, Sterne, and Goldsmith are all linked together under one term."³¹

As Loomis also rightly points out, it is naturally Swift in particular who suffers — "he is roped into the lectures as a humorist, then is berated because he does not fulfill the requirements of humor as Thackeray had defined it."³² Thackeray is guilty of several grave injustices towards the great satirist, with most of which we are already acquainted from his earlier informal judgments, but which are all the more glaring here, where he devotes to Swift much more detailed attention. In the first place, in harmony with the general purpose of his lectures (which he formulates most clearly in his lecture on Gay³³), Thackeray devotes much space to the satirist's life and his personal character, and though in this particular case he is not entirely in the wrong as to individual points, the general picture of Swift the man which emerges from his lecture is painted in too sombre colours, which fail to do full justice to the original. Influenced to a great extent by Johnson and Walpole, Thackeray measures not only Swift's personal character, but unfortunately also his genius, by an entirely erroneous standard for which he was sharply criticized by Carlyle,³⁴ namely whether he would like to live with the satirist and be his friend. His answer is negative: he presents Swift as a man who bullied, scorned and insulted his friends, who was immensely revengeful, never forgot an insult and paid it

³⁰ *Works* X, 616.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Our object in these lectures is rather to describe the men than their works; or to deal with the latter only in as far as they seem to illustrate the character of their writers" (*Works* XIII, 590—591).

³⁴ Carlyle, after a conversation between him and Thackeray on the character of Swift, made the following pronouncement, recorded by George Venables: "I wish I could persuade Thackeray that the test of greatness in a man is not whether he (Thackeray) would like to meet him at a tea-party" ("Carlyle's Life in London", *The Fortnightly Review*, XLII, 1884, 605; quoted in *Letters* I, cix).

back "with a coward's blow and a dirty bludgeon", who servilely fawned upon people from whom he could expect some profit, his servility being so boisterous "that it looked like independence".³⁵ In the last point he goes beyond even Johnson, who for all his intense dislike of Swift positively evaluated the position of equality, independence and disinterestedness which he preserved in his intercourse with high political personages.³⁶ The key to Swift's personality is seen by Thackeray in his morbid and unsatiated ambition, and though he finds some apologies for Swift's desire to excel in society and in the Church in the generally disordered condition of the times he lived in, he is less than just to the great master of satire when he compares him to a highwayman who waits in vain for the "coach with the mitre and crosier in it" and when told that it has taken a different road, "he fires his pistols into the air with a curse, and rides away into his own country", and even more so by expressing his satisfaction that fate wrested the prize out of the talons of this bird of prey, who was enchained and whose mighty wings were clipped (though he does not gaze "at the lonely eagle chained behind the bars" "without awe and pity").³⁷

Thackeray is even less just to Swift than was Johnson in his evaluation of him as a clergyman. Although on the one hand he points out that Swift was a reverent and pious spirit and adored Heaven with "real wonder, humility, and reverence", on the other hand he lays great stress upon his scepticism and apostasy, characterizing his professional life as "a lifelong hypocrisy" before Heaven and describing Swift as a man who was stifled in his cassock, strangled in his bands and went "through life, tearing, like a man possessed with a devil". Of his evaluation of Swift's life and personal character I can accept without reservations only his assessments of the years spent in Sir William Temple's house, of the personality of Swift's patron and their mutual relationship, of Swift's love for Stella, which in Thackeray's eyes redeems many of the satirist's personal defects, and his account of the last years of Swift's life, an account pervaded by genuine emotion and deep sympathy, though losing much of its value by the additional comment that Swift "deserved so to suffer".³⁸

Thackeray's views on Swift's personal character unfortunately exercised a very baneful influence upon his evaluation of the satirist's work, which is consequently biased and almost entirely unjust. It is based on Thackeray's conviction that the key to Swift's savage indignation is not to be found in "a deliberate conviction of mankind's unworthiness, and a desire to amend them by castigating",³⁹ but in his desire for power and his predatory instincts. It is interesting, however, that he himself obviously does not find this interpretation entirely satisfactory and that he is disturbed by the whole problem, as the following comment suggests:

"What had this man done? what secret remorse was rankling at his heart? what fever was boiling in him, that he should see all the world bloodshot? We view the world with

³⁵ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 474.

³⁶ See Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets. With Critical Observations on Their Works*, 2 vols., Glasgow, London, Edinburgh, MDCCCXXXIX, II, 170, 188-189.

³⁷ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 475, 478.

³⁸ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 489-490; see also *Letters* II, 800.

³⁹ *Works* XIII, 477.

our own eyes, each of us; and we make from within us the world we see. A weary heart gets no gladness out of sunshine; a selfish man is sceptical about friendship, as a man with no ear doesn't care for music. A frightful self-consciousness it must have been, which looked on mankind so darkly through those keen eyes of Swift" (*Works* XIII, 496).

Seeking for an explanation of Swift's satiric achievement exclusively in the satirist's personal psychology, Thackeray is naturally unable to do justice to the writer's individual works. *A Tale of a Tub*, one of the most masterly compositions in English literature, as Hazlitt evaluated it,⁴⁰ is in his opinion a "wild" book, the famous *Drapier's Letters* cannot according to him be called patriotic, for even if they are "masterpieces of dreadful humour and invective" and are "reasoned logically enough too", their proposition "is as monstrous and fabulous as the Lilliputian island" — "one admires not the cause so much as the strength, the anger, the fury of the champion". Thackeray entirely misunderstood, too, Swift's cruel and mordant satire in the *Modest Proposal*: in his opinion it was motivated by the satirist's hatred of children and exposes, by the sarcastic method, "the unreasonableness of loving and having children". He therefore absolutely failed to see or appreciate the wide social range of this satire and accused Swift of entering "the nursery with the tread and gaiety of an ogre".⁴¹ The very thing which makes this satire so telling — the consistency of Swift's irony — is denounced by him in the following words:

"And taking up this pretty joke, as his way is, he argues it with perfect gravity and logic. He turns and twists this subject in a score of different ways: he hashes it; and he serves it up cold; and he garnishes it; and relishes it always ... Amiable humourist! laughing castigatour of morals!" (*Works* XIII, 491-492).

Thackeray does find some positive qualities in *Gulliver's Travels*, notably the "grave and logical conduct" of the proposition, the outcome of which is the occasional marvellous strokes of humour, just, honest and noble satire and perfect images, and yet he utterly rejects the moral of the book as "horrible, shameful, unmanly, blasphemous", going so far as to say that "giant and great as this Dean is, I say we should hoot him".⁴² It is true that he comprehends that Swift's satire is directed against pettiness, cruelty, pride, vanity, foolish pretension, mock greatness, pompous dullness, mean aims and base successes, but he fails to see that the assaults of the satirist are aimed at the society in which he lived and not upon the whole of mankind. In his opinion, very near for instance to that of Scott and essentially different from that of Hazlitt,⁴³ the meaning of Swift's "dreadful allegory" is that the whole of mankind is worthless, that man in general is "utterly wicked, desperate, and imbecile, and his passions are so monstrous, and his boasted powers so mean, that he is and deserves to be the slave of brutes, and ignorance is better than his vaunted reason". As this statement suggests, Thackeray's deepest indignation was aroused by the last book of Swift's work, which he utterly rejects as filthy, obscene, and absolutely immoral. He is especially horrified at the thought "that Swift knew the tendency of his creed — the fatal rocks towards which his logic desperately drifted" and

⁴⁰ See *English Poets*, p. 146.

⁴¹ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 491, 492, 491.

⁴² For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 492, 496.

⁴³ For Scott's views see Margaret Ball, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70; for Hazlitt's see especially *English Poets*, pp. 148, 150.

that the "last part of Gulliver is only a consequence of what has gone before".⁴⁴ Unable to penetrate beneath the surface of Swift's Yahoos, and to understand that these figures not only reflect the satirist's distaste for the normal functions of the human organism, but at the same time caricature the vices of the social organism of Swift's time, as Anikst has suggested,⁴⁵ he identified them entirely with their creator:

"It is Yahoo language; a monster gibbering shrieks, and gnashing imprecations against mankind — tearing down all shreds of modesty, past all sense of manliness and shame; filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene" (*Works* XIII, 496).

Of Swift's works Thackeray accepts without any reservations only the *Journal to Stella*, as a monument of "the brightest part of Swift's story", declaring that he has read a great deal of "sentimental reading" in his time, but that he knows of "nothing more manly, more tender, more exquisitely touching, than some of these brief notes, written in what Swift calls 'his little language' in his journal to Stella". Apart from his lecture he refers with approbation to Swift's *Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation*, as an interesting document of "the amusements and occupations of persons of fashion in London"⁴⁶ in Swift's time, and also the *Directions to Servants*, which he uses, as we have seen, as his critical standard in evaluating Jerrold's Christmas book.

In spite of all his serious critical reservations and prejudiced assaults on Swift, however, Thackeray was able to do justice to other positive qualities of the satirist's art besides those mentioned above: to the elaborate and grave simplicity, wise thrift and economy, and perfect neatness of Swift's style. The following tribute is often quoted as proof of Thackeray's capacity for appreciating genius even in writers whom he did not personally like:

"An immense genius: an awful downfall and ruin. So great a man he seems to me, that thinking of him is like thinking of an empire falling. We have other great names to mention — none, I think, however, so great or so gloomy" (*Works* XIII, 505).

Thackeray continued to assess Swift along the lines indicated and in the same spirit in his later years, whether in marginal comments, through the medium of his depiction of the satirist as one of the subsidiary characters in *Esmond*, or in his lecture *Charity and Humour*. The analysis of his critical attitude to Swift enables me to come to the conclusion that at no stage of his critical and literary career was he an entirely unprejudiced and objective critic of his great predecessor. Although both his early and late judgments are in fact based upon objective criteria — the basic principles of a realistic aesthetics — they are too strongly coloured by subjective feelings, especially by his distaste for the satirist's personal character and for those aspects of his art which in Thackeray's opinion reflected Swift's individual psychology. In the 1830s and 1840s, however, this distaste did not reveal itself in such strength as it did in the following decade, for in this later period Thackeray not only paid more detailed attention to Swift's work, but also applied to it a definitively crystallized conception of humour and satire. Because of the undoubted parallels between his

⁴⁴ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 496.

⁴⁵ See A. Anikst, *Istoriya angliyskoy literaturi*, Gosudarstvennoye uchebno-pedagogicheskoye izdatel'stvo Ministerstva prosveshcheniya RSFSR, Moskva 1956, p. 156.

⁴⁶ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 498, 573.

own aesthetic relationship to reality, especially in the works of the 1830s and 1840s, and that of Swift, the injustice he commits to his predecessor, among whose successors he was the most gloomy and among whose disciples he was the first, as Taine has it,⁴⁷ presents a striking paradox which has always attracted the attention of Thackerayan scholars, who have tried to explain it in various ways. Of the explanations offered, those of Dodds and Ivasheva seem to me most adequate. The former scholar (obviously partly inspired by the earlier evaluation of Saintsbury⁴⁸) finds the cause of Thackeray's negative attitude to Swift in his being frightened (as the novelist himself declared in his lecture on Addison⁴⁹) by the truth presented by his predecessor:

"'Frightens one!' Is this the reason Thackeray was so hard on Swift? In his early years Thackeray had done his share of cutting and slashing, penetrating the follies and hypocrisies of men less mordantly than Swift but with a similar disillusion. Now he had mellowed, and the native benignity and the relish for life which had never been Swift's portion had softened the satirist. But it is possible that he had a dim, almost unacknowledged recognition of at least a potential kinship with Swift and that the latter led him to brinks towards which his own inclination had drawn him in dark hours, but of which what was mild and healthy in his nature did not approve."⁵⁰

In my opinion, however, Dodds does not present an adequate explanation of the causes which brought about the eventual change of Thackeray from the slashing to the milder satirist, for these should be sought, as I have pointed out in my study on Thackeray's aesthetic ideas, in a much wider context than that which Dodds investigates — namely in the general development of Thackeray's philosophy of life and aesthetic creed during the later period of his literary career, determined and conditioned not only by the improved circumstances of his private and professional life, but also by the changing political and social climate in his country, a development which eventually resulted in his entering into a compromise with the social milieu which he formerly so sharply indicted in his satirical depictions. As a critic who identified himself in his lectures, as Loomis has shown, with "the Victorian anti-satiric spirit",⁵¹ and as a novelist who precisely now took the first steps towards reconciliation with society by gradually retreating from sharp social satire in his fiction, Thackeray must have found Swift's satire too cruel and uncompromising, though he could not have remained entirely indifferent, as Ivasheva emphasizes, to the immense genius of the greatest master in satire who had appeared in English literature before him and whose art shared many common traits with that he himself had produced in the preceding years of his literary career.⁵²

There is yet another novelist who suffers, as Swift does, when forced into the narrow limits of Thackeray's modified conception of humour and satire — Henry Fielding — though this has so far been noticed only by Professor Ivasheva. Whereas in the earlier decades, as we have seen, Thackeray paid much attention to Fielding's satirical skill and evaluated it highly, the Fielding who emerges from his lectures and individual statements of the 1850s and 1860s

⁴⁷ See op. cit., II, 374–375.

⁴⁸ See *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 203.

⁴⁹ See *Works* XIII, 523.

⁵⁰ Op. cit., pp. 185–186.

⁵¹ Op. cit., p. 14.

⁵² See op. cit., 296.

is predominantly a genial humorist, in whom he admires, above all, the qualities of mercifulness, pity, kindness and benevolence.⁵³ It is true that in his lecture Thackeray does appreciate Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* as a "wonderful satire" and praises his "admirable natural love of truth, the keenest instinctive antipathy to hypocrisy, the happiest satirical gift of laughing it to scorn".⁵⁴ But these rare remarks cannot substantially correct his general portrait of Fielding as a kind-hearted, humane, even if dissipated novelist, a portrait, behind which, as Ivasheva points out, the satirist Fielding, from whom Thackeray learned his craft, disappears.⁵⁵

There are, however, some writers who do not suffer by being roped into the lectures as humorists and even some who gain the doubtful prize of being praised beyond their merits because they fulfil Thackeray's requirements. One of those who do not suffer is Smollett, to whose novels Thackeray devotes only a few lines, for in harmony with the conception of his lectures he pays much more attention to the novelist's life and personal character (describing both with great sympathy). Even within this limited space, however, Thackeray evaluates Smollett's art justly. He rightly sees Smollett's works as being firmly rooted in the novelist's personal experiences and recollections, and positively assesses the keen perceptive faculty and the "wonderful relish and delightful broad humour" with which this writer, who "did not invent much",⁵⁶ described what he saw and experienced. Of Smollett's characters he most highly appreciates that of Tom Bowling, who is indeed a delightful humorous portrait, and of his novels, *Humphrey Clinker*, which is by common consent Smollett's best work:

"The novel of *Humphry Clinker* is, I do think, the most laughable story that has ever been written since the goodly art of novel-writing began. Winifred Jenkins and Tabitha Bramble must keep Englishmen on the grin for ages to come; and in their letters and the story of their loves there is a perpetual fount of sparkling laughter, as inexhaustible as Bladud's well" (*Works* XIII, 643).⁵⁷

In his evaluation of Goldsmith, too, Thackeray shows himself to be predominantly a just critic. He reveals even greater sympathy for this writer's personal character and hard life than he did for those of Smollett and pays generous tribute to the art of "the most beloved of English writers",⁵⁸ appreciating those positive qualities which it did possess and which at the same time remarkably well fulfilled the demands Thackeray made on humorous writing in this period of his life — its pastoral simplicity and sentimental idyllism, its charm and tenderness:

"What is the charm of his verse, of his style, and humour? His sweet regrets, his delicate compassion, his soft smile, his tremulous sympathy, the weakness which he owns? Your love for him is half pity. You come hot and tired from the day's battle, and this sweet minstrel sings to you. Who could harm the kind vagrant harper? Whom did he ever hurt? He carries no weapon — save the harp on which he plays to you; and with which he delights great and humble, young and old, the captains in the tents, or the soldiers round

⁵³ See *Works* XIII, 646, 653, X, 615, XVII, 457, XV, 288.

⁵⁴ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 621, 646; see also X, 622, XIII, 737.

⁵⁵ See op. cit., p. 298.

⁵⁶ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 643.

⁵⁷ For some of his later comments on Smollett, written in the same spirit and tone, see *Works* XVII, 471, *Letters* IV, 186; for references to Smollett's characters see *Works* XV, 906, XVII, 450, 620, XIV, 171, XVII, 487, XIII, 628.

⁵⁸ *Works* XIII, 671.

the fire, or the women and children in the villages, at whose porches he stops and sings his simple songs of love and beauty. With that sweet story of the *Vicar of Wakefield*, he has found entry into every castle and every hamlet in Europe. Not one of us, however busy or hard, but once or twice in our lives has passed an evening with him, and undergone the charm of his delightful music" (*Works* XIII, 672-674).

Although in this passage Thackeray to a certain extent succumbs to the influence of the traditional way of regarding Goldsmith as a writer who for his impracticality and lack of strength needed the protection of the critic and the reader, and treats him rather condescendingly (for which he is reprehended by Louis I. Bredvold⁵⁹), he never shared the views of such adverse critics as were Boswell and Walpole, who characterized Goldsmith as a blockhead or even idiot, and underestimated his work, dissociating himself from Boswell's depreciatory references to him⁶⁰ and being to a large degree able to discern in Goldsmith's art even some positive values other than sensibility and humour — its humanitarian and democratic spirit. As the following comment adjoined to his quotation from "The Deserted Village" shows, he realized that Goldsmith's ideas about the ideal organization of society were utopian, yet he writes about them with sympathy:

"In these verses, I need not say with what melody, with what touching truth, with what exquisite beauty of comparison — as indeed in hundreds more pages of the writings of this honest soul — the whole character of the man is told — his humble confession of faults and weakness; his pleasant little vanity, and desire that his village should admire him; his simple scheme of good in which everybody was to be happy — no beggar was to be refused his dinner — nobody in fact was to work much, and he to be the harmless chief of the Utopia, and the monarch of the Irish Yvetôt" (*Works* XIII, 684-685).

In the conclusion of his lecture Thackeray speaks with deep feeling about "the wonderful and unanimous response of affection with which the world has paid back the love he gave it" and ends his evaluation with the following words:

"His humour delighting us still: his song fresh and beautiful as when first he charmed with it: his words in all our mouths: his very weaknesses beloved and familiar — his benevolent spirit seems still to smile upon us: to do gentle kindnesses: to succour with sweet charity: to soothe, caress, and forgive: to plead with the fortunate for the unhappy and the poor?" (*Works* XIII, 688).

Thackeray's evaluation of Goldsmith is in its essential points near to that of Hazlitt, though it is not so penetrating (in one instance we might even speak of direct derivation⁶¹); nor is it far from that of Carlyle.

Addison gains much by being included in the lectures as a humorist, for Thackeray places him above Swift and Fielding as a "gentle satirist" whose humour does not frighten him but arouses in him the feelings of contentment and calm happiness:

"It is as a *Tatler* of small talk and a *Spectator* of mankind, that we cherish and love him, and owe as much pleasure to him as to any human being that ever wrote. He came

⁵⁹ See *Dějiny anglické literatury (A History of English Literature)*, ed. Hardin Craig, Oxford University Press, New York, 1950), 2 vols., trans. Eva Masnerová and Zdeněk Stříbrný, ed. Zdeněk Vančura, SNKLAV Praha, 1963, II, 95.

⁶⁰ See *Works* XIII, 685n. (the footnote is by Hannay, but Thackeray would certainly not have included it in his lectures, if he had not agreed with the opinion expressed).

⁶¹ See Hazlitt's statement that Goldsmith "could copy nothing that he did not adorn with the graces of his own mind" (*English Poets*, p. 160), and a similar comment of Thackeray in *Works* XIII, 682.

in that artificial age, and began to speak with his noble, natural voice. He came, the gentle satirist, who hit no unfair blow; the kind judge who castigated only in smiling. While Swift went about, hanging and ruthless — a literary Jeffries — in Addison's kind court only minor cases were tried: only peccadilloes and small sins against society: only a dangerous libertinism in tuckers and hoops; or a nuisance in the abuse of beaux' canes and snuff-boxes" (*Works XIII*, 534-536).

It is obvious that Addison's (and Steele's) mild and benignant satire, which did not probe any deeper than to petty offences in social manners and ignored the flagrant social abuses lying underneath, better fitted Thackeray's modified conception of humour and satire than Swift's more deeply penetrating satirical lancet. It is therefore not surprising that he evaluates Addison as "one of the kindest benefactors that society has ever had", a great genius and most distinguished wit and scholar, "the most delightful talker in the world".⁶² He also compares Addison as a man to Swift, to the detriment of the great satirist. While he hates Swift (and Sterne) as renegades and traitors to their profession as clergymen, as he expressed it in one of his letters,⁶³ he extols Addison as "one of the finest gentlemen the world ever saw" and a genuine Christian, and it is especially the Christian virtues which redeem in his eyes all the personal foibles of the essayist. He forgives Addison not only his lack of "insight into or reverence for the love of women"⁶⁴ and his reserved attitude to other authors of his time, but even such weaknesses as those for which he sharply reprehends Fielding, as we shall see — for wine and smoking. Indeed, if it were not for these foibles, he could not have admired Addison so much, as he confessed in the following comment:

"If he had not that little weakness for wine — why, we could scarcely have found a fault with him, and could not have liked him as we do" (*Works XIII*, 530).

We know from his other comments, however (one of which is quoted in my third chapter), that for all his admiration he found Addison too cold-hearted and too perfect for his taste. This is further confirmed by his letter to Paul Émile Daurand, in which he protests against the French critic's rebuking him for praising Addison "in order to curry favour with the English aristocracy", and proceeds:

"And now I will give you the history of Addison, whom I don't like personally, but whose humour I admire with all my heart: more than his humour I admire his conduct through life; rich or poor, he was an upright, honest, dignified, gentle man, a worthy man of letters. He underwent bad fortune with admirable serenity, I thought it was right to praise him as one of our profession, and leave the reader to make his own moral from what I said" (*Letters III*, 389-390).

Another proof of this is Thackeray's depiction of Addison's personal character in *Esmond* as a perfect gentleman and model Christian, bearing "poverty and narrow fortune" with "lofty cheerfulness" and courage, upright and conscientious in his later public offices and in all circumstances maintaining his dignity, but too serene and cold, resembling with his pure and cold chiselled features and perfectly regular face rather "a tinted statue" than a living human being and not so dear to his heart as is the much less perfect, but amiable and hearty Steele.

⁶² For the quotations see *Works XIII*, 524, 536.

⁶³ See *Letters II*, 800.

⁶⁴ For the quotations see *Works XIII*, 528, 536.

The evaluation of Addison is to a large extent based on the then generally accepted assessment by Macaulay in the famous article published in the *Edinburgh Review* in July 1843, to which Thackeray several times refers and which he characterizes as "a magnificent statue of the great writer and moralist of the last age, raised by the love and the marvellous skill and genius of one of the most illustrious artists of our own".⁶⁵ His indebtedness to this criticism, however, is not absolute, as Saintsbury and Ray have pointed out, for he does not exalt Addison so much as Macaulay did, while he rather overestimates Steele, who was in Macaulay's evaluation "most unduly depressed".⁶⁶ Thackeray is certainly not entirely uncritical of Addison, for he has grave objections to his aesthetic creed and to his poetry, as we have seen in my second chapter, and he discerned some weak points even in the essays, reprehending them for superficiality and lack of deep feeling:

"He does not go very deep: let the gentlemen of a profound genius, critics accustomed to the plunge of the baths, console themselves by thinking that he *couldn't* go very deep. There are no traces of suffering in his writing. He was so good, so honest, so healthy, so cheerfully selfish, if I must use the word. There is no deep sentiment" (*Works* XIII, 536).⁶⁷

Thackeray's criticism of Addison (to which he returned once again in his lecture *Charity and Humour*) is in some of its points near to the assessments even of some other critics than Macaulay, notably of Johnson and Hazlitt. He approaches both these critics in preferring Steele to Addison and praising both essayists especially as historians of manners; he is near to Johnson in his criticism of Addison's relationship to Steele, and of Addison's works for feebleness of sentiment and superficiality of thought, and to Hazlitt in his great admiration for Sir Roger de Coverley.

As I have suggested above, it is Steele in particular who gains by being assessed according to Thackeray's modified conception of humour, for he is praised beyond his merits, as Loomis has also pointed out.⁶⁸ That Thackeray, however, is perfectly aware of what he is doing, the following open confession testifies:

"If Steele is not our friend he is nothing. He is by no means the most brilliant of wits nor the deepest of thinkers: but he is our friend: we love him, as children love their love with an A, because he is amiable . . . I own to liking Dick Steele the man, and Dick Steele the author, much better than much better men and much better authors" (*Works* XIII, 572).

This confession is the key to Thackeray's whole evaluation of Steele (as well as to his portrait of the essayist in *Esmond*) and also explains the warm tone in which it is written. In describing Steele's personal character, Thackeray does not hide the essayist's foibles, which again include even such as he found unacceptable in Fielding and which are again, as in Addison's case, forgiven because of Steele's kind heart and his sincere repentance, and apologized for by the different moral standards valid in the society of the writer's time. Thackeray admits that Steele's style, like his life, "is full of faults and careless blunders", but these are redeemed, like the writer's personal weaknesses, "by his sweet

⁶⁵ *Works* XIII, 524-525.

⁶⁶ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 204; for Ray's opinion see *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 145.

⁶⁷ See also *Works* XIII, 525.

⁶⁸ See *op. cit.*, p. 14.

and compassionate nature". He finds some weak points even in the essays, but rightly awards them the highest place in Steele's whole achievement, praising them for the pleasant wit, easy frankness and the "gush of good spirits and good humour" with which they are written, appreciating, too, Steele's relish for beauty and goodness and especially the enjoyment of life pervading them which, as we know from the already mentioned quotation in my third chapter (and also from the confrontation and comparison of the approach of the three writers to a similar subject to be found in the lecture), he prefers to Swift's "savage indignation" and Addison's "lonely serenity". In his preference of Steele as a writer who was "in the world and of it" to "those lonely ones of the earth whose greatness obliged them to be solitary",⁶⁹ Thackeray approaches the standpoint assumed by Hazlitt in his comparison of Addison and Steele.⁷⁰ Thackeray's lecture on Steele, which besides the above-mentioned critical judgments contains, too, a brief evaluation of Steele's comedies, which I shall treat later, and a splendidly written introduction in which the lecturer successfully evokes the atmosphere of the period in which the writer lived, concludes with the following tender words of farewell:

"Peace be with him! Let us think gently of one who was so gentle; let us speak kindly of one whose own breast exuberated with human kindness" (*Works* XIII, 578).

Thackeray's lecture on Steele has been very highly assessed by Clapp as "the cream of the series" (alongside that on Swift and Goldsmith) and so indeed it is as far as its warmth is concerned, and also its excellent introduction. As for the assessment of Steele, however, I rather find myself in agreement with Greig, who has pointed out that the portrait Thackeray presents in his lecture is not the real man, but "a highly romanticized version of him, a version attractive to the lecturer because, while Steele was not big enough to be frightening, he seemed to possess the same amiable virtues (. . . and weaknesses) . . . as the lecturer himself". Almost the same thing might be said about the portrait of Steele in *Esmond*, though the term "romanticized" is not in my opinion appropriate to Thackeray's approach to this figure, which is drawn with great sympathy, to be sure, but is not made larger than life, for all Steele's foibles are depicted faithfully. It is also worth noticing that this character plays a not insignificant role in the plot: Thackeray brings him upon the scene at all the crucial points in *Esmond's* life and always as a faithful friend, helper and consoler and, as Loofbourow has shown, uses him, alongside Addison and Swift, "as an emblem of the enigmatic relationship between art and reality".⁷¹

As I have suggested above, the second characteristic trait of the development in Thackeray's critical approach during the early 1850s is a shift in the relationship of his moral criterion to his other critical standards. As Thackeray progresses along the road leading him to his compromise with society and its moral code, he is developing into an ever severer critic of the moral content and of the effect of fiction on the reading public. Like Johnson and his followers he more and more intensively thinks about novels being read by young people, and these finally become, as they were for these predecessors of his, one of the main criteria in judging the value of his own literary works and of fiction in

⁶⁹ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 561, 556, 568-569.

⁷⁰ See *Comic Writers*, p. 129.

general. The organic unity of the ethical and other judgments in his criticism is therefore seriously impaired, but since in this period he devoted himself to criticism only occasionally, only two novelists are made to pay more heavily — Fielding and Sterne.

In Fielding's case this change of Thackeray's attitude is much more conspicuous than in that of Sterne, for he paid formal critical attention to the former novelist in both periods, while to the latter only in the 1850s. The difference between his earlier and later critical approach to Fielding is indeed so glaring that it has not escaped the notice of any Thackerayan scholar and several of them (Frederick S. Dickson, Wilbur Cross, Eva Beach Touster, Ralph Wilson Rader, V. V. Ivasheva and the author of this study⁷²) have attempted to provide some explanation for it, as we shall see later (p. 301). I have already dealt with one aspect of this change, ignored by all the scholars mentioned except the two last — Thackeray's endeavour to make Fielding fit into the narrow limits of his modified conception of humour and satire by presenting him almost exclusively as a tender-hearted humorist. In the following I shall be concerned with the suggested second main aspect, which is more conspicuous, and has also been noticed and assessed by all the above-mentioned scholars.

Whereas in his review of Fielding's works and his other early statements Thackeray did not find much amiss with Fielding's depiction of virtue and vice, as we have seen, in his lecture of 1851 he strictly condemns the moral principles embodied in some characters created by his former literary teacher. It is true that throughout the 1850s and even in the following decade he continues to complain of the squeamishness of contemporary society, which, regarding Fielding's novels as immoral and corrupting, forbids the writers of that generation to "lift up Molly Seagrim's curtain" and forces the Comic Muse only to indicate "the presence of some one behind it" and pass on "primly, with expressions of horror, and a fan before her eyes", but he does this outside his literary lectures — sincerely in *The Four Georges* and *The Virginians* and more or less formally in his *Roundabout Papers*. In his lecture on Fielding as well as in his comment on this novelist in *Charity and Humour*, however, he does not vent any such complaint and therefore objectively identifies himself with the society of his time, when he accuses Fielding of a "lax morality in many a vital point".⁷³ It is especially the character of Tom Jones that irritates him and excites his anger. Whereas in his review of 1840 he was able to appreciate the positive moral values embodied in Fielding's hero and to realize that his foibles were a faithful reproduction of the morality of the author's time and society, in his lecture he condemns both Tom Jones and his creator for their "immorality":

"I can't say that I think Mr. Jones a virtuous character; I can't say but that I think Fielding's evident liking and admiration for Mr. Jones, shows that the great humourist's moral sense was blunted by his life, and that here in Art and Ethics, there is a great error" (*Works* XIII, 649).

⁷¹ For the quotations see "Critique on Horseback", p. 293; Greig, op. cit., p. 135; Loof-bourrow, op. cit., p. 126.

⁷² See Frederick S. Dickson: "William Makepeace Thackeray and Henry Fielding", *The North American Review*, CXCII, 1913, pp. 522-537; Wilbur Cross, op. cit., III, 213-225; Eva Beach Touster, op. cit., Ralph Wilson Rader, "Thackeray's Injustice to Fielding", *The Journal of English and German Philology*, LVI, 1957, pp. 203-242; V. V. Ivasheva, op. cit., and my study quoted in note 19, Introduction.

⁷³ For the quotations see *Works* XV, 206, X, 622.

What is more serious, however, is that Thackeray's irritation leads him to endow this character with many negative traits which are entirely of his own invention. As Cross has demonstrated, Thackeray's portrait of Tom Jones is in fact a composite one, consisting of some traits of the actual hero, enlarged by those of Fielding, Captain Booth and Thackeray himself. By these slight fabrications, as this scholar points out, "Thackeray really did more than any other man has ever done to stain the memory of Fielding".⁷⁴ Thackeray's biased and unjust opinion of Tom Jones leads him also to deny him the right of holding the rank of hero and to apply to him the same doctrine of "unmixed" literary character which he formerly used in his evaluation of the common thieves and vulgar ruffians of the Newgate novelists, who were raised by their creators to the pedestal of glamorous heroes. Completely ignoring what he clearly realized in his review of 1840, that Tom Jones for all his foibles and sins does embody a definite and clearly expressed moral theory, namely that a good heart will redeem all sins and that it is especially for this that this character is admirable, he gives vent to this vehement protest:

"If it is right to have a hero whom we may admire, let us at least take care that he is admirable: if, as is the plan of some authors (a plan decidedly against their interests, be it said), it is propounded that there exists in life no such being, and therefore that in novels, the picture of life, there should appear no such character: then Mr. Thomas Jones becomes an admissible person, and we examine his defects and good qualities, as we do those of Parson Thwackum, or Miss Seagrim. But a hero with a flawed reputation; a hero spunging for a guinea; a hero who can't pay his landlady, and is obliged to let his honour out to hire, is absurd, and his claim to heroic rank untenable. I protest against Mr. Thomas Jones holding such rank at all. I protest even against his being considered a more than ordinary young fellow, ruddy-checked, broad-shouldered, and fond of wine and pleasure. He would not rob a church, but that is all; and a pretty long argument may be debated, as to which of these old types, the spendthrift, the hypocrite, Jones and Blifil, Charles and Joseph Surface, — is the worst member of society and the most deserving of censure" (*Works* XIII, 649—650).

Thackeray also very much resents that Tom Jones does not repent of "his manifold errors and shortcomings" and that he "is not half punished enough before the great prize of fortune and love falls to his share":

"I am angry with Jones. Too much of the plum-cake and rewards of life fall to that boisterous, swaggering young scapegrace" (*Works* XIII, 652).

As we may see, Thackeray's standpoint approaches in this period very near to that of the stern judges of the morals of fictitious characters (represented in English criticism especially by Collier, Hume, Goldsmith and the whole Johnsonian school, and Horace Walpole), from which he formerly openly dissociated himself in the comment of 1840 on the happy end of the disreputable heroes of Pierce Egan's *Life in London*:

"The artist, it is said, wished to close the career of the three heroes by bringing them all to ruin, but the writer, or publishers, would not allow any such melancholy subjects to dash the merriment of the public, and we believe Tom, Jerry, and Logic were married off at the end of the tale, as if they had been the most moral personages in the world. There is some goodness in this pity which authors and the public are disposed to show towards certain agreeable, disreputable characters of romance. Who would mar the prospect of honest Roderick Random, or Charles Surface, or Tom Jones? only a very stern moralist indeed" (*Works* II, 424).

⁷⁴ Op. cit., III, 225.

Although he never identified himself with these moralists absolutely, as we shall yet see, his standpoint perceptibly diverged from that of those critics of Fielding who rejected the rebukes addressed to Tom Jones for his "immorality" and with whom, in his earlier review, he more or less coincided in opinion (for instance Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb). Worth special notice is his letter to Robert Bell of 3 September 1848, in which he reacts to Forster's criticism of *Vanity Fair* in the *Examiner* (July 22, 1848) which characterized the atmosphere of the novel as being overloaded with the "exhalations of human folly and wickedness", so that the reader gasps "for a more liberal alternation of refreshing breezes of unsophisticated honesty", as was provided by Fielding, who, "after he has administered a sufficient dose of Blifil's choke-damp, purifies the air by a hearty laugh from Tom Jones". In his answer Thackeray defends himself by pointing out that in his opinion Tom Jones "is as big a rogue as Blifil. Before God he is — I mean the man is selfish according to his nature as Blifil according to his".⁷⁵ By rejecting Forster's statement Thackeray in fact dissociates himself from very similar judgments of Lamb and Coleridge. It is worth noticing, however, that in spite of this he allowed Hannay, the author of the footnotes to his lectures, to quote one such statement by Coleridge⁷⁶ and that he himself quotes Lamb, though he "improves" upon this critic's judgment by his own amendment, in which he even surpasses the adverse judges of Tom Jones's morals by attributing to Fielding's hero "vices" in which he never indulged (as Cross has pointed out, Tom "has never tasted punch" and "he is never seen in the novel with a pipe"⁷⁷):

"Charles Lamb says finely of Jones, that a single hearty laugh from him 'clears the air' — but then it is in a certain state of the atmosphere. It might clear the air when such personages as Blifil or Lady Bellaston poison it. But I fear very much that (except until the very last scene of the story), when Mr. Jones enters Sophia's drawing-room, the pure air there is rather tainted with the young gentleman's tobacco-pipe and punch" (*Works* XIII, 649).

It is also symptomatic that in this period of his life Thackeray more emphatically than before places above Tom Jones such characters as are either explicitly positive (Joseph Andrews, Parson Adams, Squire Allworthy, Doctor Harrison, Amelia Booth), or are "mixed" characters like Tom Jones himself and appear, like him, in the leading role, but repent of their vices and are duly punished (Captain Booth).⁷⁸ Even the portrait of Fielding the man that emerges from Thackeray's lectures and other writings of this period is considerably darker than that we know from his review of 1840. He depicts his great predecessor as a man who brutalized his life by associating with evil women, undermined his health by heavy drinking bouts, after which he often "reeled home to chambers on the shoulders of the watchman", and was dishonest about money.⁷⁹

As I have suggested, however, we cannot speak about an entire identification of Thackeray's standpoint with that of the post-Johnsonian critics and other

⁷⁵ For the quotations see *Letters* II, 424n. and 424.

⁷⁶ See *Works* XIII, 649n.

⁷⁷ *Op. cit.*, III, 224.

⁷⁸ See *Works* X, 622, XIII, 647, 651, Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 69.

⁷⁹ For the quotation see *Works* XIII, 647; see also *Letters* III, 304, IV, 186, *Works* XII, 367, XIII, 646.

hostile judges of Fielding. For all his unjust strictures on Fielding's person he is still able to appreciate the novelist's positive human qualities, and is inclined to forgive him for his "wild life" on account of his Christian repentance, his generous heart, noble spirit, and his respect for "female innocence and infantine tenderness", retaining, too, his former warm sympathy for the courage with which Fielding bore all the hardships that were in store for him.⁸⁰ For all his strict moral judgments he did not adopt a negative attitude to the art of his former master, continues to extol Fielding as a great genius and a great master of humour, positively appreciates the truthfulness of his novels to life and his excellent art of characterization and composition, and sometimes does it in very eloquent and enthusiastic words, as for instance in the often-quoted passage from his lecture ("What a wonderful art!..."⁸¹). And we do also possess direct evidence that he never fully identified himself with Fielding's most adverse detractors. He never changed, for instance, his early negative attitude to Walpole's criticism of Fielding for keeping low company, never drifted to the side of Richardson in this novelist's feud with Fielding, dissociated himself from such adverse critics of Fielding as were Hawkins, Hurd and, in his own time, the "hypercritic" in *Blackwood's Magazine*,⁸² and expressed his reservations even as to Johnson's criticism. In his lecture he for instance said:

"Richardson disliked Fielding's works quite honestly; Walpole quite honestly spoke of them as vulgar and stupid. Their squeamish stomachs sickened at the rough fare and the rough guests assembled at Fielding's jolly revel. Indeed the cloth might have been cleaner; and the dinner and the company were scarce such as suited a dandy. The kind and wise old Johnson would not sit down with him. But a greater scholar than Johnson could afford to admire that astonishing genius of Harry Fielding; and we all know the lofty panegyric which Gibbon wrote of him, and which remains a towering monument to the great novelist's memory" (*Works* XIII, 648).

Deserving at least brief notice is the attitude Thackeray assumes in *The Newcomes*. He makes his Colonel a great admirer of Johnson, believing this critic to be the greatest of men and unconditionally accepting all his critical judgments, including those on Fielding, and puts into his mouth a severe and indignant condemnation of *Tom Jones* as a "low and disgraceful" book "that tells the story of a parcel of servants, of a pack of footmen and ladies' maids fuddling in ale-houses",⁸³ and the following damaging sentence upon its hero:

"As for that Tom Jones — that fellow that sells himself, sir — by heavens, my blood boils when I think of him! I wouldn't sit down in the same room with such a fellow, sir. If he came in at that door, I would say, 'How dare you, you hireling ruffian, to sully with your presence an apartment where my young friend and I are conversing together? where two gentlemen, I say, are taking their wine after dinner? How dare you, you degraded villain!'" (*Works* XIV, 50-51).

⁸⁰ For the quotation see *Works* XIII, 646; see also *ibid.*, pp. 654, 655, 679, XVII, 471, *Letters* IV, 186.

⁸¹ *Works* XIII, 652-653; for his other later tributes to Fielding see *Works* X, 586, XIII, 14, 374, 643, 646, 651, 731, XV, 271, 906, XVI, 307, XVII, 457, 598, 600, Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 69.

⁸² For his attitude to Walpole see *Gulliver*, *op. cit.*, p. 231, *Contributions*, 115, *Works* XIII, 744, 747, XV, 552, XVII, 471; to Hawkins and Hurd, *Works* XVII, 471; to the critic of *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Works* XVII, 399-400, 471.

⁸³ For the quotations see *Works* XIV, 49, 50.

Even if the Colonel's judgment in some points reminds us of Thackeray's evaluation in the *English Humourists* (though the tone in which it is expressed is incomparably sharper). I do not think, as Kathleen Tillotson does, that Thackeray fails to dissociate himself from his hero's strictures on *Tom Jones*,⁸⁴ for he does express his own standpoint very clearly, though, to be sure, somewhat belatedly, through the mouth of his narrator in the following comment, which almost sounds as a quotation of his earlier argument against the stern moralistic judges of literary characters cited above:

"I know very well that Charles Surface is a sad dog, and Tom Jones no better than he should be; but, in spite of such critics as Dr. Johnson and Colonel Newcome, most of us have a sneaking regard for honest Tom, and hope Sophia will be happy, and Tom will end well at last" (*Works* XIV, 137).

Nor did Thackeray ever come round completely to the standpoint of the post-Johnsonian critics, who, seeing Richardson as the greatest novelist of their time, tended, as Mayo expressed it, "to put so fine a point upon their ethical sensibilities that in the whole canon of eighteenth-century fiction, only *Sir Charles Grandison* could pass muster", though that novel, as "some of them were forced to admit, was dull".⁸⁵ It is true that in one point Thackeray almost entirely identifies himself with these critics (and consequently diverges from the opposite standpoint of Hazlitt⁸⁶): in this period of his life he grew enthusiastic about the titular hero of this novel, obviously because this character, as "a code of Christian ethics — a compilation and abstract of all gentlemanly accomplishments",⁸⁷ as Hazlitt characterized it, admirably suited his own later ideal of gentlemanliness (he included *Grandison* among his favourite characters and the most convincing depictions of the English gentleman in the literature of his country, and was avowedly inspired by this character when creating Colonel Newcome and partly, too, *Henry Esmond*⁸⁸). Yet he was not entirely uncritical even of this novel, as one of his comments shows,⁸⁹ and never saw in Richardson the greatest novelist of that writer's time. In his lecture on Fielding he pointed out that "such an athletic and boisterous genius as Fielding's" must have entertained a "hearty contempt and antipathy" for *Pamela*, "couldn't do otherwise than laugh at the puny Cockney bookseller, pouring out endless volumes of sentimental twaddle, and hold him up to scorn as a moll-coddle and a milk-sop". In *The Virginians* he makes Mr. Lambert declare that Fielding is good company and that "his books are worth a dozen of your milksop *Pamelas* and *Clarissas*, Mrs. Lambert: but what woman ever loved true humour?" The attitude Thackeray assumes to Richardson in this novel (where he places him, along with Dr. Johnson, among his fictitious characters) is most interesting and demands at least brief comment. He puts evaluatory judgments upon this novelist into the mouths of several of his characters, but his own creative approach to the depiction of Richardson shows in my opinion that he identifies himself rather with the opinion of Mr. Lambert, quoted above, than with George Warrington, who sees in Richardson, and in Fielding, "the greatest geniuses

⁸⁴ See op. cit., p. 148.

⁸⁵ Op. cit., p. 146.

⁸⁶ See especially *Sketches and Essays; and Winterslow* (*Essays Written There*), A New ed. by W. Carew Hazlitt, George Bell & Sons, London, 1890, pp. 182-183 and *Comic Writers*, p. 163.

⁸⁷ *Sketches and Essays*, p. 133.

in England", or with the cynical Lord March, who characterizes the novelist as "a fat old printer, who has written a story about a confounded girl and a fellow that ruins her", or the Lambert ladies who cry over Richardson's volumes, or the primitive Harry Warrington who "thought novels were stupid; and, as for the ladies crying their eyes out over Mr. Richardson, he could not imagine how they could be moved by any such nonsense". Thackeray deliberately places Richardson in juxtaposition to Dr. Johnson (the former always appears with a train of admiring ladies and is constantly molested by his fans, whereas the learned doctor always stands unnoticed in the background), yet he does not leave the reader in any doubt as to where his own sympathies are placed and who was the greater of the two writers. The enthusiastic outpourings of Richardson's fans, who extol him as "the supporter of virtue, the preacher of sound morals, the mainstay of religion", as a man "too great and good to live in such a world",⁹⁰ are reproduced and Richardson's popularity described with a distinct undertone of irony:

"The great author was accustomed to be adored. A gentler wind never puffed mortal vanity. Enraptured spinsters flung tea-leaves round him, and incensed him with the coffee-pot. Matrons kissed the slippers they had worked for him. There was a halo of virtue round his night-cap. All Europe had thrilled, panted, admired, trembled, wept, over the pages of the immortal, little, kind, honest man with the round paunch" (*Works* XV, 271).

And finally, Thackeray himself never became such an uncritical admirer of the founder of this critical school, Dr. Johnson, as his Colonel Newcome was. In the 1830s and 1840s he referred to Johnson very rarely, most of his references concerning his unprepossessing appearance and objectionable table manners or certain episodes in his life, and only some referring to Johnson's works (especially to his *Dictionary* and *Rasselas*), either without any critical evaluation or with an implied negative judgment (as in the first chapter of *Vanity Fair* in which Becky expresses her contempt for the "Johnsonian principles" on which Miss Pinkerton's academy is based by throwing Johnson's *Dictionary* out of the window of the coach). It is also in two of these earlier comments that Thackeray dissociates himself from the "peevisish protest" of the great doctor against Fielding's fame.⁹¹ There is only one exception to this general picture and that occurs in the review of Scribe's play *Une Chaine* (April 1843) where Thackeray takes up and develops the moralistic standpoint of Dr. Johnson concerning polluted drama.⁹² As his comments of the 1850s and 1860s (some of which I have already quoted) show, even in this later period of his life Thackeray never came to any whole-hearted admiration of Johnson as critic, dramatist and novelist. Although he accepted and quoted some of Johnson's judgments in his evaluation of Swift and Goldsmith and approached to his standpoint in the assessment of Addison and (as we shall see) of Sterne, he commented on Johnson's partiality in criticism, dissociated himself not only from his adverse criticism of Fielding, but also from that of Shakespeare, of the

⁸⁸ For his references to and especially his comparisons of this character to his own personages see *Works* XIV, 49, 274, 670, *Letters* II, 815, *Works* XVI, 61, 210, 310, XVII, 600.

⁸⁹ See *Works* XIII, 755.

⁹⁰ For the quotations in this paragraph see *Works* XIII, 647, XV, 333, 271, 272, 637, 272-273, 271.

⁹¹ See *Works* VI, 413 and *Letters* II, 637.

⁹² See Garnett, op. cit., p. 169.

"kind anecdotist Spence", and of Prior's poetry, resented Johnson's chuckling over Addison's poverty and the "rather a malicious minuteness" with which Johnson described the personal habits and infirmities of "the great little Pope".⁹³ He also refers slightly to the *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* as to "that now unfrequented poets' corner, in which so many forgotten bigwigs have a niche".⁹⁴ In his later works Thackeray also assesses *Irene* as a failure and both this drama and *Rasselas* as works no longer read.⁹⁵ On the other hand, however, he makes George Warrington set a special value on Johnson's critical opinions of his play *Carpezan*.⁹⁶ He seems to have thought more of Johnson the poet, for in this period he twice quotes from "The Vanity of Human Wishes", once echoes a couplet contributed by Johnson to Goldsmith's *Traveller* and especially highly evaluates (and quotes) the poet's "sacred" verses on the death of Mr. Robert Levet (a statement almost identical with that of Scott, as Margaret Ball has also pointed out⁹⁷).

In his relationship to Johnson the man, however, we may observe a distinctly growing enthusiasm on Thackeray's part. He does not include this writer in his lectures on the *English Humourists* (though his modified conception of humour and satire would have made this perfectly possible), but pays much attention to Johnson in *The Four Georges*, extolling him as the great supporter of the monarchy and the Church, who deserved of these institutions better than the great politicians and church dignitaries of his time and was therefore rightly revered "as a sort of oracle" who "declared for Church and King"⁹⁸. (In these eulogies we scarcely recognize the Thackeray of the 1830s and 1840s, the radical republican and convinced anti-monarchist.) He highly assesses Johnson as a man for his humanity, wisdom, and tender heart and expresses his wish that he might have known him in person and enjoyed his company. This later enthusiasm for Johnson finds also its reflection in Thackeray's portrait of the writer in *The Virginians*, where he deliberately places this poor, shabbily dressed, ungentle literary man of clumsy behaviour in juxtaposition to the showy splendour of the life of the higher social classes, thus expressing his sympathies for spiritual greatness, though accompanied by poverty, as well as his distaste for intellectual barrenness, even if surrounded by wealth. Johnson also plays a certain role in the life of George Warrington, whom he helps at the time of his greatest need, by encouraging him and procuring him work. Thackeray puts into the mouth of his hero words of warm appreciation of Johnson's kindness, as well as words of regret at having formerly assessed this writer so unfavourably (in my opinion here it is also Thackeray himself that speaks). To all this we should also add that in the later period of Thackeray's life Boswell's *Johnson* was among his favourite "bed-books";⁹⁹ he was not

⁹³ See *Works* XIV, 261-262, XIII, 616, 582, 584-585, 530, 616.

⁹⁴ *Works* XIII, 508; for a similar opinion of Pen's father see *Works* XII, 70.

⁹⁵ See especially *Works* XVII, 629.

⁹⁶ See *Works* XV, 668, 669, 670.

⁹⁷ For Thackeray's quotations see *Letters* II, 542, 685, III, 565; for his statement on Levet see *Works* XIII, 762 (see also *Letters* III, 544 for another quotation from this poem); for Scott's opinion see *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by D. Douglas, 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1894, I, 192, quoted by Margaret Ball, op. cit., p. 80.

⁹⁸ *Works* XIII, 763.

⁹⁹ See especially Wilson, op. cit., I, 217, *Works* XIII, 761, *Letters* IV, 438.

unaware of the biographer's errors and prejudices,¹⁰⁰ but was willing to condone them in view of his "embalming" Johnson for the future generations. Thackeray's later attitude to Johnson the man closely approaches the standpoint of Carlyle, who was not much interested in Johnson the writer, as Wellek points out, but very much cared for the man as reported by Boswell, in whom he saw "one of the greatest heroes" and "one of our great English souls".¹⁰¹

Yet even if Thackeray never completely identified himself with the standpoint of the post-Johnsonian school of criticism and with other adverse critics of Fielding, as I have attempted to prove in the preceding analysis, the fact remains that in the later period of his life he was in some essential points of his criticism unjust to his former literary teacher. What remains now is to find out the causes of his altered attitude, for the explanations so far offered do not seem to me entirely adequate. Ralph Wilson Rader, who was the last to write on the problem (if I do not count my own study), also expressed his dissatisfaction with the results of research to date, and pointed out that the scholars who had dealt with this problem before him either ignored the motive of the change altogether (Dickson, Cross), or did not succeed in finding out the correct one (Blanchard), or undervalued the change itself (Touster). But even this scholar does not in my opinion present the final answer to the problem, for he seeks for the cause of Thackeray's changed attitude exclusively in his personal life, in the feelings of personal guilt concerning his way of life in the years preceding his wife's illness, feelings which Thackeray developed after the disaster in his family and which he endeavoured to diminish by condemning similar foibles in Fielding's heroes, in whom he saw "the image of his own youth and his own errors".¹⁰² In my opinion, however, the problem of Thackeray's altered attitude to Fielding should be seen in a much wider perspective and all the existing factors should be taken into account, not only one of them. As follows from the above analysis of Thackeray's criticism of Swift and from the whole preceding account of his criticism of fiction, his new attitude to Fielding is not the only change we may discern in his criticism in his later years and the causes of all these should be sought for, as I suggested in assessing his criticism of Swift, in the whole development of his personality, view of life, art, aesthetic creed and critical principles after the beginning of the 1850s, with which all these alterations are in complete harmony.

The second writer who suffers from Thackeray's later tendency to lay undue stress upon ethical evaluation is, as suggested, Laurence Sterne. Thackeray's critical attitude to this novelist reminds us very much of that he revealed in his criticism of Swift — he has very serious reservations as to the novelist's personal character (aggravated by the fact that Sterne was, like Swift, a clergyman) and these find reflection in his assessment of Sterne's art. When preparing his lecture, Thackeray studied fairly copious biographical material, including Sterne's manuscript *Journal to Eliza*, in which he discovered three warm love letters addressed to three different women and written, as he believed, at the same time. This "evidence" of Sterne's falseness, which is based upon an error in dates (as Ray has pointed out), leads him to condemn Sterne as a false and

¹⁰⁰ See *Works* XIII, 762–763, XVII, 471, V, 249, XIII, 586.

¹⁰¹ Quoted by Wellek, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

¹⁰² *Op. cit.*, p. 211.

morally corrupt man of impure mind and heart, a liar, coward and weakling, a vain and conceited author, jealous of all his contemporaries, and a bad clergyman (in the last point his assessment is very near to that of Johnson). This evaluation of the personal and professional character of Sterne contains some grains of truth, but in general it goes too far by greatly exaggerating some of the really existing personal foibles of the great novelist and his inadequacies as a clergyman.

Thackeray's distaste for Sterne as a man to a great extent colours his assessment of Sterne as a novelist, but in spite of this the latter is not entirely unjust (in this my opinion diverges from that of Dodds, Clapp and Greig and is near to that of Saintsbury¹⁰³). He does not deny Sterne greatness and genius and positively appreciates those aspects of the novelist's art which express genuine and noble feeling and arouse in the reader love, kindness and pity. Thus for instance he comments upon a passage from *Tristram Shandy*, which he quotes in his lecture, in the following words:

"A critic who refuses to see in this charming description wit, humour, pathos, a kind nature speaking, and a real sentiment, must be hard indeed to move and to please. A page or two further we come to a description not less beautiful — a landscape and figures, deliciously painted by one who had the keenest enjoyment and the most tremulous sensibility" (*Works* XIII, 669).

But at the very next moment he emphasizes that he finds himself unable to quote the whole description:

"There is not a page in Sterne's writing but has something that were better away, a latent corruption — a hint, as of an impure presence" (*Works* XIII, 670).

Thackeray is also able duly to appreciate Sterne's splendid art of characterization and in his evaluation distinguishes those characters through whom the novelist took an honourable place in the tradition of realism and humour in the English novel, especially Uncle Toby, whom he includes, outside his lecture, "among the masterpieces of our English school", paying at the same time generous tribute to Sterne's works which, along with those of Goldsmith, "still form the wonder and delight of the lovers of English art".¹⁰⁴ More critical, however, is Thackeray's attitude to Sterne's humour, in which he finds, as for instance Coleridge and Hazlitt also did, much affectation (though he never goes to such extremes as some of Sterne's adverse critics did, notably Horace Walpole and Goldsmith¹⁰⁵):

"The humour of Swift and Rabelais, whom he pretended to succeed, poured from them as naturally as song does from a bird; they lose no manly dignity with it, but laugh their hearty great laugh out of their broad chests as nature bade them. But this man — who

¹⁰³ See Dodds, *op. cit.*, pp. 183—184, Clapp, *op. cit.*, p. 291, Greig, *op. cit.*, p. 137, Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 203.

¹⁰⁴ For the quotations see *Works* XVII, 453, 452; see also *ibid.*, pp. 598, 602—603.

¹⁰⁵ For Hazlitt's views see especially *Comic Writers*, pp. 163—164; for Coleridge's see *Coleridge's Literary Criticism*. With an Introduction by J. W. Mackail, Humphrey Milford, London, 1921, p. 154; for Walpole's opinions see *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Orford*, ed. by Mrs. Paget Toynbee, 16 vols., Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, MCMIII—MCMV, IV, 369, V, 32; for Goldsmith's see *The Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Peter Cunningham, 4 vols., John Murray, London, 1854, 1878, II, 263, 266. Goldsmith's assessment is also quoted in Thackeray's lecture on this writer and commented with approval, but in a footnote, the author of which was Hannay.

can make you laugh, who can make you cry, too — never lets his reader alone, or will permit his audience repose: when you are quiet, he fancies he must rouse you, and turns over head and heels, or sidles up and whispers a nasty story. The man is a great jester, not a great humourist. He goes to work systematically and of cold blood; paints his face, puts on his ruff and motley clothes, and lays down his carpet and tumbles on it" (*Works* XIII, 666).

Much pose and affectation is discerned by Thackeray also in Sterne's sentiment which seems to him (with some justification) not to be always sincere and natural. He is especially irritated by the episode concerning the dead donkey in the *Sentimental Journey* (also criticized by Carlyle¹⁰⁶), to which he reverts several times also outside his lecture, condemning the sentiment expressed in it as false, casting at the novelist such opprobrious terms as "mountebank", "drivelling quack" and "whimpering hypocrite", and accusing him of forcing the reader, by his false grimaces and grief, to become sentimental over trifles which are not worth a tear.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, however, he finds unaffected feeling in Sterne's private letters and many instances of genuine love and kindness in his published writings, and realizes that the novelist's "deliberate propensity to make points and seek applause"¹⁰⁸ may be to a great extent apologized for by Sterne's being a writer by profession:

"A perilous trade, indeed, is that of a man who has to bring his tears and laughter, his recollections, his personal griefs and joys, his private thoughts and feelings to market, to write them on paper, and sell them for money. Does he exaggerate his grief, so as to get his reader's pity for a false sensibility? feign indignation, so as to establish a character for virtue? elaborate repartees, so that he may pass for a wit? steal from other authors, and put down the theft to the credit side of his own reputation for ingenuity and learning? feign originality? affect benevolence or misanthropy? appeal to the gallery gods with claptraps and vulgar baits to catch applause?

How much of the paint and emphasis is necessary for the fair business of the stage, and how much of the rant and rouge is put on for the vanity of the actor? His audience trusts him: can he trust himself? How much was deliberate calculation and imposture — how much was false sensibility — and how much true feeling? Where did the lie begin, and did he know where? and where did the truth end in the art and scheme of this man of genius, this actor, this quack?" (*Works* XIII, 665—666).

Thackeray illustrates what he has in mind by the case of a French actor who was so moved by his own singing of a sentimental ballad that he was "snivelling and weeping quite genuine tears by the time his own ditty was over". and adds:

"I suppose Sterne had this artificial sensibility; he used to blubber perpetually in his study, and finding his tears infectious, and that they brought him a great popularity, he exercised the lucrative gift of weeping; he utilized it, and cried on every occasion. I own that I don't value or respect much the cheap dribble of those fountains. He fatigues me with his perpetual disquiet and his uneasy appeals to my risible or sentimental faculties. He is always looking in my face, watching his effect, uncertain whether I think him an impostor or not; posture-making, coaxing, and imploring me. 'See what sensibility I have — own now that I'm very clever — do cry now, you can't resist this'" (*Works* XIII, 666).

The sharpest weapons of Thackeray's criticism are turned, however, against the moral tendency and effect of Sterne's novels. This aspect of his criticism of the novelist is another instance of the rapprochement of his critical attitude

¹⁰⁶ See *Essays* III, 127.

¹⁰⁷ See *Works* X, 617, XIII, 667, XVII, 451; for his criticism of another episode of this type see *Works* XIII, 667.

¹⁰⁸ *Works* XIII, 666.

to fiction in this later period to that of the Johnsonian school of criticism, for the representatives of which Sterne was a *bête noire*. As one of the above quotations shows, he found Sterne's works marred by "a latent corruption", saw the "foul Satyr's eyes leer out of the leaves constantly" and, as we have seen in his criticism of Dickens, preferred the morally purer writers of his own time, "when men no longer have the temptation to write so as to call blushes on women's cheeks, and would shame to whisper wicked allusions to honest boys".¹⁰⁹ It is true that he was aware of the historical conditioning of Sterne's "immorality" and admitted that much of it could be ascribed to the more outspoken time in which the novelist lived, but he at the same time emphasized that the context of time could not explain and excuse all the "wickedness" of this writer.¹¹⁰ Even this part of Thackeray's criticism contains some grains of truth, however, for Sterne did have an excessive predilection for eroticism, and it was not always healthy eroticism. This was noticed by some other critics besides Thackeray, and not only by Goldsmith and the other critics of the Johnsonian school, who were over-prejudiced, but also by Scott and Coleridge.¹¹¹ It should also be pointed out that in spite of all Thackeray's moral indignation he never speaks about Sterne in such strong words as for instance Johnson's disciple the Rev. Vicesimus Knox, who called the novelist "the grand promoter of adultery, and every species of illicit commerce" (though Thackeray would probably approve of this critic's seeing in Sterne's novels a threat to "public and private morality"¹¹²).

Besides the limitations pointed out in the preceding, Thackeray's criticism of Sterne has another serious defect and that is his failure to appreciate the enormous significance of this novelist as a great innovator in the form of fiction. On this, whether he realized Sterne's contribution or not, he has no comment to offer.

Thackeray's criticism of the English novelists and essayists of the 18th century very clearly illustrates the changes which took place in his aesthetic creed and critical principles between the 1830s and the end of his life. These have been noticed also by other scholars (especially Stephenson, Greig, Ivasheva and Loomis) who have pointed out that his cycle of lectures on the *English Humourists* may be regarded as a turning point in his aesthetic and critical standards. Not all of them, however, interpret this change adequately, at least from my point of view, or seek for its motives in the right places. Thus Stephenson sees in this cycle the culmination of the spiritual drama in Thackeray and the beginning of his "second approach" to the depiction of reality, and in the character of Addison, as it emerges from the lecture and *Esmond*, the foreshadowing of the novelist's "noble third way", culminating in *The Newcomes* and in the following novels. Stephenson rightly characterizes this change as a development from sharp satire to a more optimistic approach to the depiction

¹⁰⁹ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 670, 671 and XVII, 431; see also XVII, 423.

¹¹⁰ See *Works* XIII, 671.

¹¹¹ For Goldsmith's views see the LIII. letter in the *Citizen of the World*; for Scott's see *Prose Works* III, 290 (quoted in *The Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, II, 264n.); for Coleridge's see *op. cit.*, 154; one of Coleridge's statements on this problem is quoted by Hannay in one of the footnotes to Thackeray's lectures (see *Works* XIII, 671n.).

¹¹² For the quotations see the Rev. Vicesimus Knox, *Moral and Literary Essays*, No. 145, "On the Moral Tendency of the Writings of Sterne", quoted by Mayo, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

of reality, finds its roots in that gradual deepening of Thackeray's religious faith which led him to the final conviction that the existing social structure was perfect and secure, but evaluates it in the contrary way, as a change from the worse to the better, as the rise of Thackeray's star from the darkness of disbelief, pessimism and fatalism.¹¹³ Greig, on the other hand, dates the change in Thackeray's critical standards to 1852, but characterizes it in my opinion essentially correctly:

"For a number of reasons (popular success being only one of them), he was losing that clarity of vision, that detached, ironical tolerance, that independent judgement on men and affairs, which he had learnt from the men of the eighteenth century and had never quite lost . . . in the years up to 1852."¹¹⁴

Although he speaks about "a number of reasons", however, this scholar confines his search for the motives of the change to the sphere of Thackeray's personal psychology, which of course cannot be neglected, but does not explain everything. More adequate seems to me the interpretation of Ivasheva, who characterizes the *English Humourists* as Thackeray's farewell to satire¹¹⁵ and finds the motives determining this development in a much wider sphere, including, *inter alia*, the general social climate of the 1850s. Very remarkable, in my opinion, are also the conclusions of Loomis, who points out that nowhere "in the nineteenth century is there a clearer expression of the Victorian anti-satiric spirit than in *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*" and that what "makes these lectures interesting is not originality but the irony of its being Thackeray who delivered them", for in them "we are treated to the spectacle of a great satirist attacking satire". As this scholar has also rightly emphasized, this change is first to be discerned in Thackeray's criticism and only gradually and later in his fiction:

"For all Thackeray's praise of amiable humor and his condemnation of satire, he still found himself facing charges of cynicism and misanthropy, and the reason is not hard to find. Critically Thackeray may have been an amiable humorist, but creatively, almost in spite of himself, he remained a satirist. In the novels following *Vanity Fair* he deliberately attempted to modify his satire — to soften it by accenting the positive and by minimizing, if not eliminating, the negative. But Thackeray was a realist-satirist both by inclination and training; all he succeeded in doing in his attempts to soften his satire was to cloud and weaken his later fiction. And no matter how hard he tried to avoid it, his reputation for cynicism, far from diminishing, increased."¹¹⁶

As far as the evaluation of the quality of Thackeray's criticism in his lectures is concerned, because of the critic's obvious errors and injustices analysed in this sub-chapter, I cannot find myself in agreement with those critics who see in his lectures the summit of his critical achievement and considerably underestimate his early criticism, of which they of course could know only that part identified in their time (Saintsbury, Walker, Compton-Rickett, Enzinger, Cazamian¹¹⁷). Nor, however, can I wholly accept the opinions of those critics who

¹¹³ See Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, *The Spiritual Drama in the Life of Thackeray*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1913, especially pp. 38, 143, 160, 177, 185, 190.

¹¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 138.

¹¹⁵ See op. cit., p. 299.

¹¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 15; for the preceding quotation see *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ See Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, pp. 133, 202–204, 261–262 and *A History of Criticism*, III, 500; Walker, op. cit., pp. 700–701; Compton-Rickett, op. cit.,

see in the lectures "the worst blot upon Thackeray's literary reputation" (Whibley, Greig¹¹⁸). Much more judicial, and therefore more acceptable, seems to me the evaluation of the authors of *CHEL*, of Clapp, Ray and Dodds, who present a fair assessment of both the merits and demerits of this particular piece of Thackeray's criticism.¹¹⁹

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Since I have already concluded each of the preceding sub-chapters by summing up the results of my research, it will suffice now to give a final assessment of Thackeray's criticism of fiction as a whole, while drawing attention to some points which I have hitherto neglected for reasons of logical presentation. What should be in the first place duly emphasized is that Thackeray's criticism concerned with this particular sphere of literature does represent the most valuable part of his critical legacy, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter and have hoped to prove by my analysis. What must be added as resulting from this analysis, however, is that it is unequal in quality. As a critic of realistic fiction Thackeray does not come up to our expectations and this part of his criticism, though written by a great master of the art, cannot in my opinion be ranked among the most valuable fruits of his critical work. As suggested in the introduction, its range is too narrow, particularly in the sphere of French realistic fiction, it contains what are perhaps his greatest errors (his failure to recognize the genius of Balzac, his overestimation of Bernard and the injustice he commits against Swift, Fielding and Sterne in his later criticism) and it fails to provide what we should expect from one of the founders of the realistic novel of the 19th century — deeper and more penetrating reflections on the subtler problems connected with the technique of the art of fiction in general and the realistic novel in particular.

If such anticipations have not been fulfilled by Thackeray as a critic of that type of fiction he himself cultivated, however, they are not doomed to entire disappointment by Thackeray as a reviewer and parodist of those various literary fashions of his time which were based upon contrary or at least substantially different aesthetic and moral foundations than were those lying at the basis of his own fiction. It is in this part of his criticism, which may be characterized as a principled and uncompromising critical campaign against literary artifice of any kind and thus implicitly a campaign for realism in fiction, that he does what we expected him to do in his criticism of realistic fiction, even if he naturally does so indirectly rather than explicitly and concentrates his attention more upon clearing the ground and laying the foundations for the new edifice than upon actually building its walls. Although not even in this part of his criticism will he provide any consistent theory of the novel, in some of his reviews he does devote much more attention than elsewhere to most of the

pp. 514—515; Enzinger, *op. cit.*, vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 159—160; Émile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, *A History of English Literature*, Translated from the French by Helen Douglas Irvine and W.D. MacInnes, Revised Edition, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London, 1900, p. 1203.

¹¹⁸ See Greig, *op. cit.*, pp. 133—135 (identifying himself with Whibley's opinion, from *William Makepeace Thackeray*, 1903, p. 176).

¹¹⁹ See *CHEL* XIII, 294—295, Clapp, *op. cit.*, pp. 289, 290—291, 293, G. N. Ray, *The Age of Wisdom*, pp. 145—148, Dodds, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

basic problems of the art of fiction, and even to some of the subtler ones, especially in his *Morning Chronicle* reviews of fiction, in those of Mrs. Marsh's novel, of Bulwer's *Godolphin* and of "Christmas" literature (some of these reviews considering writers of fiction whose creative approach was basically realistic) and, indirectly and implicitly in his parodies of all the individual fashionable modes. Technical explanations of a work of fiction and analyses of the *minutiae* of the technique of the novelist's art were alien to his spirit, yet in the parts of his criticism mentioned he did throw out not a few suggestions as to the craft of fiction, as to the equipment a good novelist should possess to achieve the standard of real excellence. As we know from the reactions of the novelists he criticized or parodied, he did make them think more deeply over their craft and there is also no doubt that by contributing to the decrease of the enormous popularity of some of these literary fashions he helped the readers to orientate themselves in the mass production of fiction of their time and thus also contributed to the refinement of literary taste. What should be especially appreciated is that he recognized the independence of the novel as a literary form with its own laws and theory, as well as the necessity for its keeping some standards of craftsmanship. He might of course have done much more, for fiction was the only literary kind in the criticism of which he indeed could stand out as a legislator, since he possessed the advantage of intimately knowing the craft from his own personal experience as novelist and could found his critical judgments on his own splendid achievement in this field. But he was no theoretician and though he was acting on theoretical preconceptions of literary values, he did not examine the theoretical basis of his criticism and his chief mode was therefore the concrete, not the abstract — he excelled rather in the practical criticism of individual books and writers than in the theoretical criticism of literary principles, and his attention was more concentrated upon the matter of fiction than upon its form. In my opinion, however, he should not be too severely reprimanded for this limitation of critical approach, for it was quite general in his time, when the realistic novel and its theory were in process of formation both in England and France and the subtler problems of the craft of fiction had not yet attracted the attention of theorists and critics.

The analysis in this chapter has also shown that even if Thackeray's criticism of fiction is not based upon any complete aesthetic and literary theory, it is founded upon the solid principles of his aesthetic creed, which were his faithful guides during the whole period of his critical career and from which he did not begin to swerve until after its close, these later modifications of his standards being at the same time the cause of most of the erroneous judgments he pronounced after 1847. The most important aspect of his criticism of fiction, which is in my opinion the root of all its merits, is Thackeray's insistence upon realism in literature: how far a novel or story faithfully imitates "nature", depicts the selected sphere of life as it really exists or existed — that is the standard of judgment which he invariably applies to the interpretation of individual writers and their works. Firmly convinced of the great notional value of fiction, he rejects all deviations from the faithful representation of life which nullify this value — any idealization or distortion of the depicted facts, events or people, insisting at the same time that the novelist or story-writer should be intimately acquainted with his material, preferably from his own personal experience. What

he demanded from writers cultivating the art of fiction was truth of life in its entirety and not the exclusive depiction of its beautiful aspects for which, as he was convinced, human nature and the society of his time did not provide suitable material and which was in his opinion at any rate not the proper ground of the novelist. That is why he sharply protested whenever he came across any attempts of novelists or story-writers to beautify and glamorize characters whose shabby souls and degraded moral characters did not possess any particle of grandeur and why he denoted all such attempts as futile striving after the sham sublime. As all his reviews and parodies testify, the question which interested him most was indeed the creation of literary character, though he expressed his views only upon the basic issues of this creative problem. Founding his assessment of the individual characters evaluated upon his own knowledge of human psychology and life in general and his own experiences as a realistic novelist, he rejects all such characters that are absurd caricatures of human beings or the schematic black-and-white portraits common in romantic fiction, and accepts those that are vivid and lifelike. Always deeply interested not only in the truth to life of literary characters, but also in that of depicted events, he never fails to raise objections against any deviation from probability in the depicted episodes or the *dénouement* of the plot, rejecting the conventional patterns of plot exploited by fashionable romances, made to hang upon the usual devices of surprise effects and striking contrasts, as well as the abuse of fortune and chance in the disentanglement of the plot. He was convinced that the events depicted in the novel had to be determined and duly motivated by the characters of the personages, and not by interventions from without, and expressed his views on this problem very clearly several times, most happily perhaps in his reviews of Mrs. Gore's Christmas story *The Snow Storm*, of Bulwer's *Godolphin* and of Lever's *St. Patrick's Eve*, applying them consistently, however, in his whole criticism. Thackeray paid great attention, too, to the style of all the writers whom he judged from his critical chair, negatively evaluating those who wrote in an ungentlemanly, vulgar and bombastic style, and praising those whose style was natural, fresh, vigorous, not tainted by vulgarity and not "ornamented" by phrases or expressions from foreign languages. The jealous regard which Thackeray the critic had for the purity of his mother tongue is most conspicuously revealed in his reviews of the productions of the Silver-Fork School, as well as in those of all novels by Bulwer and Lever that came under his critical notice, while his concern about the purity and simplicity of literary language in general is especially manifested in his criticism of Hugo's bombastic style.

Thackeray's criticism of fiction is at the same time a concrete embodiment of his awareness of the important social function played by literature in general and prose fiction in particular in their time. One of his main merits as a critic of contemporary fiction is his capacity for grasping the significance a particular novel or story had for the society in which it originated, this capacity being conditioned, in the 1830s and 1840s, by the essentially progressive outlook on the world characteristic of him for that period. At the same time, however, his criticism of fiction also mirrors the contradictions inherent in his philosophy of life, which prevent him from coming to a full understanding of certain works of fiction and their historical and social roots. He makes some serious errors, from my point of view at least, in his conception of the social commitment of fiction

and consequently in his evaluation of some of the novels of purpose. On the other hand, however, in this part of his criticism (as in his whole critical work) he also reveals his ability to grasp the "moral" of the book he reviews and present it to the reader in a few happily worded sentences and he never fails in discerning whenever this "moral" is inartistically handled. In my opinion again, he is not always a good judge as to the objective social effect which the book he has in hand would have on his contemporaries (as for instance in the case of Dickens's Christmas stories), yet in most cases he unfailingly singles out books whose influence could not *but* be harmful (in the case of most of the literary fashions he evaluated, but especially the Newgate). Although he concentrated his attention on the malign influence works of this type would have on the morals and literary taste of the readers and did not expressly denounce their essentially escapist character, his assaults on the idealized depictions of the past, of the criminal underworld, fashionable or military life, clearly show that he was aware of and rejected even this aspect of the given kind of literature.

This part of Thackeray's critical legacy clearly mirrors, too, his conviction as to the great morally educational role played by literature in the life of human society. He aims his critical weapons especially at those works of fiction which confuse the boundary between virtue and vice, present criminal and vicious characters in an amiable light and thus exercise, as he was convinced, a harmful influence on the morals of the readers. The same considerations (and of course his deeply ingrained humanism) are the main motives, too, of his protests against the depiction of the brutal in literature, against some novelists' undue predilection for and detailed depiction of cruelties and atrocities. In applying this moral point of view, which is in my opinion not wholly to be condemned, he sometimes goes too far even in his professional criticism, notably in his reviews of French literature, which bear strong traces of being influenced by the strict and narrow-minded moral code of the English society of his time. Especially in his later criticism of the 1850s and 1860s, the increasingly strong stress laid upon the moral effect of fiction even played a retrogressive role in the then literary situation (as the similar standpoint of the Johnsonian critics had done in their time, as Mayo has pointed out¹²⁰) — helping to prolong the tyrannic rule of the "young person" in literature. If we accept Stang's statement,¹²¹ supported by much evidence, that the first protests against this "tyranny of the young person" began to appear earlier than is usually supposed, in the 1850s, the more regrettable seems to us Thackeray's eventual complete submission to it. What is no less deplorable is the fact that the soundness of his later critical judgments suffers in consequence of the earlier relative equilibrium of his moral and other judgments having been in most cases seriously impaired to the detriment of the entire evaluation, the outcome of this modification being the injustice he commits especially towards Fielding and Sterne.

Thackeray's criticism of fiction, especially of the productions of the various literary fashions of his time, has also considerable value as criticism. It clearly reveals his critical power, displays the variety of his gifts as a critic and the originality, vigour and freshness of his critical approach, bearing at the same time witness to his sound literary taste, his ability to discern the grain from

¹²⁰ See *op. cit.*, p. 157.

¹²¹ See *op. cit.*, pp. 211–215; see also Kathleen Tillotson, *op. cit.*, pp. 54ff.

the chaff and his strong propensity to laugh at dullness and pretension. It is also in this part of his criticism that Thackeray makes full use of all the critical weapons he had at his disposal, writing not only regular book reviews, but frequently having recourse to parody and burlesque, which, by their very nature, enabled him to be more concerned with literary values than he was when exploiting the traditional forms of criticism and to present a compact revelation especially of the weak points of the parodied novelist and, in the best parodies, also of the merits (notably in his parody of Lever). The other forms he used were for instance the satirical recipe for popular romances, the polemical commentary, the ironical tribute, the fictitious dialogue, the pamphlet, the open letter, and so forth. The judgments he pronounced in the period of his professional criticism on the English literature of his own time were for the most part just and most of them have also been confirmed by posterity. His criticism of French literature is not wholly devoid of national bias, but neither this part of his critical legacy nor his criticism of fiction as a whole is motivated by any personal rancour, animosity or vindictive feelings on his part, nor by pure malice.

This may be best demonstrated, as I have already tentatively suggested, in his criticism of Bulwer, to which he devoted much of his energy and time, for he quite justifiably saw in this writer one of the leading representatives of several of the prevalent literary fashions of his day. His criticism was a powerful and effective attack upon all the basic aspects of the creative approach of this fashionable writer (as we shall see further in dealing with his reviews of Bulwer's poetry and drama), an attack which always unerringly hit its target and caused Bulwer many bitter moments. As Ray has demonstrated in detail, that is why critics favourably inclined to Bulwer (especially Sadleir, who recanted, however, after the publication of Thackeray's *Letters*) or those assuming an adverse attitude to Thackeray (especially Greig) evaluated or still evaluate his criticism of Bulwer entirely negatively¹²² as brutal and malevolent, motivated by mercenary reasons, personal or political enmity and jealousy of Bulwer's "success as writer, politician, clubman, and dandy", as Greig¹²³ has it. This critic did not recant even when Thackeray's personal character had become better known after the publication of his correspondence. Even some other scholars, neither favouring Bulwer nor hostile to Thackeray, do not in my opinion interpret Thackeray's criticism of this writer correctly — finding its motives in Thackeray's revenge for corporal punishment at school (Ennis), personal antipathy and envy (Stevenson), political reasons or allegiance to Bulwer's wife (Rosa and Bulwer's grandson, the author of his grandfather's biography¹²⁴). Such interpretations of Thackeray's criticism of Bulwer are in my opinion erroneous and unjust, and that for several reasons. In the first place, it is true that Thackeray indulged in personalities especially in his pamphlet "Mr. Yellowplush's Ajew", but such personal attacks were a common phenomenon in the criticism of his time and, after all, Thackeray's trespasses

¹²² See *The Uses of Adversity*, pp. 9, 242–244, 476n.; for Sadleir's views before his recantation (in his review of *Letters* in the *Nineteenth Century*, CXI, July 1946, quoted in *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 9) see *Bulwer and His Wife, A Panorama: 1803–1836* (1933).

¹²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹²⁴ *Life of Edward Bulwer, First Lord Lytton*, by his grandson the Earl of Lytton, 2 vols., London, 1913.

in this respect were in my opinion not so grievous as those committed by some other critics. In the second place, Bulwer, for all his undoubted talent, was a definitely second-rate writer, and even if some critics of his time extolled him as the greatest novelist of the age (for instance Horne), the more clear-sighted among them — Carlyle, Maginn, partly Macaulay, Chernishevski, and others — clearly discerned the weak points of his creative approach. Their judgments, Thackeray's criticism and the following comparison of Thackeray with Bulwer, made by Charlotte Brontë, have been fully confirmed by posterity:

"A hundred years hence, if he only lives to do justice to himself, he will be better known than he is now. A hundred years hence, some thoughtful critic, standing and looking down on the deep waters, will see shining through them the pearl without price of a purely original mind — such a mind as the Bulwers, etc., his contemporaries have *not*, — not acquirements gained from study, but the thing that came into the world with him — his inherent genius".¹²⁵

Upon the whole we may safely conclude that even if Thackeray's assaults on Bulwer's person were not always in harmony with the critical and social precepts, his criticism of Bulwer's works is not prejudiced and is entirely just. Though he attacked sharply, he was also able to appreciate some positive aspects of Bulwer's method, even if he did not succeed in finding many of these. I have already quoted several pieces of evidence confirming this and could supplement them by further testimony, all showing that Thackeray approached Bulwer's work without preconceived opinions, that he did not feel any personal animosity to this writer (even taking his side in his divorce suit) and that he himself regarded his criticisms and parodies as good-natured, at least at the time when he wrote them.¹²⁶ He rejected the accusation of personal prejudice against Bulwer very explicitly twice in his letters, in the later instance emphasizing that if he had had any kind of animosity to Bulwer he would never have attacked him,¹²⁷ and in the earlier giving reasons for his sharply critical attitude:

"I wish to explain what I meant last night with regard to a certain antipathy to a certain great author. I have no sort of personal dislike (not that it matters much whether I have or not) to Sir EBLB on the contrary the only time I met him, at the immortal Ainsworth's years ago, I thought him very pleasant: and I know, from his conduct to my dear little Blanchard, that he can be a most generous and delicate minded friend. BUT there are sentiments in his writing wh^h always anger me, big words wh^h make me furious, and a premeditated fine writing against wh^h I cant help rebelling. My antipathy don't go any farther than this: and it is accompanied by a great deal of admiration" (*Letters II*, 485).

The most convincing proof of Thackeray's criticism of Bulwer not having been motivated by personal spite is, however, his whole criticism of the second-rate fiction produced in his time, which is based on the same principles as his evaluation of Bulwer and in which he metes out the same justice both to his main adversary and to many other trespassers who were in his opinion guilty in particular, as Bulwer was, of not representing reality truthfully and maltreating the novel in various inartistic ways. Although I have never been in doubt about the matter, for the evidence quoted above does not in my opinion leave room for any, the unprejudiced character of Thackeray's criticism of Bulwer has

¹²⁵ *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, I, 445; see also II, 85.

¹²⁶ See *Letters I*, 95, 398, 412, 438, II, 56, 270—271.

¹²⁷ See *Manuscript letter*, 12—15 December 1858, quoted in *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 286; see also *Letters II*, 779—781.

so far been recognized only by very few Thackerayan scholars, notably by Dr. Thrall, Dodds and Ray, who evaluate it as unbiased, honest, sincere, and based upon sound aesthetic principles.¹²⁸

What should be once again duly emphasized in conclusion and what especially Loofbourow has so ably demonstrated is that Thackeray's criticism of fiction was supremely important for him as a novelist. As the quoted scholar has shown, Thackeray's journalistic experimentation with the literary conventions of his time and the preceding Neoclassicist period "enabled him to develop his parodic verbal textures" and integrate them into "a suggestive, allusive prose that included in its own resources the elements of form and content", thus creating a precedent for all later novelists, "from George Eliot to Vladimir Nabokov", who are, even if mostly indirectly, "indebted to Thackeray's experimentation".¹²⁹ The same scholar has also in my opinion very correctly pointed out that this is not the only important bequest Thackeray as critic of fiction and novelist made to posterity, for his critical perceptions, too, are pertinent for our day as they were for his — the literary conventions he satirized are still alive in the popular literature of today, and "a brief acquaintance with the appropriate patterns and rhetoric" (provided by this scholar) "makes Thackeray's satire as relevant now as it was in his own time".¹³⁰ Even if the reviewers and critics of fiction of today do penetrate more deeply into the structure of this literary art than Thackeray did, few of them bring to their task the trenchant wit and firm aesthetic principles of Thackeray's mature criticism.

¹²⁸ See Thrall, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–71, Dodds, *op. cit.*, p. 22, *The Uses of Adversity*, pp. 240–244.

¹²⁹ For the quotations see *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 5.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.