THE PANORAMIC VISION
IN THACKERAY'S MAJOR NOVELS

A Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

THACKERAY'S APPROACH TO HISTORY

Several critics have discussed W. M. Thackeray's interest in the literature and history of the eighteenth century; indeed, it is impossible to deal with his works without considering this topic. Five of his novels have an eighteenth-century setting, and two of these, Henry Esmond and The Virginians, are invariably considered to be among his greatest works of fiction. Indeed, some critics believe that Esmond is Thackeray's very greatest novel. At least one critic considers Barry Lindon to be Thackeray's finest piece of sustained irony, and possibly his best fictional achievement.[1] Catherine, on the other hand, is regarded by most modern critics as a minor and unsuccessful work, although it contains "...not a little of his predilection for a special subject and period--the manners, customs, speech, and folk of the eighteenth century."[2] As for Dennis Duval, we can never be sure what that novel might have become had the author lived to complete it; this novel follows two very mediocre works, Philip and Lovel the Widower, but some critics see in it a return to the vigor and freshness of Esmond. In any case, it is certainly indicative of his interest in the period that two, and perhaps three, of his major novels deal with the eighteenth century.

In addition to the historical novels, Thackeray composed two sets of lectures, The Four Georges and The English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century, both of which demand some discussion if we are to fully comprehend his interest in historical subjects

and the effect of this interest on his fiction. That Thackeray knew the history of the eighteenth century and had developed a definite sense of history can be seen in his lectures and novels, but it is difficult to discover exactly what he had read other than the works of the novelists and poets. Even Gordon N. Ray's excellent biography contains very little definite information. For instance, in the chapter devoted to Thackeray's university career, Ray states: "At Cambridge, he read not only fiction and the magazines, as he had at school, but also standard histories (those of Gibbon, Mitford, Hume, Smollett) and poetry."[3] This statement is not documented, and I have found no concrete references in Thackeray's letters which indicate that he had read these histories. According to Houghton, the serious study of history was not recognized at either university until late in the nineteenth century,[4] so we must assume that any historical research done by Thackeray would have been unsystematic leisure reading. At any rate, although Ray explicitly states that Thackeray had read these histories, I have been unable to locate any statement as to what he thought of them or when he read them.

However, it seems perfectly obvious that Thackeray had read Macaulay; Ray states that both The English Humorists and Henry Esmond reflect this influence. In The English Humorists, Whig writers are more gently treated than Tories, and "...Thackeray's treatment of Addison is largely based on Macaulay's famous Edinburgh Review article of July 1843."[5] Similarly, Thackeray believed that the revolution of 1689 was "both inevitable and beneficial;"[6] consequently, Henry Esmond repents of his Jacobite sympathies, which were essential to the plot

of the novel. But Thackeray's historical philosophy transcends any merely partisan point of view; an examination of the lectures and novels will show that this attitude toward history forms the basis for an organized view of life.

The English Humorists were composed in 1850-51, immediately after the completion of Pendennis. At this time, Thackeray was earning a substantial living as a novelist, but he was obsessed with the necessity of providing an inheritance for his daughters and leaving some means of maintenance for his invalid wife in the event of his death. It was with this intention that he decided to emulate Dickens, who was at this time enjoying great success with his reading tours. J. Y. T. Greig tells us that Thackeray disliked public speaking; moreover, his novels did not readily adapt to dramatic reading as did those of Dickens.[7] However, he had read many of the authors of the eighteenth century, both for his own entertainment and in preparation for the writing of Catherine and Barry Lindon; therefore, he chose for the topic of his lectures the English humorists from Swift to Goldsmith. It must be noted that he was completing his plans for Esmond while he was composing his lectures on The English Humorists; so it is not suprising that some of the writers he discusses in the lectures turn up as characters in the novel.

The English Humorists consists of six lectures entitled respectively: "Swift", "Congreve and Addison", "Steele", "Prior, Gay, and Pope", "Hogarth, Smollett, and Fielding", and "Sterne and Goldsmith". These lectures seem rather unevenly distributed

according to our contemporary estimate of the relative importance of these authors; we are inclined to resent the devotion of an entire lecture to Steele, when both Pope and Fielding must share the space allotted to them with two lesser contemporaries. Also, as Greig points out, Thackeray absolutely ignores two of the greatest writers of the age in his failure to discuss Johnson and Richardson.[8] It is indeed strange that Thackeray failed to devote a lecture to Johnson, who appears as a character in The Virginians, and for whom the author's admiration is obvious. Greig states that the "solidity and forthrightness" of Johnson intimidated Thackeray, while Richardson's sentimentality repelled him; however, only the second part of this statement is supported by evidence. In The Virginians, Thackeray indicated his preference for Fielding over Richardson through Colonel Lambert (many of his characters echo his literary prejudices), and the reason he cites is indeed the sentimentality of Richardson's novels.[9] But that Thackeray was intimidated by Johnson seems to be a guess on the part of the critic.

It has become a critical commonplace to assail The English Humorists on the grounds of biographical inaccuracy. Whibley states that "...we cannot but remember that truth is the essence of biography, and that the lectures on the Humorists are the worst blot on Thackeray's literary reputation."[10] Like most critics, Whibley devotes considerable space to a discussion of Thackeray's essay on Swift, and in all fairness it must be admitted that it is hard to understand his hostility toward the Dean. Nevertheless, critical attacks on this essay have overworked.

Even John W. Dodds, ordinarily an ardent admirer of Thackeray, has joined in the hue and cry. Of the Swift lecture, he says, "Here is real irony: the greatest satirist of the eighteenth century stupidly misread by the great Victorian satirist."[11] Unlike Whibley, however, Dodds feels compelled to offer some excuse for the essay; he tells us that Thackeray's hostility toward Swift is the result of his realization of "...at least a potential kinship with Swift...of which what was was mild and healthy in his nature did not approve."[12]

It seems to me that these critics have missed the point of the lectures. Admittedly, there are biographical inaccuracies, as there are certain purple patches in which the author allows either sentiment or his tendency to moralize to run away with him. But this is precisely the point which has been ignored; Thackeray is neither attempting to write accurate biography nor bringing a strictly critical point of view to bear on these authors. These lectures are written from a novelist's point of view, with the primary intention of entertaining his audience. If his portraits are not always strictly accurate, they are entertaining both as characterizations and as a coherent description of literary life in the previous century. From a novelist's point of view, they are certainly successful.

These lectures also illustrate two important aspects of Thackeray's historical interest, I have already mentioned that they demonstrate both his desire to give his readers a sympathetic portrait of life in the previous century, and his great ability

to acomplish this design. We find the other important aspect of these lectures in the manner of the author's characterizations. Thackeray does not portray his subjects as unapproachable giants, but as men who display the virtues and failings of men. As we read these lectures, we become aware that although the author certainly shows us that in many respects his humorists differ from ourselves, he also causes us to realise how like us they are in many ways. This realization serves as a major illumination of Thackeray's fictional techniques in dealing with the past, and also gives us a clue as to the nature of his historical vision. As we shall see below, while he is diverted by the differences in the life of the past and that of his own age, Thackeray wants to show us how essentially similar both life and people are in every age. For a close examination of this belief, we must turn to his second series of lectures, The Four Georges.

Like his previous lectures, The Four Georges are not free of inaccuracies, but the flaws in the series do not concern us. As in The English Humorists, Thackeray willingly sacrifices strict accuracy in order to entertain his audience. In the preface to these lectures, Thackeray gives us a concise statement of his intention in them, and that statement may be applied with equal validity to his historical novels:

> I have to say thus much by way of preface, because the subject of these lectures has been misunderstood, and I have been taken to task for not having given grave historical treatises, which it never was my intention to attempt. Not about battles, about politics, about statesmen and measures of state did I ever think to lecture you: but to sketch the manners and life of

> the old world; to amuse for a few hours with talk about the old society; and, with the result of many a day's and night's pleasant reading, to try and while away a few winter evenings for my hearers.[15]

This statement may indeed be considered Thackeray's credo when he deals with historical materials. His major concern is to depict for us the life of previous ages; however, in these lectures as well as in the novels, he displays a far greater interest in the aspects of life that are similar in every age. As previously stated, it is always the aspects of man's being which most interest Thackeray, and it is this sense of the continuity of past and present, that separates him from many of his contemporaries. And it is remarkable that while he can give us starkly realistic descriptions of life in the past, it is often the universality of the conditions which he depicts that arrests our attention. The following passage provides us with an example of his ability to show us a scene from the past and yet relate it to universal human experience:

> As one views Europe through contemporary books of travel, in the early part of the last century, the landscape is awful--wretched wastes, beggarly and plundered; half-burned cottages and trembling peasants gathering piteous harvests; gangs of such tramping along with bayonets behind them, and corporals with canes and cats-of-nine-tails to flog them to barracks. By these passes my Lord's gilt carriage floundering through the ruts, as he swears at the postillions, and toils on to the Residenz. Hard by, but away from the noise and brawling of the citizens and buyers, is Wilhelmslust, or Ludwigsruhe, or Monbijouc or Versailles--it scarcely matters which,--near to the city, shut out by woods from the beggared country, the enormous, hideous, gilded, monstrous marble palace, where the Prince is, and the Court, and the trim

> gardens, and huge fountains, and the forest where the ragged peasants are beating the game in (it is death to them to touch a feather); and the jolly hunt sweeps by with its uniform of crimson and gold; and the Prince gallops ahead puffing his Royal horn; and his lords and mistresses ride after him; and the stag is pulled down; and the grand huntsman gives the knife in the midst of a chorus of bugles; and 'tis time the Court go home to dinner; and our noble traveller ... sees the procession through the trim avenues of the wood, and hastens to the inn, and sends his noble name to the marshal of the Court....[14]

The tone of this passage indicates how far removed Thackeray's ironic description is from the indignant wrath of Dickens's castigation of social evils. The repeated "and - and - and -" brings the passage to an ironic crescendo which is far more effective than a tone of moral indignation. And yet, this is no plea for contemporary reform, but a description of the social injustices of the previous century. The author is warning his audience that they should not look back on that era with nostalgia alone, for savagery and bitter oppression go hand in hand with its elegant life and manners, but he is at the same time describing the ageless contrast between rich and poor. In the remainder of the paragraph, he gives us a charming picture of the Court, and then concludes:

> But round all that Royal splendor lies a nation enslaved and ruined: there are people robbed of their rights--communities laid waste--faith, justice, commerce trampled upon, and well-nigh destroyed--nay, in the very center of Royalty itself, what horrible stains and meanness, crime and shame! It is but to a silly harlot that some of the noblest gentlemen, and some of the proudest women in the world, are bowing down; it is the price of a miserable province that the King ties in diamonds around his mistress's white neck. In the first half of the

> last century, I say, this is going on all Europe over. Saxony is a waste as well as Picardy or Artois; and Versailles is only larger and not worse than Herrenhausen.[15]

This statement give us an excellent conception of Thackeray's vision of historical perspective. As Versailles is only larger and not worse than Herrenhausen, so Napoleon is only a manipulator of life on a larger scale than Becky Sharp. Vanities may be more grandiose in some men than in others, but the same motivations lie behind all of them. Although the external aspects of one era may differ from those of another, the factors which Thackeray finds to be common in every age demonstrate to him the continuity of history. This concept is essentially what I refer to as his panoramic vision. Although Thackeray's conception of life utimately amounts to a sweeping vision of human history, it is limited in that he believes every age, and every story, to be only a variation on the same pattern, and not a distinct entity. In addition to this, his approach to psychology and human nature is essentially that of the eighteenth century; Thackeray believes that man is motivated by a relatively small number of basic needs and desires, which have been the same throughout history. Consequently, we find that he repeats many of the same themes in bis novels again and again. As David Cecil says:

> Only once did he paint openly a panorama of human life and call it Vanity Fair. But they are all really about Vanity Fair; Vanity Fair as seen in the life of a young man, Vanity Fair as seen in the life of a family, Vanity Fair as seen eternally the same in the life of the past.[16]

To Thackeray, the previous century, and indeed the entire past, was not so different from his own, however much appearances and manners may have changed. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he believes in the immutability of human nature, and that the vices and follies of every age are much alike. Indeed, for Thackeray, the eighteenth century represents all of history, in that he sees that age and his own as representative of the vast Vanity Fair of human experience.

It will be the purpose of this thesis to define and explore this attitude, as it affects his novels and as it differentiates his ideas and opinions from those of other Victorians. I will deal primarily with the five major novels: Henry Esmond, The Virginians, Vanity Fair, Pendennis, and The Newcomes. I select these works because it is in them that Thackeray most obviously and artistically displays his peculiar philosophy of history; Philip and Lovel tbe Widower are only dull repetitions of what he had already done. I include Barry Lindon because it is his earliest important "historical" novel, and because it contains several important indications of the author's philosophy of history. Much of the material in the final chapter will be comprised of a comparison of Thackeray's attitudes and interests with some of the major Victorian ideas discussed by Walter Houghton in The Victorian Frame of Mind.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Charles Whibley, William Makepeace Thackeray (London, 1903), Chapter 3. However, this is generally regarded as an extreme position. While the novel deserves a greater degree of critical attention than it has received, its limited scope alone prevents it from ranking with Vanity Fair or Henry Esmond.

[2]George Saintsbury, A Consideration of Thackeray (London, 1931), p. 53.

[3]Gordon N. Ray, Thackeray (New York, 1955), two volumes, I, p. 119.

[4]Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (New Haven, 1957), p. 142.

[5]Ray, II, 145.

[6]Ray, II, 179.

[7]J. Y. T. Greig, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (London, 1950), p. 132.

[8]Greig, p. 134.

[9]The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray, (Philadelphia, 1901), 26 volumes, VIII, p. 336. All future references will be cited as Works.

[10]Whibley, p. 176.

[11]John W. Dodds, Thackeray: A Critical Portrait (New York, 1941), p. 185.

[12]Dodds, p. 186.

[13]Works, XXIII, 6.

[14]Works, XXIII, 9-10.

[15]Works, XXIII, 10-11.

[16]David Cecil, Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation (Chicago, 1958), p. 68.

Chapter I

THE APPROACH TO THE PAST

Barry Lindon is the earliest of Thackeray's important historical novels, and, according to Charles Whibley, stands as one of his finest literary achievements. This novel, published periodically in Frazers from April to September of 1843, went almost unnoticed in England, and except for a pirated American edition, was not re-issued until 1856. In this work, as in many of his other novels, Thackeray avails himself of a mask; the story purports to be the memoirs of an Irish rogue, written during his imprisonment. The ironic effect of the novel is largely indebted to this device, for Thackeray allows Barry to damn himself through his repeated self-justifications. Thackeray maintains a sure grasp on the character through most of the story; Barry is sublimely unconscious of his own hypocrisy, contradicting himself unblushingly as the mood takes him. At the beginning, he boasts of his descent from the ancient Irish kings (many of Thackeray's Hibernian characters have

this tendency); he tells us that he would claim this descent, "... but that there are so many silly pretenders to that distinction who bear it and render it common."[1] Nevertheless, after his marriage to Countess Lyndon, he embosses the Royal Irish arms on their carriage over her coronet. In depicting Barry' eagerness to establish his claim to a noble lineage, Thackeray shows us the character's membership in the universal brotherhood of Snobs.

One of the greatest merits of his narrative is the frequency and fluency with which Barry slips from a zestful account of his roguery to a sanctimonious defense of his actions. Thackeray, who was consummately familiar with many of the forms of human weakness, gives us one of the finest portraits in English literature of a villain who wishes to appear well in the eyes of the world. In this character he manages to portray for us an eternal type as well as a convincing individual. Barry's vices exist, as he exists in every age, for hypocrisy, heartlessness, and avarice are eternal, though they take different forms as the fashion of the world changes.

This novel is as interesting for its brilliant descriptions of eighteenth-century life as it is for the main narrative. As the story progresses, we are shown the squalor of Dublin and the absurd pretentions of the Irish

upper classes, the brutality of life in both the British and Prussian armies during the Seven Years' War, life in Frederick the Great's Prussia, court life on the Continent and in England, and finally the last days of a broken-spirited wretch in the Fleet Prison. This panoramic vista of life reflects both Thackeray's interest in the variety of human affairs and his knowledge of the eighteenth century. In several passages, Thackeray tells us, through his hero, how he believes a novelist should approach history. One of the best examples occurs in Barry's description of what a common soldier sees and experiences in a battle:

> Were these memoirs not characterized by truth, and did I deign to utter a single word for which my own personal experience did not give me the fullest authority, I might easily make myself the hero of some strange and popular adventures, and, after the fashion of novel-writers, introduce my reader to the great characters of this remarkable time. These persons (I mean the romance-writers), if they take a drummer or a dustman for a hero, somehow they manage to bring him in contact with the greatest lords and most notorious personages of the empire; and I warrant me there's not one of them but, in describing the battle of Minden, would manage to bring Prince Ferdinand, and my Lord George Sackville, and my Lord Granby, into presence. It would have been easy for me to have <u>said</u> I was present when the orders were brought to Lord George to charge with the cavalry and finish the rout of the Frenchmen, and when he refused to do so, and thereby spoiled the great victory. But the fact

> is, I was two miles off from the cavalry when his Lordship's fatal hesitation took place, and none of us soldiers of the line knew of what had occurred until we came to talk about the fight over our kettles in the evening, and repose after the labours of a hard-fought day.[2]

This statement, of course, is ironic; in the first place, we have already become aware of Barry's notion of "truth," and we also know that one of his greatest desires is to mingle with his superiors. However, discounting the irony, most of this passage is truthful enough. Of course, we realize that it is Thackeray and not Barry who sneers at the romance-writers; he criticizes their improbable narratives because they do not conform to the realities of human history. Now Thackeray does not demand a completely objective and verifiable account in the historical novel; we have already seen in the two series of lectures that he is quite willing to take liberties with facts and events in order to make his subject more entertaining. It is a deeper truth that he demands from the novelist; Thackeray seeks in other novels, and attempts in his own, an account of the most elemental facets of human experience. In the passage above, he tells us that the common soldier generally has no effect upon the great decisions which win or lose battles; in fact, he probably

has no knowledge of what is happening in any but his own immediate surroundings. The ordinary soldier is not asked for advice by his officers, and the adventures that he encounters are not at all like those we read about in novels.

This passage deals specifically with soldiers and war, but like a great many of Thackeray's observations, it may be applied to any number of analogous situations. As the individual soldier has no discernible effect on the outcome of a battle, so the ordinary man is unable to greatly affect the world around him for either good or evil, according to Thackeray. He sees the inability of most men to control even their own destinies as a universal and timeless phenomenon; he views history as a vast and impersonal force which eventually engulfs even those men such as Marlborough or Frederick the Great who have some limited ability to contend with it. Thackeray certainly believes that men appear from time to time who alter the course of history; I have just mentioned two of these who appear in his novels. But it is characteristic of his panoramic vision that he discerns the appearance of a few such giants in almost every generation; Henry Esmond serves under Marlborough, and his grandsons are friends of Washington. This seems to indicate that Thackeray regarded the periodic appearance of such men as an historical law

in itself.

I have stated above that the author's intention in this passage is to give us a realistic description of human experience. We can accept the observations that Barry makes about the realities of war as his own because they are expressed in the language we expect from him. However, at the end of this section, Thackeray, and not Barry Lindon, is obviously the speaker:

> Such knaves and ruffians do men in war become! It is well for gentlemen to talk of the age of chivalry; but remember the starving brutes whom they had--men nursed in poverty, entirely ignorant, made to take a pride in deeds of blood--men who can have no amusement but in drunkenness, debauch, and plunder. It is with these shocking instruments that your great warriors and kings have been doing their murderous work in the world; and while, for instance, we are at the present moment admiring the "Great Frederick", as we call him, and his philosophy, and his liberality, and his military genius, I, who have served him, and been, as it were, behind the scenes of which that great spectacle is composed, can only look at it with horror. What a number of items of human crime, misery, slavery, go to form that sum-total of glory! I can recollect a certain day, about three weeks after the battle of Minden, and a farmhouse in which some of us entered; and how the old woman and her daughters served us, trembling, to wine; and how we got drunk over the wine, and the house was in a flame presently; and woe betide the wretched fellow afterwards who came home to look for his house and his children.[3]

It is the tone of this paragraph which warns us that the author is no longer speaking through his hero but for him. Barry Lindon would not employ the words used, or have these thoughts, for that matter. But if this reflection is out of character, it still shows us the author's mind at work, dramatizing the life of the past, and pointing out the elements which are common to every age. It is much like the previously quoted passage from The Four Georges, both in its content and intensity. As we see the contrast of the sparkling court life and the wretched peasantry, so Thackeray shows us the difference between the romantic conception and the stark realities of war. But the most striking aspect of both paragraphs is that the scene presented, with minor alterations, would fit any age. Change the scene from The Four Georges slightly and Thackeray could be describing a hunt on the DuPont estates in modern Kentucky, only miles from a poverty-stricken mining town. Or transpose the passage from Barry Lindon to the Europe of World War I or II, and we see that savagery and inhumanity are inevitable components of the human condition.

Another statement of Barry's might well apply to the present, or indeed any age. We may have become too sure that the complexities of our era are a new aspect of human

experience, and that only in this century have issues become so entangled that moral and ideological questions are nearly insoluble. And yet, Thackeray shows us Barry Lindon's ironic amusement concerning the same sort of question:

> It would require a greater philosopher and historian than I am to explain the causes of the famous Seven Years' War in which Europe was engaged; and, indeed, its origin has always appeared to me to be so complicated, and the books written about it so amazingly hard to understand that I have seldom been much wiser at the end of a chapter than at the beginning, and so shall not trouble my reader with any personal disquisitions concerning the matter. All I know is, that after His Majesty's love of his Hanoverian dominions had rendered him most unpopular in his English kingdom, with Mr. Pitt at the head of the anti-German war party, all of a sudden, Mr. Pitt becoming Minister, the rest of the Empire applauded the war as much as they had hated it before. The victories of Dettingen and Crefeld were in everybody's mouths, and "the Protestant hero" as we used to call the godless old Frederick of Prussia, was adored by us as a saint, a very short time after we had been about to make war against him in alliance with the Empress-queen. Now, somehow, we were on Frederick's side; the Empress, the French, the Swedes, and the Russians, were leagued against us; and I remember, when the news of the battle of Lissa came even to our remote quarter of Ireland, we considered it as a triumph for the cause of Protestantism, and illuminated and bonfired, and had a sermon at church, and kept the Prussian king's birthday; on which my uncle would get drunk: as indeed on any other occasion. Most of the low fellows enlisted with myself were, of course, Papists

> (the English army was filled with such, out of that never-failing country of ours), and these, forsooth, were fighting the battles of Protestantism with Frederick; who was belabouring the Protestant Swedes and the Protestant Saxons, as well as the Russians of the Greek Church, and the Papist troops of the Emperor and the King of France.[4]

In this passage, we see that Thackeray had a keen conception, as well as a sardonic appreciation, of the ironies of history, a grasp of the absurd behavior of men and nations. If one wished to find a modern instance of a change of national opinion such as that in England toward Frederick, he would only need to survey the attitudes of the American newspapers toward Russia before Stalingrad and after. Indeed, there are many situations in Barry Lindon that have modern parallels; the account, in chapters seven and eight, of Barry's employment as a spy in Frederick's Berlin could, with minor alterations, have come out of any contemporary novel dealing with diplomacy and espionage.

Even his realization that the past was no golden era in which life was more simple cannot prevent a certain nostalgia in Thackeray. Aware as he was of the evils which existed in the previous century, Thackeray discerns in the fast and corrupt court life of the previous era a certain zest, a flair for living, that his own staid age lacked.

Barry's defense of gambling is ironic, to be sure; Thackeray knew from personal experience the evils of this sport and the moral status of its devotees. But he is nevertheless wistful about the passing of the great freebooters of the table:

> In later times, a vulgar national prejudice has chosen to cast a slur upon the character of men of honour engaged in the profession of play; but I speak of the good old days in Europe, before the cowardice of the French aristocracy (in the shameful Revolution, which served them right) brought discredit and ruin upon our order. They cry fie now upon men engaged in play; but I should like to know how much more honourable <u>their</u> modes of livelihood are than ours. The broker of the Exchange who bulls and bears, and buys and sells, and dabbles with lying loans, and trades on State secrets, what is he but a gamester? The merchant who deals in teas and tallow, is he any better? His bales of dirty indigo are his dice, his cards come up every year instead of every ten minutes, and the sea is his green table. You call the profession of the law an honourable one, where a man will lie for any bidder; lie down poverty for the sake of a fee from wealth, lie down right because wrong is in his brief. You call a doctor an honourable man, a swindling quack, who does not believe in the nostrums which he prescribes, and takes your guinea for whispering in your ear that it is a fine morning; and yet, forsooth, a gallant man who sits him down before the baize and challenges all comers, his money against theirs, his fortune against theirs, is proscribed by our modern moral world. It is a conspiracy of the middle classes against gentlemen: it is only the shopkeeper cant which is to go down nowadays. I say that play was an institution of chivalry: it has been wrecked,

along with other privileges of men of birth.[5]

Now this statement, of course, is heavy with irony, as is any of Thackeray's better passages. In the first place, we must smile at Barry's interpretation of "chivalry"; he cheats at cards and dice with the greatest abandon, and his skill with sword and pistol enables him to get away with it, and insures the payment of those who lose to him. Also, we realize that it is rank insolence for Barry to wear the appellation of "gentleman". And yet, leaving Barry's character aside, his statements are true enough. We realize, as Thackeray did, that not all doctors are quacks and some lawyers are men of principle, but we cannot say that there is no justice in his charge. And certainly his statement regarding brokers and tradesmen is true enough. This statement is not to be construed as a wholehearted defense of either gambling or the dubious class of gentlemen with whom Barry associates. It is, however, another of Thackeray's comments on the nature of human experience. The respectability of any profession or pursuit is determined by society, and morality rarely has anything to do with its decisions. In Barry's era, the professional gambler is accorded the sanction of Society; to the mid-Victorians, the merchant who buys lowest, sells highest, and pays his workmen the least for the greatest amount of work earns the right to call himself respectable. The point that Thackeray wants to make is that the society of the past century regarded many questionable motives, desires, and pursuits as eminently

respectable. And so, of course, does ours, and that of every age.

In Barry Lindon, then, Thackeray draws for us a vast and intricate portrait of eighteenth-century society. We are shown the manners and customs of a society quite different from that of the Victorian era, but we also see many similarities. The characters of this novel wear a different fashion, but their vices and virtues are those which are common to all of humanity. As David Cecil says, "Thackeray's (characters) are equally alive, but they live in virtue of the characteristics they share. Nor are these, as with Scott, say, the common characteristics of a group. Thackeray is interested not in the variety, but in the species; not in men but in man."[6]

As previously stated, many critics believe that Henry Esmond is Thackeray's finest work of art. If it is not, it is at least the only one unmarred by serial publication; of Thackeray's long novels, it is the only one that was published whole. Because of this, the novel seems to be more concise than his others; the prose is less encumbered with the reversals and long digressions that occasionally mar Pendennis, The Newcomes, and to a greater extent, The Virginians. Thackeray was proud of the novel; he considered it his best work. He had long planned to write a novel about the age of Queen Anne; his knowledge of the period had been acquired during his readings in preparation for the lectures, as well as from many hours of reading for pleasure. And because his knowledge is thorough,

the result is convincing; we are able to accept Esmond as the autobiography of a man of the last century. According to Whibley, he manages to convey a feeling of the period without any artificial style or antique phrasing:

> You will search his pages in vain for strange words or strangely constructed sentences. It is true that he makes a few concessions to an ancient fashion of spelling: he writes Peterborow, for instance, and Bruxelles; but for the rest he gives a very liberal interpretation to archaeology. How, then, does he produce the effect of another century? Merely by keeping his style at a higher level than it usually attains. From beginning to end he writes with a restraint which you will vainly seek in Pendennis. He has thrown over the story a veil of solemnity, through which his personages appear far away like the distant shapes of another age. The critic who declared that there is no page of Esmond but might have been written by a contemporary of Queen Anne was manifestly deceived. Examine the text narrowly, and you will find both words and phrases essentially modern. Indeed, it is the cadence rather than the phrase that is of the eighteenth century, and Thackeray's ear seldom misled him. In other words, the author of Esmond has reproduced the effect, not the actual language, of the past....[7]

Esmond is unified by three converging sub-plots: the Jacobite loyalties of the family, Henry's love for Beatrix, and the question of Henry's legitimacy. Although we learn the truth about Henry's birth at the end of the first volume, we continually await his chance to claim his title and the Castlewood estate. Indeed, this is one of the earmarks of Thackeray's skill; a lesser novelist would have seized an opportunity to kill off Frank Castlewood so Henry could claim his title with a clear conscience. But this is the way things

happen in novels, not in life, and Thackeray is far too aware of reality to fall into such an error. Although he could take certain liberties with history in order to bring the Pretender to England, his ironic view of life was too strong to allow the false luxury of a conventional happy ending in which virtue reaps the greatest rewards and evil is inevitably punished.

Indeed, all three of these sub-plots exhibit the deft touch of Thackeray's irony. The fact that the Stuart pretenders should be so much more personable than the dour Hanoverians is one of the historical oddities which always amused him. Similarly, the spectacle of a man blindly pursuing a woman who is not worth the effort appearts to Thackeray as one of the great ironies of life; we find this situation in many of his novels. The effect is heightened in Esmond, since Henry is at the same time blind to Rachel's feeling for him. This is one of the eternal situations which most interest Thackeray; the drama of unrequited love, and of love for an unworthy object goes on interminably, from generation to generation. This game is not reserved for the noble or the wealthy; it goes on in the market and the kitchen as well. As Dickens believes that every man has had his Flora Finching, so Thackeray believes that we have all of us pursued our Fotheringay, and made fools of ourselves in the eternal style of humanity.

Indeed, many of the delusions of humanity provide grist for Thackeray's mill. He tells us again and again that many of our desires are not worth pursuing, and that the achievement

of them will not make us happy. Beatrix Esmond, like Barry Lindon, desires social position above all else, and in the pursuit of this chimera engages herself to a marquis, whom she jilts in favor of an Earl; eventually her quest leads her to become the mistress of the Pretender. This situation has its parallel in her own family, for Isabella, Dowager Countess of Castlewood, is the former mistress of James I, and it is rumored that James and his brother had quarrelled over her. Indeed, the Dowager Countess' career closely parallels that of Beatrix; the old woman believes, as do many of Thackeray's elderly ladies, that her charms have not faded and that she still resembles the portrait, done in her youth, in which she is portrayed as the huntress Diana. In The Virginians, the sequel to Esmond, we learn that Beatrix too keeps a portrait done in her youth, although she is all too aware that her beauty has faded. There are similarities; although these women belong to different generations, their attitudes toward life, their senses of values, and their conceptions of deportment are the same. As Isabella is disappointed with the saturine Henry, who refuses to get drunk as a gentleman should, so Beatrix Bernstein encourages Harry Warrington's indiscretions and becomes irrated with his brother George, whose temperament is similar to that of his grandfather. Both of these ladies respect birth and fortune; Isabella's attitude toward Henry Esmond becomes deferential when she learn that he has discovered the secret of his birth, while old Baroness Bernstein

quickly withdraws her favor from Harry when she learns that George, the eldest son and true heir to the Virginia estates, is alive.

One of the factors that causes the mature novels of Thackeray to appear to us to have more unity than those of any other novelist, is his repeated portrait of a wealthy and lonely old lady. The Dowager Countess in Esmond, Beatrix Bernstein in The Virginians, Miss Crawley in Vanity Fair, and Lady Kew in The Newcomes are all variations on the same theme, and these ladies serve to illustrate again Thackeray's major philosophical idea. Each of these ladies belongs to a different age, although Miss Crawley is not much older than Lady Kew, and the fact that these women of different eras share essentially the same traits of character shows us once again Thackeray's belief that certain basic ideas and motives are encountered every generation. This is another aspect of what I call Thackeray's panoramic view of life. To him, superficial differences notwithstanding, human life in every age is characterized by the same triumphs and defeats, the same fears and aspirations. "Vanity Fair" is not just the world of the Regency, but the eternal drama of human existence. This is not to say that all his novels are the same, for his characters, though many of them are similar, are highly individualized, and the dramas which they enact vary considerably; nevertheless, the theme of "Vanity Fair" runs through them all, and it comprises a major part of Thackeray's

view of the world.

The opening paragraphs of Esmond contain another important indication of Thackeray's approach to history. He tells us that the writing of history has become encumbered with ceremony, that it deals only with kings "and had nothing to do with the registering of the affairs of the common people." He continues in this vein, showing us that even the great Louis XIV was, for all the pomp and ceremony that surrounded him, no more than a man to his mistress, his barber, or his surgeon. In other words, it is not the fact that history deals with the great rather than the common man that irritates Thackeray, but rather that kings and ministers and warriors are idealized in the Court Gazette and the newspapers of the early eighteenth century. He continues with his unflattering description:

> Shall we see something of France and England besides Versailles and Windsor? I saw Queen Anne at the latter place tearing down the park slopes, after her stag-hounds, and driving her one-horse chaise--a hot, red-faced woman, not in the least resembling that statue of her which turns its stone back upon St. Paul's, and faces the coaches struggling up Ludgate Hill. She was neither better bred nor wiser than you and me, though we knelt to hand her a letter or a wash-hand basin. Why shall History go on kneeling to the end of time? I am for having her rise up off her knees, and take a natural posture: not to be forever performing cringes and congees like a court-chamberlain, and shuffling backwards out of doors in the presence of the sovereign.[6]

This excerpt proceeds a short account of the Castlewood family, who had given freely of both their fortunes and their lives in the service of the House of Stuart. The history of the Castlewood loyalty is another of Thackeray's

ironic situations which are at once particular and representative of a common human experience; the devotion of the Esmonds to the Stuart cause is contrasted throughout the novel with the many weaknessess of the ungrateful monarchs they served. Of Charles II in exile, Thackeray gives this description:

> What a spectacle is more august than that of a great king in exile? Who is more worthy of respect than a brave man in misfortune? Mr. Addison has painted such a figure in his noble piece of "Cato." But suppose fugitive Cato fuddling himself at a tavern with a wench on each knee, and a dozen faithful and tipsy companions of defeat, and a landlord calling out for his bill; and the dignity of misfortune is is straightway lost. The Historical Muse turns away shamefaced from the vulgar scene, and closes the door--on which the exile's unpaid drink is scored up--upon him and his pots and his pipers, and the tavern-chorus which he and his friends are singing. Such a man as Charles should have had an Ostade or Mieris to paint him. Your Khellers and LeBruns only deal in clumsy and impossible allegories: and it hath always seemed to me blasphemy to claim Olympus for such a wine-drabbled divinity as that.[9]

Thackeray maintains this attitude toward the Stuarts throughout the novel; although he gives full credit to their personal charm and their good intentions, he thoroughly exposes their indecision, ungratefulness and immorality. At one point he intimates that half of Marlborough's army would have rallied around James Edward had he the courage to ride into their camp and lead them. Now this statement may be less than accurate; his characterization of the Pretender is decidedly unfair. The Stuarts may not have been strong

men, and they certainly had their share of faults, but to say that the Pretender threw away his greatest opportunity in pursuit of a woman is to accuse him of gross stupidity. Of course, the incident is fictional, but Thackeray wrote it for the same reason that he purposely blackens the character of James Edward. The unswerving loyalty of the Esmond family illustrates once again Thackeray's belief that men often devote their lives to the most unworthy causes. It is for this reason that he takes liberties with history in his portrayal of the Pretender; had James been shown as a stronger and more worthy man, the irony would be less effective. And of course, the irony in this situation is double; not only does Henry waste years in the fruitless pursuit of his cold and worldly cousin Beatrix, but her seduction by the Pretender shows him that his Jacobite sympathies have been also wasted on an unworthy cause.

Here again we see the nature of Thackeray's vision. To Thackeray, the fact that Henry devotes a part of his life to his passion for Beatrix exactly parallels the devotion of hundreds of men, great and insignificant, to the Stuart cause. He shows us that our individual vanities are only the follies of nations on a smaller scale; we follow and serve our mistress for reasons as good or bad as we sweat and bleed for James Edward, or Marlborough, or any leader we choose, and since we are human, our loyalities in each case are apt to be misguided.

There is relatively little to say about <u>The Virginians</u>,

for most of the material dealing with Esmond applies to its sequel as well. Of Thackeray's five major novels, The Virginians displays the most disturbing flaws. The author tells us that the story will concern two brothers who fought on opposite sides during the American Revolution; it is this theme which is supposed to unify the novel. Apparently, he forgot this design early in the composition of the novel, for the episodes dealing with the American Revolution occupy only the last fourth of the second volume. Actually, this is two novels, one dealing with the adventures of Harry Warrington in England, and the other with those of his brother George. As in Esmond and Barry Lindon, Thackeray paints for us a lively and delightful portrait of life in England during the eighteenth century, and as usual, he creates several vivid characters. In The Virginians, however, his intrusions become more frequent and more repetitious. Thackeray always realized that the greatest respect in which he was Dickens's inferior was the relatively limited fertility of his own creative imagination, and in this novel, he is generally repeating himself. If the major novels are read in the order in which they were written, it becomes at times painfully obvious that Thackeray's digressions in the later ones often exactly repeat statements he has made before. Although it is broad, Thackeray's conception of life is not deep, so he naturally runs out of original things to say. And one feels that the author was well aware of this deficiency

as he wrote the novel; the reader finds himself counting statements he remembers that were made in Vanity Fair, in Pendennis, or in The Newcomes.

However, this novel contains some very amusing passages, and at least one character which we would be sorry to do without. This, of course, is the Baroness Bernstein, Beatrix Esmond as an old woman. Only Beatrix, of all the old ladies mentioned above, is portrayed for us in both her youth and her decline. And it is typical of Thackeray's conception of character that he dwells on her essentially unchanged intellect. The irony inherent in the condition of a decayed beauty is present, of course, but the Baroness is never ludicrous as was the Dowager Countess Isabella. We admire the ingenious devices by which she rescues Harry from his entanglement with Maria, and we heartily enjoy her imperious domination of the Castlewood family who hope to inherit her money. Nor do we think the less of her when, with the appearance of George, she loses interest in Harry, who is no longer the Fortunate Youth. This, as Thackeray so often reminds us, is the way of the world, and if we fret about it we waste our time. It is much more reasonable to accept, and to enjoy what we can.

These, then, are Thackeray's historical novels. We see in them the extent of his panoramic view of life as it relates to the past. In these works, he deals with the vanities of the eighteenth century, and by extension, of all human history. In the next chapter we will deal with this concept of life as

it relates to his own era. Most Victorians considered their age to be essentially different from those that had preceeded it; they believed it to be an era in which outdated traditions were being broken with the dawn of a glorious new chapter of human history. As we shall presently discover, Thackeray could not accept this belief.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Works, XIX, p. 4.

[2]Works, XIX, p. 72.

[3]Works, XIX, p. 73.

[4]Works, XIX, p. 69.

[5]Works, XIX, pp. 137-138.

[6]Cecil, p. 62.

[7]Whibley, pp. 180-181.

[8]Works, VII, p. 2.

[9]Works, VII, p. 3.

Chapter II

THE CONTEMPORARY NOVELS: THE CONTINUUM OF PAST AND PRESENT

All of the novels that we will consider in this chapter have a nineteenth-century setting; the action of Vanity Fair takes place during the Regency, while Pendennis and The Newcomes deal with the middle and early Victorian period. But setting is not the only factor that differentiates them from the historical novels discussed above. In these works, Thackeray's narrative manner alters conspicuously. Two of the previously considered works are written in the autobiographical style, and in all three, the author's interest in recreating for us the life of the previous century dominates much of his narrative. Of the works to be considered below, not one takes the form of autobiography (although in The Newcomes, the author employs a narrator), and the society which he describes, except for that of Vanity Fair, is that in which his audience lived. And in the case of Vanity Fair, it is necessary to note that while the staid mid-Victorians disapproved of many aspects of the Regency society which Thackeray depicts, the period is certainly not so remote from the experience of his readers as the age of Anne or the first two Georges. Many of his readers remembered the period, and the occurrance of char-

acters such as Lord Steyne, Major Pendennis, and Dickens's Mr. Turveydrop.in mid-Victorian fiction is ample evidence that the Regency dandy was still to be encountered in London. Also, many of the characters of Vanity Fair such as Rawdon Crawley and George Osborne are recognisably Regency types, but most of them, in Thackeray's usual manner, are portrayed in terms of the traits which are common to all humanity rather than those which differentiate them from people of other ages.

Vanity Fair was Thackeray's first major success in the art of fiction, as well as his first successful departure from the conventions that had governed fiction. In this novel, there is no single character with whom we can completely sympathize; we are not supposed to survey the story through the eyes of Amelia, or Becky, or any of the others. It is characteristic of Thackeray's view of life that even the "good" characters have serious weaknessess, for he inevitably attempts to depict the truth of human nature, and he knows that even the best of men has faults. The subject of this novel is not one character, or a group of characters, but society. As David Cecil says, in this novel "...that panorama of life which is the subject of all Thackeray's books is openly the subject; here, writing about Vanity Fair, he calls his book Vanity Fair. And it is the salient fact about Vanity Fair, in Thackeray's view, that it admits no heroes. To be heroic is to dominate circumstance; in the Vanity Fair of Thackeray's imagination, everyone is the slave of circumstance."[1]

It is also in this novel that Thackeray evolved his manner of relating the story, that quiet, half-sardonic conversational style with which he tells us about the events, comments on them, and then directs our attention elsewhere. As previously stated, he learned the value of authorial commentary from Fielding. But Fielding relegates his remarks to specific sections of his books, and confines himself to narration of his story in the other parts. The method of intruding whenever he feels it necessary to point out a moral or an ironic circumstance, or to direct our attention from one place to another, is Thackeray's own innovation. And one of the major reasons that he adopts this style is that he sees life as a whole rather than as a series of loosely-connected segments. Thackeray cannot confine himself to telling us about the life of Becky Sharp or Amelia Sedley; he must relate the separate fragments to each other because he cannot help seeing them all as a part of the same design. This is one of the reasons, as Geoffrey Tillotson points out, that characters and families that appear in one Thackeray novel often reappear in another:

> ...he was at pains to link his novels by the consanguinity of the personages. The author of Joseph Andrews had invented a new member of the family invented by Richardson, but Thackeray, like Balzac and to a lesser degree Disraeli, promoted such transferences into a practice. His novels hang together like a dynasty. If, unlike Balzac and Trollope, he did not group them, or some of them, under one name, it was not for lack of choice. Esmond--to neglect chronology of composition, as we do in arranging the line of Shakespeare's

> history plays--leads on to The Virginians. Arthur Pendennis, who is the center of The History of Pendennis, is the supposed editor of the materials that make The Newcomes, and with his family participates in the action of both. And though at the close of The Newcomes we are invited to see him 'disappear...as irrevocably as Eurydice,' he returns to share and record the adventures of Philip. Lady Kew, important in The Newcomes, is the sister of Lord Steyne, who is important in Vanity Fair, reappears in Pendennis as the friend of Major Pendennis, and is mentioned in The Newcomes and Philip. By means of The Newcomes we learn the later history of some of the personages of Vanity Fair. The links between novel and novel are sometimes so fine as to declare themselves as placed deliberately. Even in Lovel the Widower the Rev. Charles Honeyman and the dubious Sherrick, prominent in The Newcomes, get a passing reference. And though the two great novels fall into two main groups, those groups themselves are not without their family interconnection. The Warrington of Pendennis and The Newcomes is a descendent of the family into which the daughter of Henry Esmond marries....[2]

This unity is precisely what I mean when I refer to Thackeray's panoramic view of life. To him, the saga of human history is a vast and varied pageant in which the one constant factor is human nature. Although the customs and manners of the past amuse him enough to inspire his recreating of eighteenth-century society in his historical novels, he prefers to deal with the universal, that is, with the human ambitions and absurdities that do not change. His fiction demonstrates quite thoroughly that Thackeray does not believe in moral progress, which in turn indicates that he believes neither man nor society is perfectable. At times in his novels he inadvertently shows us that he would like to believe it,

but his ironic vision prevents him. However, only in Vanity Fair and in Esmond did his ironic vision keep his more sentimental tendency in check.

I do not know of any novel which lays bare human weakness, vice, and folly as skillfully or as successfully as Vanity Fair. And yet Thackeray never allows his irony to become completely cynical or misanthropic. He shows us that people can be very stupid, very foolish, or very wicked, but he does not for a moment believe that all men are so. His "good" characters invariably display dubious qualities, while his "bad" ones generally display some favorable trait which enables us to view them as not totally evil. Thackeray's characters, unlike those of Dickens, are never either wholly good or evil, and it is precisely this ambivalence of character which makes them live for us.

Thackeray's treatment of Amelia saves her from the angelic insipidness of the conventional Victorian woman. Although she displays all the goodness, humility and self-sacrifice required of the stock nineteenth-century heroine, Thackeray both shows and tells us that she is also a selfish little fool whose virtues may be perfectly admirable in fiction but are actually serious weaknesses in life. We are quite aware that her devoted enshrinement of her dead husband is wasted on a worthless cad, and we wonder how she forgot George's obvious and repeated attentions to Becky during their brief life together. It is also obvious that her worship of her son only

spoils him, and we are sure that young Rawdon Crawley is a much more likeable child than is young George Osborne. We also view her taking Dobbin for granted as evidence of her selfishness. Indeed, the only female character in the novel who seems to conform to the stereotype of a Victorian woman is Lady Jane, of whom we do not see enough to be able to judge. In these characterizations, we find Thackeray developing two of the themes we have remarked in the novels previously discussed: that the nature of man is neither good nor evil, but rather ambivalent, and that both man and society are essentially unchanging in the most fundamental qualities.

Of the male characters, Dobbin comes closest to being almost totally good, and it is no moral flaw that causes us to see him as something less than heroic. But if domination of circumstance is the yardstick by which we measure heroic qualities, we find that Dobbin, like the rest of the characters, is dominated. His tender heart can only be a flaw in Vanity Fair, and we rather tire of his patient devotion to Amelia. His greatest moment comes when he renounces Amelia and leaves Pumpernickel, and I suspect that we are rather disappointed when he comes hurrying back. And even here, Thackeray remains true to his concept of Vanity Fair; he tells us that Dobbin will have no illusions as to the unmitigated merits of Amelia once he has won her.

The morally questionable characters of Vanity Fair receive the same sort of treatment, with the single exception

of Lord Steyne. Indeed, this character comes close to being a serious flaw in the novel. I believe that Charles Whibley's analysis of the character is quite justified:

> A man is always more effective than a monster, and Steyne's monstrosity is palliated by very few touches of humanity. He is too much an affair of buckteeth and bushy whiskers. A scowl too often "gathers over his heavy brow." His jaw is so infamously underhung that you are suprised his friends do not send for the police at his first apparition. Yet he is represented as the friend of "the most august personages," and as the daring rival of Mr. Fox at hazard. His moral aspect is far worse even than his physical. It is his pleasant pastime to bully women and children. For instance, he heartily disliked Becky's boy. "When they met by mischance he made sarcastic bows or remarks to the child, or glared at him with savage-looking eyes." Here, indeed, we are at close quarters with the ogre of the fairy-story, and with the best intentions in the world we can no longer put faith in my Lord Steyne.[3]

However, the veracity of the character is less important for our purposes than the theme of decline and corruption among the aristocracy which he represents. Of the characters we meet in Vanity Fair, Steyne is by far the most powerful and the noblest, but his line is tainted by infertility and hereditary insanity. This character, who stands at the very head of the social scale of Vanity Fair, whose position in the government gives him vast power, appears to us as the very embodiment of all that is corrupt. In some ways, Steyne reminds us of Dickens's Sir Leicester Dedlock, who also symbolizes both the enfeeblement of the aristocracy and corruption in government. However, in Sir Leicester, we are shown some

of the strengths of the olass as well; Steyne is a creature whose evil is unmitigated by any factor. In Steyne, Thackeray also portrays for us the leveling power of history, for in this man, whose family has carried the traditions and responsibilities of its class for countless generations, we see that the sins and weaknesses of his ancestors have come home to roost. Another example of Thackerayan irony is evident here; that which was once great has been fatally weakened through the ages to the point that the man who represents the best that Vanity Fair has to offer appears to us as the least enviable of men. Here, on a larger scale, the author shows us the sort of cyclic progression which he demonstrates in the careers of Becky and Amelia; to Thackeray, the cycles of growth and deterioration, of rise and fall, may encompass months, years, or generations. In the cases of individuals, families, or societies, the process is much the same; change occurs, but the fundamental desires and motivations of men alter as little as the goals which each succeeding social order sanctions. The development of this world-view results from Thackeray's somewhat fatalistic historical philosophy; his frequent references to Ecclesiastes illustrate his belief that change is only superficial and that the endless repetition of the cycles of history constitutes the ultimate reality. In the careers of his heriones as in the gradual downfall of the house of Gaunt, he tells us that all is indeed vanity, and demonstrates that time--history--

is one of the greatest forces to which man must answer.

At one point in the novel, in Brussels before Waterloo, history and fiction converge; his fictional characters take part in a major historical event. Yet Thackeray does not avail himself of the opportunity to describe this event, which was one of the most important of the nineteenth century. This is not due to any inability on his part to describe military encounters, for in Barry Lindon, Esmond, and The Virginians we are given several excellent descriptions of battles. Rather, he abstains from such a narrative because he prefers to show us how a great historical event will affect individuals only peripherally connected with it. Napoleon's escape from Elba had already ruined Amelia's father, and in the chapters that take place before and during the battle Thackeray draws an ironic parallel between what happens in the city and on the field. The ball which proceeds the battle is in itself an ironic commentary, for while the English officers and ladies play their absurd little games of snobbery and conquest, Napoleon's columns are marching west, to encounter and deal out death and destruction. Becky's domination over Amelia at the ball may in itself be regarded as a mock-heroic victory, and, as such, an ironic comment on the great events which are preparing.

In this sequence of chapters we learn nothing essentially new about the characters; the cowardice of Jos Sedley does not surprise us, nor does Amelia's weakness or the equanimity with which Becky meets the thought of her possible widowhood.

And we are not suprised to discover that the garrulous and usually foolish Peggy O'Dowd is in reality as strong and resolute a character as we meet in Vanity Fair. What we are shown, as in the scenes at the ball, is the strategy adopted by a number of characters in order to survive. Becky prepares herself for either eventuality, the victory of French or Allies, Jos Sedley exhibits a semblance of courage only as long as he believes that the Allies are winning, after which he retreats, while Amelia sinks into utter despair. All of these actions serve two functions; they show us the reaction of a group of individuals during a great historical event, and especially Becky's tactics in secreting her valuables and securing horses serves as an ironic parallel to the battle which is going on. But the final ironic comment, and the one which most thoroughly indicates Thackeray's historical perspective in these chapters, is this short paragraph:

> No more firing was heard at Brussels--the pursuit rolled miles away. Darkness came down on the field and the city: and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart.[4]

At this point, we see that Thackeray is primarily interested in the great cycles and movements of history in terms of their effect on the individual lives of his characters, and by logical extension, on the lives of all men. If we survey his novels, we find that they contain many battles. To Thackeray, Waterloo assumes its place in history beside Blenheim and Wynandel,

as Napoleon and Wellington assume theirs beside Marlborough, Prince Eugene, and the other great warriors of the past. In the chapters that deal with Waterloo, we see only another cycle repeated, as we see the great leaders of one century supplant those of the one preceeding it. But it is in relation to Becky, to Henry Esmond, to Barry Lindon, to Amelia, that he sees these events, and he is primarily interested in the universal aspects of their reactions. The image of Amelia praying for her husband, who lies dead on the battlefield, is ageless; in this brief paragraph Amelia becomes for a moment the symbol of all women in every age who have waited and prayed for their husbands at war--and whose prayers are not answered.

The credo of Vanity Fair lies in the final paragraph of the novel, and it can be considered the most concise statement of Thackeray's view of life:

> Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or having it, is satisfied?--Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.[5]

This statement can only be construed as cynicism if we ignore the content of the novel. Obviously, Thackeray believes that some measure of happiness is attainable, for certainly Dobbin and Amelia are quietly satisfied in their marriage. However, he does not believe that complete satisfaction or unmitigated happiness can exist, for circumstance and human nature combine to defeat us. We do not find the conventional "happy ending" in a Thackeray novel, in which the hero and

heroine are married in the last chapter and are expected to live happily ever after. Thackeray is too thorough a realist to believe in such sentimental panaceas; as he cannot draw a good character without compromising qualities, so he understands life too thoroughly to be able to portray or predict for any of his characters a life of unalloyed felicity.

Pendennis and The Newcomes are Thackeray's only major novels that deal with mid-Victorian life and characters. These novels have much in common; several characters from Pendennis recur in The Newcomes, and the latter is narrated by Arthur Pendennis himself. John W. Dodds calls The Newcomes "just a better Pendennis"[6] and I believe that his evaluation is quite justified. Because the two novels are so similar, I propose to deal with them together. This discussion will be rather limited because we do not find the sort of convergence of history and fiction in these works that exists in the novels considered in the first chapter, or in Vanity Fair. Also, many of the comments concerning Thackeray's view of life which have already been made apply equally to these novels. My major concern in this discussion will be to show how Thackeray's historical philosophy affects the scope and point of view in these novels.

In Pendennis and The Newcomes, Thackeray creates the same vast panorama of society which we have found in Vanity Fair and in Esmond; and, as could be expected, he gives us two characters that link these novels to Esmond and The Virginians. Warrington is descended from the family into

which Henry Esmond's daughter married, and it is the ancestor of Paul de Florac with whom George Warrington fought a duel and who later saved George's life in The Virginians. As I have previously stated, these interconnections are occasioned by the nature of the author's historical vision. He employs them to demonstrate for his reader the continuum of past and present, just as he dwells upon the essentially unchanging aspects of human nature to make the same point. The characters in these two novels, like those of the works we have previously considered, are generally morally equivocal. Some, like Barnes Newcome or Blanche Amory, have a greater propensity for conniving and treachery, while others, like Colonel Newcome, are generally benevolent. But Thackeray's concern for portraying the truth of human nature always causes him to show us that even his "good" characters have their failings. So we are shown that Colonel Newcome can be pompous and vindictive, and Helen Pendennis is jealous, overly possessive, and too willing to believe evil reports about her son. There are few saints in Thackeray's novels; the one exception which I can remember is the Countess de Florae. And this lack of unqualifiedly good characters does not indicate that Thackeray did not believe that human beings can be benevolent, but only that they cannot be completely so.

History is not a dynamic force in these novels, as it is in those we have previously considered, but Thackeray's historical point of view is implicit in both his characters and in the situations which they encounter. Arthur Pendennis

and Clive Newcome manage to have a great deal in common without being exactly alike, but either of them can be considered as the prototype of a young man making his start in life. The fact that they are carefully individualized only makes their universality more apparent; in Pen's affair with Emily Costigan, or in a more serious vein, Olive's baffled pursuit of Ethel Newcome, we are given the very essence of youthful love. One critic has compared Thackeray's characters to the personified virtues and vices of the medieyal morality plays, but this view ignores the fact that they are usually convincingly complex.[7] It is true that many of them exhibit one primary quality which we are apt to remember, but it is only the least successful characters upon whom we can hang a tag. I have already mentioned Colonel Newcome's benevolence, which we are more likely to remember than his stubbornness or his capacity for holding a grudge. If I were to recall this character a long time after having read the novel, I might be tempted to dismiss him as one of Thackeray's conventional portraits of a good man, but I would obviously have forgotten many of the facets of the character that the author created.

In Pendennis, Thackeray show us another example of the eternal sameness of human relations in the friendship of Pen and Warrington. They remind us very much of the Warrington brothers in The Virginians; indeed, it is the same sort of interaction which we observe between Henry Esmond and his cousin Frances. Thackeray is fond of depicting

this sort of juxtaposition, in which one character has a rather introverted and intellectual disposition, while the other is more extroverted and devil-may-care. And the author is very much a part of both characters in each of these instances. According to John W. Dodds, this is quite intentional:

> If we are to find something of Thackeray in Pendennis we must also see something of him in Warrington, who represents the other half of Thackeray's dualism. One can almost hear the dialogue between Thackeray's good and bad angels in the long important argument between Pen and George in Chapter 61--Pen's attitude of general scepticism and acquiescence in the world as it is versus Warrington's aggressive idealism (with Thackeray going out of the way to explain that in presenting Pen's worldly pococurantism he is speaking only dramatically!). ...There is more of Pen than of Warrington in Thackeray, but neither puts the whole case for him. The truth of which Pen professed to be unaware lies perhaps somewhere between the two extremes. As for the battle that those extremes make in man's mind, Thackeray, like most people, declares a draw.[6]

Such a dialogue does not exist in either Esmond or The Virginians, but the idea is implicit in Henry and George, who are idealists, in contrast to Frances and Henry Warrington, who, like Pen, are more willing to accept the world as it is. As Dodds indicates, Thackeray can sympathize with the idealist, but since he does not trust institutions and has no belief in moral progress, he knows that we had better emulate Pen and accept established order of the world, although we need not be so happy about it. In fact, he tells us from time to time that the spectacle should sober us:

> O brother wearers of motley! Are there not moments when one grows sick of grinning and tumbling, and the jingling of cap and bells? This, dear friends and companions, is my amiable object--to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private.[9]

Now this statement taken out of context could be misleading, for the author is not telling us that the spectacle of life should make us miserable, but only that at times it will certainly have this effect, and rightly so. But if we relate the particular vanities and vices of the moment to the perspective afforded by the panorama of history, we will see their relative inconsequence. The following paragraph from the first chapter of The Newcomes will give us a more coherent view of the effect of Thackeray's philosophy of history on his fiction:

> If authors sneer, it is the critic's business to sneer at them for sneering. He must pretend to be their superior, or who would care about his opinion. And his livelihood is to find fault. Besides, he is right sometimes; and the stories he reads, and the characters drawn in them, are old sure enough. What stories are new? All types of all characters march through all fables; tremblers and boasters; victims and bullies; dupes and knaves; long-eared Neddies, giving themselves leonine airs; Tartuffes wearing virtuous clothing; lovers and their trials, their blindness, their folly and constancy. With the very first page of the human story do not love, and lies too, begin? So the tales were told ages before Aesop; and asses under lions' manes roared in Hebrew; and sly foxes flattered in Etruscan; and wolves in sheep's clothing gnashed their teeth in Sanscrit, no doubt. The sun shines to-day as he did when he first began shining; and the birds in the

> tree overhead, while I am writing, sing very much the same note they have sung ever since there were finches. Nay, since last he besought good-natured friends to listen once a month to his talking, a friend of the writer has seen the New World, and found the (featherless) birds there exceedingly like their brethern of Europe. There may be nothing new under and including the sun; but it looks fresh every morning, and we rise with it to toil, hope, scheme, laugh, struggle, love, suffer, until the night comes and quiet. And then will wake Morrow and the eyes that look on it; and so da capo.[10]

This statement tells us a great deal about Thackeray's approach to fiction. I have previously quoted David Cecil's statement that Thackeray's main interest lies in the universal aspects of man's life and experience. But in the pursuit of these universals, he gives us a fantastic variety; the experiences of Pen and Clive Newcome may in some ways be similar, they may encounter the same kinds of situations, be motivated by similar desires, encounter similar frustrations, but their experiences are sharply individualized. Lady Kew may embody the same vices and vanities as Miss Crawley or Beatrix Bernstein, but she is not an exact likeness of either. Colonel Newcome is overly indulgent to his son, but his indulgence takes a different form than does that of Helen Pendennis for Arthur or that of Mr. Osborne for young George. It is in this implicit recognition that all stories are old and that the dramas his characters enact are essentially variations on an eternal theme, that Thackeray's concept of history affects these two novels. These characters continue the same drama that was played out in the historical

novels and in Vanity Fair, but it is the variety which Thackeray wants us to recognize. In the last line of the paragraph quoted above, he tells us that this same pattern of human experience will go on eternally in the future, but the eyes that perceive it will see, as we do, that the sun still looks fresh every morning. As long as man exists, he should perceive the essential sameness of human experience, and will delight in the infinite variety which it offers. This is the historical vision, that panoramic view of life, that Thackeray creates for us in his novels.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Cecil, p. 73.

[2]Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray the Novelist (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 5-6.

[3]Whibley, pp. 107-108.

[4]Works, I, 404.

[5]Works, II, 431.

[6]Dodds, p. 193.

[7]Dodds, pp. 152-153.

[8]Works, I, 225.

[9]Works, V, 5-6.

Chapter III

THE PANORAMIC VISION AND VICTORIAN ATTITUDES

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the effect of Thackeray's panoramic vision upon his fiction; it will be my purpose in this chapter to examine how this vision differentiates him from his contemporaries. Some critics have stated that there is a definite lack of "ideas"in Thackeray's fiction; Geoffrey Tillotson points out that they really mean

> ...the lack in Thackeray's novels of ideas about matters much under discussion at the time. In the mid-nineteenth century new fields of thought were discovered, in which ideas offered themselves thickly as blackberries. Favourite fields for cogitation--I enumerate them without attention to precedence--were religion, society, anthropology, politics, the sciences, psychology, morality. In most of these fields... Thackeray had either little to say, or little to say of much contemporary interest.[1]

He adds in a footnote that Thackeray scatters many ideas of contemporary interest through his travel books and articles, adding that "they are usually of the brilliant 'undergraduate sort.'"[2]

We have only to look at the novels of his great rival, Dickens, to see that by comparison, Thackeray has relatively little interest in the contemporary excitements which were

rocking his society. Dickens either deals with, or demonstrates his awareness of literally dozens of these themes. He satirizes Puseyism in Mrs. Pardiggle, hypocrisy in Mr. Pecksniff, child labor in Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, and lacerates Sabbatarianism in Mrs. Clennam. He shows us the evils of an antiquated legal system in Bleak House, attacks government beaurocracy in the Circumlocution Office of Little Dorrit, and exposes the dehumanizing aspects of the Benthamite philosophy in Hard Times. Indeed, we can hardly read a chapter of any Dickens novel without encountering some reference to contemporary issues and problems. When we find such scenes as poor Jo munching his crust on the steps of The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, when we read the description of Mr. Dombey's railroad journey to Brighton past slums and social evils that he will not see, or when we are shown the squalor of Tom-all-Alone's, we cannot but be aware that Dickens's knowledge of the contemporary scene is vast and that his art owes much to this knowledge. Even the reeking graveyards of Bleak House and the collapse of Merdle's financial empire embody topical concerns and references. This does not mean that Dickens was a profound thinker or that he advocated concrete programs of reform which could be expected to alleviate the social evils that he so relentlessly describes. Actually, Dickens's philosophy is rather naive. As David Cecil says:

> It centers round a single belief--a belief in the paramount value of the primary, simple, benevolent impulses of man, his natural affections for home and mother and wife and sweetheart, his unconsidered movements of charity and gusts of gaiety, his instinctive wish to love and laugh and give and share.... He tended to suspect all institutions, churches, charitable societies, government offices, laws, reformatories, because he felt they were attempting to do by mechanical means the good which could only come from the spontaneous action of the individual.... He could not even feel much enthusiasm for virtues if they were severe and self-regarding--thrift, stern justice, the public spirit that sacrifices an individual for a cause.[3]

Now, as Cecil reminds us, this philosophy, though it is crude, is not shallow. But it entails a belief in Father Christmas, and more importantly for our purposes, it makes an assumption to which Thackeray could not acquiesce: that most men are basically good.

But our first concern is the vast number of topical references and descriptions of contemporary life in Dickens's novels, as opposed to the conspicuous lack of them in Thackeray's. In several passages, such as those that deal with Lady Southdown in Vanity Fair, Thackeray pokes fun at Evangelical religion, and especially to its literature, such as The Washerwoman of Finchley Common. He makes another broadside slap in this direction in his description of Sophia Newcome's household:

> As you entered at the gate, gravity fell on you; and decorum wrapped you in a bundle of starch.

> The butcher-boy who galloped his horse and cart madly about the adjoining lanes and common, whistled wild melodies (caught up in abominable playhouse galleries), and joked with a hundred cookmaids, on passing that lodge fell into an undertaker's pace, and delivered his joints and sweetbreads silently at the servants' entrance. The rooks in the elms cawed sermons at morning and evening; the peacocks walked demurely on the terraces; the guinea-fowls looked more quaker-like than those savoury birds usually do. The lodgekeeper was serious, and a clerk at a neighboring chapel. The pastors who entered at that gate...fed the little lambkins with tracts. The head-gardener was a Scotch Calvinist, after the strictest order, only occupying himself with the melons and pines provisionally, and until the end of the world, which event, he could prove by infallible calculations, was to come off in two or three years at farthest.[4]

We may also regard the failure of the Bundlecund Bank as a topical reference, for Thackeray himself had lost some money through speculating on bubbles of this sort. And in a minor sort of way it is possible to regard the charitable efforts of Becky on behalf of "The Destitute Orange-girl, the Neglected Washerwoman, the Distressed Muffin-man..."[5] as a satirical comment on this type of activity. Again, the medieval affectations of Charles Honeyman in Lady Whittlesea's chapel may be regarded as a comment on Puseyism. But this sort of comment is very sparse in Thackeray's fiction, and the major reason for it is, once again, the nature of his conception of man in historical context. I have stated previously that it is the universal aspects of humanity that interest Thackeray, and I have also discussed his belief that human nature does not change. Also, as Tillotson points out, Thackeray, like

Pen, "...accepts the social structure as it stands, even though there is much in it that pains him."[6] In all of his novels he writes about society, but, as with his characters, it is always the aspects of it which are common to every age that occupy him. Certainly he recognizes the particular characteristics which differentiate one era from another; if he did not, the descriptions of eighteenth-century life in the historical novels would be neither convincing nor interesting. But Thackeray looks first for the universal, and he finds that society, like human motivations, alters very little in its most important aspects. Dodds says that in The Newcomes his chief ideas are easy to list:

> ...the Peerage is the Bible of English society; marriages made for money are not likely to be happy; not all poor men are honest; the way to get ahead in society is to push yourself forward; every one has a skeleton in his closet; hearts do not break for love; innocent old gentlemen are likely to be imposed upon.[7]

But these ideas are not confined to The Newcomes; most of them, or variations on them, occur in all of the works we have surveyed. This is not to say that these ideas comprise the whole of a Thackeray novel; rather, that taken in combination with his characterizations and the incidents which he describes, as well as the unity of his works which is caused in part by his reiteration of these themes, we can see these ideas merging into what David Cecil calls "...a conscious, considered criticism of life."[8] Thackeray simply is not interested in the sort of

particular details that his contemporaries care about; the explication of the truths which he believes to be at the very core of human experience, consists of showing us how very basic are the motivations and circumstances that have always governed human lives.

Thackeray's concept of ideal morality, like that of Dickens, is quite simple; we see it demonstrated in his "good" characters from Henry Esmond to Colonel Newcome, as we are shown its antithesis in Barry Lindon, Becky Sharp, Barnes Newcome, and innumerable others. However, Dickens, as previously stated, believes that most men are basically good, and that generally those who are not may be capable of reform. Thackeray believes that man is morally neutral, and that in all probability, the goals which society endorses as desirable give him a propensity for selfishness at the least, and at worst for blatent evil. I have stated that we find almost no characters in Thackeray whose goodness is unmitigated; we also find that his selfish or wicked characters experience no changes of heart. He is incapable of creating a Flora Dombey or an Esther Summerson, because such totally good characters do not coincide with his view of man; neither can he depict a sentimental reformation like that of the elder Dombey or of Eugene Wrayburn. As shown in the passage from The Newcomes which was quoted in the previous chapter, he views human nature as an unchanging aspect of the panorama of history, and he accepts man, as he accepts society, for what

he is, though as both author and member of the human community he does not necessarily approve. The point is that while many of his contemporaries were deeply concerned about ethical questions, Thackeray, because of his concept of human nature, was not concerned with such problems.

One of the most prevalent aspects of the Victorian mind, according to Walter E. Houghton,[9] is the anti-intellectual bias of the age. The Victorians were primarily interested in utility and practicality; the middle classes despised theory as having little relation to the realities of life. Consequently, we find that the practical scientist is glorified at the expense of the classical scholar or the artist; Bentham believed the game of push-pin to be of more value than the arts as long as it afforded more pleasure. However, this attitude does not prevent the age from making great contributions to thought; as Houghton reminds us:

> It is to claim only that middle- and upper-class society was permeated by a scornful or frightened view of the intellectual life, both speculative and artistic, and the liberal education that fosters it.[10]

Thackeray had been an indifferent student himself, and we are shown his reaction to his own experiences with conventional classical education in his portrayal of the undistinguished scholarly careers of Pen and Clive Newcome. However, he was certainly not hostile to classical learning; many of his characters, from Henry Esmond and George Warrington to James

Binnie and the Warrington of Pendennis, are consummately familiar with not only the Greek and Latin authors, but with Shakespeare and the great writers of the eighteenth century. Many of them, in fact, are themselves artists. Esmond not only writes, but is a skillful artist, George Warrington writes plays, Pen becomes an author, and Clive becomes a painter. Indeed, not only many of his heroes, but also several of the secondary characters that he admires, have a more than peripheral connection with the visual or literary arts. Of course, one reason for the abundance of novelists, journalists, and artists that appear in Thackeray's novels is that he had been involved to some extent in each of these pursuits himself. He began his search for a career as an art student in Paris, and turned to journalism when he discovered that his talents lay mainly in the areas of caricature and illustration. After the loss of his patrimony in a journalistic venture, he turned to the sort of journalistic endeavors that we find Pen and Warrington engaged in, and like them, Thackeray began his journalistic career as much from necessity as from choice. Also, like Pen, Thackeray eventually progressed from reviews and criticism to fiction.

Obviously, Thackeray could not accept his society's evaluation of either education or the arts. He was, however, quite aware of the prevailing prejudice, and he attacks it in several instances. In old Osborne, Thackeray satirizes the snob's approach to education; this man, who heartily despises

scholars, or indeed, anyone who is not rich, wants his grandson to have the best education because it will establish his superiority. Similarly, the Newcome family looks down on Clive because of his choice of professions, and we find several characters either adminishing or deriding him for doing work that is not gentlemanly. It must be remembered that his satire is not directed at the entire Victorian society, but only at those who revered the merchant and the mechanic, and despised the arts and classical education as impractical and rather subversive. In many respects, Thackeray was a man of the eighteenth century, at least in the things he admired, and his concept of genius belongs to that age rather than to his own.

There are many other aspects of the Victorian age which Thackeray ignores in his fiction. Although he did not accept many of the doctrines of Christianity, and specifically repudiated the authority of the Old Testament,[11] in his novels he mentions neither the conflict of science and religion nor the many sectarian disputes of his age. Also, he exhibits none of the fascination with gadgetry or technology which is so typical of the average Victorian. And most of the respects in which he differs from his contemporaries are due to his interest in the universal aspects of life. He ignores many aspects of contemporary life which would fit into his philosophy, but we do not seriously regret their omission from his fiction. The picture of life that we do find in his major novels is in many ways very modern, for his historical vision causes

him to adopt a position of relativism with which we can actively sympathize. And in this we find another respect in which he diverges from many of his contemporaries: unlike Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, even Dickens in certain instances, Thackeray is unable to be dogmatic. His panoramic vision causes him to accept certain factors of life as absolute, it is true, but he shows us again and again that we cannot dominate circumstance, that we often fail to understand our own motivations, and that our efforts to cope with life are much like those of all men throughout history. It is this message, that we are engaged in the common struggle of humanity, that lies at the heart of Thackeray's panoramic vision.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Tillotson, p. 181.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Cecil, pp. 56-57.

[4]Works, V, 21-22.

[5]Works, II, 430.

[6]Tillotson, p. 183.

[7]Dodds, p. 200.

[8]Cecil, p. 69

[9]Houghton, p. 110.

[10]Houghton, p. 110.

[11]The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray, ed. Gordon N. Ray, (Cambridge, Mass., 1945-47), four volumes, III, p. 217-218.

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