THE ROAD TO VANITY FAIR:
CYNICISM, SENTIMENTALITY, AND DESPAIR IN THE EARLY THACKERAY

by

Sheldon Goldfarb

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Department of English

Winnipeg, Manitoba

THE ROAD TO VANITY FAIR: CYNICISM, SENTIMENTALITY, AND DESPAIR IN THE EARLY THACKERAY

BY

SHELDON GOLDFARB

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

--Ecclesiastes 4:1

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine the various psychological attitudes found in the works of William Makepeace Thackeray up to and including Vanity Fair, with a view to understanding how the attitudes, which often seem quite contradictory, interact with one another. My procedure has been to study Thackeray's main fictional works between 1837 and 1848 in order to understand the aspect or aspects of Thackeray's psychology that each one embodies. I have also made use of available biographical material to supplement the evidence from the fiction.

In my first substantive chapter, I look at Thackeray's earliest fictions and conclude that most of them are dominated by feelings of anger. In my next chapter, I study the following period in Thackeray's development, in which his works seem more subdued and sentimental, although still with angry elements, especially towards the end of the period. Works from the two first periods contain elements of fear, which seems to be a major part of Thackeray's psychological make-up. Fear plays a prominent role in Barry Lyndon, the subject of the next chapter, undercutting the expression of revenge which is that novel's main point. Vanity Fair, the subject of the final substantive chapter, embodies many of Thackeray's earlier attitudes, but is distinguished by new-

found power that at times transforms old anger into stinging satire and maudlin sentimentality into mature sympathy.

I conclude that Thackeray's fiction is the creation of a fearful, suffering man, who, in his fiction, expresses his fears, his angers, and his yearnings. In general, to understand these aspects of Thackeray's personal sufferings is to understand the works embodying them; but in Vanity Fair, though still motivated by his old sufferings, Thackeray is able at times to transcend his personal problems and create some superior art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go first of all to my supervisor, Professor R.P. O'Kell, for all his advice and assistance to me in the course of my work on this thesis. I would also like to thank Professor Judith Flynn, in whose class I was first introduced to William Makepeace Thackeray, and Professor John J. Teunissen, whose thought-provoking classes taught me a great deal about the study of literature. The University of Manitoba and its Department of English both provided me with much-needed funding while I was working on my thesis, for which I am very grateful. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement and for their patience in listening to me expound my theories about Thackeray and the Road to Vanity Fair.

PRIMARY REFERENCES

References to Thackeray's works are as follows:

For Vanity Fair (abbreviated VF), the edition referred to is: Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero. Edited by Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963 (the Riverside edition).

For Barry Lyndon (abbreviated BL), the edition used is: The Luck of Barry Lyndon. Edited by Martin J. Anisman. New York: New York University Press, 1970.

For all other literary works by Thackeray, reference is to the collected edition of his works in 17 volumes edited by George Saintsbury. Published at London: Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press, n.d. [1908] (the Oxford Thackeray). Individual works are referred to by volume and page number in Saintsbury's edition. The abbreviation Works is used where necessary.

Reference is also made to the following collections:

The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray. Edited by Gordon N. Ray. 4 volumes. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945-1946 (abbreviated Letters).

Mrs. Brookfield and Her Circle. Edited by Charles and Frances Brookfield. 2 volumes. New York and London: Scribner's and Pitman [1905] (abbreviated Mrs. Brookfield).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of William Makepeace Thackeray is his elusiveness. He twists and turns and hides from sight, makes the most wickedly cynical jabs one moment only to dissolve into sentimentality the next, moves from self-pity to self-promotion to self-scorn in the twinkling of a jaundiced eye, and all in all leaves the reader--and the critic--wondering where he stands. More than one critic has thrown his hands up in despair or disgust at the apparent vacillations,[1] and more than one critic has been drawn to use the image of the kaleidoscope to describe what is going on in Thackeray's work.[2]

It is, I think, an apt metaphor, especially concerning the large question of Thackeray's attitude--or attitudes--to life. Although there are some who would see a "oneness" in the man,[3] it is hard to escape the feeling as one reads at least the early works that every turn of a page is like the

---

[1] For despair, see Lambert Ennis, Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic (Evanston, Ill., 1950), p. 129; see also J.Y.T. Greig, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (London, 1950), ch. 1, who is more prone to disgust.

[2] Robert A. Colby, "Catherine: Thackeray's Credo," Review of English Studies, n.s. 15 (1964), 395; David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists (London, 1934), p. 74.

[3] For instance, Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray the Novelist ([Cambridge, England], 1954), p. 1.

shaking of the glass, shifting the fragments into new attitudes that at first seem bewilderingly contradictory. It is, however, possible to take the kaleidoscope apart and discover the nature of the fragments inside it, and it is this that I have attempted to do in my examination of Thackeray's works.

I am not one of those who believes that in Thackeray's case--or for that matter in the case of most authors before the post-modern era--the author was fully in control of his kaleidoscope of attitudes. There are those who would have us see a Thackeray beyond human imperfections who plays with his kaleidoscope to tease the reader into self-examination. Ambiguity and ambivalence then become the author's way of telling us of "the ultimate unknowability of the truth";[4] or they are Thackeray's way of trapping the reader, making the reader judge incorrectly at first so that he can later see the shallowness of his first judgments.[5]

To me these are unhelpful approaches, stemming from a priori assumptions about the nature of authorship rather than from a detailed examination of Thackeray's shifting and contradictory fictions. The Thackeray revealed to me in

---

[4] Ann Y. Wilkinson, "The Thomeavsian Way of Knowing the World: Technique and Meaning in Vanity Fair," ELH 32 (1965), 386; see also Bruce K. Martin, "Vanity Fair: Narrative Ambivalence and Comic Form," Tennessee Studies in Literature 20 (1975), 47.

[5] See Michael Lund, "Beyond the Text of Vanity Fair," Studies in the Novel 11 (1979), 150, 155-159, and Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore, 1974), pp. 112-120.

those fictions is not some God-like gamesman and deceiver, but rather a tortured human being full of inner conflicts, thwarted desires, and fearful hostility. In short, what is revealed in Thackeray's writings is a neurotic personality, very much as described by the psychologist Karen Horney, whose work has been applied very interestingly to Thackeray by Bernard J. Paris.[6]

In his analysis of Vanity Fair, Paris sees Thackeray as resorting to various defensive strategies in order to cope with an unfriendly universe. These strategies are compliance, aggression, and withdrawal. In Vanity Fair, according to Paris, Thackeray is alternately compliant (seeking approval through self-depreciating submission and conciliation), aggressive (seeking revenge and scorning weakness and compassion), and withdrawn (seeking safety in escape or detachment). This is a very suggestive analysis, but perhaps somewhat too rigid. There are attitudes in Thackeray's work--his sentimentality, for instance, and his feelings of inadequacy--that do not fit comfortably into Paris's categories. There are also problems with Paris's application of his categories. For instance, he sees Vanity Fair as being predominantly a compliant work when it actually seems much more a work of aggression and, to a lesser extent, escape. Thus, although I am in basic agreement with Paris's psychological approach to Thackeray, I have not followed all of

[6] Karen Horney, The Neurotic Personality of Our Time (New York, 1937); Bernard J. Paris, "The Psychic Structure of 'Vanity Fair'," Victorian Studies 10 (1966-67), 389-410.

his interpretations, and I have also tried to be more flexible in understanding the shadings of Thackeray's works. Rather than concentrate on three or four basic categories, I have emphasized the variety of attitudes to be found in Thackeray's fiction, the various forms of sentimentality, for instance, and the different ways he expresses fear and inadequacy. The basic categories are important, and I delineate them (in slightly different fashion from Paris) in my Conclusion, but my interest is primarily in the various manifestations of those categories in the individual works.

I am also interested, as are most critics, in what it is that makes Vanity Fair, the end of Thackeray's early road, stand out from all his previous efforts. It is not the characterization, for though some critics have praised it,[7] in reality the characters are no more the main point of Vanity Fair than they are of The Yellowplush Papers or Major Gahagan. Thackeray is very little interested in portraying realistic, consistent human beings on the page; he is interested in expressing his own personal feelings: his fears, his anger, his yearnings, and so forth. It is thus rather pointless to try to judge the characters, as one critic recommends that we do,[8] for they are not consistent and neither is Thackeray's attitude to them. He uses his char-

[7] See John Carey, Thackeray: Prodigal Genius (London, 1977), p. 177; Juliet McMaster, Thackeray: The Major Novels ([Toronto], 1971), pp. 25-26.

[8] McMaster, p. 46. See also U.C. Knoepflmacher, Laughter and Despair: Readings in Ten Novels of the Victorian Era (Berkeley, 1971), p. 64.

acters to express his feelings. For instance, out of anger he might want to attack the world as an evil place, and to that end he might use Becky Sharp as an instrument of revenge against the world's evil; but he might just as easily use her to represent the world's evil, or in another mood to represent his feelings of oppression.

In all this there is little difference between Vanity Fair and the works that preceded it, except perhaps that in Vanity Fair there is more inconsistency of character and a greater number of conflicting attitudes being expressed. But what lifts Vanity Fair above Thackeray's other early works is the way he expresses his personal feelings. In Vanity Fair, the feelings are personal without seeming to be personal. That is, ultimately one can trace the anger in this novel back to Thackeray's personal concerns; but whereas in the earlier fiction those concerns are transparently obvious, in Vanity Fair Thackeray rises above the immediate causes for his anger and in a highly superior manner portrays, at least at times, anger incarnate. In his earliest works, Thackeray seems to be complaining about his personal problems. In Vanity Fair, although those personal problems are his basic motivation, he transcends them and rises above mere complaint to the realm of cynical satire and clever revenge.

Still, the ultimate motivation of Vanity Fair, as of Thackeray's earlier works, is personal. Thus to fully understand these works, it is necessary to understand some-

thing of Thackeray's personal life and, more particularly, his personality.

Perhaps the event that was the most fundamental in creating Thackeray's personality was his separation from his mother at a very tender age. Born in Calcutta in 1811, Thackeray was sent to England in 1816, the year after his father died, while his mother remained behind in India and remarried. The trauma of this separation can be seen years later in Thackeray's essay "On Letts's Diary," in which he recalls

> a ghaut, or river-stair, at Calcutta; and a day when, down those steps, to a boat which was in waiting, came two children, whose mothers remained on the shore.

Once in England, the two children were sent to

> a school of which our deluded parents had heard a favourable report, but which was governed by a horrible little tyrant, who made our young lives so miserable that I remember kneeling by my little bed of a night and saying, 'Pray God, I may dream of my mother!'[9]

School life, the real world that the young Thackeray was plunged into, proved to be pure torment to the future author, so much so that he ran away one time, only to return because he was "so frightened by the sight of Hammersmith High Road."[10] Of one of his schools, Thackeray later com-

---

[9] The Roundabout Papers (Works, 553-554).

[10] Account by Lady Ritchie (Thackeray's daughter), cited by Gordon Ray, Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity, 1811-1846 (New York, 1955), p. 71. Ray provides the fullest account of the facts of Thackeray's life. The most interesting analyses of Thackeray's character can be found in the already cited works by Lambert Ennis and the hostile but perceptive J.Y.T. Greig.

mented:

> What a dreadful place that private school was; cold, chilblains, bad dinners, not enough victuals, and caning awful!
>
> (Works, XVII, 495)

And in a letter from 1847 he wrote that his experiences at school had taught him "to hate bullying & tyranny" (Letters, II, 284). Of Charterhouse, the school he spent the most time at, the young Thackeray wrote (at the time):

> Doctor Russell [the headmaster] is treating me every day with such manifest unkindness and injustice, that I really can scarcely bear it. . . . I wish I could take leave of him tomorrow.
>
> (Letters, I, 24)

And in his essay "Thorns in the Cushion," Thackeray wrote:

> Remember your own young days at school, my friend--the tingling cheeks, burning ears, bursting heart, and passion of desperate tears, with which you looked up, after having performed some blunder, whilst the doctor held you to public scorn before the class, and cracked his great clumsy jokes upon you--helpless and a prisoner! Better the block itself, and the lictors, with their fasces of birch-twigs, than the maddening torture of those jokes!
>
> (Works, XVII, 400)

It was not just the cruelty of the real world, however, but the fact of being separated from his mother that affected Thackeray. In his essay "On Two Children in Black," he singles out "that first night in school" as being extremely hard to bear. On that first night, one encounters "[a] hard bed, hard words, strange boys bullying, and laughing, and jarring you with their hateful merriment--as for the first night at a strange school, we most of us remember what that is" (Works, XVII, 370, italics in original).

Thackeray does add that the first night is not the worst, but the reason for that would seem to be that the separation of the first night continues. In any case, the main point of this essay is to discuss the separation of children from parents. Thackeray bases his discussion on an incident he says he witnessed, in which two children took leave of their mother. The incident prompts the following meditation:

> Perhaps I recollect driving down . . . with my own mother to the end of the avenue, where we waited--only a few minutes--until the whirring wheels of that 'Defiance' coach were heard rolling towards us as certain as death. . . . I hear the wheels now: I smart the cruel smart again: and, boy or man, have never been able to bear the sight of people parting from their children.
> (Works, XVII, 369-370)

The fact of separation, especially this sort of separation, which could be looked on as a form of abandonment, is significant in two ways. First of all, it means there was for Thackeray a happier time before he was thrust into the world, a time that could be the basis for later sentimental yearnings for escape and protection. But secondly, what must also have been produced was a sense of distrust for anyone, such as his mother, who might seek the role of protector, for protectors, he had seen, could suddenly leave one at the mercy of the world. As well, protectors could turn out to be tyrannical themselves. His own mother, though he at times spoke of her as "a gentle angel" interposing between him and misery (Letters, II, 361), at other times seemed more the source of misery. There were many disagreements between Thackeray and his mother, especially

over his activities (gambling, drinking, theatre-going) as a young man on the Continent, and Thackeray would respond to criticism in hurt or angry tones. "I wonder at your objecting to the Theatre-going," he wrote, and another time, after confessing to being hurt by some criticism, said: "I do not think I deserved those strong terms of reproof."[11]

Thus Thackeray was discovering a world in which there was no reliable haven to which he could escape from the world's cruelty. And the cruelty did not cease after he left school, though it took different forms. Instead of having to endure beatings and sarcasm, Thackeray now suffered through rejections in love (Letters, I, 146), a failure to achieve popularity with his early writings (see Letters, II, 192-193), the loss of his fortune,[12] and, perhaps most galling of all, a lack of acceptance from high society. Thackeray looked on himself as genteel. He scorned those who were not gentlemen or who "smell[ed] a little of the shop" (Letters, I, 61, 107); but it seems he was scorned himself for not having the proper credentials for polite society. In his letters he twice speaks of being snubbed, and in later years commented defensively on his social position.[13] In fact, he had reason to be defensive. Although his family was well off--his father, an official in the East India Company, left him 17,000 pounds when he died--

---

[11] Letters, I, 93, 96. See also I, 97, 137; II, 70, 74-75.

[12] See Ray, p. 162.

[13] Letters, I, 78, 444; II, 334, 459.

Thackeray came not from the gentry or aristocracy, but from the professional middle classes and, worse, from the colonial branch of the professional middle classes. Whatever an Anglo-Indian's standing in India, in England it was bound to be lower. Moreover, Thackeray was unfortunate enough to lose his father's fortune very quickly. He was thus forced into journalism, a career that was not quite respectable at the time. In short, Thackeray sought to be regarded as genteel, but did not really qualify and was thus susceptible to rebuffs that would reinforce in him the notion that the world was cruel and unfair.[14]

The end result of all this was a personality in which fear, anger, uncertainty, and escapist sentimentality all mingled. In school, according to a fellow student, Thackeray was "a pretty, gentle, and rather timid boy."[15] Later Carlyle described him as "a big, fierce, weeping, hungry man; not a strong one."[16] Trollope, who knew Thackeray in later life, said he was "unsteadfast, idle, changeable of purpose, aware of his own intellect but not trusting

---

[14] For Thackeray's social origins and early years, see Ray, pp. 24, 52-53, 60-64, 67, 153-154, 162, 167-168, 194-195, 213-215.

[15] George Venables, cited by Anthony Trollope, Thackeray (London, 1879), p. 4.

[16] Cited by Ann Monsarrat, An Uneasy Victorian: Thackeray the Man, 1811-1863 (New York, 1980), p. 3 (italics in original).

it."[17] And another contemporary described him as being sensitive and lacking in confidence, yet sarcastic.[18] Here was a man who could be easily hurt, who felt he had been hurt, and who would seek to protect himself in a variety of ways, from sarcasm to timidity, or in Paris's terms, from aggression to compliance.

Knowing these things about Thackeray's life, one is better able to understand the forces at work in his fiction. Many times, indeed, the narrators and other characters in Thackeray's early fiction seem to be openly voicing Thackeray's own complaints and reflecting his own unhappinesses. At other times, of course, this is not true. And at still other times it is unclear. Deciding whether a character or narrator speaks for Thackeray can be difficult, but I believe it can be done, based on a knowledge of Thackeray's personality, familiarity with Thackeray's texts (so that one can recognize recurring motifs), and above all sensitivity to the particular text being analyzed. And whether or not an individual character speaks for Thackeray, the texts as a whole speak for him. His writings are pervaded by his various attitudes, and it is to an analysis of those attitudes that this study is devoted.

---

[17] Trollope, p. 19.

[18] See Ennis, pp. 1, 40, 43.

Chapter II

MEDDLING WITH VICE: CATHERINE, THE YELLOWPLUSH PAPERS, AND SOME OTHERS

> Who would meddle with dull virtue, humdrum sentiment, or stupid innocence, when vice, agreeable vice, is the only thing which the readers of romances care to hear?
>
> --Catherine

As has been often noted,[19] Thackeray began his career as a parodist. But he was a parodist with a difference. The point with him was not parody for its own sake, but what might be called "anti-sentimentality," an attack on the sentimental view of the world.[20] Life is not like that, he kept trying to say, in his earliest works. People are not

[19] See, for instance, Saintsbury's introduction to Volume I of his edition of Thackeray, p. xxviii. See also John W. Dodds, Thackeray: A Critical Portrait (New York, 1941), p. 36, and Robin Ann Sheets, "Art and Artistry in Vanity Fair," ELH 42 (1975), 421.

[20] Cf. George Levine, The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley (Chicago, 1981), p. 132: Thackeray's "art is always importantly parodic, seeking to displace the delightful absurdities of literary conventions with the truths that lay beyond literature." I would agree, but with limitations. Thackeray was not "always" parodic the way he was in his early works (c. 1837-40), though some parodic strains can sometimes be seen later in a secondary role. Also, Thackeray was not, as Levine says (p. 133), deprecating all fiction-making, but merely the heroic and sentimental varieties; it was not that Thackeray thought fiction by its very nature distorted reality, but that reality had been distorted in some writers' (other writers', not his) works.

kind, compassionate, and magnificent, but selfish, uncaring, and cruel. Life is no heroic adventure, but a tawdry sideshow.

We can see this anti-sentimentality in one of the first literary works Thackeray produced (at age 17): a poem, "Timbuctoo," published in an undergraduate newspaper at Cambridge. The whole poem is a parody, but especially notable is the line: "The beast is found,--pop goes the musketoons" (I, 1), to which Thackeray has appended the footnote:

> A learned friend suggested 'Bang,' as a stronger expression; but, as African gunpowder is notoriously bad, the Author thought 'Pop' the better word.
>
> (I, 2)

In heroic adventures, musketoons would undoubtedly go "Bang," but Thackeray knows that life is not a heroic adventure and that in the real world expectations are often disappointed.

This was in 1829, and before Thackeray began his serious career as a literary writer. It was only in 1837 that he published what was probably his first work of fiction, "The Professor," a short story subtitled "A Tale of Sentiment." It is not really a tale of sentiment, of course; rather the reverse, which is only to be expected. Thackeray did indulge in sentiment at times, but he would seldom do so if he said he was going to do so. It is almost a rule of thumb with him that if his text says one thing, the opposite is meant. If Dobbin is called a hypocrite, that means he is not; if a chapter promises sentiment, it is unlikely to

deliver. The title character of "The Professor" says, "I am not what I seem" (I, 116, italics in original), and this is true of his creator as well. Thackeray liked to disguise himself, perhaps because he feared the world, or perhaps because he felt there was evil in himself that he had to conceal. As the Professor goes on to say, "I cannot tell thee what I am; a tale of horror, of crime, forbids the dreadful confession!"

Of course, these are the Professor's words, not Thackeray's, and in putting them in his character's mouth, Thackeray is first of all satirizing the high-flown language of heroic romances; but in typical Thackerayan manner, the text here pursues two objects: besides attacking sentimentality, revealing something of the author's fear of exposure.

But it is true that above all the "Tale of Sentiment" is an attack on sentimentality, especially on the sentimentality found in romantic fiction. For instance, there is the heroine, Adeliza Grampus, whose very name is a mockery. Adeliza, we are told, had been "fed from her youth upwards with so much . . . literary ware, that her little mind had gone distracted" (I, 114). Ready for love, she does not, however, find a prince, but has to settle for the boy who opens the oysters in her father's shop. This incongruity typifies the tale; ordinary life is constantly colliding with the highest sentiment, much to the latter's disadvantage.

Thus, the Professor declares his love for Adeliza in the most stirring language--only he says everything with a Cockney accent. Referring to the beatings of Adeliza's heart, he says: "I eard them haudibly. . . . I wished to henter your seminary, to be continually near you." And he adds, "I love thee, Hadeliza" (I, 115-116). It is the same with the description of the Professor's rejected lover; she speaks most poignantly of the ruin within her, but then we are told that she "slapped her heart, and big tears rolled down her chin and so into her tucker" (I, 118, italics added). The use of words like "slapped," "chin," and "tucker" impairs our ability to sympathize with this character as a tragic heroine, for tragic heroines do not have such things as chins and tuckers.

What Thackeray has done here is to completely undermine the assumptions of high romance, where grief is pure and disembodied, and where true love exists only in the finest accents, accompanied by ethereal gestures, such as the lover kneeling before his beloved. The Professor does indeed think of kneeling before Adeliza, "but the road was muddy; and his trousers being of nankeen, his gallant purpose was frustrated" (I, 116). So it must always be, Thackeray is saying, for in life, as opposed to fiction, there is always mud to get in the way. This is a rather cynical approach to the world; it has been called realistic (by Thackeray himself and by several of his commentators),[21] but one wonders

[21] Thackeray wrote that "the Art of Novels is to represent

if cynicism and realism are really the same thing.

In any case, what predominates in "The Professor" is the sense that life is not a sentimental fantasy, but something much more ordinary, humdrum, even nasty. As the narrator says, commenting on the mischief the Professor causes to the school that hired him: "Confidence can be sometimes misplaced. . . . friendship is frequently but another name for villainy" (I, 112). This bitter remark is actually much stronger than the rest of the story,[22] which is concerned more with commonness than nastiness, but it hints at later developments. What emerges in Thackeray's next work, for instance, is not just mockery of romantic visions, but a statement of grievance against evil in the world, especially against high society and the snobbery surrounding it.

Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality" (Letters, II, 772, italics in original). For critics who accept Thackeray's view of himself as a realist, see Ina Ferris, William Makepeace Thackeray (Boston, 1983), p. 14; Juliet McMaster, Thackeray: The Major Novels ([Toronto], 1971), p. 188; Keith Hollingsworth, The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray (Detroit, 1963), p. 225; and Robert Colby, "Catherine: Thackeray's Credo," Review of English Studies, n.s. 15 (1964), 384. The most extreme statement of this view can be found in Lidmila Pantuckova's study, W.M. Thackeray as a Critic of Literature (Brno, 1972), p. 45. Pantuckova says Thackeray created "a whole series of vivid and convincing depictions of the life, manners, and morals of the English upper classes, which possess a great instructive value and through the medium of which he provided . . . a mighty weapon for those who actively participated in contemporary social struggles."

[22] In this view, I differ from James H. Wheatley, Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 12-13, who says Thackeray is here satirizing his narrator's bitterness. It is true that the tone of the surrounding passage is light-hearted and mocking, but to my

The work in question is The Yellowplush Papers,[23] and in it Thackeray at times seems intent on portraying the world as a thoroughly evil place. At other times, however, this sense of grievance fades and is replaced by a sort of non-threatening humour--"nervous laughter," one might call it--as if Thackeray were afraid of provoking anger among those he wishes to attack.

One of the most obvious examples of this nervous laughter can be seen in the use Thackeray makes of his narrator, a buffoon of a character named Charles James Harrington Fitzroy Yellowplush. If ever there was an unreliable narrator, Yellowplush is it. He is pretentious, foolish, and a mangler of the language (especially its spelling). It is impossible to take him seriously. Consider, for instance, his opening words, addressed to an imaginary editor, concerning a book the editor has sent him to review:

> Your dellixy in sending me My Book does you honour; for the subjick on which it treats cannot, like politix, metafizzix, or other silly sciences, be criticized by the common writin creatures who do your and other Magazines at so much a yard. I am a chap of a different sort. I have lived with some of the first families in Europe, and I say it, without fear of contradistinction, that, since the death of George the IV, and Mr. Simpson of Voxall Gardens, there doesn't, praps, live a more genlmnly man than myself. As to figger, I beat Simpson all to shivers; and know more of the world

---

mind the mockery comes from the narrator, not from the author at the narrator's expense; and the particular sentence quoted stands out from its light-hearted surroundings as something both narrator and author mean to be resentful.

[23] The formal title is The Memoirs of Mr. Charles J. Yellowplush, Sometime Footman in Many Genteel Families.

> than the late George. He did things in a handsome style enough, but he lived always in one set, and got narrow in his notions.
>
> (I, 155)

Of course, what strikes one immediately here is the idiocy of the narrator. He is obviously uneducated, as his many misspellings attest, and his claim to be superior to George IV makes him appear ludicrous. And yet, under this clown's mask, Thackeray is doing some interesting things. We may note the mild jab at those who write for "so much a yard," which seems to be a criticism of Thackeray himself. This is perhaps a second mask beneath the first one: beneath humour, self-depreciation. But one may also detect a note of self-promotion, however much disguised by ludicrous exaggeration, in Yellowplush's statement that there is no one more gentlemanly than he. It is a view Thackeray might hold of himself.[24] And then there is the curious juxtaposition of George IV and "Mr. Simpson of Voxall Gardens," as if the former were no better than the latter. It is as if Thackeray were making a veiled criticism of the King.

---

[24] See Thackeray's statement a few years later when beginning to be accepted into high society (the statement occurs in a letter to his mother, who was living in Paris at the time with Thackeray's stepfather):

> The great people . . . [are] rather surprized that I am [a] gentleman--they dont know who I had for my father & mother and that there are 2 old people living in Paris on 200 a year, as grand folks as ever they were. I have never seen finer gentlefolks than you two.
>
> (Letters, II, 334).

On the next page Yellowplush makes the following remark:

> As for the Sat'rist, that's different: I read it myself, reg'lar; for it's of uncompromising Radiccle principils, and lashes the vices of the arristoxy.
>
> (I, 156)

If one could ignore the uneducated nature of the language, this would seem to be a case of Thackeray associating himself with Radical attacks on the aristocracy. But one cannot ignore the nature of the language; the language subverts the attack, and the primary message conveyed by this passage is that this is a fool spouting nonsense. And yet, judging by its prevalence in Thackeray's works,[25] the anti-aristocratic view here expressed by Yellowplush is indeed close to Thackeray's own. But if any aristocrat were to protest to Thackeray about his insolence, Thackeray could simply say that the view was not his, only that of an ignorant footman who could not even spell.

We thus see a number of Thackerayan attitudes in this opening episode of The Yellowplush Papers. There is anger at the aristocracy, there is nervous laughter that covers it up, and there is also some self-mockery and self-promotion. Moreover, within a couple of pages, there is the first appearance of yet another attitude, what can be looked on as an extension of anger: revenge, revenge upon the aristocracy. Yellowplush recounts a most humiliating story about an incident when he was serving in genteel company (I,

[25] See, for instance, pp. 20, 24 below.

160-162): the water bowls being used by the guests turned out to be full of second-hand water from a party two weeks before, and in a basin being used by a duke was a set of false teeth lost at the earlier party. The duke turns as pale as ashes, but Yellowplush bursts out laughing at this aristocratic embarrassment; and though Yellowplush describes the scene in his usual ridiculous manner, there is a sense of the author joining with him in this vengeful pleasure.

It is in the next Yellowplush episode, however, that we get the clearest expression of Thackeray's sense of grievance against the higher orders. After an introductory scene in which Yellowplush and his fellow servants are mocked for paying tribute to "the exolted class" of aristocrats (I, 166), Yellowplush, on being reprimanded by his master, suddenly switches his position and speaks words that seem to come straight from Thackeray's heart:

> Cuss the aristoxy, say I, for a set of proud tyrants, who won't reckonize the highest order of merit, genius.
>
> (I, 166)

This is the essence of Thackeray's position. He feels that high society is cruelly unfair for neglecting his genius and for not accepting him despite his lack of status; and the rest of this episode ("Miss Shum's Husband") merely elaborates on that point in story form.

The Miss Shum of the episode's title is a Cinderella-type character with eleven sisters, all of whom are uglier and nastier than she is, but all of whom (along with their

bullying mother) lord it over her. This in itself is an example of oppressed merit, but it is not the main one. The focus of the story is not on Miss Shum herself, but on her husband, the mysterious Frederic Altamont, who lives in high style, complete with Yellowplush as his servant, but whose source of income is unknown. It turns out that he makes his money as a crossing sweeper (interestingly enough a profession that Thomas Carlyle, a few years earlier, compared to magazine writing),[26] and the discovery of this fact shocks both Mrs. Shum and Yellowplush, with the latter quitting Altamont's service.

In this case, Thackeray does not share Yellowplush's attitudes. His point is, rather, that Altamont the crossing sweeper (like Thackeray the magazine writer) is a better person than either Yellowplush or Mrs. Shum. The latter two are low, vulgar, and nasty, whereas Altamont is kind, honest, and genteel in behaviour even if not in social origin. It is clear who is superior, and yet the inferior people are somehow able to look down on the superior one. The story fairly bristles with indignation at this injustice, this ignorant and snobbish injustice by which true merit is disregarded merely because it resides in a person who does not have the right social background and who must work for a living. And the most galling part of the whole situation is

[26] See Gordon Ray, Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity, 1811-1846 (New York, 1955), p. 194. See also p. 196, where Ray says Thackeray may have been thinking of the low regard of his own profession when he wrote "Miss Shum's Husband."

that it is not even aristocrats who are being snobbish here; it is members of the lower classes snubbing one who is actually far above them.

But Thackeray does not confine himself to exposing social snobbery. He uses Mrs. Shum to attack another of his favourite targets: women. Mrs. Shum is a common type in Thackeray's works: the domineering or meddling female. She bullies her husband, abuses her daughter, and meddles in her son-in-law's marriage, until the latter can take it no more and bursts out with the following speech of Thackerayan anger:

> Get up, . . . you lazy, trolloping, mischief-making, lying old fool! Get up, and get out of this house. You have been the cuss and bain of my happyniss [sic--Yellowplush's spelling] since you entered it. With your d--d lies, and novvle reading, and histerrix, you have perwerted Mary [Miss Shum], and made her almost as mad as yourself.
> (I, 184)

Such open anger appears only rarely in the rest of The Yellowplush Papers. Instead, nervous laughter takes over, accompanied by displacement: Thackeray shifts his attack from his real target (snobbery and female domination) to less important ones like gambling and swindling.

Not that Thackeray admired swindlers and gamblers. It seems, indeed, that he had been swindled himself in his early days; certainly he lost a lot of money at the gaming tables.[27] Moreover, although Thackeray's anger was mainly

---

[27] Gordon Ray (Letters, I, 506) repeats a story about Thackeray being swindled at cards. J.Y.T. Greig, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (London, 1950), p. 56, doubts the story (which does not come directly from Thackeray); but

aimed at women and aristocrats, at times it became his attitude to everything. "All the world seems to disagree with him," Yellowplush says of one character (I, 212, italics in original), and it is an apt description of Thackeray as well, at least in some of his moods.

Still, when not attacking his real targets, Thackeray was even more likely than usual to drown his anger in nervous laughter. Thus, when he recounts how Deuceace the earl's son swindled innocent Dawkins, though there is some anger at Deuceace and sympathy for Dawkins, there is too much broad humour for us to take the situation seriously.

It is the same throughout most of the episodes in which Deuceace appears. We are introduced to a world in which everyone is trying to cheat everyone else, and we seem called on to laugh rather than to condemn. There are no victims, there is no suffering, there is only the amusement provided by charming rogues.

A few angry attacks do emerge, though. We see Deuceace succeeding in love against a rival because the rival is truly smitten and thus stammers and stutters before his beloved, whereas Deuceace feels nothing and can be charming (I, 236). This is Thackeray damning the world for rewarding the hypocrite over the man of true feeling. It is also an early example of a slightly different attitude than anger: sympathy for the good man who suffers in the cruel world.

---

whether he was swindled or not, Thackeray did lose large sums gambling. His account book for 1833 (Letters, I, 504) records a loss of 668 pounds at one night's play.

Not until somewhat later in his career (see Chapter III below) will Thackeray indulge in this sort of sympathy to any great extent, but even at this stage there are occasional hints of compassion, often mixed with rather sentimental idealizing: the world in general is evil, but the few victims are pure and good. This is an attitude perhaps best described as "liberal sentimentality," a sentimentality that does not at all deny the existence of evil. It might also be seen less as true compassion than as disguised self-pity.

There are other angry attacks in the Deuceace episodes, most notably on snobbery and the privileges of the nobility. Yellowplush says that if Deuceace had been a commoner he would have been called a swindler, but "rank and buth . . . can warrant such singularities as my master show'd" (I, 190). Deuceace is rather abusive and insolent, and Yellowplush says this is typical of men of fortune. Moreover, the insolence of the nobility wins them respect. Yellowplush says:

> We <u>like</u> being insulted by noablemen,--it shows they're familiar with us. Law bless us! I've known many and many genlmn about town who'd rather be kicked by a lord than not be noticed by him. (I, 225, italics in original)

This is the sort of subservience Thackeray cannot stand--not because he is opposed to subservience as such, but because he thinks the wrong people are benefiting from it. Yellowplush notes that he and his master, being a nobleman and a nobleman's servant, "were better served, and moar liked,

than many pipple with twice our merit" (I, 225), people like William Makepeace Thackeray, one presumes.

In the Deuceace episodes, it also becomes clear how much Thackeray resents women. In a strongly worded passage in which the comic misspellings nearly vanish, Thackeray has Yellowplush say of one female character that she had "a genius--a genius which many women have--of making a hell of a house, and tort'ring the poor creatures of her family" (I, 232, italics in original). Later we are told that no man is happy the day before his marriage, it being "the longist and unpleasantist day in the whole of a man's life . . . excep, may be, the day before his hanging" (I, 279).

Thackeray does not let this type of anger surface often--throughout most of the Deuceace section it is the humour that is dominant--but at the end of Deuceace's story the humorous disguise gives way to reveal a confused mixture of anger and frustration. Deuceace loses a hand in a duel and is tricked into marrying an ugly woman whom he abuses. Thackeray's sympathies are not entirely clear in this section; at one point we see Deuceace writhing, gnashing his teeth, and wriggling the stump of his hand (I, 296), and the effect is one of revulsion, but whether against Deuceace or his enemies it is hard to say. When one of Deuceace's opponents (who also happens to be his father) triumphs over him and lectures him on manners, we feel ourselves on Deuceace's side against a character who seems to represent the smooth and smug oppressors of the world. But when we see Deuceace,

looking like "a devvle of hell" (I, 300), strike his wife so that she falls screaming, the point of view shifts again to depict a new oppressor even though we are still dealing with oppression.

It seems, in these last moments with Deuceace, that Thackeray's disguise of his angry feelings has partially broken down, but only partially: the humour is gone, but the remaining anger is presented in an unfocused and confused manner, as if a fearful Thackeray were resorting to a second line of defence against revealing his true feelings.

The Yellowplush series ends with two essays on Bulwer-Lytton, one of which pursues Thackeray's familiar complaint about the oppression of true merit, while the other, surprisingly, turns into a self-critical analysis on the same subject. In the first, Bulwer and a friend criticize Yellowplush's writing and say that education (which Yellowplush lacks) is more important than genius (I, 308). The irony is obvious. Thackeray, who failed to complete a Cambridge degree, is mocking the emphasis on formal training, suggesting that innate talent is much more important. It is a typical Thackerayan suggestion. He who had no formal standing or credentials constantly put forward the view that men should be judged by their intrinsic merit, not by their rank, their wealth, their achievements, or any other external measure (none of which would show Thackeray's true worth). And yet men were not so judged, and thus the world must be a cruel and unfair place.

This is Thackeray, and it is even, in a surprising reversal, Bulwer. The latter suddenly defends genius and notes that its possessors (like himself) suffer dearly for it: they inspire too much enmity (I, 311-312). "Wo to genius," says Bulwer--and Thackeray too--for they know that the world persecutes it.

But from this complaint about the sufferings of genius, we shift to a statement by Bulwer's friend that being a literary man has allowed him to dine with "the lords of the land," a statement followed by Bulwer's admission that he is to be made a baronet (I, 312, 313). Though there is a suggestion here that the undeserving are being rewarded, there is also at least a hint of a quite opposite notion: that literary pursuits can propel a man into the highest echelons. These are the very echelons that Thackeray has been condemning, of course, but beneath the anger at the evil lords there is pretty clearly a desire to be accepted by them. Thackeray condemns high society because he has worshipped it and been rebuffed; this is unrequited love and sour grapes, not the principled opposition to hierarchy that some critics have detected.[28]

---

[28] See Barbara Hardy, The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray ([Pittsburgh], 1972), who talks of Thackeray's "social criticism" and his "radicalism of argument" (pp. 12-20). See also Dodds, who calls Thackeray "an advanced left-wing liberal" (p. 21). In contrast, a more recent commentator--Grahame Smith, The Novel and Society: Defoe to George Eliot (London, 1984), pp. 159-172--criticizes Thackeray for his "lack of grip" on social issues (p. 162). However, Smith is closer to the others than it might seem, for he sees Thackeray as trying and failing to present "an extended image of society"

In the second essay on Bulwer, Thackeray ends up making a thinly veiled criticism of his own feelings of persecution. But before he gets to the criticism, he seems to be suggesting not that such feelings are unreasonable, but only that one should not proclaim them to the world. He has Yellowplush advise Bulwer not to complain about mistreatment, for such complaining only encourages the envious to increase their attacks (I, 317-318). This is not the statement of a man who thinks persecution is imaginary, but rather of one who thinks that it is quite real and that it may be made worse by talking about it. The emphasis changes, however, further on in the episode, when Yellowplush derides Bulwer's notion that the critics are biased against him because of his politics: "Does any mortial man in England care a phig for your politix? Do you think yourself such a mity man . . .?" (I, 322). Write well, says Yellowplush, and the critics will praise you (I, 333).

Here, then, Thackeray does turn against the idea that he is the victim of persecution. But this is only a brief moment of clear-headedness. In The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan, which appeared at about the same time as The

---

(p. 172), whereas it is my view that Thackeray's intentions are not to analyze society coherently, but to lash out at it as a result of his frustrations. I thus differ as well from Robin Gilmour, Thackeray: Vanity Fair (London, 1982), p. 29, who sees Thackeray as engaged in "a meditation on the genesis of Victorianism" and as analyzing his society in terms of its dying "military-aristocratic culture" and its new "bourgeois code." In fact, these terms would have been quite alien to Thackeray; he is anything but a social novelist.

Yellowplush Papers, we find Thackeray again suggesting that the world is a place of injustice and persecution.

The main thrust of Major Gahagan is anti-sentimental. It is a satire of the heroic romance, another instance of Thackeray saying: This is what you read in books, but life is not like that. The narrator-hero tells unbelievable tales about his exploits in war: all the battles he won virtually singlehandedly, all the men he has killed, all the dangers he has surmounted. One outstanding victory he gained against a superior force mounted on elephants by the brilliant expedient of firing a shot at the trunks of the animals, who were all standing in line. The single shot sheared off one hundred and thirty-four elephants' trunks, causing a stampede and temporarily saving Major Gahagan's force (I, 403-404). Quite a phallic victory, one might say; and it is perhaps indicative of Thackeray's feelings towards the rest of the (male) world.

But the main point of all this is to make us laugh at the absurdity and to force us to recognize that life is not really full of miraculous and heroic deeds. Or if it is, those deeds turn out to be rather distasteful than otherwise. For instance, it is quite revolting to read Gahagan's description of how he gloriously destroyed an enemy leader by slicing his head in two from forehead to chin (I, 347-348), and the description is clearly intended to make us see that much of what passes for heroism in books is in reality quite evil. Such heroism is too violent for Thackeray, who preferred a peaceful, less threatening world.

In undermining heroic postures, Thackeray uses his narrator-hero as an object of ridicule. There are times, however, when the narrator seems more reliable, when he seems to express some typical Thackerayan notions, concerning, for example, the neglect of true merit. Here is a typical passage:

> We were on the eve of that remarkable war which was speedily to spread throughout the whole of India, to call forth the valour of a Wellesley, and the indomitable gallantry of a Gahagan; which was illustrated by our victories at Ahmednuggar (where I was the first over the barricade . . .); at Argaum, where I slew with my own sword twenty-three matchlock men, and cut a dromedary in two; and by that terrible day of Assaye, where Wellesley would have been beaten but for me--me alone; I headed nineteen charges of cavalry, took . . . seventeen field-pieces, killing the scoundrelly French artillerymen; on that day I had eleven elephants shot under me, and carried away Scindia's nose-ring with a pistol-ball. Wellesley is a duke and a marshal, I but a simple major of Irregulars; such is fortune and war! But my feelings carry me away from my narrative . . .
>
> (I, 341)

Carried away indeed--from foolish exaggerations, mocked in the name of anti-sentimentality, to a complaint about the unfairness of life that seems to come straight from the author.

Gahagan seems to come closest to voicing Thackeray's concerns when he complains in later episodes about the way critics have scorned his earlier ones. Gahagan threatens reprisals against these mockers, saying: "If I can use the pen, I can also wield a more manly and terrible weapon [the sword]" (I, 352). That Gahagan is allowed to suggest in this way that the pen, Thackeray's own "weapon," is some-

thing less than manly seems to indicate a sense of inadequacy on the author's part, an apprehension on his part that perhaps he is scorned not because of prejudice, but because of a real lack of merit. It is all of a piece with the perhaps envious and revenge-inspired de-trunking of the elephants and with the curious opening of Major Gahagan, in which the narrator complains that his previous work, a collection of poetry, was thought to be from the hand of a woman.

We thus have anger at the world's neglect of true merit combined with self-doubt about that merit. However, the doubts subside, as does even the world's neglect. At one point, after Gahagan's heroics again earn him no reward, there is a popular outcry, and he is finally given a minor command (I, 369-370). This sort of wish-fulfillment, mixed with revenge, emerges more than once before the tale is done. For instance, having made angry little jabs throughout about ill-tempered, ugly women who shriek like jackals and who can subjugate the most terrifying warriors (I, 376, 380, 391), the Major, near the end of the tale, is finally able to get a woman to become servant to his wishes, even to the extent of lighting his pipe (I, 392): the male's right to smoke despite female objections is a recurrent symbolic issue in Thackeray.

A few pages later Gahagan gives us a description of a group of women under siege who have been reduced to hideousness (I, 396), a description that seems in itself an act of

revenge. And yet among the hideous ones there is a still lovely woman, his beloved Belinda, whom he later marries. Here, amidst revenge, we see a fantasy escape: though Thackeray resents women for oppressing him, he still yearns for there to be one who could provide at least a partial solution to his problems.

That his problems may in part be self-imposed seems to be suggested by one interesting incident in which Gahagan, in disguise, recounts exaggerated (even for him) stories praising himself, prompting an enemy listener to attack him (I, 384). At some level Thackeray seems to have sensed that if the world was hostile to him, perhaps he had a hand in making it so. But this self-criticism is rather fleeting; for the most part, Major Gahagan is a work of anti-sentimentality and resentment, with very little self-insight. It does not have the maturity to delve into psychological realities, but remains on a more superficial level, expressing neurotic attitudes rather than understanding them.

At least, however, the attitudes in Major Gahagan are expressed fairly clearly, so that the reader knows what the author is trying to say. This is much less the case in Stubbs's Calendar; or, The Fatal Boots, a work that appeared soon after the account of the adventurous Major.

Like both Major Gahagan and The Yellowplush Papers, Stubbs's Calendar has a narrator (Bob Stubbs) who at times is the author's butt and who at other times seems to be

expressing, in word or deed, the author's own views. However, whereas Gahagan and Yellowplush are figures of fun, Bob Stubbs is a rather nasty creature, so that when he voices complaints or seems to be in a situation that calls for sympathy, it is much harder for the reader to provide it. It is one thing to laugh at a buffoon and yet acknowledge the truth of some of the things he says; it is quite another to be revolted by a scoundrel and then have to sympathize with him. The tone that results is uncertain, the overall effect is unpleasant, and Stubbs's Calendar ends up as perhaps the most unpleasant production in all of the early Thackeray.

From the very beginning of the work, we are uncertain about the narrator-hero. Stubbs begins by saying he has not had a fashionable or heroic life, a statement that seems meant to win our identification, expressing as it does the author's anti-sentimental views and his image of himself as an outsider; but the narrator is soon producing a Cockney misquotation of Shakespeare and admitting to being "sharp . . . at a bargain" (I, 419), making him seem less like our representative in a cruel and foolish world than an example of its cruelty and foolishness. When Stubbs goes on to complain of the decline of his fortunes, the complaint seems to reflect Thackeray's own feelings of self-pity; and there seems to be some authorial resentment in the account of Stubbs's parents' financial mismanagement. But for Stubbs to complain about the squandering of his inheritance and at

the same time to let us see that his parents spent it in part on doctors' bills for his own illnesses confuses us by mixing what may be justified anger with selfish ingratitude (I, 420-422).

This confusion is typical. A piece of sentimental nostalgia for childhood turns sour when we realize that Stubbs misses "those dear early days" because at that time he was more successful in his swindling (I, 422-424). As we go on, the emphasis seems to be on Stubbs's nastiness, on how he cheats his schoolmates and others, and Thackeray's intention seems to be to attack the world in the person of this representative scoundrel. But when the scoundrel is caught and first flogged by the schoolmaster and then ducked under the pump by the schoolboys (I, 426, 432), we are not sure where to place our sympathies. The portrayal of flogging and bullying at school seems to be a heartfelt attack, and it is made against a target that Thackeray felt strongly about;[29] but Stubbs is just too evil and too deserving of punishment for us to be thinking mainly about the cruelty of schools. This seems almost to be a case of nervous laughter, only there is no laughter: it is the making of an attack and the simultaneous undercutting of it by associating it with an unsympathetic character.

The most curious example of this double vision lies at the very heart of Stubbs's story and concerns the shoemaker Stiffelkind. The very name Stiffelkind seems straight out

[29] See the Introduction above, pp. 6-7.

of the Brothers Grimm, and the story of the shoemaker's relationship to Stubbs has quite a fairy-tale air about it. Crossed by Stubbs over a pair of boots, Stiffelkind vows eternal vengeance, saying in his accented English: "You shall never hear de end of dem" (I, 432, italics in original). And he is right: throughout the story, Stiffelkind is constantly popping up, like a bad fairy, to cause Stubbs grief because of the boots, all of which prompts Stubbs to call him a monster (I, 445). And yet this is really a grotesque perversion of a fairy tale, for if Stiffelkind is the wicked one, what is Stubbs? Stubbs, in structural terms, should be the hero, yet he is just as evil as his malefactor. It seems another case of undercutting, of Thackeray accusing the world of persecuting him and at the same time retracting the accusation and blaming himself. The effect is quite unsettling.

Throughout most of the rest of the story, Stubbs is portrayed as a selfish villain. Even when he complains of his ill luck, we can muster no sympathy. He seems merely a self-pitying wretch, as when he asks what he has done to deserve bankruptcy: "Hadn't I always kept an eye to the main chance?" (I, 473).

In scenes like this, Thackeray seems to be attacking his narrator, but at the end of the story there is a curious shift to having Stubbs, with hardly any undercutting, express his creator's feelings. The bankrupt Stubbs, all his schemes come to naught, is rescued by, of all people,

Stiffelkind, who says that Stubbs has suffered enough, and who takes him in and gives him room and board. Stiffelkind, "who had persecuted me all through my prosperity, grew compassionate towards me in my ill-luck," Stubbs says (I, 475). This is a statement that combines fear and fantasy: the world will punish those who become too successful, Thackeray seems to be saying, but perhaps it will take care of those who fail. What we have here is a wish for, and the achievement of, an escape into an almost maternal sort of protection.

But though Thackeray may yearn for such protection, he also distrusts it; it is too likely to lead to humiliation. Thus we see Stubbs being teased and ridiculed at the home of Stiffelkind and, as the ultimate blow, being forced into a demeaning position as a postman (I, 476-477). He still tries to maintain his dignity, however, saying he grew accustomed to his situation "as all great men will do" (I, 477), this being an interesting example of self-praise in the face of indignities. Stubbs has fled in fear to a humiliating dependency, and then to protect his self-esteem he resorts to asserting his greatness. It is an interesting psychological sequence.

But the main attitude in Stubbs's Calendar is anger, anger directed at Stubbs and also at the world that oppresses Stubbs, anger directed outwards and anger aimed (out of fear or self-dislike) at the self, the author's self. Almost everything in Stubbs's Calendar is to be

reviled; it leaves the reader nowhere to turn, no consciousness to trust in or even to be amused by. There is little humour in this work; the anger in it is too overpowering.

In Catherine, Thackeray's most important production of 1839 and perhaps the best thing he wrote before Vanity Fair, anger again predominates, but here it is lightened by humour and, except at the end, there is little of the nastiness that mars Stubbs's Calendar. Moreover, although the humour in Catherine at times functions to undercut the anger, at other times the anger emerges through the humour in a satirical combination that anticipates Thackeray's best work.

On the surface, the anger in Catherine seems to be directed at the criminal classes and the writers who glorified them. Those writers included Bulwer, Ainsworth, and even Dickens, all of whom, in the decade in which Catherine appeared, produced works in which criminals were made to seem admirable.[30] It was only natural for Thackeray to oppose this trend: as one who saw himself as a persecuted outsider, he would instinctively attack whatever was fashionable; and given his tendency to see and attack vice everywhere, he would be especially likely to denounce a fashion that seemed to excuse vice in its most obvious form. He therefore set out, as he remarked in a letter to his mother, to write a crime story so horrible that readers would give up such works altogether (Letters, I, 433). He wanted to present rogues who really were rogues, as the nar-

[30] See Hollingsworth, pp. 65-142.

rator (Ikey Solomons) says in Catherine itself (Works, III, 31-32),[31] with the ultimate aim of getting the public to give up his rogues and those of all other authors.

Through Solomons, Thackeray mocks the public for preferring vice to virtue (III, 7-8), a somewhat disingenuous complaint, given that he seems to prefer vice himself, at least as a topic to write about. Of course, he sets out to denounce vice rather than to glorify it in the manner of the Newgate novelists; but a curious thing happens to his denunciation on the way to making it. Vice in this tale becomes identified with crime, with the activities of murderers, thieves, and other low types. Thackeray was no defender of these people, of course, but they were not the ones against

---

[31] I equate Solomons's views with Thackeray's here, for it seems to me that Solomons, unlike Yellowplush, Stubbs, and Gahagan, is a more or less reliable narrator. Solomons takes no part in the story's action and does not come into view as an object of authorial attack in the manner of the earlier narrators. Also, as Edgar Harden notes, Solomons expresses himself in an educated way that makes him seem like Thackeray's mouthpiece (Harden, "William Makepeace Thackeray," Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 21, p. 269). It has, however, been argued that Solomons is unreliable: see John Christopher Kleis, "Dramatic Irony in Thackeray's Catherine: The Function of Ikey Solomons, Esq., Jr.," Victorian Newsletter 33 (Spring, 1968), 50-53. Kleis points out that Ikey Solomons was the name of a London criminal and that Thackeray seems to suggest at one stage (III, 79n) that his narrator is writing the tale in prison. True as these points are, however, they do not weigh strongly against the main point that Solomons is never discredited in the manner of a Stubbs or a Gahagan. There is little sense here of the author stepping back and mocking his narrator; even the prison reference seems more a case of authorial self-mockery than an attempt at distancing, and elsewhere (see III, 32) the jokes on Solomons are made by Solomons him-

whom he felt the strongest grievance.[32] To launch a strong attack on thieves and murderers was really to displace his anger onto a secondary target; the result, as in the Deuce-ace adventures, was a story in which the ostensible anger seems not very serious, a story in which, ironically, the rogues often seem as charming and delightful as any that could have appeared in Ainsworth or Bulwer, while at the same time a truer, and occasionally more powerful, anger emerges in satirical jabs at the upper classes and at other targets that were part of Thackeray's own world, as opposed to the exotic world of criminals.

Thus Catherine begins with a mocking description of wartime patriotic fervour, something that was part of Thackeray's milieu and something that he skewers here with a light touch (III, 5). In contrast, although there is humour in the first description of Corporal Brock (alias Captain Wood), one of the lower-class rogues in the tale, it is indulgent humour rather than satire. Brock, we are told, is a lover of stolen food, strong liquor, and bawdy songs, and he is "coarse, boisterous, and jovial" (III, 5-6). The narrator calls Brock and his young commander, Count Maximilian von Galgenstein, a great pair of rascals (III, 7), but this is an example of narrative deviousness: in fact, these rogues are rather charming, and though we laugh we do not

self in a very knowing way, quite unlike the inadvertent self-condemnation of the earlier narrators.

[32] This point is made by Jack P. Rawlins, Thackeray's Novels: A Fiction that is True (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 81-82.

condemn.

When Brock and Galgenstein trick some dull-witted villagers into enlisting in the army, and when Galgenstein flirts with the barmaid Catherine, we seem far from real anger, but rather in the midst of escapist laughter. If any real attacks are being made, it is upon women: Catherine is scolded for being a flirt--which is typical of females, according to the narrator--and she seems especially cruel in telling one of her admirers, John Hayes, that she will marry him if nothing better turns up (III, 20). We seem meant to sympathize with Hayes for his unrequited love, though the language quickly becomes so exaggerated ("O cruel pangs!": III, 21) that we seem back in the land of nervous laughter (and anti-sentimentality).

Perhaps realizing that he has drifted from his ostensible purpose, Thackeray ends Chapter One by having Solomons denounce all the characters as low rogues; but instead of crime he is soon talking of love again. Again it is sympathy for a rejected lover that comes to the fore; but, in typical Thackerayan style, this time it is Catherine, the one who did the rejecting before, who is rejected (by Galgenstein). For Thackeray, it is the situation of rejection that matters, not the identities of those involved.

Thackeray also provides an attack on one of his favourite targets, the worship of the aristocracy. Solomons, in explaining why a rich tradesman was eager to have his daughter marry Count Galgenstein, says:

> I suppose every one of my readers has remarked how great an effect a title has on the lower classes. Yes, thank Heaven, there is about a free-born Briton a cringing baseness, and lickspittle awe of rank.
>
> (III, 41)

This is followed by a bitter remark explaining why the Count is kind to Catherine on the eve of deserting her: "People always are when they are swindling you, or meditating an injury against you."

Beneath the nervous laughter we thus see some very real attacks, but attacks that have little to do with criminality. Thackeray does try to retrieve the situation in Chapter Three by warning his readers "to detest, scorn, loathe, abhor, and abominate" his characters for being low criminals (III, 46), but it is hard for the readers to do so when it is clear the author does not. For though Thackeray has the narrator complain that he is sick of the characters and their displeasing adventures (III, 45-46), the problem is not that they are too disgusting but, as Thackeray wrote to his mother, that they are "not made disgusting enough" (Letters, I, 433). The attack on criminality is thus greatly weakened, but the story seems to benefit as a result. For one thing, by not making the characters too disgusting, Thackeray avoids the unpleasantness he produced in Stubbs's Calendar. Secondly, his failed attack on criminality somehow allows him to slip some more interesting attacks past his internal censor. He hits targets he cares more about and at times does so with satirical panache.

The failure of the attack on criminality can be seen in Catherine's botched attempt to poison the Count, which turns into a silly farce (III, 47-50). In contrast, the more serious sort of attack can be seen a few pages later, when the ex-criminal Brock is described in his new incarnation as a gentleman. Once he has obtained some money (by means of theft), Brock is able to pass as a member of the genteel orders, for "he spent his money like a gentleman, he loved women like a gentleman, would fight like a gentleman, he gambled and got drunk like a gentleman" (III, 69). Being a gentleman is not all that special, it would seem; perhaps it is even disreputable. Cleverly, Thackeray here ridicules upper-class pretensions.

Thackeray makes another artful jab at his own world in describing the thinking of an innkeeper who learns that one of his guests is riding a horse belonging to John Hayes. The innkeeper suspects some wrongdoing, but takes no action. The narrator blandly explains this in the following manner:

> Had [the innkeeper] not thought that times were unquiet, horses might be sold, and one man's money was as good as another's, he probably would have arrested the [guest] immediately, and so lost all the profit of the score which the latter was causing every moment to be enlarged.
>
> (III, 86)

It is a wickedly cynical comment, worthy of the narrator of Vanity Fair.

There is one other moment that anticipates the later novel: when Catherine, having been ill-treated by the Count and her aunt, finally meets some kindness from a slow-witted

parson, who wants her to marry John Hayes. Catherine, who has been leading a completely dissipated life with Count Galgenstein, and who is not really repentant of anything except having lost him, replies that she would like to marry Hayes but is unworthy: "She had loved John Hayes," she says--"he had been her early, only love; but she was fallen now, and not good enough for him" (III, 59-60). This first-class piece of deceit, which makes the parson admire her greatly for her supposed humility, is something worthy of Becky Sharp at her Satanic best. It is evil, of course, and we disapprove in a way; but primarily we admire Catherine here, not for her humility, of course, but for her ability to get back at a cruel world.

Thackeray does not always attain this high level, however. Although he makes other attacks on the world around him, many of them have the complaining quality characteristic of his anger in this period. A borderline case occurs when he discusses Catherine's domination of Hayes, whom she does finally marry. Catherine controls Hayes to the extent that he even agrees to accept her illegitimate son, Tom, into his household; and this, says the narrator, is not surprising, for "the reader, high or low, knows that when Mrs. Reader desires a thing, have it she will; you may just as well talk of avoiding her as of avoiding gout, biles, or grey hairs" (III, 110, 102). There is a bit too much personal complaint in this, but it still has a light, superior quality about it.

Later in the tale, however, Thackeray's anger over spouses and marriage takes a much more personal, less skilful form. Presenting Catherine's complaints against her husband, whom she considers an obstacle to her advance, he has her make the following remark:

> Why was I bound to this wretch? . . . I who, born a beggar, have raised myself to competence, and might have mounted--who knows whither?--if cursed fortune had not balked me!
>
> (III, 153)

Hayes is the most despicable creature who ever lived, the narrator agrees, "and to this sordid wretch was Catherine united for ever" (III, 152).

In these passages, Thackeray seems to be attacking burdensome spouses and asking us to sympathize with the plight of those who must put up with them. The attack is not very successful, but it does seem heartfelt. Indeed, it seems to reflect Thackeray's real-life situation, for at the time Catherine was appearing he was having a great deal of trouble in his own marriage. Several letters exist in which he complains that his wife's interruptions keep him from working, and on one occasion he found it necessary to go to Greenwich to find a place where he could "write something in peace and quiet." Another time he went to Warwick, even though his wife was about to give birth to their third child. He later felt with some remorse that he had neglected his domestic duties--"I must learn to love home more," he said, "and do my duty at the fire side as well as in my writing room"--but when he did stay home it seems the

main result was conflict: one letter speaks of his being in labour over his writing and "dreadfully cross" with his "poor little wife" in consequence. "She had much better let me go away on these occasions," he adds, "but she won't."[33]

Catherine's burdensome husband thus seems a transmutation of Thackeray's burdensome wife, and yet at times Thackeray knew better than to blame his wife for his shortcomings. Soon after Catherine's complaints, he has the narrator rebuke her for her attacks on her husband. She is guilty of "perverse argumentation" and "devil's logic," the narrator says, adding:

> How often have we,--we poets, politicians, philosophers, family men--found charming excuses for our own rascalities in the monstrous wickedness of the world about us; how loudly have we abused the times and our neighbours!
>
> (III, 153)

But Thackeray cannot hold to this insight; it is too comfortless. And thus he retreats to saying that "nothing could be more just than Mrs. Hayes's sense of her husband's scoundrelism and meanness" and to describing Hayes, in words that may be either Catherine's or the narrator's (it is unclear), as "the bar between her and wealth, happiness, love, rank, perhaps" (III, 153, 155).

The point is not to show Catherine as good and Hayes as bad, for we have already seen how, earlier in the work, the situation was described as the exact reverse: Hayes oppressed by Catherine. Indeed, the view will shift again,

---

[33] Letters, I, 389, 398, 420, 421, 446-447, 478 (July 1839-September 1840).

with Hayes being unfairly accused of terrorizing his wife when it is she and her son who terrorize him (III, 156). Nor is the point to show that marriage is an institution of mutual mistreatment. The point seems to be that marriage is a relationship of oppressor and victim. One example is Catherine playing tyrant to her husband; another is Hayes being a drag on his wife (a less deliberate but still objectionable form of oppression). This is another situation in which Thackeray cares little for the individuals involved, but only for the nature of the relationship. There is no consistency on the surface--when Thackeray describes Catherine as a tyrant, he seems to forget that Hayes is a burden, and vice versa--but there is a deeper emotional truth: that oppression is hateful, that spouses are impediments at best and tyrants at worst. It is Thackeray's anger emerging here, and beneath the anger, perhaps, fear, fear of marriage, of emotional closeness, fear that this sort of closeness may be fraught with danger and hostility. Hayes, we note, nearly kills Catherine in an angry assault on her after she attempts to stab him with a kitchen knife (III, 151). Relationships in general seem more warlike than anything else for Thackeray; for instance, consider this description of how Brock (now Wood) encourages quarrels in the Hayes household:

> When the doubtful battle flagged, he by his art would instantly restore it. When, for instance, Tom's repulsed battalions of rhetoric fled from his mamma's fire, a few words of apt sneer or encouragement on Wood's part would bring the fight round again; or when Mr. Hayes's fainting squad-

> rons of abuse broke upon the stubborn squares of Tom's bristling obstinacy, it was Wood's delight to rally the former.
>
> (III, 148-149)

Wood, we may note, seems much more the scoundrel here than he did earlier as Brock, and significantly this development follows his transformation from an open criminal into an outwardly respectable, apparently virtuous citizen, one who has family affections and yearns to settle down (III, 120). Thackeray asked us merely to laugh at Brock the criminal; but the respectable Wood we are supposed to find reprehensible.

This is the pattern of Catherine until nearly the end of the tale: laughing at the criminal classes while seriously attacking the respectable ones. But then, at the end, in describing the murder of John Hayes, Thackeray finally forces himself to make a real attack on the criminal life he has ostensibly been attacking all along. In doing this, he serves his original purpose of making criminals appear disgusting; but the result is to turn the closing pages into something quite inferior to what has gone before.

At the beginning of this sordid part of the tale, Thackeray says (through his narrator) that we have now arrived "at a point, for which the author's soul hath been yearning ever since this history commenced" (III, 165); but this seems a rather questionable statement. Perhaps Thackeray's conscious mind yearned for scenes "interestingly horrific," as the narrator puts it; but as we have seen, Thack-

eray's soul seems to have been much more interested in dealing with snobbery and female domination than in producing scenes of criminality. Indeed, when "hideous spectacles" come into view, Thackeray's soul seems revolted, and the story turns to other matters (III, 151, 183).

Still, though the physical act of murder is so distasteful to Thackeray that he first skips over the killing of Hayes and then resorts to reproducing the account in the Newgate Calendar (III, 170, 176-182), perhaps his soul really did yearn for this killing in a way. As we have seen, Thackeray felt burdened by his wife, and perhaps he had a subconscious urge to be rid of her, which he expressed in this story. Certainly, there is no great sympathy for the murder victim here. When the three murderers (Catherine, Tom, and Brock) get Hayes drunk in order to kill him, the main point of the scene seems to be to heap scorn on Hayes's drunken actions (III, 169). Then, after the murder, we seem meant to sympathize with Catherine, who suffers terribly at the hands of Galgenstein. It is true that Thackeray, in the person of the narrator, steps in at this point to say he has fooled the reader by making an illiterate murderess out to be a "tragedy princess" and thus getting us to sympathize with vice (III, 173-175); but Thackeray is not convincing in the role of post-modernist trickster. We know that Thackeray had a "sneaking kindness" for Catherine (Letters, I, 433), and what seems to be at work at the end of the story is not authorial duplicity, but inner conflict.

Thackeray seems torn between sympathy for a suffering spouse and a desire to condemn vice, with perhaps an additional conflict between wanting to get rid of his wife and feeling guilty about feeling that way. In any case, the result is a rather hysterical ending with uncertain tone, complete with Galgenstein falling down in a fit and Solomons turning the whole production into a comedy revue (III, 174, 182-183).

The ending of Catherine is thus rather a disaster, but what comes before includes some of Thackeray's most felicitous barbs and can compare with his best work. For all his achievement, however, we should not confuse this work with a realistic portrayal of the world: it is a cynical portrayal, occasionally illuminating a true evil, but more often simply reflecting the torments of a suffering mind.

We get more insight into Thackeray's mind from two works that appeared early in 1840, Cox's Diary and The Bedford-Row Conspiracy. Both are slight, but each has its own sort of interest. In Cox's Diary, we find Thackeray up to his old tricks of criticizing genteel society. For instance, the lowly barber Cox, the hero of the piece, inherits a fortune and immediately changes his name to Mr. Coxe Coxe, for, as he says, "that's the way, double your name, and stick an 'e' to the end of it, and you are a gentleman at once" (III, 216). So much for the pretensions of the upper classes, at least according to this account.

But beneath this criticism of the upper classes, we find another attitude: the apparently contradictory desire

to be accepted by the upper classes. The whole story seems to act out this desire, being an account of Cox's near-miraculous elevation into high society. This, of course, is a fantasy, and it is the sort of fantasy we have seen Thackeray yearning towards all through this period, whether it is Gahagan hoping for his promotion, Catherine wishing to rise who knows whither, or Bulwer's friend saying how a literary career can propel one into the higher echelons. And yet, as the fantasy gets worked out in Cox's Diary, it all goes remarkably sour.

The trouble is that though Cox seems to make it into high society he and his wife are not really accepted. The aristocrats will come to their dinners, but they will not speak to them (III, 216-220). Even in high society, it seems, one can be snubbed, and what Cox discovers in the course of this story is that entering the upper ranks merely means an increase in the number of humiliations he has to suffer. He goes on a hunt, but is caught in a tree, his horse is taken by a fellow huntsman, he falls from the tree into the mud, and everyone laughs at him (III, 222-224).

Cox complains that high society is not as wonderful as he expected. He has to eat so much now that he gets heartburn, headaches, and insomnia, not to mention doctors' bills. He must go to the opera, which he finds tedious, and the ballet, which he finds indecent; and when he complains of the indecency, he gets laughed at, producing another humiliation.

It is the humiliation more than the heartburn that seems the essential problem here: Cox is raised into high society only to fall again and again. He falls from the tree, later he falls through a trap door backstage at the ballet, and on a trip to the Continent he falls into the water and nearly drowns (III, 236, 263). At the end, when the inheritance is taken away from him, he is grateful; now he can go back to being a barber, which is where he is happiest, for, as he says with a Cockney pun, "I can't flourish out of my native hair" (III, 276, italics in original).

We have seen that Thackeray's attacks on high society mask a desire to be part of high society; but the desire to be accepted is not entirely real itself: beneath it is a fear of acceptance, a fear of getting into high society, where one can easily be humiliated. It almost seems that Thackeray's true aim is to remain safely excluded and then to complain about his exclusion. Certainly, even while gratefully accepting his return to barbering, Cox issues complaints about the justice system that took away his inheritance (III, 269-270), and though Cox is not Thackeray, the two seem most similar in wanting to proclaim indignantly that the world is unfair, while not at all wanting to do anything about it.

The Bedford-Row Conspiracy is something of a transitional work. It contains many elements that we have seen in the works that precede it, but at the same time it hints at new developments in the works to come. Thackeray's ear-

liest fiction, as we have seen, can be said to fall into the category of anger or cynicism, and Bedford-Row certainly has its share of this attitude. It begins, for instance, with some parodic anti-sentimentality, the narrator talking of "Sol descending" and of the "mystic unions of the soul" perceived by the young lovers, John and Lucy (I, 490-491). This seems straightforward Thackeray, saying that the world is not like this; or if it is, it should stop: it is too foolish.

But in the midst of this apparent mockery of romantic idiocy, having just said that John and Lucy were a pair of fools, Thackeray slips in a parenthesis saying that this is what "every young couple ought to be who have hearts that are worth a farthing" (I, 491, italics in original). Later we will be given a flashback to how John first met Lucy, at a dance, about which scene the narrator comments:

> I do not know by what extraordinary charm . . . but young Perkins [John], who all his life had hated country-dances, was delighted with this one, and skipped, and laughed, poussetting, crossing, down-the-middling, with his merry little partner, till every one of the bettermost sort of the thirty-nine couples had dropped panting away.
> (I, 500)

Coming from the Thackeray who, in Catherine described love as a "bodily infirmity" much like smallpox (III, 35), this is astonishing. It is sentimentality, pure and simple, and not even the "liberal sentimentality" we have seen a little of in the earlier works. It is not a sympathizing with the victims of oppression; here there is no oppression,

all seems right with the world, and Thackeray seems to be trying to bathe us all in sunny good feelings, in "conservative sentimentality."

At first glance, it seems inconceivable that a man of such great cynicism could also produce this sort of sentimentality, but there is a common root to these conflicting attitudes, and the root is suffering. Thackeray has suffered, or thinks he has suffered, at the hands of a cruel world; and one natural response to this suffering is to lash out in an angry, cynical way at those he believes have caused the suffering. But an equally natural response is to yearn for an escape from the suffering, even to imagine a world without suffering, a pleasant idyll safe from all reality's care and woe. It is this that we see in John and Lucy's love, and it is almost as if Thackeray were harking back to his own courtship, trying to wave away the disillusioning realities of his three-year-old marriage and recapture an earlier set of feelings.[34]

Still, sentimentality is not the dominant attitude in this work. The story is, rather, dominated by resentment and, even more, by nervous laughter. There are attacks--but

[34] That Lucy, under pressure from her guardians, at one point breaks off the engagement (I, 512) suggests Thackeray's own history: his future mother-in-law also intervened and temporarily put an end to his courtship. See Letters, I, 309, 318-319. See also Ray, The Uses of Adversity, pp. 182-188; Lambert Ennis, Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic (Evanston, Ill., 1950), pp. 70-76. The idyllic emotions also seem similar. Thackeray, soon after meeting his wife-to-be, talked of spending all his evenings "uttering the tenderest sentiments in the most appropriate language" (Letters, I, 296).

rather light-hearted attacks--upon Lady Gorgon, a large plough horse of a woman who bullies her husband and who has great pretensions to superiority but who is actually only a brewer's daughter (I, 492-493, 501-502, 506). Similarly, Thackeray provides light-hearted, even at times sympathetic, mockery of William Pitt Scully, who adjusts his principles for purely personal reasons. Slighted in love for a Tory rival, he becomes a Radical Dissenter. At the same time, he and his law partner, who remains a Tory, decide to stay together because this way they can win business from both the Establishment and the Dissenters: "a manoeuvre which . . . is repeated in almost every country town in England," according to the narrator (I, 495).

This is all rather gentle mockery, no more. When the attacks threaten to get warmer, they are almost immediately defused, and everything dissolves into such undirected laughter that it is hard to tell just what the author intends. Thus, when Lucy's relatives tell her she has danced long enough with "this person" (meaning John), John takes offence at the implied snobbery, and we are ready to join him--until we read, a few lines on, that John's "soul swelled with a desperate Republicanism: he went back to his patron more of a Radical than ever" (I, 500). Such foolishness is beyond sympathy.

Similarly, we seem later to be party to an attack on political corruption, as we learn of the sinecure John is about to obtain: a place in the "Tape-and-Sealing-Wax

office," with a low salary, but with six months' vacation and only two hours' work a day. Even at this point the attack seems more joking than serious; but then William Pitt Scully the humbug arrives on the scene, fresh from preparing an impromptu speech, and he proceeds to lambaste the practice of granting sinecures in such exaggerated terms that we begin to question whether Thackeray means to attack it at all, especially when we learn that Scully's real motive is to obtain the sinecure for his own nephew (I, 516-517, 520). Thus is the reader bamboozled--led first to attack some wrongdoing and then to attack the attacker. It is almost as unsettling as Stubbs's Calendar, except here there is more humour and no unpleasantness.

With this work of nervous laughter, we come to the end of Thackeray's first literary period, a period of anti-sentimentality, angry attacks, and angry attacks masked by humour. In his next work, Thackeray will begin in his old anti-sentimental vein, but external events will intervene and turn him for a while in a somewhat different direction.

Chapter III

SENTIMENTAL APTITUDES: FROM SHABBY GENTILITY TO GEORGE FITZ-BOODLE

> I am too apt to grow sentimental, and always on the most absurd pretexts.
>
> --The Fitz-Boodle Papers

Towards the end of 1840, Thackeray's wife went mad. Perhaps it was her way of dealing with Thackeray's neglect of her;[35] in any case, despite many attempts at treatment,[36] she never recovered, and Thackeray was thus free of his marriage relationship (though not of his marriage), just as the heroine of Catherine had made herself free of hers. Catherine was burned at the stake for her pains, and Thackeray, too, burned, though in less literal ways.

The effect on his writing in this period was to make him more subdued, less angry, more melancholy--and also more sentimental. Separated now from his wife, he had one less motivation to attack the world to keep it at a distance: part of it was now permanently at a distance, and of course

---

[35] This is the reasonable suggestion found in Lambert Ennis, Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic (Evanston, Ill., 1950), pp. 77-87, which I would follow in preference to the statement by Dr. Stanley Cobb that there is no evidence that Thackeray himself was a "cause of trouble" (Appendix VII to the Letters, I, 520). For evidence of Thackeray's neglect, see above, pp. 44-45.

[36] See Letters, II, 13, 14-15, 36.

he immediately wished it back. Love became less a subject for angry complaint than for sighing sentimentality, a shift that can be seen quite clearly in his Shabby Genteel Story, which he was composing at the time of his affliction.

The story begins with angry attacks in the old manner, both personal ones and lighter, more satiric ones similar to those in the best parts of Catherine. The snobbishness of the lower orders is satirized in a superior way, as is the fair-weather nature of friendships and the fact that money tends to be given to those who already have it. However, when it comes to a discussion of marriage, the tone becomes more querulous. The businessman James Gann marries, and we are told that he gains "rather a questionable benefit." Subsequently, he is "properly henpecked by his wife and mother-in-law." Then, when his business unexpectedly goes bankrupt, his mother-in-law, who had dined at his expense and benefited by his kindness, cruelly turns on him, calling him "a swindler, a villain, a disreputable, tipsy, vulgar man" (III, 282-286). Where marriage is concerned, Thackeray still writes as if expressing personal grievances.

In the next part of the story, the focus shifts. Thackeray does not regain the confident form he displayed for brief moments earlier, but the target of his attacks changes. Curiously, it is James Gann whom he now begins to criticize. Having lost his money, Gann ceases to be an object of sympathy and becomes an object of criticism, primarily because he decides he is too genteel to find work.

Instead, he idly lolls about, and actually seems not very genteel at all, spending his time in tawdry surroundings, drinking gin, spying on schoolgirls, telling "public-house jokes," and becoming fat, bald, and dirty, with a wife who indulges in "cheap finery" (III, 288-289). It is a rather contradictory attack: Gann is criticized for withdrawing from the world and also for representing the most tawdry aspects of the world. On the one hand, Thackeray resents the equation of gentility and idleness, for he works and yet feels himself genteel; but on the other, he finds the real world--especially the lower-class world--rather distasteful, even fearful. This latter attitude is probably the stronger one; by force of circumstance, Thackeray has had to work for a living, to enter the world in that manner, but if he had his way, he probably would stay out of it: he would relapse into novel-reading and avoid all occupation, as he did when he still had an inheritance,[37] for the world to him is a frightening place.

The focus shifts again with the arrival of George Brandon, a hanger-on of the aristocracy who takes one look at the Gann household and dismisses it as vulgar and ridicu-

---

[37] Even when he had lost most of his inheritance, he was still reluctant to find a profession. He became an art student--a questionable decision in itself--but did not even do his art work: "I have become latterly so disgusted with myself and art and everything belonging to it, that for a month past I have been lying on sofas reading novels, and never touching a pencil" (Letters, I, 279, April 1835). Only when it became necessary to support a family did Thackeray become serious about an occupation (writing).

lous. Mrs. Gann he speaks of as canaille, and really this is no more than the narrator has been saying. Coming from Brandon, however, it seems vicious and hypocritical, for though Brandon disdains the Ganns he also seeks desperately to impress them with his aristocratic associations. Thackeray had been attacking the lower classes (represented by the Ganns) for being vulgar, but now he attacks the upper classes (represented by Brandon) for looking down on others, probably because those others had included himself. Having to work for a living and perhaps feeling rather inadequate as a result, Thackeray strove to show himself superior to both the lower and the upper classes, damning them both as belonging to "a miserable, truckling, cringing race" (III, 296, 304-305).

However, having especially directed the attack at aristocratic hangers-on like Brandon, Thackeray suddenly reverses field and says that those of us who criticize such people are really just jealous. "We envy Lickspittle," he says, "that is the fact" (III, 305), and it seems that he has retreated into nervous laughter or self-understanding--but only for a moment. He is soon sliding off into another attack, with another dizzying shift of direction. The attackers of "tuft-hunters" cease to be "we" and the tuft-hunters cease to be vile; the latter become "a friend of mine" or "a great man, a literary man" who suddenly achieved fame and wealth and has been criticized enviously as a result. The attackers now are "Snarley, Yow, Simper, Can-

dour," who hate any successful colleague. "If he is ruined, they will be kind to him and just; but he is successful, and woe be to him!" (III, 305-306).

It all seems marvellously contradictory, but the beginning and the end fit together nicely. Thackeray dislikes the aristocracy and its hangers-on because they lack true merit, and when true merit reveals itself it comes under attack from the envious. Except for the self-critical comment that links these two positions, we have here quite typical early Thackeray: his anger at the world and his fear of it.

Also typical of the early Thackeray is the central relationship of the story, that between Brandon and the youngest of the Ganns' three daughters, Caroline. Caroline is another of Thackeray's Cinderella characters (indeed she is so called several times in the story), suffering abuse from her mother and sisters even though she is much more meritorious than they. "Poor little Caroline," says the narrator, and in a classic example of liberal sentimentality he goes on to glorify her as "wonderfully gentle and calm," truly genteel, a girl who bears up bravely under injustice (III, 290-292). Her only shortcoming is her addiction to sentimental novels; she sees herself as a romantic heroine to be rescued eventually by a prince--and that prince will be George Brandon.

Here emerges the main point of the story: anti-sentimentality. Caroline's taste for romantic fiction and

lurid adventure fiction is mocked, as are the romantic affectations of Andrea Fitch, a rival to Brandon for Caroline's affections. Most of all, we see that Brandon, "the prince," is actually a selfish scoundrel bent on seducing Caroline: ruining her, not saving her. Thackeray intends us to see that in real life there are no happy endings, no glorious escapes from misery.

And yet it seems Thackeray himself wishes there were. The mockery of Caroline's novels is lovingly done, with the narrator seemingly caught up in what he supposedly is laughing at (III, 307).[38] Fitch's romantic foolishness similarly seems to be regarded with almost as much sympathy as derision (III, 320-322), especially since his love is rejected: Thackeray always sympathized with the defeated. And most of all, though George Brandon begins as a complete cad intent on ruining Caroline (see III, 324), in the end he falls in love with her (III, 361, 366). The whole point of the story was to attack Cinderella-type (conservative) sentimentality, but in the end Thackeray almost completely surrenders to it. Brandon becomes a prince after all and marries Caroline rather than seducing her, and so they live happily ever after.

---

[38] And we know that the novels in question are ones Thackeray himself loved even if he knew they portrayed a world that never was: see Works, XVII, 418-419, 429-432, 601-608.

Or almost. In fact, a few imperfections remain. First of all, though Brandon becomes a prince in relation to Caroline, he remains fairly obnoxious otherwise, still currying favour with lords, for instance (III, 367). This, in fact, is an interesting point. Thackeray wrote the last section of his tale, in which Brandon becomes a prince in love but not in other things, after Mrs. Thackeray had begun to show signs of her illness.[39] Perhaps as a result Thackeray was inclined to leave off satirizing the notion of a happy marriage and instead embrace it, while at the same time maintaining his criticisms of tuft-hunting.

One should perhaps not press the biographical connections too far, but it is interesting to note that the shift to sentimentality in love seems to coincide with the ending of Thackeray's own love relationship. Now that it is gone, he seems to yearn for it, though even in fantasizing a happy ending he inserts qualifications. Thus, the narrator suggests that the marriage is a fraud, perpetrated not by Brandon but by his so-called friends, and the story ends with these equivocal words:

> God bless thee, poor Caroline! Thou art happy now, for some short space at least; and here, therefore, let us leave thee.
>
> (III, 381)

It is as if Thackeray were imagining himself back into the happy beginning of his own marriage, but then remembering that the happiness had not lasted. Still, the point is

---

[39] See Letters, I, 469 (and note) and 519.

that, much more so than The Bedford-Row Conspiracy, the Shabby Genteel Story is taken over by conservative sentimentality at its end, the first time such sentimentality made this strong a showing in Thackeray's works.[40]

The move towards sentimentality is even more marked in Thackeray's next work, The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond, written after the seriousness of his wife's illness had become clear. There is anger in this story, but much less than in previous works; the main attitudes here are liberal and conservative sentimentality, wish-fulfillment, despair, and self-reproach.

We begin in a mood of self-reproach tinged with self-pity. Early on the narrator-hero, Sam Titmarsh, who is looking back in time at the events of the story, says, "In those days I had a heart" (IV, 12), as if he is now a cold, suffering, bitter man. The line is quite revealing about the attitude in which Thackeray began the story, for it has nothing to do with the truth of the plot: as we learn at the story's end (IV, 140), Sam Titmarsh, when he writes this tale, is a happy man. But that is when the gloom of the story has been overtaken by sentimental fantasy.

---

[40] Seventeen years later Thackeray was to deny the story's sentimental implications and suggest that if he had continued the story Caroline would have been deserted by her "wicked husband" (Works, III, 280). This interpretation does not jibe with Brandon's nature at the end of the story, and I think this is a case in which we must trust the tale rather than the teller.

Titmarsh at the beginning is not the most appealing of characters. He neglects his sweetheart, Mary, to pay court to his rich aunt Hoggarty, in the hopes of getting some money out of her. Titmarsh is no swindler like Stubbs; he is, rather, an ordinary man, but at this stage also a selfish one. It seems almost a cynical presentation by Thackeray: even normal men are selfish and greedy, he seems to say, but in such a sighing tone that the feeling is one of despair, not cynicism, let alone wicked satire. There is no bite here, no anger, and the result, one may add, is a rather dull work.[41]

One other result of this lessening of anger is a sense of indulgence. "We all have our little vanities," Titmarsh says with a figurative shrug (IV, 38), and it is as if Thackeray, out of despair, is ready to forget the criticisms he used to make.[42] Not entirely, of course. There are still little jabs at the hypocrisy of businessmen--showing that Thackeray played no favourites as between capitalists and

---

[41] So indeed says one unnamed commentator quoted by Saintsbury (IV, xi), but Saintsbury himself disagrees, and Thackeray said the story was one of his favourites (IV, 3).

[42] In another context, George Levine, The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley (Chicago, 1981), p. 155, comments on this Thackerayan indulgence of our vanities: "Unlike Bunyan," Levine says, "Thackeray describes vanity fair not to make us choose against it, but to . . . elicit indulgence of the vanities that mark us all." This is, of course, true here, but it is misleading if Levine means that this was always Thackeray's intent. Thackeray had many attitudes, indulgence being only one, and a rare one at that. There is little indulgence in the works of the previous period.

landowners--and at the insolence of the aristocracy (IV, 14-15, 34), but, especially in these early pages, the atmosphere is too subdued for us to feel the old anger at the world.

The reason, as Thackeray himself noted later, is that he was writing at a time of "personal grief and calamity" (IV, 3), a reference to his wife's madness, for which he seems to have taken some of the blame. He had neglected his wife and even wished her gone, and now that she was, in a most horrible way, he felt remorse and also a yearning to have her back.[43] In The Great Hoggarty Diamond, this changed feeling is reflected in the depiction of the wives in the story. Mary, who becomes the narrator's wife, is idealized as an angel (see IV, 113, 125, and passim), and so is the wife of the narrator's employer, Mrs. Brough (IV, 64, 103, 121). Only the chief clerk's wife remains shrewish (IV, 22), but she plays a minor role in the story. If wives have become angels, however, other women remain tyrants, most notably Titmarsh's aunt Hoggarty, who seems to represent all the oppressive mother figures in Thackeray's own life. Some of the angriest passages in the story concern the aunt's impositions on poor Titmarsh and her unjust accusations

---

[43] "I am a great deal more unhappy without [her], than ever I thought it was in my nature to be," he wrote to Mrs. Carlyle: reported by Gordon Ray, Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity, 1811-1846 (New York, 1955), p. 264. Thackeray also wrote of his wife at this time: "Only let her get well and I shall be the happiest man in the world" (Letters, II, 15).

against him and his wife (IV, 92, 99, 109-110).[44]

Still, the emphasis is not on this, but on the wonderful qualities of Mary--who, however, is rarely seen up close, but mainly glorified from afar and at second hand (one cannot get too close to an angel)--and, in the early pages, on Titmarsh's neglect of her. After his early selfishness, Titmarsh actually becomes rather more agreeable, standing up for his friend Gus (IV, 28) and generally appearing to be a young innocent without evil motives, though perhaps somewhat foolish (see IV, 54-58, 84, 108-109). But he is neglectful of his sweetheart, who is left behind in the country while Titmarsh makes his way in London. Dining at the chief clerk's, he is made to think of Mary when the clerk's wife expatiates upon the coldness and indifference of husbands: "Will you be so neglectful when you marry, Mr. Titmarsh?" (IV, 40, italics in original). Reaching for a keepsake he has from Mary, Titmarsh then tears his fingers on the Great Hoggarty Diamond (the present he received from his aunt when keeping her company and missing a rendez-vous with his beloved) and finally becomes so

---

[44] Ray, p. 265, sees Aunt Hoggarty as representing Thackeray's grandmother, who harassed Thackeray's wife; but Aunt Hoggarty also seems to embody Thackeray's negative views about his mother-in-law and, especially on matters of religion (referred to on p. 98 of the story), his disagreements with his mother. See Letters, I, 463-464, 468 (on Thackeray's grandmother), I, 321, 433, 438, 444, 476, 479, 482, and IV, 145 (on his mother-in-law), and I, 402-403, 467, and II, 205 (for religious disagreement with his mother). For a more general criticism of his mother, see Letters, III, 12-13. See also the Introduction above, pp. 8-9.

unwell he has to leave. The theme of self-reproach could not be more clear.

And yet Thackerary indulges in self-justification too. However cruel it may have been to pursue worldly success at the expense of spending time with his Mary, Titmarsh's efforts in this line do produce results and his wealth increases to the extent that he and Mary can now marry (IV, 72-73). I may have neglected you for my writing, we can almost hear Thackeray saying to his no longer listening wife, but it was all for you.

And in fiction, if not in real life, this argument is accepted. Indeed, the result is a great deal of happiness. Titmarsh returns triumphantly (but modestly) to his home village; "the happy day" of his marriage arrives, and he is "the happiest husband" (IV, 75-77). We are a long way from The Yellowplush Papers and the comparison of marriage to a hanging.

Titmarsh and his wife do not, however, simply live happily ever after. They suffer through bankruptcy, the loss of a child, and the tyranny of Aunt Hoggarty. But the emphasis throughout is less on the evil world out there than on the goodness of the Titmarshes and their friends in the face of adversity (IV, 92-93, 103, 113, 114, 118-120, 122, 125). This is a liberal sentimentality that seems quite close to the conservative variety, and thus it is no great surprise that the story ends happily, with the aristocracy kindly hiring Mary as a wet-nurse and Titmarsh himself as a stew-

ard. After losing their first-born, the Titmarshes have children who survive, so that Sam can say:

> Am I not a happy father? and is not my wife loved and respected by all the country?
>
> (IV, 140)

Thus does Thackeray indulge his wishes, turning away from an unhappy reality to imagine an idyllic fiction. Even the aristocracy is nice to Titmarsh in the end, and when, briefly, they are not, Thackeray's representative uses the opportunity to make a righteously indignant defence of his virtue, in the process correcting one of the aristocrats (the Earl of Tiptoff). This being a fantasy, the result is that, after turning red for a moment, Tiptoff holds out his hand and says:

> You are right, Titmarsh, and I am wrong; and let me tell you in confidence, that I think you are a very honest fellow. You sha'nt lose by your honesty, I promise you.
>
> (IV, 140)

Here is wish-fulfillment indeed: to be allowed to criticize the aristocracy and to have them thank you for it. Such would be truly Heaven.

The last-minute quarrel with Tiptoff arises from the improper attentions paid by the earl's brother-in-law to Titmarsh's wife. It is a curious thing that this story that so consistently praises wives and marriage should also be rife with adulterous situations. No less that four different men pay or are thought to pay improper attentions to Mrs. Titmarsh (IV, 82, 88-91, 136, 139). And though poor Mary remains true to her husband, it is not so with another

character, the chief clerk's wife, who does apparently commit adultery with a "poetic" fellow (IV, 141).

Gordon Ray suggests that all this may point to "some unrecorded episode" in Mrs. Thackeray's life,[45] but perhaps it is more that Thackeray's fears of marital intimacy, driven underground by remorse at this point, emerge as adulterous attacks on marriage even while Thackeray consciously attempts to praise the institution. The yearning for an ideal marriage is only one-half of Thackeray's feelings about intimate relationships, and the other side--the frightened side seen overtly in Catherine and in other early works--will make itself known regardless of the author's conscious intentions.

Perhaps fear accounts for Thackeray's reversion, in a short story published a few months after The Great Hoggarty Diamond, to his old anti-sentimental mockery of happy endings. The story, "Sultan Stork," is a parody of the Arabian Nights supposedly written by Major Gahagan. The use of the Major indicates a return to earlier attitudes, and their dominance can most clearly be seen at the end of the story in the following statement by Scheherazade:

> Where did you ever hear of a king who had been kept out of his just rights by a wicked enchanter, that did not regain his possessions at the end of a story? No, sir, at the last page of a tale, wicked enchanters are always punished, and suffering virtue always rewarded; and though I have my doubts whether in real life--
>
> (IV, 197-198)

---

[45] Ray, p. 478, n. 16.

The statement breaks off here, but Thackeray is clearly suggesting that in real life happy endings are not to be found.

This disbelief in happy endings seems to interact with Thackeray's yearning for them in his next major work, The Fitz-Boodle Papers, which, like The Great Hoggarty Diamond, focuses on romantic relationships. In this case, however, though there is yearning for romance, there is no happy union as in the earlier story. Thus, instead of conservative sentimentality, there is liberal sentimentality mixed with despair and self-loathing. The narrator Fitz-Boodle, who is too much of a buffoon to be Thackeray tout court but who still seems to express many Thackerayan attitudes, yearns for various women, feels self-pity and despair when rejected by them, and also at times falls into self-mocking scorn because of his failures. There is, as well, some anger in the old style, but the emphasis is much more on a sentimental presentation of the victim's suffering than on an angry denunciation of those responsible for it. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the suffering in these cases results more from rejection by women than from subordination to them. Deprived of his wife, Thackeray suffered less from marriage than from the lack of it. Unhappy marriages would certainly not disappear from his fiction after this, but they would now have to share the stage with stories of rejected lovers.

The Fitz-Boodle Papers does begin, however, with a complaint against subordination rather than rejection, a complaint directed partly at women, but not only at them. The issue in this case is the old one of smoking. Fitz-Boodle loves to smoke, but suffers as a result. Because of his smoking, he is flogged at school, expelled from university, and discharged from the army. In addition, his stepmother disinherits him and his brother tells him not to visit, which is especially hard on him because it deprives him of seeing his nephews and nieces. As he puts it:

> It's hard . . . , for I am a lonely man, after all, and my heart yearns to them.
>
> (IV, 209)

This yearning seems quite autobiographical, for at this time Thackeray was separated from his children, having had to leave them with his mother in Paris while he pursued his career in London.

There is yearning for more than the right to visit children, however. Complaining of how English ladies take offence at tobacco, Fitz-Boodle looks forward to the day when the cigar will subjugate the women of England, just as it has the women of other lands (IV, 205). There is a sexual component to this wish, but Thackeray (through Fitz-Boodle) seems to be seeking more than the triumph of men over women; he is wishing that the world would let him be. "What is this smoking that it should be considered a crime?" he has Fitz-Boodle ask plaintively (IV, 204), and the tone is characteristic. Fitz-Boodle and his creator are upset at

the world, but not in an angry way: more in a despairing way. Speaking of what ensued after leaving school and the army, Fitz-Boodle says:

> Alas! in life it went no better with me, and many pretty chances I had went off in that accursed smoke.
>
> (IV, 216)

Not only does the "Alas" signify despair rather than anger, but calling the smoke "accursed" seems to suggest an element of self-accusation. Indeed, the way Fitz-Boodle repeats the condemnations made of him makes us feel that Thackeray, out of fear or a sense of inadequacy, was blaming himself for his failures. Fitz-Boodle informs us that he has been called diabolical, "a demon of wickedness," and a serpent (IV, 208, 206, 209). We are also shown that Fitz-Boodle provokes many of the attacks on him by, for instance, blowing smoke in the face of a superior (IV, 207). The sense of self-reproach is very strong here. If there is suffering, Thackeray is saying, perhaps the sufferer himself is responsible for it; perhaps he even deserves it.

In the next few pages, Fitz-Boodle begins discussing his unhappy love affairs, and what is revealed is a complex mixture of attitudes. There is anger at women, clearly prompted by feelings of rejection. Fitz-Boodle mocks the talk of ladies (IV, 211-212) and cheers the death of "eleven thousand British virgins" (IV, 223), but this is in the midst of recounting his first three unhappy romances. He even admits that he hates young ladies because not one of

them ever treated him well (IV, 213). Later he will extend this anger to men who are successful with women. "I have seen the ugliest, little, low-bred wretches, carrying off young and lovely creatures," he complains (IV, 283), adding:

> There's something annoying in their cursed complacency--their evident sunshiny happiness. I've no woman to make sunshine for me.
> (IV, 289, italics in original)

Poor Fitz-Boodle, victim of an unfair world: the liberal sentimentality is at its peak here, overwhelming the anger, which in general gives way to softer emotions like self-pity and hopeless longing. Behind the rage at women is a wish that they would treat him well, for actually he adores them, as can be seen from his loving descriptions of his sweethearts (IV, 215, 224).

Some of Fitz-Boodle's descriptions become rather nostalgic, and nostalgia is a common Thackerayan attitude at this time. "I can recollect her bright and rosy of a sunny summer afternoon," Fitz-Boodle says of his first love (IV, 215), and later he sighs for the loss of his own good looks: "Where are you now, slim waist and golden hair?" (IV, 224). The nostalgia is in part an extension of the feeling of suffering and in part an attempt to escape from that feeling, as in the following passage:

> The spirit flies back to days gone by, kind eyes look at me as of yore, and echoes of old gentle voices fall tenderly upon the ear. Away! to the true heart the past never is past.
> (IV, 262, italics in original)

This sort of escapism is a common Thackerayan attitude, seen in another form when Fitz-Boodle speaks of running off to be a sheikh or a "painted savage" in some land where he will be obeyed by women, not commanded by them (IV, 223).

The fear of being commanded is another attitude present here. There may be anger over rejection, but there is also fear of acceptance, for when he is accepted briefly by Mary M'Alister, Fitz-Boodle finds that he must attend balls and boring operas and give up bachelor parties and, worst of all, smoking. If we consider Fitz-Boodle's cigars to be a sexual symbol, what may be operating here is a fear of emasculation; Fitz-Boodle is upset to have to give up his masculine pleasures and take up "female" activities like opera. And he seems rather afraid of his wife-to-be: she makes him the butt of her jokes, and he calls her merciless (IV, 218-219).

Fear of women emerges most strongly in the last Fitz-Boodle tale, "Ottilia." After several episodes of female rejection, in this final story Fitz-Boodle is successful with a woman, but runs away before he has to get truly involved. Ostensibly, what causes him to flee is Ottilia's over-indulgence in food and drink, which causes her nose to turn red. Fitz-Boodle becomes obsessed with her nose, watching it constantly, but it may be Ottilia's ravenous hunger that is the real problem. She eats five meals a day and has meat twenty-one times a week. "She was always eating, and always eating too much" (IV, 312). How could he

marry such a creature? "Marry a sarcophagus, a cannibal, a butcher's shop?" (IV, 313). How over-eating makes someone a cannibal or a sarcophagus is hard to grasp, unless one sees Fitz-Boodle's fear figuratively: a fear of being swallowed up by a demanding female who may turn out to be his coffin.

Fear emerges at another point in The Fitz-Boodle Papers when the narrator discusses criticisms he has received over his tale of Minna Lowe. Minna, another of Fitz-Boodle's loves, is Jewish, and her relatives are swindlers; but that is only natural, says Fitz-Boodle, for "a Jew banker . . . cannot forgo the privilege of cheating" (IV, 261). This anti-Semitism, which is quite common in Thackeray,[46] provokes criticism from a Jewish correspondent, to which Fitz-Boodle responds in a revealing way, revealing about the author as well as the narrator, for there seems little distance between them here.

---

[46] Typically Jews feature in his works as villainous money-lenders and directors of spunging-houses: see Stubbs's Calendar (I, 469-473, 484); Cox's Diary (III, 256); and The Great Hoggarty Diamond (IV, 104, 114). Thackeray seems to dislike Jews for the same reason he dislikes women and aristocrats: because they have more power than he has, including power over him. This is anger at a group he feels has abused him and is different from his contemptuous attitude towards Americans and other foreigners. In The Fitz-Boodle Papers, Thackeray has Fitz-Boodle deride Americans for being rude and vulgar (IV, 255ff.), a portrayal derived from self-regard and apparently meant to conceal feelings of inadequacy. There is similar condescension towards the Irish in Men's Wives (IV, 463-465) and in Barry Lyndon (pp. 52n, 103, 261, 377n).

Fitz-Boodle begins by denying any prejudice against Jews, saying that he was criticizing only one Jewish family, not all Jews. Surely there have been Jewish rogues, he says, so why can he not portray one? This sounds reasonable, but Fitz-Boodle argues so insistently for the existence of Jewish rogues that his statement begins to seem more like a reiteration than a retraction, until he suddenly stops and says:

> Be calm, thou red-maned desert-roarer [the letter-writer being Jewish, Fitz-Boodle refers to him as the Lion of Judah], the arrows of Fitz-Boodle have no poison at their tip, and are shot only in play. (IV, 282)

This, we can see, is a variation on Thackeray's nervous laughter technique. He has made a criticism; he still believes in it;[47] but to soothe those he has offended, he says his attack was all in fun. The fearful nature of this retraction can be seen in the next lines, when Fitz-Boodle says, only half in jest:

> I never wished to attack the Jewish nation, far from it; I have three bills now out. (IV, 282)

At the beginning of this section, Fitz-Boodle asserts that he does not care one straw whether the public likes what he says (IV, 281). But the emptiness of this boast can be seen not only in the discussion of anti-Semitism, but in

---

[47] As can be seen from Thackeray's very next work, Men's Wives, in which the Jews are criticized in the same terms as before: one character in that work is "in the hands of the Jews" and has to pay more than twenty thousand pounds in interest on a loan of one thousand, yet still owes the original thousand (IV, 350). See also IV, 366, 403-404, 407, 410, 495; and see Barry Lyndon, pp. 264, 295.

the handling of a second criticism: that the Fitz-Boodle stories are dull. Fitz-Boodle says that at first he thought this criticism was inspired by envy, but it gave him great pain to think so many were envious of him, and he suddenly had an idea: perhaps the critics were right, perhaps his writing was dull. He reread the previous story and found that "it was abominably stupid" and this produced in him a feeling of great calm (IV, 282-283, italics in original).

Here we have more fear-inspired bowing to the opinion of others, and it is interesting that it should emerge at a time when, immersed in despair and sentimentality, Thackeray was making fewer attacks than previously. There is less to apologize for, but he is apologizing more, because his emphasis on sentimentality inclines him to apology, or compliance, in Bernard Paris's terminology. Feeling more unsure of himself than ever, Thackeray finds it politic to turn his attacks inward rather than chance reprisals from others. As he has Fitz-Boodle say:

> Instead of crying, 'The world is wicked--all men are bad,' is it not wiser, my brethren, to say, 'I am an ass'?
>
> (IV, 283)

Wiser, we should note; not truer. There are points in The Fitz-Boodle Papers when self-condemnation seems to be a genuine product of guilt and inadequacy, but here it seems simply a ruse intended to deflect criticism.

Many of the attitudes of The Fitz-Boodle Papers, indeed of this whole second period of Thackeray's career, are

encapsulated in a poem by Ottilia that Fitz-Boodle presents at the end of his work (IV, 310). In the poem, Ottilia talks of how as a child she thought the world was peopled by princesses and of how she dreamed that fairy people would bring wondrous gifts for her, "the new-born babe they bless'd." In her dream she was cursed and captured by an ogre, but rescued by a prince in armour. But these are mere fantasies, she concludes with a sigh; there is no knight for her, and so she wishes she could be a child again upon her nurse's knee.

Here is the sentimental view of a perfect world, accompanied by delusions of grandeur that mask feelings of inadequacy (Ottilia becomes almost a Christ child attended by the Magi). And here is the suffering caused by a wicked world, the escapist yearning for a princely rescue, the self-pitying sigh for the lack of a rescuer, and the nostalgic lament for the safer days of childhood when there were nurses for protection. All that is missing in this is the fear that is also found in this period, the fear that prevents Thackeray's characters from accepting rescues even when they seem possible.

Fear may be the strongest and most constant of Thackeray's emotions. As we have seen, in The Fitz-Boodle Papers the narrator-hero yearns self-pityingly for women who reject him, but when he is accepted (by Ottilia) he is terrified and runs away. In Cox's Diary, although the hero at the end complains of his exclusion from high society, the main point

of the story is to express fear of being accepted by high society. Fear seems to lurk everywhere, producing the situations of exclusion that lead to both the angry complaints of Thackeray's first period and the sentimental yearning of his second.

In Thackeray's next work, a collection of four stories entitled Men's Wives, there is the beginning of a move back to the anger of Thackeray's first period. Some of Thackeray's most nostalgic and melancholy passages can be found in these stories, but on the whole the mood darkens, culminating in hysterical anger and some abortive Satanism on the part of the author.

In "Mr. and Mrs. Frank Berry," Thackeray revealingly juxtaposes the pain of life at school with that of life in marriage. Gone is the depiction of marital bliss; gone even is the longing for such bliss. Instead we have, first, a portrayal of school bullying and then a depiction of the wifely variety, as if what Thackeray feared in marriage was a return to the suffering of his childhood. The story (narrated again by Fitz-Boodle) begins with Fitz-Boodle describing the bully at his school, one Biggs, who abused other boys "unmercifully" (IV, 317). However, Biggs was not the only source of torment at the school: if any boy from one boarding-house strayed into another, Fitz-Boodle says, "the most dreadful tortures were practised upon him, as I can answer in my own case"; and on one occasion when Biggs beat a little boy, the other little boys gathered round, for

"little boys always like to see a little companion of their own soundly beaten" (IV, 321, 318). Here we see anger, fear, and bitterness, leavened only slightly by two examples of wish-fulfillment: the presence of a strong boy whom no one dares bully (he is so much beyond even the masters' control that he can smoke a cigar without being punished) and a successful intervention by the young Frank Berry against the the bully Biggs.

In the second part of the story, even this leavening is missing: even Frank Berry, the scourge of Biggs, falls prey to one stronger than himself, his wife, the former Angelica Catacomb (another tomb for men, like Ottilia). "Here was this lion of a fellow tamed," Fitz-Boodle comments sorrowfully (IV, 329) before attempting to free Berry from his enslavement. In the end, however, even Fitz-Boodle trembles before Mrs. Berry and flees, allowing Frank to relapse into domestication, a condition signalled by his wearing galoshes, a respirator, and a pitch-plaster. What Frank has given in to, in short, is an emasculating, mothering overprotection.

The fear of emasculation, symbolized in "Mr. and Mrs. Frank Berry" by a fountain that plays a "ceaseless dribble" (IV, 326), carries over into the first part of the next story, "The Ravenswing," where there is a mocking portrayal of the effeminate hairdresser, Eglantine. Called "a fat, foolish, effeminate beast" by one character, Eglantine wears rings, a "pound of grease" on his hair, and (in one scene) a

glossy old silk dressing gown. As well, he uses pink stationery, is revealed to be a coward, and seems so unmanly to the ladies that, though they shriek when another man sees them with their hair down, they think nothing of appearing that way before Eglantine (IV, 360, 369, 376, 383, 354). By sneering at effeminacy in this way Thackeray, it would seem, is seeking to defend his own masculinity.

And yet Eglantine is not entirely an unsympathetic character (perhaps revealing some identification with effeminacy on Thackeray's part and thus provoking him to attack it all the more strongly). In the first part of the story, the hairdresser and the tailor Woolsey are equally victims of the fair Morgiana, who is described angrily and slightingly as a "showy sort" of coquette (IV, 357). In "Mr. and Mrs. Frank Berry," Thackeray had expressed his fear of women; here he reverts to anger at oppressors and sympathy with victims. We do, however, return to a form of fear--fear of humiliation rather than fear of domination--when Eglantine and, to a lesser extent, Woolsey are made to appear ridiculous in their courtship while a third rival, Howard Walker, a rather disreputable character, wins and marries Morgiana.

A curious thing now happens. The story ceases to focus on the cruel coquetries of women; in fact, Morgiana, from being a mildly villainous character, becomes the poor victim of her selfish husband, a precursor of Amelia Sedley. In part, this change arises from a shift in the target of

attack: from women who reject to men (rival men, husbands) who are successful in love. Morgiana thought her husband was an angel, our narrator says, shaking his head; in fact, Howard Walker was "a swindling parvenu gentleman." But, the narrator continues disgustedly, Morgiana's type of wifely faith is quite common: a husband can be dull, ugly, vulgar, and a humbug, but his wife will never realize it. "They will believe in their husbands, whatever the latter do." The narrator sees husbands as "male brutes" or Bottoms, inexplicably attended by Titanias who "tickle their gross intellects and minister to their vulgar pleasures" (IV, 388-389, italics in original).

This is transparent jealousy; this is Thackeray complaining that, instead of loving him, women have the effrontery to love their husbands. And perhaps it is one particular woman Thackeray has in mind, for by the time he wrote this story he had already met and become attracted to Jane Brookfield, the wife of his friend, the Reverend William Brookfield.[48] In any case, Thackeray is, at this point, setting up an attack against both husband and wife, but the

---

[48] "The Ravenswing" began appearing in April 1843. Thackeray met Jane Brookfield the previous year and gave her a book as a Christmas present in December 1842 (Mrs. Brookfield, I, 120). In May 1843, he wrote: "I don't think I have fallen in love with any body of late, except pretty Mrs. Brookfield" (Letters, II, 110). In 1846, he wrote: "Mrs. Brookfield is my beau-ideal. I have been in love with her these four years" (Letters, II, 231). As for Thackeray's views of Rev. Brookfield, in 1848 he wrote that Jane had been ill because of "a husband whom she has loved with the most fanatical fondness and who . . . [is] kind to all the world except her" (Letters, II, 380).

attack tends to concentrate on the brutality of the husband, and the attitude to wives becomes more sympathetic. In fact, Thackeray goes so far as to have his narrator generalize about the plight of wives, indeed of all women. The narrator talks of women's "slavery" and their "prison work" and says his heart bleeds for them (IV, 390). Nor is this the only time in Thackeray's works that we find general remarks in defence of women. In A Shabby Genteel Story, for instance, we are told that women suffer more than men and that brutes can seduce a woman and escape punishment while the woman in question will be ruined; it is enough, says the narrator, to make one "sympathize with the advocates of woman's rights" (III, 291, 324).

Coming from Thackeray the misogynist, these are strange words indeed but, I think, explicable. First of all, there is the adulterous impulse already alluded to: in attacking his male rivals, the husbands, Thackeray is led into defending the wives, for if the husbands are brutal, the wives must be suffering. But more than this. Thackeray does indeed see women as victims, even though (in apparent contradiction) he also calls them oppressors. They are victims of male brutes (and of other women), but they oppress gentle souls like himself. He puts the situation most clearly in Vanity Fair:

> I know few things more affecting than that timorous debasement and self-humiliation of a woman. How she owns that it is she and not the man who is guilty: how she takes all the faults on her side: how she courts in a manner punishment for the wrongs she has not committed, and persists

> in shielding the real culprit! It is those who injure women who get the most kindness from them--they are born timid and tyrants, and maltreat those who are humblest before them.
>
> (VF, 481)

Thackeray can sympathize with women, for they suffer from the same brutes who oppress him; but he also believes that however much they suffer, they in turn are tyrants over such as him, the humble men who constitute a quite separate group from oppressor males. Thackeray can seem to defend women against men, because he does not include himself in the group "men." He is in a different group--a different sex, one might almost say--a sex made up of gentle souls who are never cruel to women but who, unfairly and inexplicably, suffer at their hands.

Such suffering can produce anger, and we see such anger in Woolsey, "the honest and faithful tailor" (IV, 421), who becomes Morgiana's protector in the absence of her neglectful husband. Woolsey is Dobbin to her Amelia, or Thackeray to her Mrs. Brookfield, nobly helping Morgiana out financially, buying back her piano for her at an auction, and taking on the father's role towards her son. He is, however, subject to fits of anger: "If you give any more of your impudence," he tells an insulting servant, "I'll beat every button off your jacket" (IV, 420-421). This anger carries over to the narrator, who launches a vehement attack on the credit system (IV, 421-422). Thackeray was concerned about a creditor suing him at this time,[49] but the force of

[49] See Letters, I, 448n; II, 95, 96, 99, 107, 112.

this attack seems to derive from the context of resentment over Woolsey's deserving Morgiana but not having her.

This situation is actually perfect for Thackeray. He turns his attentions to an unattainable (because married) woman: Jane Brookfield in real life, Morgiana in fiction. He is thus safe from the dangers of involvement and can angrily attack the "injustice" of the situation knowing that the situation will not change. Or he can fantasize, in a vague way, about an eventual union with his unattainable beloved. Thus, though in the heart of the story a mere friendly kiss from Morgiana frightens Woolsey and makes him "blush exceedingly" (IV, 424-425), at the very end of the tale Thackeray allows himself to imagine Morgiana's husband dying and Woolsey marrying her. It is a happy ending, a wish-fulfillment ending.

This is actually the second of two separate endings that the story has, being a postcript the narrator supposedly adds years after he originally wrote his account. The original ending is much sadder, in the liberal sentimental vein, concentrating on Morgiana's suffering at the hands of her first husband. Indeed, there is a good deal of sentimentality, nostalgia, and despair in "The Ravenswing," in the manner of Thackeray's other works in this period. Besides the sympathy for Morgiana, there is, for instance, a description of an old house that is one long sigh for the passage of time (IV, 435-436), and there is an idyllic scene in which Morgiana, her mother, her baby, and Woolsey--"let

us say all four babies together," the narrator comments (IV, 429)--romp on the floor. Infancy here seems to be a refuge Thackeray would like to fly to; it is a safe condition, exempt from commitment and responsibility. Life in prison is similarly safe from such things, and it is noteworthy that "The Ravenswing" contains a description of prison life that makes it out to be quite wonderful, an effective means of escape from a demanding world (IV, 423-424).

But despite the lingering sentimentality and escapism, anger keeps breaking through in this story, anger not only over thwarted love, but over such things as the aristocracy's treatment of artists, the selfishness of mankind, and the corruption of critics (IV, 396, 401-403, 443-452). And it is anger that dominates the next story, "Dennis Haggarty's Wife." In fact, as one critic notes,[50] anger (in the form of misogyny) gets so much out of control in this story that the reader feels that Thackeray has misjudged, forced the issue, and thus forfeited the reader's sympathy.

At first the anger is mild. There is mockery, but nothing stronger, of Mrs. Gam, the vulgar and pretentious Irishwoman who is seeking a husband for her daughter, but who scorns the proposal of a mere army surgeon, Dennis Haggarty. Years later, Fitz-Boodle (the narrator) is surprised to find that Haggarty has been accepted as the daughter's husband after all, and comments, in another mild attack,

---

[50] Robert L. Bledsoe, "Fitzboodle among the Harpies: A Reading of 'Denis Haggarty's Wife'," Studies in Short Fiction 12 (1975), 181-184.

that if Haggarty did not have to marry the mother-in-law too he might get on well enough (IV, 469). From mild attacks we shift to feeling sorry for Haggarty when we find that he lives in poverty, and then we reach the turning point of the story, when we are told abruptly that Mrs. Haggarty is blind and has been disfigured by smallpox (IV, 471).

The reader wants to sympathize with Mrs. Haggarty at this point, but Thackeray will not let us. Instead, through Fitz-Boodle, he makes all sorts of derogatory remarks about Mrs. Haggarty: she is affected, she shrieks, she sings vilely, she drinks excessively, and she talks incessantly of her suffering. Fitz-Boodle denounces her "vanity, her infernal pride, folly, and selfishness"; he delights in describing her features as "wretched, angular, mean, scarred"; and he even considers telling her that she has been disfigured (a fact she does not know). The only reason he does not tell her is that he finds her so much of a "dullard" that she would probably not believe him. "A dullard recognizes no betters" and will not listen to the truth, he says (IV, 471-473).

Other people see Mrs. Haggarty as a great sufferer, but Fitz-Boodle will have none of that. To him, Dennis Haggarty, who had to give up his medical practice to tend his demanding wife, is "the martyr of the family" (IV, 475). This martyrdom is confirmed at the end of the story, when Mrs. Haggarty, whom the narrator calls a "foul mass of greedy vanity" (IV, 479), drives her husband out of the

house and deprives him of most of his money (IV, 479, 481-482).

Thackeray in this story seems to be in part Fitz-Boodle and in part Dennis Haggarty. Through Fitz-Boodle, he is hysterically asserting his superiority to dullards, and through Haggarty he portrays himself as the great martyr. He wants to be both admired and sympathized with; he is the great man and the great sufferer, suffering the burden of a sick wife. At this time, Thackeray was in financial difficulties and commented more than once on the money he was paying to support his insane wife;[51] perhaps this feeling of being burdened is reflected in the portrayal of Mrs. Haggarty. And perhaps the hysteria of the portrayal reflects guilt feelings about turning his affections towards a new woman (Mrs. Brookfield).

Whatever the cause of the anger, it reaches a peak in the last story, "The -----'s Wife." Gathering up all his frustrations, Thackeray here creates a frightening, Satanic figure through whom he can extract some revenge. In The Fitz-Boodle Papers, Thackeray had his narrator accept, in a guilty way, others' condemnation of him as diabolical. In that work, to be Satanic was grounds for self-criticism; but here being Satanic seems almost something to glory in. Evil, be thou my good, Thackeray seems to be saying.

---

[51] Letters, II, 99, 113 (March, May 1843). See also footnote 49 above.

The story actually begins in a sentimental way, lyrically depicting Thackeray's favourite locale, Pumpernickel (or Weimar), with its "pleasant grass besprinkled with all the flowers of summer," its shining river, its singing birds. Fitz-Boodle is there, discussing the "golden days of chivalry" with some friends, but we soon see beneath the charming surface, learning of robber knights, torture chambers, "toads, serpents, and darkness" (IV, 483-485): anti-sentimentality sours the fantasy.

One of Fitz-Boodle's friends then tells the story of Angelica, the Satanic figure, with her "diabolical" smile and her "infernal twinkle" (IV, 487). The daughter of the prison governor, Angelica is raised by her father, her mother having died after much rough treatment from him. Angelica, like Becky Sharp after her, revels in the company of her father's rude companions and takes to swearing and dice-playing; she also enjoys watching floggings and can ride "like an Amazon." This "young imp of Lucifer" grows up to be beautiful, cruel, and haughty. She has many lovers, toying with them all; she is a siren leading men to ruin, especially young noblemen whom she beats at dice. Really she should have been called Angelica Diabolica, says Fitz-Boodle's friend, for she is a fallen angel (IV, 486-489).

"The dangerous and wicked Angelica" (IV, 491) seems almost a mirror image of the soft-hearted Thackeray, who was a boy raised by women just as Angelica is a girl raised by men. It is as if we were seeing Thackeray's shadow self in

Angelica, the repository of all his anger and hatred for once springing to life full-blown on the page. It cannot last, however; it is too frightening even for Angelica's creator. The fact that he distances Angelica through not one but two narrators (Fitz-Boodle repeats to us the story he heard from his friend) is a sign of that; and even at this distance Thackeray cannot allow Angelica to continue as his avenging self. He has her meet a mysterious figure who seems rather diabolical himself. In relation to this figure, there are references to the "foul fiend" and the Devil, and we are told that Angelica felt that "in daring and wickedness this man was a match for her" (IV, 495-496).

The suggestion seems to be that if one indulges in Satanism, one ends up going to the Devil. Guilt and fear overcome revenge, and Thackeray seems set to condemn himself to Hell. But perhaps that, too, seemed too frightening. In any case, the mysterious stranger turns out to be not the Devil, but the executioner, and when Angelica (who has in the end married him) finds this out, she screams, faints, and is later carried home "raving mad" (IV, 502). Fearful of the powers he was dealing with, Thackeray turns the story into a parodic joke, mocking the snobbery that disdains certain professions and the exaggerated reactions of romance heroines.

What thus emerges at the end of Thackeray's second period, a period that began with sentimentality of various sorts, is anger, anger that can go as far as Satanic

revenge, but which can also collapse into self-condemnation or nervous laughter. It is a combination we shall see in the next period as well.

Chapter IV

POETIC JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE: THE RISE AND FALL OF BARRY LYNDON

> Do not as many rogues succeed in life as honest men?
>
> --Barry Lyndon

Perhaps the best way of approaching Barry Lyndon is by means of an interesting passage in Chapter Fourteen (Chapter Thirteen in some editions).[52] In this chapter, the narrator-hero, known up till this point as Redmond Barry, meets Sir Charles Lyndon and his wife, Lady Lyndon. Sir Charles is a dying man and he sees that Redmond Barry is planning on marrying his widow when he is gone in order to acquire a fortune. This is a course the dying man warns against. He, too, had thought to better himself through his marriage to Lady Lyndon, who was rich even then, but he regrets his marriage now. He would have done much better, he says, to have married for love, to have made a "virtuous attachment" (BL, 248-249).

---

[52] Thackeray first published this novel in 1844 as The Luck of Barry Lyndon. In 1856, it appeared in revised form as The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, with the original two opening chapters combined into one. Chapter Fourteen in the 1844 edition (the edition referred to here) is thus Chapter Thirteen in the edition of 1856. See Martin Anisman's comments (BL, 1, 66).

This is the first stage of a four-part argument on marriage that occupies no more than a page, but which exhibits so much internal inconsistency that the reader is hard put to determine exactly what the author had in mind. Indeed, one could say this about almost all of Barry Lyndon, and it is for this reason that it is useful to begin an examination of the book here.

The first stage of the argument is that it is better to marry for love than money. This is a standard Thackerayan argument. In "The Ravenswing," for instance, Morgiana is praised for loving Howard Walker "not because her mamma told her, nor because he was an exceedingly eligible and well-brought-up young man; but because she could not help it" (Works, IV, 411). This is sentimentality celebrating true feeling, and it is also an attack on marriages that are made on the basis of wealth and status.

Sir Charles's views are in line with the attack on marriages of convenience. He recommends love-matches and, as might be expected, proceeds to enumerate their good points. But he does so in a rather disconcerting way, saying:

> There's nothing like having a virtuous drudge at home. . . . It gives a zest to one's enjoyments in the world. . . . No man of sense need restrict himself, or deny himself a single amusement for his wife's sake; on the contrary, if he select the animal properly, he will choose such a one as shall be no bar to his pleasure, but a comfort in his hours of annoyance.
>
> (BL, 249, italics added)

There is something wrong here. Surely Thackeray cannot expect us to endorse this picture of marital bliss. It is

true that he has his misogynistic tendencies, but as we have seen in "The Ravenswing" and elsewhere (see above, pp. 82-83), when confronted with the brutish treatment of women that Sir Charles Lyndon yearns for, he tends to sympathize with the abused women and to denounce their bullying husbands.[53] At this point, then (stage two of the marriage argument), Thackeray seems no longer on Sir Charles's side, and indeed seems to have changed his position entirely. At first, Thackeray seemed to be recommending love-matches, but now he seems to be condemning them for oppressing women.

In stage three there is yet another shift. Sir Charles continues his description of the "ideal" marriage by contrasting it with the misery of his current situation, in which he is married to a woman who neither loves nor comforts him:

---

[53] For a contrary view, see Laurence Lerner, "Thackeray and Marriage," Essays in Criticism 25 (1975), 293. Lerner argues that Thackeray's ideal was a submissive woman. This is only partly true, for it ignores Thackeray's yearning after motherly women; but even if it were completely true it would not prove Lerner's point that Thackeray endorsed the sort of male tyranny recommended by Sir Charles Lyndon. On the other hand, though no supporter of male tyranny, Thackeray was not primarily a defender of women as Katharine M. Rogers argues in The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature (Seattle, 1966), pp. 197n-200n. Rogers plays down Thackeray's "few misogynistic elements" and emphasizes his positive feelings towards women's love; but this is surely to distort the situation. Thackeray yearned for and idealized women's love (whether maternal like Mrs. O'Dowd's or submissive like Amelia's), but he also feared such love and ended up attacking women as a result. If anything, the fear and the attacks were stronger than the yearning.

> I have got the gout: who tends me? A hired valet, who robs me whenever he has the power. My wife never comes near me. What friend have I? None in the wide world. . . . Get a friend, sir, and that friend a woman--a good household drudge, who loves you.
>
> (p. 249)

With the use of the word "drudge" for a second time, Thackeray moves us back to stage two, but for the most part these lines are directly opposed to the immediately preceding ones. Here, in a typically indirect way, but still quite clearly, the advantages of a love-match are praised. In such a marriage, the wife will tend the husband when he suffers and will be his friend when he needs one. When Thackeray has Sir Charles complain about not having such a friend or comforter, the feeling seems authorial; this is what Thackeray wants; this is Thackerayan yearning for protection, quasi-maternal protection, from a hostile world.

But Thackeray seems to feel he does not get such protection. It is other men, less deserving men, who win such female favour. We have seen this complaint in earlier works (see above, pp. 72-73, 81-82, 84), and here it leads to the last stage of the marriage argument, with Sir Charles saying that if a man is a rogue, his wife will say he is an angel, and "if he is a brute, she will like him all the better for his ill-treatment of her" (p. 249). Behind Sir Charles's approval of this situation is Thackeray's disgust that it is evil men who win women's hearts rather than good men like himself.

The first and third stages of the marriage argument are defences of the love-match; the second stage is an attack on it; and the fourth is a complaint about not being able to enjoy its benefits. The first, third, and fourth stages fit together, but the second seems out of place. It expresses a genuine Thackerayan attitude (sympathy for fellow victims of oppression), but it is used here to undercut an equally genuine attitude, the yearning for protection. Perhaps Thackeray felt guilty about this latter attitude; perhaps he felt the comfort he yearned for was selfish and would oppress others. But perhaps the reason for undermining the impassioned yearning for safety was quite different. Immediately after Sir Charles's little disquisition, Redmond Barry says that the remarks were those of "a weakly, disappointed man" (p. 249). To seek protection is to confess weakness, and we have seen elsewhere (above, pp. 36, 80) that however much Thackeray yearned for protection, he also feared the weakness that it implied. His real objection to having a comforter-wife, therefore, may have been based on the fear of being controlled; the concern for the oppression of others, though genuine at other times, is here just a mask for something else, for the fear that operates all through Barry Lyndon and undercuts almost all its anger and yearning.

What is somewhat out of the ordinary about this example of undercutting is that it depends on a real ambivalence in the author, the tension between desiring protection and fearing it. Elsewhere in Barry Lyndon, and throughout

Thackeray's early works, undercutting is less profound, based less on real ambivalence about goals than on fear of revealing those goals. Earlier in Barry Lyndon, for instance, Barry makes a ridiculous claim about the antiquity of a ring he owns. He says it has been in his family thousands of years, and we laugh at this pretentious untruthfulness. But Barry adds: "I warrant the legends of the Herald's College are not more authentic than mine was" (p. 181). From an attack on Barry, Thackeray has quickly moved to an attack through Barry on aristocratic pretensions. It is interesting to note that the attacks are essentially against the same thing: snobbery based on false pretensions, whether Barry's or the aristocracy's. But the first attack undercuts the second. The first attack expresses a genuine Thackerayan attitude (anti-snobbery), but it is used to undercut an equally genuine attitude, in fact the very same attitude. By making the attacker guilty of the crime he attacks, Thackeray vitiates the force of the attack. It is a fear-based manoeuvre. But unlike the case of the marriage argument, it expresses no deep-seated ambivalence. Thackeray is against aristocratic snobbery: there is no ambivalence about that as there is about female comforters. In this case, Thackeray is merely afraid that expressing his views on snobbery will cause offence. This is a reminder that fear functions at two levels in Thackeray. It is perhaps the most fundamental of his emotions, the ultimate source of many of the attitudes that appear on the surface

of his works; but it can also appear itself on the surface as a means of undercutting the very attitudes it has produced. And when it does act to undercut other attitudes, it produces many problems for the reader trying to determine what exactly the author is trying to say.

Thus, a large portion of Barry Lyndon has the appearance of a revenge fantasy. Barry, who is repeatedly humiliated in his youth, vows to achieve great heights in order to mortify his oppressors, and we see him succeeding in this plan, returning in triumph to Ireland after a long absence:

> How were times changed with me now! I had left my country a poor penniless boy--a private soldier in a miserable marching regiment. I returned an accomplished man, with property to the amount of five thousand guineas in my possession, with a splendid wardrobe and jewel-case worth two thousand more, . . . having by my own genius and energy won my way from poverty and obscurity to competence and splendour.
>
> (p. 254)

At this point Barry seems to speak for the author, to represent Thackeray's feelings of humiliation and revenge. The triumph of Barry Lyndon reads like the author's own fantasy of wished-for triumph. And yet even at this moment of victory, the feelings are not pure. Barry congratulates himself on not having stayed behind to become "a raw Irish squireen" and imagines what would have happened to him if he had:

> I might have been the father of ten children by this time, or a farmer on my own account, or an agent to a squire, or a gauger, or an attorney, and here I was one of the most famous gentlemen of Europe!
>
> (pp. 254-255)

In this passage, as he lists the things he might have been, Barry seems to become less and less contemptuous of them, so that his final self-congratulation on his fame becomes an almost desperate attempt at self-assurance. In portraying Barry's rise, Thackeray has fantasized a grand revenge on the world, but suddenly he no longer seems to believe in his fantasy. He falters in his belief and seems prepared (through Barry) to celebrate mediocrity and the ordinary life rather than to elaborate on the fantasy of life at the top. Thackeray thus undermines his own fantasy, perhaps from fear of what life at the top would entail (which would make this an undercutting derived from true ambivalence), or perhaps merely out of fear that his fantasies may provoke reprisals (making the undercutting more of the superficial variety). In any case, there is an ambivalence that disconcerts the reader at the height of the revenge fantasy, and this is far from being the first time such ambivalence undercuts the depiction of revenge in Barry Lyndon.

Barry begins his tale, after a denunciation of women, by claiming a grandiose descent:

> Though as a man of the world I have learned to despise heartily the claims of some pretenders to high birth . . . truth compels me to assert that my family was the noblest of the island, and, perhaps, of the universal world.
> (p. 47, italics in original)

Our first response to this statement is to laugh at the absurdity of Barry's claim, but there is something else at work here. It is as if Thackeray were using an exaggerated

joke to conceal and display his beliefs at the same time. Barry's claim to greatness is not much different from the notion of superior merit we find repeatedly in Thackeray,[54] and it is as if Thackeray himself is claiming superiority and simultaneously denying the claim by exaggerating it into absurdity. Almost all of Part One of Barry Lyndon is built on this basis: nervous laughter undercutting the assertion of greatness, the anger at oppressors, and the plans for revenge. Barry is created as a character with few morals and with many foolish pretensions. He is a Yellowplush of a character, not one to take seriously; so if he plots revenge or makes grand claims, no one will take offence.

Seen from afar, the plot of the novel is a revenge fantasy; seen closer up, the hero of the plot seems a quite flawed instrument of revenge. Yet despite all the undercutting, the real attitude, in Part One at least, seems to be sympathy with Barry and through him an expression of some of

[54] "Miss Shum's Husband" turns on this question, and The Yellowplush Papers also contains the already quoted remark about people with twice the merit of Deuceace and Yellowplush (see above, p. 24). Major Gahagan is in part a complaint about the world's neglect of the narrator's merit (though in that case as well the merit is presented in absurdly exaggerated form). Catherine is another character who claims superior ability (see above, p. 44), and note as well the assertions of superiority in "Dennis Haggarty's Wife" (above, pp. 87-88). It is also interesting to turn to a diary Thackeray kept a dozen years before he wrote Barry Lyndon, in which he talks approvingly of the very thing that seems so ludicrous in Barry. In the diary, Thackeray envisions "a young Tory knight" taking a place in Parliament, where he might command respect as a result of his pedigree. "He might shew himself conscious of his birth & yet despise it in others," Thackeray wrote (Letters, I, 214). Barry Lyndon does no more.

Thackeray's deepest feelings.[55] For instance, after the assertion of greatness, Barry talks of the "treachery" that deprived his family of its lands, the main traitor being a woman who betrayed the plans of his Irish ancestors. The result was to prevent the "just massacre of the English" and to allow the English to commit "odious butchery" on the Irish (pp. 47-49). It is hard for us to have sympathy for those who would commit a "just massacre," but the complaint of treachery seems a real one.

Besides these feelings of betrayal, the opening chapters of Barry Lyndon are suffused with feelings of anger and revenge over various forms of mistreatment. For instance, at school Barry is caned seven times, but refuses to accept an eighth punishment, hitting his master, knocking down an usher, and escaping knife in hand (pp. 58-59). We have seen anger at school brutality and many other things in Thackeray's previous fiction; we have even seen Frank Berry come to the aid of an oppressed schoolboy; but this is the first

---

[55] Saintsbury sees a different emphasis, saying that primarily Thackeray is making fun of Barry and criticizing him, though at times he moralizes through him (Works, VI, xi). My view is closer to that of Martin Anisman, who says that Barry retains our sympathy till late in the novel (BL, 3). I agree with Robert Colby's view that Barry is simultaneously a self-exposing scapegrace and an alter ego of Thackeray, but I do not agree with the implication that these states of being are of equal weight, nor with the statement that Thackeray maintains a balance between them except for a few lapses (see "Barry Lyndon and the Irish Hero," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 21 (1966), 128). At least in Part One of the Novel, Thackeray seems more on Barry's side than against him; but at the same time the fact that there are these two competing views of Barry produces not balance, but uneasiness.

time an oppressed schoolboy has himself risen up against the oppressors. In Barry Lyndon, Thackeray goes beyond expressions of anger at the world to having his representative fight back against mistreatment. This is revenge as in "The -----'s Wife." But it is weaker somehow for being so closely connected to suffering and humiliation, and as well it is constantly being undercut. Thus the schoolboy episode is immediately followed by Barry's ridiculous claim to have bettered Dr. Johnson in argument. "I pretty soon silenced him," Barry reports; and the way he silenced him was by saying:

> Sir, . . . you fancy you know a great deal more than me because you quote your Aristotle and your Pluto [sic], but can you tell me which horse will win at Epsom Downs next week?
> (p. 59, italics in original)

This, says Barry, shows that he lost nothing by leaving school. Thackeray thus seems almost to reverse himself. He begins by identifying with Barry's attack on school only to make fun of Barry just when the latter says explicitly that school has no value.

It is similar with Barry's fighting experiences, of which he is quite proud. At the age of fifteen, he says, he had beaten all the other boys in the region (p. 61). In the army, he defeats a bullying "monster" in a cudgel fight (pp. 112-113) and, after he joins a Prussian regiment, he becomes such a "proper fighting beast"--called by some "the English Devil" and regarded as the most wicked soldier in Prussia--that no one dares cross him (pp. 154-155). This is a fan-

tasy of perfect revenge: the weakling becomes so powerful that all must bow down to him. And yet, just as with the schoolboy episode, the revenge here is undercut. Barry claims to have silenced a critic by defeating him in a duel, and in fact will go on to talk of many such triumphs (pp. 161, 181-182, 186, 203-204, 250, 284), but the supposed editor of Barry's narrative intercedes to question whether Barry really won so many encounters (p. 164n). And not only is Barry's prowess questioned, but the virtue of such fighting is itself criticized. When Barry boasts of shoving a bayonet into a "poor little ensign, so young, slender, and small" (p. 120), we seem meant to shrink from the barbarity of the killing. As well, in several other instances the point seems to be to attack Barry for his violent attitudes. We seem to be asked to recoil from Barry's philosophy that "a man of honour . . . dies, but never apologises" (p. 93); and when Barry takes pride in the fact that his mother would rather see him hang than avoid a duel (pp. 88-89), we shake our heads at the inhumanity of the two of them.

Indeed, for all his anger at the world, Thackeray often shrank from violence and antagonism. In Major Gahagan, he seems to be revolted by the Major's "heroic" killings and in Catherine he mocks military enthusiasm and can hardly bring himself to describe the murder of John Hayes (see above, pp. 29, 39, 48). In Barry Lyndon itself, Barry reports unhappily that his father and his uncle had quarrelled, "as all men will" (p. 52); and later Barry refrains from elaborating

on another dispute, saying that it is pointless to dwell on ancient disagreements and the persons involved in them, for "good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all equal now" (p. 54). This is the fear of confrontation speaking. It is a genuine Thackerayan attitude, perhaps stemming from the memory of his own suffering in various disputes. Thackeray would rather that the world was a friendly place in which no one (especially himself) had to suffer at the hands of others.

However, although the antipathy to violence is genuine, Thackeray uses it, especially in the description of Barry's first duel, primarily as a means to weaken our sympathy for the narrator-hero. We may be tending to feel as one with the young Barry rising up to wreak just revenge on his enemies; but we are reminded that this revenge can be savage and cruel, and our feelings become muddled. And since it is the author who is reminding us that revenge is often not pleasant, we cannot in any way accuse him of advocating it. Thackeray can thus fantasize about revenge and disavow the fantasy at the same time.

Much of the impetus for the fantasy in Barry Lyndon stems from the humiliations described in detail in the early chapters. In these chapters, young Barry is scorned by the world. It is not just that he is mistreated; he is told over and over that he is inadequate. He falls in love with his cousin Nora, but she mocks him, saying he is only a penniless boy of fifteen (she is several years older).

Later she tells him that his rival in love, Captain Quin, is a man while he is only a boy. Then when Barry talks of joining the army, she says he is only big enough to be a little drummer (pp. 69, 72). Nora assures a jealous Quin at one point that Barry, being a mere boy, means no more to her than a lap dog; and when Barry challenges Quin to a duel, the latter says: "I'll send for the usher to cane you, little boy" (p. 78). Even the kinder characters laugh at Barry's attempts to act as a man, and he feels mortified (p. 86).

In response to these humiliations, Barry swears he will become a soldier despite what Nora says, and not just a soldier but a general (p. 72). He also vows to become "the greatest hero ever known out of Ireland" (p. 69). Moreover, as we have seen, he does not just yearn for a better future, but tries to seize the present. From his earliest days, he is always fighting, and he fights Captain Quin too. Interestingly, however, the duel with Captain Quin leads to Barry's flight from home. Thinking he has killed Quin, Barry flees and vows never to return "but as a great man" (pp. 88-96, 98).

This is interesting because it indicates how much fear there is in this seeking after greatness. Thackeray has arranged the story so that Barry has to escape in order to prove himself: the greatness he will achieve will be achieved far from home, after running away. In this manner, Thackeray creates a fantasy in which his hero can be both

safe and great. By running away, Barry protects himself from the terrors of home; and by achieving greatness he dispels any feelings of inadequacy. It is true that, since running away is involved, the feelings of inadequacy might seem to be reinforced; but Thackeray deals with that problem by having Barry's flight result from his bravery in facing a more experience duellist. On the other hand, since we later discover that the duel was a fraud in which Barry was merely fooled into thinking he had killed his man (p. 115), the old feelings of inadequacy tend to reassert themselves. Still, the fact remains that in devising this escape into foreign greatness Thackeray has created an ideal fantasy for dealing with a world full of terror and humiliation.

The only rival to this fantasy in the novel is the dream of maternal protection, which can guard the sufferer from the evil world while reassuring him that someone loves him. However, the problem with this refuge is that it may seem demeaning, and it may bring the sufferer closer than he wants to be to another person. We have already seen some of the resulting ambivalence in the marriage argument, in which the wife functioned as a quasi-maternal figure; and the ambivalence is seen again in connection with Barry's mother.

It is hard to tell what we are to think of Barry's mother. She is vain and hypocritical, she avoids paying her bills, and she seems jealous of Barry's interest in Nora (pp. 53-55, 51, 67). But we also see her suppressing her jealousy and making excuses for Nora to prevent Barry from

being hurt by discovering Nora's unfaithfulness. And when Barry falls ill, his mother does everything in her power to help him. Barry describes her as "the good mother, who loved me better than any thing else in the world, and gave up even her favourite habits, and proper and becoming jealousies, to make me happy" (pp. 73-74). She is sympathetic to Barry when he goes to fight his first duel, but her sympathy takes a strange turn: she puts a ribbon on his sword and would rather have him fight than "dishonour" himself (pp. 92, 88-89). Barry approves of this, but Thackeray does not seem to; authorial irony seems to lurk beneath Barry's praise of his mother's "gallant feelings" (p. 89). The hidden suggestion seems to be that a mother should protect her child, not thrust him into duels. And thus we see the continued ambivalence: Mother is good, but perhaps not good enough, perhaps actually not good at all. Later, other mothers are described as neglecting their sons (pp. 210, 244); but there may be worse things than neglect: Barry's uncle calls Barry's mother a "scold" (p. 169), which is a strange criticism coming from a brother-in-law; it seems more what a son might complain of. Barry himself confesses his fear of his mother:

> I don't care to own that she is the only human being whom I am afraid to face. I can recollect her fits of anger as a child, and the reconciliations, which used to be still more violent and painful.
>
> (p. 271)

It is interesting that the reconciliations were the most fearful times: it seems love can be more terrifying than anger.

It is perhaps because of all these fears and ambivalences that Barry, on his return to Ireland, puts off seeing his mother; and despite eventually having a loving meeting with her, he is glad to leave her (pp. 270-272). In any case, by this point Barry is in control, at the peak of his power, and does not need a mother's protection. Only at the end does he come to depend on her again. When he once more falls low, she takes care of him, helping him to bed at night and bringing him his breakfast in the morning. Barry praises her "disinterested care and watchfulness" (p. 365), but at the same time compares her to a thief and calls her wily, one of the "artful sex" (pp. 365-366). There is ambivalence to the end.[56]

Thackeray is thus left with the revenge alternative, but even that can produce ambivalence, as we saw earlier (above, pp. 97-98), the deeper ambivalence about whether revenge is actually a worthwhile goal and the surface ambi-

[56] But despite the ambivalence, it is not quite fair to say, as does John Carey, that Thackeray's work "up to and including Vanity Fair" is entirely free of "mother-worship": John Carey, Thackeray: Prodigal Genius (London, 1977), p. 12. Besides the elements of mother-worship in Barry Lyndon, there are moments of such idealization in Catherine, as when the narrator rhapsodizes over mothers who look tenderly on their sons while they sleep, casting "a sweet spell of peace, and love, and fresh-springing joy" (Works, III, 154). In Vanity Fair, the narrator at times idealizes Amelia's mothering (VF, 347-348, 380), and there is disguised mother-worship in the portrayal of Mrs. O'Dowd on the eve of Waterloo (VF, 282-284).

valence that results from fear about pursuing such a goal. This surface ambivalence seems to take over in the section of the novel following Barry's flight from home, as he falls in with rogues and acts roguishly himself, so that we seem to get a reproduction of the Deuceace episodes in The Yellowplush Papers: everyone trying to cheat everyone else, everyone a scoundrel, no one a victim, an amoral but not a truly evil world, or at least a world we are asked not to condemn, but merely to laugh at.

There is not much anger or revenge here. One of the few examples occurs when Barry makes a scornful remark about the low origins of one of his companions (p. 106). Here Thackeray seems to be attacking Barry's snobbery, but even that is not certain. It seems possible to interpret the passage as a genuine attack on people of inferior merit. It is hard to tell, and the resulting uncertainty accords well with the atmosphere of nervous laughter, the refusal to make serious attacks.

When Barry joins the army, the situation changes somewhat, but there is still uncertainty surrounding his first reactions to life as a soldier. When he expresses disdain for the vulgarity of the private soldiers to whose company he is relegated (p. 112), we again wonder if this is an attack on Barry's snobbery or an expression of Thackeray's own disgust at being regarded as inferior. As Barry's army experiences continue, however, it seems that the latter attitude is the main one Thackeray has in mind. Barry says

his pride revolted at his low conditions compared to those of the officers and he complains that one needs money to obtain a commission. Moreover, he is furious that though he is a descendant of Irish kings, he can still be caned by a "young scoundrel" fresh from Eton (pp. 117-118). Thackeray is, of course, laughing at Barry's vainglorious claim of royal descent, but other than that the complaint seems to come from the author. Thackeray is again expressing the feelings of humiliation that marked the opening chapters.

The army episodes also contain moments of wish-fulfillment, as when, through the aid of an officer friend, Barry begins to receive special favours. For instance, he gets to mess with the sergeants even though only a corporal (p. 118). Later his association with another officer will ensure that the sergeants are civil to him (p. 161). This is a fantasy of achievement without effort, or reward without desert: Barry has not really done anything to deserve reward; he merely ingratiates himself with the proper authorities. Of course, he considers himself "quite as well-bred" as anyone in authority and thus deserving of special treatment (p. 157), but this is a position we seem asked to laugh at. Still, underneath the laughter Thackeray seems to be identifying with Barry, feeling that he too, despite a lack of apparent achievements, is worthy of great honours because of his intrinsic merits. Barry and Thackeray seem to be glorifying themselves to compensate for feelings of inadequacy.

We are reminded of the feelings of inadequacy in the episode with the wounded Lieutenant Fakenham. When Fakenham hears that Barry, who is also wounded, is to be treated in the same room, he says: "A corporal? . . . turn him out" (p. 124). But Barry gets his revenge on the lieutenant by stealing his clothes and money, and impersonating him. Here again we have the fantasy of achieving high status without having to work one's way up through the ranks in the normal fashion. Of course, if one is intrinsically superior to other men, the normal rules do not apply. And as Barry puts it, becoming a lieutenant in this unconventional way merely meant a return to his "proper sphere" (p. 129). In actuality, however, this approach is based on fear: it is fear of the normal routes that leads one to deny the need for following them.

At first glance, it would seem that all that is feared in this is the struggle for the reward, not the reward itself. But such a view would be incorrect. Thackeray quickly deprives Barry of his fraudulent lieutenancy and returns him to the rank of private, a development that seems motivated by authorial fear of operating in too rarefied surroundings. Similarly, during Barry's gambling career, it is not failure in the struggle for success but success itself that causes anxiety. Barry greets the loss of a fortune calmly, even eagerly. "Was I cast down?" he asks. "No." He explains:

> Our wardrobes still were worth a very large sum of money . . . and, without repining for one single

> minute, or saying a single angry word . . . we pawned three-fourths of our jewels and clothes . . . and with produce of the sale, and our private pocket-money, amounting in all to something less than 800 louis, we took the field again.
> (p. 188)

Catastrophe is no cause for worry, it seems; but success certainly seems to be. Before losing his fortune, Barry's life, though splendid, is quite dangerous. One time after winning a considerable sum, he is ambushed by a group of armed men sent by the loser. And often in the midst of success he and his partner-uncle are driven out of an area by angry princes or police ministers (pp. 185-186). The fear, clearly, has to do not only with the dangerous process of achieving the heights, but with the even more dangerous process of staying there.

But if success is too dangerous to be endured, failure loses its appeal before long. Back in the army as a private, Barry feels oppressed and mortified to such an extent that he is ready to sympathize with the bloodthirsty mutiny launched by some of the other private soldiers. The mutineers split the head of one sentry and chop off the hand of another, and their leader later bayonets an officer who strikes him in court. Still, the rebels and their leader are described in glowing terms and Barry excuses their actions by saying that though it is true that they destroyed two sentries to obtain their liberty, "how many hundreds of thousands of his own and the Austrian people did King Frederick kill because he took a fancy to Silesia?" He adds:

> It was the cursed tyranny of the system that sharpened the axe which brained the two sentinels of Neiss; and so let officers take warning, and think twice ere they visit poor fellows with the cane.
>
> (p. 152)

This may be the only time in all his early works that Thackeray (for he seems to share Barry's views here) excuses criminals for their crimes. Usually Thackeray attacks evil, sometimes he jokes about it, and occasionally he revels in it; but he hardly ever makes excuses for it in the modern liberal way, blaming "the system" for the wrongdoing.[57] We may note that even here Thackeray is not being as liberal as one might think: he is not saying that the system corrupted the mutineers and made them evil, only that the cruelty of the system justifies revolt against it. Still, it is interesting that Thackeray goes even this far, and to understand why he does we should look at the text immediately following the description of the mutiny. Even the paragraph describing the last scene of the mutiny ends with the words "the cane," and the following paragraphs talk incessantly of canings and the misery of the soldiers who suffered them. "I have seen the bravest men of the army cry like children at a cut of the cane," Barry says (p. 154), and it begins to dawn on the reader that Thackeray is not really talking about the

---

[57] In this I differ from critics such as Robert Colby, who sees Thackeray as, if not excusing villainy, at least pointing out the forces that cause it. Barry is evil because his father was, says Colby: Nineteenth-Century Fiction 21 (1966), 115-117; but it seems to me that Barry's roguish ancestors exist to exemplify Barry's roguery rather than to "explain" it.

army; he is talking about school. This is his own horrible Charterhouse, and the mutiny is revenge for his ill-treatment there. In keeping with the rest of the book, however, the revenge here is rather tentative. We do not get an emotional identification with savage avengers, as we do with the Satanic Angelica in the first half of "The -----'s Wife." We have, rather, an admission that the rebels are guilty of murder and insubordination (p. 151), accompanied by a rationalistic attempt to defend their actions as justified under the circumstances. Thackeray has Barry explain the mutiny instead of revelling in it. There is fear here too.

This fear, at work behind so many of this novel's scenes, takes centre stage in one extraordinary chapter which recounts "the Tragical History of the Princess of X---." The princess of the title is Olivia, the wife of Prince Victor and the mistress (apparently) of the Chevalier de Magny. When we first meet her, in an earlier chapter, she is described as being selfish, extravagant, and a liar, but charming. "I never knew a woman whose faults made her so attractive," Barry says. "She used to ruin people, and yet they all loved her" (p. 193). The princess seems much like Angelica Diabolica, a dark, powerful figure worshipped by others. She is what Barry has been trying to be, and in fact it is at the same period when he meets the princess that Barry himself begins to win the sort of power she seems to possess. By some complicated intriguing, including

blackmail, Barry is able to make some powerful persons cringe before him and do his bidding. The Chevalier de Magny, for instance, who had sneered at Barry "a hundred times" and called him "a vulgar Irish upstart," becomes Barry's servant. "I had him under my thumb," says Barry, none too pleasantly (p. 204). Barry claims to have raised himself by his "talents, honesty, and acuteness" (p. 208), but we see it is really through dishonesty, spying, and informing; and we begin to shrink from him. Just as Barry seems to be achieving his revenge, Thackeray begins to become uneasy; and it is almost as if he creates the Princess Olivia to work out what he fears may happen to one who dares to seek revenge and power.

The fate of the princess, like that of Angelica in "The -----'s wife," is told at two removes, an indication in itself that this part of the novel is dealing with fearful matters. Barry reports the story at second hand from Rosina of Liliengarten, the second wife of Prince Victor's father, who presents us with a tale of horror, violence, and betrayal. Her account is of a world in which no one can be trusted, in which those who appear to be rescuers are actually agents for the most wicked villains. The atmosphere is ominous and full of foreboding, much like that of "The ------'s Wife," but in this case Thackeray lets events reach their natural horrifying climax rather than shying away from it as he did in the earlier story. In "The -----'s Wife," it was as if he was afraid to display his own fear; this time he does not hold back.

Madame de Liliengarten begins with the Minster of Police, Geldern, who is determined to ruin the princess. Geldern knows of the affair between Olivia and Magny, and also knows that Olivia has lent Magny a royal emerald which Magny has pawned. The minister knows all this because of his spies. "We had all spies over each other," says Madame de Liliengarten (p. 218). The minister arranges with one of his spies to waylay the money-lender carrying the jewel, ostensibly so it can be returned to the princess. He promises his spy, who is a valet for Magny, that he will be given a great reward. This, however, is a lie, the first major betrayal. The spy is set up as a thief so that Geldern can have an excuse to search Magny's premises and "accidentally" discover incriminating documents about Magny's relationship with the princess.

The results are swift and horrifying. Magny is arrested and forced to take poison. His grandfather, a close friend of Prince Victor's, goes mad. Princess Olivia becomes hysterical and is confined to her apartments. She issues threats and accusations and writes letters to various influential personages, carried by one of her trusted servants, who of course betrays her and takes the letters straight to Prince Victor. The prince, who had been thinking merely of banishing his wife, now decides she must die. Meanwhile, the princess is plotting her escape with the help of another trusted servant, who leads her one night through a secret passage, ostensibly to freedom, but actually to an

old tower where her husband and the executioner wait. The executioner seizes her by the hair and chops off her head. This, apparently, is what Thackeray fears happens to those who aim too high.

Still, he lets Barry continue his rise. Barry wins thousands through gambling, has many triumphs with the fair sex (or says he does: significantly, we are given no details about these potentially fear-inspiring relationships), and builds such a reputation with his sword that few people care to encounter it (pp. 237-238, 250). Barry mingles with the aristocracy (p. 263) and, as already described, his return to Ireland is a triumph of wish-fulfillment and revenge (above, p. 97). Finally, Barry's crowning achievement is to win the hand of the recently widowed Lady Lyndon. At first, Lady Lyndon will have nothing to do with Barry, even though she had been fairly friendly to him while her husband was alive. As a result, Barry feels (or at least acts) like an injured lover, complaining that Lady Lyndon only intended to "play with the heart of the poor artless Irish gentleman who adored and confided" in her (p. 279). He will not stand for this, he vows angrily: "I am not one of those poor souls with whom coquettes can play, and who may afterwards throw them aside" (p. 280). No, Barry (and through him Thackeray) will have revenge on those who mistreat him so. He sets out to terrorize Lady Lyndon in order to win her adoration, and completely succeeds in his plan. He has her letters intercepted so that

he always knows her itinerary and can appear where she does; he bribes a fortune-teller to tell her that she will become his wife; and he concocts a complicated scheme by which he enables his cousin to marry Lady Lyndon's ward, though both the ward and Lady Lyndon had opposed the match. In short, he does everything possible to increase in Lady Lyndon "the sentiment of awe" and he succeeds to the extent that she wonders fearfully: "Can this monster . . . bend even Fate to his will?" (p. 283). Lady Lyndon refers to Barry as her "murderous adorer" and her "dark spirit," commenting that his eyes are "black serpent-like" (pp. 283, 284). In the end, she marries him. It is the triumph of the downtrodden outsider, rising up from oppression to exercise power over his former oppressors.

And yet nothing is this simple in Thackeray's fiction. For one thing, the prize, once obtained, is a fearful thing to possess. Barry Lyndon does not suffer in the manner of Princess Olivia, but he is not happy in his triumph. "Beware of greatness," Sir Charles Lyndon had warned him. "Ever since I have been married and have been rich, I have been the most miserable wretch in the world" (p. 242). Barry ignores the warning, but later comes to share Sir Charles's views. For all the splendour and wealth and aristocratic associations that his marriage brings him, he regrets marrying Lady Lyndon. She is an "odious wife," and he often wishes himself a private in the army again, "or any thing so as to get rid of her" (pp. 249-250). More gener-

ally, Barry speaks of the "harassing cares and responsibilities which are the dismal adjuncts of great rank and property" and says that "many a time in the course of my prosperity I have sighed for the days of my meanest fortune" (pp. 310, 309). Just as in Cox's Diary, Thackeray is letting his fear emerge: he may yearn for revenge and the attainment of greatness, but he fears it too.

At a different level, Thackeray also fears the mere expression of his desire for revenge. We have seen how, all along, the revenge motif in which we sympathize with Barry is undercut by the introduction of passages that make us laugh at Barry's foolishness or shake our heads at his unscrupulousness. Now, however, perhaps because the revenge has reached its peak, the undercutting becomes even stronger. In Part One of Barry Lyndon, it seems safe to say that, despite the undercutting, Thackeray's sympathies are usually with his narrator-hero. There are occasional moments of brutality (see above, pp. 102-103) when Thackeray turns against his hero, but for the most part he supports him even while he laughs at him. This is less true in Part Two, in which there is hardly any laughter. In this part of the book, Barry is less the buffoon or charming rogue and much more the malevolent villain. We see him developing in this direction at times in Part One: for example, when he talks of having the Chevalier de Magny under his thumb (see above, p. 114). But this trend becomes more pronounced in Part Two, especially in his treatment of Lady Lyndon after

their marriage. In Part One, before the marriage, when Barry made Lady Lyndon cower before him, it seemed like the justified revenge of the downtrodden. But when he continues to terrorize her even after she is under his control, his actions seem less acceptable. We shudder when he says: "Lady Lyndon was a haughty woman, and I hate pride, and I promise you . . . I overcame this vice in her" (p. 302). Much of the rest of the novel reveals just how far Barry would go to break his wife's pride and spirit. Among other things, he flirts shamelessly in front of her; he makes her give up her independent social life; he forces her to entertain his company when she does not want to; he gets drunk and beats her; and he throws a knife at her son. As well, he chops down the trees on her estate and remodels her mansion with deplorably bad taste (pp. 302-304, 311, 319). In short, Barry becomes a vulgar bully and, as well, a swindler (p. 309n), someone who is quite clearly the object of authorial criticism.

This attack on Barry seems in part an attempt by Thackeray to distance himself from a revenge he is afraid to express; but in part it is also a reflection of a real loss of identification with Barry. Thackeray frequently mocks or criticizes characters whom he is actually in sympathy with in order to avoid taking responsibility for their attacks on society. But here he seems truly to be losing sympathy for Barry, because Barry is no longer the oppressed outsider that Thackeray believes himself to be; Barry is now in power

himself, not excluded from society but a leading light in it; not weak, but strong. In Thackeray's view of the world, to be strong is to be evil. And thus it is that he has the "editor" of Barry's memoirs comment that Barry was no hero but a rogue and that his success shows there is no justice in the world: "Worldly success is by no means the consequence of virtue; . . . if it is effected by honesty sometimes, it is attained by selfishness and roguery still oftener" (pp. 312n, 351). This is a quite strange reversal. In the first part of the novel, despite the undercutting, we seem meant to see Barry's rise as poetic justice; now it has become poetic injustice. When Barry falls, says the editor, that will be poetic justice (p. 302).

And yet the fall of Barry Lyndon is no more a simple cause for celebration than was his rise. Thackeray's feelings remain mixed. Thus, although Barry at times is clearly brutal, at other times we seem meant still to sympathize with him, and at still other times it is unclear what is being expected of us. We sympathize with Barry in his fears at the top and also when he falls to the bottom. At the top, he associates with aristocrats, but they cheat him (p. 313). As well, his ability and luck desert him (p. 314). Success seems highly dangerous, and we seem meant to identify with Barry as he suffers through its dangers. As well, we seem asked to share his suffering as he falls from the heights and complains about his hardships: he tells us of being bound up in an "inextricable toil of bills and debts"

while "lawyers upon lawyers posted down from London" (p. 349), and he says pitiably that he could feel the net "drawing closer and closer" (p. 363). All this provokes sympathy; but when he sighs gloomily about ending his days in prison (p. 383), the sighing seems overdone, perhaps because it is juxtaposed with remarks denouncing his godson for helping Lady Lyndon escape from her own prison (Barry's house). Similarly, when Barry complains that his conduct has been misrepresented as odious and cites some of the slanders spread about him (that he has driven his wife mad and killed both his sons: see pp. 319, 345, 347, 360-361), we tend to agree that he is being unjustly vilified and yet we know that he has committed some vile acts, even if not those particular ones; so we are left confused about where to place our sympathies.

In short, Part Two of Barry Lyndon betrays an uncertainty of purpose. Even in Part One the primary intent--to create sympathy for Barry's revenge--is undercut in various ways; but at least there is a primary intent. In Part Two, out of fear and a failure of identification, the undercutting becomes so strong that one cannot say what the primary intent is. It is impossible to tell whether we are to sympathize with Barry or to damn him, and the resulting uncertainty leaves the reader quite unsettled. It is only when Thackeray frees himself from uncertainty and acquires a new sense of self-confidence that he is able to realize his potential. It is this that he accomplishes, at least in part, in Vanity Fair.

Chapter V

THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE: STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS IN VANITY FAIR

> My prospects are very much improved and Vanity Fair may make me--The thought thereof makes me very humble & frightened: not elated.
>
> --Thackeray, Letter, December 1846

The first thing to note about Vanity Fair is its lack of unity. Many critics have striven to see wholeness in this novel,[58] but it is not a unified work. Despite attempts to prove that Becky is bad and Amelia is good (or vice versa),[59] it cannot fairly be said that either of the

[58] John Mathison, "The German Sections of Vanity Fair," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 18 (1963), 235, sees unity deriving from the author's attitude to the world; Harriet Blodgett, "Necessary Presence: The Rhetoric of the Narrator in Vanity Fair," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 22 (1967), 211, sees the narrator as the principle of unity in the novel; and Myron Taube, "Contrast as a Principle of Structure in Vanity Fair," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 18 (1963), 119, sees unity of theme in the novel. Michael Lund, "Beyond the Text of Vanity Fair," Studies in the Novel 11 (1979), 158, assumes there is unity when he argues that Thackeray is mocking Amelia's supposed heroism in refusing to leave her husband behind and flee from Brussels with Jos. Lund argues that Amelia's "heroism" is undercut because it implies a belief in her husband's loyalty, and we know from other parts of the novel that he is not loyal.

[59] A.E. Dyson, "An Irony Against Heroes" (1965), in Arthur Pollard, ed., Thackeray: Vanity Fair: A Casebook (London, 1978), pp. 170-175, argues that Becky is essentially heroic and that we are "on her side." Other critics argue that Becky is essentially evil and that we are to oppose her throughout the novel: see John E. Tilford,

two central female characters is consistently portrayed in the novel, still less that the author's attitude to either of them remains the same throughout. As the narrator himself comments, "Have we not all been misled about our heroes, and changed our opinions a hundred times?" (p. 602). Nor can one point to thematic consistency. Vanity Fair is a big book and many of the conflicting attitudes of Thackeray's early period find a home here: there are scenes of all sorts, to quote the narrator again, scenes of sentiment and scenes of anger, moments of despair, and a great deal of revenge. But above all there is one disunifying factor that sets this novel apart from almost all that went before, and that is self-confidence.

In Barry Lyndon and other of Thackeray's earlier works, we have seen fear intrude to undercut expression and produce weakness. We have also seen an emphasis on feelings of inadequacy and humiliation, and most of all we have seen Thackeray's own personality and personal problems break through the surface of his art. In the early Thackeray before Vanity Fair, to understand the man is to understand the work,

Jr., "The Degradation of Becky Sharp," South Atlantic Quarterly 58 (1959), 603-608, and John Hagan, "Vanity Fair: Becky Brought to Book Again," Studies in the Novel 7 (1975), 479-506. For negative views of Amelia, see John Halperin, "Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, and Trollope," in Egoism and Self-Discovery in the Victorian Novel: Studies in the Ordeal of Knowledge in the Nienteenth Century (New York, 1974), pp. 33-45, and Sister M. Corona Sharp, "Sympathetic Mockery: A Study of the Narrator's Character in Vanity Fair," ELH 29 (1962), 326-331. For a positive view, see Katharine M. Rogers, "A Defense of Thackeray's Amelia," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 11 (1970), 1367-1374.

and to understand the work is to understand the man. This is not the case in Vanity Fair, at least not all the time. In the earlier works, there are attacks on snobbery, schools, critics, and women that read like thinly disguised personal complaints. In Vanity Fair, Thackeray rises above that level and achieves, at times, "Olympian impersonality," to quote one critic.[60] At other times, however, the older Thackeray still shows through. There are times when Thackeray transcends his problems and achieves an artistry rarely seen in his previous works, and there are times when he is weak and fearful, personal and petulant, in the old manner.[61] The new power in Vanity Fair is the major source of disunity in the work, but it is also what makes this novel better than anything Thackeray had ever done before.

The novel begins in very much the old manner. The first number (Chapters One through Four) may have been written as early as 1844,[62] while Thackeray was still at work on Barry Lyndon, and it shares many of the characteristics of

[60] Laurence Brander, Thackeray ([London], 1964), p. 18).

[61] This old manner has won high praise from John Carey, who sees Thackeray as being at his most vital before 1848, full of "freshness and disrespect," "vibrant hatred," and "irresistible sincerity": Thackeray: Prodigal Genius (London, 1977), pp. 9, 167, 171. One wonders, however, at Carey's statement that vituperation is always exhilarating (p. 197), and one also wonders at his view that the pre-1848 Thackeray is always vituperative. In fact, as my analysis has shown, there is much in Thackeray's early work that is soft and sentimental, even fearful; and when the early Thackeray is vituperative, it is often in a petulant way that is not exhilarating at all.

[62] The Tillotsons summarize the stages of composition in their introduction to the novel (pp. xvii-xxvii).

the earlier work. There are feelings of humiliation, a desire for revenge, anger and the undercutting of anger. There is also some yearning for a better world, and undercutting of that too. There is weakness here, and yet there are also moments that foreshadow the more powerful material that is to follow.

We are introduced to both Becky and Amelia in the first number, and at first it seems that both characters reflect the author's secret fantasies. Amelia is the embodiment of goodness, of the world Thackeray would like to live in. She is "kindly, smiling, tender, gentle, generous" and "one of the best and dearest creatures that ever lived" (p. 14 and note).[63] Everyone loves her, even Miss Pinkerton, the pompous headmistress of her school; and when she leaves there are tears all around (pp. 13-15). Life and novels "abound in villains," the narrator says, and so he finds it a relief to spend time with Amelia, who is "so guileless and good-natured a person" (p. 14). This view of the narrator's seems to be the author's as well: in Thackeray's earlier works the world had indeed seemed quite villainous, and it is as if, at the beginning of Vanity Fair, Thackeray is looking for an escape from that villainy through Amelia.

It seems, however, that Thackeray is somewhat fearful of expressing his desire to escape to a virtuous world. People may mock, after all, as indeed does "JONES," the

---

[63] The second phrase was toned down to "a dear little creature" in the revision of 1853.

imaginary reader who the author is sure will find the details surrounding Amelia to be "excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultra-sentimental" (p. 15). Perhaps to forestall this sort of mockery, Thackeray introduces some of his own--having one of Amelia's friends cry so hard the doctor has to be called and speaking of Amelia's twelve intimate friends (p. 14, and see pp. 41-42)--as if to say that he does not really believe in this sentimentality himself. Thackeray also introduces some other flaws into his portrayal of Amelia, making her less than a heroine owing to some physical imperfections, most notably the shortness of her nose (p. 14). Given that Thackeray's nose was similarly imperfect, having been permanently flattened in a schoolboy fight,[64] it is interesting that he gives this feature to Amelia. If Amelia is a near-perfect creature but with a few trivial flaws, perhaps Thackeray, who has one of the same flaws, is also close to perfection: it is a subtle form of self-glorification, perhaps introduced to counter feelings of inferiority.

Feelings of inferiority are expressed more openly in these first chapters through Becky and, later, Jos. If Amelia symbolizes the world Thackeray desires, Becky lives in the world he feels trapped in. She is a second-class citizen on the fringes of gentility, constantly in contact with rich heiresses and earl's grand-daughters and yet treated

---

[64] See Gordon Ray, Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity, 1811-1846 (New York, 1955), p. 85.

"worse that any servant in the kitchen" (p. 19). This reads like a thinly veiled personal complaint by the author, much like the ones he makes in several of his earlier works. Thus Barry Lyndon complains of being treated no better than a lowly private and remedies the situation, in a vengeful manner, by fraudulently assuming a lieutenant's position (see above, pp. 108-110). Becky, too, seeks to improve her position and does so with feelings of revenge in her heart; but even in these early chapters we see some differences between her and Barry. Barry's revenge was tied very closely to his humiliations and made weaker as a result. Becky's revenge becomes separated from her suffering, and she begins to become an almost elemental force of retribution, "a punitive comic agent," as one critic puts it.[65]

In these opening chapters, this turning of Becky into a force of pure revenge is clumsy and incomplete, but it is there. We begin to lose sight of her reasons for revenge and are made to concentrate instead on the power of that revenge. When we first hear of her, she seems discriminated against because she is not rich like Amelia and the other girls (p. 13). In the next chapter, however, Thackeray seems to change his mind about her, making her less the injured innocent with just cause for revenge than a creature--"a viper," Miss Pinkerton calls her (p. 23)--who attacks for no apparent cause, for the pleasure of it. She

[65] Bruce K. Martin, "Vanity Fair: Narrative Ambivalence and Comic Form," Tennessee Studies in Literature 20 (1975), 44.

is an eagle among pigeons (p. 21), a Satanic creature like Angelica in "The -----'s Wife," through whom the author can have his revenge in a much more powerful way than through some deserving and humiliated little girl.

There are moments when we clearly seem intended to relish Becky's Satanism. For instance, when the narrator refers to her "horrid sarcastic demoniacal laughter," there is approval in his voice; and when Miss Pinkerton thinks with fear of "this rebel, this monster, this serpent, this firebrand" (p. 23), it is as if we had been presented with a champion strong enough to mortify the bullies of creation. It is true that Becky attacks more than just bullies. As a Satanic creature, she goes after everyone, even kindly Miss Jemima, whom she mimics cruelly (p. 22). But this indiscriminate assault does not turn us against Becky; on the contrary, we rather enjoy and identify with her wild retribution.

Still, there are moments in the opening chapters when Thackeray undercuts the power of his rebel. He has her fall prey to envy, for instance, and he associates her with her father's weak complaints about the world's injustice (pp. 22, 20). He also has her indulge in some snobbery (p. 20), thus making her for a moment reflect the evil of the world instead of being solely the rebel against the world. We do not have a consistent Satanic rebel, but a character who at times is weak or whose status as a rebel is called into question. The result is a dilution of the revenge feeling

and a sense of undercutting and uncertainty like that in the early stages of Barry Lyndon.

In Chapters Three and Four, the undercutting continues, with Becky, for instance, made the butt of a practical joke (the incident of the hot curry and chili). Devils do not suffer this way, though innocent little girls do. Becky becomes less evil, more a character to sympathize with, and thus less effective as an instrument of revenge. Thackeray lets the text weaken, turning from Satanism to sympathy. He has Becky indulge in "Alnaschar visions" (p. 28), making us feel sorry for a poor girl doomed to disappointment instead of having us to thrill to the power of a confident avenger. Becky does anticipate some of her later wiles in her manoeuvring to win Jos, but even in this she seems too ordinary, too much the lover telling lovers' lies in order to enter the very conventional institution of marriage, not a true rebel setting herself against society. And adding to the weakness in these chapters is the portrayal of Jos, who is frightened of everyone, especially women, and who lets himself be bullied by his father (pp. 29-35).

If Vanity Fair had continued in this way, portraying the weak and the frightened, it would probably not have gained its present high regard. In fact, a contemporary commentator noted that the opening chapters had been "so poor" and "tentative" that many readers would not have continued reading had it not been that in subsequent numbers

"the writer's power grew."[66]

The growth of Thackeray's powers between 1844, when he apparently composed the first number of Vanity Fair, and 1847, when he began producing more powerful chapters, perhaps resulted from two developments in the intervening period. First of all, he began to enjoy some literary and financial success; and secondly, he triumphed over his mother in a battle for custody of his two children. The children had been with their grandmother in Paris for several years while Thackeray tried to establish himself in London. In June 1845, he wrote of his unhappiness about parting from them after a brief visit, and over the next year he wrote his mother several times asking her to move back to London with them. The children and their grandmother did finally come for a visit in October 1846, and Thackeray was able to talk his mother into giving up custody, probably in part because he had better established himself in his career. Whereas in 1844 he was complaining that his stories were out of print and in June 1845 was still upset about his lack of success, by early 1846 he was sounding pleased about the sales of his travel book Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo and happy in general about his finances, also commenting that he was beginning to see "great people." On January 2, 1847, the day after the

[66] Review in The Athenaeum, November 1848, cited in John Sutherland, "A Vanity Fair Mystery: The Delay in Publication," Costerus, n.s. 2 (1974), 191. Sutherland adds that Thackeray's opening chapters represent "a fossilized state of his earlier writing self."

first number of Vanity Fair appeared, he wrote that he had hopes of achieving "a pretty fair place" in his profession and of appearing before the public "among the first fiddles."[67]

This new confidence made Thackeray not so much a "mature philosopher" or a "sentimental novelist," as two critics have described it,[68] but a wickedly superior satirist. He becomes not gentler in Vanity Fair, but superior; not less satirical, but satircal in a stronger, less petulant way, hurling "Greek fire," as Charlotte Bronte put it.[69]

Even in the opening number, there are moments that border on this sort of superior satire: for instance, when the narrator calls the world a looking glass and says the way to succeed is to put on a smiling face (p. 19).[70] This passage, though, still has too much of the bitterness of complaint about it, compared, for instance, with the skilful irony of a remark about Dobbin's schoolboy antagonist, Cuff, in the second number of Vanity Fair. Frightened of Dobbin, the bully Cuff swears off meddling with him, "though we must

---

[67] Letters, II, 162-163, 192-193, 196-197, 200, 204, 215, 225, 229, 231, 238, 243-244, 252, 255-256, 258, 261.

[68] Ann Monsarrat, An Uneasy Victorian: Thackeray the Man, 1811-1863 (New York, 1980), p. 156; Lambert Ennis, Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic (Evanston, Ill., 1950), p. 127.

[69] Preface to Jane Eyre.

[70] This comment by the narrator is often misinterpreted. I analyze it in detail in Appendix B below.

do him [Cuff] the justice to say he always spoke of Mr. Dobbin with contempt behind his back" (p. 47). Here we have the narrator performing a clever sleight of hand; he leads us to expect some praise of Cuff, then slips in a wickedly casual attack on Cuff's cowardice. It is an admirable example of craftiness and unexpected irony, much more effective than any hot-tempered denunciation could be.

The increasing power of the second number can be seen not only in the appearance of such moments of inspired satire, but also by the turning away from the emphasis on fear and weakness. In the manuscript version of Chapter Six, for instance, Jos breaks off his romance with Becky solely from panic (p. 677). In the version Thackeray published, however, the emphasis shifts to George Osborne's snobbish determination to keep "a little upstart governess" out of Amelia's family (p. 62).

Still, there is much in the second number, and also in the third, that harks back to the weakness of Thackeray's earlier days. In Chapter Five, for instance, there are self-pitying meditations on the mistreatment of schoolboys (pp. 45, 47), there is escapist fantasy (Dobbin reading the Arabian Nights: p. 47), there is a portrayal of our hero Dobbin as ungainly and timid (pp. 45, 53), and there is fearful undercutting of his triumphs at school by having him attribute them to George Osborne (p. 51). In Chapter Six, Thackeray takes refuge in one of his oldest concerns: anti-sentimentality. He develops lengthy parodies of criminal

and "genteel rose-water style" fiction, in effect deserting his own story for the safer enterprise of attacking the stories of others.[71] Also in this chapter, the narrator indulges in self-mockery by saying that the tune he is piping is a very mild one (p. 54), a statement of inadequacy that fits in with his confession of ignorance about Newgate and the aristocracy (p. 674). It seems to accord less well with his earlier claim that as a novelist he knows everything (p. 31); but in fact such self-glorification is just the other side of inadequacy, a defensive assertion resorted to only because of inadequacy.

In Chapter Seven, the last chapter of the second number, Thackeray indulges in some soft-hearted nostalgia for stage-coaches (p. 73), but this chapter and those in the next number give evidence of growing power. There is more serious attacking in this chapter, against the corruption of Sir Pitt Crawley and his ancestors; and more importantly, the attacking at times seems to come from a superior height. It is nothing new for Thackeray to be angry and attack the world around him; but when he can have Sir Pitt defend his rotten borough by saying, "Rotten! be hanged--it produces me a good fifteen hundred a year" (p. 66), we are dealing with a different sort of anger, something altogether more cynical and superior, something that makes us laugh delightedly but also scornfully at some representative of the world Thack-

---

[71] These parodies were omitted in later editions: see pp. 672-674.

eray feared and abhorred.

In the well-known passage at the end of Chapter Eight, however, Thackeray relapses into his older, weaker form of anger. To promise to "step down from the platform" to abuse evil characters (p. 81) is in effect to abandon his superior position and to give up irony and subtlety for open complaint. What is more, the context of this statement of opposition to evil is an attack on Becky Sharp which the narrator uses quite openly to exculpate himself for her criticisms of the Crawleys. The narrator has attacked the Crawleys as representatives of corrupt high society; he has Becky repeat some of these attacks; but he then attacks Becky and disavows her criticisms, saying they come from one "who has no reverence except for prosperity, and no eye for anything beyond success" (p. 81). It is the sort of the thing we have seen before, in Stubbs's Calendar; the reader is left at a loss to understand who is really being attacked, and the feeling we are left with is one of uncertainty and weakness.[72]

The mixed nature of the early numbers can be seen quite clearly in Chapter Nine, when the narrator describes Mr. Pitt. The first part of the description expresses a variety of old Thackerayan attitudes. Pitt is simultaneously some-

---

[72] For a discussion of some other sources of confusion in this passage, see J.A. Sutherland, Thackeray at Work (London, 1974), pp. 28-31. Sutherland notes the undercutting that results from the narrator's description of himself as a fool and from his use of cant phrases like "as a man and a brother."

one to laugh at for his foolishness, admire for his kindness to his stepmother, and sympathize with for his sufferings at school, where he was beaten and called Miss Crawley (pp. 83-84). This part of the description is reminiscent of the treatment of Eglantine in "The Ravenswing" (see above, pp. 80-81): simultaneous mockery of and identification with one who is weak and inferior. But suddenly, in the midst of all this, the narrator produces a piece of confident, wicked satire by saying that Pitt Crawley had cultivated "a mediocrity which ought to have insured any man a success" (p. 84). This is a satiric blow at the whole world. It is no mere mocking of an obvious fool; but neither is it a whining complaint about the injustice of life. It is clever and subtle, yet it is buried in the midst of the weaker attitudes of sympathy for, and easy mockery of, a poor bumbler. The power is still tentative.

It is only in the next chapter that Thackeray hits his stride, launching several subtle attacks on the world in a superior and general way. There is not much of a sense of personal complaint here; this is a serenely good-natured savaging of Thackeray's milieu. The Satanism of the opening chapters here re-emerges in much subtler form, as Thackeray takes his revenge on society by means of his ironic narrator.[73] Thus after Miss Crawley says she was a beauty in her day, the narrator parenthetically remarks: "All old women

---

[73] For a discussion of the reliability of the narrator, see Appendix C.

were beautiful once, we very well know" (p. 93). On the same page he mockingly notes that Sir Pitt readily became a supporter of the Whigs once they took power; and also on the same page he speaks derisively of Mr. Pitt's concern for the souls of his opponents: "It is a sort of comfort which many of the serious give themselves."

With these satirical remarks, we see a new Thackeray at work, one who is not directly raising personal grievances such as his mistreatment by bullies or women, but one who, though still ultimately motivated by fear and resentment over his perceived mistreatment, rises above his own personal problems and aims his attack at a much larger range of targets, exposing the foolishness and corruption of all that he sees around him. This is neither realism nor maturity, for it presents a very one-sided picture of the world; but it is powerful and highly attractive, stirring a sympathetic chord in any reader who has ever felt frustrated enough to want to lash out indiscriminately and cleverly at the whole world.

For the next several chapters, the narrator functions as a Satanic revenge figure; but he is not the only one. In Chapter Eleven, for instance, Mrs. Bute Crawley and Miss Pinkerton exchange letters which are masterpieces of hypocrisy and savagery (pp. 95-97). Thackeray's attitude here seems somewhat mixed; on the one hand, these two schemers represent the sort of evil he abhorred; and yet he seems to relish their machinations, in the same way that he grows to

appreciate the intrigues of Becky Sharp, who eventually supersedes the other two as the novel's main intriguer. When Becky "wisely" ignores Lady Crawley because that lady has no power in her household (p. 88) and when Becky allows her pupils to read what they like because, after all, "what instruction is more effectual than self-instruction?" (p. 90), we laugh at her, at her self-serving wickedness, but in an almost approving way, as if identifying with her brilliant opposition to the world. In this there is not the weak sort of uncertainty that we saw in Barry Lyndon, but a combination of two powerful attacks: an attack on the wicked sort of things done by Becky, Mrs. Bute, and Miss Pinkerton and an attack by these characters in their wicked way upon the world or whoever is in their path. These characters may be doing the sorts of things we hate to have done to us, but they are also the things we secretly wish we could do ourselves if only we were strong enough. It may be that this ambivalence towards evil--in author and reader--is the source of the power of these passages.[74]

[74] On this ambivalence, see Paris, 401-403, who says that Becky embodies aggressive traits which Thackeray consistently repudiates but unconsciously yearns to express. For an interesting analysis of submerged aggressive feelings in the context of the charades of Chapter Fifty-One, see Maria DiBattista, "The Triumph of Clytemnestra: The Charades in Vanity Fair," PMLA 95 (1980), 827-837. DiBattista has illuminating things to say about Becky as a demonic character intent on a "campaign of vengeance" (827), but she is mistaken in seeing Becky's revenge as "feminine" and as an attack on "sexual imperialism" (831). In her view, "Vanity Fair centers on the lot of women" (833); but in actuality, in this novel, as in his earlier works, Thackeray is concerned first of all with his own suffering, not with that of other individuals or

Becky emerges in these chapters as a much more subtle Satanic figure than she was in the opening chapters. In the beginning, her devilishness was openly proclaimed, only to fade away so that she became a poor victim to sympathize with, a charming rogue to laugh at, and then a nasty creature to criticize in the old, complaining manner. From about Chapter Ten, however, at the same time that the narrator gains in power, Becky begins to become a subtle manipulator whom we admire for her ability. She gives up ineffective rebellion for more successful deviousness and, though less often called a devil or a serpent, more effectively acts like one.

However, when we return to Amelia in Chapters Twelve and Thirteen, it is as if we are entering a different world, the old Thackerayan world of personal suffering. The story of Amelia's mistreatment at the hands of George Osborne and the ladies of Vanity Fair seems a very thinly disguised expression of Thackeray's own feelings of self-pity in the

---

groups. When Becky complains about being treated worse than a servant (p. 19), it seems more like Thackeray's anger at exclusion than an attack on male supremacy. Becky's appearance as Delilah (p. 151) and the fact that women are said to be the worst oppressors of other women (p. 278) also undermine the feminist reading of this novel. It is interesting that Thackeray here, as in "The -----'s Wife," makes his instrument of revenge a woman, but she is still his instrument, the instrument of a male writer motivated by his own private sufferings. Thackeray certainly revels in Becky's triumphs over males like George Osborne and General Tufto, but he also enjoys her manipulations of Miss Briggs and Miss Crawley, and her triumph over a rival female at the charades themselves. The point is in the triumph, not in the male-female relationship.

face of a hostile universe. The narrator does make some wicked jabs (at female jealousy, for instance: p. 108), but for the most part Thackeray here relapses into playing out his own personal problems. Curiously, some of this weakness seems to rub off on Becky when she next appears, and the narrator even takes to mocking her jealousy of Amelia (p. 135). In this passage, Thackeray is not himself weak, for the narrator's mockery seems cleverly superior; but when Becky has her scene with George in which she revenges herself for George's snobbish mistreatment of her (pp. 138-139), the passage itself seems weak. There is too much of a sense of what Becky's revenge is for; it is like the revenge in Barry Lyndon, too much connected to previous defeats and humiliations. As well, Becky is too openly antagonistic, attacking George instead of manipulating him into doing her bidding.

The combination of strength and weakness continues into the fifth number (Chapters Fifteen through Eighteen). The narrator satirizes the "Miss Toadys" of the world (p. 148) and also is withering at one point towards the snobbery of Becky and Rawdon:

> I hope the reader has much too good an opinion of Captain and Mrs. Crawley to suppose that they ever would have dreamed of paying a visit to so remote a district as Bloomsbury, if they thought the family whom they proposed to honour with a visit were not merely out of fashion, but out of money, and could be serviceable to them in no possible manner.
>
> (p. 164)

Rawdon is similarly satirized for wanting to play George at billiards, not of course to cheat him, but merely to take "that fair advantage of him which almost every sporting gentleman in Vanity Fair considers to be his due" (p. 164). Becky asserts some strength of her own to admire, even as we shake our heads at her, when she writes a shamelessly ingratiating letter to Miss Briggs, whom she actually despises (p. 155). But one of the most striking examples of power in these pages is something not satirical, but what one critic calls sober-sympathetic.[75] This is the scene in which Sir Pitt proposes to Becky, who is distraught to have to reject him (pp. 141-143). Although we know Becky is upset mainly about missing Sir Pitt's money and position, still the expression of her unhappiness seems much more real than the maudlin excess that Thackeray indulges in when, for instance, he is feeling sorry for Amelia. With Amelia, Thackeray indulges in liberal sentimentality, idealizing unbelievably. In the scene with Becky, there is more restraint and as a result a truer sadness. Perhaps this is because, knowing Becky's motives, Thackeray does not idealize her; but perhaps ultimately this scene is strong because it draws on Thackeray's real suffering as a man who could not have a real marriage now that his wife was insane. This real suffering is something quite different from the more common Thackerayan attitude of paranoia: the thought that

---

[75] J.Y.T. Greig, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (London, 1950), p. 110.

the whole world was against him. And since even his most confident satire ultimately derives from that paranoia, it is perhaps in sad scenes like this one between Becky and Sir Pitt that Thackeray is at his most realistic and mature.

Mature sadness is found once or twice more in Vanity Fair. There is the pathos of John Sedley's ruin, in which we feel all the more strongly for the man because he is not a "sweet face ravaged by grief" (a description of Amelia: p. 187), but a person with real failings, paranoid delusions that perhaps have contributed to his ruin (pp. 189-192). There is also the anguish of Mr. Osborne over the death of his son, in which Osborne feels frightened, sorrowful, and selfishly angry all at once: he is sorry George is gone and almost blames himself, but he is also annoyed that George cannot now apologize (pp. 340-341). The selfishness makes the scene achingly true to life and makes it a much more sophisticated response to loss than, for instance, Thackeray's idealized portrayal of Mrs. Titmarsh in The Great Hoggarty Diamond. In both cases, Thackeray may be thinking of his role in causing his wife's insanity; but in the early work his guilt is disguised and denied; here it is openly faced.

To return to the fifth number: here, along with strengths satirical and sympathetic, there are moments of old-fashioned weakness, times when Thackeray indulges in liberal sentimentality over Amelia (Chapter Eighteen) or fearfully comments on the world's tendency to invade one's

privacy (the episodes of Dives's death and Sedley's bankruptcy: pp. 159, 164). There is also the old fear of female control, revealed in the narrator's referring to Becky as a Delilah who makes Rawdon into a submissive husband (pp. 151, 165).

Such weakness is less evident in the subsequent number, however. The narrator rises to new satiric heights in Chapter Nineteen, flicking his satirical whip at various instances of the world's folly. At one point he skilfully misleads the reader into expecting a piece of fatuous morality only to deliver a thrust at the motives beneath the supposed morality. Praise everybody, he says, in what seems like a banal recommendation to be good to others. "Never be squeamish," he adds earnestly, as if urging us to do what is right but difficult; ". . . speak out your compliment both point-blank in a man's face, and behind his back, when you know there is a reasonable chance of his hearing it again" (p. 179). Compliments may win rewards: that is why people give them, at least according to our cynical narrator. And he is not the only cynic in this chapter. There is also Mrs. Bute Crawley, who returns briefly as a shameless manipulator of others' feelings, paying false compliments to Miss Briggs for ulterior purposes (pp. 178-179). The reader is swept up into a world of cynicism, feeling himself to be one of the cynics, superior to the rest of the world and even to the less competent cynics, like Mrs. Bute at the end of the chapter, when she overplays her hand and alienates the mem-

bers of Miss Crawley's household. A good Devil always makes her victims love her. Becky Sharp knows that.

Indeed, Becky's only appearance in this number (at the end of Chapter Twenty-Two) affords an instructive example of how the truly skilled avenger wins the admiration of those she tramples on. Becky here re-encounters George Osborne; but in contrast to their previous meeting, in which Becky openly sought revenge by attacking George, here she much more cleverly wins George to her side by "apologizing" for her previous attack and feigning humility (p. 210). It is the difference between honest opposition and devilish intrigue. We sympathize with the former, but thrill to the latter.

There are moments of weakness in this number, especially concerning the love triangle surrounding Amelia, in which Thackeray seems to have very personal matters in mind. The depiction of the noble Dobbin (significantly referred to here by his first name, which is the same as the author's: p. 187), gentle Amelia, and the unworthy George Osborne, suggests Thackeray's own involvement with the Brookfields.[76] But this personal material is very much secondary in these

[76] See above, p. 82. See also Letters, II, 306, for a statement made the very month this number appeared that "Mrs. Brookfield still keeps possession of this [heart]." Somewhat earlier Thackeray had to apologize to Reverend Brookfield for being too extravagant in his praise of his wife, and even in apologizing Thackeray said that Mrs. Brookfield's charms tended to "ravish" him "to the highest degree" (Letters, II, 271-272, February 1847). See as well Letters, IV, 431-432 (September 1851), when the uneasy relationship finally ended and Thackeray candidly expressed his feelings of love, jealousy, and betrayal.

chapters.

In the next number, however, the emphasis is on Amelia's story, and Thackeray's personal feelings dominate. At times both Amelia and Dobbin are noble and suffering figures here (pp. 213, 221, 233-234), reflecting Thackeray's view of himself, while at other times Amelia seems to represent Mrs. Brookfield inexplicably worshipping her husband instead of her much more worthy admirer, William (pp. 230-231). In this aggrieved state, Thackeray brings Becky on stage to act not as his avenger but as a representative of oppressive society: nasty to poor Amelia and abusive to loyal Rawdon (pp. 233, 245). Only briefly, towards the end of Chapter Twenty-Five, does Becky show some of her breath-taking Satanic spirit, musing that if "puling, sickly" Pitt Crawley died, Rawdon would inherit and "all would be well" (p. 243).

Although the next number (the eighth) contains some inspiring moments of Becky working her wiles on George Osborne and General Tufto and winning the admiration of a multitude of men (pp. 269-277), the emphasis remains on Thackeray's older, weaker attitudes: the suffering of Amelia (pp. 250, 275, 278-279), the fear of marriage (Amelia thinks in "terror" of her marriage bed: p. 251), and mockery of the vulgar and the inferior (Mrs. O'Dowd and Jos: pp. 256-259, 260-261, 269-271). Thackeray has retreated in these numbers into personal concerns; he no longer rises above those concerns. There is a faltering of confidence here, perhaps, strangely enough, a result of Thackeray's own success. In

July 1847, the month when he composed the eighth number, Thackeray commented on the complimentary reviews he was receiving (Letters, II, 311 and note). A month earlier he had written of the great people he now knew (Letters, II, 305). Success in 1846 had given him confidence; now, paradoxically, too much success had apparently made him fearful again. Certainly, there is evidence that his entry into high society provoked criticisms and made him defensive,[77] which may explain the remark in Chapter Thirty in which the narrator weakly tries to justify some sarcasm of Becky's:

> It was only when her vivacity and sense of humour got the better of this sprightly creature . . . that she would break out with her satire.
> (p. 285)

Satire is not such a terrible thing, Thackeray seems to be saying, merely the result of vivacity.

But though Thackeray defends satire here, he does not indulge in it much in these chapters. There is a mocking comment on the fact that men often buy jewellery for women who are neither their wives nor their daughters (p. 287), but there is more about motherly Mrs. O'Dowd, who is now admired for the most part (pp. 282-284), and cowardly Jos (pp. 302, 304, 312-313). Thackeray seems to be yearning for maternal protection and also seeking to bolster his self-esteem by mocking obvious inferiors. Becky does make one more of her devilish attacks, this time on Jos, whom she flatters and coaxes in order to ensure herself a place in

[77] Letters, II, 334, 359-360. See also Gordon Ray, Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom (New York, 1958), pp. 34-35.

his coach (pp. 295-296); but though we revel in her strength here, it will not appear again for a while.

Indeed, after an encounter with Amelia (p. 291), Becky emerges much weakened. Thackeray brings together representatives of good and evil in this scene, and seems to side with the forces of good, as if deciding to emphasize his own virtue rather than indulge in revenge fantasies. He seems, in fact, to lose the ability to produce an effective revenge fantasy. When Becky encounters Lady Bareacres soon after the scene with Amelia, she is unable to exercise her wiles in the old way, but can merely sneer openly (p. 307). Later Becky even seems, briefly, to join the forces of good, sympathizing with Amelia and praising Rawdon, and after that she becomes a mere illustration of conventional selfishness and ambition, dreaming about becoming a duchess when she should be worrying about her husband's fate on the battlefield (p. 312). In Becky's Satanic moments, there is much less emphasis than there is here on potential rewards; she functions then more as evil incarnate, evil for which the rewards are secondary, evil almost for its own sake; and when she does consider her goals, it is certainly not in a yearning way about duchesses, but in a confident, matter-of-fact manner. Cajoling Jos in a Satanic moment, she thinks:

> My dear sir, should an accident befal [sic] the army, and a retreat be necessary, you have a very comfortable carriage, in which I propose to take a seat.
>
> (p. 295)

Compare this with: "And I am not sure that she did not dream that night of becoming a duchess" (p. 312). One is strong and one is wishful.

Becky does seem to get her wish, however. In Paris, after Waterloo, she wins many admirers, and the narrator says that her "wit, talent, and energy" merited her a place of honour in Vanity Fair (p. 339). This seems almost indulgent about high society, and it changes Becky from a wicked enemy of the world into one who is good enough to be accepted into it. Thackeray seems to have given up revenge and is yearning for acceptance. The transformation is not complete, of course; the narrator makes a slashing remark about the unforgiving nature of respectable women, for instance (p. 318); but even here it is noteworthy that the attack is against the notion of revenge. Everything begins to weaken now: the intrigues of the younger Pitt for his aunt's money are so open, and the narrator so lightheartedly calls him "artful" and "Machiavellian" (p. 321), that we seem called on neither to condemn nor to admire, but to laugh as if at the charming roguery of Thackeray's early fiction.

Behind all this weakness lurks fear, along with feelings of inadequacy. We have already noted Amelia's terror over marriage. The narrator also makes the following revealing comment:

> Did we know what our intimates and dear relations thought of us, we should live in a world that we should be glad to quit, and in a frame of mind and a constant terror, that would be perfectly unbearable.

(p. 293)

The world is a fearful place, it seems, a point made again in the visit of James Crawley to his aunt in Chapter Thirty-Four. The very title of the chapter ("James Crawley's Pipe is Put Out") is suggestive of Thackeray's old fears; and the portrayal of James as a frightened adolescent, awkward, silent, and bashful, terrified of the ladies and feeling excluded by the men (pp. 329-334), seems to reflect very personal feelings on the part of the author. Thackeray here seems to fear the world and to feel inadequate to face it.

There are, of course, ways of escaping fearful things. There is nostalgia for childhood, which Amelia indulges in on visiting her parents (p. 251), and then there is madness. Amelia hovers on the border of madness when her husband goes off to war (pp. 289-290, 298, 309, 345); but though we sympathize with her suffering, it seems that her retreat in the direction of insanity is not a route Thackeray wants to follow. Amelia seems less him than his wife here: a fellow sufferer, but one even weaker than he was, and thus one who could fall prey to a terrible affliction that Thackeray does not at all seem to yearn for.

Instead, he contents himself with expressing his fears and portraying the sufferings of the noble in an unjust universe. Thus Dobbin provides unstintingly for the widowed Amelia and her child and yet is unfairly accused of trying to cheat her (pp. 347-348, 380-381). Amelia herself, when not going mad or playing Mrs. Brookfield to Dobbin, is a

loving mother to her son, but is persecuted by her interfering mother (pp. 375-376). And the virtuous Raggles suffers at the hands of a swindling Becky and Rawdon (pp. 358-360). There are also some idyllic moments (Amelia with her son, Rawdon with his: pp. 380, 368) when Thackeray indulges in some wistful yearning.

But not all is weakness in these chapters. The strong scene of Mr. Osborne's anguish occurs here; Becky and Rawdon engage in some devilish dealings at the gaming table in Chapter Thirty-Six; and the narrator makes wicked jabs at the hypocrisy and self-delusion of women (pp. 364, 379). Still, the changed emphasis can be seen by considering the most memorable guise in which Becky appears in this section of the novel: as "an unearthly being . . . to be worshipped and admired at a distance" (p. 369). Here, for a moment, Becky becomes God, a stern God who terrifies both her son and her husband. "For God's sake, Rawdy, don't wake mamma," says Rawdon Senior, afraid his son will cry one morning (p. 368). And the narrator comments:

> Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children; and here was one who was worshipping a stone!
>
> (p. 369)

Becky is powerful but oppressive here, not our representative against the world, but the world's representative against us. She is no longer a Satanic figure embodying Thackeray's powerful opposition to the world, but a cruel God before whom Thackeray's representatives quake. There is weakness here, the old weakness of fear and complaint.

Weakness is mixed with strength in the next few chapters, but the weakness of cringing before Becky-as-God disappears, and Thackeray is once more on her side. There are moments when Becky is his powerful representative again, working her Satanic wiles on Miss Briggs and the Crawleys (pp. 401, 402, 404). At other times, Thackeray is with Becky, but in weakness, as she expresses what seem to be his own fears and yearnings: for instance, when she wishes she could give up her position in society and become a country gentleman's wife, safe from "cares and duns, schemes, shifts, and poverty" (pp. 410, 409). And then there are times when Becky seems strong without being Satanic, when she is simply a gallant figure doing battle against the world, as when she makes plans to win acceptance and cries happily when she succeeds (pp. 399, 403). Thackeray seems strong here too, and yet the weakness soon overcomes him. It is all rather confusing, and these chapters (making up Thackeray's twelfth number) are among the most mixed he wrote.

The first of them (Chapter Thirty-Nine) is the strongest. Here Thackeray makes an unexpected return to form as a wicked satirist, producing barbed comments like one about Sir Pitt's kitchen maid, who flatters the master's favourite servant, Betsy, "just like a genteel sycophant in a real drawing-room" (p. 390). In the next chapter, Thackeray turns to wish-fulfillment, recounting how young Pitt ousts his meddlesome mother-in-law from his house. But the wish-

fulfillment is somehow not as weak as usual. It is as if Thackeray had someow managed a synthesis of his Satanic and weaker sides, producing something strong and yet not wicked. It is the same at the beginning of Chapter Forty-One, when Becky and Rawdon, on returning to Queen's Crawley, remember past times and feel agitated (p. 403), just like characters in a realistic novel. But this is a passing moment, and Becky is soon back to reflecting the author's varying attitudes: from his desire for revenge to his fear in the face of the world. In Chapter Forty-Two, the narrator satirizes snobbery, but then shows that a similar attack by Mr. Osborne is motivated by envy and rejection (p. 414). It is a very self-revealing moment, as if Thackeray were aware of the basis of his own criticisms; but the effect is to weaken the original attack.

Thackeray's next number is also a somewhat confused mixture, but the overall trend is away from power, towards the weaker attitudes of self-pity, virtuous disapproval, and fear. In Chapter Forty-Four, Becky is her old manipulative self, ironically called an "artless little creature" for the way she entraps Pitt and especially for the way she hems a shirt for her son to demonstrate her virtue: "Whenever Mrs. Rawdon wished to be particularly humble and virtuous," the narrator says, "this little shirt used to come out of her work-box." It is always the same shirt, however, and she never finishes it (pp. 427, 428). This parody of Penelope is Becky at her best; but we lose sympathy with her when she

becomes openly nasty to her son and heartlessly deceives the good-natured Miss Briggs (pp. 429, 430-431). Thackeray shifts from admiring skilful artifice to disapproving of evil and then shifts again to feeling sorry for Becky in the face of the fearsome servants' inquisition. The narrator becomes quite frightened of servants who can sweep away their superiors merely by raising a broom (p. 432).

Fear begins to become a major element in the novel now. Even in the midst of one of little Rawdon's idyllic excursions with his father, we find ourselves involved in a rat hunt in which drains are stopped up and ferrets inserted to flush out "the persecuted animals" so that the hunting party can kill them (p. 439). Thackeray seems to feel that he is trapped like the rats, doomed now that he has entered high society.

The fear becomes so strong that he takes to denying that he is in high society. In the chapter on Gaunt House, for instance, the narrator's friend Tom Eaves notes the sufferings of the great and how they are constantly at each other's throats, and the narrator comments:

> Let us, my brethren, who have not our names in the Red Book, console ourselves by thinking comfortably how miserable our betters may be. (p. 454)

When he began writing Vanity Fair, this statement would have accurately reflected Thackeray's position in the world; but now, after the success of his early numbers and his acceptance into rarefied circles, for him to say this is to

attempt to charm his way past the dangers he now sees around him. Thrice more (pp. 460, 487, 491) the narrator will assert that he is outside the society of the great, but it does not ring true. Thackeray seems to feel himself trapped, however much he may deny it, and he seems to see no way out except, once again, madness: this time the madness of Lord George Gaunt, who loses his mind, significantly, just as he is about to launch a brilliant career (p. 456). Judging from the fear of madness that overtakes Lord Steyne, however (p. 457), this escape route is still unacceptable to Thackeray.

Thackeray recovers enough in the next chapter to launch a satirical attack on the King and his admirers, one of whom is Becky Sharp (pp. 458, 463). "Even our Becky had her weaknesses," the narrator says (p. 460), and despite some artful moments, Becky is now no longer a Satanic rebel, but a foolish and snobbish seeker after status. We mock her foolishness and disapprove of her snobbery, but she is not just a representative of high society and its hangers-on; she is also at times the expression of Thackeray's fears about being in high society. Even in this mostly satirical chapter, these fears emerge, as Thackeray has Lord Steyne warn Becky about the dangers she faces in being a "poor little earthenware pipkin" among "the great copper kettles" of the higher circles (p. 465).

The dangers can be seen in the very next chapter, when "poor little Becky" has to endure the slights of grand

ladies at a party (p. 474). Then at a second party, Becky is set upon again (pp. 489-490). She does emerge victorious from these encounters, and indeed wins extravagant praise for her acting in the infamous charades (p. 498); but her position seems very tenuous. Thackeray seems afraid the bubble will burst, though he expresses the fear this time through Rawdon rather than Becky. Becky is merely bored (p. 487), though even that, surely, is a disguise for fear; but Rawdon is openly frightened and feels alienated from the splendour he sees around him (p. 499).

Of course, he has cause. The most fearful aspect of high society, it would seem, is that one cannot trust anyone there, and Rawdon is soon to discover that he cannot even trust his wife. After her triumph at the charades, Becky becomes again a representative of high society, an example of the dangers that an innocent like Rawdon must face if he somehow stumbles into the upper echelons. However villainous Rawdon may have been earlier in the novel, at this point he seems wholly good: our representative. And when he confronts Steyne and Becky, the latter two are clearly the enemy. Becky, wearing "serpents, and rings, and baubles" (p. 515), is Satanic again, but Thackeray is now opposing the forces of Satan from the standpoint of innocence and virtue. These latter forces even triumph here in the short run, and in a burst of wish-fulfillment[78] Thackeray has

[78] Not genius, as Thackeray and some modern critics have thought: see Robin Gilmour, Thackeray: Vanity Fair (London, 1982), p. 45, and Carey, p. 182.

Becky admire her husband, "strong, brave, and victorious" (p. 515). Rawdon routs one enemy and wins the admiration of another; it is a triumph reminiscent of The Great Hoggarty Diamond and just as unreal.

For though Rawdon can scar Lord Steyne physically, the elite cannot really be defeated. They fight back in underhanded ways, smiling and offering gifts to those who would oppose them. Rawdon wants to fight a duel, but Lord Steyne offers him a governorship, and Rawdon feels "with a kind of rage that his prey [is] escaping him" (p. 536). There is no way to win against the rulers of high society, Thackeray is saying. Rawdon is sent to Coventry and death, perhaps the fate Thackeray feared; and Becky, too, suffers, as the respectable gossip maliciously about her (p. 538). Becky joins Rawdon as our representative here,[79] and they both serve as reflections of Thackeray's fear of the power of Vanity Fair.

This fear seems to lead Thackeray into despair, which is especially evident in his description of Amelia's life in Chapter Fifty-Seven. Amelia is said to be in captivity, leading a cheerless existence as the servant to querulous

---

[79] Becky's shift from adulteress to slandered innocent is merely one of the many instances in which Thackeray transforms a character in order to reflect his attitude of the moment. It has nothing to do with the narrator's shortcomings or the author's squeamishness, two views expressed by the critics. See Ann Y. Wilkinson, "The Thomeavsian Way of Knowing the World: Technique and Meaning in Vanity Fair," ELH 32 (1965), 375-387; and Laurence Lerner, "Thackeray and Marriage," Essays in Criticism 25 (1975), 296.

and ungrateful parents. She has lost her husband and her son and feels quite alone in the world. When her mother dies, she even wishes that she might change places with her (pp. 552-553), and this is not the first suicidal notion we have seen in this section of the novel. When Becky falls, she contemplates taking laudanum to end it all (p. 516), and Rawdon soon after talks of cutting his throat (p. 521). Moreover, Dobbin, on his way back from India, nearly dies of a fever at about the same time (pp. 554-555). There is gloom and death everywhere one looks.

But Thackeray resolves to escape from this predicament, and numbers seventeen and eighteen of Vanity Fair turn into a sentimental and self-glorifying idyll in the midst of fear and suffering. Thackeray decides to escape from high society and to show that he is superior to it. His superiority he demonstrates through Dobbin, who is frequently called William now, and who develops into a Christ-like paragon worshipped by everyone (pp. 557-558, 567, 580, 589, 591, 602, 649). As for the escape from high society, the first attempt involves establishing Amelia and her household in a genteel but not too grand neighbourhood, in "a comfortable house of a second or third-rate order" (p. 578). The point is to be comfortable but also safe, avoiding Becky's mistake of flying too high.

But even in her house of the second or third rank, Amelia begins to be visited by the inhabitants of Vanity Fair, especially after she inherits money from Mr. Osborne. Lady

Dobbin comes calling, as do George Osborne's two sisters and various of Jos's friends. Amelia is soon the centre of a "very genteel circle," whose female members seem to spend all their time making malicious comments about her (pp. 579, 581-582, 593-595). Clearly, this will not do:

> This sort of society was too cruelly genteel for Emmy: and all jumped for joy when a foreign tour was proposed.
>
> (p. 595)

Thus follows the trip to Pumpernickel, in actuality an excursion into sentimentality. Sentimental idealizing begins even before departure. Amelia's son, Georgy, who had been utterly selfish, becomes a more considerate child under Dobbin's tutelage (pp. 383, 540-542, 580). Amelia has a reconciliation with her father (p. 586), and even Mr. Osborne mellows towards her and towards the memory of his disobedient son (pp. 589-591). Then, once on the Continent, we seem to have entered Paradise: a "happy valley," the narrator calls it (p. 607), and "a new world of love and beauty" (p. 600). "I like to dwell upon this period of [Amelia's] life," the narrator says, "and to think that she was cheerful and happy" (p. 601). In fact, he not only dwells on it now; he dwelled in it then. The narrator materializes and enters the story for the first time in Pumpernickel, as if this were where Thackeray himself longed to reside, in the fictional representation of his beloved Weimar.[80] And why not live in a place that can be described

---

[80] See Letters, III, 442-445.

in this manner:

> Pleasant Rhine gardens! Fair scenes of peace and sunshine--noble purple mountains. . . . Who has ever seen you, that has not a grateful memory of those scenes of friendly repose and beauty? To lay down the pen, and even to think of that beautiful Rhineland makes one happy.
>
> (p. 600)

In this land, the women do not sneer at Amelia, but are friendly to her (p. 612), there are continual festivities and entertainments, and everything is arranged "so that a man's life might in fact be a perfect round of pleasure" (p. 610).

One may wonder whether this is truly a man's life, however, and in fact closer inspection reveals that Paradise is seriously flawed. For one thing, it seems excessively autumnal. The narrator speaks of "the old town, with its old moats" and sets his description in the evening, with "long blue shadows stretching over the grass," the sun setting, and night falling, so that "the river grows darker and darker" (p. 600). Pumpernickel lives in "profound peace" (p. 610), but it begins to seem like the peace of the grave. To escape Vanity Fair, Thackeray seems to be learning, is to go out of the world.

And indeed, probably for this reason, Vanity Fair reappears even in Pumpernickel. Partly it appears in order to be mocked: for instance, in the person of Tapeworm, the English diplomat with "his grinning, his simpering, his scented cambric handkerchief, and his high-heeled lacquered boots" (p. 606). Thackeray, of course, despises Vanity

Fair, and yet it seems he cannot live without it. He has Amelia presented at the Pumpernickel court (p. 607), and he has the narrator comment with nervous humour that he associated only with the nobility in Pumpernickel ("for as for the Bourgeois, we could not quite be expected to take notice of them": p. 610, italics in original). Pumpernickel, we find, is a place not only of comfort, but of splendour, and the narrator approvingly describes magnificent dinners at which servants in scarlet and lace attend the guests and serve on silver (p. 610). Thackeray seems to be wishing he could have the pleasures of Vanity Fair without the dangers.

Given that this is impossible and that he must choose between death and Vanity, Thackeray seems to opt for the latter. He brings Becky back into the story as a tempting, mysterious figure, the serpent in the Garden, an evil but a necessary evil (see pp. 614-616); and he uses her to launch his last powerful satirical attacks on the polite world (pp. 617, 623, 634). He returns to Vanity Fair, we see, but not exactly as a friend. Indeed, having reminded himself of its shortcomings, he seems to contemplate another escape, writing almost lovingly of Becky's Bohemian exile among the disowned, the hopelessly indebted, the brawlers, the gamblers, and the cheats (p. 625). This life involves neither the terrors of high society nor the deathliness of Pumpernickel; but ultimately it is too vulgar for Thackeray:

> Faugh--what shall we say, we who have moved among some of the finest company of Vanity Fair, of this refuse and sediment of rascals?
>
> (p. 627)

Becky herself feels embarrassed at her new companions and, on seeing Lord Steyne, tries to return to his society (pp. 628-629). But he refuses her cruelly, terrifying her with threats of murder; Vanity Fair, we are reminded, is a dangerous place. Indeed, even the lords are not immune from its dangers, for Lord Steyne, despite his eminence, dies on hearing of the fall of the House of Bourbon (pp. 629-630). It may, in fact, be precisely because of Lord Steyne's eminence that he is so vulnerable; a lesser man would not have been so affected by the fall of royalty. Better not to rise too high: that seems to be the message.

There seems then to be only one alternative left: love, romance, the comfort that a woman can offer. The major romance of Vanity Fair is that of Dobbin and Amelia. Dobbin has been yearning for the "gentle little woman" (p. 421) all through the novel, but he has been rebuffed by her just as Mrs. Brookfield rebuffed Thackeray. Amelia is full of gratitude towards Dobbin, nothing more (p. 591); she remains attached to her worthless husband even after his death. And when Becky shows up at the end, Amelia chooses her presence over Dobbin's, provoking the Major's departure (pp. 642-649). Thackeray seems to be thinking here not only of Mrs. Brookfield and her attachment to her husband, but of his wife and her submission to her mother.[81] Becky in these

[81] As noted above (footnote 34), Thackeray's mother-in-law had tried to prevent his marriage, and his wife had seemed willing to submit to her mother's orders to stop the courtship. It took some vigorous wooing by Thackeray, along with a promise not to "weaken such a tie as

final chapters, with her clinking brandy bottle (pp. 633, 637), resembles nothing so much as the vulgar, interfering mothers-in-law of Thackeray's earliest fiction.

Love is not the answer either, then; but it leads Thackeray to his final escape: not love, but revenge in love. After portraying Amelia's unjust rejections of the noble Dobbin (see pp. 643, 645), he takes his revenge, in the first place by having Dobbin denounce Amelia as being unworthy of his love (p. 647). Amelia is then shown to be cast down by Dobbin's words, and the narrator cruelly adds to her humiliation by congratulating her on her "victory" in getting Dobbin to leave, a victory she suddenly seems not to want (p. 648). The next stage of the revenge is to show Amelia begging for Dobbin to return. She is "wretched" without him and reproaches herself for having "flung away such a treasure" (p. 655). She writes Dobbin, and when he returns she hangs her head and kisses his hands (p. 660). But the crowning part of the revenge is that, though Dobbin marries her, he no longer truly loves her. He is fonder of his daughter than of his wife, and Amelia herself knows it (p. 666). In fact, Amelia is a disappointment to him. The narrator's closing words--"Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" (p. 666)--clearly refer to Amelia's shortcomings and indicate, from one point of view, not

---

exists between you two [his wife-to-be and her mother]," before the future Mrs. Thackeray found the courage to marry him (Letters, I, 309, 318-319). See Ray, The Uses of Adversity, pp. 182-188; Ennis, pp. 70-76.

so much despair as the final stage of revenge. The rejecting woman has been forced to beg her man to return, and when he does he is able to act coolly towards her, for after all she is not truly worthy of him. Thackeray has found his refuge: a revenge fantasy against Mrs. Brookfield.[82]

It is a curiously unsatisfying sort of revenge, however, a sad revenge that gives no pleasure, for it denies Thackeray the love he had yearned for. Somewhat before the end of the novel, the narrator ironically celebrates the union of Dobbin and Amelia, saying:

> This is what [Dobbin] has asked for every day and hour for eighteen years. This is what he pined after. Here it is--the summit, the end--the last page of the third volume. Good-bye, Colonel--God bless you, honest William!--Farewell, dear Amelia--Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling!
> (pp. 660-661)

There is mockery here, especially of Amelia the "parasite." But there is sad yearning too, a sentimental wish for the happy ending that Thackeray will not provide. A truly happy ending, involving a real relationship, would probably have been too frightening to conceive; and besides, in real life, there was no happy ending with Mrs. Brookfield. A fearful Thackeray thus holds to his anger, even though he is the one

---

[82] This connection between Dobbin's revenge on Amelia and Thackeray's feelings for Mrs. Brookfield is made by Lambert Ennis, pp. 147-148. Ennis notes that at the end of the book Thackeray "absent-mindedly" gave Amelia a maid with the name of Payne, the same name as Mrs. Brookfield's maid. Thackeray then anxiously apologized to Mrs. Brookfield (Letters, II, 394).

who is most hurt by it, deprived by it of even yearning for happiness.

If we consider the novel's concluding passage once more, we can see that there is despair in it after all, not directly over Amelia and her shortcomings, not over the fact that marriages do not live up to expectations,[83] but over the fact that revenge fantasies do not live up to them. Thackeray the author has his desire at the end of the book--an escape from fear (and love and life)--but he is far from satisfied with it. In fact, he suffers because he has attained it.[84] This is the real suffering of one who is trapped inside his fears and fantasies, not the imaginary suffering Thackeray has been writing about while in the grip of those fantasies. This is not the pure and noble Dobbin or Amelia suffering inexplicably in a cruel world; this is more like the failed John Sedley suffering because of his own paranoid delusions. There is power in the scene that depicts the ruin of Mr. Sedley, and there is power in these final pages as Thackeray expresses his own feelings of devastation. It is the poignant power that comes from revealing the truths of an all-too-human heart.

---

[83] As Bernard Paris argues in A Psychological Approach to Fiction (Bloomington, Ind., 1974), p. 127.

[84] This authorial suffering and dissatisfaction may explain the melancholy tone of "Before the Curtain," which Thackeray composed at the end of the novel, though it appears at the beginning.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

To travel through Thackeray's early work is to encounter what at first glance seems to be a bewildering array of apparently conficting attitudes: self-pity and self-scorn, mockery of sentimentality and indulgence in it, virulent anger at the world and gentle yearning for a better life. Most of these attitudes can be grouped under the headings of Anger (or Cynicism) and Sentimentality; but even that raises the question of how one author can embody two sets of feelings that seem so opposed to each other.

Further study sheds some light on these problems. At root, what all of Thackeray's early works (including Vanity Fair) reflect is the torment of the author. Feeling that he was suffering in a hostile world, Thackeray's two main responses in his fiction were to attack the world for making him suffer and to yearn to escape from his suffering. His cynicism and his sentimentality stem from the same root. To speak just of cynicism and sentimentality, however, is to over-simplify. There are two other fundamental feelings in Thackeray which are perhaps even more important than cyncism and sentimentality. These are fear and inadequacy. Often, Thackeray's anger and sentimentality are not direct products of his suffering, but only indirect products, arising out of

fear or a sense of inadequacy, and only ultimately traceable to his feelings of torment.

Anger may even at times be a mere disguise for fear in Thackeray's works, as when he attacks marriage in Catherine out of what seems like fear of emotional intimacy. More often, however, the process is that fear, being Thackeray's reaction to a hostile world of bullies, snobs, and tyrannical women, prompts him to flee to safer ground. Such flight is at times quite openly portrayed, for instance in Cox's Diary when Cox is glad to leave the terrors of genteel life, in The Fitz-Boodle Papers when Fitz-Boodle flees Ottilia, and in Barry Lyndon when Barry runs away to seek his greatness far from his tormentors.

Flight, however, produces a sense of exclusion, of being separated from the good things in life. This in turn produces resentment and also yearning for what has been given up. Thus Cox complains about losing his inheritance and Fitz-Boodle yearns for love, even though both of them have, out of fear, surrendered these things with relief. One may then extrapolate from these clear depictions of the process of fear producing anger and sentiment to suggest that even when Thackeray is not himself pointing out the connections, his anger--at women, snobs, or whatever--is derived from self-imposed exclusion based on fear. The same may be said of his sentimental yearning and the despair it often develops into.

There are also connections between anger and inadequacy, and sometimes these, too, are made explicit. At one point in The Fitz-Boodle Papers, Thackeray has Fitz-Boodle confess that his anger against one woman and her family was an endeavour "to hide under the lash of wit the bitter pangs of humiliation" (Works, IV, 303). It may be supposed that much of Thackeray's anger elsewhere is also meant to cover up humiliation, to boost his self-esteem by lowering that of others. An obvious example is the attack on Mrs. Haggarty as a "dullard" in "Dennis Haggarty's Wife," but even anger that does not seem directly linked to sneering at others may be motivated in part by a desire to boost self-esteem. To attack aristocrats and make them seem ridiculous is one way a person who feels inferior to the higher orders can reassure himself of his own self-worth.

Another way of achieving this reassurance is by self-glorification; but self-glorification, too, can lead to anger if the high opinion one reaches of oneself is found not to be shared by others. Much of Thackeray's anger at snobbery can be traced to this source. Thackeray is angry, as he has Yellowplush say, because the aristocracy will not "reckonize" his genius. In this way does inadequacy, indirectly through self-glorification, produce anger.

What we have, then, is inner torment producing fear, resentment, yearning, and inadequacy. As well, however, the fear, once produced, can itself generate resentment, yearning, and even feelings of inadequacy (to flee in fear is not

the way to build self-esteem). And the inadequacy can lead to feelings of anger and probably as well to yearning sentimentality. In any case, however produced, fear, resentment, yearning, and inadequacy are the building blocks on which Thackeray's fiction rests. These four basic elements produce a host of varying attitudes: the anti-sentimentality (a form of anger), the wish-fulfillment (a form of sentimentality), the self-glorification (a disguise and compensation for inadequacy), and so on.[85] All of Thackeray's works before Vanity Fair can be characterized as expressions of one or more of these derived attitudes. The Yellowplush Papers embodies nervous laughter (a form of fear) and anger. Cox's Diary is mainly an expression of fear. The Great Hoggarty Diamond combines sentimentality of the liberal and conservative varieties (that is, feeling sorry for victims and idealizing the world). And Barry Lyndon expresses revenge, though the revenge is undercut by nervous laughter and its non-humorous variant.

Vanity Fair differs from the earlier works in part because it embodies so many different attitudes. There are feelings of inadequacy, there is revenge of a Satanic sort, there is anger expressed satirically, there is anger expressed less than satirically, there is yearning for a better world, there is escapism, nostalgia, and compassion for victims. There is even some nervous laughter, and at

---

[85] For a list of Thackeray's attitudes, see Appendix A below.

the end there is fear and self-glorification.

But Vanity Fair is different not only because of its great variety of attitudes, but also because of the power with which some of these attitudes are expressed. The kaleidoscope is shaken more frequently in this novel, but Thackeray not only provides more patterns; he provides a sharper focus than before. The anger here, embodied most notably in Becky's Satanic revenge and the narrator's satirical cynicism, is stronger, more confident, and more artistic than anything else in the early Thackeray, except perhaps for some scenes from Catherine. The same can be said for the mature sympathy that here replaces (at least at times) Thackeray's usual maudlin sentimentality. Vanity Fair is an artistic leap, a display of unexpected power from an author who had previously remained stuck in the tangled thickets of personal concerns. Here he launches himself, tentatively, onto a grand highway.

Whether he can stay on the highway is another matter. The very success that seems to be at the root of his breakthrough in Vanity Fair in the end makes him flee back to his old personal preoccupations. Moderate success seems to have inspired Thackeray, but the spectacular success of the early numbers of Vanity Fair seems to have terrified him and led him to return, in the last third of the novel, to his old, weak attitudes, almost bereft of the power he so briefly displayed. The last part of Vanity Fair is, for the most part, personal, frightened, belligerent, and despairing.

One can explain all this, but it is regrettable that one has to. It would have been much better if Thackeray could have maintained his power to the end.

Appendix A

THACKERAYAN ATTITUDES

The following is a list of attitudes that can be found in Thackeray's early works:

1) nervous laughter (the humorous undercutting of attacks)

2) non-humorous undercutting

3) overt fear

4) anti-sentimentality

5) open anger

6) cynicism proper (i.e., questioning of motives)

7) justified revenge

8) Satanic revenge

9) satirical anger/cynicism

10) liberal sentimentality (compassion for others or self-pity)

11) conservative sentimentality ("all's right with the world")

12) yearning for a better world, nostalgia, escapism, etc.

13) wish-fulfillment

14) despair

15) mature sympathy

16) self-scorn

17) self-glorification, self-justification

18) looking down on others.

Attitudes 1-3 derive from fear; attitudes 4-9 derive from anger; attitudes 10-15 derive from yearning and feelings of pain (though number 12 is influenced by fear as well); and attitudes 16-18 derive from feelings of inadequacy.

Appendix B

"THE WORLD IS A LOOKING-GLASS"

The passage in Vanity Fair that contains the well-known statement, "The world is a looking-glass," has often been misinterpreted. The passage, which is a commentary by the narrator, continues after the looking-glass remark with the comment that the world "gives back to every man the reflection of his own face." The narrator then goes on:

> Frown at it [the world], and it will in turn look sourly upon you; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly kind companion; and so let all young persons take their choice.
>
> (VF, 19)

Bernard J. Paris takes all this to be a serious recommendation to be good.[86] Similarly, Cynthia G. Woolf says that the narrator here is telling us that the world holds up a mirror to "man's nature" and rewards those who are most deserving. But Woolf notes that the novel goes on to show an undeserving Sir Pitt Crawley being rewarded with high honours, and so she reasons that the point is to encourage the reader to draw moral inferences that contradict the narrator's morality.[87] But the narrator does not say that the world reflects

---

[86] "The Psychic Structure of 'Vanity Fair'," Victorian Studies 10 (1966-67), 404.

[87] Cynthia G. Woolf, "Who is the Narrator of Vanity Fair and Where Is He Standing?" College Literature 1 (1974), 198, 195.

man's "nature" or his soul or his inner being--only his face, that is, his surface appearance. The narrator is not being fatuous at this point, but cynical. He is ironically recommending the hypocritical practice of putting on a pleasing appearance in order to win the world's favour, and thus in reality he is criticizing the ways of the world, not foolishly recommending conventional nonsense.

The confusion arises because, just moments before, the narrator was being fatuous, saying that those who are ill treated by the world fully deserve the treatment they get. There is some rapid shifting going on here, in Thackeray's most characteristic manner, and to understand it all we must go back a bit further.

The narrator's commentary arises out of the account of Becky's desire for revenge against Miss Pinkerton and her academy, in which, says Becky, she has been treated "worse than any servant in the kitchen" (VF, 19). Becky's suffering and her revenge feelings both seem to reflect Thackeray's own feelings, and when he has the narrator agree with Becky that she was no angel, the tone seems sympathetic, even admiring, as if the author were yearning for Satanic revenge, through Becky, for all his own humiliations. However, such revenge, directed against genteel society, might provoke retaliation. Thackeray seems suddenly to realize this and to become frightened. The result is that he distances himself, briefly, from Becky. Through the narrator, he calls her a misanthropist, emphasizing her own unplea-

santness towards the world, and saying that this unpleasantness explains her suffering.[88] Out of fear, it seems, Thackeray is withdrawing the attack on genteel society and saying that it is those who complain and seek revenge who are to be criticized. It is an approach reminiscent of The Fitz-Boodle Papers and Fitz-Boodle's comment that it is wiser to call oneself an ass than to attack the world (see above, p. 77).

Thus there is a shift from expressing a desire for revenge through Becky to attacking those that seek such revenge, a shift from attacking the world to withdrawing the attack in the Fitz-Boodleian manner. But then there is another shift which renews the attack on society. Immediately after blaming sufferers for their suffering, the narrator embarks on the cynical looking-glass commentary, which gives an entirely new meaning to the notion that those who suffer deserve to suffer. To say that to succeed in life all one need do is put on a pleasing appearance suggests

---

[88] The text reads:

> Miss Rebecca was not, then, in the least kind or placable. All the world used her ill, said this young misanthropist (or misogynist, for of the world of men she can be pronounced as yet to have had but little experience), and we may be pretty certain that persons of either sex whom all the world treats ill, deserve entirely the treatment they get.

This is the 1848 version. In 1853, the words "(or misogynist . . . experience)" and "of either sex" were deleted (see VF, 19 and notes).

that sufferers suffer not because they are evil, but because they are too foolish to perform the simple acts of hypocrisy necessary for success. The narrator is now saying: If you are too stupid to lie and dissemble, then you deserve whatever befalls you. Of course, he is being ironic (and bitter); he does not really approve of lies and dissembling; but what he is not being here is fatuous, even though he was being fatuous (as a result of the author's fears) just a moment before.

This passage occurs early in the novel, and the shifting attitudes in it reflect the unsettled nature of the opening chapters, in which Thackeray is moving towards confident satire but is still hampered by his fear of offending his audience. The momentary withdrawal of the attack on the world is a result of his fear, whereas the reassertion of the attack anticipates the strength of later chapters. In a sense, then, this passage is a microcosm of the struggle that goes on throughout the novel, and it is thus a passage that it is important to interpret correctly.

Appendix C

THE NARRATOR OF VANITY FAIR

In my discussion of Vanity Fair, I have assumed that the narrator reliably reflects Thackeray's own attitudes. I have done so because, as is the case in Catherine, the narrator in Vanity Fair is not involved in the novel's action (except very briefly and marginally in the closing chapters) and thus he does not become an object of attack. This is in contrast to a narrator like Barry Lyndon, whose actions undermine his credibility. There is also a contrast with the narrator of The Yellowplush Papers, whose language is so comical that he cannot function consistently as an authoritative voice. The narrator of Vanity Fair, on the other hand, speaks standard English and does not engage in action that might leave him open to authorial ridicule. Still, there have been many critics in recent years who have dismissed him as a fatuous and fallible being whose commentary is not to be accepted as Thackeray's own.[89]

The narrator has been attacked on two grounds: first, for who he is; and second, for what he says. The first attack deals with the narrator as a character. It is pointed out that the narrator is given a wife named Julia

---

[89] See, for example, Juliet McMaster, Thackeray: The Major Novels ([Toronto], 1971), pp. 3, 5, 9.

and (at least at one point) is said to be more than fifty years old.[90] Since Thackeray was in his thirties at the time and married to a woman named Isabella, the narrator is obviously not Thackeray. Of course, this is true in a literal sense, but that hardly proves that Thackeray was not using a fictional persona to express his actual feelings. Moreover, to make the narrator over fifty seems somehow truer to Thackeray's essential being--"What is it makes one so blase & tired I wonder at 38," he wrote in 1849 (Letters, II, 565)--than to give him Thackeray's chronological age. It is also noted that there are discrepancies in the narrator's biography: his age varies and he has children at one point and not at another.[91] But this indicates unreliability not in the narrator, but in the author, who was notorious for such sloppiness.[92]

The second major argument against the narrator is that what he says is inconsistent or inane.[93] Again, this is really the author's fault, not his narrator's. We have seen Thackeray's inconsistency throughout his oeuvre; and as for

---

[90] Ioan Williams, Thackeray (London, 1968), p. 67.

[91] Harriet Blodgett, "Necessary Presence: The Rhetoric of the Narrator in Vanity Fair," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 22 (1967), 212n, McMaster, p. 37.

[92] See Saintsbury, Works, IV, xxiii, for a discussion of such discrepancies in other works. See also Sutherland, Thackeray at Work, pp. 3-4, and Thackeray's own confession on this point in Works, XVII, 593.

[93] Roger M. Swanson, "Vanity Fair: The Double Standard," in The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century, ed. George Goodin (Urbana, 1972), p. 135; McMaster, p. 43.

inanity, the only actual example given[94] refers to the narrator's saying people who suffer deserve their suffering (VF, 19.) This is actually a typical case of Thackerayan fear (of Thackeray excusing the oppressors for fear of provoking them), not an example of mocking the narrator (see Appendix B above for more detail on this point). The narrator of Vanity Fair is not a character held up by the author for ridicule. On the contrary, he seems a quite faithful reflection of his creator's strengths and weaknesses. If he seems inane at times, that reflects Thackeray's fearfulness and feelings of inadequacy. But he is not always inane; he is sometimes quite powerful, though one would never know it from reading some of the critics.

---

[94] McMaster, p. 9.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Allen, Walter. The English Novel. New York: Dutton, 1954.

Auerbach, Nina. "Incarnations of the Orphan." ELH 42 (1975), 395-419.

Baker, Joseph E. "'Vanity Fair' and The Celestial City." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 10 (1955), 89-98.

Bledsoe, Robert L. "Fitzboodle among the Harpies: A Reading of 'Denis Haggarty's Wife'." Studies in Short Fiction 12 (1975), 181-184.

Blodgett, Harriet. "Necessary Presence: The Rhetoric of the Narrator in Vanity Fair." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 22 (1967), 211-223.

Brander, Laurence. Thackeray. Revised edition. [London]: Longmans, Green, 1964.

Burch, Mark H. "'The world is a looking-glass': Vanity Fair as Satire." Genre 15 (1982), 265-279.

Burns, Wayne. "Thackeray's Amelia and Dobbin or Vanity Fair without Becky Sharp." Recovering Literature 5, ii (1976), 5-17.

Cabot, Frederick C. "The Two Voices in Thackeray's Catherine." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 28 (1974), 404-416.

Carey, John. Thackeray: Prodigal Genius. London: Faber, 1977.

Cecil, David. Early Victorian Novelists. London: Constable, 1934.

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

-----. "Catherine: Thackeray's Credo." Review of English Studies. N.S. 15 (1964), 381-396.

Connelly, Joseph F. "Transparent Poses: Castle Rackrent and The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon." Eire 14, ii (1979), 37-43.

Cowart, David. "Sacrificial Motifs in Thackeray's Vanity Fair." CEA Critic 41 (1979), 21-25.

Craig, G. Armour. "On the Style of Vanity Fair" (1958). In Thackeray: Vanity Fair: A Casebook. Edited by Arthur Pollard. London: Macmillan, 1978.

DiBattista, Maria. "The Triumph of Clytemnestra: The Charades in Vanity Fair." PMLA 95 (1980), 827-837.

Dibon, Anne-Marie. "Form and Value in the French and English 19th-Century Novel." Modern Language Notes 87 (1972), 883-914.

Dodds, John W. Thackeray: A Critical Portrait. New York: Russell and Russell, 1963. Reprint of 1941 Oxford University Press edition.

-----. "Thackeray as a Satirist Previous to Vanity Fair." Modern Language Quarterly 2 (1941), 163-178.

Dooley, D.J. "Thackeray's use of Vanity Fair." Studies in English Literature 11 (1971), 701-713.

Dyson, A.E. "An Irony Against Heroes" (1965). In Thackeray: Vanity Fair: A Casebook. Edited by Arthur Pollard. London: Macmillan, 1978.

Ennis, Lambert. Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1950.

Ferris, Ina. "Realism and the Discord of Ending: The Example of Thackeray." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 38 (1983), 289-303.

-----. William Makepeace Thackeray. Boston: Twayne, 1983.

Fraser, Russell A. "Pernicious Casuistry: A Study of Character in Vanity Fair." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 12 (1957), 137-147.

Garrett-Goodyear, Joan. "Stylized Emotions, Unrealized Selves: Expressive Characterization in Thackeray." Victorian Studies 22 (1977), 173-192.

Gilmour, Robin. Thackeray: Vanity Fair. London: Edward Arnold, 1982.

Greig, J.Y.T. Thackeray: A Reconsideration. London: Oxford University Press, 1950.

Gulliver, Harold S. Thackeray's Literary Apprenticeship. Valdosta, Georgia: privately printed, 1934.

Hagan, John. "Vanity Fair: Becky Brought to Book Again." Studies in the Novel 7 (1975), 479-506.

Halperin, John. "Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, and Trollope." In Egoism and Self-Discovery in the Victorian Novel: Studies in the Ordeal of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century. New York: Burt Franklin, 1974.

Harden, Edgar F. "The Discipline and Significance of Form in Vanity Fair" (1967). In Thackeray: Vanity Fair: A Casebook. Edited by Arthur Pollard. London: Macmillan, 1978.

-----. "The Fields of Mars in Vanity Fair." Tennessee Studies in Literature 10 (1965), 123-132.

-----. "William Makepeace Thackeray." Dictionary of Literary Biography. Volume 21 (Victorian Novelists Before 1885). Detroit: Gale, 1983.

Hardy, Barbara. The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray. [Pittsburgh]: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.

Hollingsworth, Keith. The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963.

Horney, Karen. The Neurotic Personality of Our Time. New York: Norton, 1937.

Houston, Neal B. "A Brief Inquiry into the Morality of Amelia in Vanity Fair." Victorian Newsletter 30 (Fall, 1966), 23-24.

Iser, Wolfgang. The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

James, David L. "Thackeray and His Narrator." Essays in Criticism 26 (1976), 189-190.

Klein, J.T. "The Dual Center: A Study of Narrative Structure in Vanity Fair." College Literature 4 (1977), 122-128.

Kleis, John Christopher. "Dramatic Irony in Thackeray's Catherine: The Function of Ikey Solomons, Esq., Jr." Victorian Newsletter 33 (Spring, 1968), 50-53.

Knoepflmacher, U.C. Laughter and Despair: Readings in Ten Novels of the Victorian Era. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

Lemon, Lee T. "The Hostile Universe: A Developing Pattern in Nineteenth-Century Fiction." In The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century. Edited by George Goodin. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Lerner, Laurence. "Thackeray and Marriage." Essays in Criticism 25 (1975), 279-303.

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

Levine, George. The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Loofbourow, John. Thackeray and the Form of Fiction. Princeton: Princeton Unversity Press, 1964.

Lougy, Robert. "Vision and Satire: The Warped Looking Glass in Vanity Fair." PMLA 90 (1975), 256-269.

Lund, Michael. "Beyond the Text of Vanity Fair." Studies in the Novel 11 (1979), 147-161.

McCullen, Maurice L., Jr. "Sentimentality in Thackeray's Vanity Fair." Cithara 9 (1969), 56-66.

McMaster, Juliet. Thackeray: The Major Novels. [Toronto]: University of Toronto Press, 1971.

Margulies, Jay W. "Vanity Fair: No Prizes Worth Winning." Research Studies 45 (1977), 1-13.

Martin, Bruce K. "Vanity Fair: Narrative Ambivalence and Comic Form." Tennessee Studies in Literature 20 (1975), 37-49.

Mathison, John K. "The German Sections of Vanity Fair." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 18 (1963), 235-246.

Mauskopf, Charles. "Thackeray's Concept of the Novel: A Study of Conflict." Philological Quarterly 50 (1971), 239-252.

Miller, Mark Crispin. "Barry Lyndon Reconsidered." Georgia Review 30 (1976), 827-853.

Milner, Ian. "Theme and Moral Vision in Thackeray's Vanity Fair." Philologica Pragensia 13 (1970), 177-185.

Moler, Kenneth L. "Evelina in Vanity Fair: Becky Sharp and Her Patrician Heroes." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 27 (1972), 171-181.

Monsarrat, Ann. An Uneasy Victorian: Thackeray the Man, 1811-1863. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1980.

Nadel, Ira Bruce. "Becky Sharp and the Three Per Cent Solution." Victorian Newsletter 58 (Fall, 1980), 20-23.

Pantuckova, Lidmila. W.M. Thackeray as a Critic of Literature. Brno Studies in English. Brno: Universita J.E. Purkyne, 1972.

Paris, Bernard J. "The Psychic Structure of 'Vanity Fair'." Victorian Studies 10 (1966-67), 389-410.

-----. A Psychological Approach to Fiction. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974.

Parker, David. "Thackeray's Barry Lyndon." Ariel 6, iv (1975), 68-80.

Praz, Mario. The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction. Translated by Angus Davidson. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

Rawlins, Jack P. Thackeray's Novels: A Fiction that is True. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Ray, Gordon. The Buried Life. London: Oxford University Press, 1952.

-----. Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom, 1847-1863. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958.

-----. Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity, 1811-1846. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955.

-----. "Vanity Fair: One Version of the Novelist's Responsibility" (1950). In Thackeray: Vanity Fair: A Casebook. Edited by Arthur Pollard. London: Macmillan, 1978.

Redwine, Bruce. "The Uses of Memento Mori in Vanity Fair." Studies in English Literature 17 (1977), 657-672.

Reed, Walter L. An Exemplary History of the Novel: The Quixotic versus the Picaresque. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Rogers, Katharine M. "A Defense of Thackeray's Amelia." Texas Studies in Literature and Language 11 (1970), 1367-1374.

-----. "The Pressure of Convention on Thackeray's Women." Modern Language Review 67 (1972), 257-263.

-----. The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966.

Rogers, Winslow. "Thackeray's Self-Consciousness." In The Worlds of Victorian Fiction. Edited by Jerome H. Buckley. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Salerno, Nicholas A. "Catherine: Theme and Structure." American Imago 18 (1961), 159-166.

Scarry, Elaine. "Enemy and Father: Comic Equilibrium in Number Fourteen of Vanity Fair." Journal of Narrative Technique 10 (1980), 145-155.

Segel, Elizabeth Towne. "Truth and Authenticity in Thackeray." Journal of Narrative Technique 2 (1972), 46-59.

Sharp, Sister M. Corona. "Sympathetic Mockery: A Study of the Narrator's Character in Vanity Fair." ELH 29 (1962), 324-336.

Sheets, Robin Ann. "Art and Artistry in Vanity Fair." ELH 42 (1975), 420-432.

Smith, Grahame. The Novel and Society: Defoe to George Eliot. London: Batsford, 1984.

Stevens, Joan. "A Note on Thackeray's 'Manager of the Performance'." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 22 (1968), 391-397.

Stevenson, Lionel. Review of Geoffrey Tillotson's Thackeray the Novelist. Nineteenth-Century Fiction 10 (1955), 80-83.

-----. "Vanity Fair and Lady Morgan." PMLA 48 (1933), 547-551.

Stewart, D.H. "Vanity Fair: Life in the Void." College English 25 (1963), 209-214.

Sundell, M.G. "Thackeray Criticism: Its Fortunes and Misfortunes." Studies in the Novel 4 (1972), 513-521.

Sutcliffe, Emerson Grant. "Thackeray's Romanticism." South Atlantic Quarterly 21 (1922), 313-321.

Sutherland, J.A. "The Expanding Narrative of Vanity Fair." Journal of Narrative Technique 3 (1973), 149-169.

-----. "Thackeray as Victorian Racialist." Essays in Criticism 20 (1970), 441-445.

-----. Thackeray at Work. London: Athlone Press, 1974.

-----. "A Vanity Fair Mystery: The Delay in Publication." Costerus. N.S. 2 (1974), 185-191.

Swanson, Roger M. "Vanity Fair: The Double Standard." In The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century. Edited by George Goodin. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Taube, Myron. "The Character of Amelia and the Meaning of Vanity Fair." Victorian Newsletter 18 (Fall, 1960), 1-8.

-----. "Contrast as a Principle of Structure in Vanity Fair." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 18 (1963), 119-135.

-----. "The George-Amelia-Dobbin Triangle in the Structure of Vanity Fair. Victorian Newsletter 29 (Spring, 1966), 9-18.

-----. "Thackeray and the Reminiscential Vision." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 18 (1963), 247-259.

Thompson, Leslie M. "Becky Sharp and the Virtues of Sin." Victorian Newsletter 31 (Spring, 1967), 31-33.

Tilford, John E., Jr. "The Degradation of Becky Sharp." South Atlantic Quarterly 58 (1959), 603-608.

Tillotson, Geoffrey. Thackeray the Novelist. [Cambridge, England]: Cambridge University Press, 1954.

Tillotson, Kathleen. Novels of the Eighteen-Forties. Corrected edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

Tolley, Michael J. "The Teller and the Tale: Thackeray in Vanity Fair." In Approaches to the Novel. Edited by John Colmer. Sydney, Australia: Rigby, 1966.

Trollope, Anthony. Thackeray. London: Macmillan, 1879.

Von Hendy, Andrew. "Misunderstanding about Becky's Characterization." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 18 (1963), 279-283.

Wheatley, James H. Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1969.

Wilkenfeld, Roger B. "'Before the Curtain' and Vanity Fair." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 26 (1971), 307-318.

Wilkinson, Ann Y. "The Thomeavsian Way of Knowing the World: Technique and Meaning in Vanity Fair." ELH 32 (1965), 370-387.

Williams, Ioan M. Thackeray. London: Evans, 1968.

Wolff, Cynthia G. "Who is the Narrator of Vanity Fair and Where Is He Standing?" College Literature 1 (1974), 190-203.

Worth, George J. "More on the German Sections of Vanity Fair." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 19 (1965), 402-404.