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The Main Sources of Thackeray's Aesthetic Creed

Thackeray never summed up or analysed the principles which form the basis of his critical judgments, but we may gather many unformulated "rules" from his critical practice and gain a relatively clear idea of the basic criteria he applies in his assessment of individual authors and their works. These criteria are naturally founded upon and develop organically from his conception of the nature and function of literature and art, from his aesthetic creed. Every work dealing with Thackeray as literary critic (or art critic, for that matter) would be of course incomplete and unscholarly, if it took no notice of this issue of basic importance, without whose solution no adequate evaluation of Thackeray's critical work can be attained. Being aware of this, I have investigated Thackeray's views on art and literature — both in their development and practical application in his literary work — during the preparatory stages preceding the present study, and have published the results of my research separately in an extensive article "The Aesthetic Views of W. M. Thackeray".¹ Thus I do not think it necessary to incorporate this study as a whole into the present work, however intimately it is bound up with it, and shall only draw upon the conclusions of my investigation, referring the reader for details of the argument to the original source. There is one matter, however, which I have not dealt with. For the purpose of the quoted study I did not think it necessary to investigate all the sources of Thackeray's aesthetics and therefore did not go further back than to Fielding as the founder of the literary form cultivated by Thackeray, his immediate predecessor and avowed literary preceptor. The present study, however, requires deeper attention to this matter, for without determining in the first place Thackeray's relationship to the Neoclassicist aesthetic and critical creed, as well as to that of Romanticism and of his own age, it would be impossible to assess his precise position in the criticism of his time. It is of course not possible to ascertain with any absolute certainty which aesthetic principles and critical standards Thackeray consciously took over from his predecessors and which he eventually arrived at for himself in the course of his own literary and critical practice. No reliable evidence for this exists, since Thackeray's records of his study of the great critical works of the past and of his own time are incomplete, as he did not note all the books he read and did not always, as we have seen, express his opinion on those he recorded. I shall therefore speak less of indebtedness and more of the points of resemblance and differences between his creed and those of his predecessors and contemporaries. The present chapter is devoted only to his aesthetics, while his critical creed and its relationship to that of his predecessors and contemporaries will be discussed separately.

Not to make my argument too lengthy, I shall concentrate, in the first four sub-chapters, only upon the basic aesthetic problems, selecting those upon which the parallels and differences between Thackeray's conceptions and those of the

¹ See note 19, Introduction.

Neoclassicists and Romantics may be best demonstrated, namely, his conception of some of the diverse aspects of the social function of art and literature, of nature and of beauty in nature and art and of artistic imitation. The fifth sub-chapter will attempt to sum up the relation of Thackeray's aesthetic creed to early Victorian aesthetics.

1. The Social Function of Literature and Art

As I have shown in the study referred to above, with the strengthening impact upon Thackeray's consciousness of the social struggles in the period of Chartism, the novelist came to be more and more alive to the significant role played by art and literature in the life of human society and paid relatively considerable attention to the diverse aspects of their social function. The conception at which he eventually arrived in the years of his prime was that of art as being at the same time depictive and instructive, closely connected with the moral life of man and devoted to the tasks of inspiring virtue and purifying human manners, and altogether representing a very important factor in human life and society. As this summary suggests, the original sources of his conception are the theories of Aristotle and Horace, and his standpoint is therefore near to that of the numerous followers of these founders of aesthetics, before him or of his own time, who did not subscribe to the doctrine of art for art's sake, but were convinced that all art should serve mankind in the endeavour to create a better and more beautiful world. In the ensuing consideration of the relationship between Thackeray's views and those of his predecessors and contemporaries I shall therefore leave out the most obvious parallels resulting from the common source of these views, especially those concerning the common opinion of these aestheticians that the instruction provided by art should concern first and foremost the sphere of human morals, the common stress laid upon the moral mission of art. In the analysis of his criticism, however, I shall pay detailed attention to this conception of his, both in its development and in its practical application in his critical practice. This chapter will be then devoted to the most conspicuous differences to be found between his views and those of the Neoclassicists and Romantics (to whom, however, some of their successors of Thackeray's own time will be added) regarding certain selected aspects of the social function of literature and art — the instructive value of literature, didacticism in art, the social commitment of literature, the position of the artist in society and his relationship to that society.

Upon the whole it seems to me that in his views on the above aspects of the social function of literature Thackeray is nearer to the Neoclassicists than to the Romantics, for his conception differed from that of the former only in some not very essential points, whereas the difference between his standpoint and that of the Romantics (though not of all of them) concerns at least one important issue. Although Thackeray shared with the Neoclassicists (especially with Fielding and Johnson) and even with some Romantics (Wordsworth, Hunt and Hazlitt) their strong belief in the instructive value of literature as equalling and even surpassing that of history in its vividness, eloquence and verisimilitude, demanded instruction from literature and expressed his satisfaction when he got it, he occasionally assumes an attitude which bears traces of the influence of

his own time. Living in the age of Utilitarianism, and resenting the perpetual stress laid upon the "useful", he pronounces statements which evoke the impression of willingness to accept also the idea that the novelist could be merely an entertainer — the idea explicitly rejected for instance by Fielding in the *Covent-Garden Journal* of February 1752 (and much later very emphatically by George Eliot). In his critical consideration of the memoirs of the Irish historical highwayman James Freeny, some Irish stories and a tragedy in verse, he for instance writes:

"It is a comfort, meanwhile, to come on occasions on some of the good old stories and biographies. These books were evidently written before the useful had attained its present detestable popularity. There is nothing useful *here*, that's certain: and a man will be puzzled to extract a precise moral out of the adventures of Mr. James Freeny; or out of the legends in the *Hibernian Tales*, or out of the lamentable tragedy of the *Battle of Aughrim*, writ in most doleful Anglo-Irish verse. But are we to reject all things that have not a moral tacked to them? 'Is there any moral shut within the bosom of the rose?' And yet, as the same noble poet sings (giving a smart slap to the utility people the while), 'useful applications lie in art and nature', and every man may find a moral suited to his mind in them; or if not a moral, an occasion for moralizing.

Honest Freeny's adventures . . ., if they have a moral, have that dubious one which the poet admits may be elicited from a rose; and which every man may select according to his mind. And surely this is a far better and more comfortable system of moralizing than that in the fable-books, where you are obliged to accept the story with the inevitable moral corollary, that *will stick close to it*" (*Works* V, 163—164).

As is obvious from this and similar passages,¹ his affirmations are always at the same time protests against didacticism in art, against novelists who append an explicit "moral" to their stories or use "poetic justice" in enforcing their moral instruction. In his conception of poetic justice, which I examined in detail in my study on his aesthetic opinions, both as it developed and as he applied it in his fiction, he is of course near to all those aestheticians who interpreted this problem in the Aristotelian spirit (especially to Addison and Johnson), and far from those who were inspired by Plato's twofold scheme of rewards and punishments (Bacon, Sidney, Scaliger, the French critics, Rymer, Dryden, Dennis and Ruskin), though in his later years he begins to reveal a tendency in his fiction to drift towards the standpoint of the latter category, exclusively, however, in deciding the destinies of his positive characters. In his general attitude to didacticism in art, however, he reminds us too of some Romantic poets and critics, especially of Shelley, Keats, Hazlitt and De Quincey, and among his contemporaries, of the critics writing for *Fraser's Magazine*,² of Carlyle, G. H. Lewes and George Eliot, as well as of his Russian contemporary, Belinski.

As far as the differences between his conception and that of the Romantics are concerned, there is one issue where he differs only apparently, and another where he does so unmistakably. The first issue is that of the commitment of literature to contemporary social and political struggles, on which Thackeray pronounced some statements at first sight totally divergent from the standpoint of the revolutionary Romantics, who regarded art as a mighty weapon in the struggle for the transformation of the world, as well as from that of Ruskin who saw in Beauty not a luxury, but "a weapon to help in the stern conflict of

¹ See *Contributions*, especially pp. 73—74, 101.

² For the analysis of their standpoint see Stang, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

life",³ and in the artist a social reformer. In the same passages in which he made the above-mentioned statements that the novelist, and particularly the humorist, should be a mere entertainer, he also categorically declared that literature should not be socially and politically committed and that the novelist should be a non-combattant in contemporary social struggles and should not assume the role of the regenerator of society. If we look at his arguments more closely, however (as I have done in two of my previous studies⁴), we can clearly see that he did not so much protest against the commitment of literature as such, as against the incompetence of the authors (mostly second-rate) to whom he applies this principle and who were incapable of depicting political and social relationships through the medium of their characters, of clothing their purpose in adequate artistic form. As his protests show, he perfectly realizes that any other way of generalizing social conflicts in the novel than by means of the characters and plot is inadequate from the point of view of art and that not only the moral, but also the specific social lesson should be implicit in the literary work and not appear explicitly in the form of direct preaching — in short, as we have seen, he protests against didacticism in art, though didacticism of a hitherto not very common type, namely that which appeared in some second-rate social and political novels of his time. As I have shown in detail in both studies referred to above, it is not his theoretical declarations, however, but his own literary work which provides us with the final answer to the question of what his views on the social commitment of literature actually were. Even if he might not have been fully aware of it himself (though one remark from his private correspondence reveals that at least on one occasion he realized that he was participating, through the medium of his fiction, in "unscrewing the old framework of society" and getting it "ready for the Smash"⁵), he 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 his readers with deep and truthful knowledge of the depicted sphere and thus in fact also provided a mighty weapon for those who actively participated in contemporary social struggles. Even if he did not resolve to enter the political and social fight of the English people, did not accept the programme of the Chartists and followed the revolutionary situation in the country with increasing fears, his mature satire possessed great subversive strength, revealing as it did the decisive role of money in society and condemning the social code, hitting thus at the very root and foundation of society and helping to undermine what so far seemed firm and unshakable, to shatter the self-satisfaction of the classes in power and their conviction of the unlimited durability of their rule.

As we can see, his standpoint as novelist is actually very near to that assumed by Shelley and Byron both as men and poets. Although he was obviously not aware of it, as a man he shared with these Romantic poets many views on individual political and social questions (the parallels in this sphere are indeed striking and would deserve a more detailed separate treatment). As a novelist he depicted his society, as they did theirs in their poetry, as a desolate world of

³ A. H. R. Ball, *Ruskin as Literary Critic*. Selections, Cambridge University Press, 1928, p. 33.

⁴ "W. M. Thackeray's Literary Criticism in the 'Morning Chronicle'" and "The Aesthetic Views of W. M. Thackeray".

⁵ *Letters* II, 761.

universal purchase and sale governed by money, and pronounced a crushing judgment upon the profligate and cynical upper classes. Byron is particularly close to him in his use of irony as one of the main weapons of satire, exploiting the theme of success in society and choosing for the main motif of his mature works the same motto from *Ecclesiastes* (XII, 8) as Thackeray did — “Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity”. That Thackeray was not aware of this affiliation between himself and this Romantic poet or that on the other hand he perhaps realized it, was disturbed by it and therefore wanted to dissociate himself from it, is suggested by his very negative opinion of Byron as both man and poet. He was obviously unable to accept the poet’s romantic individualistic revolt, for he questions the purity and disinterestedness of its motives, rejects the poet’s individualism as being only “egotism and talk of one’s own sorrows”⁶ and his whole gloomy philosophy, seeking its roots, like the naïve empiric critics of his time so sharply criticized by Belinski,⁷ in Byron’s indigestion. In several of his remarks and through the medium of several minor characters who succumbed to the cult of Byron’s poetry,⁸ he condemns Byronism (very much like Hazlitt and Carlyle, though not in such strong words as did the latter) as a literary movement casting despair and darkness all over Europe and dangerous to public morals.⁹

Nor did he sense the affiliation between himself and Shelley, although his attitude to this Romantic, both as man and poet, was much more positive than that to Byron. As his early reaction to Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam* shows, he was able to appreciate the beauty of the poetry, but the creed upheld by the poet seemed to him absurd.¹⁰ What he found unacceptable was obviously Shelley’s atheism, as follows from the ensuing passage from a letter which he wrote to his mother when he was preparing his essay on the poet for a planned but finally not realized new university magazine *The Chimaera* (that he did write this essay and also began to compose a contribution to the discussion on Shelley in the students’ Debating Society proves, on the other hand, that he did feel the impact of the poet’s powerful personality):

“There is an excellent motto (tho’ a long one) in Devereux it is in the 3^d v(olume) at the end of a Book, it is about Bezoni the Atheist. (I shall) write it very small; ‘I know that the intention of Bezoni was benevolence, & that the (practice) of his life was virtue, & while my reason tells me that my God will not punish the reluctant & invol(untary) errors of one to whom all Gods creatures were so dear, my religion bids me hope that I shall meet him in that world where no error is, & where the great Spirit to whom all passions are unknown avenges the momentary doubt of his justice, by a proof of the infinity of his mercy’ — There — it has not taken up much room and I think will express the character & I hope the fate of Shelley —” (*Letters I*, 98–99).

⁶ *Works* III, 102.

⁷ Quoted in *Dějiny anglické literatury. Období romantismu (A History of English Literature. The Age of Romanticism)*; translated from the original *Istoriya anglijskoy literaturi*, vol. II, part I, 1953, by Karel Stěpaník, SPN Praha, 1955, p. 180.

⁸ Mr. Dawkins in *Yellowplush Correspondence*, Orlando Crump and Tom Fitz-Warner in *Coz’s Diary*, Andrea Fitch (to some extent) and Caroline in *A Shabby Genteel Story*, Mr. Pogson in *A Caution to Travellers*, Lord Daudley in *Reading a Poem*, George Delamere in *Rolandseck*, Bill Tidd and Gus Hoskins in *The Great Hoggarty Diamond*, Adolphus Simcoe in *Miss Tickletoby’s Lectures on English History*, the heroine of *The Ravenswing*. Mr. Wiggle and Mrs. Sackville in *The Book of Snobs*, Mr. Hicks in *Mrs. Perkins’s Ball*, Captain Sumph in *Pendennis*.

⁹ See *Works* II, 46–47, III, 513, VIII, 27, IX, 136–137.

¹⁰ See *Letters I*, 51 and 74.

The main reason why Thackeray took Shelley's philosophy so seriously is that he never doubted the poet's sincerity and never regarded his revolt against society as a mere pose assumed with an eye to the public and posterity (as he did in the case of Byron). This finds confirmation in his continuing positive opinion of Shelley's poetry, to which he refers comparatively rarely¹¹ but never negatively (differing thus from Hazlitt), and by which he was possibly in one case even directly inspired, as Saintsbury has suggested.¹²

The deepest root of Thackeray's hostile or at least critical attitude to the doctrines propagated by the two great Romantic poets lies of course in his own philosophy of life, in his dissociation from any revolutionary solution of the contradictions within his society and his resulting inability to accept prophecies of such a solution, including those presented by Byron and Shelley. His position might therefore have been nearer to Ruskin, who did not present or prophesy any such solutions and whose declared aim was to proclaim and prove the essence and authority of beauty and truth, to alleviate the pressure of poverty by averting mankind from the quest for money. Ruskin was indeed close to Thackeray, not only in his view of contemporary civilization as a great fair of vanities, inhabited by people "having no hope, and without God in the world"¹³ (using the same words even as Thackeray, and as their common teacher, Carlyle¹⁴), and as an iron age governed by materialism and commercialism, but also in certain conceptions of the social function of art — the rejection of art for art's sake, the exclusion of art from the Utilitarian concerns of the age and the identification of art with morality, as well as in some other principles of aesthetics to be commented upon in the following. It is also worth noticing that both these writers saw industrialization in terms, as Wellek points out in his evaluation of Ruskin, "not only of human suffering but also of the blight it inflicts on art and free creativity."¹⁵ In his reflections on the negative effect of church and state puritanism on art, Thackeray quotes Voltaire's verses "On a banni les démons et les fées", and adds:

"We are not putting in a plea, here, for demons and fairies, as Voltaire does in the above exquisite lines; nor about to expatiate on the beauties of error, for it is none; but the clank of steam-engines, and the shouts of politicians, and the struggle for gain or bread, and the loud denunciations of stupid bigots, have wellnigh smothered poor *Fancy* among us" (*Works* II, 173).

Owing to the lack of evidence commented upon in the first chapter, we have no means of ascertaining whether Thackeray was aware of these parallels between his and Ruskin's theory. Since in his earlier years he so much admired the social criticism of Ruskin's teacher Carlyle, it seems probable that he might have had some sympathies, too, with that of Ruskin. His above-mentioned editorial attitude to *Unto this Last*, as well as Ruskin's argument against his conceptions

¹¹ See especially *Works* IX, 251; for the less significant references see *Works* II, 68, VII, 251, XII, 430, XVII, 380.

¹² See *A Consideration of Thackeray*, pp. 74–76.

¹³ *Modern Painters* XVI, quoted by A. H. R. Ball, op. cit., p. 193.

¹⁴ For Thackeray's words see *Letters* II, 309; for Carlyle's formulation *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 5 vols., Chapman and Hall Limited, London, 1899 (further to be cited as *Essays*), III, 89.

¹⁵ René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750–1950*. Volume Three: *The Age of Transition*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1966, p. 148.

of charity in a letter to him of December 1860,¹⁶ seem to suggest, however, that in his later years his opinion was more critical.

The issue referred to above in which Thackeray unmistakably differs from the standpoint of most of the Romantics (as well as from that of Carlyle), is the conception of the position of the artist in society and his relationship to that society. As I have pointed out in "The Aesthetic Views of Thackeray", he consistently adhered to the realistic opinion that writers and artists are not beings elected by God and possessing something inaccessible to other people, but that they, like any members of their society, work to earn their livelihood and therefore have to work honestly and fulfil all their duties. In this he made no distinctions between the writers of fiction and artists cultivating the "higher" spheres of art — poets, painters, or composers. Thus for instance in his article on the Art Union he presented to the painters some humorously worded proposals as to how they could profit from joining this Union, pointing out that they could thus settle their debts with the tailor and washerwoman, and adding:

"You may fancy, my friend, that there is some caricature in this, and possibly you are right. You will never stoop to Mr. Snip in the manner painted out by me; you are above entreating your washerwoman, cutting jokes with your butcher, or cajoling the respectable gentleman who calls for your contributions once a quarter. Art, say you, is above paltry speculation and mean ideas of gain. An artist never stoops to intrigue, or chaffers for money. He is the priest of nature, called to worship at her glorious altar, by special vocation; one chosen out of the million, and called up to the high places; in short, you will make a speech, crammed with fine words, proving your disinterestedness, and the awful poetical nature of your calling.

Psha! my good friend, let us have no more of this stale talk. You are a tradesman as well as my lord on the woollack, or Mr. Smith selling figs, or General Sones breathing freely and at his ease in an atmosphere of cannon-balls. You each do your duty in your calling, and according to your genius, but you want to be paid for what you do" (*Works* II, 582—583).

He also pointed out that the artist had no right to hold his society in contempt, but should feel a great responsibility towards it and serve it honestly with his talent. In his review of George Sand's *Spiridion* he wrote, interpreting the attitude of the "prophets" of the Sandian type:

"In the meantime, O man of genius, follow our counsel: lead an easy life, don't stick at trifles; never mind about *duty*, it is only made for slaves; if the world reproach you, reproach the world in return, you have a good loud tongue in your head; if your straitlaced morals injure your mental respiration, fling off the old-fashioned stays, and leave your free limbs to rise and fall as Nature pleases; and when you have grown pretty sick of your liberty, and yet unfit to return to restraint, curse the world, and scorn it, and be miserable, like my Lord Byron and other philosophers of his kidney; or else mount a step higher, and, with conceit still more monstrous, and mental vision still more wretchedly debauched and weak, begin suddenly to find yourself afflicted with a maudlin compassion for the human race, and a desire to set them right after your own fashion" (*Works* II, 247—248).

It is clear that his conception is poles apart from that of Byron, for whom the artist was a tragically isolated rebel in deep and unreconcilable conflict with his society. It is true that Thackeray himself did not live in harmony with society, especially in his earlier years, and that therefore even in his aesthetic relationship to reality some elements of Romanticism may be found (Las Vergnas and Maître find them in the "lament of his elegy", in the emotion of the

¹⁶ See *Letters* IV, 211—212.

writer who has missed his vocation and found fulfilment too late, in his sensibility, which takes refuge from mockery under the mask of sarcasm, pseudo-cynicism and humour¹⁷). His conflict with his milieu, however, never reached such depths as that of Byron, and in his later life, when he revealed an increasing tendency to accept the values and standards of society, it ceased to trouble him. As I have pointed out in my study on his aesthetics, in his later reflections on the material and social position of the artist in his own time and country, he finally arrived at a complete identification of the literary man or artist with his bourgeois milieu, which accepts him in a friendly way if he serves it, and despises him if he fawns upon it. In that period of his life he obviously could not even imagine that the writer might be in opposition to society and yet be in the right, as he himself had been in the earlier stages of his literary career.

As follows from our analysis, when reflecting upon the material or social position of the artist in society or his relationship to it, Thackeray is upon the whole nearer to the Neoclassicists (notably to Boileau) than to some English Romantics or aestheticians of his own time, who laid upon the poet very high demands (for instance Carlyle and Ruskin), or envisaged him as entirely free from any duties or responsibility towards society (for instance Byron and Emerson). In his opinion regarding the artist's social standing Thackeray differed, too, from Schiller as well as from Carlyle. In his reference to Schiller's poem "Die Teilung der Erde", he dissociates himself from its author's opinion that the only place for the poet is heaven:

"In the old song of Schiller, Love bids the poet, now that the earth is partitioned among the strong and wealthy, to come to heaven in his distress, in which there will always be a place for him: but he has to try the people yet — the weak and poor; and they whose union makes their strength, depend on it, have a shelter and a welcome for him" (*Works* II, 591).

Both Carlyle and Thackeray agreed that the life of literary men was by no means enviable, but while the latter insisted that writers were fully entitled, by the right of their talent, to be received even in the highest social circles, the former sharply decried their being ashamed of their poverty, their desire to be regarded as gentlemen and to move in the society of higher classes, and saw the motives of their endeavours to gain access to this society in their greed and worship of Mammon, which could not have any benign consequences for literature; he expressed his fears that poets and philosophers were adopting the philosophy of grocers and lackeys, and reprehended even Thackeray for circulating "among fashionable people", covering his "native disposition with a varnish of smooth, smiling complacency, not at all pleasant to contemplate", and cultivating "dinner-eating in fashionable houses", which was in Carlyle's opinion "not salutary discipline for work of any sort".¹⁸

As we shall see in the next sub-chapters, however, when Thackeray reflects upon the relationship of the artist to nature and to the reality depicted, his attitude changes, he begins to make distinctions between the writers of fiction on

¹⁷ See Maitre, "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", pp. 281—282 (quoting Las Vergnas).

¹⁸ Charles Gavan Duffy, *Conversations with Carlyle*, Sampson Low, Marston, and Company, Limited, London, 1892, p. 76; see also *Essays* II, 131—133.

the one hand and poets and painters on the other hand, lays higher claims upon the latter and is consequently not so far from the conception of the Romantics and of some of his contemporaries as in his reflections upon the issue discussed above.

2. Beauty in Exterior Nature

Before analysing the relationship between Thackeray's conception of nature as the subject of artistic imitation and that of his predecessors and contemporaries it is necessary to determine what his conception of nature itself actually was, for this is a problem which has not yet been thoroughly investigated. As I have pointed out in my study of his aesthetics, the significance Thackeray gives to the term "nature" is in its substance identical with that given it by his literary teacher Fielding — nature in the wider sense of the word, the entire reality, all that really exists within and without us or that can be realized. For the purposes of this chapter, however, more detailed attention to this matter is required, and I shall therefore consider the different aspects of his conception separately — dealing with his conception of beauty in nature, beauty in art and artistic imitation, in this and the following two sub-chapters.

One of the most controversial points is Thackeray's attitude to the beauties of exterior nature, existing in the universe regardless of the interference of human power and invention. The circumstance that Thackeray was a genuinely town-bred man who took pleasure in town life, as well as the undeniable fact that depictions of exterior nature occupy little space in his imaginative works, have led some scholars (notably Charles Mackay) to the conclusion that the novelist was indifferent to the beauties of natural scenery. The quoted scholar places Thackeray in this respect on the same level as Dr. Johnson and all the ancients, finding additional proof for his statement in the fact that Thackeray did not go to see the Niagara Falls when he was in the United States, though within reach of this natural wonder, and maintaining that the novelist "took more pleasure in contemplating the restless tide of human life in the streets of London, than in looking at, or wandering among the most glorious panoramic splendours of mountain and forest, or wide stretching river, lake or sea".¹ Let us investigate this statement point by point.

It is true that Thackeray definitely preferred town-life with its clubs, theatres, taverns, and busy streets to life in the country, spent most of his adult life in London or in Paris and only rarely complained that he had chosen such a way of life. His attitude is perhaps most clearly expressed in *Philip*:

"Ardent lover as he was, our friend [i.e. the hero of the novel — *LP*] was glad to be back in the midst of the London smoke, and wealth, and bustle. The fog agreed with his lungs, he said. He breathed more freely in our great city, than in that little English village in the centre of Paris which he had been inhabiting" (*Works* XVI, 448).

It is also true that when he found himself amidst scenery that was too wild, savage and lonely, or if he was forced to observe nature in an uncomfortable situation and in bad weather, he began to think "that after all London was a bearable place" and that he "*might* put up with a sofa and a newspaper in

¹ "Forty Years' Recollections", London, 1877, quoted by Wilson, op. cit., I, 308.

Pall Mall", or exclaimed: "Well, I am a Cockney: I wish I were in Pall Mall!"² It is also undeniable that as a novelist he found in town life and in human life in general an endless source of inspiration and certainly regarded human society as more interesting and important than the most fascinating natural scenery, perfectly realizing that the depiction of man served him as his medium for depicting the whole of reality and following thus in the footsteps of Fielding, for whom the depiction of man was "the highest object . . . which presents itself to the pen of our historian, or of our poet".³ In his fiction he depicted predominantly people of the town and even if he placed his characters in a country milieu, he was more interested in them than in the natural beauties amidst which they lived, never using descriptions of exterior nature for their own sake, but always as one of the expressive media employed in making his characterizations more penetrating. Thus for instance the description of the sea in *Pendennis* serves Thackeray to depict more convincingly the rising tide of love in Pen's mind, the sun seems to exist for the express purpose of shining upon Emily and enhancing her charms in the hero's eyes, the moon and stars for providing illumination to Helen's prayers for her son and memoirs of her first dead lover, and the whole natural scenery of Clavering for exercising beneficial influence upon Pen, awakening pangs of grief and shame in him for his foibles and shortcomings.

All this should not lead us, however, to the precipitate conclusion that Thackeray was indifferent to natural beauties, either as novelist or as man. From time to time he did wander among "the most glorious panoramic splendours" of exterior nature, and not only deeply felt their beauty, but also put his pen to paper to express his feelings, predominantly in private correspondence and non-fictional works, especially travel-books, but sporadically, too, in his novels. As far as his imaginative works are concerned, his attitude is most convincingly expressed in his renderings of the experience of his *alter-egos* *Pendennis* and *Esmond*. His depiction of sunset at Fair Oaks is followed by this commentary:

"Little Arthur's figure and his mother's cast long blue shadows over the grass; and he would repeat in a low voice (for a scene of great natural beauty always moved the boy, who inherited this sensibility from his mother) certain lines beginning, 'These are thy glorious works, Parent of Good; Almighty! thine this universal frame', greatly to Mrs. Pendennis's delight" (*Works* XII, 13).

Esmond's feelings, after his having fully realized Lady Castlewood's devotion, are depicted by Thackeray in the following comment:

"As he had sometimes felt, gazing up from the deck at midnight into the boundless starlit depths overhead, in a rapture of devout wonder at that endless brightness and beauty — in some such a way as now, the depth of this pure devotion . . . smote upon him, and filled his heart with thanksgiving" (*Works* XIII, 213—214).⁴

He also explicitly declared in one of his letters to his daughters that the world was only half a world for a man who did not possess the faculty of admiring "the beautiful works of nature",⁵ and expressed his thankfulness that

² For the quotations see *Works* V, 217, 326.

³ *Tom Jones*, Book VIII, chapter 1.

⁴ For similar passages in Thackeray's later imaginative works and essays see *Works* X, 306 and XVII, 435, 526—527.

⁵ *Letters* II, 692.

both he and his daughters were able to indulge in this pleasure which has, moreover, as he adds, the additional merit that it makes people better. The most abundant evidence of his attitude to exterior nature may be found, however, in his travel-books, notably in the *Irish Sketch Book* and *A Journey from Cornhill to Cairo*. Especially in the former book we find many descriptions of natural beauties, both of smiling pleasant landscapes and of noble savage countries of rocks and heath, which he mostly observes with the eyes of a painter, very often insisting at the same time that no printer's type, no pen and ink can give the idea of the magnificence of Nature, though a painter's brush could.

In several passages in these descriptions we come across an attitude which we may regard as typical for Thackeray, as for instance in the following comment upon a "fair writer" who called Red Bay "Switzerland in miniature":

"The writer's enthusiasm regarding this tract of country is quite warranted, nor can any praise in admiration of it be too high; but, alas! in calling a place 'Switzerland in miniature', do we describe it? In joining together cataracts, valleys, rushing streams, and blue mountains, with all the emphasis and picturesqueness of which type is capable, we cannot get near to a copy of Nature's sublime countenance; and the writer can't hope to describe such grand sights so as to make them visible to the fireside reader, but can only, to the best of his taste and experience, warn the future traveller where he may look out for objects to admire. I think this sentiment has been repeated a score of times in this journal; but it comes upon one at every new display of beauty and magnificence, such as here the Almighty in His bounty has set before us; and every such scene seems to warn one that it is not made to talk about too much, but to think of and love, and be grateful for" (*Works* V, 316-317).

From his *Journey from Cornhill to Cairo* I have selected one passage, from the introduction, in which he describes how he spent part of a night during his voyage on the deck of the ship and observed the ocean and the starry skies. He describes at some length the feelings excited in him "by contemplating this vast, magnificent, harmonious Nature", includes them among "a set of emotions about which a man had best be shy of talking lightly" (characterizing them as "a delight and ecstasy which is not only hard to describe, but which has something secret in it that a man should not utter loudly"), and expresses his "love and reverence towards the Power which created the infinite universe blazing above eternally, and the vast ocean shining and rolling around". He confesses that his heart is filled "with a solemn, humble happiness that a person dwelling in a city has rarely occasion to enjoy", and proceeds:

"How far off city cares and pleasures appear to be! how small and mean they seem, dwindling out of sight before this magnificent brightness of Nature! But the best thoughts only grow and strengthen under it. Heaven shines above, and the humbled spirit looks up reverently towards that boundless aspect of wisdom and beauty" (*Works* IX, 86).

These two quotations, together with the numerous passages in both travel-books which they typify, may be taken as a reliable basis for discussing the relationship between Thackeray's conception of exterior nature and beauty in nature and the conceptions of the Neoclassicists, Romantics and Thackeray's contemporaries.

As his expressions "vast, magnificent, harmonious Nature", "the infinite universe blazing above eternally" and "that boundless aspect of wisdom and beauty" suggest, Thackeray found in exterior nature the same beauty as was discovered there by the Neoclassicists and conceived by them to be the perfect harmony

and law of their mechanical universe, a beauty existing, too, in the universe of all Christian believers, who see in it the creation of God's eternal Wisdom. He could therefore identify himself with Johnson, Reynolds and all the earlier and later non-Neoclassicist thinkers who conceived exterior nature as inexhaustible and unchangeable and believed that the works of nature had invariably had the same order and beauty since the day of their "creation". As the selected quotations show, Thackeray's conception of the origin of beauty in Nature was not materialistic — in the spirit of objective idealism he finds the origin of natural beauties outside reality: in his opinion, they were bestowed upon mankind by the Creator, whom he conceives as eternal, abstract Good and the Absolute Truth, "independent of matter", as he himself expressed it, and "existing in spite of it".⁶ This conception is, of course, an inseparable part of Thackeray's religion, but if we interpret it from the philosophical point of view, it is very near to that of Plato's Christian followers (and even to that of those medieval aestheticians whose main stress was not laid on asceticism, mysticism and rejection of reason, as for instance St. Augustine⁷, as well as to that of Shaftesbury, Boileau, Addison, Burke, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Carlyle, Ruskin and Emerson), and essentially differs from the conception of those aestheticians who interpreted this issue in the Aristotelian spirit (Reynolds, Diderot, Herder). Of these aestheticians and writers it is Addison, Shaftesbury and Keats who are particularly near to him, not only in their Platonist belief in the spiritual creative principle, but also in their Aristotelian acknowledgment of the real existence of the material world, as well as in their commonsense attitude to the world of the senses, their distaste for asceticism, and rejection of mysticism.

As our quotations reveal, Thackeray was also fairly near to Carlyle's conception (and hence also to that of Carlyle's two followers Ruskin and Emerson) of exterior nature as a manifestation of that Divine Idea of the World which "lies at the bottom of Appearance" and permeates the visible universe which is only its symbol, though he would probably not have been very willing to accept Carlyle's opinion that the visible universe had no significance in itself and even no real existence independent of the Divine Idea. On the other hand, however, Carlyle was very near to Thackeray in that he was able to reconcile his religious faith with an interest in and love for the real world which, as the reflection of the invisible spiritual reality, was in his opinion worthy of that love. It is worth noticing that Thackeray recognized (as did Ruskin) how much of Emerson had the same note, though he might not have realized that the root of this similarity lay in the common influence of Carlyle. When he read Emerson's *Essays* in 1856, he wrote of them in one of his letters:

"They are very wise and benevolent — They come to very like conclusions to those wh^d the Worldling who writes these presents to you reaches sometimes — and as I read honest Emerson, I fancy I have known it all before" (*Letters* III, 547—548).

It should be pointed out, however, that Thackeray's conception was not so transcendental as that of these three theoreticians (and consequently nearer

⁶ *Letters* I, 403; see also *ibid.*, II, 206, 470, 615.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the parallels between his philosophy and that of St. Augustine see Joseph E. Baker " 'Vanity Fair' and the Celestial City", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, September 1955, pp. 89ff.

to that of Wordsworth, as we shall see in the next sub-chapter) — he thought of beauty in nature rather in the terms of religious faith than of pure philosophy and did not therefore analyse its origin in such depth as they did. Moreover, we have already quoted one of the passages in which he confesses that he finds transcendental philosophy beyond his comprehension; to this we shall add another, concerning Carlyle's philosophy, taken from Thackeray's early review of the *French Revolution*:

"There are, however, a happy few of Mr. Carlyle's critics and readers to whom these very obscurities and mysticisms of style are welcome and almost intelligible; the initiated in metaphysics, the sages who have passed the veil of Kantian philosophy, and discovered that the 'critique of pure reason' is really that which it purports to be, and not the critique of pure nonsense, as it seems to worldly men: to these the present book has charms unknown to us, who can merely receive it as a history of a stirring time, and a skilful record of men's worldly thoughts and doings. Even through these dim spectacles a man may read and profit much from Mr. Carlyle's volumes" (*Works* I, 68).

The passages quoted as the basis for this discussion reveal, too, along with his depictions of exterior nature in his fiction and travel-books, the differences between Thackeray's conception and that of the Romantics. He could not accept the current Romantic conception of nature as scenery or mere pageantry of the countryside and his admiration of nature has nothing in it of the semi-mystical adoration characteristic for most of the Romantics. Even if he uses the words "ecstasy" and "rapture", speaks much about reverence, and in one case, not quoted above, defines the aesthetic enjoyment (referring in this case to beauty in art) as a "sensual effort" which "carries one quite away from the earth, and up to something that is very like heaven",⁸ he feels shy of uttering his feelings aloud, thus differing from most of the Romantic poets who positively revelled in such emotions and were far from shy in voicing them. It is true that he endows one of his characters, Clive Newcome, with a typically romantic attitude to nature,⁹ but even in this case he does not identify himself with the attitude and attributes it to the painter's youth. Nor did Thackeray share the predilection of some Romantics (especially Byron) for the most violent aspects of nature, for nature in wrath. As we know from his travel-books, he preferred simple, quiet, pleasing landscapes to those which were merely picturesque, dismal and lonely-looking, or too magnificent, possessing "immense overpowering splendour".¹⁰ He also liked wild prospects, but only if they were not too fierce, if they had "a kindly, friendly look".¹¹ A typical attitude of his may be discerned, for instance, in the following passage summing up his impressions of the savage scenery of the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. He expresses his satisfaction that he succeeded in getting rid of the guide and "the other beggars" and was "left tranquil to look at the strange scene with [his] own eyes, and enjoy [his] own thoughts at leisure", and proceeds:

"That is, if the thoughts awakened by such a scene may be called enjoyment; but for me, I confess, they are too near akin to fear to be pleasant; and I don't know that I would desire to change that sensation of awe and terror which the hour's walk occasioned, for a greater familiarity with this wild, sad, lonely place" (*Works* V, 326).

⁸ *Works* II, 555–556.

⁹ See *Works* XIV, 346.

¹⁰ *Works* V, 128.

¹¹ *Works* V, 208; see also *ibid.*, pp. 101–102, 113, 147, 259, 266.

Elsewhere he describes a quiet nook admired by Scott, of no great picturesqueness when compared with the beauties around, but preferred by him for its "gentle, homely beauty" to more magnificent views:

"Tomkins and I are not made for the immense. We can enjoy a little at a time, and enjoy that little very much; or if like birds, we are like the ostrich — not that we have fine feathers to our backs, but because we cannot fly. Press us too much, and we become flurried and run off, and bury our heads in the quiet bosom of dear mother earth, and so get rid of the din, and the dazzle, and the shouting" (*Works* V, 129).

In his imaginative work we find one instance in which he parodies this predilection of the Romantics for nature in its angry moods — in the attitude of Andrea Fitch, who "lives in a storm", and expresses his feelings in the following tirade addressed to Brandon:

"A true hartist is never so 'appy as when he can have the advantage to gaze upon yonder tempestuous hocean in one of its hangry moods."

Thackeray's voice may be heard in Brandon's reaction:

"'Aye, there comes the steamer', answered Mr. Brandon; 'I can fancy that there are a score of unhappy people on board who are not artists, and would wish to behold your ocean quiet'" (*Works* III, 336).

If Thackeray could identify himself with the Neoclassicist conception of exterior nature untouched by human hands and possessing identical beauties since its creation, his capacity for admiring even wild nature unembellished by art, as well as his whole imaginative work, show that he could not accept the further Neoclassicist conception of *la belle nature*, nature improved, corrected and adorned by human hands and deprived of its original coarseness. If he was at all near to any of the Neoclassicists in this issue, it was to Addison, who differed from most of his contemporaries in preferring "the rough careless strokes of nature" to "the nice touches and embellishments of art",¹² preferring fields to gardens and a natural tree to a trimmed. Living at the time of the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution, Thackeray could not help seeing that his world was not so orderly as the Neoclassicists had believed, nor so beautiful as some Romantics would have liked it to be, and that for the most part all that human interference had succeeded in doing was to spoil the original freshness of nature. It is especially the interference of the Industrial Revolution that he resents. Thus London, though he liked living in it, is in his eyes no longer that orderly place with trimmed gardens and parks through which Addison walked to his coffee house. It seems to him beautiful only at night and on Sunday, when great peace and calm rules over the sleeping city and the chimneys of the factories are not smoking, or in spring-time, when the London season begins and when nature "with a violent effort" comes to the aid of this "great, black, bilious, overgrown city, stifled by gas, and fogs, and politics" and infuses into it "a little spring blood":

"The town of London feels then the influences of the spring, and salutes it after its fashion. The parks are green for about a couple of months; Lady Smigsmag, and other leaders of the *ton*, give their series of grand parties; Gunter and Grange come forward

¹² *Essays of Joseph Addison*, ed. Sir James George Frazer, 2 vols., Macmillan and Co., London, 1915, II, 191.

with iced-creams and champagnes; ducks and green-peas burst out; the river Thames blossoms with whitebait, and Alderman Birch announces the arrival of fresh, lively turtle. If there are no birds to sing and make love, as in country places, at least there are coveys of opera-girls that frisk and hop about airily, and Rubini and Lablache to act as a couple of nightingales" (*Works* III, 538).

In all his other descriptions of London he faithfully records the negative phenomena brought about by the expansion of industry, the whole city darkened with soot from coal smoke, the gloomy and smoky houses with their black chimney-pots, blackened trees and gardens, dreary grass-plots in the squares, decayed and slatternly looking houses in the dismal quarters of the poor. In his depiction London is a place which is only rarely illuminated by the sun during the day and by a "degenerate" moon at night and in which no flowers will bloom, as Blanche Amory points out, adding a comment characteristic of her creator, but not sincere on her part:

"The gardener comes and changes our balconies once a week. I don't think I shall bear to look London in the face again — its odious, smoky, brazen face!" (*Works* XII, 825).

Thackeray also strongly feels the deteriorating influence of life in London upon the people's capacity for aesthetic enjoyment. In his *Journey from Cornhill to Cairo* he writes:

"Are we so blasés of the world that the greatest marvels in it do not succeed in moving us? Have society, Pall Mall clubs, and a habit of sneering, so withered up our organs of veneration that we can admire no more? My sensation with regard to the Pyramids was that I had seen them before: then came a feeling of shame that the view of them should awaken no respect" (*Works* IX, 228).

Even when he depicts a countryside where the sun is still shining brightly from the skies, he mourns over the grass-grown deserts which had been, before the railroads were introduced, busy roads alive with constant travel, and over trout-streams which had been spoiled by the refuse from factories. In depicting Ireland he notes the miserable cabins of the peasantry, wretched villages with their ruinous and hideous streets, and shabby fields covered with thistles, offering the following comment:

"In this fairest and richest of countries, men are suffering and starving by millions" (*Works* V, 86).

It is worth noticing, however, that he does not reject interference by mere human hands, by manual labour, in exterior nature — in his *Irish Sketch Book* he several times positively comments upon large, liberal and prosperous landscapes "in the neighbourhood of the towns, where people have taken a fancy to plant, and where nature has helped them, as it almost always will in this country", finding the "rich, golden, peaceful plains, with the full harvest waving on them and just ready for the sickle" not only pleasing from their natural beauties, but from having, too, "a manly, thriving, honest air of prosperity, which is no bad feature, surely, for a landscape."¹³ In his resentment of the intrusion of the Industrial Revolution into exterior nature and human life and his awareness that the world was becoming uglier and the beauty of nature was being destroyed by industry on a large scale, he is of course very close to Ruskin.

¹³ For the quotations see *Works* V, 98, 153, 348.

3. Beauty in Art

In contradistinction to most of the Neoclassicists, Thackeray was convinced that the secret of beauty in art, and of aesthetic enjoyment, could not be explained by reason. He was not so ready, as most of them had been, to attempt to define the substance of the beautiful (or the sublime) or of their effect upon the onlooker. In one of his art criticisms he lays the requirement that pictures should contain sentiment and great ideas, and proceeds:

“As for telling you what sentiment is, and what it is not, wherein lies the secret of the sublime, there, madam, we must stop altogether; only, after reading Burke *On the Sublime*, you will find yourself exactly as wise as you were before. I cannot tell why a landscape by Claude or Constable should be more beautiful — it is certainly not more dexterous — than a landscape by Mr.— or Mr.—. I cannot tell why Raphael should be superior to Mr. Benjamin Haydon . . . ; or why ‘*Vedrai, carino*’, in *Don Juan*, should be more charming to me than ‘*Suoni la tromba*’, before mentioned . . . All these points are quite undefinable and inexplicable (I never read a metaphysical account of them that did not seem sheer dullness and nonsense); but we can have no doubt about them” (*Works* II, 503).

From his art criticisms we may get, however, a comparatively clear idea of what his conception of beauty in art actually was. As several of his remarks show, he believed that the great end of the artist was not only to charm and affect the onlooker or listener, but to touch his heart, to “strike far deeper than the sight”,¹ to arouse in him not only purely aesthetic sentiments, but at the same time profound gratefulness to God who had provided such beauties for man to enjoy — or, as he elsewhere expressed it, the highest element of beauty in art was for him the feeling of Christian love. In one of his art criticisms he wrote:

“The great artist who is the priest of nature is consecrated especially to this service of praise; and though it may have no direct relation to religious subjects, the view of a picture of the highest order does always, like the view of stars in a calm night, or a fair quiet landscape in sunshine, fill the mind with an inexpressible content and gratitude towards the Maker who has created such beautiful things for our use” (*Works* II, 502).

It is therefore not surprising that he had much in common with all those aestheticians and poets (both of the Neoclassicist and Romantic period, as well as of his own) whose conception was rooted in Christian religious feeling and for whom art was a branch of religion and aesthetic enjoyment a form of religious experience. Thus he recognized a kindred spirit in Addison, as is obvious from the following summary of the essayist’s philosophy of life in his lecture of 1851:

“When he turns to Heaven, a Sabbath comes over that man’s mind: and his face lights up from it with a glory of thanks and prayer. His sense of religion stirs through his whole being. In the fields, in the town: looking at the birds in the trees: at the children in the streets: in the morning or in the moonlight: over his books in his own room: in a happy party at a country merry-making or a town assembly, goodwill and peace to God’s creatures, and love and awe of Him who made them, fill his pure heart and shine from his kind face” (*Works* XIII, 540–541).

Thackeray’s identification with Addison was not, however, unconditional and could not be so owing to the difference in period between him and the essayist and to the changes which had occurred in the world once so calmly and serenely

¹ *Works* II, 396.

observed by his predecessor. Thackeray was not so secure and confident in his faith as Addison was, as follows especially from one letter to his mother of 1855, in which he writes about a Mr. Yorke, "a perfect prize parson — pious humble merry orthodox to the most lucky point liked by everybody", and adds:

"How I should like to be like Yorke! — not for the being liked — but for that happy orthodoxy wh^h is as natural with him as with Addison and other fortunate people, and wh^h wd make my dear old Granny so happy if I had it" (*Letters* III, 438).

He differed from Addison especially in laying stress (as the Romantics did) upon individuality and feeling as the basic factors in artistic creation. Individuality was in his opinion "the great charm of most works of art", as he points out in a longer reflection in which he ascribes to every artist a right to see and depict reality in his own manner, and from which I select only the following conclusion:

"Every man has a manner of painting, or seeing, or thinking, of his own; and lucky it is for us too, for in this manner every one's work is a new one, and books are fresh and agreeable, though written upon subjects however stale. If a company of authors chose to write down the circumstances of a voyage from the Bank to Clapham, no doubt they would each make a pleasant, novel, and instructive history; — pleasant at least to such persons who like to speculate not only on the subject but on the artist; and this latter is always new, at least he never lasts for more than threescore and ten years, and is perfectly different from all who follow or precede him" (*Works* V, 375—376).

In the sphere of painting, Thackeray sought the reason of the beauty of a picture, as Clapp has rightly pointed out, in the quality of the sentiment and not in the qualities of design² and therefore most highly evaluated paintings in which he could feel the great heart of the painter, which he regarded as "a higher ingredient of beauty than mere form" and the first "artistical quality".³ He had a predilection for pictures which inspired his compassion and appealed not only to his reason, but especially to his heart and feelings, which soothed him and pleased him "like a sweet rhythmic chant",⁴ or delighted him by their innocent sweetness. These statements, as well as his tendency to define art as "a feeling for the beauty of Nature", or "an exquisite and admiring Sense of Nature," to refer to aesthetic enjoyment as to "a certain emotion of awe," a "thrill of the heart," or "exquisite pleasure and content", and to call aesthetic expression "this undefinable arch-quality of sentiment,"⁵ clearly show that he saw, like the Romantics, the substance of art in the emotional life of the artist, though unlike some Romantics and rather like Hazlitt, he did not let himself so emotionally overwhelmed as to subordinate reason to feeling. Indeed, Thackeray's aesthetic conceptions differ from those of Addison in so many essential points (to be dealt with below) that it is more rewarding to seek for parallels in this particular issue among Thackeray's not so orthodox immediate predecessors, the English Romantics, and his own contemporaries.

And we do find close parallels, in the first place again between his conception and that of Carlyle, Ruskin and Emerson. Sharing the views of these writers upon the origin of beauty in nature, he could of course accept, too, their

² See "Critic on Horseback", p. 298.

³ *Works* II, 386; see also *ibid.*, p. 553.

⁴ *Works* XVII, 447.

⁵ For the quotations see *Works* II, 379, *Letters* II, 691, *Works* II, 385, 396, 503.

conception of art as another form of wisdom, as a branch of religion which "always participates in its character". the sacred mission of which is to reveal the Truth, "the beautiful, the religious Wisdom". as Carlyle formulates it, i.e. the spirit of Nature conceived as a symbol of the Divine Idea. to provide for the reader and onlooker an insight into this reality behind appearances, into the mystery of the universe, to "reveal to us glimpses of the Unseen but not unreal World, that so the Actual and the Ideal may again meet together, and clear Knowledge be again wedded to Religion. in the life and business of men".⁶ Indeed, Thackeray's declaration, in *The Newcomes*, that "Art is truth: and truth is religion: and its study and practice a daily work of pious duty",⁷ strongly reminds us of the similar identifications made by Carlyle, Ruskin and Emerson. How near Thackeray was to Carlyle is also obvious from the following words he put into the mouth of Ethel, who writes in a letter to Mrs. Pendennis about Barnes as being "of the world still". and proceeds:

"Nor must we deal too harshly with people of his nature, who cannot perhaps comprehend a world beyond. I remember in old days, when we were travelling on the Rhine, in the happiest days of my whole life, I used to hear Clive, and his friend Mr. Ridley, talk of art and of nature in a way that I could not understand at first, but came to comprehend better as my cousin taught me; and since then, I see pictures, and landscapes, and flowers, with quite different eyes, and beautiful secrets as it were, of which I had no idea before. The secret of all secrets, the secret of the other life, and the better world beyond ours, may not this be unrevealed to some? I pray for them all, dearest Laura, for those nearest and dearest to me, that the truth may lighten their darkness, and Heaven's great mercy defend them in the perils and dangers of their night" (*Works XIV*, 876).

How near he was to all the three theoreticians and especially to Emerson is obvious especially from his tendency to conceive poetry, music, painting and ballet as really identical, ascribing to them essentially the same aesthetic effect and often finding himself unable to distinguish their specific traits, noticing only the common aspects conditioning their aesthetic substance. The following statement, selected from several similar remarks, strongly reminds us of Emerson's well-known declaration that Raphael paints wisdom, Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, etc., and that the "laws of each art are convertible into the laws of every other":⁸

"And this is the queer power of Art: that when you wish to describe its effect upon you, you always fall to describing something else. I cannot answer for it that a picture is not a beautiful melody; that a grand sonnet by Tennyson is not in reality a landscape by Titian; that the last *pas* by Taglioni is not a bunch of roses or an ode of Horace; but I am sure that the enjoyment of the one has straightway brought the other to my mind, and vice versa" (*Works VI*, 541).⁹

Thackeray's standpoint, however, is not entirely identical with that of Emerson and occupies a place somewhere between it and the Neoclassicist conception. Although he was not so dogmatic as the Neoclassicists were, Thackeray took over from them their hierarchical classification of art into two spheres, the higher of which (in his conception) included painting, sculpture, music, ballet, and poetry, and the lower (though he does not mention this explicitly in this

⁶ For the quotations see *Essays* III, 23, I, 208.

⁷ *Works XIV*, 851; see also *Works II*, 384, etc.

⁸ Quoted by Wellek, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁹ See also *Works II*, 385, 396, 669, XVI, 480.

connection) the productions of the writers whom he almost consistently called "humourists", i.e. the writers of fiction. Like the Neoclassicists, too, he ascribed the capacity for fulfilling the supreme aim of art. for depicting the beautiful and the sublime and evoking a genuine aesthetic enjoyment, only to the branches of art belonging to the higher sphere. The aim of the artist should be to evoke similar feelings to those the artist himself experienced when looking at the object of his depiction:

"The effect of the artist, as I take it, ought to be to produce upon his hearer's mind, by his art, an effect something similar to that produced on his own, by the sight of the natural object. Only music, or the best poetry, can do this" (*Works IX*, 174).

As his declarations of this kind testify — including the already quoted comparison of "the greatest artist" to the priest of nature — for those artists who represent the "higher" branches of art Thackeray could accept the high claims which Carlyle, Emerson and Ruskin (as well as Shelley, Goethe and Schiller) laid upon the artist in general. As he could accept Carlyle's elevation (and that of his two disciples, Ruskin and Emerson) of each fact of nature in the material world into a symbol of some spiritual fact, he could also identify himself with Carlyle's conception of the poet as the high priest of Nature, in whose heart resides some effluence of Wisdom, some kind of Gospel-tidings, burning till it be uttered, who is able to penetrate into the "sacred mystery of the Universe" and solve its secrets, to reveal to us the hidden beauty in nature, the divine side of things, the deep truth of art, to represent the invisible in the visible, imbue the finite with the infiniteness of significance, and ennoble the real into the ideal. He also could accept Carlyle's opinion that a really great poet is one of the small number of elected beings (though he would probably not use the word "elected"), but not the belief that the poet thus conceived is a hero, a real ruler of the world, and he certainly would not apply this high ideal to the novelist. As Ray has pointed out, Thackeray intended his lectures on the English Humourists "to be pointedly anti-Carlylean", and "made 'The Humourist as Man of Letters' almost the antithesis of 'The Hero as Man of Letters' as Carlyle had described him in the fifth of his famous lectures on 'Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History' in 1840".¹⁰ Fielding is for instance characterized by Thackeray in the following way (most unfair to the novelist, as we shall see later):

"I cannot offer or hope to make a hero of Harry Fielding. Why hide his faults? Why conceal his weaknesses in a cloud of periphrases? Why not show him, like him as he is, not robed in a marble toga, and draped and polished in a heroic attitude, but with inked ruffles, and claret stains on his tarnished laced coat, and on his manly face the marks of good fellowship, of illness, of kindness, of care, and wine. Stained as you see him, and worn by care and dissipation, that man retains some of the most precious and splendid human qualities and endowments" (*Works XIII*, 646).¹¹

In fact, Thackeray refrained from using the term "Beauty" when he described the aim of the novelist and preferred the term "Truth", which did imply an ideal world outside the phenomena, the aesthetic ideal from the point of view of which he depicted reality, namely Christian love, but which he predominantly

¹⁰ *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 144.

¹¹ See also *Works XIII*, 632, where Thackeray applies the same point of view upon the painter Hogarth.

conceived rather as "truth of life", the sad, disheartening and hideous truth about human nature and society. Even though he envisaged man as an inseparable part of the universe created by God, as "God's work, and good to read, as all works of Nature are",¹² and was therefore convinced that in view of the final harmony between man and nature, both the creations of God, even the human soul and human nature should have some share in that beauty which had been brought into the world by the Creator and whose depiction he regarded as the highest aim of art, he failed to discern it in the people living in the Vanity Fair of his society. For this reason, especially in the early and mature periods of his literary career, fiction could not be for him, as art was for Keats, "a realization of the unity of Truth and Beauty", the two highest aims of artistic and human endeavour.¹³ As far as I have been able to ascertain, Thackeray identifies Truth with Beauty only once when referring to fiction and to his own creative approach, and even in this case he has some doubts as to the validity of his declaration:

"If the Truthful is the Beautiful, it is Beautiful to study even the Snobbish: to track Snobs through history, as certain little dogs in Hampshire hunt out truffles: to sink shafts in society and come upon rich veins of Snob-ore" (*Works* IX, 261).

Much more typical of him is the following statement from the conclusion of *Barry Lyndon*, in which he polemizes with "scores of misguided people both in novels and in the world, who forthwith set up the worldly prosperity or adversity of a man as standards by which his worth should be tried", accuses novelists of making "a most profuse, mean use of this pedlar's measure", namely poetic justice, insists that human life does not exhibit justice after this fashion, and proceeds:

"If this be true of the world, those persons who find their pleasure or get their livelihood by describing its manners and the people who live in it are bound surely to represent to the best of their power life as it really appears to them to be; not to foist off upon the public figures pretending to be delineations of human nature, — gay and agreeable cut-throats, otto-of-rose murderers, amiable hackney-coachmen, Prince Rodolphs and the like, being representatives of beings that never have or could have existed. At least, if not bounden to copy nature, they are justified in trying; and hence in describing not only what is beautiful, but what is ill-favoured too, faithfully, so that each may appear as like as possible to nature. It is as right to look at a beauty as at a hunchback; and, if to look, to describe too: nor can the most prodigious genius improve upon the original" (*Works* VI, 310).

Having failed to discern in the shabby souls of the members of his society the beauty which should have been present there, if they were to be the subject of the above conception of art, Thackeray turned his creative attention to the reverse side and chose the approach of a slashing satirist, which he himself characterized in the following way:

"As he later told Dr. John Brown, his misfortunes had developed in him 'a sense of the ugly, the odd, of the meanly false, of the desperately wicked'; exacerbated but undefeated, 'he laid them bare: them under all disguises he hunted to the death'".¹⁴

¹² *Works* II, 46.

¹³ Karel Štěpánik, *Básnické dílo Johna Keatse (The Poetical Work of John Keats)*, SPN Praha, 1958, p. 169.

¹⁴ *Horae Subsecivae*, Third Series, Edinburgh, 1884, p. 180; quoted in *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 228.

As I have demonstrated at greater length in my study on his aesthetics, the truth about man and society which he tells in his early works is a terrible and hideous truth about a society consisting of an endless number of parasites, villains, criminals, rogues and their dupes and every day giving birth to more and more corrupted people. In these "dreadful early works in which every stroke is full of venom",¹⁵ as they were characterized by his contemporaries, Thackeray does not offer any hope for mankind, as both his views upon human nature and upon human society are deeply pessimistic and fatalistic. But even if these works are pervaded by an atmosphere of utter despair, they do not stand apart from Thackeray's ideal of beauty: it does not find embodiment in his images, but it is inherent in his sharp negation of the reality depicted. The truth about human nature which Thackeray presents in the quartet of his great novels, *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *Henry Esmond* and *The Newcomes*, is much more complex and goes deeper below the surface of the reality he depicts, yet the satirist perseveres in his fatalistic views upon the unchangeable character of human nature, presenting to his readers an impressive panoramatic picture of a cold and empty world governed by the laws of purchase and sale, and inhabited by people whose hearts are nothing but stalls of vanity in the fair of life and who have irrevocably lost the capacity for genuine human feelings. But though his mature work is plunged, like his earlier, into the black shadow of scepticism, pessimism and fatalism, the reign of this darkness is not absolute — there appear in it glimpses of "better things", as Thackeray expressed it in his letter to G. H. Lewes. His aesthetic ideal begins to emerge in a more concrete form. For even if Thackeray had not grown more optimistic about human nature, in consequence of the gradual modifications of his philosophy of life and his aesthetic relationship to reality he has learned to be more tolerant of human weaknesses and to appreciate the potential beauty inherent in human nature. In *Vanity Fair* his aesthetic ideal is still predominantly implicit in his negation, but for the first time finds, too, concrete embodiment in the character of Major Dobbin. After the publication of this masterpiece of his, Thackeray reveals an increasing tendency to propagate his aesthetic ideal in a more emphatic manner, to find positive social and moral values in his society and beauty in human nature and to embody them in his characters of noble-minded positive heroes. In the three great novels after *Vanity Fair* he still perseveres in his doubts about the possibility of his ideal being actually realized in his time and society and presents his positive characters as people who are detached from the usual way of life of their class and for whom there is therefore no place in their society. In his later novels, however, the protagonists of his aesthetic ideal are no longer depicted as misfits in their society, do not live their lives in bitter solitude culminating in utter defeat or a least disillusion, but are rewarded for their virtues by such happiness as corresponds to the conceptions of their milieu — by a good material and social position and idyllic family life. They give therefore a telling testimony that at the end of his life Thackeray lost his earlier doubts as to the possibilities of the realization of his aesthetic ideal in his own time and place and found much beauty in human nature, and that he therefore might have found the high claims Carlyle laid upon the artist in general acceptable

¹⁵ *The Westminster Review*, 1853; quoted *ibid.*, p. 249.

even for the novelist, although in those last years of his life he reveals no tendencies to subscribe to Carlyle's conception of the artist as a hero.

In any case even in his earlier years, when his identification with Carlyle was not unconditional and when in his theoretical reflections he consistently relegated fiction to a lower place in the hierarchy of the arts, he, along with the other novelists of his time, rose to the challenge, when Carlyle, measuring fiction by the highest canons of literature, found it totally wanting and condemned it as writing based upon delusion and pretence, as a mere passive recreation which provides an idle mind with fantastic shows and indolent emotions, and a stimulant which is on the same level as opium and Scotch whisky.¹⁶ Even though Thackeray did not think that the fiction of his time could fulfil the highest aim of art, he defended its expressive validity and instructive value, and both as novelist and critic endeavoured to raise it from its undeserved degradation. As Kathleen Tillotson has pointed out, it was especially Carlyle's challenge in his "Biography", containing ironical encouragement and contemptuous allusion to the novelist's "Long-ear of a Fictitious Biography", which attracted the attention of Thackeray and the other novelists of his day. As the same scholar shows, Mrs. Gaskell took two sentences of this challenge "as the title-page motto of *Mary Barton*", while Thackeray "recalled the passage, with other Carlylean phrases, in his manifesto in *Vanity Fair*":

"I have said that these novelists rose to the challenge; they did not discard the long-eared livery, but they claimed that it concealed a 'week-day preacher', one who 'lifts his voice and cries his sermon'. After Carlyle, the rift between the 'prophetic' and the merely entertaining novel widens. There were, and have continued to be, innumerable novels produced by his two arch-foes Dilettantism and Mammonism; but the 'novel proper' as distinct from the novel as the product of an 'amusement industry' was helped by Carlyle to a status in literature and life which it has hardly yet lost."¹⁷

According to the same scholar, after Carlyle, too, "the poetic, prophetic, and visionary possibilities of the novel are fully awakened . . . ; the reader of Dickens and Thackeray, still more of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, becomes aware of an aura of symbolism (in Dickens, even of allegory) that is absent from earlier English novels" (with the possible exception, as she adds in a footnote, of *Tristram Shandy*, which Carlyle often recalls in *Sartor*).¹⁸ Mrs. Tillotson has also discovered some parallels between Thackeray's and Carlyle's creative approach — in the use of *personae* and self-projections and in the "device of 'editing' with its deliberate complication of the distance between introspection and communication".¹⁹ Dodds has discerned some echoes of Carlyle's philosophy in *Men and Coats*, *Ludovicus Rex*, the *Second Funeral of Napoleon* and *Colby* in *Catherine*,²⁰ while Loofbourow has presented a detailed analysis of the influence of Carlyle's substitution of parable, biography and history for epic and of his discovery of their potential kinships on contemporary writers of fiction. Under this influence

¹⁶ See especially *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, 2 vols., Chapman and Hall Limited, London, 1899, I, 29–30, *Essays* I, 215, 255, II, 2, IV, 76.

¹⁷ Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, 1954, p. 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154 and note.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁰ See Dodds, *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 51–52 and Robert A. Colby, "*Catherine: Thackeray's Credo*", *The Review of English Studies*, vol. XV, No. 60 (1964), pp. 389–390, 387 and 387n.

the novelists "began to interpret their characters' experience in terms of parable" and "to think of themselves as symbolic biographers", although they were at the same time on the defensive and opposed to Carlyle's declaration that "History is not only the fittest study, but the only study, and includes all others whatsoever", "a strident 'It is *not*'", their resistance gathering "arguments as it gained momentum".²¹ As far as Thackeray himself is concerned, Loofbourow points out that the influence of Carlyle is most clearly manifested in *Esmond*, the primary modes of which are biography and history:

"In the end, public fact and personal analysis merged in Carlyle's chaotic conceptions — biography and history, having paused to mate with allegory in *Sartor Resartus*, hesitated on the verge of a new kind of novel and then materialized in *Esmond*."²²

As the same scholar has shown, however, Thackeray's succumbing to Carlyle's influence is not unconditional, for in some aspects he radically differs from his teacher and in some goes beyond him. He dissociates himself entirely from Carlyle's formula of heroes and supermen: his endeavour in *Esmond* is to make history familiar rather than heroic, to divest her, as he writes in his satirical invocation to the Muse of History, of the ceremony with which she had encumbered herself, to have her rise up off her kneeling position before the kings with whose affairs she has so far exclusively busied herself and "take a natural posture: not to be for ever performing cringes and congees like a Court-chamberlain, and shuffling backwards out of doors in the presence of the sovereign".²³ He goes beyond Carlyle in presenting a synthesis of this historian's conception of history "as a sequence of symbolic typifications in an omnipresent allegory", as Loofbourow characterizes it, with Macaulay's conception of history "as an organic cause", both these conceptions being a new development, according to Loofbourow, for "before the nineteenth century, history had been only a record from which interesting facts and useful lessons could be drawn, not an aspect of contemporary reality":

"In *Esmond*, history is both cause and symbol. Events observed by a modern intelligence, self-conscious and introspective, are experienced by an imagination which is in the process of cultural development. The hero's mind grows with his civilization, its evolution reflected in the expressive textures of his language . . . *Esmond's* historical events are sociological causes . . . Historical significance is not the novel's crux, but it is a forceful theme; political evolution in *Esmond* is an objective illustration of the cultural process that is reflected in the hero's subjective experience."²⁴

As Loofbourow points out, history in *Esmond* is converted into imaginative symbol, the major epic metaphors generating "forms that convert historical experience into a recurrent allegory of human event", while the writer's "expressive technique communicates this event as subjective response of intuitive perception; and the union of past and present takes place". The outcome of the whole complex process of development is a historical novel of a new type. As Loofbourow sums it up, *Esmond* as a "creative synthesis of history and fiction — a sequence of expressive modes figuring cultural development, public events mirroring a private experience, a double perspective correlating past and

²¹ For the quotations see op. cit., pp. 101, 102.

²² Ibid., p. 99.

²³ *Works* XIII, 14.

²⁴ Op. cit., pp. 161–162.

present — was a significant break with the illustrative tradition. *Esmond's* method has reappeared in radically different forms — in *Romola*, *Orlando*, *Ulysses*, in Tolstoy, Proust, and Dos Passos. The techniques vary . . . But the aesthetic significance of history in these later novels is strictly comparable with Thackeray's achievement. It is a concept without parallel in Scott or Cooper, Bulwer Lytton or *The Tale of Two Cities*".²⁵

As the same scholar has shown, Carlyle's influence is not limited to this particular instance of *Esmond*, for the novelist "applied his mentor's theory" that man "'everywhere finds himself encompassed with Symbols', . . . the 'visible record of invisible things'"²⁶ in his whole creative approach. For instance in *The Newcomes* he regarded himself as a symbolic biographer, "a biographical archaeologist excavating his characters' emotional past". Carlyle's influence makes itself strongly felt, too, in Thackeray's style. As Loofbourow has demonstrated, one of the precursors of his prose was "the rhetoric of Carlyle, who revived, in prose, the richness of allegorical figuration". Carlyle combined "the biblical tropes of Donne and Milton with the romanticism of Lamb and De Quincey";²⁷ and his figured rhetoric taught Thackeray to fuse the allusive modes he uses into cumulative metaphors.

In spite of all this undeniable indebtedness of Thackeray to Carlyle, it should be emphasized, however, that Thackeray often uses Carlyle's symbolisms in satirical modifications and that the sublime he sought in art, and even in its "higher" branches, was not after all so transcendental as that which had been sought by his teacher, as well as by Ruskin and Emerson, nor was it so exalted as that postulated and created by most of the Romantics. As we know from Thackeray's art criticisms, he had a predilection for pictures showing simple and homely scenes drawn from nature and the heart, which did not cultivate the heroic, but the pathetic and familiar, preferring "a gentle sentiment, an agreeable, quiet incident, a tea-table tragedy, or a bread-and-butter idyl" to more exalted subjects. More than once he expressed himself very explicitly, giving his preference to humble and pleasant pictures "that we can live with — something that shall be lively, pleasing or tender, or sublime, if you will, but only of a moderate-sized sublimity";²⁸ or declaring:

"Earthy are we, and of the earth; glimpses of the sublime are but rare to us; leave them to great geniuses, and to the donkeys" (*Works* II, 59—60).

It is therefore not surprising that of all the conceptions of beauty in art presented by the idealistic philosophers of the age, it was that of Wordsworth which he found after all most acceptable. As we know from his marginal remarks, he identified himself with the poet's conception of nature as being not only exterior nature, the material world, but also the imaginative world derived from the world of material things. He saw the beauty of Wordsworth's poetry in the poet's art of evoking in the reader's mind echoes of the philosophical thoughts underlying the poetic images (as Thackeray expressed it in his comments upon Wordsworth's poem "The Reverie of Poor Susan", "misty

²⁵ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 165, 164.

²⁶ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 101, from *Sartor Resartus*, Book III, ch. 3.

²⁷ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 101, 78.

²⁸ For the quotations see *Works* II, 595, 572; see also *ibid.*, p. 558.

moralties, reflections, and sad and pleasant remembrances"²⁹), his art of presenting, through the depiction of material things, the hidden meaning of the poet's experience, revelations and quick insights into "the great moving spirit of things", as the poet himself formulated it.³⁰ The following quotation shows at the same time that Thackeray identified himself, too, with Wordsworth's principle that poetry may find its material in every natural object, even the humblest, and that he admired the poet's art of sublimating such objects by endowing them with ideal and ethical notions:

"And as the poet has told us how, not out of a wide landscape merely, or a sublime expanse of glittering stars, but of any very humble thing, we may gather the same delightful reflections (as out of a small flower, that brings us 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears') — in like manner we do not want grand pictures and elaborate yards of canvas so to affect us, as the lover of drawing must have felt in looking at the Raphael designs lately exhibited in London. These were little faint scraps, mostly from the artist's pencil — small groups, unfinished single figures, just indicated; but the divine elements of beauty were as strong in them as in the grandest pieces: and there were many little sketches, not half an inch high, which charmed and affected one like the violet did Wordsworth; and left one in that unspeakable, complacent, grateful condition which, as I have been endeavouring to state, is the highest aim of the art" (*Works* II, 502).

Even his identification with Wordsworth was not, however, entirely unconditional, for he could not accept the above mentioned principle of the poet as applied to human society and human nature, differing from him both in his earlier failure to find any beauty or grandeur in human nature, as well as in his later successful ventures in discovering it in some individuals from his own social class and milieu. Although he certainly did share the poet's opinion that the final aim of literature was the universal truth about human manners and the human heart and grounded his novels, as Geoffrey Tillotson has pointed out, in the same "world of all of us" as Wordsworth did his poetry, he did not share, as the same scholar shows, "Wordsworth's further belief that the heart shows itself best when there is least artificiality",³¹ in the humblest country people unspoilt by civilization. He believed, like Wordsworth (and also Hazlitt), that even men in the humblest walk of life had their rightful place in poetry and fiction, insisted that "A man, as a man, from a dustman up to Aeschylus, is God's work, and good to read, as all works of Nature are",³² demanded, in his other reflections on this subject, that even dustmen should be sung about in poetry and factory workers and miners depicted in fiction,³³ and revealed thus an attitude totally divergent from that of the most rigorous Neoclassicists (especially Boileau) and near to that of Wordsworth. It is obvious, however, that the types of heroes this poet selected, especially the earlier characters of the "blessed poor in spirit", did not seem to Thackeray to possess the necessary poetic qualities. In his evaluation of Cruikshank's "Flying Dustmen" he writes:

"Is there no one to write a sonnet to these? — and yet a whole poem was written about Peter Bell the Wagoner, a character by no means so poetic" (*Works* II, 437).

²⁹ *Works* II, 415; for another positive comment on "the majestic repose and splendour" of Wordsworth's (and Virgil's) art see *Works* II, 669.

³⁰ *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. Nowell C. Smith, Henry Frowde, London, 1905, p. 7.

³¹ For the quotations see Geoffrey Tillotson, *Thackeray the Novelist*, Cambridge University Press, 1954, pp. 230, 192—193.

³² *Works* II, 46.

³³ See *Works* II, 437 and *Contributions*, 80.

Through the mouth of Colonel Newcome he later referred to "Peter Bell" as to a poem deservedly ridiculed by all the reviews and in this case we may assume that he identified himself with his hero, though otherwise he does not share the Colonel's contemptuous attitude to the new literary gods of the young generation, including Tennyson and Keats as well as Wordsworth.³⁴ As Thackeray's critical attitude to the sanctimoniousness, prolixity and dullness of Wordsworth's "Excursion" and other philosophical poems of this type demonstrates (excluding the "Ode on Immortality", which he very much admired),³⁵ he had obviously some reservations, too, as to Wordsworth's poetical heroes who were the protagonists of the poet's later ideals of humanity — pharisaic humility, social quietism and a patient devotion to God's will. This is further confirmed by his parodistic interpretation of Wordsworth's later unruffled placidity and the philosophical calmness with which the poet observed the by no means calm world around him, in the following "notice" to his parody of Wordsworth's style, "Ode to Sibthorp. By the Poet Laureate":³⁶

"In the distant solitude of my mountains, the echoes of the great world reach me faintly and seldom. But as the storm sometimes ruffles the placid bosom of my lakes, the political tempest breaks over the Poet, too, occasionally, and blows into commotion the placid depths of his soul.

It was on reading in my paper (the *St. James's Chronicle*, which, with some friends, I have taken in for thirty-three years) the announcement, by my admirable friend Colonel Sibthorp, that he was about to sacrifice his life and his whiskers upon the altar of his country, that I felt a tumultuous movement to me very unusual.

I bathed twice in the lake, and, having ascended Mount Rydal, I lay down upon the topmost peak there, and flung my feelings into the following lyrical shape. I chose the Anapaestic measure, as best suited to express the agitation of the subject of the sacrifice. The other metres employed in the ode are of a calmer tendency, as the reader will see" (*Works* VII, 220).

Thus I do not think that Thackeray fully shared the standpoint of the other Victorians who, as Praz has shown, loved the poet for finding in the humble aspects of life and society "a rival theme to challenge comparison with the heroic, which had hitherto held the stage in poetry", for "his discovery of a note more truly moving, more genuinely heroic, in humble people than in the great and celebrated".³⁷ Although Thackeray certainly did reject the heroic in life and literature, he scarcely could have seen in "Peter Bell" an ideal example of the democratization of the heroic, as in Praz's opinion his contemporaries did. I find myself in agreement rather with Geoffrey Tillotson, in whose opinion Thackeray rather "shared the belief of Pope that it is the contrast between the heart and civilization that best reveals the cardiac condition".³⁸

³⁴ See *Works* XIV, 261.

³⁵ For his critical views on Wordsworth's philosophical poems see especially *Works* VII, 240, 252, Wilson, op. cit., I, p. 243, *Works* XVI, 114; for his admiration of "Ode on Immortality" see *Works* XVI, 114 and Wilson, op. cit., *ibid.*; for a quotation see *Letters* I, 395.

³⁶ *Punch*, April 26, 1845; for his early parody of Wordsworth's poetical style, as well as of the poet's tendency to theorize, see "Mr. Braham. Sonnet. By W. Wordsworth" (*The National Standard*, May 11, 1833).

³⁷ Praz, op. cit., p. 46.

³⁸ Geoffrey Tillotson, op. cit., p. 193.

4. Artistic Imitation

As I have shown in my study on Thackeray's aesthetics, in his theoretical reflections upon aesthetic problems what the novelist paid perhaps the greatest attention to was the relationship of the depiction to the depicted. He did not formulate any complex questions concerning this relationship, nor did he compose any elaborate disquisitions on the aesthetic values of nature and art, or upon the hierarchy of these values. Yet even his tentative theorizing shows that he had a relatively clear conception of all the basic problems — the object of artistic imitation, the degree of faithfulness of the latter, and the creative process in general.

In several of his reflections on the object of artistic imitation Thackeray emphatically stressed the idea of nature being primary and art secondary, of nature being the norm and model of art. As is obvious from this summary of his conception, he dissociated himself from the most rigorous Neoclassicists (especially from Boileau, but also from Burke, Johnson and Reynolds) and assumed a standpoint near to that of for instance Diderot, Hobbes, all the great English Romantics except Shelley, of Hazlitt, Carlyle and Jeffrey. The nature he demanded that art should depict was exterior nature itself, as known by the artist from direct personal observation, and not from "idle recollections". He expressed his standpoint very clearly in the following appeal to the illustrators of the *Annuals*, whom he reprehends for chasing away nature from their drawings and replacing her by "feeble, impotent caricatures of Nature",¹ by false beauty, and proceeds:

"And ye, O young artists! who were made for better things than to paint such senseless gimcracks, and make fribble furniture for tawdry drawing-room tables, look at Nature and blush! See how much nobler she is than your pettifogging art! — how much more beautiful Truth is than your miserable tricked-up lies. More lovely is she than a publisher's bill at three months — a better pay-mistress in the end than Messrs. Heath, Finden, and all the crew. The world loves bad pictures, truly; but yours it is to teach the world, for you know better. Copy Nature. Don't content yourselves with idle recollections of her — be not satisfied with knowing pretty tricks of drawing and colour — stand not still because donkeys proclaim that you have arrived at perfection" (*Works II*, 378).

At the same time Thackeray dissociated himself from one of the basic principles of the Neoclassicist creed (most rigorously applied by Boileau) that nature should be identified with antiquity and that the foundation of poetry should be sought in the works of the ancient classical writers, assuming thus a standpoint near to Diderot's and to that of all the English Romantics (of the latter perhaps the nearest to him were Hunt, Hazlitt and De Quincey). He insisted that the first norm and model for art should be "natural beauty, which, thank God, is fresh and attainable by us all, to-day, and yesterday, and to-morrow", and not the "artificial grace" of "the intolerable, stupid classicalities", of the "pale imitations of the antique". "It is the study of Nature, surely", he pointed out, "that profits us, and not of these imitations of her", and he consistently demanded that the artists (meaning painters in the quoted cases) should copy "directly from nature", should draw their portraits "respectfully from the great, beautiful, various, divine face of Nature".² He went in his dissociation

¹ *Works II*, 354.

² For the quotations see *Works II*, 48, 47, 48, 46, *Contributions*, 138, *Works II*, 569.

from the Neoclassicist doctrine so far as to assume a very critical, if not negative attitude to Greek art itself. His attitude to Greek tragedy is obvious from the following passage from the prologue to *Esmond*:

"The actors in the old tragedies, as we read, piped their iambs to a tune, speaking from under a mask, and wearing stilts and a great head-dress. 'Twas thought the dignity of the Tragic Muse required these appurtenances, and that she was not to move except to a measure and cadence. So Queen Medea slew her children to a slow music: and King Agamemnon perished in a dying fall (to use Mr. Dryden's words): the Chorus standing by in a set attitude, and rhythmically and decorously bewailing the fates of those great crowned persons" (*Works* XIII, 13).

As Loofbourow has so convincingly demonstrated, these opening lines "phrase the archaic formulae of heroic decorum with quiet irony", but the same figure "becomes a vehement satire on artistic convention when the hero argues with Addison at the center of the novel", the whole emblem of historical hypocrisy becoming "a symbol of aesthetic artifice" in Addison's reply and the motifs from the prologue being "integrated with satiric pastoralties"³ in this important argument, with which I shall still deal in detail later. Greek visual art carries in Thackeray's opinion "corporeal beauty to a pitch of painful perfection" which is quite heartless and passionless and hence altogether inhuman:

"Such monsters of beauty are quite out of the reach of human sympathy: they were purposely (by the poor benighted heathens who followed this error, and strove to make their error as grand as possible) placed beyond it. They seemed to think that human joy and sorrow, passion and love, were mean and contemptible in themselves. Their gods were to be calm, and share in no such feelings. How much grander is the character of the Christian school, which teaches that love is the most beautiful of all things, and the first and highest element of beauty in art!" (*Works* II, 501).

This quotation proves, on the one hand, how far Thackeray in his negative attitude to Greek art was from Shelley and Keats, and how near to Hazlitt and, on the other hand, how near he was to Diderot in his admiration and defence of the Christian inspiration in art as an immense advance upon pagan mythology. Unlike Diderot, however, he was not willing to accept uncritically all the schools of art inspired by Christian religion, and sharply pilloried the so-called Catholic school of Overbeck and Cornelius, which stood in his opinion even on a lower level than the Classical school of painting, being "made up of silly affectations, and improvements upon Nature", unlike the Classical school which "was founded on Nature at least".⁴ In contradistinction to Diderot who, not blinded by his philosophic creed, defended the pictures in Catholic churches and saw in the church painter "a sort of preacher, more clear, striking, intelligible, more readily accessible to the common people than the priest and his curate",⁵ Thackeray condemned, very much as Goethe did, most pictures in Catholic churches as "hideous exhibitions of bodily agonies"⁶ which turn the spectator sick and are fit only to brutalize him. In his opinion a genuine religious

³ For the quotations see op. cit., pp. 117, 172, 143.

⁴ *Works* II, 53; see also *ibid.*, pp. 56-57, 386, 551-552, 556-557, VI, 486, XIV, 508-509, *Contributions*, 148.

⁵ Diderot in the *Salon* of 1765, quoted by R. Loyalty Cru, *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1913, p. 416.

⁶ *Works* VI, 491; see also *ibid.*, pp. 479, 499 and XVII, 445-447 (on Rubens's church pictures).

painting is only such as lacks the "affectation of middle-age mannerism" typical of the Catholic School, and expresses "the religious sentiment", purifies the spectator's heart, touches his affections, or awakens "the feelings of religious respect and wonder".⁷ Thackeray differs from Diderot, too, in not being able (mainly because he lived in a Protestant country and was a believer himself) to appreciate the deep effect which not only church pictures but all the outward ceremonies of Catholic worship exercise upon believers. He several times expressed his rejection of the outward pomp of this form of devotion. As far as Christian inspiration in art in general is concerned, however, he always gives it its due. He gives his preference to the great works which Christian inspiration has produced in literature and the fine arts, to "a new sublime — an original sublime — quite as sublime as the Greek sublime", which he finds in the works of Shakespeare, Milton and Michael Angelo. As I have suggested in the first chapter, he did not rest content with these theoretical proclamations, but fought, together with the other "anti-humbuggists", against the intolerable "classical reign" in art, which oppressed his nation for a hundred and ten years, as he says, endeavouring to pull down "the bloated, unnatural, stilted, spouting, sham sublime, that our teachers have believed and tried to pass off as real". These attacks of his are directed (like those of Diderot were) against the already mentioned Classical School, represented in his time by Louis David and Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson and their followers, whom Thackeray denounced as impostors and whose productions he relentlessly criticized as "conventional copies of the stony antique" and "distorted caricatures".⁸ As follows from the above, Thackeray could accept, at least to some extent, only the views of those writers of the Neoclassicist period or of their predecessors, who insisted that the ancient writers should be imitated, but wisely (Ben Jonson) or that their works should be regarded only "as a rich common, where every person who hath the smallest tenement in Parnassus hath a free right to fatten his muse" (Fielding), or who regarded the imitation of the ancients as only a new beauty super-added "over and above a just Painting of Nature" (Steele), or demanded that the wealth acquired by the study of the classics should be augmented by the author's own collection, by the study of nature itself (Johnson and Goldsmith; though in this case Thackeray would insist that the study of nature came first): in short, of those writers who used the classical heritage in a way which at least in some respects resembled his own, this being, however, much more subtle, classical allusions forming for the most part an integral component of his narrative, as Loofbourow has shown.⁹ As we know from Thackeray's criticism, in general he certainly did not regard the above-mentioned writers as cool and lifeless, contemptuous of nature on account of antiquity, or correcting it in the name of antique ideals.

Worthy of separate notice in this connection, however, is again his attitude to Addison, for in this essayist he did sense some coolness, as we shall see later, and, moreover, openly dissociated himself from Addison's aesthetic relationship to reality, both in the Latin verses celebrating the action at Vigo Bay and in his poem "The Campaign", which was in Thackeray's opinion too much indebted

⁷ For the quotations see *Works* II, 504, VI, 478.

⁸ For the quotations see *Works* II, 48, 50, 381.

⁹ See *op. cit.*, especially pp. 19 and 119.

to the Neoclassicist doctrine. Expressing his view through the mouth of Esmond, he at first critically comments upon Addison's lofty praise of the action at Vigo Bay, which in fact was "a bad business", and adds:

"That honest gentleman's muse had an eye to the main chance; and I doubt whether she saw much inspiration in the losing side" (*Works* XIII, 202).

As Loofbourow has pointed out, the novel's "sardonic analysis of national gallantry has begun; the theme of art versus reality that is to be developed through Addison's celebration of British prowess is initiated". When Esmond meets Addison in London, he first expresses his admiration of the writer by quoting from his Latin verses, but even in this quotation, as Loofbourow shows, the "significance of artistic deviation from reality — the distinction between meaningful and meretricious illusion — is implicit . . . ; and the Orpheus allusion precludes a pastoral irony that pervades the poet's impersonation".¹⁰ Thackeray's attitude is, however, most clearly expressed in the episode depicting Steele's reading of Addison's "Campaign" to Esmond in the poet's lodgings, in which the hero of the novel rebukes the poet for presenting a too polished and idealized depiction of "that bloody and ruthless part of our campaign, with the remembrance whereof every soldier who bore a part in it must sicken with shame", and which Addison "describes as blandly as though he were recording a dance at the Opera, or a harmless bout of bucolic cudgelling at a village fair", and proceeds:

"I admire the licence of you poets', says Esmond to Mr. Addison . . . I admire your art: the murder of the campaign is done to military music, like a battle at the Opera, and the virgins shriek in harmony, as our victorious grenadiers march into their villages. Do you know what a scene it was' (by this time, perhaps, the wine had warmed Mr. Esmond's head too), — 'what a triumph you are celebrating? what scenes of shame and horror were enacted, over which the commander's genius presided, as calm as though he didn't belong to our sphere? You talk of the 'listening soldier fixed in sorrow', the 'leader's grief swayed by generous pity'; to my belief the leader cared no more for bleating flocks than he did for infants' cries, and many of our ruffians butchered one or the other with equal alacrity. I was ashamed of my trade when I saw those horrors perpetrated, which came under every man's eyes. You hew out of your polished verses a stately image of smiling victory; I tell you 'tis an uncouth, distorted, savage idol; hideous, bloody, and barbarous. The rites performed before it are shocking to think of. You great poets should show it as it is — ugly and horrible, not beautiful and serene. Oh, sir, had you made the campaign, believe me, you never would have sung it so'" (*Works* XIII, 254—255).

Addison is not disturbed by Esmond's criticism and answers, "smiling very placidly":

"What would you have?" says he. 'In our polished days, and according to the rules of art, 'tis impossible that the Muse should depict tortures or begrime her hands with the horrors of war. These are indicated rather than described; as in the Greek tragedies, that, I dare say, you have read (and sure there can be no more elegant specimens of composition); Agamemnon is slain, or Medea's children destroyed, away from the scene; — the chorus occupying the stage and singing of the action to pathetic music. Something of this I attempt, my dear sir, in my humble way: 'tis a panegyric I mean to write, and not a satire. Were I to sing as you would have me, the town would tear the poet in pieces, and burn his book by the hands of the common hangman'" (*Works* XIII, 255).

In the second place, Thackeray dissociated himself from Addison's principle, which was one of the main tenets of the whole Neoclassicist aesthetic creed.

¹⁰ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 137, 142—143.

namely that art should depict only what is heroic in man, that is, ennobled, static, abstractly generalized nature (as Lessing expressed it in his refutations of the Neoclassicist creative method) — that it should not reveal what is human in the hero, what is individual and disharmonic. His attitude is again very clearly expressed in Esmond's objections to Addison's glorification of Marlborough, voiced partly in the above-quoted passage, to which Addison replies in the following response, quoting or rather echoing Horace's *Ars Poetica*; Loofbourow characterizes this and the above-cited reply of Addison as a "dispassionate Horatian homily", showing on a detailed analysis that it is "a pastiche of Horatian and Virgilian allusions":¹¹

"We must paint our great duke", Mr. Addison went on, 'not as a man, which no doubt he is, with weaknesses like the rest of us, but as a hero. 'Tis in a triumph, not a battle, that your humble servant is riding his sleek Pegasus. We college-poets trot, you know, on very easy nags; it hath been, time out of mind, part of the poet's profession to celebrate the actions of heroes in verse, and to sing the deeds which you men of war perform. I must follow the rules of my art, and the composition of such a strain as this must be harmonious and majestic, not familiar, or too near the vulgar truth. *Si parva licet*: if Virgil could invoke the divine Augustus, a humbler poet from the banks of the Isis may celebrate a victory and a conqueror of our own nation, in whose triumphs every Briton has a share, and whose glory and genius contributes to every citizen's individual honour. When hath there been, since our Henrys' and Edwards' days, such a great feat of arms as that from which you yourself have brought away marks of distinction? If 'tis in my power to sing that song worthily, I will do so, and be thankful to my Muse. If I fail as a poet, as a Briton at least I will show my loyalty and fling up my cap and huzzah for the conqueror" (*Works* XIII, 255-256).

To this Esmond objects that there "were as brave men on that field" (for he was not a great admirer of Marlborough, as Thackeray adds in brackets), "there were men at Blenheim as good as the leader, whom neither knights nor senators applauded, nor voices plebeian or patrician favoured, and who lie there forgotten, under the clods. What poet is there to sing them?"¹² By this argument and this question, which did not find its reply until after Esmond's time and immediately before the time of his creator, in the Pre-Romantic and Romantic period, Esmond does not convince Addison, however, who persists in his attitude, expressing his warm admiration for Marlborough as a great man, possessing "a latent power in him which compels the favour of the gods, and subjugates fortune", a gift which he admires most of all in this leader:

"To be brave? every man is brave. But in being victorious, as he is, I fancy there is something divine. In presence of the occasion, the great soul of the leader shines out, and the god is confessed. Death itself respects him, and passes by him to lay others low" (*Works* XIII, 256).

To support his standpoint Addison then uses a dubious Homeric parallel, as Loofbourow points out (comparing Marlborough to the divine Achilles before whom Hector flees, as do war and carnage before Marlborough). A couple of days after this the two men meet again and Addison asks Esmond to provide him with information about the battle of Blenheim which he is celebrating, quoting in Latin from *Heroides*. As Loofbourow adds, "with his sentimental Ovidian quotation, the European battlefield is reduced to a comic projection

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 172, 143.

¹² *Works* XIII, 256.

of the *Iliad* — an epic burlesque that will characterize the narrator's image of Esmond's later campaigns".¹³

The argument between Esmond and Addison clearly shows that even in this period of his life, when Thackeray as novelist began to retreat from his earlier categorical refusal to create heroes and heroines, in his theory he did not subscribe to Addison's conception of the heroic, as it revealed itself in "The Campaign". Nor did he do so in his literary practice. None of the positive characters which he created in his best novels — Major Dobbin, George Warrington, Esmond and Colonel Newcome — are the glorified heroes of the type created by Addison in Marlborough, illusory ideal heroes created by the method of idealization, but are all genuine representatives of a certain concrete social and moral ideal, realistically observed from life and possessing human weaknesses and defects of character. And what is even more noteworthy is the fact that even in the case of Colonel Newcome, when Thackeray avowedly drew upon Addison, finding inspiration both in the latter's social and moral ideal and in his character of another, non-heroic type, Sir Roger de Coverley, his indebtedness was not a servile imitation or acceptance. This has been pointed out by Loomis, who is, however, interested in the nature and development of Thackeray's satire, and not in his conception of the heroic:

"In one major character Thackeray evidently hoped to embody the heartwarming appeal of benevolent humor: Colonel Newcome begins as an apparently harmless eccentric, a gentleman of the old school who is motivated by a benevolent nature. As *The Newcomes* progresses, however, the characterization of the Colonel darkens. Ultimately his stubborn, almost stupid, insistence on living up to certain dubious principles destroys not only himself but also (allowing for the artificial and arbitrary happy ending) Clive. Thackeray was incapable of maintaining a sentimental view of such a man as the Colonel; intentionally or unintentionally he probed too deep ever to create a Sir Roger de Coverley or a John Jarndyce. Far from elevating amiable humor, his treatment of Colonel Newcome undermines it."¹⁴

Upon the whole we may say that in his conception of the heroic Thackeray was nearer to those Neoclassicists who were not so loyal to the Classical dogma in this issue as was Addison in his poetry and who, mainly because they cultivated the "low" genre of fiction, underestimated by the Neoclassicist aestheticians, managed to a great extent to escape the rigorous application of the literary precepts of their age, namely Fielding, Defoe, Smollett and Sterne. And of course, as several scholars have pointed out and as I have also shown in two of my previous studies,¹⁵ it was to Fielding that he owed the greatest debt. In the 1830s and 1840s Thackeray unconditionally accepted, both in his theory and practice, all the aesthetic principles of this great novelist, including his tenet that the writer of fiction should not introduce into his stories any "infallible characters", any incarnations of "angelic perfection" or "diabolical depravity", since people in real life are neither angels nor devils, but beings in whom virtue and vice are mixed up in such a remarkable manner "that it may require a very accurate judgment and elaborate inquiry to determine which

¹³ Op. cit., p. 144.

¹⁴ Chauncey C. Loomis, Jr., "Thackeray and the Plight of the Victorian Satirist", *English Studies*, vol. XLIX, No. 1, February 1968, p. 15.

¹⁵ See "The Relationship of W. M. Thackeray to Henry Fielding" and "The Aesthetic Views of W. M. Thackeray".

side the balance turns".¹⁶ As I have shown in my study of his aesthetics, Thackeray did not wholly retreat from this principle even in his later years, more particularly in his fiction, but there did appear some significant modifications in his theory and criticism: he modified his former attitude to Fielding's conception of the heroic and began to reveal a tendency to become a convert to Johnson's doctrine that the novelist should present in his characters ideal projections of human moral possibilities, and not faithful copies of human nature (though he did not claim Johnson as his model in this particular point, and it seems more probable that his direct teacher here was Maginn, as we shall see later). As I shall point out in greater detail in the chapter on his criticism of 18th-century fiction, however, his surrender was never entirely unconditional.

On the problem of artistic imitation as such and the degree of its faithfulness to actual reality, Thackeray was obviously even less willing to theorize than on the problem of the object of artistic imitation discussed above. Yet even in this case he did speak out, though always in very simple and straightforward words, insisting that art should imitate nature, and that the imitation should be faithful — art should be a faithful mirror of nature, "a close imitation of life".¹⁷ As these statements of his (and of course all his imaginative works) show, he was following in the footsteps of Aristotle, choosing the first of the three famous definitions of art formulated by the great philosopher, which refers to those writers who represent things "as they were or are", and echoing it several times, especially when referring to the depiction of man and of human nature in fiction. The terms he uses in his definitions, and especially the traditional figure of the mirror, closely resemble those of the many followers of the great founder of aesthetics. Of the English adherents of Aristotle, his terms particularly resemble those of Shakespeare and of the realists of the 18th century, notably Fielding and Johnson, of the foreign aestheticians Diderot and of his contemporaries George Eliot in her earlier stage of development. There are again, however, some differences between his standpoint and that of Aristotle's interpreters in the Age of Neoclassicism and, of course, especially between Thackeray's position and that of those theoreticians and writers of the Romantic Age and of his own period who chose as the starting point of their theory the third definition of Aristotle (art as depiction of things "as they ought to be"). The points of resemblance and the differences between his conception and that of his predecessors and contemporaries will be again best demonstrated by an analysis of the individual principles of his creed.

Although Thackeray defined the relationship of the depiction to the depicted as "a close imitation of life", as did Johnson, but even more in the sense of Diderot, Hazlitt, Schiller, Ruskin, Dickens, George Eliot and Lewes, he did not conceive this term as absolute adequacy in the reproduction of nature in art, as simple transcription from nature. He was not willing to accept a copy of nature which would be an exact, photographic reproduction: on the contrary, he rejected mere copy work in painting, whether from the antique, as we have

¹⁶ For the quotations see *Tom Jones*, Book III, ch. 5; Book X, ch. 1; *Jonathan Wild*, vol. III, Book I, ch. 1.

¹⁷ For the quotation see *Works* VI, 607; see also *Works* II, 354, 378.

seen, or from nature,¹⁸ was critical of pictures and literary works which replaced imagination by a literal, plodding faithfulness to reality and naturalistic detail, and appealed to painters not to depict nature "as they find her", but to trust "to their own powers of invention" and represent "ideal beauty".¹⁹ As this statement shows, Thackeray had no such distrust of imagination as some of the Neoclassicists revealed (especially Boileau and Bouhours) and was therefore nearer to those of their contemporaries, who had recognized its importance in the creative process (especially to Addison who, as Robertson believes, "in the suggestive papers on the imagination . . . laid the foundation of the whole romantic aesthetics in England").²⁰ In contradistinction to most Romantics, however, he was obviously less interested in the subjective process by which experience is changed into literature, as he has not left us any theory of imagination (as for instance Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt and Ruskin did) and revealed no inclination towards the overestimation of exuberant fantasy (as did for instance Keats). He again drew, however, significant distinctions between the individual spheres of art.

His use of Reynolds's term "ideal beauty" in the above-quoted statement suggests that for the "higher" branches of art, especially for painting, Thackeray was not entirely unwilling to accept the conception of those theoreticians and writers who emphasized the ideal element in art and conceived imitation as idealization of nature. Yet his negative opinion of the Neoclassicist doctrine as a whole, his explicit rejection of Addison's tenet that the author may mend and perfect nature "where he describes a reality" and add "greater beauties than are put together in nature, where he describes a fiction",²¹ with which I have already dealt, as well as his reserved attitude to Reynolds as critic of art, clearly show that his term "ideal beauty", which he in any case uses only in this single instance, is not identical with that of Reynolds. Nor are its implications entirely identical with those attributed to it by the Romantics. As his reflections upon this problem suggest, for the poet, painter and composer Thackeray could accept the Romantics' conception of the artist soaring on the wings of fantasy into an ideal world. When he wrote about the "higher" branches of art, he did ascribe to imagination a very significant role in the creative process: a picture, for instance, should have in his opinion "great poetical *intention*", wonder and poetry, and should tell the onlooker more than he can see.²² On poetry and music he wrote:

"I doubt, after all, if there is any need for an artist to make his portraits like. What you want is not to be struck by the resemblance, but impregnated with the idea. For instance, when the thunderstorm comes, as in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, you don't think of putting up your umbrella: when you read young Mr. S. Rogers's pretty verses —

Mine be a cot beside a hill,
A beehive's hum salute my, &c.

you are not led to suppose that they contain a real picture of rural life and felicity; but they fill the mind with sweet, pleasant, countrified, hay-smelling, hawthorn-flowering,

¹⁸ See e.g. *Works* II, 511, 633; *Contributions*, 136; Spielmann, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁹ *Contributions*, 27.

²⁰ J. G. Robertson, *Studies in the Genesis of Romantic Theory in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1923, p. 241.

²¹ *Essays of Joseph Addison*, II, 199; see also *ibid.*, p. 200.

²² For the quotation see *Works* II, 51; see also *ibid.*, p. 645.

tree-whispering, river-babbling, breeze-blowing rural perceptions, wherein lie the reader's delight and the poet's charm and mystery. As the mesmerists' giving a glass of cold water to their lucky patients can make the liquor assume any taste, from Johannisberg to ginger-beer — it is water still, but it has the effect of wine: so a poet mesmerizes you with his magical tap" (*Works* VI, 593).

Thackeray even stipulates for the painter's and the poet's privilege to use exaggeration, mentioning in this connection the "gigantic extra creations", as are Ariosto's giants, Shakespeare's Caliban and the gigantic trees in one of Cattermole's pictures, all of which are "impossible" but, as they correspond to the creative purpose of the artist, the onlooker and reader gives them "a poetic credence".²³ Even in the sphere of the "higher" branches of art, however, the exaggeration should not in Thackeray's opinion go too far, and the flight of the artist's fantasy should not reach immeasurable heights. This is confirmed by his comment upon "the philosophy of exaggeration" and his rejection of "monstrous theatrical effects"²⁴ in two of his art criticisms, but especially by his evaluation of the sculptures in the statue-room at Luxembourg in his article "On the French School of Painting". He praises as best those sculptures that are pretty, fanciful, naive, "admirable in workmanship and imitation of Nature", and proceeds:

"These are not very exalted subjects, or what are called exalted, and do not go beyond simple, smiling beauty and nature. But what then? Are we gods, Miltons, Michael Angelos, that can leave earth when we please, and soar to heights immeasurable? No, my dear MacGilp; but the fools of academicians would fain make us so. Are you not, and half the painters in London, panting for an opportunity to show your genius in a great 'historical picture'? O blind race! Have you wings? Not a feather: and yet you must be ever puffing, sweating up to the tops of rugged hills; and, arrived there, clapping and shaking your ragged elbows, and making as if you would fly! Come down, silly Daedalus; come down to the lowly places in which Nature ordered you to walk. The sweet flowers are springing there; the fat muttoms are waiting there; the pleasant sun shines there: be content and humble, and take your share of the good cheer" (*Works* II, 54).

This statement of course further confirms what we have said in the preceding sub-chapter on Thackeray's conception of beauty in art and his predilection for the down-to-earth, humble and "moderate-sized" sublime. It suggests at the same time, however, that the ideal world in which Thackeray sought for his sublime was not so transcendental and visionary as was that of Shelley, nor so mystical as that of Coleridge. It was, however, very near to that of Wordsworth, as I have shown, as it was to Keats's world of beauty created by poetic imagination, pointing upwards but deeply rooted in the beauties of actual reality — of English gardens, forests and fields; and to Hazlitt's world of goodness and beauty, "another mightier world" which exists "only in conception and in power" besides and beyond the everyday material world, "the universe of thought and sentiment, that surrounds and is raised above the ordinary world of reality".²⁵ I have found out only one instance, however, in which Thackeray directly expressed his own ideas of this realm of beauty, in his article on "Caricatures and Lithography in Paris":

²³ *Contributions*, 135.

²⁴ See *Works* II, 486n. and 526—527.

²⁵ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets and the English Comic Writers*, G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., 1916 (further to be cited as *English Poets and Comic Writers*), *Comic Writers*, p. 199.

"So much has church and state puritanism done for us — so well has it succeeded in materializing and binding down to the earth the imagination of men, for which God has made another world (which certain statesmen take but too little into account) — that fair and beautiful world of art in which there *can* be nothing selfish and sordid, of which Dulness has forgotten the existence, and which Bigotry has endeavoured to shut out from sight" (*Works* II, 172).

This quotation, in which we may discern echoes of Carlyle and Ruskin, at the same time suggests how near to Thackeray's conception was the ideal world of Carlyle which, like Thackeray's own, was not "remote from the Actual, but under it and within it". Unlike Shelley and Coleridge, Carlyle did not lead his readers away from the world of men, soaring with them into a visionary, romantic or supernatural region, or to "some past, distant, conventional heroic world", but insisted that literature should "dwell in Reality", should reflect, "in many-coloured expressive symbols, the actual passions, the hopes, sorrows, joys of living men".²⁶ As Buckley has pointed out, Carlyle sought "the miracle of being, not in the remote realms of the ideal, but in the firm soil of actuality . . . However eccentric may have been his prose style, however unique his insights, he was fundamentally at one with the major early Victorians in his preference for a sociological realism; he was by his own definition 'a bringer-back of men to reality'".²⁷

As Carlyle's strong influence upon Thackeray's fiction shows, the novelist could accept the philosopher-historian's conception even for this "lower" branch of art, though again in a less transcendental form than it had been conceived by its creator. As all his reflections upon fiction prove, any idealism in this sphere of art was for him untenable. He never envisaged the novelist as soaring on the wings of fantasy into a better and more beautiful world created by his own imagination, and explicitly rejected this idea in the following refutation of the possible objections to his sober and matter-of-fact description of the Pyramids:

"— And this is all you have to tell about the Pyramids? O for shame! Not a compliment to their age and size? Not a big phrase, — not a rapture? Do you mean to say that you had no feeling of respect and awe? Try, man, and build up a monument of words as lofty as they are — they, whom 'imber edax', and 'aquilo impotens', and the flight of ages have not been able to destroy!

— No: be that the work for great geniuses, great painters, great poets! This quill was never made to take such flights; it comes of the wing of an humble domestic bird, who walks a common; who talks a great deal (and hisses sometimes); who can't fly far or high, and drops always very quickly; and whose unromantic end is, to be laid on a Michaelmas or Christmas table, and there to be discussed for half an hour — let us hope, with some relish" (*Works* IX, 253—254).

In Thackeray's opinion the novelist's imagination should be kept within certain bounds: he should not deviate from nature, to correct it or improve upon it, should not select from it only what is beautiful and noble but depict it in its entirety, including its less beautiful or hideous aspects, and paint it faithfully — in short, as his literary teacher Fielding expressed it, "draw his materials from nature only", adhere to nature, "from the just imitation of

²⁶ For the quotations see *Essays* I, 272, 271, 66, 213.

²⁷ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper. A Study in Literary Culture*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1952, p. 37.

which will flow all the pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible reader".²⁸ His standpoint is most clearly apparent from his dispute with David Masson which concerns the problem of the ideal and real in art, as it was interpreted by the latter critic in his article "*Pendennis and Copperfield, Thackeray and Dickens*".²⁹ As Ray has pointed out,

"Masson distinguishes in his article (pp. 69—70) between real and ideal styles in art. The aim of the former, he maintains, 'is to reproduce pictures that shall impress by their close and truthful resemblance to something or other in real nature or life'. The latter, on the other hand, 'strikes, not by recalling real scenes and occurrences, but by taking the mind out of itself into a region of higher possibilities, wherein objects shall be more glorious, and modes of action more transcendent, than any we see, and yet all shall seem in nature'. Thackeray is an artist of the real school, Masson continues, but Dickens works in the ideal. If Thackeray should be praised for the verisimilitude of his fiction, it is none the less a mistake to reproach Dickens because his characters are not life-like. 'Art is called Art, says Goethe, precisely because it is not Nature; and even such a department of art as the modern novel is entitled to the benefit of this maxim' (p. 75)" (*Letters II, 772n.*).

Thackeray reacted to Masson's article in a letter to the critic in which he expressed his deep admiration for Dickens's art, but reprehended him for deviating from a faithful depiction of reality, while he dissociated himself from Goethe's principle:

"I quarrel with his Art in many respects: wh^h I don't think represents Nature duly; for instance Micawber appears to me an exaggeration of a man, as his name is of a name. It is delightful and makes me laugh: but it is no more a real man than my friend Punch is: and in so far I protest against him — and against the doctrine quoted by my Reviewer from Goethe too — holding that the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality — in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically: but in a drawing-room drama a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics, not an embroidered tunic, nor a great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime weapon" (*Letters II, 772—773*).

As this quotation shows, Thackeray was convinced that Dickens was overstepping the boundaries to which in his opinion imagination should be limited in the art of fiction. He was of course right in seeing that Dickens had strongly permeated his fiction with imagination, but failed to realize that his contemporary deliberately chose this particular creative approach, which he himself characterized as "fantastic fidelity",³⁰ and that he purposely dwelt, as he expressed it in his preface to *Bleak House*, "upon the romantic side of familiar things". As Stang has shown, Dickens "saw a very distinct connection between his own art and that of the folk and fairy tale and realized his methods were very far from those of the realistic novelists of the mid-century. As far as he was concerned, the prevailing emphasis on verisimilitude was beside the point, since he was consciously using distortion and fantasy:

It does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth... The exact truth should be there; but the merit or art in the narrator is the manner of stating the truth... In these times, when the tendency is to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like — to make the thing, in short, a sum in reduction that any miserable creature can do that way — I have an idea (really founded on the love of what I profess),

²⁸ *Tom Jones*, Book IV, ch. 6; *Joseph Andrews*, Preface.

²⁹ *The North British Review*, May 1851, pp. 57—89.

³⁰ Forster's *Life of Dickens*, ed. J. W. T. Ley, New York, n. d., p. 726.

that the very holding of popular literature through a kind of popular dark age, may depend on such fanciful treatment.”³¹

Dickens was motivated in the choice of his specific creative approach by two main reasons, both of which could have been well understood by Thackeray, as they played a not negligible role in the selection of his own method, though they led him to different results. Like Thackeray, Dickens felt that reason alone could not cope with the reality of his time, as it could not help the novelist to come to “see into the heart of things”, and that only imagination, as Stang has interpreted his standpoint, could “unify the many disparate facts of experience”.³² This conviction led Dickens to his characteristic “fusion of the graces of the imagination with the realities of life”,³³ the result of which were his most delightful but to some extent fanciful depictions. Thackeray, on the other hand, was led by the same distaste for pure rationalism and by his awareness of the relativity and multiplicity of the reality of his time to the creation of a new type of prose, as Loofbourow has shown, writing novels in which he “dispenses with rational analysis”, but at the same time he can do without the exuberant fantasy of the Dickensian type, developing “a narrative medium whose expressive images convey the novel’s emotional event” and presenting characters who are “refractions of allusive color rather than instruments of rational insight” and who at the same time are “images of contemporary subjective complexities”.³⁴

The second motive of Dickens’s choice was his conviction, analysed by Stang and Stone, that imagination was a condition *sine qua non* for the survival of man in the Iron Age. He expressed this view perhaps most convincingly in his “Preliminary Word” to *Household Words* (March 30th, 1850), partly cited by Stang and paraphrased and quoted by Stone:

“As he, through imagination, had turned harsh experience into art, so would *Household Words* teach ‘the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination’. *Household Words* would ‘show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out’.”³⁵

As Stone has shown, the great stress Dickens laid upon imagination revealed itself very strongly, too, in his editorial work for *Household Words*. He could not bear the “colourless, shapeless” writing that destroyed whatever it touched, many times reprehended his contributors for the lack of “elegance of fancy”, the depressing, dreary, arithmetical dustiness and awkwardness of the style which he called “pale literary boiled veal” or “stewed lead” and emphasized that the magazine had to be kept imaginative, that “Some fancy must be got into”³⁶ it. He put all these demands into practice, subjecting all the contributions to “his meticulous editorial scrutiny” and correcting or often completely re-

³¹ Op. cit., 156 (quotation from Forster, op. cit., pp. 727–728).

³² Ibid., pp. 27–28 (quotation from *All the Year Round*, XVIII, p. 120).

³³ Quoted by Harry Stone in “Dickens and the Idea of a Periodical”, *The Western Humanities Review*, vol. XXI, No. 3, Summer 1967, p. 255, from the announcement in the last number of *Household Words* of Dickens’s new magazine, *All the Year Round*.

³⁴ For the quotations see op. cit., pp. 77, 79, 85.

³⁵ “Dickens and the Idea of a Periodical”, p. 245.

³⁶ Quoted by Harry Stone in “Dickens ‘Conducts’ *Household Words*”, *The Dickensian*, vol. LXIV, May 1968, p. 76.

writing most of them. According to Stone, it was not easy for Dickens's staff to achieve the kind of fancy he demanded: they emulated his example, but such emulation too often "never got beyond mimicking the grossest externals of his manner: his exaggeration, animism, repetition, or grotesquerie". One of those collaborators, Percy Fitzgerald, "who learned the externals of the technique but never quite brought off the achievement", as Stone points out, wrote about the consequences of such a proceeding to the staff:

"The writers were compelled, owing to the necessity of producing effect, to adopt a tone of exaggeration. Everything, even trivial, had to be made more comic than it really was. This was the law of the paper, and the reader is conscious of it when he takes up the journal after an interval of years. As I can testify from my own experience, this pressure became all but irresistible. A mere natural, unaffected account of any transaction, it was felt, was out of place, it would not harmonise with the brilliant, buoyant things surrounding it. I often think with some compunction of my own trespassings in this way, and of the bad habit one gradually acquired of colouring up for effect, and of magnifying the smallest trifle."³⁷

As we shall see later, Thackeray was well aware of these dangers that Dickens's creative approach laid in snare for his less talented imitators. Also Dickens himself gradually realized the necessity of controlling and disciplining his imagination. As Stang points out, "emphasis on careful craftsmanship, method, technique and form became a dominant concern in his theory of the novel"³⁸ and, as his later novels show, he did eventually learn to hold his exuberant fantasy in check. This development has not passed unnoticed by Thackeray who positively commented upon the greater simplicity in style in *David Copperfield* and even believed that this change was due to the influence of his *Vanity Fair*.³⁹ The road he himself had chosen was, however, different all along. As we have seen, he had the same fears as Dickens as to the possible destruction of Fancy in the age of "economists and calculators", yet his theoretical reflections and especially his whole imaginative work clearly show that he did not share Dickens's belief that imagination was that decisive factor which would ensure the survival of man, alleviate the distress of the working classes and altogether ease the harshness of the mechanical age. He had essentially different ideas as to how art was to help in transforming the world and as to the possibilities of the realization of this change. As I have shown in more detail in my study on his aesthetics, Thackeray's conception of this important issue is characterized by the deep contradictions which are rooted in the contrasts existing in his consciousness since his youth and sharpened under the impact of the stormy events of Chartism. In 1840, when the Chartist movement was at its whitest heat, he began to proclaim the opinion, inspired by Ovid's famous tribute to the arts (which he also liked to quote⁴⁰), but probably indebted, too, to the similar view of many writers before him (Jonson, the English 18th-century writers, Diderot, Keats, Hazlitt, Schiller, etc.), that one of the important tasks to be performed by art in human society was to ameliorate manners. In contradistinction to his predecessors, however, he added something novel — that one part of this task was to calm the revolutionary moods of the working class. As I have pointed out, the argument he develops in "Caricatures and Lithography

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77; for the above quotations see *ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 19; see also p. 20.

³⁹ See *Letters II*, 531.

⁴⁰ See *Works II*, 169, 468–469, 411–412, III, 203, VIII, 466, XIV, 69, 70, XVI, 86.

in Paris", his comparison of the cheerful and sober French workers with their embittered and dissatisfied comrades in England and the remedy he proposes to the latter after the French model (the cultivation of art and promotion of harmless amusement) clearly show that he regarded the aesthetic education of the working class as the main means of securing its contentment and obedience, and thus actually saw in literature and art, even though he might not have been aware of it himself, important instruments for suppressing the revolutionary activity of the masses, for which he had some understanding and even sympathy, but which he at the same time greatly feared.

As this summary suggests, in some of its aspects his conception is near to that of Dickens, while in others it diverges from it. Both novelists believed that art and literature should serve the widest masses, that their proper place was in the hands of the people, and included in the term "the people" both the working class and the middle, or at least, lower middle classes. Both insisted, too, that literature should not write down to the level of the taste of its readers, but should refine and elevate it, and though they both recognized that the working classes should have their entertainment, they were not indifferent as to what sort of literature provided it. Both demonstrated this as novelists, and in addition Thackeray, as a relentless critic of literary trash and Dickens, both as contributor to and editor of *Household Words*, were committed to this principle. Dickens's main purpose in founding *Household Words* had been, as Stone has pointed out, "to give the lower classes an opportunity to read something better than their steady diet of cheap confessions and lurid adventures"⁴¹ and his magazine did in fact limit the popularity of this literature, "playing havoc", as he himself expressed it, "with the villainous literature".⁴² There is, however, one characteristic difference between the point of view of the two novelists. In his genuine and warm sympathy for the lower classes Dickens occasionally tended to depart from his principles and include even "the villainous literature" among the means of providing entertainment for the working classes. This is obvious from the following outburst of sympathy in his reply of 17th March 1854 to Charles Knight's complaint about the enormous popularity of the sensational novels of G. W. M. Reynolds and Edward Lloyd:

"The English are, so far as I know, the hardest-worked people on whom the sun shines. Be content if, in their wretched intervals of pleasure, they read for amusement and do no worse. They are born at the oar, and they live and die at it. Good God, what would we have of them!"⁴³

In view of the novels mentioned in this connection — the "penny dreadfuls" of the lowest kind of criminal fiction — we may assume that such a statement would probably never have been pronounced by Thackeray, the severe judge of the Newgate fiction, exasperated at the idea that the readers of his time were continuously gorged with "blood, and foul Newgate garbage".⁴⁴ The two novelists differed, too, in their view of Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*. While Thackeray mercilessly attacked it as critic (though he had a sneaking kindness for it as reader, as we shall see later), Dickens obviously regarded it as not wholly

⁴¹ Harry Stone, "New Writings by Dickens", *The Dalhousie Review*, vol. 47, No. 3, p. 318.

⁴² "Dickens and the Idea of a Periodical", p. 251.

⁴³ Charles Knight, *Passages of a Working Life*, London, 1864, III, p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Works* III, 166.

rejectable as reading for the wide masses (though he meant his *Oliver Twist* to be a protest mainly against this novel, as we shall also learn below), for he published it in *Bentley's Miscellany* under his own editorship.⁴⁵ What is on the other hand worth noticing, however, is Thackeray's inability to appreciate duly Dickens's endeavour to provide the lower classes, through the medium of his novels, with a better entertainment and humour than they currently cultivated or produced themselves, or had access to in cheap publications. He expressed his point of view most clearly in the following passage from his review of the popular ballads published by Catnach, "Horae Catnachianae" (*Fraser's Magazine*, 1839):

"All these people have their own society, manners, amusements, intrigues, crimes, follies, and fashions, just as well as the twelve thousand families whose names are registered in the *Court Guide*. Fraser sells to his thousands, but Catnach to his hundreds of thousands; who have this advantage over us, that while by cheap printing, and the progress of the art of reading, the manners and amusements of the *Court Guide* world are well known to them, we have, on the contrary, no idea of their manners, no relish for their amusements, except as we see them in Boz's witty puppet-show: an entertaining exhibition, all must allow, but not a faithful one.

The world, the honest working world, is not idle enough to have reached such a high point in the art of joking as Boz would assign it. A great deal of ease, and leisure of mind and body, are required for persons, before they can make much proficiency in that science; and our labouring men have not, as we scarcely need say, much time for this, the study of idleness. In the *original* ballads before us, the humour is very simple indeed. It is Punch's humour, that lies not so much in the point of his replies as of his stick. The jokes are of the simplest formation; and much more droll than they, are the notions of the sublime and pathetic, of all of which we shall try and give some instances."⁴⁶

I have also dealt in the study on Thackeray's aesthetics and in the present work with his explicit rejection of the idea that art should be directly socially and politically committed; to this I should add that among the novelists whom he reprehended for posing as social reformers he included even Dickens, committing the great injustice of placing him on the same level as the rest of the pilloried writers, all of them second-rate and well deserving his criticism. He mentions Dickens only by name, however, does not refer to any specific novel of his great contemporary in this connection and does not condemn him in such strong words as for instance the reviewers of the *Saturday Review* did, who described Dickens and Reade as "writers who are to society what rats and worms are to a ship's bottom".⁴⁷ We have also seen that these reflections of his were rather protests against inartistic handling of the broad theme of social and political relationships in the novel than rejection of the social commitment of fiction in general, as well as protests against the novelists' inexpert and uninformed meddling in affairs of which they had no notion and which should

⁴⁵ See "Dickens and the Idea of a Periodical", p. 240. It is worth noticing, however, that when Dickens thought of his vindication against the unjust attacks of critics on *Oliver Twist*, he pointed out that if "this opportunity had presented itself" and he "had made this vindication" (and he had done so in the 1841 preface to the novel, as we shall see later), then "I could have no objection to set my hand to what I know to be true concerning the late lamented John Sheppard, but I feel great repugnance to do so now, lest it should seem an ungenerous and unmanly way of disavowing any sympathy with that school, and a means of shielding myself" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter, Bloomsbury, 1938, I, 240).

⁴⁶ "Horae Catnachianae", *Fraser's Magazine*, April 1839, p. 410.

⁴⁷ *The Saturday Review*, IV, 34 (July 11, 1857), quoted by Stang, op. cit., p. 24.

have been rather handled by politicians. And we have seen, too, that in spite of his at first sight (and from my point of view) very heretical declarations in the above-quoted arguments, in spite of his subjective fatalistic views of the possibilities of any changes in his society, in spite, too, of his alarm at the idea of any such changes and of his eventual resigned acceptance (which took place during the period when Dickens "came more and more to realize", as Stang has pointed out, "that more fundamental changes were needed"⁴⁸ than the removal of specific social abuses), Thackeray saw in art, as Dickens did, a deeply social force and, by creating his splendid satirical depictions of the society he knew as a dehumanized world of universal purchase and sale, he did the same service to that society as Dickens, although he had selected a different manner of expression. Like Dickens, Thackeray did not create his depictions of society for their own sake, but presented them to his readers to help them to a better understanding of the world they lived in, conceivably to aid them in transforming it. He was obviously convinced that this purpose would be better fulfilled if he told them the unadorned truth about their society than if he embellished the harsh reality and endowed it with all the charms of romance, as Dickens proposed to do in *Household Words* (intending to find a place in his magazine even for the factory chimneys, so hated by Thackeray, as these "Swart giants, slaves of the Lamp of Knowledge, have their thousand and one tales, no less than the Genii of the East"⁴⁹). In Thackeray's eyes such a creative approach must have contained the potential danger of leading Dickens to something this novelist himself never intended — to reconciling people to the hideous reality or to providing an escape from it. Of course he need not have harboured any such fears, for Dickens, like himself, never subscribed to any theory that regarded art and literature as an escape mechanism, never actually led his readers away from their world, but, on the contrary, made them strongly aware of its seamy side and was consistently opposed, like Thackeray, to idealizing tendencies in art, to any art, as Stang has it, "which seemed to separate itself too much from life"⁵⁰.

There is still one matter to be discussed, and that is Thackeray's explicit rejection of the validity for fiction of Goethe's maxim "Art is called Art, precisely because it is *not* Nature". The discussion fortunately need not be very lengthy, for this rejection is obviously based on a misunderstanding on the part of Thackeray. The English novelist apparently thought that Goethe rejected nature as the norm and model of art, while the German poet addressed his maxim to those vulgar interpreters of his time who conceived art in an oversimplified manner as the direct and exact reproduction of nature and hence regarded some spheres of art (for instance solo singing and ballet) as entirely "unnatural". What Goethe had in mind when he pronounced this categorical statement was that art would be needless, if what is immediately apprehended were identical with what is inevitable according to natural law and the phenomenon were identical with the substance. In any case, however, this misunderstanding is curious at least for two reasons. In the first place, Thackeray himself never made, as we have seen in this chapter, any absolute identifications

⁴⁸ Op. cit., p. 23.

⁴⁹ "Dickens and the Idea of a Periodical", p. 246.

⁵⁰ Op. cit., p. 157; see also *ibid.*, p. 158.

between "art" and "nature" and was aware, as Goethe was, of the important role played in the creative process by imagination (though the German poet laid greater stress upon this particular aspect of artistic creation). In the second place, Thackeray was apparently well informed about Goethe's philosophy and literary theory, and in one case assessed it rightly. In his early review of Mrs. Austin's book *Characteristics of Goethe* we find the following statement which shows that he realized that Goethe's philosophy, and hence his literary theory, were rooted in actual reality:

"His genius was altogether averse to metaphysics; he had a decided repugnance to the super-sensual, and his philosophy was that of experience."⁵¹

In this particular case, however, he was much influenced by the interpretation of Mrs. Austin, as follows from his echoing of her substantiated opinion that Goethe's mind was "of a perfectly original cast, its character exhibiting little affinity with any other to which the history of literature introduces us", as well as of her more questionable view that Goethe was not marked "by the peculiarities of the period in which he lived", having caught "little or nothing of the spirit of his great contemporaries",⁵² and that the differences between him and Herder were very serious and unreconcilable. As Reiman has shown, Goethe's philosophy was indeed indebted rather to that of Spinoza than to that of any of his contemporaries, but he was also deeply influenced by Herder, as he himself confessed,⁵³ and though there were of course some differences in their point of view, which led to serious conflicts and even to a temporary estrangement between them, they were nearer to each other in basic philosophical questions than has sometimes been supposed.

In the review we are discussing Thackeray does, however, express also his own opinion, uninfluenced by the views of Mrs. Austin and relating not to Goethe's philosophy but to his literary theory and creative approach. He quotes Goethe's letter from Weimar of 18th September 1831, in which the poet describes a fountain in front of his house and people who go there to fetch water, as well as the following reflection added to the description:

"Here now is an opportunity for the artist... to show what he was able to see, to apprehend, to select, to imitate. Here he may study an act or occupation indispensable to man, at all its moments, each of which is important, many pertinent, beautiful, graceful, and in the best sentiment and style. And thus we should have one case which might stand for a thousand, from which it would be evident that, without immediate union of object and subject, no living work of art can be produced.

I thank the critical and idealistic philosophy that it made me observant of myself: that is an enormous gain; it does not, however, supply the object; that we must take for granted, as well as the ordinary intelligence of man requisite to enjoy the pleasantries of life in our unchangeable relation to it."

To this Thackeray adds the following dry comment:

"The fountain opposite Goethe's house is not particularly picturesque, and the people who frequent it not remarkable for their beauty. But there are beauties disclosed to the poetic

⁵¹ "Characteristics of Goethe", *The National Standard*, May 25, 1833, p. 322.

⁵² For the quotations see *ibid.*

⁵³ His confession is quoted by Pavel Reiman in *Hlavní proudy německé literatury, 1750—1848 (The Main Streams of German Literature)*, trans. E. Jungmannová and J. Koh-nová-Hermanová, SNPL, Praha, 1958, pp. 103—104.

eye which the common observer will endeavour in vain to discover; and the philosopher can make sermons on running brooks, such as the fountain at Weimar, which, we confess, appeared to us a most ordinary waterspout."⁵⁴

This comment suggests that Thackeray could not unconditionally approve of Goethe's creative approach, for he believed that it was leading the poet to a retreat from actual reality. He found it particularly objectionable as far as Goethe's fiction was concerned, as follows from his negative assessment of *Wilhelm Meister*, in which he condemned the novel not only on moral grounds, but also for containing traces of mysticism. He maintained that the book was "a wretched performance . . . without principle & certainly without interest — at least the last volume", containing neither "delicacy morality or philosophy" (though he added that he had perhaps no right to judge of the last, as he was not initiated), and proceeded:

"If the mystick statues scrolls & sphinxes &c — only typify the actual & bodily part of the book why the mysticism is but a doting drivelling sentimentality not worth the pains of deciphering" (*Letters I*, 213).

As this statement shows, Goethe's symbolism, particularly as revealed in the second half of the novel (though this arose, as Carlyle pointed out, only from a secondary, substituted motive⁵⁵), seemed to him unacceptable for fiction and even prevented him from realizing how near the German poet was to him in his conception of literature and art in general and his theory of imitation in particular. Like Thackeray, Goethe never abandoned the soil of reality, never subscribed to any theory which proclaimed idealization of nature in art, in his theoretical reflections never deviated from the principles of realism, however profounder may have been the philosophical grounds which he progressively sought, and was implacable to any deviations from the truth of life in art. As Lewes pointed out, Goethe's constant endeavour was "to study Nature, so as to see her *directly*, and not through the mists of fancy, or through the distortions of prejudice, — to look at men, and *into* them, — to apprehend things as they were".⁵⁶ Like Thackeray, Goethe as critic fought against the Romantic School (though in contradistinction to the English critic he did not launch his campaign until the last years of his life) and in this fight stubbornly defended the realistic orientation of literature towards life, rejecting, very much like Thackeray, the Romantic predilection for celebrating night, death, and mystical escape from life, for depicting pathological and morbid phenomena and the dark aspects of life and leading the reader away from the reality of his own time to an idealized conception of the Middle Ages (unlike Thackeray, however, Goethe juxtaposed to these reactionary tendencies Greek art and culture). It is worth noticing, however, that Thackeray apparently found Goethe's conception of art acceptable for poetry in general and for Goethe's poetical works in particular, since his comments upon the latter are predominantly affirmative, as we shall see.

⁵⁴ "Characteristics of Goethe", *The National Standard*, June 8, 1833, p. 357.

⁵⁵ See Carlyle, *Wilhelm Meister*, I, viii.

⁵⁶ *Life and Works of Goethe*, London, 1864, p. 52; quoted by Greenhut, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

5. The General Position of Thackeray's Aesthetic Creed

Thackeray's aesthetic creed as we have just seen is not original, nor is it, however, entirely imitative. A detailed confrontation and comparison of his views with those of his great predecessors and contemporaries has revealed that there exist numerous points of resemblance in individual tenets but that there are always, too, many differences which show that his indebtedness was not absolute and that he took over those isolated principles of individual aestheticians which suited his own conception rather than accepted their whole theories.

We have seen that he had a highly critical attitude to the Neoclassicist doctrine and openly dissociated himself from several of its main principles, but that he was at the same time much indebted, especially in his conception of the art of fiction, to the doctrines of the English realistic novelists of the period, either in individual tenets or even for his whole conception, as was the case with Fielding. Upon the whole we may say that Thackeray's conception of the art of fiction is thoroughly realistic and nearer to that of Fielding than to that of anybody else — indeed, as far as his purely theoretical reflections upon this art are concerned, I have not ascertained any traces of later influences. The reason of my failure to do so is of course the relatively very small number of such reflections on Thackeray's part and the fact that they do not concern the more subtle aesthetic problems in this particular branch of art. As far as his own fiction is concerned, however, the situation is different. This does not mean that his imaginative work is not thoroughly realistic, yet it does bear traces of later influences (as we have partly seen) and clearly shows that he went beyond the influence even of his greatest literary teacher, Fielding, and hence all the more so of the more orthodox Neoclassicists. His sharply satirical depictions of society, and the hideous truth about human nature which he reveals in them, very convincingly show how perfectly he realized that something had gone wrong with the rational and moral order in human society, according to which his predecessors in the Neoclassical Age could safely classify various human emotions and experiences. Living in a period when the economic and social contradictions within the structure of society, inherited from the preceding century, were daily brought into a sharper relief under the constant and increasing impact of the Industrial Revolution, he found himself unable to share the Augustans' general confidence in the psychological and philosophical stability of mankind and especially their belief that everything was for the best and that man lived in the world of orderly and universal values. He came to realize, as many of his contemporaries did, that pure rationalism could not interpret the new aspects of experience to which changing conditions were giving birth and that "a retreat to neoclassical certitudes",¹ as Loofbrourow expressed it, was no longer possible. It is therefore not surprising that he so enthusiastically welcomed the death of Classicism in painting, brought about by the arrival of Romanticism:

"Nevertheless, Jacques Louis David is dead. He died about a year after his bodily demise in 1825. The romanticism killed him. Walter Scott, from his Castle of Abbotsford, sent out a troop of gallant young Scotch adventurers, merry outlaws, valiant knights, and savage Highlanders, who, with trunk hosen and buff jerkins, fierce two-handed swords, and harness on their backs, did challenge, combat, and overcome the heroes and demigods of

¹ Op. cit., p. 52.

Greece and Rome. *Nôtre Dame à la rescousse!* Sir Brian de Bois Guilbert has borne Hector of Troy clear out of his saddle. Andromache may weep; but her spouse is beyond the reach of physic. See! Robin Hood twangs his bow, and the heathen gods fly, howling. *Montjoie Saint Denis!* down goes Ajax under the mace of Dunois; and yonder are Leonidas and Romulus begging their lives of Rob Roy Macgregor. Classicism is dead. Sir John Froissart has taken Dr. Lemprière by the nose, and reigns sovereign" (*Works* II, 56).

Yet he inevitably came to realize, however, that even the romantic aesthetic creed failed to give sufficient scope for the full artistic expression of the experiences and emotions of contemporary man. He certainly could have shared the later opinion of Cardinal Newman (pronounced in 1870 and quoted by Loofbourow) that "this universal living scene of things is after all as little a logical world as it is a poetical; and, as it cannot without violence be exalted into poetical perfection, neither can it be attenuated into a logical formula".² He did not of course reject the Romantic doctrine altogether and identified himself with several of its tenets in his reflections upon beauty in art as presented by the "higher" spheres of art (as we have seen), yet he found it unacceptable for fiction. In this particular sphere of art he realized that the basic principles of the Romantic creed were opposed to his own, and strongly felt the danger of their leading the novelist away from a faithful depiction of actual reality into some imaginary world of romance. And when he found his fears realized — in the degenerate romanticism of second-rate fiction and poetry, which he reviewed as a critic — he did not hesitate to voice his disapproval, and dissociated himself from both the literary practice and theory of the authors he assessed. How far he was from identifying himself with the Romantic aesthetic theory in the sphere of fiction is also fully demonstrated in his own imaginative work. As we have seen, Thackeray's creative approach does betray some traces of the Romantic attitude; moreover, in his mature prose Loofbourow has discovered many resonances, ironic modifications or satirical echoes of romantic prose — of "the impressionist imagery of Carlyle" and of the poetic prose of fashionable fiction — as well as skilful refinements of the lyric devices borrowed from romantic poetry. Yet in his hands these conventions and devices acquire a substance of their own, symbolizing "the imaginative experiences of English civilization, and the emotional adventures of a hero who is the novel's narrator [i.e. *Esmond* — *LP*], rationally evaluating his own perceptions":

"Pastoral, mock-epic, and chivalric modes reinterpret heroic adventure in the perspective of past idealisms... and in satirical inversions of these ideals... A still more potent catalyst, the intuitive insight of romanticism, transforms the heroic tradition; and Thackeray's distillate of nineteenth-century lyricism becomes an introspective medium in which conventional images acquire an unfamiliar chiaroscuro — the rhythmic and rhetorical flexibility of his style enables him to write a language that projects a history of the English mind from its classical background to its romantic present within the limited scope of an eighteenth-century memoir."³

Even though Thackeray makes full use of the conventions and devices of romanticism, his creative approach in general remains that of a sober realist who deliberately avoids all the typically romantic excesses — mysticism, morbid melancholy, hero-worship, fantastic motifs, hyperbole and stylization, who does

² John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1947, p. 204; quoted by Loofbourow, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 116–117; for the above quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 146, 109.

not concentrate his attention upon exceptional situations, incidents or characters and does not lead his readers into an ideal world of philosophical speculation or imaginary human model society, or into an idealized past, but adheres to the material world of the senses, inhabited by real human beings.

It would seem then, that the aesthetic doctrines which were most acceptable to him were those created by the aestheticians and writers of his own time, of the first half of the 19th century. But the detailed analysis presented in this chapter has revealed that this was not entirely so. As we have seen, he could share some of the aesthetic ideas of Carlyle and the style of this writer did exercise a strong influence on his prose; yet Thackeray openly dissociated himself from some of the tenets of Carlyle's doctrine, notably that of hero-worship. In any case Carlyle himself did not see in Thackeray a writer fulfilling his high ideal of the artist as hero and prophet. He regarded the novelist as a great and talented author, placed him above Dickens (in his opinion Thackeray had "more reality in him and would cut up into a dozen Dickenses"),⁴ admitted that "a beautiful vein of genius lay struggling about him" and that nobody in his day wrote "with such perfection of style", but he found him lacking in convictions and beliefs and maintained that he was "a big mass of soul, but not strong in proportion".⁵

As far as Ruskin and Emerson are concerned, all the points of resemblance we have discovered between their and Thackeray's creed concern principles which these aestheticians drew from a common source — Carlyle's aesthetic doctrine. I doubt that Thackeray was at all directly influenced by Ruskin, for when he could for the first time become acquainted with the latter's aesthetic creed — in 1843 — his own conception had been almost completely defined. After all, in Ruskin's eyes Thackeray was neither a kindred spirit nor an artist corresponding to his ideals — he disliked realism in fiction, regarded the modern realistic novel as represented by Dickens, Thackeray and even by George Eliot as a low form and pronounced several hostile judgments on Thackeray, condemning him as a writer lacking in genuine religion and comparing him to a "meat-fly" which settled "on whatever one had for dinner, and made one sick of it".⁶ As far as Emerson is concerned, Thackeray read him for the first time too late to be directly influenced by his theory.

Of the other aestheticians and critics of Thackeray's time it is especially G. H. Lewes and Matthew Arnold who come to mind when we are looking for the possible sources of Thackeray's aesthetics. In this case, however, it is not only the critical attitude of these critics to Thackeray's art, but also the time factor that represents the main obstacle. Lewes's aesthetic creed matured approximately at the same time as that of Thackeray, but it was not until the 1850s that he "adopted a predominantly realistic position",⁷ as Stang has pointed out and it is also possible that Thackeray did not even know his aesthetic theory as a whole, for it was appearing mostly in scattered periodical articles. Moreover, Lewes failed to understand, as Loomis has shown, one of "the very qualities

⁴ Quoted by Duffy, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁵ For the quotations see *Letters* IV, 304—305 (from Reid, *Life of Lord Houghton*, II, 113); see also Duffy, *op. cit.*, p. 77 and *Letters* I, cix.

⁶ Quoted by Melville, *op. cit.*, I, 252; see also A. H. R. Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

that makes *Vanity Fair* a great novel, its satire of human vanity", which in his interpretation becomes simply "false and unwholesome teaching".⁸ His dislike of consistent satire and distrust of satire itself, as they are revealed in his reviews of Thackeray's novels,⁹ clearly show that Lewes did not find Thackeray's art wholly consistent with his own aesthetic theory, even if he was one of the rare admirers of the great novelist among the younger generation of the London critics. It is true that Thackeray could have taken some of Lewes's critical opinions into consideration when writing the novels following *Vanity Fair*, but he would scarcely change his basic aesthetic principles, by that time definitely formed. The fact that in the very next novel coming after *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, he does not present such a black picture of human nature as that in the earlier book for which he was reprehended by Lewes, is not due to his critic's influence, but to the development of his own outlook upon life, due to other, deeper causes. As I have suggested in the first chapter, we have no evidence as to whether Thackeray was acquainted with Matthew Arnold's critical work, and at any rate we cannot speak about any indebtedness of Thackeray to this critic (though there are several points of resemblance between their creeds), as Arnold did not lay the foundations of his aesthetics until 1853, in his preface to the second edition of his poems, when Thackeray was already a mature artist. In any case Arnold did not see in Thackeray a novelist who wholly fulfilled the demands he laid upon literature — he did not regard him as a great writer, though he admitted that "his style is that of one".¹⁰

As we have seen, our search for the sources of Thackeray's aesthetic creed among the doctrines of the more significant aestheticians and critics of the period has so far not been very fruitful, with the exception of the indebtedness to Carlyle. There is still one source, however, which demands consideration, and that is the aesthetics of a critic very influential in his time, though nowadays almost entirely forgotten, a critic who assumed the role earlier than Thackeray, with whom the latter as a young journalist collaborated and with whose works he was also familiar — Dr. William Maginn. The first scholar who devoted some attention to Maginn's aesthetic theory, which for the most part remains buried in his articles in the old files of the Victorian magazines, was Dr. Thrall, though even she has concentrated more upon his critical theory and method than upon his aesthetics. As she has shown, Maginn's aesthetic theory was firmly rooted in the English realistic tradition of the 18th century, especially in the literary theory and practice of Smollett, Fielding and Sterne, for whose vigorous and full-blooded writing he had a fine relish, and at the same time strongly influenced by German philosophy and literary theory (especially by Lessing, Schlegel, Schiller and Goethe), as well as by those of Carlyle and in a lesser degree of Coleridge (according to Saintsbury, however, Maginn "seems to have owed little or nothing to the influence of Coleridge").¹¹ In Dr. Thrall's opinion

⁸ Op. cit., p. 11.

⁹ See especially Lewes's article in the *Morning Chronicle* (March 6, 1848) already referred to in the first chapter, which is ostensibly on the *Book of Snobs*, but develops into a general consideration of Thackeray's art (for quotations from it see *Letters* II, 353n.; for Thackeray's reaction see *ibid.*, 353—354), and his review of *Vanity Fair*, published in the *Athenaeum* (August 12, 1848) and considered by Loomis in his study.

¹⁰ Quoted by Melville, *op. cit.*, I, 252; see also Dodds, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹¹ *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, III, 489.

the outcome of the influence of the German thinkers and of Carlyle, and *Fraser's* greatest service to the criticism of the time, was the occasional introduction of aesthetic theory into its reviews. The critics of the magazine realized "that their individual judgments ought to be supported by philosophical principles", and for that reason "the criticism of Maginn spasmodically strained itself for brief references to the creative imagination as concomitant to excellence, and to the functioning of the mind in the process of creation".¹² This brief summary in itself suggests how much Thackeray had in common with Maginn and in what aspects he differed from him — especially in his negative attitude to German transcendental philosophy and his indifference to Coleridge. Indeed, he did not think much of the most conscientious follower of Coleridge on the staff, John Abraham Heraud, who was, contrary to Maginn, more deeply read in and more strongly influenced by German transcendental philosophy and aesthetics, as Dr. Thrall has shown, representing "the strange meeting ground of Carlyle and Coleridge".¹³ Thackeray not only acutely criticized Heraud's poetry, but characterized this critic in 1841, when Heraud had already worked as editor of the *New Monthly Magazine*, as "a man of a noble madness and dullness".¹⁴ As Dr. Thrall has demonstrated, in the first years of his collaboration with *Fraser's Magazine* Thackeray saw in Maginn his model, and imitated him, and this indebtedness lasted until the publication of his first *Yellowplush* paper, when the pupil outgrew his master. G. N. Ray, on the other hand, thinks that Dr. Thrall exaggerates the intimacy of Thackeray's association with Maginn, but admits that her thesis of Maginn's strong influence upon the young Thackeray has much to recommend it.¹⁵ The quoted scholars are both more concerned with Maginn's influence upon Thackeray's critical theory and practice (with which we shall deal separately in the next chapter) than upon his aesthetics, though of course the influence upon the latter is implied in that upon the former. In my opinion Maginn's aesthetic doctrine might have indeed been one of the main sources from which Thackeray drew his own ideas (if any such direct source was needed by him at all), but the whole problem demands more detailed consideration which will not be possible until all Maginn's contributions have been unearthed, identified and reprinted.

When seeking for the possible sources among the aesthetic doctrines created by the novelists of Thackeray's time, we may straightway exclude the ideas of Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope and George Eliot, for these originated later than those of Thackeray, and all these writers, consciously or unconsciously, in a greater or lesser degree, learned from him. Charlotte Brontë openly declared him to be her master, paid enthusiastic tributes to his art in which she saw a model to imitate (though she also discovered some contradictions in his creative approach) and, as Stang has it, "deliberately linked herself with the Thackeray of *Vanity Fair* at the beginning of her career as a published novelist

¹² Op. cit., p. 88.

¹³ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁴ *Letters* II, 24.

¹⁵ See Thrall, op. cit., especially pp. 58, 77—78, and *Letters* I, 192n. See also Malcolm Elwin, op. cit., p. 59.

through the extravagant dedication to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*".¹⁶ Trollope had little understanding for the methods of work of a greater genius than his own, reprehended Thackeray for being, in contradistinction to Dickens, "unsteadfast, idle, changeable of purpose" and entirely failed to comprehend the basic principle of his mature art — his satire — considering it to be his "chief fault as a writer", but nevertheless he regarded Thackeray as the greatest novelist of his time, placing him even above George Eliot and praising him for his supreme knowledge of human nature, the faithfulness of his characters to life and his pure and harmonious style.¹⁷ George Eliot disclaimed conscious discipleship, but only, as Geoffrey Tillotson has pointed out, "to withdraw the disclaimer in conceding that, like herself, Thackeray valued truthfulness towards his material, the right and privilege of a novelist to see it, as it were, with the eyes of a man whom ordinary people would respect, and to see a vast amount of it".¹⁸

Indeed, as Tillotson and Loofbourow have shown,¹⁹ it was the last-named novelist who in spite of her disclaimers profited most from Thackeray's experiments in the art of fiction (and implicitly, we should say, from his aesthetic creed, though rather from its unformulated than its formulated principles). Trollope in spite of his merits never reached the heights of Thackeray's mastership and Charlotte Brontë, for all her claims of discipleship and all her endeavour to emulate her master especially in his calm power and capacity of keeping his imagination under control, never entirely succeeded in curbing the passion and intensity with which she depicts human emotions (and it was of course most fortunate that she did not do so, for she would have then ceased to be what she was). For this intensity in feeling, derived from Byron, Shelley and Coleridge, and more immediately from George Sand, Charlotte Brontë was reprimanded by Lewes, who urged her to study and copy Jane Austen as a novelist who is no poetess, has no "sentiment", "no eloquence, none of the ravishing enthusiasm of poetry".²⁰ She partly accepted Lewes's rebukes, but held her ground admirably, assuming three distinct attitudes in her defence. In the first place, she pointed out that when she first began to write (i.e. her novel *The Professor*), she was so impressed with the truth of the principles advocated by her critic that she "determined to take Nature and Truth as [her] sole guides", and consequently avoided melodrama, romance and "over-bright colouring", restrained imagination and repressed excitement, "and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave, and true". Yet she failed to impress the publishers and to satisfy the demands of the

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 16; for the statements of Charlotte Brontë see Clement Shorter, *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, 2 vols., Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1908, especially II, 92, I, 445, II, 443 (from the *Personal Reminiscences of Charlotte Brontë*, by John Stores Smith, in the *Free Lance* of March 7, 1868), I, 378.

¹⁷ For the quotations see Anthony Trollope, *Thackeray*, New Edition, Macmillan and Co., London and New York, 1887, p. 19, and the same, *An Autobiography*, London, 1946, p. 170. For Trollope's praise see *ibid.*, pp. 217–218.

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 290; for George Eliot's disclaimer see *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, Oxford University Press, Geoffrey Cumberlege; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954, II, 348–349.

¹⁹ See Geoffrey Tillotson, *op. cit.*, Appendix II, pp. 288ff.; Loofbourow, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 74–76, 83, 164ff., and 197, 205, 210–211.

²⁰ *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, I, 388.

circulating libraries. In the second place, she expressed her willingness to follow Lewes's advice and "the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen's 'mild eyes'. 'to finish more and be more subdued' ", but she was not sure whether she would be able to achieve this, if she were to follow, as she felt bound to, the creative urge which was mastering her and "which will have its own way", expressing her doubts whether any attempts to counteract this influence were at all desirable or possible. In the third place, she pointed out to Lewes the difference between her own high ideal of the novel as literary art approaching or equalling poetry. her own conception of the terms "poetry" and "sentiment", on the one hand, and Lewes's views on the other. In her definition of the term "poetry" she referred to George Sand's art, while in that of "sentiment" to Thackeray.²¹

Thackeray himself, however, clearly understood that there were some essential differences between her conception of the novel and his own, as well as between their respective ideas of the novelist's creative approach. He did feel the strong impact of the intense feeling pervading *Jane Eyre*, evaluated the novel as "that master-work of a great genius", confessed that he was "exceedingly moved & pleased" by it and that the love passages made him cry, and that he "could not, having taken the volumes up, lay them down until they were read through".²² Yet after he had met the authoress in person, he assumed a more reserved attitude to the same quality, both as he recognized it in Charlotte Brontë herself and as he discerned it in her novels. As one of his comments shows, the "fire and fury" he found raging in the authoress's heart did not suit him and prevented him from entering into a closer friendship with her. Although he deeply admired her "independent, indomitable spirit" and paid tribute to her as to "that intrepid outspokener and champion of truth, that eager, impetuous redresser of wrong",²³ he did not pronounce all these words of praise until after Charlotte's death, in his preface to her unfinished story *Emma*, which was published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in April 1860 under his editorship. This preface at the same time shows, however, that although he so much admired her crusading zeal, it seemed to him, after all, too idealistic and naïve.²⁴ As far as her novels are concerned, Thackeray obviously came to realize that her passionate spirit was reflected in her relationship to her characters in a degree and quality not corresponding to his own conception of the novel. He had always been convinced that this relationship between the novelist and his personages should be objective and detached, and not characterized by excessive sentiment, that a "novelist . . . ought to have no likes, dislikes, pity, partiality for his characters",²⁵ and he therefore voiced his objection to the authoress's approach, though only in a private letter:

"I think Miss Brontë is unhappy and that makes her unjust. Novel writers should not be in a passion with their characters as I imagine, but describe them, good or bad, with a like calm" (*Letters* III, 67).

That there was not a complete identification between Charlotte Brontë and her avowed literary teacher is also obvious from the well-known fact that the

²¹ For the quotations see *ibid.*, I, 365, 386; see also *ibid.*, p. 388.

²² For the quotations see *Works* XVII, 376, *Letters* II, 319, *Works* XVII, 376.

²³ For the quotations see *Letters* III, 12 and *Works* XVII, 375; see also *Works* XVII, 374.

²⁴ See *Works* XVII, 375.

²⁵ *Works* XVI, 152.

cagerly sought meeting with Thackeray brought much disappointment even to her, for she discovered that her master was not, after all, that high-priest of Truth she had considered him to be, the first social regenerator of the day, scorching, with the courage and strength of a prophet, the upper classes with the fire of his sarcasm, and that he was not so "terribly in earnest in his war against the falsehood and follies of 'the world'"²⁶ as she had supposed. As Geoffrey Tillotson has shown, she "failed altogether to comprehend either his ambivalent outlook on London society, which, though he might satirize, he could not do without, or his thoroughly practical view of literature, induced by a dozen years of writing for his living".²⁷ What she did not in fact realize, however, was that she met the great satirist at a time when he had already taken his first steps on the road leading to his reconciliation with the reality he had so sharply satirized in his early works and in *Vanity Fair*. What even more clearly reveals the differences between her approach and that of her teacher is the fact pointed out by Loofbourow that in contradistinction to him (and to George Eliot) she went on practising traditional techniques, adapted rather than altered, while he created a "new expressive medium that transformed the novels of many English writers"²⁸ after him, including George Eliot. It is worth noticing, however, that Thackeray himself seemed not to have realized this discrepancy. Charlotte Brontë's style was that quality of her art which he admired most and praised on every occasion, appreciating it as "very generous and upright", bearing witness either to a very good knowledge of language, better than in most female novelists, or to a "classical" education, and highly evaluating her "remarkable happy way (which few female authors possess) of carrying a metaphor logically through to its conclusion".²⁹ It is also very interesting that even though he was inclined to claim George Eliot as a disciple of his, and enthusiastically admired especially her first work *Scenes of Clerical Life*,³⁰ he had some unspecified reservations concerning her creative approach (presumably that which she uses in her later novels),³¹ as follows from this comment from his later correspondence:

"I admire but cant read Adam Bede and the books of that Author" (*Letters* IV, 238).

The only major early Victorian novelist who remains then to be considered as Thackeray's possible teacher in aesthetics is Charles Dickens, whose aesthetic creed developed and matured simultaneously with that of Thackeray. Yet even in this case the time element represents a far from negligible negative factor. We have no evidence whatever as to whether Thackeray read Dickens before 1836, when he began for the first time to refer to his contemporary's works, but we may safely assume that if he read Boz's sketches before that date,³² he

²⁶ *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, I, 373.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 83; see also *ibid.*, pp. 4, 9.

²⁹ For the quotations see *Letters* II, 319, III, 233; see also *Works* XVII, 374.

³⁰ See *The George Eliot Letters*, II, 293n., 322, 458; see also *ibid.*, pp. 299—300 and *Letters* IV, 15—16n.

³¹ We know with some certainty that he read, besides *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Romola*, for they were found in his library.

³² We know for certain that he read Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* when he wrote his article on Cruikshank, for he includes the book (ed. 1839) among those whose illustrations he evaluates, and refers to it in two brief comments, in one of which he says that it is "not the worst among Mr. Dickens's books, as we think" (*Works* II, 482).

might at best have recognized in their author a kindred spirit and certainly not his own literary and aesthetic teacher, for Dickens's literary theory and creative method were at that time of course as immature as were Thackeray's. In the 1840s and 1850s he became perfectly familiar with Dickens's works and creative approach, so much so indeed that it was not only within his power to parody the latter (though he desisted from this) but also to derive from both some basic tenets of the novelist's theory with which he could hardly have become acquainted anywhere else.³³ He also frequently compared Dickens's art to his own, very often to the latter's disadvantage, as we shall see later, but in this period of his life Thackeray's literary creed had been definitely formed and all he could do by way of revision — and he was not much inclined to do anything — was to verify it or perhaps correct it in some non-essentials. At any rate, he also dissociated himself openly from one of the main principles of Dickens's theory of imitation, which makes the possibility of any direct influence of his fellow-novelist's aesthetics upon his own very questionable.

Having so far discovered such a small number of aestheticians and novelists of Thackeray's time and place who could be regarded as his teachers in the sphere of aesthetic theory, and having ascertained that even in the cases revealed (Carlyle, Maginn) his indebtedness was not unconditional, I feel in duty bound to consider at least very briefly the possible foreign influences. The first writer who occurs to us is of course Balzac, for there are indeed so many points of resemblance between his creative approach and that of Thackeray (and implicitly between the aesthetic concepts of the two novelists) that the two contemporaries have often been compared and that there have appeared several theories and conjectures as to these resemblances having their origin in Thackeray's direct or indirect indebtedness to the French writer. As Maître has most conclusively pointed out,³⁴ however, all Thackeray's references to Balzac show

³³ Dickens was mostly reticent on theoretical problems concerning art and if he did speak out, it was mainly in the prefaces to his novels, in the contributions to his magazines or in his letters. Thackeray of course read his prefaces, but the proportion of theory in these is not very great. He read Dickens's articles in *Household Words*, for he was a subscriber to the magazine, but in view of the anonymity of all the contributions he could not attribute any of them safely to Dickens, even if he probably recognized that all of them bore the stamp of the editor's influence.

³⁴ See "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", especially p. 281. For a detailed consideration of Thackeray's relationship to Balzac see also my study "Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of French Literature", pp. 104—109, to which I now add a correction. In a footnote to page 104 of that study I mentioned the review of Balzac's work *Monographie de la presse parisienne* (1843), published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in April 1843 under the title "Balzac on the Newspapers of Paris", as having been ascribed to Thackeray by Garnett, but regarded by Ray and Maître as very doubtful. As far as Ray is concerned, I relied upon his edition of Thackeray's *Letters* and unfortunately missed the evidence he gives for Thackeray's authorship in the footnotes to *The Uses of Adversity* (pp. 484—485, note 11). After studying the problem for the second time, however, I have found Ray's evidence not very convincing, since it rests upon a single question in Forster's manuscript letter of 14th March, 1843 ("Did you think of Janin?"), which in my opinion does not necessarily imply that Thackeray did write the review. In view of this, and of the internal evidence mentioned in my previous study which in my opinion speaks rather against Thackeray's authorship than for it, I decided not to include this review in the present work. More convincing to me seems Ray's evidence for Thackeray's authorship of "English History and Character on the French Stage" (which I treated in my last study as doubtful), and of the review of Herwegh's poems.

that he never comprehended the real greatness of the French novelist, whose work remained a practically closed book to him. He did not find in his novels that realism which corresponded to his own conception of literature — sober, matter-of-fact representation of actual facts, devoid of romantic excesses, exaggerations, and striking contrasts — and therefore erroneously classified him as a representative of *L'École romantique*, evaluating his novel *La Peau de Chagrin* as a typical product of this school, containing “plenty of light & shade, good colouring and costume, but no character”.³⁵ In his other comments he reprehended Balzac for depicting merely states of “convulsive crimes” and horrors, criticized his stories as wearisome and betraying bad taste, and his style as not being sufficiently graceful and elegant. The aspects in which Balzac’s realism differed from his own prevented him from appreciating the French novelist’s marvellous art of characterization, not to mention those splendid depictions of propertied society which have so many traits in common with his own. In view of his uncomprehending attitude to Balzac’s art and of the almost simultaneous maturing of their aesthetic creeds, the direct influence of the French novelist upon Thackeray’s aesthetics and creative approach seems to me very improbable. Much more acceptable is in my opinion the view which regards the parallels between their novels and, implicitly, their theory as the outcome of “a certain simultaneity in the literary tendencies of the two countries” (this is the opinion of Maitre,³⁶ though this scholar obviously sees in this simultaneity rather a curious coincidence than a phenomenon having its origin in the basically similar social order existing in the two countries), or of indirect influence (the same scholar suggests indirect influence through the medium of Thackeray’s favourite Charles de Bernard, Balzac’s disciple and imitator).

The possible influence of the second greatest French realist of the period, Stendhal, upon Thackeray is in my opinion almost certainly out of the question. It is an indubitable fact that there are even closer and more numerous parallels between Thackeray’s and Stendhal’s aesthetics and creative methods than between Thackeray’s and Balzac’s, parallels which are indeed so striking that they have led Jerome Donnelly³⁷ to the conclusion that *Henry Esmond* was almost certainly directly influenced by *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Yet his opinion remains mere hypothesis, for there is a complete absence of evidence as to whether Thackeray ever read any works of his great contemporary — he does not refer to them or to their author in any of his public or private writings. It is most probable, indeed (though Donnelly believes to the contrary) that none of this novelist’s works ever got into Thackeray’s hands, for Stendhal was rarely read in England until 1861, as Stang points out,³⁸ and was not generally known during Thackeray’s lifetime even in his own country.

The last two foreign writers to be briefly considered here, who certainly could have exercised an influence on Thackeray’s aesthetic creed, are Goethe and Schiller. He became acquainted with their works at the period when he was most open to influence, as a young man finding himself for the first time

³⁵ *Letters* I, 225.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 293.

³⁷ See *op. cit.* in note 16, Introduction.

³⁸ See *op. cit.*, p. 36.

amidst the busy life outside school and university walls, and, liberated from the hateful school discipline, eagerly imbibing the new stores of knowledge provided bountifully by life itself, as well as by the literature he then studied. And, indeed, as I have pointed out in my study of his aesthetics, Thackeray's sojourn at Weimar did play a far from negligible role in the whole development of his views and personality. The gradual maturing of his world outlook in the favourable calm atmosphere suitable for deeper reflection on some of the important problems of life and human society, serious and eager study of literature and history, literary discussions at the ducal court and private social parties, participation in the rich cultural life of the town including frequent visits to the theatre, personal acquaintance with Goethe — all this could not but bring about a considerable expanding and deepening of Thackeray's interests and aesthetic opinions. It was in this period, too, that he began to reflect seriously upon some of the basic aesthetic problems and pronounced his first original literary judgments. As Merivale suggests, life in a town which was then a veritable Court of Letters, pervaded by "the living presence of Goethe and scarce less living memory of Schiller", might also have drawn the attention of the sensitive young man, who had as yet no definite plans for the future, towards literature.³⁹

And it was especially his personal acquaintance with Goethe and the study of his work, as I have pointed out in the same study, that exercised so strong an influence upon Thackeray's developing literary views — provoking him to thoughts and reflections upon the fundamental problem of literature, its relationship to reality, and helping him to realize and formulate his own views more definitely and clearly. Yet these reflections led him, as we have seen in the preceding sub-chapter, to the rejection of one of the basic tenets of the German poet's aesthetic theory, while his personal meeting with Goethe, which took place in October 1830, did not remove his critical reservations as to the poet's private character as he fancied he knew it from the talk of his Weimar acquaintances and friends. Although he was even then able to recognize the extraordinary genius of that "noble" poet, as he expressed it himself, he at the same time characterized him as a libertine "by practice & profession", "little better than an old rogue", and not "exempt from the little mean money-getting propensities to w^h it appears he is addicted". He himself writes that he was unwilling to give the poet such a character but that it was "the strict & uncomfortable truth".⁴⁰ And indeed, as I have pointed out in the quoted study, even though his opinion was unjustifiably stringent, there is a grain of truth in it, for he met Goethe two years before the latter's death, at the period when the great writer had already resigned himself to the sphere in which he had to live and when his character had already been harmfully affected by his high position at the court of the duchy and its general social conditions. What is more lamentable, however, is that Thackeray's opinion of Goethe as a man considerably influenced his views of the poet's work, which are — especially as far as Goethe's fiction is concerned — in many respects biased. Yet in spite of all this Goethe's influence did play a role not only in the formation of Thackeray's aesthetic creed, as I have suggested, but also in "the complex

³⁹ Op. cit., p. 83.

⁴⁰ For the quotations see *Letters* I, 136, 148.

processes that prefigured the prose of *Vanity Fair*", as Loofbourow points out, even though this may only have been indirect influence through Carlyle, whose metaphors, representing a very important factor in these processes, "were derived from Goethe and the German romantics, whose work Thackeray knew, as well as from Milton and Donne". Moreover, as R. M. Werner and Heinrich Frisa have shown, Thackeray was also directly influenced by Goethe's fiction, notably when writing *Pendennis* — certainly by *Werther* (in this case consciously and with a satirical intent) and probably too by *Wilhelm Meister* (in the opinion of both Werner and Frisa certainly and consciously).⁴¹ Thackeray himself, however, never claimed any direct discipleship to Goethe and might not even have realized that his style was indirectly influenced, *via* Carlyle's works, by that of Goethe.

As Thackeray's Weimar references to Schiller seem to suggest, in this early period of his life it might have been rather the latter poet than Goethe in whom he saw a literary model or aesthetic preceptor, for he ranked him then above Goethe and declared that he believed "him to be after Shakspeare The Poet".⁴² Indeed, he was so enthusiastic about Schiller that he even thought of taking upon himself the gigantic task of translating the poet's collected works, writing to his mother that if he "could ever do the same for Schiller in English" as was done for Shakespeare in German, he would be proud of having conferred a benefit on his country.⁴³ I believe, however, that the main reason for his enthusiasm, which he did not entirely lose even in his later years, for he continued to prefer the creative fire of this poet to the broader genius of Goethe, was rather his sympathy with Schiller's progressive political ideals and his admiration of the poet's "unexceptionable"⁴⁴ religion and morals than any regard for him as his teacher in aesthetic theory. It is true that he might have found Schiller's essentially idealistic conception of artistic imitation and his aesthetic ideal of an escape from reality to the illusory realm of "aesthetic vision" to be not wholly inapplicable to the "higher" branches of art, yet he must have found it unfruitful for fiction, for Schiller's tendency of looking "aloft rather than around", as Carlyle expressed it, and his predilection for "speculations on Art, on the dignity and destiny of Man", made him forget "the common doings and interests of Men",⁴⁵ which had always been Thackeray's main concern as novelist.

And so the search for possible sources of Thackeray's aesthetic conceptions in the aesthetics of his own time has led us to the unavoidable conclusion that in spite of his indebtedness to some of the aestheticians and critics of this period especially in his conception of the aim and aesthetic effect of the "higher" branches of art, he did not and could not find among them, nor among con-

⁴¹ For the quotations from Loofbourow see *op. cit.*, pp. 78—79; for the opinions of Werner see *op. cit.*, pp. 13—15, and for those of Frisa *op. cit.*, p. 15. Werner's opinion that in depicting the relationship between Pen and Warrington Thackeray was inspired by *Torquato Tasso*, as well as his view that the preface to *Vanity Fair* stood under the direct influence of the "Vorspiel auf dem Theater" from Goethe's *Faust*, and that in his story *The Painter's Bargain* Thackeray transposed the Faust motif into the humorous, are rejected by Frisa as too far-fetched, questionable, or rather bold (see *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 16).

⁴² *Letters* I, 147.

⁴³ *Letters* I, 148.

⁴⁴ *Letters* I, 136.

⁴⁵ *Essays* II, 198; see also *ibid.*, pp. 199, 200.

temporary novelists, any pioneer of his own theory of the novel. The main reason why he could not do so was the fact that none of the aestheticians, critics and novelists mentioned in this sub-chapter who could have influenced him — Carlyle, Ruskin, Maginn, Dickens, Balzac and Goethe — left to posterity any complete and finished theory of the novel. And even if they had done so, he would not have identified himself completely with their conception (with the possible exception of that of Maginn), not even with that of Carlyle and certainly not with that of Dickens and of Balzac. For he created a new type of fiction, as Loofbourow has so convincingly demonstrated, which demanded a theory of its own and for which none of the theories created up to his time was entirely adequate. Having come to realize that reality in his time “was no longer an absolute” and that “truth [was] a subjective value, defined by personal criteria”, he also became aware that “artistic truth could be achieved only through the synthesis of individual response” and found a new medium for expressing the multiple aspects of modern experience — “the shifting kaleidoscope of the ‘point of view’ with its imaginative approximation of simultaneity”, the first example of which is to be found, as Loofbourow has demonstrated, in his *Henry Esmond*. The patterns of this type of prose are according to the quoted scholar unprecedented in English fiction, being essentially different from those characteristic of the older “illustrative” novel cultivated by the 18th-century realists and Jane Austen, as well as from those exploited by Dickens, the Brontë sisters and Trollope. As Loofbourow has pointed out, by his expressive experimentation Thackeray prepared a medium and created a tradition for such writers as George Eliot, George Meredith, Henry James, Ronald Firbank, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Joyce and even Proust, though “it is not the question of literal derivation that is important” as regards these later writers — “it is the occurrence of an artistic mutation that produced new qualities in the novel”.⁴⁶

It is a great pity, indeed, that Thackeray so much disliked theorizing (or perhaps was such a bad theoretician) that he paid attention only to some basic problems of the theory of the novel and did not analyse and substantiate all the principles upon which he worked when writing his fiction. If he had done so, we could be justified in maintaining that even in his theory he stood alone among his contemporaries just as, according to Charlotte Brontë and to the noteworthy conclusions of Loofbourow in our own time, he did in fiction. Even his tentative theorizing, however, provides us with sufficient ground for disagreeing with Stang’s statement (though not wholly categorical) that among “all the Victorian novelists, George Eliot was perhaps unique in that she formulated her ideas about life and art before she started to write her first novel”.⁴⁷ Thackeray did the same and did so earlier, and had something to say on most of the problems considered by Eliot and dealt with by Stang, even though his reflections are usually not formulated so seriously and precisely as are those of the great authoress. In the 1830s and 1840s he was the only major English novelist who worked as a professional literary and art critic (George Eliot’s first article was published in 1846, but she did not become

⁴⁶ For the quotations see *op. cit.*, pp. 204, 206, 204, 165.

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

a regular contributor to London periodicals until 1851) and who did express himself quite copiously, as we have seen, on aesthetic and literary problems in his book reviews and art criticism, as well as in marginal comments in his imaginative works and letters. If we add to this the fact referred to above that Dickens was much more reticent on the problems of literary theory than was Thackeray, we may safely conclude that the latter was a pioneer in the field.