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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

For more than ten years (1833—1847) W. M. Thackeray worked as a professional literary critic, first as foreign correspondent to the *National Standard*, and from about 1834 as contributor to several magazines and newspapers, chiefly *Fraser's Magazine*, the *Times*, the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, the *British and Foreign Review* and the *Morning Chronicle*. Even in later years, when he had renounced critical for imaginative literary work, he indulged occasionally in criticism, delivering a whole series of literary lectures, publishing three burlesques and one book review, writing several essays, sketches or *jeux d'esprit* (critically considering some authors, books, dramas, cultural events or the literary profession for *Punch* and the *Cornhill Magazine*), and several open letters addressed to editors, critics or readers in which he reacted against adverse criticism of his works. His literary critical work was of inestimable value for his whole growth as artist, as Loofbourow has so convincingly shown,¹ but it possesses, too, considerable intrinsic merit and forms an important part of his literary legacy, though of course not such an important bequest to posterity as his novels. Besides having the special interest attaching to criticism formulated by a great creative artist, his critical contributions are so extensive in quantity and so individual in quality as to demand separate and detailed consideration.

This has so far not been done, however, at least not in any published study of monograph character. The only attempt hitherto is Charles Gerald Mausekopf's doctoral dissertation *Thackeray's Literary Criticism*,² but this has not been published and the summary in the *Dissertation Abstracts* seems to suggest that it throws only limited new light upon the subject. There have appeared, of course, several shorter or even more extensive studies dealing with Thackeray as reader or critic of books (Melville, Clapp, Enzinger),³ and several scholars have evaluated his critical work for individual magazines, either in books devoted to the assessment of the critical and political programme and achievement of these periodicals (Thrall),⁴ of Thackeray's collaboration with one particular magazine as journalist as well as literary critic (Spielmann),⁵ or of Thackeray's

¹ See John Loofbourow, *Thackeray and the Form of Fiction*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1964.

² New York University, 1964.

³ "Lewis Melville" (Lewis S. Benjamin), "Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of Books", *The Fortnightly Review*, vol. 80, pp. 836—845; Edwin R. Clapp, "Critic on Horseback: William Makepeace Thackeray", *The Sewanee Review Quarterly*, XXXVIII, 1930, pp. 286—300; Philip Enzinger, "Thackeray, Critic of Literature", *The Quarterly Journal*, University of North Dakota, 1930—1931: vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 318—333; vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 52—65; vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 145—160.

⁴ Miriam M. H. Thrall, *Rebellious Fraser's*, Morningside Heights, Columbia University Press, New York, 1934.

⁵ M. H. Spielmann, *The Hitherto Unidentified Contributions of W. M. Thackeray to "Punch"*, Harper and Brothers, London and New York, 1899.

early newspaper and magazine work in general (Johnson, Gulliver),⁶ in prefaces to their editions of Thackeray's critical contributions (Garnett, Ray),⁷ in magazine studies on some newly discovered contributions (Winegarner),⁸ or in articles reconsidering the bibliography of his contributions to one particular magazine (White).⁹ Thackeray's literary criticism in general or in some of its particular aspects was also evaluated by several scholars in their books devoted to the assessment of his work and personality (of these we should mention especially Melville, Saintsbury, Elwin, Dodds, Stevenson, Greig, Ray, Ivasheva and Loofbourow),¹⁰ to the history of literature or criticism (*CHEL*, etc., and Saintsbury's *History of Criticism*; no attention is paid to Thackeray's criticism by René Wellek in his *History of Modern Criticism*), or to the Victorian novel or literary theory (Praz, Stang).¹¹ Thackeray's criticism of French literature is considered, as well as in some chapters in books or the introductions mentioned above, in Saintsbury's *History of the French Novel*,¹² in Marcel Moraud's *Romantisme français en Angleterre de 1814 à 1848*,¹³ in Raymond Las Vergnas's *W. M. Thackeray, L'homme, le penseur, le romancier*,¹⁴ and in my own last study "Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of French Literature",¹⁵ not to mention one book and several periodical articles considering some individual aspects of Thackeray's critical opinions on some great or lesser French writers of his time and especially his alleged or real indebtedness to them (Walter, Lafleur, Pacey, Falconer, Maître, Taylor, Donnelly, etc.).¹⁶ Thackeray's criticism

⁶ Charles Plumtre Johnson, *The Early Writings of W. M. Thackeray*, Elliot Stock, London, 1888; Harold Strong Gulliver, *Thackeray's Literary Apprenticeship. A Study of the Early Newspaper and Magazine Work of W. M. Thackeray*, Valdosta, 1934.

⁷ Robert S. Garnett (ed.), *W. M. Thackeray: The New Sketch Book*, Alston Rivers, Ltd., London, 1906; G. N. Ray (ed.), *William Makepeace Thackeray: Contributions to the "Morning Chronicle"*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1955 (further to be denoted as *Contributions*).

⁸ Lela Winegarner: "Thackeray's Contributions to the *British and Foreign Review*", *The Journal of English and German Philology*, vol. XLVII, 1948, pp. 237-245.

⁹ Edward M. White, "Thackeray's Contributions to *Fraser's Magazine*", *Studies in Bibliography*, vol. XIX, 1966, pp. 67-84.

¹⁰ "Lewis Melville", *William Makepeace Thackeray*, 2 vols., John Lane, The Bodley Head, London, 1910; George Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, Oxford University Press, London, 1931; Malcolm Elwin, *Thackeray, A Personality*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1932; John W. Dodds, *Thackeray: A Critical Portrait*, Oxford University Press, New York, London, Toronto, 1941; Lionel Stevenson: *The Showman of Vanity Fair. The Life of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Chapman & Hall, Ltd., London, 1947; J. Y. T. Greig, *Thackeray: A Reconsideration*, Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Toronto, 1950; G. N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity (1811-1846)*, Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, London, 1955 and *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom (1847-1863)*, Oxford University Press, London, 1958; V. V. Ivasheva, *Tekkerey-satirik (Thackeray the Satirist)*, Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1958; John Loofbourow, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Mario Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, trans. Angus Davidson, Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, London, 1956; Richard Stang, *Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1959.

¹² (To the Close of the 19th Century), 2 vols., Macmillan and Co., London, 1917, 1919.

¹³ Champion, Paris, 1933, pp. 294 et seq., and *passim*.

¹⁴ Champion, Paris, 1932.

¹⁵ *Brno Studies in English*, vol. IX, Opera Universitatis Purkynianae Brunensis, Facultas Philosophica, No. 166, 1970, pp. 37-128.

¹⁶ Dr. Erwin Walter, *Entstehungsgeschichte von W. M. Thackerays "Vanity Fair"*, 1908; Paul T. Lafleur, "Sainte-Beuve, Balzac, and Thackeray", *The Modern Language Review*, vol. IX, 1914, pp. 517-520; W. C. D. Pacey, "Balzac and Thackeray", *The Modern Language*

of the Silver-Fork novelists is dealt with by Matthew Whiting Rosa in *The Silver-Fork School: Novels of Fashion Preceding Vanity Fair*,¹⁷ and his criticism of the Newgate School by Hollingsworth in *The Newgate Novel 1830—1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray*.¹⁸ To this survey of literature dealing with the subject I should perhaps add some other of my previous studies considering individual aspects of Thackeray's critical work, published in this series or elsewhere, upon which I shall draw in the present work.¹⁹

One of the reasons why Thackeray's literary criticism has not yet been assessed in any published monograph study may obviously be seen in its not representing any solid or consistent body which could have impressed the public and critics of his own time and of our own. He published only two critical works in book form, the first of which, however, his *Paris Sketch Book*, contains more art criticism and fiction than literary criticism, while the second, *Lectures on the English Humourists of the 18th Century*, is in the opinion of several writers (including myself) not a fair specimen of his critical work, as the aesthetic and critical standards applied in it are not entirely identical with those he used in the previous period of his professional literary criticism. The rest of his critical work, predominantly professional, was published anonymously or under various initials or pseudonyms in several magazines of his time, and though much of it has already been identified as his (by the main authorities on the bibliography of his works: Shepherd, Johnson, Garnett, Melville, van Duzer, Saintsbury, Elwin, Gulliver, Thrall, and recently Ray, Winegarner and White),²⁰ and partly reprinted, a great part of it still lies buried away in the files of the Victorian magazines waiting either to be identified or only reprinted. The not yet satisfactorily solved problems of the bibliography of his critical contributions and the difficult access to the latter are of course very grave obstacles hampering any scholar who attempts to evaluate Thackeray as literary critic, let alone a scholar living outside England. In individual instances I found these obstacles almost unsurmountable, but I hope this has not hampered me so much as to prevent me from fulfilling one of my purposes — to reveal

Review, vol. XXXVI, 1941, pp. 213—224; J. A. Falconer, "Balzac and Thackeray", *English Studies*, vol. XXVI, 1944—1945, pp. 129—133; Raymond Maître, "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1950, pp. 279—293 and "Nouvelles Sources françaises de Thackeray", *Etudes anglaises*, XVII, No. 1, 1964, pp. 56—61; A. Carey Taylor, "Balzac and Thackeray", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1960, No. 3, pp. 354—369; Jerome Donnelly, "Stendhal and Thackeray: The Source of 'Henry Esmond'", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1965, No. 3, pp. 372—381. To these studies we should add that of the anonymous contributor to the *Dublin University Magazine*, December 1864.

¹⁷ New York: Morningside Heights, Columbia University Press, MCMXXXVI.

¹⁸ Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1963.

¹⁹ "The 'Newgate School' of Romance and its Place in the English Literature of the Eighteen-Thirties", *Brno Studies in English*, vol. I, 1959, pp. 103—117; "W. M. Thackeray's Literary Criticism in the 'Morning Chronicle', 1844—1848", *Brno Studies in English*, vol. II, 1960, pp. 79—108; "V. G. Belinski, Karl Marx and W. M. Thackeray on Eugène Sue's 'Les Mystères de Paris'", *Sborník prací filosofické fakulty University J. E. Purkyně v Brně*, D 7, 1960, pp. 149—160; "The Relationship of W. M. Thackeray to Henry Fielding", *ibid.*, D 9, 1962, pp. 99—114; "The Aesthetic Views of W.M. Thackeray", *Brno Studies in English*, vol. VI, Brno, 1966, pp. 7—74.

²⁰ Richard H. Shepherd (ed.), *Sultan Stork and other Stories and Sketches by W. M. Thackeray (1829—1844)*. To Which is added The Bibliography of Thackeray. Revised and Considerably enlarged, George Redway, London, 1887; Henry Sayre van Duzer, *A Thackeray Library*, Privately printed, New York, 1919. For the other works see notes above.

the range of Thackeray's literary criticism as considerably wider than is shown by any preceding scholar (with the possible exception of Mauskopf, the summary of whose work does not touch upon this problem, though the work itself may).

Another reason for the relative indifference of Thackerayan scholars to this aspect of Thackeray's work seems to be the almost general feeling surviving from the time when a much smaller amount of his criticism was known, and then expressed by Enzinger, that the hitherto accepted evaluation of Thackeray's literary criticism (especially that of Saintsbury in his *Consideration of Thackeray* and *History of Criticism* and that of the authors of *CHEL*) is just, that most probably it does not contain many errors, that "the status of Thackeray as a critic, in which three quarters of a century have served to settle him"²¹ cannot be substantially changed or disturbed and that, if reassessed, it would be rather placed on a lower level than remain on that which it had assumed thanks to the eminent quotability of his critical judgments. That such a feeling does survive is proved by the fact that none of those scholars above-mentioned who published their works after the publication of Thackeray's *Letters* (which signified a substantial enlargement of his critical legacy thanks to their editor's new discoveries) even thought of suggesting that Thackeray's position as critic should be reassessed, though some of them (especially Ray and Ivasheva) rate his criticism more highly than most of their predecessors did.²² It is true, of course, that the purpose of these two scholars as well as of most of the others (Stevenson, Greig, Praz and Stang) was different; but not even Mauskopf, as far as the summary of his work suggests, paid due attention to the problem. Stang, who did invaluable service to the early and especially to the mid-Victorian criticism of fiction and above all to the theory of the novel by showing these to form an important part of the history of English criticism and literary theory, and so could have done something, too, for Thackeray the critic, did not, however, include him in his account as a critic (though he did pay some attention to his criticism), but rather as a theorizing novelist. Of the scholars writing after 1945, only Clapp, in his more recent study, "The Victorian Mettle", ranks Thackeray among the "principal actors in the story of Victorian literary criticism", though in the category of non-professional critics for whom criticism was not a major concern, "but the left hand of genius at work".²³ I do not presume to attempt any revolutionary reversals of Thackeray's position as critic, but I do think that in view of the fairly numerous critical contributions which have been unearthed and definitely attributed to him since the older

²¹ Enzinger, op. cit., vol. 21, No 2, p. 157; see also p. 159.

²² For Ray's evaluation see especially *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 324; for Ivasheva's op. cit., p. 89. Even among the older scholars there were some, however, whose assessment of Thackeray's literary criticism was either very positive (especially that of Hugh Walker, who evaluated Thackeray as a critic of the first rank; see *The Literature of the Victorian Era*, Cambridge University Press, 1913, p. 700, and that of Arthur Compton-Rickett; see *A History of English Literature*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., London, 1940, p. 515) or more positive than negative (Herman Merivale and Frank T. Marzials, *Life of W. M. Thackeray*, The Walter Scott Publishing Co., London and Felling-on-Tyne, New York, 1891, Saintsbury, Dodds, etc.).

²³ Edwin R. Clapp, "The Victorian Mettle: Three Words More", *The Western Humanities Review*, vol. XV, Winter 1961, p. 13; in his earlier study quoted above, however, Clapp is much more critical and does not place Thackeray in the first rank among the critics of his time.

scholars pronounced their judgments, his critical status deserves at least reconsideration.

In the choice of my subject I was further motivated by my not having been able to accept unconditionally the assessments of most of the scholars mentioned above. Although I could identify myself with most of their positive judgments (especially with those concerning Thackeray's professional criticism) and with some of their negative ones, I did not find myself in agreement with all of the latter. I intend to take issue especially with one fairly current opinion, namely that of those scholars who insist that Thackeray's critical judgments are not consciously founded upon any objective basis in principle, or, at the best, that they are founded upon a number of generalizations (Clapp), upon two main principles (Melville), or upon "two or three recurrent axioms" which "happened to be contradictory of one another" (Stevenson).²⁴ On the other hand, however, I can certainly accept the opinion of those critics (especially Dodds and Saintsbury)²⁵ who point out that Thackeray's criticism is not based upon any fixed aesthetic and critical doctrine, but I do so only with the stipulation that what they have in mind is a systematic, coherent, and explicitly formulated theory, which Thackeray in fact does not provide, and not an implied code or creed, which he does. Nor do I find myself in agreement with those scholars (notably Enzinger, Saintsbury and Clapp) who, on the basis of alleged absence of aesthetic and critical principles in Thackeray's criticism, doubt the safety of his critical judgments in general and who, especially Saintsbury, see in this singular uncertainty and incalculability of his judgments the "chief difficulties in the way of a consistent estimate of the man's critical work" (as Clapp puts it,²⁶ believing that it is rather the mixed and impure quality of Thackeray's critical faculty — the fusion — or confusion — of forms and functions which makes for the insecurity in his particular critical judgments and represents the main obstacle preventing scholars from arriving at such an evaluation). Finally, I cannot agree with most of the scholars so far mentioned (nor with some others quoted in the following) as far as their evaluation of the general development of Thackeray's critical standards, principles and approach is concerned. I cannot think, with for instance Saintsbury, Enzinger and Clapp, that his critical approach underwent no changes, nor can I accept the opinions of those scholars who notice some development or even change, but fail to evaluate it correctly, seeking its causes exclusively in the private and professional life of the critic (Thrall, Dodds, Ray, Greig), or regarding it as a change for the better (Enzinger, Dodds, Thrall, Saintsbury, Walker, Compton-Rickett, Cazamian).

The main purpose of this study is then to investigate and evaluate Thackeray's literary criticism in greater detail than has so far been done and to try to ascertain the justness or unjustness of the hitherto accepted evaluation of this important part of his legacy. One of my main concerns will be to find out whether Thackeray relied exclusively upon spontaneous judgments or applied any objective criteria in his interpretation of the works of individual authors, and whether his approach underwent any changes or development or remained unchanged from the beginning to the end of his critical activity. I shall try to

²⁴ See Clapp, "Critic on Horseback", pp. 286—287, 289—290; Melville, "Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of Books", Stevenson, op. cit., p. 88.

²⁵ See Dodds, op. cit., p. 35; Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 43.

²⁶ See op. cit., p. 287; see also *ibid.*, p. 290.

ascertain whether he based his judgments and method upon a specific critical creed and whether his practice conformed to this creed. As I have pointed out, my concern will be, too, to pay attention to the range of his criticism, and lastly, to attempt to evaluate his position as a critic in the criticism of his time and place. I do not intend to exaggerate Thackeray's critical merits or inflate his critical work into the dimensions of great literary criticism, and shall therefore watch for every indication of bias on his part, and consider its sources and influence. I agree with Clapp that Thackeray's critical writing possesses a highly elusive individuality and therefore refuses to be subjected to a pattern or a label, "to be pigeon-holed in any academic filing-cabinet" and that "we must be suspicious of any account of Thackeray as a critic which does not reckon with this compound-quality in his work, or which answers all questions by a reference to his time, or to a moral outlook, or to any other single circumstance". In contradistinction to this scholar, however, I do not think that owing to its highly individual character Thackeray's critical work defies evaluation altogether, that "Thackeray is the critic-errant, and no rules (unless they be the White Knight's) are quite satisfactory as to why or how he chose, in his own way, certain dragon-humbugs to destroy, certain moral maidens to succor".²⁷ Although I do not intend to lay down any "rules" concerning Thackeray's critical principles and method, I hope to show that he was perfectly aware of why he had chosen the particular writers or books as the targets of his criticism and that neither his choice of the subjects nor his principles and method were so random and irrational as Clapp suggests. My analysis does not of course lay claim to any fully exhaustive and final elaboration of the problem and is presented as a modest contribution to its definite solution.

²⁷ For the quotations see *op. cit.*, pp. 287—288.